

COLOUR IN THE LANDSCAPE

Disturbing colonial histories shape the countryside on NICK HAYES's doorstep.



Illustrations by the author

The Basildon Estate in West Berkshire blocks my route to the river, and adds several miles to my walk from home to the train station. When I first put my hands to its walls and climbed over, I found it also blocked me from the best views in the village: 2,500 acres of classic Cotswolds, with rolling valleys of beech and birch and oak that fall away to the gleaming ribbon of the River Thames. There are red kites in the sky, and not a single public right of way.

The parish of Basildon resisted enclosure until the mid eighteenth century, and a spate of private Acts culminating in the Enclosure Act of 1773. The turnip munching oiks of Basildon and England were not alone in their outrage at enclosure. The aristocracy was also mighty peeved, just as they had been when Henry VIII flogged off most of the church's land to lawyers and merchants, and when Cromwell's yard sale of royalist land opened up ownership to the lower echelons. Old feudal emperors were being muscled out of their God-given lineage, both in Parliament and society, by a new breed of landowner: the trader, the business man, the capitalist.

The English Hindustan

Francis Sykes bought Basildon on his second return from India. He had started as a 'writer' for the East India Company, a 19 year old clerk administering silk trading in Calcutta. By the time he bought my village, he had risen through the ranks of the Company to become Governor of Cossimbazar, the high priest of trade in northeast India. He was on a salary of about £25,000 a year, equivalent to £1.25 million today, about the same amount as the CEO of John Lewis. But like every other member of the Honourable East India Company, most of Sykes's money was made on the side. Bribes, gifts, insider

trading, personal monopolies and private embezzlement were all actively encouraged by the climate of the Company, allowing him to bring in five times his official salary.

The first time Sykes came back, he bought Ackworth Hall in Yorkshire. By time he returned the second time he had sold Ackworth, and in 1771 he bought the much larger Basildon Estate. He brought back silks, gems, carpets, paintings and several million pounds, and set about phase two of the plan – the social ladder, a peerage, Parliament.

At that time, Berkshire was known as the English Hindustan because so many of the East India Company's men had settled there after returning with fingers sticky from the colonial cookie jar. The disgraced Governor of India Warren Hastings lived for a time at Purley Hall, a little east of Basildon. Due south in Engelfield were the Benyons, whose descendant Richard is currently the richest MP in Parliament.

Benyon's hereditary wealth had given him leverage into trade. For the most part though, these were 'self-made' men, and they stormed into the English landscape like lottery winners, swishing through the halls of Westminster in Indian silk coats buttoned with pearls, Indian gems hanging from their wives' necks. These men were called Nabobs by their detractors, from the Indian title *Nawab*. Like Jos Sedley in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, they aspired to the social status they thought befitted their newfound wealth. They were not well liked:

"Without connections, without any natural interest in the soil, the importers of foreign gold have forced their way into Parliament by such a torrent of corruption as no private hereditary fortune can resist".

So said the Earl of Chatham, whose own hereditary fortune derived from his grandfather's plundering of a diamond now worth £48 million, with which he bought a rotten borough and his rung on the ladder. The diamond was from Madras.

East and West

While the Nabobs rollicked around Britain, wealth was also pouring in from another point of the compass: not the East, but the West Indies. From the late 16th to the early 19th century, the 'triangular trade' which carried manufactured goods from Europe to West Africa, slaves from there to the Americas, and sugar from there back to Europe, pumped money into Britain like never before.

Until only recently the exact nature of this wealth, and its effect on British landscape and society was locked away in the National Archives. But in 2009 a team from University College London began creating an encyclopaedic record of every owner, attorney, mortgagee and legatee involved with the British slave trade.

Compensation

The UCL study achieved this feat not by taking a retrospective census of slave ownership, but by collating records of compensation. Audited accounts of slave owners were used as evidence in Parliament to establish the value of the 'property' they would lose through abolition. When slavery was finally abolished in 1833, the British taxpayer paid out £20 million, a colossal sum equating to over a third of that year's entire government revenue.

That these men were rewarded for their losses rather than indicted for the moral abomination of slavery is an indication of the power of the groups who lobbied against abolition. They saw the writing on the wall, and deflected the argument. Strategically, the abolitionists were cornered by clever narratives that demanded compensation for legally held property. Some felt they had no moral right to continue the ethical fight, because whilst they did so, thousands would have remained in bondage. Accepting the logic of compensation was a *realpolitik* way of getting the chains off the African hostages.

The payment of compensation also left deep marks on Britain. There have been long debates among historians about how much of Britain's wealth and global power was built on the backs of Africans. Very little, say some: but this case is now much harder to make, given the voluminous evidence in the UCL study.

Bringing Injustice Home

No such website exists for the East Indian Nabobs. Nothing traces the money that came in. When their fall came, it was not colonialism under the spotlight but notorious individuals such as Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, and

Francis Sykes of Basildon.

In the 18th century the East India Company's army was twice the size of the 'official' British army. Its ruthless work established a stronghold for the British Empire, which took over India when the company failed. The company had



Legacies of Slavery

Legacies of British Slave-ownership is the title of UCL's comprehensive website, which contains a vast amount of information drawn from meticulously archived records of compensation paid to slave-owners. It offers many pathways into this dense jungle of data. Visitors can search by colony; by specific parish or island; by crop (not just sugar, but also coffee, tobacco, cocoa and indigo); by acreage, or by number of people enslaved. As well as sorting slave-owners by gender, by occupation, or by their home address in Britain, you can also search for commercial or institutional names – including Lloyds, Barclays, and the Church of

England – or for individual surnames, such as Orwell (ancestors of George), Cameron (as in David) and the Bentincks, whose descendant Tim is better known to Radio 4 listeners as David Archer.

There are interactive maps of Caribbean colonies as well as one of Britain, on which you can zoom in and see the footprint of slavery on your own doorstep. You can also see the physical legacies of the trade, the country estates, gardens and statues these men erected in their own honour. You can trace the cultural legacies, the Constables, Gillrays, Gainsboroughs, Blakes and

Canalettos. You can trace the societies and clubs, the colleges, schools and universities, the asylums, hospitals, charities and golf clubs who benefitted from slave wealth. Perhaps most fascinatingly of all, you can trace the letters, pamphlets and newspaper articles associated with the slave trade, and watch the conversation turn from the stark immorality and logical inconsistency of owning another person, to the notion of compensation for the removal of private property.

www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/

allowed a small elite group to suck enormous wealth from the Indian subcontinent and ship it back home. The subsequent vilification of these few men allowed the British state to continue their work, out of sight, until Gandhi came along.

Over three million Africans were transported as slaves by British traders, of whom 400,000 died on the journey. As UCL's Catherine Hall says, "it's been much more comfortable for the British to sit with the history of abolition than the history of slavery". There have been plenty of films and TV shows about William Wilberforce. Similarly, there have been plenty of schmaltzy stories about the Indian Raj, all cricket and gin and mutual respect. But according to some estimates, up to 29 million Indians died of famine, and worse, under the colonial regime. Both narratives are parts of a glossy whitewash over the impacts of British colonialism.

While not comparable in scale to the devastating effects elsewhere, these impacts were also significant at home. As newly rich men returned from the colonies, they used their freshly bought influence, peerages and seats in Parliament to accelerate the processes of enclosure which would ensure the consolidation of their wealth. With parliamentary ratification of the enclosure acts, rapid industrialisation and the highland clearances, the oppression of cultures and people which had been normalised far away was written deep into the British landscape.



Whose Countryside?

A couple of years ago, the poet Benjamin Zephaniah went for a jog with a friend in the Essex countryside. They were interrupted by the police, responding to reports of 'suspicious men' running across the fields. Two friends were turned into criminals by the thinnest film of enclosure: their skin. This event, of course, only came to light because of Zephaniah's fame, but it reflects an apparent British consensus that black means urban, that the countryside is not for ethnic

minorities. These groups make up ten per cent of the urban population, but only one per cent of the rural population.

Very few of the country houses mentioned in this article wear their rotten core on their sleeves. Basildon House mentions Sykes's plundering of India in one brief context-free sentence: "private trading and the acceptance of presents was permitted". Still, in 2013 English Heritage did release a book detailing the slavery connections of their properties, and projects such as the UCL database are enabling a new look at history.

But the popular narrative of rural England has not yet been updated. There is as yet little

acknowledgement that modernisation and 'improvement' was largely built on the backs of slaves. What will visitors make of the Palladian palaces once the unvarnished facts, the bare bones of this guilt, have been dug up and strewn around their manicured gardens?

References for *How Many People Own the UK?* (pp 41-42)

1. The Scottish Register of Sasines has been open to the public for centuries, but as Scottish land reformer Andy Wightman found, it's very far from complete.
2. Bateman's 'Acre-ocracy' analysis is available online at https://ia800208.us.archive.org/29/items/acreocracyofengl00baterich/acreocracyofengl00baterich_bw.pdf
3. See for instance David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, 1990.
4. Roy Perrott, *The Aristocrats*, 1967; see pages 13 and 150-155.
5. The UK is c.60 million acres, the Republic of Ireland is c.17 million acres, so together = c.77 million acres. England is 32 million acres, Wales 5 million acres, so England + Wales =
- 37 million acres. Scotland is 19.5 million acres, and Northern Ireland is 3.5 million acres.
6. Andy Wightman, *The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who owns Scotland (and how they got it)*, 2016 edition, p.143. Wightman's extensive mapping of Scottish estates is online at www.whoownsScotland.org.uk
7. www.cla.org.uk/sites/default/files/A0938084%20Environ.Standards%20Resp.pdf
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9. DEFRA, *Agriculture in the United Kingdom datasets*, www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/agriculture-in-the-united-kingdom, chapter 2 'structure of the industry', tab 'Table_2_3_input'.
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11. Natural Resources Wales' farm statistics are published at <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/welsh-agricultural-statistics/>
12. MAFF 1960 farm statistics, National Archives, Kew. The authors will publish copies of these statistics on whoownsengland.org.