Audley End Report

Researched and written by Edinam
Completed: 14 May 2021

Introduction

Just outside the small town of Saffron Walden in Essex lies Audley End, a stunning Jacobean mansion once renowned as the largest and most opulent house built in early 17th-century England.

Its rural location is far from the ports and marine cities that enabled Britain to become the world's foremost slave-trading nation and colonial power. Yet, a glimpse into Audley End's past will reveal connections to the British Empire and Atlantic enslavement in the activities of three families who've resided at the property: the Howards, the Griffins and the Nevilles. All prominent members of the English nobility, together, these families take us through 200 years of British imperialism, from the explorative beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade to the establishment of a global empire.

Figure 1 Figure 3: A Map of the West Indies &c, Mexico or New Spain by Herman Moll (1732) Retrieved from Royal Geographical Society - https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/1732_Herman_Moll_Map_of_the_West_Indies_and_Caribbean_-_Geographicus_-_WestI

Early History of Audley End

Audley End has long been associated with the English nobility. Originally an abbey that was founded by Geoffrey de Mandeville, 1st Earl of Essex, it was seized by King Henry VIII during the 16th century English Reformation and granted to Sir Thomas Audley (1488–1544) who converted it into a residence. This was the house that his grandson Admiral Thomas Howard, 1st Earl of Suffolk (1561-1626), inherited, demolished, and then rebuilt on the scale of a royal palace in the period between 1605 and 1614.

The Howard Family

Thomas Howard inherited Audley End at a time when England was competing with other European nations such as Portugal and Spain to establish overseas empires, with Ireland being colonised in the late 16th century and colonies across the Americas soon following, beginning with Virginia in 1607. As an admiral in the Navy Royal, Thomas Howard helped establish England as a maritime power and was subsequently rewarded with a knighthood, made Baron Howard de Walden in 1597 and the 1st Earl of Suffolk in 1603.

Thomas' eldest son, Theophilus Howard, 2nd Earl of Suffolk and 2nd Baron Howard de Walden (1584 – 1640) was named as a councillor in the Second Charter of Virginia in 1609. The document awarded colonialists and planters more influence over the territorial governance of Virginia and enabled English merchant companies and individuals to invest in the colonisation effort. The position did not earn Theophilus much money and given the family's precarious finances, he was forced to sell estates worth £36,000 to avoid bankruptcy. Howard's financial difficulties arose from the fall from grace of his father, the 1st Earl who had been stripped of his office of Lord Treasurer and sent briefly to the Tower of London accused of corruption and embezzlement. This coupled with his extravagant expenditure on the building of Audley End left family finances severely stretched.

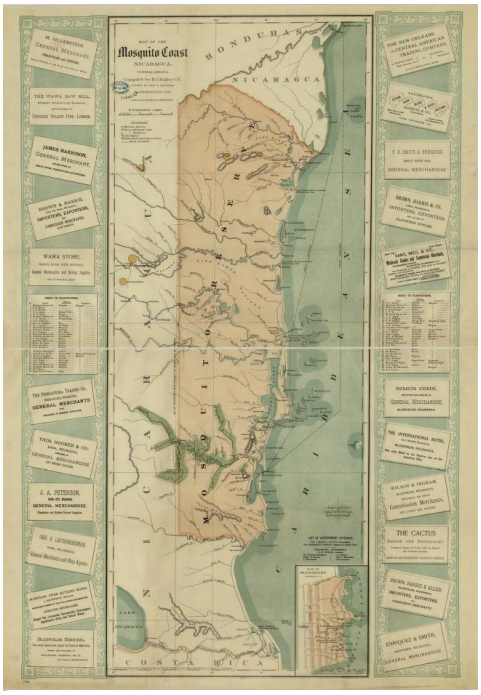

Figure 2 Map of the Miskito or Mosquito Coast, Nicaragua, Central America by H.G. Higley and S.D. Spellman, printed by G.W. & C.B. Colton & Co. (New York, 1894) Retrieved from the Library of Congress - https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4852m.ma001018/?r=-0.712,0.16,2.425,1.149,0

Theophilus' eldest son, James Howard, 3rd Earl of Suffolk (1620-1689), married Lady Susanna Rich (1627–1649) in 1640, the year he inherited Audley End. Her father, Henry Rich, 1st Earl of Holland (1590–1649), was the governor of the Providence Island Company, which colonised several islands off the Miskito Coast in Central America to use as bases for trade and privateering purposes. Although Holland was largely inactive in the company's business affairs, he used his influence at court to obtain a charter and other legal privileges for it, meaning he still earned a significant amount of money from the company.

Despite marrying into wealth, James' finances remained under pressure and in 1666 he sold Audley End to King Charles II for £50,000, of which £20,000 remained on mortgage. However, upkeep costs proved ruinous and successive monarchs showed little interest in the property, so Audley End was

returned to Theophilus's youngest son, Henry Howard, 5th Earl of Suffolk (1627-1709) in 1701.

Upon the 5th Earl's death in 1709, the estate passed to his eldest son, also named Henry, whose role as a member of the Council of Trade and Foreign Plantations provides another significant connection to transatlantic slave trading and chattel enslavement in the Americas for the Howard family. Established in 1696, the Council was an unelected regulatory body of commissioners composed of noblemen and merchants responsible for foreign trade and plantation affairs. Henry became the Council's senior Commissioner of Trade and Plantations in 1715 and held the post until his death in 1718.

Figure 3: Headstone of Scipio Africanus, Photo William Avery, accessed WikiCommons

A further link to enslavement history that occurred during the lifetime of Charles William Howard (1693-1722), the 7th Earl of Suffolk, was the family's connection to an enslaved Black servant named Scipio Africanus (1702–1720). An elaborate headstone and religious inscription bearing the name 'Scipio Africanus' marks the burial place of the young, enslaved African, located in St Mary's churchyard, Henbury, near Bristol. His presence there, and the 1720 date of burial, suggest that he worked at Henbury's Great House which was Charles' main residence – he spent very little time at Audley End which was shut up during his short tenure. In keeping with a convention of the time to assign the classical names of Greek or Roman leaders to servants of colour, the young, enslaved African was named after Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, the famous Roman general of African descent.

At the time of the young man's death, it is estimated there were around 10,000 enslaved Black people in Britain. However, in the absence of detailed documentation about the lived experiences and social status of people who were enslaved servants in stately homes throughout Britain, this type of memorial dedicated to a named 18th century figure with African heritage remains very rare.

After Charles's death in 1722, his successors continued a process begun by the 6th Earl to reduce Audley End to more manageable proportions so that by the 1740s only the inner court remained. After the 10th Earl died in 1745 with no surviving heirs, the Audley End estate was divided between three distant family members, whilst a fourth, Thomas Howard, 2nd Earl of Effingham acquired the house. Elizabeth, Countess of Portsmouth (1691–1762), one of the beneficiaries, bought the house from Effingham in 1751. She assigned her nephew, Sir John Griffin Whitwell (1719-97) as her heir on the condition that he change his surname to Griffin. Sir John had already inherited one of the other portions of the estate from his mother, Ann Whitwell and would later buy the remaining third from the Earl of Bristol so reuniting the estate once again.

The Griffin Family

Sir John Griffin Griffin inherited Audley End in 1762. He had a long military career, rising to the rank of major-general in 1759, and commanded troops during the Seven Years' War. Sir John fought only in Europe, though Britain's successes on the battlefield led to the acquisition of new colonies in North America and the Caribbean, seized from France and Spain. As he had no children, Sir John was made the 1st Baron of Braybrooke in 1788, with the condition that his title and inheritance would

pass to his nephew's son, Richard Aldworth Neville. In return Richard was to change his surname to Griffin.

Richard (1750–1825) inherited Audley End in 1797 and became 2nd Baron Braybrooke. From 1762, when he was 12 years old, until the early 1820s, he held the sinecure post of Provost-Marshall of Jamaica. Like many of the public offices in the Caribbean, the post of Provost-Marshall was a patent bestowed directly by the king and could be inherited. The post holder had responsibility for civilian law enforcement across the island including the administration of debt litigation and the levying of fines on defaulting debtors, providing ample opportunities for corruption. Like most Jamaican office holders Richard Griffin was an absentee, relying on an array of deputies to carry out his duties. Over his lifetime this lucrative post is said to have brought him around £120,000.

The 2nd Baron Braybrooke made only modest changes to Audley End which had been left in good order by his predecessor, focusing on improvement to heating and sanitation which made the house more comfortable. In 1820 he retired to his other estate, Billingbear in Berkshire, handing over the keys to Audley End to his son, Richard Neville, later 3rd Baron Braybrooke, and his growing family.

The Grenville Family

In 1780, Richard Griffin married Catherine Grenville (1761–96), the daughter of Prime Minister George Grenville. Their firstborn son, also named Richard, inherited Audley End whilst their second, George Neville-Grenville, became Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge and later also Dean of Windsor.

Alongside other property Neville-Grenville invested in a Jamaican sugar plantation. Named Hope, the 200-acre plantation was owned by Roger Hope Elletson, who was the Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica, the official representative of the monarch and acting nominal chief executive officer. Under his management, around 300 enslaved people lived on the plantation.

When Elletson died in 1775, the plantation and all enslaved persons were inherited by his widow, Anna Gamon. She married James Brydges, the 3rd Duke of Chandos in 1777 and the two became joint absentee plantation managers and slave owners. The work of the enslaved people delivered the couple an annual income of £6,000 per year amounting to around £5m today.

In 1813 the plantation was inherited by their daughter, Lady Anna, who married the 1st Duke of Buckingham (1776–1839) in 1796, and passed it to her son, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham (1797–1861) when she died in 1836.

At the time, Britain was in the process of abolishing slavery throughout its Empire – primarily as a direct result of the slave rebellions that destabilised the plantation economy, the lobbying of anti-slavery campaigners and the legislative debates taking place in the British Parliament. Cessation of the transatlantic trade began with the passing of the Slave Trade Abolition Act of 1807, which restricted the transportation of enslaved persons on British ships. This was followed by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833/4. However, full emancipation for enslaved Africans in British colonial territories took a further four years to achieve, after the transitional process known as 'Apprenticeship' was forced to end on 1 August 1838. To compensate slave owners for the loss of their 'property', the UK government set aside £20 million (equivalent to many billions today). This amount had to be borrowed and was only paid off by British taxpayers in 2015. Formerly enslaved people weren't offered any compensation or reparations.

George Neville-Grenville was a trustee of the 2nd Duke of Buckingham's marriage settlement and was awarded £6,630 as part of a £20,000 compensation claim for the 379 enslaved persons resident on the Hope plantation at the time.

Conclusion

Uncovering the connections to plantation enslavement and the British Empire of the three families resident at Audley End, has revealed very poignant narratives about how enslaved labour in the Caribbean underpinned the wealth of the English nobility.

As the financial beneficiaries of enslavement connected to Audley End were primarily absentee plantation owners and colonial administrators based in Britain, the additional, embodied link to enslavement, via Scipio Africanus, is a very important, poignant, and proximate aspect of this site's connections to the Atlantic world. Additionally, the fact that the headstone marking the burial place of the 18th century enslaved man named Scipio was defaced by vandals during 2020 – presumably as a retaliatory -response to the earlier toppling of enslaver Edward Colston's statue in Bristol during that year – shows that these histories continue to be of relevance to contemporary socio-political debates and activism concerning equality, diversity, decolonisation, and racial justice.

References

Drury, P. J. (1980). No Other Palace in the Kingdom Will Compare with It: The Evolution of Audley End,1605-1745. *Architectural History Vol. 23*, 1-39+145-171.

Kaufmann, M. (2007). *English Heritage Properties 1600-1830 and Slavery Connections.* English Heritage.

Kaufmann, M. (2011). *English Heritage Properties and the Slave Trade.* English Heritage.

Legacies of British Slave-ownership Project. (n.d.). Retrieved from UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership Project: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/

Olusoga, D. (Director). (2015). *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* [Motion Picture].

Sainty, J. C. (1974). *Office-Holders in Modern Britain: Volume 3, Officials of the Boards of Trade 1660-1870.* University of London & History of Parliament Trust. Retrieved from British History Online.

This report was written by Culture& trainee researcher in residence Edinam, with support from English Heritage historians and the University of Leicester as part of a project to research little-known links between English Heritage sites across the country and the transatlantic slave trade. Edinam's research was funded by an ESRC Impact Accelerator Award awarded to Professor Corinne Fowler of the University of Leicester to work with English Heritage.