Osborne House Report

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Abstract

"It is impossible to imagine a prettier spot," said Queen Victoria of Osborne House, her scenic retreat located on the idyllic Isle of Wight. With its coastal location, spacious grounds and well-tended gardens, Osborne is a shining example of the country houses that have become so emblematic of England's heritage. However, a look behind its opulent façade can reveal hidden connections to the complex history of British imperialism, as well as some hitherto not widely known realities about the lives of Black people in Victorian England.

This report is structured into five sections that cover Osborne's early history, details of landowning families connected to the estate, and what archives reveal about the lived experiences of the property's former residents. It makes clear the connections between Osborne House, Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and associated links to the history of colonialism throughout the Caribbean region, continental Africa, and the wider British Empire. There is a particular focus on the hidden Black presence at Osborne – not only in terms of artworks and cultural objects within the collections, but also evidence about the lives and experiences of people of colour with direct links to this historic house as both visitors and residents. Drawing on under-utilised archival sources about Osborne House, the report illuminates and raise awareness of the diverse, intricate, and long-standing connections between this key site of English heritage and the British Atlantic world

Introduction

As the ferry from Portsmouth crosses the Solent and approaches the Northern coast of the Isle of Wight, the cream-coloured belvedere towers of Osborne House, the marine residence of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, come into view. Reminiscent of an Italian Renaissance villa with its picturesque silhouette and terraced gardens, it was one of the most well-known buildings of its day, inspiring architecture all over the world. Due to its position on the Solent opposite the port of Southampton, once known as Britain's gateway to the world, the building was one of the first or last landmarks people saw when sailing away from or towards these isles.

The house in its current form was built between 1845 and 1851 as a private family home for the Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. However, records show that the estate has existed for far longer as it is comprised of the former manors of Barton and Osborne.

Barton Manor was first recorded as being held of King Edward the Confessor by Bolla in the Domesday survey, carried out in 1086 as Britain's earliest public record of property owners liable for tax. Osborne Manor was first recorded as Oysterborne, the hereditary home of the Bowermans before being passed to the Arneys, then the Lovibonds. The estate was purchased in 1630 by Eustace Mann, a chemist from Southwark near London, and upon his granddaughter Elizabeth's marriage, passed to her husband, Robert Blachford in 1705.

Robert Pope Blachford inherited the Osborne estate from his father Brydges Blachford in 1768, and between 1774 and 1781, rebuilt the old Tudor house in fashionable classical style, turning the property into a three-storey residence, with a walled kitchen garden and a brick-built stable block.

This was the property that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert purchased for £28,000 in 1845 from Lady Isabella Blachford, a descendant of Robert Pope, concluding their search for a seaside retreat to escape the pressures of London and Windsor. As the existing house proved to be too small, Victoria and Albert decided to rebuild it, calling on the services of London builder and property developer, Thomas Cubitt. The house he built in stages from 1845-51 is in a quintessential Italian 'palazzo' style, inspired by Prince Albert's trip to Italy's Bay of Naples in 1839. First to be built was the pavilion, similar in layout to a London townhouse, which provided private accommodation for Victoria and Albert with a nursery on the upper floor, whilst the adjoining household wing accommodated the royal household. Old Osborne house was then demolished, and the main wing built in its place with terraced formal gardens to the south.

The royal couple also purchased additional land including neighbouring Barton Manor in order to extend the estate and increase its privacy. In all the estate's size increased from 800 to 5,000 acres. Barton Manor was 'restored' by Cubitt and had its outbuildings redesigned as a model farm.

Other buildings were added in later years. This included the Swiss Cottage and Museum for the royal children, stables to house 50 horses, dormitories for male and female servants, lodges, a landing house for the coastguard, and a sea wall along the coast. In 1890-91 the Durbar wing was added to the main house, providing a large dining space for formal banquets with rooms above it for Queen Victoria's youngest daughter, Beatrice and her family.

As Osborne was a private residence Victoria had to fund its purchase and all building works from her own funds, the privy purse. Queen Victoria's reign was marked by a great expansion of the British Empire that helped Britain emerge as the principal economic power, and it seems that the Queen benefitted personally from the nation's growing wealth and status. Victoria herself became so wealthy that she was the first British Sovereign who could afford to bequeath her private fortune to her family in her will.

The Queen continued to visit Osborne frequently until her death in 1901, with the estate passing down to her successor, Edward VII, who gifted it to the nation on his coronation day in 1902.

In 1903 part of the Osborne estate was developed into a college for naval cadets as reforms initiated in 1902 led to a rapid expansion of the navy and the need for additional training places. The Royal Naval College, Osborne was formally opened by Edward VII in August 1904 and operated for 17 years before closing in 1921 as by then the Royal Naval College in Dartmouth was able to accommodate all the new cadets required. The ground floor rooms in the pavilion, the Durbar room and Swiss Cottage and Museum were opened to the public in 1904. The rest of the house and grounds became the King Edward VII Convalescent Home for Officers, which also opened in 1904. Those areas opened to the public came under the management of English Heritage in 1986, and English Heritage took over the rest of the site when the convalescent home closed in 2000.

Timeline

The British monarch was the head of the British Empire, which at its height assumed governance over nearly half a billion people and covered a quarter of the world's land area. The Empire has its

roots in overseas exploration voyages commissioned by monarchs since the late 15th century, following earlier Spanish and Portuguese dominance in overseas exploration.

The first of these voyages was in 1496 when King Henry VII of England commissioned John Cabot, an Italian navigator and explorer, to discover a new route into Asia across the Atlantic Ocean. A year later he successfully crossed the Atlantic and made landfall in North America. Following this, England went on to establish overseas colonies with the first being Ireland in the late 16th century. Colonies across the Americas soon followed, with Virginia in 1607, Saint Kitts in 1623, Barbados in 1627, Montserrat in 1632, Anguilla in 1650 and Jamaica in 1655.

In the competition with other European nations, such as Spain and France, to form vast empires, it was the colonisation of these territories and the highly profitable network of global commerce that it spawned that facilitated Britain's rise to become the world's foremost imperial power.

At the heart of this economic and colonial growth was 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 and then transported them across the Atlantic to work on plantations established across the Americas. It was a trade initiated by the Portuguese in 1526 in response to the strong demand for cheap labour in the Americas, following the establishment of plantation economies based on cotton, sugar, and tobacco.

English involvement in the nefarious slave trade began in 1562, when John Hawkins formed a syndicate to finance a slaving voyage to Sierra Leone, looking to share in the profits the Portuguese were making from the trade in human beings. Setting sail with three ships, he captured and enslaved 300 Africans in Sierra Leone, and transported them to plantations in the Americas where they were traded in return for pearls, hides, and sugar. The profit made from the sale was so large that on his return to England, Queen Elizabeth commissioned additional voyages and granted Hawkins a coat of arms with a depiction of an enslaved man.

Using the wealth generated from plantation enslavement, Britain went on to build its trading interests across the globe, and colonise more territories, supported by an expanded royal navy. This enabled the country to generate great wealth as British traders were able to buy and sell commodities from and to every corner of the empire. By the end of the 18th century Britain was the world's principal slave trading nation and economic power, with more than half of the world's goods being traded though British hands and with British currency. The wealth generated funded institutions, banks and infrastructure across Britain, as well as private properties, and would later contribute to the Industrial Revolution, further enriching Britain. The nation's involvement in the trade continued until the early 19th century, by which point, the combination of the success of the Industrial Revolution, the cost of supressing regular slave rebellions and a growing abolition movement made goods produced by enslaved workers less important to the British economy.

The Slave Trade Act of 1807 restricted the transportation of enslaved persons throughout the Empire and the Slavery Abolition Act 0f 1833 eventually led to emancipation throughout the British Empire by 1st August 1838. To compensate slave owners for the loss of what they considered their 'property', the government set aside £20 million (equivalent to many billions today). This amount had to be borrowed and was only fully paid off by British taxpayers in 2015. It did not offer formerly enslaved people any compensation or reparations.

Colonial connections

With its peripheral location on the sparsely populated Isle of Wight, it can be easy to forget that Osborne House isn't far from the busy port of Southampton, known then as the gateway to the world. Whilst the house's coastal location and expansive grounds enabled the royal family to live a life of relative seclusion, their proximity to the busy port and the ease of access it afforded to the world meant that they were never far from the evidence of empire, and empire that Victoria herself saw as a civilising and benign influence.

The Queen's reign oversaw Britain's 'Imperial Century', so called because of the rapid expansion of territorial governance and dominance in world trade. By the end of the 19th century, the Empire covered approximately one quarter of the worlds land surface and nearly half a billion people, which was one fifth of the world's population at the time. New colonies established during the century included Egypt, New Zealand, Kenya, Ghana, Togo, Uganda, Nigeria, and Burma. The century also saw large numbers of settlers from the British Isles migrating to British dominions such as Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, where British rule had severely diminished the indigenous populations.

With the Empire, Britain was able to establish and maintain economic dominance as it afforded Britons the ability to easily acquire raw materials such as cotton and sugar cane, turn them into goods inexpensively and sell them freely in a global market covering every continent. This was combined with the advent of the Industrial Revolution, which enabled products to be produced at a speed and on a scale never seen before. Together, this meant that by 1851, Britain was the world's dominant exporter and first global industrial power, producing much of the world's coal, iron, steel, and textiles. Every week ships arriving to and from ports such as Southampton, would be carrying merchants, traders, soldiers, emigrants etc, alongside these goods, making Britain a very wealthy nation.

Before the Queen ascended to the throne in 1837, Britain was in the process of formally abolishing the transatlantic slave trade throughout the Empire. Despite this, Britain continued to benefit from the slave trade long after abolition as the country continued to import materials such as cotton from the United States, which still relied on slave labour to fuel the mills in Northern England. Also the trading networks established during the era of slavery continued to be exploited, and the wealth earned from the economies of enslavement continued to be invested in new infrastructure, trade and industrial production.

At the same time, Britain relied on a system of indentured servitude mainly from the Indian sub-continent to staff plantations across the colonies, as a substitute for the enforced labour provided by formerly enslaved Africans. From 1840 to 1870, it is estimated that over one million Indians were transported to British colonies in the Caribbean and Africa, with a smaller portion to Britain itself. At Osborne House, for example, there were a number of Indian servants attending to the royal household at the time.

Britain's continued reliance on goods produced by slavery and the system of indentured servitude, meant that even with abolition, the country continued to rely on exploitation to generate the great wealth which financed the wars, invasions, and excursions the country undertook in its mission to become the world's foremost colonial power by the end of the 19th century.

Queen Victoria, like many of the British elite, benefitted from this wealth and it was used to fund the creation of properties and organisations that enriched them further. In the case of the monarch, she was able to privately invest in properties across the Britain and the Americas, including the early skyscrapers in New York, said to have "helped her pennies grow" to tens of millions of pounds. She became so wealthy that unlike her predecessors who bequeathed nothing but debts to their

successors, she became the first British sovereign who bequeathed private fortunes and properties to her family and successor. This wealth was also used to the fund the creation and renovations of Osborne House as unlike the Crown Estates of Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle, it was funded entirely by the Monarch's personal funds and therefore privately owned.

Sarah Forbes Bonetta

Figure 1 Portrait of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, 1862, Camille Silvy. Accessed via Wikipedia.

It is often thought that the historic presence of Black people in Britain began and ended with Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Two frequent visitors to Osborne House, Sarah Forbes Bonetta, a Yoruba orphan from Nigeria and her daughter Victoria Davies, are evidence to the contrary. Unique figures in British history, their stories reflect a position of privilege that most living in Victorian Britain could only imagine, whilst at the same time highlighting how absent Black women have been from the little that has been written and retained in archived about the longevity of the nation's Black presence.

Born as Omoba Aina, in Oke-Odan, a village in the Nigerian administrative area now known as Yewa South in the Ogun State, Sarah was raised as a princess of the Yewa (formerly Egbado) tribe. She resided in Oke-Odan with her family until 1848, when she was orphaned during a war with the nearby Kingdom of Dahomey at the age of five. The Kingdom, which is located in the area known today as Northern Benin, was an important regional power because of their organised domestic economy which was built on conquest and slave labour.

The war which left many of her fellow tribe members dead or enslaved, led to Aina being captured and enslaved by Dahomey's ruling monarch, King Ghezo. As her royal background designating her as an important prisoner, she was spared from being sold into the transatlantic slave trade. Instead, she was kept as a captive in King Ghezo's court, where she remained for the next two years, until the arrival of the British naval captain, Frederick E. Forbes in 1850. Forbes was visiting Dahomey on a British diplomatic mission set up to persuade African leaders to end their involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, following the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act.

Despite two visits, Forbes was unsuccessful in his negotiations with King Ghezo to end Dahomey's participation in the trade and on his last visit was instead presented with a number of gifts, one of which was Aina. Out of moral concern for her likely and deadly fate of being executed as part of a Dahoman ceremony, Captain Forbes accepted her on behalf of Queen Victoria and returned to Britain in July 1850, with plans for the British government to be responsible for her care.

During this time, the majority of Black people present in Britain were soldiers, domestic servants and formerly enslaved Africans who were emancipated following the abolition of slavery a few years earlier. Due to the racist beliefs that were used to justify the subjugation of Black people during the slave trade and colonialism, many Black people suffered social prejudice and lived in poverty. As a ward of the British State, Aina was in a position of privilege that most in Victorian Britain could only imagine and yet her treatment whilst she was in England would show the unique dichotomy she faced as a Black African girl living amongst the British elite.

Before beginning the journey back to England she was christened at a mission church and renamed Sarah Forbes Bonetta, after Captain Forbes and his ship, the HMS Bonetta, much like the way that enslaved Africans were renamed after their owners.

She remained with the Forbes family for a few months and during this time, Forbes put together a proposal to present to the government for her care, describing her as intelligent, good mannered and able to speak English fluently. He eventually won approval to present his case directly to Queen Victoria and in November 1850, she was presented to the Queen who was said to have become so enamoured by the "poor little Negro girl" that she paid for Sarah to be educated at the Annie Walsh Memorial School in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as her ward (Source of the quotation: Royal Archives (RA) Queen Victoria's Journal, 1850; cited by Bressey 2005, p. 255).

She was chosen to be educated in Sierra Leone as it was widely believed that England's climate was fatal to the health of African children due to the number of children who had died en route to England during Britain's involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

She returned to England in 1855, aged twelve and was entrusted to the care of Rev Frederick Scheon and his wife, who lived at Palm Cottage, Canterbury Street, Gillingham. In the years that followed the Queen hosted her at Osborne House several times for periods ranging from days to months.

Figure 2 Photograph of James Pinson Labulo Davies and Sarah Forbes Bonetta (Sarah Davies), by Camille Silvy. Accessed via Wikipedia

In 1862, she was granted permission by the Queen to marry the Sierra Leone-born Captain James Pinson Labulo Davies in Brighton. Following her marriage, she split her time between Lagos and England, giving birth to three children. Her eldest was called Victoria Davies, named after the Queen, who was also her godmother.

Despite her closeness to the Queen, over the next few years, Sarah's family faced many financial difficulties culminating in Captain Davies being taken to court in early 1880 on charges of fraud. Though he won, the stress of the case and their financial difficulties took a toll on Sarah's health. In May 1880, she left Lagos for Madeira, a Portuguese island in the Atlantic Ocean to recuperate and escape the stress. However, after receiving word that all the property she owned, not secured to her in the marriage contract by her trustees, had been handed over to her husband's trustee in bankruptcy, her health deteriorated further, and she died of tuberculosis on the 15th of August 1880.

Upon her death, Sarah's financial difficulties left her children as reliant on the generosity of the Queen as she had been. Sarah's eldest daughter Victoria Davies left for England, shortly after her death, to meet with her godmother, the Queen. At the Queen's expense, Victoria Davies attended Cheltenham Ladies College and was later given an annuity by the Queen which allowed her to remain in England and maintain a close relationship with the Queen. She continued to visit the Queen at Osborne House and her other royal residences, throughout her life. They were so close that when Victoria Davies had her first child, the monarch's youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice, became the child's godmother.

The collections

Although famous for its Italianate exterior, a walk through Osborne House will reveal how some of the ornate furniture, artefacts, and portraits that line its walls are reflective of hidden geographies that tell the story of the power of the British monarchy and its empire.

The Durbar Wing, for example, which was completed in 1891 to house the Queen's youngest daughter, Princess Beatrice, and her family, contains various architectural stylings and pieces of artwork that speak to the Queen's status as Empress of India. Dozens of portraits of people from India line the walls of the Durban corridor. Some of the people depicted are named such as Maharajah Duleep Singh, the deposed fifth Maharajah of Lahore who as a result of the second Anglo-Sikh war in 1848, was sent to Britain in exile. The corridor opens into a large room known as the Durbar room, which was designed by Lockwood Kipling, father of the author Rudyard Kipling, in a Northern Indian architectural style, inspired by the Queen's role as Empress of India. The focal point of the room is an intricate piece of plasterwork designed by Indian plasterer Bhai Ram Sing, that depicts a peacock, a significant symbol in Indian mythology.

Throughout the house, other rooms, pieces of artwork and furniture reveal similar links to colonial history. One example is the portrait of Prince Alamayou, the only legitimate son of Tewodros II, the Emperor of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). He was brought to England by Tristam Charles Sawyer Speedy, an army officer and explorer in 1868, following his father's suicide that took place after Abyssinia's defeat against the British in the Battle of Magdala. Similar to Sarah Forbes Bonetta, he was presented to Queen Victoria at Osborne House, where the Queen expressed great interest in him. However, his arrival and presentation at Osborne is where the similarities between Alamayou and Sarah end. This is because, unlike Sarah, upon his arrival, he got to keep his name, had an official portrait painted and was schooled in England until he died of pleurisy aged eighteen. Perhaps speaking to the differences between how girls and boys were treated, or indeed whether it mattered if the person of colour came from a British colony or not.

Figure 3 Prince Alemayehu, as photographed by Julia Margaret Cameron at the Isle of Wight in 1868. Accessed via Wikipedia.

This portrait is one of the few connections that Osborne has to the African diaspora that is displayed prominently. Other objects reflecting a Black presence are left uninterpreted. Down the Equerries' corridor for example, there is a painting called *The Embarkation* which includes a 'black boy', an 'Arab man' and a naked, brown skinned 'servant'. In the Durbar room entrance hall, on one wall, there is a portrait of a black boy dressed in what appears to be a uniform. Their background remains unknown as there is no text accompanying the portrait to indicate who this boy is and why his portrait is hanging in Osborne House. Of Sarah Forbes Bonetta and her daughter Victoria Davies, figures who were known to have had a presence at the house, no contemporaneous portraits of them line the walls to indicate their past presence.

Conclusion

This report makes clear how much of modern Britain was built on the proceeds of slavery and how Osborne House, a former royal residence is no exception to this. As a country house known worldwide for its architectural style and opulence, to many Osborne has simply been a beautiful royal backdrop to a wonderful visitor experience. However, with its colonial connections, links to

British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and hidden Black presence, it is also a place that can speak profoundly about the past and who we are as a nation. There is a reason why many of these histories were hidden and in uncovering them, we can help to dispel myths and narratives that uphold troubling legacies today.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Selected items from the Osborne House collections illustrating aspects of the property's links to enslavement history, colonialism and the Atlantic world.

Source: The Royal Collection Trust – online catalogue
https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/page/1

Collection reference	Title / Short description	Details
RCIN 84551	Baby's bonnet c.1842 (Jamaica)	A baby's bonnet from Jamaica. Made from pink silk with Jamaican lace-bark (previously identified as flax) laid over the top and gathered at the edges. It has pink silk ties. Dimensions: 23.0 x 18.0 x 4.0 cm Provenance: This cap was sent to HRH Princess Victoria (1840-1901) from Jamaica in 1849.

RCIN 420766	Watercolour portrait of Prince Alamayou, aged 7 (1868) – painted at Osborne House by Reginald Easton (1807-93)	Portrait of Prince Alamayou, son of Tewodros II (1818–68), Emperor of Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia). Following his father's suicide in 1868, Alamayou was brought to England by army officer Tristam Charles Sawyer Speedy (1836–1910). Alamayou lived with Captain Speedy on the Isle of Wight and was presented to Queen Victoria at Osborne House.
RCIN 1040697	Natural history/zoology book about the study of fish in British Guiana (today's Guyana), 1841-43	Ichthyology : fishes of British Guiana / Robert H. Schomburgk. (The Naturalist's Library ; v. 30. Ichthyology ; v. 3). 1841-43. 12mo. Vol. 30 of 40. Located in the Drawing Room at Osborne House.
RCIN 41202	Mahogany serving table, c. 1825-75	A mahogany serving table with a low shaped back ledge with scrolling ends and a central cresting, projecting ends and entablature, resting on two robustly carved winged lion monopodia supports. Located in the Dining Room at Osborne House. It is likely the wood was sourced from tropical forests in Central America and the Caribbean region.
RCIN 403652	Portrait in oils of a Black sitter – located at The Durbar Entrance Hall, Osborne House	The portrait depicts Willem Jerve Koetjie (1850-1867), a page boy who completed four years' service in the household of Queen Victoria's daughter, Princess Alice (1843-78). In this portrait, Willem Jerve Koetjie wears a black livery jacket trimmed with silver edging over a red waistcoat. Materials: Oil on canvas. Dimensions: 58.3 x 49.7 cm. Provenance: Presented to Queen Victoria by Princess Alice, Grand Duchess of Hesse, 1867; recorded at Osborne House, 1876

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