Battle Abbey Report

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Introduction

The ruins of Battle Abbey, set with the historic town of Battle that was created to serve it, stand as a tangible and vivid reminder of one the most famous military engagements to take place on English soil – the 1066 Battle of Hastings.

However, a look beyond the events of 1066 reveals connections to the British Empire and Atlantic enslavement in the activities of the Webster family, the Abbey's longest serving and last resident owners. Covering a period of over 200 years from the 17th century to the abolition of enslavement in the 19th century, a glimpse into the lived experiences of the Webster family shows how the wealthy supplemented their fortunes through commerce and the exploitation of enslaved workers in the Americas.

Overview

The Battle of Hastings was fought on the 14th of October 1066 and marked the beginning of the Norman Conquest of England, when William, the Duke of Normandy, defeated King Harold II and became William I, the first Norman monarch to rule England.

The battlefield owes its survival to William I who built a monastery on the site as an act of penance for those who had lost their lives during the battle. Dedicated to the Trinity, the Virgin and St Martin of Tours, the Benedictine monastery of Battle Abbey was opened in 1071.

It operated for 467 years before it was suppressed by Henry VIII in the 16th century English Reformation and given to Sir Anthony Browne, who demolished the church and converted the abbey's dormitory into a country house. It remained within the Browne family until it was bought by Sir Thomas Webster in 1721 for £56,000.

Power and Profit

Sir Thomas Webster (1679–1751) purchased Battle Abbey at a time when Britain was beginning to assert itself as a leading global economic and imperial power. This was primarily a direct result of the transatlantic slave trade, a highly lucrative international trading network in which Europeans exchanged goods for millions of enslaved Africans from West and Central Africa who were then put to work on plantations established in the Americas.

The Portuguese were the first to engage in Atlantic slave trading in the early 16th century, followed by the Spanish, French and English. The English first colonised Ireland in the late 16th century, but colonies across the Americas soon followed, with Virginia in 1607, Bermuda in 1609, Saint Kitts in 1623, Barbados in 1627, Maryland and Montserrat in 1632, Anguilla in 1650 and Jamaica in 1655.

It was the colonisation of these territories that were referred to as the 'new world' and the highly profitable network of global commerce that their plantation economies spawned, that facilitated Britain's rise as a global imperial and economic power.

Sir Thomas Webster was the eldest son of prominent merchant and tobacco trader, Sir Godfrey Webster (1648 –1720), who was able to accumulate an immense fortune from Britain's establishment of plantation economies in the Americas.

Rising Fortunes

Sir Godfrey Webster began his career in 1633 as an apprentice to his uncle Peter Webster, a merchant and prominent member of the Clothworkers' Company in London. He qualified as a clothier and gained admission to the company in 1670. From then on, Sir Godfrey earned enough money to expand his business interests. One of these interests was tobacco.

Tobacco, cultivated by enslaved Africans, formed an essential component of the colonial North American economy. It was the main and most successful cash crop that was cultivated and exported from Virginia, the first British colony established in the Americas. So successful was this venture that, by late 1600s, the equivalent of more than £20 million of the crop was exported to London per year. As such, those who traded in the crop, like Sir Godfrey Webster, were able to become enormously wealthy from it.

Figure 1 Map of Virginia, discovered and as described by Captain John Smith, 1606; engraved by William Hole. Accessed from: Wikipedia https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virginia_map_1606.jpg

At the time, financial institutions such the Bank of England were being set up to help manage Britain's finances and develop the nation's long-term credit instruments, such as loans. Alongside helping to finance the traders and merchants that facilitated the dramatic expansion of Britain's network of global trade, these credit instruments also helped finance Britain's army and navy. This increase in funding for the military enabled Britain to engage in multiple wars during the 17th and

18th centuries, which were in large part aimed at securing more colonies and increasing the number of enslaved Africans working on plantations.

Looking to benefit further from the transatlantic slave economy Godfrey provided a loan to King William III and in return was awarded a lucrative contract to supply clothing to the army and hemp to the navy. With the money earned, he purchased Bank of England stocks and by 1710 owned a sufficient stake to qualify for the role of governor. This in turn led to him supporting other mercantile ventures that enabled Britain to expand its plantation economy and colonial footprint around the world.

With the fortune he amassed, Godfrey bought several properties across England and was able to gain political and economic influence, leaving his children in a privileged position as part of the British landowning class. This money and influence enabled his son Sir Thomas Webster to build a political career and purchase Battle Abbey as his country seat. At the time, the Battle estate was in a poor state of repair, but with the money he inherited Sir Thomas was able to renovate and refurbish it as a grand country residence befitting his lofty status.

Connections to a slaveholding dynasty

Battle Abbey's history is connected to that of the Vassalls, a prominent slaveholding family, through whom the Websters were able to gain access to and directly benefit from three plantation estates in Westmoreland, Jamaica. The story begins with Sir Godfrey Webster, 4th Baronet (1747–1800), a descendant of Sir Thomas Webster, who inherited Battle Abbey in 1780 though he didn't gain vacant possession until his aunt, widow of the 3rd baronet, died in 1810. In 1786 he married Elizabeth Vassall (1771–1845), a 15-year-old heiress.

The Vassalls were a large family of wealthy English colonists who settled in British colonies across the Americas in the 16th century, including Virginia, Massachusetts, Jamaica, and Barbados. Beginning with William Vassall's (1592–1655) purchase of land in Barbados in 1648, members of the Vassall family were among the Caribbean's most influential planters until Britain abolished slavery throughout its colonies in the 19th century.

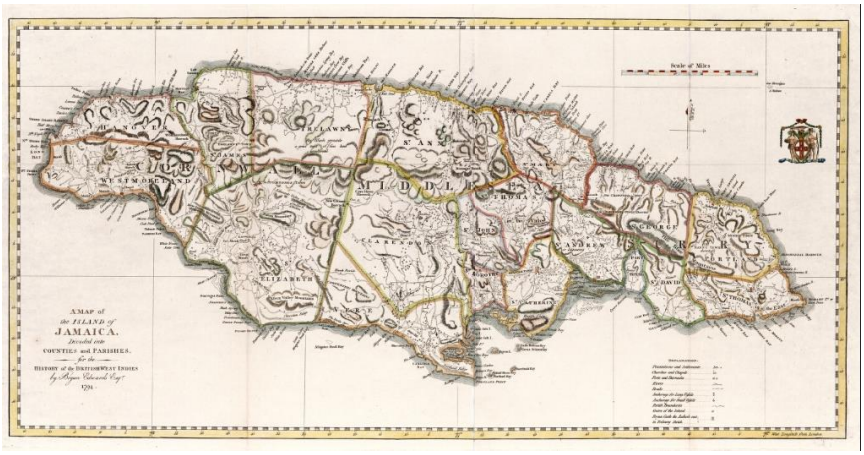

Figure 2 Edwards, Bryan, 1794, A Map of the island of Jamaica divided into counties and parishes for the history of the British West Indies. Accessed From: University of Florida Digital Library http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF90000118/00001

At the time of Elizabeth's marriage to the 4th Baronet in 1786, her father Richard Vassall (1732–95) owned three sugar plantations named Sweet River Pen, Friendship and Greenwich in Westmoreland, Jamaica. These plantations were highly profitable. At the time Jamaica was the region's focal point in

the Triangular Trade – especially for the sailing routes used by British slave traders. Enslaved Africans held captive on the coast of West Africa were transported to Jamaica where they were sold at an auction and then distributed to other islands in the Caribbean. In addition, Jamaica was also Britain's main source of sugar, and with it the wealth of many British merchants and traders, as it quickly became the most profitable cash crop to be produced in the region following rising demand in 18th century Europe to sweeten popular drinks such as tea and coffee.

As Richard's only child, Elizabeth was the sole heiress and was thus entitled to a yearly income from the profits of the plantations, estimated in her father's will to be around £7,000. However, as she was a woman, it was expected that in the event she got married she and her husband would hold these properties jointly, with both families entitled to the inheritance. Sir Godfrey Webster, the 4th Baronet, took on the additional surname of Vassall after their marriage in accordance with the will of Elizabeth's grandfather, Florentius Vassall.

Their relationship, however, ended in divorce in 1797 following Elizabeth's extramarital affairs which resulted in one, possibly two, illegitimate children. As a result, Elizabeth surrendered her inheritance, yearly income and children to Sir Godfrey. However, after he committed suicide three years later, Elizabeth was given back all her property and shared it with her new husband, Henry Fox, Lord Holland, the father of one of her illegitimate children, Charles Richard Fox. Sadly though she remained separated from her children who were taken in by Sir Godfrey's sister and her family. Like Sir Godfrey, Holland adopted the name Vassall to safeguard his children's rights to his wife's West Indian fortune. Holland's actions contrast with those of his uncle, Charles James Fox, who was a prominent abolitionist of the transatlantic trafficking of Africans.

Sir Godfrey Webster Vassall, 4th Baronet and Elizabeth had five children together, and the eldest son, also named Godfrey (1789–1836) became the 5th baronet and inherited Battle Abbey on his father's death in 1800. With the family's wealth he undertook extensive restoration and renovation of the estate. However, the combined costs of the building works and his constant gambling left the 5th Baronet in debt, prompting him to sell most of his property and stocks and shares, which included the Battle Abbey muniments. The three plantations were unaffected as following Elizabeth's marriage to Lord Holland, their primary ownership had transferred from the Vassalls to the Hollands.

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. To compensate slave owners for the loss of their 'property', the UK government borrowed £20 million, a debt that was only paid off by British taxpayers in 2015. Formerly enslaved people weren't offered any compensation or reparations.

The Hollands made a slavery compensation claim in 1836 which Sir Godfrey, 5th Baronet successfully counterclaimed against for an amount of £5,000. As the 5th baronet died later that year, the payment was made to trustees for the benefit of his son Sir Godfrey Vassall Webster, 6th Baronet (1815–53).

So, although the marriage between Godfrey 4th Baronet and Elizabeth ended in divorce, the fact they had been married entitled Sir Godfrey's descendants to her fortune, meaning the Websters continued to hugely benefit from the profits of plantation enslavement in Jamaica. This illustrates how marriage was used as a means of transferring wealth amongst the elite and how for women, their ownership of enslaved persons and plantations often made them 'good' marriage prospects.

Being an heiress to a fortune built on enslavement in Jamaica, which as explained before, was of particular geographic and strategic importance to Britain's plantation economies, would have made Elizabeth a very 'good' prospect for marriage. A point further highlighted by both Elizabeth's husbands taking on her surname to ensure they had rights to her inheritance.

Another such marriage alliance occurred in the next generation, further connecting Battle Abbey to Jamaica.

An advantageous marriage

Sir Godfrey Vassall Webster, 6th Baronet married Sarah Joanna Ashburnham, neé Murray (1807–89) in 1851. Her Creole, mixed race, father, William Murray, was a slave owner who had lived on his own sugar plantation in St James, Jamaica, between 1795 and 1815. He was also said to have owned various properties across Jamaica, some acquired from merchants in England and two plantations inherited from his wife, Elizabeth Virgin. Named Bull Dead and Hope, they were sugar and rum plantations located in the Jamaican parish of Manchester.

From her father's mercantile profits and real estate investments, Sarah was able to amass a fortune of £33,473 8s by the time she married the 6th Baronet. The bulk of this fortune likely came from the five named plantations that William made slavery compensation claims for as the owner in fee, in 1835. In addition to Hope and Bull Dead plantations, this also included the Garland Grove Pen, Purling Stream and Latium plantations which were all located in the Jamaican parish of St James.

As detailed on the UCL Legacies of Slave Ownership database (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/), Sir Godfrey, 6th baronet, was awarded £6,612 10s 5d for 373 slaves on the Latium plantation, £916 3s 11d for 50 slaves on Purling Stream plantation, £565 9s 11d for 26 slaves on Garland Grove Pen plantation and £2,010 13s 10d for 115 slaves on the Hope and Bull Dead plantations.

Conclusion

Covering a period from Britain's first foray into the transatlantic trafficking of Africans in the 16th century to the abolition of enslavement in the 19th century, exploring the Webster family's connections to plantation enslavement and the British Empire, has shown how the historic Battle Abbey benefitted from slavery-derived wealth for five generations.

As such, this investigation has highlighted the myriad ways in which enslaved labour in the Caribbean supplemented the fortunes of the wealthy in England. Particularly, the massively overlooked role of female plantation owners in the transatlantic slave economy, Jamaica's geographic, economic and strategic importance to the British Empire.

Prevailing scholarship has tended to argue that married women rarely possessed control over properties and profits related to enslavement because of misogynistic reasons, with an example being coverture – the legal doctrine whereby the property and income of any woman would become her husband's upon marriage. As I hope to have shown through an exploration of Battle Abbey's connections to Jamaica by way of marriage alliances to wealthy heiresses, the situation was far more complex as there were many ways in which married women circumvented the limitations that came with marriage. Whether it was by lifelong income from plantation profits, or by a marriage settlement or alliance, women could benefit from the profits of enslavement-related commerce.

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