

British Slavery, the Caribbean, and Wells Cathedral: An Introduction

'People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming home. I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children's teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself. Because they don't grow it in Lancashire, you know. Not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom. This is the symbolisation of English identity – I mean, what does anybody in the world know about an English person except that they can't get through the day without a cup of tea? Where does it come from? Ceylon - Sri Lanka, India. That is the outside history that is inside the history of the English. There is no English history without that other history'.

- Stuart Hall (1)

For over two hundred years, Britain was one of the leading nations in the Atlantic slave trade and the use of enslaved labour in its colonies in the Americas. A huge number of Britons made their wealth through exporting millions of enslaved Africans from Africa to colonies across North America and the Caribbean, in places like Jamaica, Barbados and Guiana, and forcing them to spend their entire lives working on coercive labour plantations, in order to produce commodities such as sugar, tobacco and cotton for sale and consumption back in Europe. From John Hawkins' first slave voyage in 1562, this vast system of exploitation remained intact for hundreds of years until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in 1834. Even with the passage of abolition, the huge quantities of slave-derived wealth and the £20 million paid out to slave-owners in compensation by the British government continued to shape the nation's history well into the nineteenth century and on to today. The emergence of modern Britain, or indeed modernity itself, cannot be fundamentally understood without addressing the histories of slavery. Slavery touched nearly every aspect of British social and economic life, be it national politics, shipping, banking, tea-drinking, industrial growth, popular culture and much more. It is, as Stuart Hall so powerfully proclaimed, *the outside history that is inside the history of the English*.

The Church of England is no exception to this history. Its clearest and most direct connection to British transatlantic slavery was through its missionary organisation The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), which owned and profited from hundreds of enslaved people on the Codrington plantations in Barbados in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. More recently, the Church announced its findings that it paid members of the clergy in the eighteenth century with funds derived from Queen Anne's Bounty, which invested a significant amount of wealth in the slave-trading South Sea Company (2).

British Slavery and Wells Cathedral

So where does Wells Cathedral fit into all of this? How has the history of the Cathedral been entangled with that of places across the Caribbean and Western Africa? And what are the ways in which slavery "comes home" – financially, culturally, commemoratively and beyond – to the Cathedral?

Wells Cathedral seeks to answer these challenging and important questions. With the use of primary sources and databases such as the *Legacies of British Slavery Project* (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>), which provides a full list of individuals compensated for direct and/or indirect links to slave-ownership in the

1830s, we can reconstruct some of the key figures tied to both British slavery and the history of the Cathedral, narrate the stories of the lives of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, and, crucially, begin an important discussion about the potential for reparative action today. Though research is still ongoing and more remains to be uncovered, several details piecing together the Cathedral's complex relationship to slavery are starting to emerge (3).

Geographically, Wells Cathedral sits at a crucial location within the West Country. The Cathedral's proximity to Bristol, one of Britain's major transatlantic slave-trading ports and a hub for commercial activity, meant that it sat physically surrounded by propertied families who had generated their wealth from transatlantic slavery. Families such as the Tudways in Wells, the Dickinsons in Kingweston, and the Pretor-Pinneys in Somerton all lived in the region of the Cathedral and commanded significant wealth and influence in local politics and public affairs.

In the early nineteenth century, these families and the Cathedral itself stood at a turning point in their histories. With the passage of the Reform Act in 1832 and the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, wealthy Somerset-based families with connections to Caribbean slavery looked to invest their financial capital, both from their profits from enslaved labour and the compensation for slavery paid out under abolition, in the political and religious institutions of the day. Many Britons who had lived and worked within the slave economy of the Caribbean began to return home. In the Church itself, the reorganisation of ecclesiastical finances under the Church Act of 1836 meant that cathedrals like Wells looked increasingly to outside sources of income, such as loans and subscriptions, in order to survive financially.

As a result, a close network of individuals and families linked to Caribbean slavery increasingly began to dominate much of the Cathedral's financial and ecclesiastical life from the 1840s. From 1839 onwards the archdeaconry of Bath and a canonry of Wells were both held by William Thomas Parr Brymer (1796-1852), whose father, Alexander Brymer, had been a North American colonial administrator involved in the shipping of enslaved-produced commodities from the Caribbean to Halifax in Canada (4). The politician Francis H. Dickinson (1813-90), whose family had owned enslaved people in Jamaica for centuries, also emerged on the scene as the Cathedral's leading patron and sponsor of restoration works (5). Joining them was the Reverend John Hothersall Pinder (1794-1868), a slave-owner from Barbados and a previous chaplain to enslaved Africans on the SPG's Codrington plantations, and Principal of Codrington College, who had returned from the Caribbean in the mid-1830s (6).

Together, Brymer, Dickinson and Pinder brought their wealth and their connections to slavery and British colonies into shaping the Cathedral's future, both internally and externally in its relationship with the Caribbean. In 1840, along with Bishop Henry Law, they created Wells Theological College with Pinder as its inaugural head. Brymer and Dickinson both gave money to the restoration of the east end of the Cathedral, and Dickinson led the contributions for the restoration of the Cathedral in May 1845. The 1840s and 1850s also saw visits to the cathedral from bishops representing the Caribbean colonies, with the Bishop of Antigua being welcomed in 1842 and the Bishops of Barbados and Jamaica in 1846. As a result of Pinder's connections to Barbados, the Cathedral also began to develop ties with Codrington College. In the 1850s, for example, students at Wells Theological College provided funds for the creation of "Pinder Scholarships" to train students at Codrington to become missionaries in West Africa. Led by the West Indian Church Association, these missionary efforts resulted in the visits to the Cathedral of Hamble James Leacock, a former slave-owner from Barbados, and John Duport, a Black missionary from Saint Kitts, in the early 1850s and in 1863 respectively (7). While Brymer died in 1852, Pinder and Dickinson continued to be intimately involved in the Cathedral's history for much of the mid nineteenth century.

This brief overview of how slavery “came home” to the Cathedral is at once both complex and simple. It is already clear just how intricate and entangled these histories are, bringing together slave-owners, missionaries, politicians and clergymen from across the nineteenth-century Atlantic worlds right to the heart of Wells. But one single narrative is also too simple, too reductive when there are so many other stories to be told: for example, that of Thomas Dehany Bernard (1815-1904), who inherited his father’s enslaved people in Jamaica and wealth and went on to become a canon and Chancellor of Wells (1879-1904); or Abraham Elton (d. 1794) buried in the cathedral with a memorial now in the cloisters, who was the great-grandson of slave-trader Sir Abraham Elton of Clevedon Court; and above all, the lives of the enslaved people across the Caribbean linked to the history of Wells.

Future Directions: Telling the Stories of the Enslaved and Reparatory Action

Taking up these challenging histories and reconstructing the Cathedral’s relationship with the history and afterlives of British slavery allows us to do important things.

Firstly, we can begin to tell the stories from the perspective of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean that connect to Wells. In practice, that means asking questions such as: what was life like for enslaved people at sites like the Dickinsons’ Appleton Estate in Jamaica, or for those subjected to Pinder’s discipline at the Codrington plantations in Barbados? How did enslaved people survive in, challenge and resist these brutal systems of exploitation, violence and racism? What are the ways in which we can share and commemorate these histories today so that they are remembered? (8)

Secondly, these histories demand that we reflect upon the inequalities generated by British slavery that continue into the Cathedral’s present and wider society. Both under-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups across the Church of England and the enduring presence of racism across its institutions continue to be issues that need to be confronted and tackled head on. Historic and existing financial benefits from slavery-derived wealth will also need to be subjects of discussion, identifying the full extent to which the Cathedral has benefited financially from slavery and the potential for reparatory action through education and outreach programmes.

Going forward, Wells Cathedral is working on developing interpretation boards for memorial sites to Dickinson, Pinder, and others around the Cathedral and a paper leaflet to create entry points for visitors into these histories, allowing them to develop a richer and more challenging understanding of the Cathedral’s history beyond Wells itself. The project will also be reaching out to discuss these histories and important questions with Codrington College in Barbados, which had a close relationship with Wells Theological College for much of the nineteenth-century, with the hope of restoring these deeply entangled histories of Wells and the Caribbean and to generate meaningful discussion about what reparative action might look like today. (9)

References

- (1) Stuart Hall, ‘Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities [1991]’, in Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. by David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019) 63-82 (p. 70)
- (2) ‘Church Commissioners Research Into Historic Links into Transatlantic Chattel Slavery’, Interim Report, June 2022, accessed from

- <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Church%20Commissioners%20research%20report%20final.pdf>> [accessed 20/06/2022].
- (3) For a more in-depth overview of connections between Wells Cathedral and transatlantic slavery, see James Clark, 'Survey of Connections to Transatlantic Slavery Documented in Wells Cathedral Archives and Other Collections', Interim Report July 2021. Much of the basis for this introduction is provided by Clark's report, expanded and updated with further details.
 - (4) For details of William Brymer's father Alexander Brymer, see J. B. Cahill, 'Brymer, Alexander', *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, accessed from <http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brymer_alexander_6E.html> [accessed 20/06/22]; Shirley Tillotson, 'How (and how much) King's College benefited from slavery in the West Indies, 1789 to 1854', *University of King's College*, p. 11, accessed from <<https://ukings.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/202001TillotsonKingsSlaveryIndirectConnections.pdf>> [accessed 20/06/22].
 - (5) For details of the Dickinson family and their connections to slavery, see the entry for 'William Dickinson II', *Legacies of British Slavery*, accessed from <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/23936>> [accessed 20/06/22]; 'Papers of the Dickinson Family of Kingweston, 1545-2004', *South West Heritage Trust*, accessed from <<https://someterset-cat.swheritage.org.uk/records/DD/DN>> [accessed 20/06/22].
 - (6) For details of John Hothersall Pinder, see the entry for 'John Hothersall Pinder', *Legacies of British Slavery*, accessed from <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146652643>> [accessed 20/06/22]; 'Peter Brathwaite on John Hothersall Pinder', *National Portrait Gallery*, accessed from <<https://www.npg.org.uk/blog/peter-brathwaite-blog>> [accessed 20/06/22].
 - (7) See Rev. H. Caswall, *The Martyr of the Pongas: Being a Memoir of the Rev. Hamble James Leacock* (New York: Thomas N. Stanford, 1857), p. 104; Rev. A. H. Barrow, *Fifty Years in Western Africa: Being a Record of the Work of the West Indian Church on the Banks of the Rio Pongo* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1900), p. 89.
 - (8) For details of enslaved life on Codrington, see Travis Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Janice McLean-Farrell and Michael Anderson Clarke, 'Missions in Contested Places/Spaces: The SPG, Slavery, and Codrington College, Barbados', *Mission Studies*, 38 (2021) 325-349. As Pinder's reports as chaplain to enslaved people on Codrington are fully digitised and available via the British Online Archives, they are an excellent potential source for future use in understanding the realities of life for enslaved people on Codrington that connect directly to Wells.
 - (9) This text has been compiled from the research of Tommy Maddison and James Clark (University of Exeter) with the assistance of Jessica Witchell and the oversight of the Cathedral Chapter.