

Beckford - an investigation Transcript

0:10

William Beckford. This is a history of William Beckford for the Revealing the City's Past project.

0:21

Beckford lived from 1709 to 1770 and his statue by John Francis Moore, dated 1772 is entitled Alderman William Beckford and is in the Guildhall at the City of London.

0:40

When I look upon this statue that simply shows a man towering over us as well as two seated women, I feel deeply unsettled by what I am supposed to feel and think.

0:56

Beckford, the central subject, is dressed in the mayoral robes and chain of office.

1:03

The two women, representing trade (commerce) and the City of London (Britannia), bear symbols of prosperity (a cornucopia) and victory (sword and shield) with the City of London's flag.

1:22

The intention of wonder over the subject's wealth and power is evident.

1:29

However, this wealth was built on the barbarity of enslavement

and the contextless presentation of the statue omits a violence about which I want to know more.

1:45

This statue was commissioned by the City Common Councilman (the Court of Common Council), which still operates today, to celebrate William Beckford and an address he made to King George the Third in 1770.

2:02

This admonishment of the monarch called for the rights and liberties of the City of London to be defended against the undue influence of the Crown.

2:16

The speech represents what was seen to be a victory of the City of London over the reassertion of royal authority.

2:26

There is a bitter irony in a statue that intends to celebrate a victory over perceived oppressors when the man commemorated derived his wealth from generations of enslaving Africans and profiting from their forced labour on plantations he owned across Jamaica.

2:51

This is graphically portrayed through one of the initial sketches for the Commission.

2:58

It depicts Beckford with the figure of Britannia beside him, leaning on him affectionately.

3:07

Shockingly, his right foot presses as if in victory on the back of a manacled African man who is prostrate beneath his feet.

3:20

That this image was considered an appropriate design for a memorial celebrating the defence of liberty brings not only the sickening reality of the violence of enslavement into view, it also signifies a key aspect of slavery, dehumanisation.

3:43

Dehumanisation involved treating enslaved people as objects, denying them basic human rights and stripping them of their dignity and identity, which allowed slave owners to justify their exploitation and oppression of enslaved people.

4:05

The explicit display of subjugation, degrading and devaluing of another human being in the sketch is a manifestation of the normalisation of this cruelty and the desensitisation to the suffering slave owners inflicted.

4:26

Whilst symbolically offensive, its inclusion amongst the potential final designs unintentionally gives today's audience a glimpse into the shameless acceptance of the source of Beckford's wealth and power and in turn the City of London's which was literally built off the backs of enslaved Africans.

4:51

So let me tell you a story about William Beckford, one I can trace through the records and research done around his life.

5:02

His biography is one that sets him and his family in the context of some of the most important moments in the history of Jamaica, where enslaved and freed Africans are mentioned but not prominent, and where brutality is communicated in numbers.

5:23

This research reveals the shadow this enormous statue continues to cast over us and on cloaks the legacy it hides.

5:35

The Beckfords in Jamaica. The Beckford family's engagement in Jamaica began when William's grandfather, Colonel Peter Beckford, emigrated to the island in 1662.

5:49

After it was captured from Spain in 1655 and became a British territory in 1669, Peter Beckford senior was granted land in Clarendon by royal patent and when he died in 1710 he owned an estimated wealth of one and a half million pounds in bank stocks, worth the equivalent of more than £209 million

6:19

In 2023. Beckford would spend approximately 24 years in Jamaica.

6:30

These included the first 14 years of his life from 1709 to 1723, and those spent when he returned to Jamaica after his father's death.

6:42

From 1735 to 1744, he became one of the most prominent colonial administrators on the island.

6:53

Even after leaving Jamaica, he remained influential as an absentee planter.

7:00

This benign phrase obscures the tyrannical grip Beckford wielded from afar.

7:09

An active anti abolitionist insurrection on his plantations was severely punished, including decapitation, burning alive and hanging.

7:22

Beckford held many roles of political influence, some of which his family had held in generations before him.

7:32

These included seats in the Jamaica House of Assembly for the Parish of Clarendon, as Member of Parliament for Shaftesbury

from 1747 to 1754, and MP for the City of London from 1754 until his death in 1752.

7:53

He took up the Freedom of the Ironmongers Company and was then elected Alderman of Billingsgate Ward.

8:01

In 1755 he became Sheriff of London, a role his uncle Sir Thomas Beckford held.

8:09

He was also knighted in the Guildhall in 1655.

8:14

Beckford benefited from the nepotism, privileges and freedom gained through wealth derived from enslaving others.

8:25

He was known to flaunt this wealth and continued to profit from the labour of enslaved Africans while in England.

8:36

How much land did he own in Jamaica?

8:40

In 1740, William Beckford had full and part ownership of estates in Clarendon, St Dorothy (now merged with Saint Catherine) and St Mary (including the Escher estate).

8:56

He expanded his holdings further in 1740 when he acquired estates in Saint Thomas, Westmoreland, and Saint Anne.

9:07

By 1754, he held 22,021 acres of land in Jamaica.

9:15

Beckford and his extended family were implicated in many pivotal moments in the fight for emancipation by the enslaved.

9:25

These acquired lands became significant sites for a style of guerrilla warfare now common across the globe today.

9:36

Taking back control. During the 1700s, the Maroons - previously enslaved Africans who escaped their captors during the exchange of power between Spain and England, began waging war on the British.

9:54

The first Maroon War began in 1728 and continued until 1740, during which the Maroons valiantly fought for their freedom, which they won, resulting in the Maroon Treaties.

10:09

The first Maroon Treaty was signed by the fiercely Leeward Maroon leader, Cudjoe, on the 1st of March 1739.

10:21

The territory established during these wars remained independent nations within Jamaica today.

10:30

The Beckford family therefore were living on the island for the majority of the First Maroon War.

10:37

By the time the treaty was signed, William Beckford was active on the island as a politician.

10:45

There is evidence that Cudjoe was said to have gone sailing with William Beckford, which hints at the complex relationship with the free Maroons and the British colonial administration which continued to enslave Africans after the Maroon Wars until the abolition of slavery in 1834.

11:07

In 1761, of the Caribbean's most celebrated strategic campaigns in pursuit of freedom by the enslaved erupted on Beckford's Esher estate in the form of Tacky's War.

11:21

From 1760 to 1761. A year after this fight for emancipation was savagely suppressed by the plantation owners and colonial authorities, William Beckford would be elected Lord Mayor of the City of London, where he would sit for a second term in 1769 until his death in 1770.

11:49

Whose compensation?

11:51

On his death, William Beckford's estate listed slave ownership at probate as 1356 enslaved Africans, of whom 718 were listed as male and 638 as female.

12:12

The total value of the estate at probate was £114,268 in Jamaican currency.

12:23

Approximately 74% of this wealth, equating to £84,159, was the value of enslaved Africans.

12:37

Despite having eight illegitimate children, William left the majority of his wealth to his only son through marriage, William Thomas Beckford (1760 to 1844).

12:51

He inherited the majority of his estate at 10 years old.

12:56

This son was known at one point to be the richest commoner in England, who continued to profit from the trade in enslaved Africans until its abolition.

13:09

As a result of the Slave Compensation Act of 1837, William Thomas Beckford received almost £13,000

13:18

In compensation, which roughly equates to £1,362,921

13:27

In 2023. He used his money primarily to build a significant art collection, the remains of which are now scattered across major collections throughout the country, including the National Gallery.

13:44

This investment in art showed that the valuable lives of the enslaved people were eventually and almost invisibly converted into profits, which were used to purchase artworks, including those that memorialise the enslavers themselves.

14:04

The more tangible legacy of those who were enslaved by the Beckford family or related to them is the prevalence of the name itself.

14:14

This dehumanising practise of substituting the slaver's name for the enslaved's identity makes Beckford the 64th most common last name in Jamaica.

14:28

In 2014, 8,689 of the population bore this name.

14:36

While I look upon the statue of a man towering over us.

14:41

We can now see the ability of wealth and power to sanitise the violence of participation, and benefit in the horrors of enslavement.

14:53

It is hoped that this account will illuminate the erasure of thousands of lives of people who were dehumanised and exploited to create obscene wealth for a few.

15:07

As I end this narrative, I am reminded that we are reckoning with the legacy left by the wealthy few who use the money they gain through the exploitation of enslaved Africans to memorialise themselves, to keep their names alive for generations to come.

15:28

Those who either lost their own identity or survived the horrors of enslavement were meant to stay anonymous and unseen, forgotten.

15:40

However, their legacy lives on, visible through their descendants.

15:46

Their stories are told in different ways, with their descendants resisting the unfiltered celebration of their oppressors, with their presence and with continued demands for truth and justice.

16:03

This was co-authored by Rachael Minott and peer reviewed by Doctor Carol Ann Dixon.