

## Decolonising the landscape talk

What I mean by radical history is I use the term to describe both the content and the form of the story we intend to tell about our area's past. The content will focus upon places in our local landscape that have a radical history, in a sort of upside-down view of 'heritage'. Christopher Hill wrote of a world turned upside-down; that is how we intend to write of our heritage. Places and stories that are often forgotten or ignored will be brought back to life; conventional narratives and explanations will be questioned. I remember the excitement of reading E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* on my 21st birthday and have never forgotten his wish that the lives of ordinary people should be rescued from 'the enormous condescension of posterity'. That's what we will be doing in terms of places, people and posterity.

I will now address what I mean by a radical approach: this has a number of varying meanings. One meaning is in terms of collaboration: the history that is written will be produced by a group of people in a number of different ways, using different media, rather than by anyone 'voyaging alone on strange seas of thought'.

The first thing to say about walking locally to reveal a hidden colonial landscape is that it's not just the obvious – the grand country houses and so on. The colonial can also be obscured by the ordinary. The colonial can be mediated by what used to be called the Keynesian multiplier effect.

Take Chalford, for example. So many jobs and livelihoods were dependent upon the East India Company.

Chalford has such a labyrinth of weavers' walks and footpaths –  
And on a mid-winter's day, with plumes of smoke rising from Chalford Bottom  
Mistletoe in the trees, light folded in envelopes of cloud,  
It's hard to imagine that this picturesque Cotswold village  
Was once hand in glove with the East India Company,  
As at Seville's Upper Mill,  
Now a select residential development,  
With the stream, now private and sequestered,  
Between houses and a car park.  
The information plaques in the village and alongside the canal mention the EIC trading links  
But only in terms of the profits made.  
There is no hint of oppression, imperialism, war, or the ideology of racism,  
No hint of the fact that the East India Company was also involved in the slave trade.

And a typical information plaque in Nailsworth:

'Gigg is so small and tucked away that it is hard to imagine that it was once the generator of great wealth. In the 1790s John Remmington bought it and other mills. From the profits he added a sumptuous wing to his house up the hill at Barton End. His cloth was bought by the East India Company for sale to China.'

Our plaque would be different:

These cottages clambering up the Cotswold hillsides, this Golden Valley harmony of water, wood and stone is derived, in some degree, from war, slavery, racism, opium and imperialism.

The second area I wish to look at is revealing a hidden Black presence and presence of people of colour within Gloucestershire. Here are a just few parish register entries up to the abolition of slavery from around Stroud:

1. Bisley, 1603: John Davies 'ye black' was buried.
2. Nympsfield, 1719: Daniel 'a black stranger' buried.
3. Nympsfield, 1773: Francis London 'a servant to the Rt. Hon. Lord Ducie – supposed to be 17 years of age', 'a native of Africa' was baptised.
4. Rodborough, 1778: William Jubiter – 'black' was buried.
5. Stroud, 1786: Adam John Parker, Negro, 32, was buried. Parish funeral.
6. Frocester, 1790: William Frocester, supposed to be 11 or 12 years old, born on the island of Barbados, now a servant of Edward Bigland Esq. residing in Jamaica, was baptised.
7. Stroud, 1801: William Eliis, son of Qualquay Assedew, a Negro of Guinea, aged 12 years, was baptised.
8. Bisley, 1815: Testimonial from Richard Raikes, supporting the application of John Hart, Writing Master, to the post of master at Bisley Blue Coat School, 'Unfortunately he is a Mulatto, a native of the West Indies'.
9. Michinhampton, 1826: Thomas Davies, 'an infirm travelling Black', was buried, 67 years old.

This incomplete list offers some tantalising possibilities: historical research and guided historical imagination to recreate these hidden lives and street names or place names with information plaques. This could conceivably occur through working with and for schools and with and through the Black Ark arts group and Stroud District Council. If you go to the Radical Stroud website and type 'parish registers' into the search box, then you will find the whole county's relevant entries.

The next area to address is the beneficiaries of the abolition of enslavement. Stroud is rightly proud of its unique arch but that hides a few backstories, of course. First up, the arch

inevitably and monumentally foregrounds White abolitionists. Secondly, there's the people who benefited from abolition in this county.

Bristol, Clifton, spa towns such as Bath, Cheltenham, the city of Gloucester, rural Gloucestershire... the West Country was awash with beneficiaries. I've done some research for my daughter's school in London and London was minor, I felt, in terms of compensation compared with the West Country. And as you probably know, the compensation paid to owners of enslaved people amounted to over £17 billion in today's values; that was 40% of gross domestic product then in 1833, and taxpayers only stopped paying off the interest on that loan in 2015.

I just want to focus on a few locals: the Reverend Ostrehan of Sheepscombe – there is a memorial in the church there, praising his Christian beneficence. It doesn't mention Jamaica. Then there's Samuel Baker up at Lypiatt. His compensation helped pay for the development of Gloucester Docks and Bakers Quay. This was the hub of Gloucester's industrial revolution. Baker also used his ill-gotten gains to invest in the development of the railway infrastructure in the Forest of Dean coalfields.

And then, in terms of our landscape, the Great Western Railway was funded to a large degree by Bristol capitalists, enriched by compensation. And so, our branch line from Swindon arguably exists because of that. Research needs doing into whether Cheltenham slave-owners helped pay for that branch line. The UCL database provides that source for research. Finally, a mention of the Gladstone family and the oft-revered Liberal prime minister. They had a Gloucester connection and no one gained more from compensation than the Gladstones. And the Gladstones invested heavily in railways. The railway revolution, that modernisation of Britain's economy that led to the Great Exhibition and Britain as 'The Workshop of the World'... it wasn't entrepreneurial flair: it was enslavement money.

Next up: the famous Stroud Scarlet cloth. It was some ten years ago that I challenged the seeming worship of Stroud Scarlet cloth with this piece. At that point, I was thinking about Stroud Scarlet's involvement in the triangular trade, and whether and how much of it went from Bristol to Africa. Now, we all know the pictures of Stroud Scarlet cloth stretched out on tenterhooks in Rodborough Fields. But we have to remember where it went. This martial and imperial country was at war for some three-quarters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries... three out of every four years!

But the Redcoats were also part of the military infrastructure that maintained the plantocracy in the West Indies. Indeed, so intimidating a colour was that which was associated with the military that plantation owners would deliberately wear red to intimidate the enslaved as they made their way around the islands. Hear this from *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Trade War* by Vincent Brown:

'Slaves generally avoided anyone wearing a red coat, like those worn by grenadiers, he noted, and as a result, "some Gentlemen put on a coat of that Colour when they Travell" to deter trouble on the roads.'

And in *Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain*, Padraic X. Scanlon shows how Redcoats (Stroud Scarlet) were used to quell demonstrations after abolition – because there was no immediate freedom, of course. The enslaved thought that they were free. But they weren't. Instead: the so-called apprenticeship system. Some backstory that, to the abolition arch.

Now, the one you've been waiting for: grand country houses.

The stately homes of England

How beautiful they stand  
To prove the upper classes  
Still have the upper hand

Hierarchy, aristocracy, blue blood, lineage and 'Heritage':  
Grandeur, wealth, stability, beauty, power, art, culture, landscaped gardens,  
Arcadia, follies, the classics, aesthetics, elegance, manners, the Grand Tour,  
The Augustan Age of Elegance,  
The Age of Enlightenment –

This is the overt heritage of the English Stately Home.

But what of the covert heritage of some of these august piles –

Plantations, sugar, tobacco, the triangular trade, slaving,  
Abolition compensation, colonial office in the West Indies,  
From the counting house to the country house...

Here followeth a list taken from Madge Dresser's

English Heritage publication *Slavery and the British Country House*,

This list starts in the north of Gloucestershire and takes an erratic southerly line,

Down through Bristol and into Somerset,

With a postscript detour west beyond the Severn and the Bristol Channel:

Wallsworth Hall, Badgeworth Court, Quedgeley House, Barrington Park, Frampton Court,

Lypiatt Park, Cirencester Park, Newark Park, Ozleworth Park,

Badminton House, Dodington House, Dyrham Park, Cleeve Hill House,

Oldbury Court, Henbury Great House, Kingsweston House,

Ham Green House, Leigh Court, Wraxall Court, Tyntesfield, Belmont,

Wraxall House, Naish House, Clevedon Court, Charlton House,

Ashton Court, Tracey Park, The Cedars (near Wells),

Hadspen House, King Weston House, Court House, Earnshill, Coker Court,

and now west over the river,

Lydney Park, Tutshill House (near Chepstow), Piercefield (near Chepstow).  
Also think about Brentry House (now called Repton Hall), Bristol,  
Reflect on the revered landscape designer, Humphrey Repton,  
Reflect on the cult of the picturesque, the cult of the Sublime,  
The Romantic Imagination, the fashion for the Gothick,  
The Shakespearian trope of this 'sceptred isle',  
The lyrical self-contained world of the stately home,  
Think about Goldney House in Clifton,

The setting out of these elite falling gardens can be seen as forming part of the process called 'Georgianisation', in this instance the 'ideology of naturalising the hierarchical conditions of social life through landscape architecture'.

And that means we have to leave the insular world of the stately home,  
Within this 'sceptred isle', and think about The Tempest,  
Prospero, Ariel and Caliban,

Especially the representation of poor Caliban,

For 'heritage', like 'charity', does not always begin at home.

Crikey! I haven't even mentioned the Blackboy clock and statue – but that's another story for another time.

And I haven't had time to speak about the need for reparations. But thanks for listening.