

Minutes of the Stoneleigh History Society meeting held on the 26th of November in Stoneleigh Village Hall at 7.30 pm.

1. There were 21 members present, 4 visitors and 7 apologies.
2. Sheila welcomed everyone to the meeting. There was only one notice which was given by Sue Crofts. A clipboard with finger buffet suggestions/donations would be circulated during refreshment time. This is for the Christmas Quiz and Social on the 17th of December.
3. Sheila introduced her talk which was **'Stoneleigh, Sugar and Slavery'**. A valuable source of information for this talk was **'The Sugar Barons - Family Corruption, Empire and War'** by Matthew Parker.

Stoneleigh.

Sheila introduced the talk by stating that in the Domesday Book, Stoneleigh's entry mentions 'slaves', which puts a whole new emphasis on the topic.

Sheila then gave details of the Drax family and their connection with Stoneleigh and slavery. The connection began in 1564 with a member of the Drax family becoming Vicar of Stoneleigh. His name is on the church board.

In the 16th and 17th centuries several members of the Drax family were born or died in Stoneleigh e.g. Thomas Drax who was born in Finham and died in Stoneleigh in 1632. Another member, James Drax was born in Coventry in 1609 and was one of the earliest English migrants to Barbados. He is acknowledged to be one of the very earliest plantation owners to develop their business through slavery.

A Drax family tree demonstrated the strength of the link with Barbados which continues to this day.

Some of the earliest indentured slaves in Barbados were white Europeans. Gradually as the slave trade developed, Africans were shipped from the West coast and replaced white slaves. Trading in goods such as sugar, cotton and metal goods completed the triangle of trade from Africa to the Caribbean, the south of the US and then on to Europe.

By the mid 1600s 200 African slaves were working on the Drax estate working to produce sugar which then was shipped to England where the demand was intensifying.

James Drax became very wealthy and bought properties in Coventry, Boston, Kent and Yorkshire. He was knighted by Cromwell. A relative of his - Colonel William Drax - had been a Royalist and he left for Barbados. He later developed plantations in St Ann's in Jamaica.

Richard Drax is well known today as a former M.P. for Dorset and owner of a large estate near Wareham plus a luxury home at Sandbanks. The Drax house in Barbados still stands today.

After the slave trade was abolished in 1836 the slave owning families and investors in trade based on slavery were keen to agree compensation for their losses. As David Olusoga has reported, many quite ordinary individuals received large sums of money.

The Leigh family

On the tomb of Duchess Dudley the inscription suggests that she was aware of slavery and gave money to help support European slaves in Turkey.

Mediterranean pirates were very active in the slave trade and there are many accounts of raiding parties capturing women and children who were sold in slave markets in places such as Algiers – e.g. a raid in 1631 on Baltimore a coastal village in Ireland.

Duchess Dudley's legacy also appears on a benefaction board in Ashow church. In the 18th/19th century Mary Leigh, the sister of Edward had a house in Kensington which she called Grove House. The Royal Albert Hall stands today where the house once was. She had an interest in the Kensington Workhouse and suggested that representatives should go to Stoneleigh to advise on the workhouse there. An account of this is in the booklet produced by David and Jean Vaughan on the 'Wentworth Workhouse'.

The successor to Mary Leigh was the Rev. Thomas Leigh from Adelstrop. He was an abolitionist and sold Grove House to William Wilberforce one of the prime movers in the slavery abolition movement. He bought the house for £4000 and lived most of his life there, having called it Gore House, since it was on Kensington Gore.

The Jane Austen Connection.

The Austen family were one of those seemingly ordinary groups of people who had taken out shares in slavery as an investment.

They also had numerous other slavery connections. For instance why is 'Mansfield Park' so called? Lord Mansfield had a connection with the abolition movement. He lived at Kenwood House and employed Humphrey Repton to design the landscape. Repton also worked at Stoneleigh and Adlestrop. In 'Mansfield Park' the family of the house has links with Antigua, another slave island in the Caribbean.

Jane was close to her uncle, Rev. Thomas Leigh, and this may have led her to raise the issue of slavery in Mansfield Park.

The Reverent James Wentworth Leigh

He visited a plantation in Georgia where emancipated slaves worked. The previous owner, Pierce M Butler had gained notoriety by organising the largest sale of slaves in America in 1859. His wife Frances Ann Kemble, A British woman, was an abolitionist and during the Civil War wrote a book on her life on the plantation called 'A residence on a Georgian plantation in 1838 – 39'. She did not publish the book until 1863. Although not wishing to antagonise her husband who had custody of her two daughters, she felt compelled to release the book as she was concerned about the picture of slavery as painted by some commentators.

James Wentworth Leigh and the Butler's youngest daughter also called Frances married and kept the plantation going using emancipated slaves. Under the name Frances Butler Leigh she also wrote a book about slavery called 'Ten years on a Georgia plantation, since the war'. During the mid 1870s the Leigh's were active in Georgia and helped to build St. Cyprian's Church which was for the black population.

The pair later returned to the England and their gravestone can be found in Stoneleigh churchyard with the inscription 'James Wentworth Leigh and his wife Frances nee Butler of Savannah'.

Another Leigh, Rowland, married Mabel Gordon of Savannah, daughter of a cotton merchant. They are buried in Ashow churchyard.

Mabel's sister married William Low of Clarendon Square, Leamington. He was the son of a cotton merchant and when they moved to Wellesbourne they took two freed slaves with them as cook and butler.

The fruits of abolition.

From the mid 1830s the British Government paid out many millions of pounds in compensation to those whose investments had been lost due to the abolition of slavery.

In Leamington Spa many of the attractive villas and terraces were built using compensation money e.g. Clarendon Square and Beauchamp Hall (now Kingsley School).

Conclusion.

The story of slavery in the UK is a combination of –

*small villages * great houses * ordinary people * changing times * forgotten legacies.

4. Questions followed and then the meeting broke for refreshment.
5. The meeting closed at 21.15. The next one is the Christmas Quiz and Social on the 17th of December.
6. Thanks to Sarah, Kate and Phil for doing the refreshments for us.

N.B.

Please do not forget that on Sunday the 8th of December at 12 noon the Fardon Plaque will be erected. Refreshments will follow at the Club.

Also, you will find attached to these minutes the list of items you have pledged to bring to the Christmas Quiz and Social. If you were not present at the November meeting and intend to come on the 17th just bring one of the items not allocated. Remember: drinks will be provided; teams will be made up on the night, with cash prizes for members of the winning team! Only £1 to enter. The questions have been set by members, so you all have a chance of getting at least one right!!