Witley Court Report

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2 July 2021

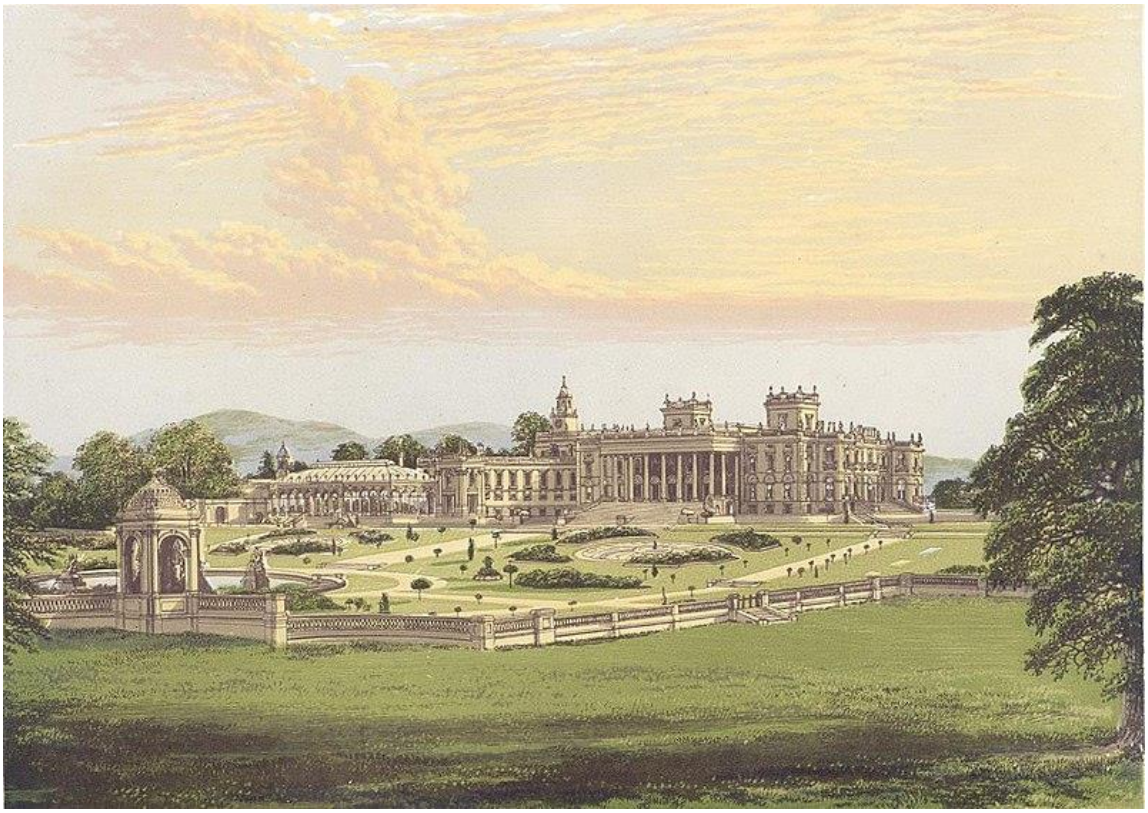

Figure 1 Watercolour of Witley Court with the gardens as designed by William Andrews Nesfield, by William Andrews Nesfield, 1880. Accessed by Wikipedia.

Abstract

Formerly a place of lavish Victorian parties and royal entertainment, the neoclassical mansion of Witley Court in Worcestershire, West Midlands is known today for its near-total destruction caused by a devastating fire in 1937. Now one of England's most spectacular ruins, its remaining walls, and the surrounding village of Great Witley that was created to serve it, still give a sense of the wealth and opulence that was once displayed there.

Past work on the history of Witley Court has focused mainly on how its wealthy owners created an architectural masterpiece set within sumptuous gardens and grounds. Until relatively recently however, little attention had been given to the sources of wealth which made the development of Witley Court possible.

A look past the façade will reveal a journey through a history of empire, where successive generations of two resident families, the Foleys and Wards, economically prospered from their involvement in Atlantic slave-trading and Britain’s colonial expansion across the globe.

The Iron Assault

For nearly two centuries, Witley Court was owned by the Foley family, whose fortunes were at first based on the iron industry.

The Foleys first became associated with Witley Court when Thomas Foley (1617 – 1677) purchased the estate in 1655. At the time, Witley Court was a substantial Jacobean mansion, which had been developed in turn from a medieval manor house by the Russell family.

Thomas's purchase of Witley Court was made possible through the Foleys involvement in Britain's burgeoning ironworks industry. Though iron had been manufactured in Britain since prehistoric times, the 17th and early 18th centuries saw numerous changes take place which enabled iron manufacturers to enrich themselves in ways never seen before. The introduction of new technology led to a step change in iron production processes around this time most notably the replacement of charcoal with coking coal in blast furnaces, leading to the emergence of the West Midlands as an important centre of iron manufacture serving both national and global markets.

These developments helped set the stage for Britain's involvement and dominance in the transatlantic slave trade as the manufacture of iron was essential to the success of Britain's plantation economies across the Atlantic world. Chains, shackles, branding irons, guns and other weapons and tools used by British slave traders, plantation owners and the military who supported them were iron-made, as were most shipbuilding materials. As the trade in enslaved Africans and Britain's colonial footprint expanded across the globe, the iron industry saw incredible growth. The coal industry saw similar benefits, as it was used in iron's production.

As a family of ironworkers from the Midlands, the Foleys contributed to the industry's growth and were able to become enormously wealthy from it.

Building an Empire

Thomas Foley I was the eldest son of Richard Foley (1580-1657), a parliamentarian and prominent ironmaster from Stourbridge, West Midlands. Born in Dudley, Richard inherited a modest nail-making business from his father. By the time he was 50, however he had converted this business into an iron production empire that covered Staffordshire, Worcestershire, and Shropshire.

His mercantile success was due to his integration of the whole iron production process from the moment the iron ore was delivered to the furnace to when the rods were given to the nailers, achieved through the purchase of several furnaces, forges and nail shaping sites across the Midlands. This was also helped by Richard being one of the first to use the newest developments in iron production technology such as slitting mills, which made the process faster and more efficient than ever before. Richard's success helped propel the Midlands to the forefront of the country's iron production at a time when naval expeditions and wars that were fought for the purpose of acquiring colonies across the New World, increased demand for nails and other iron wares.

Iron manufacturers like the Foleys from the Midlands played a leading role in supplying armaments to the opposing sides during the English Civil War, and to the military in the post-war period and profited enormously from it. For example, during 1644 and 1645 alone, during the English Civil Wars of the mid-17th century, Thomas Foley, though he was a Parliamentarian supporter, supplied as many as 10,000 pike-heads to the royalist cause, together with bullets, grenades, cannon, shot and other iron wares.

Richard Foley's wealth helped set up three of his sons - Richard, Thomas, and Robert, as ironmasters, providing them with business connections and property. Upon Richard's death, Thomas Foley as the eldest son from his second marriage, inherited most of his father's fortune and business interests. Over the next 40 years, he used this wealth and his political status as an MP to increase the profits of the family business by expanding its commercial links. In 1651, he invested in ironworks in New England, a region comprising the North American colonies of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont that had been settled by the British.

In 1652, he married Anne Browne of Spelmonden in Kent, daughter of John Browne, the greatest gun manufacturer in the country and the first King's Gun founder. In this role, John had supplied Oliver Cromwell's Navy with ordnance, especially cannons and guns during the Commonwealth period. His sons, George and John continued the business with Thomas Foley as a partner. In the 1650s and '60s they were the main supplier of ordnance for the Navy during a period when the island of Jamaica was seized from the Spanish (1655) and the colonies of New York, New Jersey and Delaware were established. These formative years for the British Empire saw the reinforcement of the navy's role in seizing and protecting the colonies, as most of those colonies were 'won' in battles against other European powers, with examples being New York taken from the Dutch and Jamaica from the Spanish. Thomas played an important role in the partnership, supplying iron for making the guns. In this way, the Browne and Foley partnership helped to ensure the prestige of the navy whose brief increasingly was to ensure British hegemony over the Atlantic trade. The wealth earned from his various business ventures enabled Thomas to purchase Witley Court, and several smaller properties across the country, which helped set up further generations of the Foleys.

New Money, New Politics, New Power

The immense wealth earned from the Foley iron production empire propelled them from the middle to the upper classes. With this newfound wealth and status, further generations of the Foleys, decided to gradually withdraw from direct involvement in the iron industry that had made them wealthy and focus more on building up their landed estates and getting involved in politics. To achieve this, the Foleys concentrated on philanthropical efforts, the making of various additions and improvements to Witley Court and the neighbouring village of Great Witley and forming marriage alliances and partnerships with families that had strong political and mercantile connections and investments in the British Empire and the triangular trade.

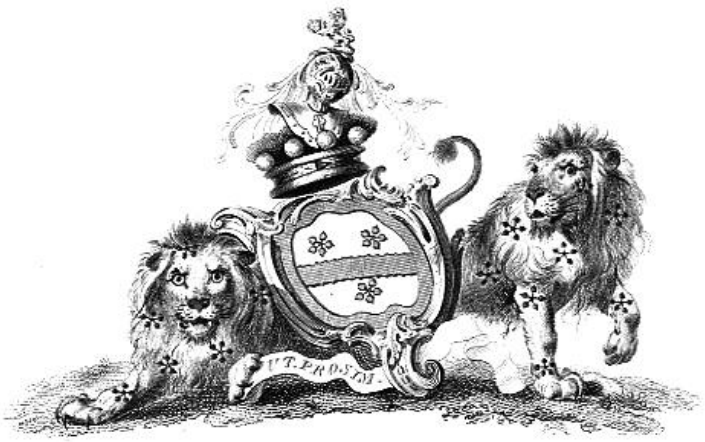

Figure 2 Baron Foley Coat of Arms, Taken from Catton's English Peerage, 1790 by Charles Catton. Accessed via Wikipedia.

Thomas Foley's sister Martha married William (Jolley) Jolliffe (1622 -1712), who was an MP who held important posts in the Royal African Company, the Levant Company and later the East India Company, a good example of intertwined colonial histories. These were all colonial charter companies set up to assume governance over foreign trading ports and posts enabling Britain to build a global monopoly on commerce. This was achieved through the seizure and colonisation of territories, with the East India Company operating in large parts of the Indian subcontinent, parts of

Southeast Asia and Hong Kong. Combined with the Navigation Acts which were a series of Laws enacted to regulate British ships, shipping, trade, and commerce so as to ensure all British trade was carried by British ships, and colonial goods could only be exported to Britain or to other British colonies. This protectionist policy helped make the country enormously wealthy as British traders had the monopoly on all goods and trade produced, imported and exported across the Empire.

Thomas Foley's grandson, also named Thomas (1673-1733) was created the 1st Baron Foley of Kidderminster in 1712 and married Mary Strode, the daughter and heir of Thomas Strode (1628-1699) a wealthy London lawyer and sergeant-at-law. Through their marriage settlement, he earned £30,000 which allowing for inflation would be worth between £3 - £6.8 million today.

The Strodes had strong mercantile links to the Americas, in particular to the recently colonised island of Barbados and North American colony of Carolina. Mary was the niece of John Strode, an MP who held the office of farmer of export duties for Barbados and the Leeward Islands from 1670-84. In this role, he earned some £400 pa from the collection of duties on rum and sugar in Barbados. He was also a leading planter in South Carolina by 1671. At the time, the Carolina slave trade, was the largest among the British colonies in North America, with rice being the main cash crop.

Figure 3 1676 map of the British colony of Carolina, created by John Speed. Accessed via Wikipedia public domain.

A further but nonetheless relevant connection can be found in the marriage of the 1st Baron Foley's (1673–1733) sister Elizabeth to Robert Harley (1661-1724), a notable Conservative politician, First Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer in 1685.

Harley had a strong interest in expanding the scope of the nefarious trade in enslaved Africans. He invested heavily the Royal African Company, which was originally set in 1660 to establish colonies in Africa. It soon shifted its focus to the establishment and sustainment of Britain's slave trading economy in Africa, with the company being responsible for shipping more enslaved Africans to the Americas than any other company in the history of the Atlantic slave trade. Harley supported the establishment of the South Sea Company as he wished to see some important commercial and governmental role for the Royal African Company after it lost its monopoly in the trade in 1698 due to financial troubles.

Founded in January 1711, the South Sea Company was created as a public-private partnership to consolidate and reduce the cost of the national debt. It was intended to be a Conservative competitor to the Bank of England's financial dominance in the transatlantic slave economy. To help achieve this, Harley appointed the 3rd Baron Foley, his wife's cousin, as the Commissioner of Trade and Plantations in 1711. This was a lucrative post which took a sustained and direct interest in protecting the interests of British Caribbean sugar planters.

In 1713, Harley became the Governor of the South Sea Company. That same year, the company was granted the Asiento de Negros monopoly contract, enabling them to enslave and transport 144,000 people per year to Spanish South America. The contract led to a substantial increase in the number of enslaved Africans working on plantations. Though the company infamously crashed in 1720 and

ruined thousands of investors in an event known as the South Sea Bubble, the wealth and position which Harley derived from his investments were significantly linked to Britain's colonial and enslavement related activities.

A further and more distant connection to the South Sea Company for the Foleys can be found in the family's relationship with the Hoares. The Foleys and the Hoares were linked through the marriage of the 1st Baron Foley's grandnephew to the second daughter of Henry Hoare (1677-1724).

The Hoares are known for founding C. Hoare & Co, the oldest private bank in the United Kingdom and the second to be established ever after the Bank of England. Henry inherited the bank from his father, Richard (1648 -1719) who founded it. As one of the oldest banks, it played a pivotal role in financing Britain's role in the trade of enslaved Africans. The bank invested heavily in the South Sea Company, with the bank and Henry being among very few to benefit from the South Sea Bubble, as he earned £28,000, a sum worth between £3 and £5 billion in today's money, from cashing in shares before the crash.

As many of the Foleys banked with C. Hoare & Co, they were saved from ruin after the crash. The 1st Baron Foley (1673-1733) 'lost heavily' when the bubble burst 'but remained a wealthy man' and was able to begin plans to rebuild Great Witley Church where he was buried.

Although some of these connections are distant to Witley Court, it exemplifies the political, mercantile and financial benefits that such marriage alliances brought to a family.

Changing Fortunes

With the money earned from his inheritance, the 1st Baron Foley set out to rebuild and renovate the village of Great Witley, starting with a new church, however he died before any work could start. In 1735, his son, Thomas, the 2nd Baron Foley (1703–1766) constructed the new parish church. In 1747, he commissioned James Gibbs to decorate the interior in a then-fashionable Baroque style, with paintings and furnishings acquired at the auction of the contents of Cannons in Middlesex, the former home of the James Brydges, 1st Duke of Chandos. This included painted panels by Antonio Bellucci, and ten hand painted windows by Joshua Price of London. Interestingly Cannons had been demolished as the Brydges family had been impoverished by losses in the South Sea Bubble.

A few years later, the park was landscaped, which included the relocation and expansion of the village of Great Witley. In the mid-18th century, a lake known as Front Pool was created to the north of the house by damming the brook that feeds it. Sometime between 1772 and 1794 an ornamental woodland known as the wilderness was planted to the north-east, with walks laid out along the banks of the lake and brook.

In 1805, the 3rd Baron Foley, was able to commission John Nash, the leading Regency architect, to design a succession of ambitious alterations to Witley Court. These included the addition of two massive porticos to the north and south fronts.

These improvements, however, combined with the move away from ironworking as a source of wealth, came at a significant cost for the Foleys as it depleted their family fortune, with the Foleys having to eventually sell the estate in 1833 to ward off bankruptcy.

Heirs and inheritors

The other main family that contributed to the development of the Witley Court estate was the Ward family. A family of prominent politicians and landowners, their association with Witley began in 1837, when the trustees of William Ward (1817 – 1885) purchased the estate from the 4th Baron Foley. Although an orphan at 16 and therefore still a minor, William Ward was one of the richest individuals in England with an inheritance that included a fortune built on the income from more than 200 coal and iron ore mines in the West Midlands and plantations in Jamaica acquired from his second cousin, John William Ward, 1st Earl of Dudley (1781-1833). John William Ward owned three plantations in Jamaica that he inherited from his grandmother Lady Mary, Viscountess Dudley and Ward. These were the Whitney and Rymesbury estates in the Jamaican parish of Clarendon and the New Yarmouth estate in the former Jamaican parish of Vere, that now constitutes part of Clarendon.

At the time the trustees purchased Witley, Britain was in the process of abolishing slavery throughout its Empire – primarily as a result of the slave rebellions that had destabilised the plantation economy, the lobbying of anti-slavery campaigners and the legislative debates taking place in the British Parliament. In 1826, having inherited the Jamaican plantations, John William Ward tried to prevent abolition by speaking against a proposal to abolish slavery in the British Colonies in parliament. Nonetheless, the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 eventually led to emancipation throughout the British Empire by 1st August 1838. 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.

According to the UCL Legacies of British Slave-Ownership database, John William Ward was awarded £12,728 for the emancipation of 655 enslaved people from the three plantations. However, as he had died by the time the funds came through, without any heirs, his fortune was distributed among distant family members, with William Ward's trustees receiving the Jamaican estates and the slavery compensation payment.

With the immense wealth earned from his inheritance, William Ward commissioned architect Samuel Whitfield Daukes, who had already altered his London house, Dudley House on Park Lane, and the church at Great Witley, to remodel the house at Witley Court. The renovations, which were largely complete by 1860, involved using ashlar stone cladding over the existing red brickwork in the ornate Italianate style popularised by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert for their Osborne House residence on the Isle of Wight. Other new additions included a new curving wing which led to a vast glass-roofed conservatory.

William also commissioned the leading garden designer William Andrews Nesfield to create an ornate formal garden to complement the remodelled mansion. The garden, which included grand formal parterres and the Perseus and Andromeda fountain, was said by Nesfield to be his 'monster work'. These renovations helped Witley Court reach the peak of grandeur, as it was now host to a range of formal lavish parties, some of which were attended by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII).

Conclusion

Once one of the great country houses of England and now one of the country's most spectacular ruins, a walk around Witley Court will still enable one to gain a sense of the opulence and scale of what once was, from the mixture of architectural styles ranging from Jacobean to Italianate, to the surrounding gardens that speak of its Victorian grandeur. But as I hope to have shown in this

investigation, a look past the grand façade reveals how the foundations of Witley Court were built on a dark history. One that is connected to the founding of the British Empire, Jamaican sugar fortunes and the nefarious Atlantic trade.

Exploring the sources of wealth of the two most prominent families at Witley Court, the Foleys and the Wards, reveals how embedded enslavement is in the house's history. From the Foleys iron production empire that enabled its first expansion, to the Ward's slavery compensation award that enabled further development of the estate, slavery-derived wealth has always been invested into Witley Court and elevated the wealth of its residents. This is typical of many estates that display opulence but do not state the details of how that opulence was achieved. As such, this investigation reveals the varied ways in which enslaved labour benefitted the aristocracy, from the trade which helped to establish new landed dynasties to the compensation that was awarded to slaveholding families after abolition.

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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.