theguardian

From Jane Austen to Beatrice and Eugenie … the long reach of UK slave-owning families

Research identifies 20,000 owners and shows how the trade permeated notable British institutions

Jamie Doward

Sunday 25 September 2016 00.03 BST

Most royals are proud that they can trace their lineage back centuries. But princesses Beatrice and Eugenie may be reluctant to delve too far into their past. New analysis reveals that Prince Andrew's daughters are the direct descendants of a major slave-owning family.

The link comes through their maternal grandmother, Susan Barrantes, née Wright, Sarah Ferguson's mother, who is descended from Sir Henry Fitzherbert, a fabulously wealthy aristocrat who in the 18th century owned sugar plantations and more than 1,000 slaves in Jamaica and Barbados.

Today, the Fitzherbert family name is remembered primarily for philanthropy. As with many who made money from slavery and were seen to give generously, the sources of their wealth have been left unexamined - until now.

Henry Fitzherbert's unedifying history is confirmed in research carried out by the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership, which has identified some 20,000 slave-owners whose role in the notorious trade has hitherto remained obscure.

Among them were the Cussans family. Records show that Thomas Cussans III, who died in 1855, received compensation of £3,831 12s 9d for the 199 enslaved people he owned at Amity Hall in Jamaica. Cussans was the great-great-great grandfather of Viscount Linley's father, Tony Armstrong Jones, the 1st Earl of Snowdon.

Previous work by the centre, published in 2013, identified around 3,500 slave owners who in the 1830s received compensation when abolition was introduced. Among those whose ancestors made money out of the slave trade were George Orwell and David Cameron.

The centre's new analysis highlights the extent to which slave-owners and their families permeated every stratum of British society in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It reveals that figures as varied as Edmund Burke, Thomas Malthus and Jane Austen were connected to slave-ownership through personal ties.

Austen addressed slave ownership in *Mansfield Park*. But what is less well known, outside of Austen scholars, is how her family were friends with several prominent slave owners. One of them, Thomas Hall, who was awarded the compensation for three estates in St James, Jamaica, was reputedly the model for Mr Woodhouse in *Emma*.

While many people will be fascinated by the characters that emerge from the centre's database, the influence the slave trade has had on British institutions is also noteworthy.

Predecessor firms of Lloyds, RBS and Barclays held enslaved people or had mortgages over them. Both the Booker and Man firms of the ManBooker prize had their roots in slavery, as did brewer Greene King and the company that spawned the insurance giant Royal & Sun Alliance.

Dr Nick Draper, the new director of the centre, which from this week has a permanent base at University College London's department of history, where it is supported by the Hutchins Center at Harvard University, said the database was helping to shed light on a long-neglected aspect of British history.

"In Britain we privilege abolition," Draper said. "If you say to somebody 'tell me about Britain and slavery', the instinctive response of most people is Wilberforce and abolition. Those 200 years of slavery beforehand have been elided - we just haven't wanted to think about it. We've just focused on abolition and put slavery to one side.

"Our challenge is to make it impossible to write the history of the industrial revolution, the history of the 18th century, the history of the British empire without stumbling over slavery in some way and then having to confront it."

The database also enables users to make connections between slave-owners and the impact of their wealth on British culture. Pictures and objects bought with wealth derived from slavery are found in the National Gallery, the British Museum, the Tate and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Among them are Sandro Botticelli's *The Mystic Nativity*, owned by the National Gallery, and some 2,800 books forming the Storer Collection held at Eton College Library.

A debate is emerging as to how much the public should be informed about the links between works of art and the slave trade. After working with the centre, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has made changes to some of its entries to reveal the true source of their wealth. Draper suggested art galleries and museums could do more to explicitly reveal their links to the trade.

"It seems to me there should be recognition in the catalogue entries," Draper said. "And if they are pictures of slave owners then I think there is a particular obligation to make that clear both in the catalogue and arguably in the description on the wall."

The database reveals the extent to which British architecture has benefited from the slave trade. The Hurlingham Club, Dodington Park and Wycombe Abbey were all built by slave-ownersLondon's West India Docks, now Canary Wharf, the Rolle Canal in Devon and Battle Abbey were restored or built with slave trade money.

Draper said the data allowed people to make up their own minds about Britain's relationship with the slave trade.

"We're generating endless empirical data because we want to get the evidence on the table," he said. "What we've got is confirmation that slavery permeated British society, you can scratch many places and you will find some form of linkage with slavery. We are trying to give people the materials to find the traces of slave ownership and decide for themselves how significant they are."

Establishing the connections between slave-owners and their impact on British society would not have been possible even a couple of decades ago, he said. But technology has

allowed historians to collate and mine millions of archived records.

The new research is likely to give ammunition to the coalition of Caribbean nations demanding reparation from the European countries that made money out of the slave trade.

Helping Britain face up to its past would aid this process, suggested Draper. “Until there is some candid conversation about Britain and slavery there won’t be any responsiveness to calls for reparation.”

More news

Topics

Slavery British empire Prince Andrew Jane Austen

Save for later Article saved
Reuse this content