

Please note: This text contains content and descriptions of slavery which may cause distress or that some may find triggering.

William Beckford 1709-1770 **John Francis Moore, Alderman William Beckford, 1772**

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. Beckford, the central subject is dressed in the mayoral robes and chain of office. The two women, representing Trade (Commerce) and the City of London (Britannia)¹ bear symbols of prosperity (a cornucopia) and victory (sword and shield) with the City of London's flag. The intention of wonder over the subject's wealth and power is evident. 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.

This statue was commissioned by the City Common Councilmen (the Court of Common Council), which still

¹ From Philip Ward-Jackson (2003) *Public sculpture of the City of London*, Page 163–165:

'At a lower level, and turned outwards, are two female allegories seated in forlorn attitudes. Below is a black tablet with the words of Beckford's speech engraved on it. From J.F. Moore's description of his project, presented to the monument committee in 1770, we learn that Beckford is represented at the moment when he embarks on the less submissive part of the celebrated reply to George III (see biographical details below). Moore also identifies his two allegorical figures:

"This model is intended to answer best the following part of the speech viz. 'Permit me Sire, father to observe that whoever had already dared or shall hereafter endeavour etc. etc', when his body became almost erect, lifting up his right hand and with great firmness concluding his reply. On the right side of the statue is an emblematical figure representing the City of London mourning with the Mace, Sword of State, City Arms & the Cap of Maintenance on her head. On the left side, a d^o representing Trade and Navigation, in a drooping posture with a cornucopia, a compass, an anchor, and a mural crown on her head."

In Dr Madge Dresser (2007) *Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London*, Page 172-174, the figures flanking Beckford are referred to as 'allegorical figures of Britannia and Commerce.'

operates today, to celebrate William Beckford and an address he made to King George III in 1770. 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. The speech represents what was seen to be a victory of the City of London over the reassertion of royal authority.

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. This is graphically portrayed through one of the initial sketches for the commission. It depicts Beckford with the figure of Britannia beside him, leaning on him affectionately. Shockingly his right foot presses, as if in victory, on the back of a manacled African man who is prostrate beneath his feet. 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. 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. 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. 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.²

So let me tell you a story about William Beckford, one I can trace through the records and research done around his life. 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. This research reveals the shadow this enormous statue continues to cast over us and uncloaks the legacy it hides.

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, 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 £1,500,000 in bank stock³, worth the equivalent of more than £209 million in 2023)⁴.

Beckford would spend approximately 24 years in Jamaica. These included the first 14 years of his life (1709-1723) and those spent when he returned to Jamaica after his father's death. From 1735-1744⁵ he

² An engraving of the initial sketch can be viewed online on the [National Galleries Scotland website](#). Accession number EP 4155.2. [accessed 22 May 2023]

³ 'Peter Beckford (Baptised 1643-1710)', [National Portrait Gallery](#) [accessed 5 March 2023] Beckford family detailed within the [UCL Legacies of British Slave Ownership online database](#). Primarily sourced from the research in Perry Gauci's , *William Beckford First Prime Minister of the London Empire* (Yale University Press, 2013) [accessed 20 September 2023].

⁴ [Bank of England inflation calculator](#) [accessed 20 September 2023]

⁵ Richard B. Sheridan, 'Beckford, William (bap. 1709, d. 1770)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

became one of the most prominent colonial administrators on the island. Even after leaving Jamaica, he remained influential as an 'absentee planter'. This benign phrase obscures the tyrannical grip Beckford wielded from afar. An active anti-abolitionist, insurrection on his plantations was severely punished, including decapitation, burning alive and hanging.⁶

Beckford held many roles of political influence⁷, some of which his family had held in generations before him. These included seats in the Jamaica House of Assembly for the parish of Clarendon, as Member of Parliament (MP) for Shaftesbury in 1747-1754; and MP for the City of London from 1754 until his death. In 1752, he took up the Freedom of the Ironmonger's Company and was then elected alderman of Billingsgate ward. In 1755 he became Sheriff of London, a role his uncle, Sir Thomas Beckford held (he was also knighted in the Guildhall in 1655). Beckford benefited from the nepotism, privileges and freedom gained through wealth derived from enslaving others.⁸ He was known to flaunt this

⁶ [Beckford and the slave trade: The legacy of the Beckford family and slavery](#) [accessed 22 May 2023]

⁷ See Dr Amy Frost (2018) *The Beckford Era*, Page 61. In: Dakers, C. (2018) *Fonthill Recovered: a cultural history*. London: UCL Press, Page 59-93.

⁸ 'In 1747 Beckford's political campaign gathered pace when he was elected as MP for Shaftesbury. The Freedom of the Ironmongers' Company in 1752 followed, and then, in 1754 he was elected as an MP for the City of London. Beckford's strength in the capital continued to grow and he ascended from Sheriff of London (1755) to twice Lord Mayor of London (1762 and 1769). A close ally and personal friend of William Pitt, Beckford was a key member of the Whig party.'

⁸ For further information on the Beckford family's wealth derived from enslavement and the plantation economy, see: Parker, Matthew (2012) *The Sugar Barons*, London: Windmill Books. It is also interesting to understand the "irony" of Beckford's involvement in the architecture of enslavement and his ostentatious lifestyle in Britain built on the profits of participating in the nefarious transatlantic enslavement system is appropriate for this lengthier piece. Beyond the Guildhall Library manuscripts, there is an entry for 'William Beckford' in the online version of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, written in 2004 by Richard B. Sheridan, which describes the enslaver's extravagant lifestyle and ostentatious shows of significant wealth as follows: 'William Beckford, the rich colonial, occupied a difficult position in English society because of his ugly Jamaican accent, lack of charm, and ostentatious display of immense wealth.'

wealth⁹ and continued to profit from the labour of enslaved Africans while in England.

How much land did he own in Jamaica?

In 1740 William Beckford had full and part ownership of estates in Clarendon, St. Dorothy (now merged with St Catherine) and St. Mary (including the Esher estate). He expanded his holdings further in 1740 when he acquired estates in St. Thomas, Westmoreland and St. Ann. By 1754 he held 22,021 acres of land in Jamaica.¹⁰ Beckford and his extended family were implicated in many pivotal moments in the fight for emancipation by the enslaved; these acquired lands became significant sites for a style of guerrilla warfare now common across the globe today.¹¹

Taking back control

During the 1700's, the Maroons – previously enslaved Africans who escaped their captors during the exchange of power between Spain and England – began waging war on the British. 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. The first Maroon Treaty was signed by the fierce Leeward Maroon leader, Cudjoe, on 1st March 1739¹². The territory established during these wars remain

⁹ Alderman William Beckford, Lord Mayor of London, Victoria and Albert Museum Collections Online. Accession number: A.48-1928. [Notes prepared for 'Uncomfortable Truths / Traces of the Trade' gallery trails \(Trail 3: 'Britain & The West Indies'\)](#), 20 February - 31 December 2007. Helen Mears & Janet Browne. Largely drawn from William Beckford's ODNB entry, 1986. [accessed 5 March 2023].

See also: Perry, V (2022) *A bittersweet Heritage: Slavery Architecture and the British Landscape*. London: Hurst, for a comprehensive account of the different ways Beckford flaunted his wealth.

¹⁰ William Beckford entry on [UCL Legacies of British Slave Ownership online database](#) [accessed 20 September 2023].

¹¹ Brown, V. (2020). *Tacky's revolt: the story of an Atlantic slave war*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press.

¹² Hart, R. (2002) *Slaves who abolished slavery: Blacks in Rebellion*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press. (specifically, Chapters 1: The Beginning of Black Resistance:, 2: The First Maroon War and 4: The Second Maroon War).

independent nations within Jamaica today. The Beckford Family therefore were living on the island for the majority of the first Maroon war. By the time the treaty was signed, William Beckford was active on the island as a politician. There is evidence that Cudjoe was said to have gone sailing with William Beckford¹³ 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.

In 1760, one 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 (1760- 1761)¹⁴. A year after this fight for emancipation was savagely suppressed by the plantation owners and colonial authorities¹⁵, 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.

Whose compensation?

On his death, William Beckford's estate listed 'slave-ownership' at probate as 1,356 enslaved Africans, of whom 718 were listed as male and 638 as female. The total value of the estate at probate was £114,268 Jamaican currency. Approximately 74% of this wealth (£84,159) was the value of enslaved Africans¹⁶. Despite having eight illegitimate children, William left the

¹³[The Beckford Family, Westminster School Archive](#) [accessed 5 March 2023]

¹⁴ [1776 Salon: Tacky's Revolt, American Repertory Theater](#) [accessed 5th March 2023] For further reading see Professor Vincent Brown, the Charles Warren Professor of American History and Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. Brown's book *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2020), Chapter 2 (The Jamaica Garrison, pp. 44-84) and Chapter 4 (Tacky's Revolt, pp. 129-163) deal specifically with the significance of Tacky's War in narratives of resistance and directly reference William Beckford (esp. pp. 54-58, and p.130). Richard Hart also wrote a chapter on Tacky's War in *Slaves who Abolished Slavery: Blacks in Rebellion* (2002)- please see: Chapter 6, pp. 130-156.

¹⁵ Samuel Momodu, 2021, 'Tacky's War (1760-1761)', [Black Past](#) [accessed 5th March 2023]

¹⁶ Alderman William Beckford, Legacies of British Slavery database

majority of his wealth to his only son through marriage, William Thomas Beckford (1760-1844). He inherited the majority of his estate at ten years old. This son was known, at one point, to be the richest commoner in England¹⁷, who continued to profit from the trade in enslaved Africans until its abolition.

As a result of the Slave Compensation Act of 1837, William Thomas Beckford received almost £13,000 in compensation, which roughly equates to £1,362,921 in 2023¹⁸. 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 Gallery¹⁹. 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. The more tangible legacy of those who were enslaved by the Beckford family or related to them is the prevalence of the name itself. This dehumanising practice of substituting the slavers name for the enslaved's identity makes Beckford the 64th most common last name in Jamaica. In 2014, 8,689 of the population bore this name.

While I look upon this statue of a man towering over us, we can now see the ability of wealth and power to sanitise the violence of participation, and benefit in the horrors of enslavement. 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.

¹⁷ Peter Beckford 1643-1710, [The National Portrait Gallery](#) [accessed 5th March 2023]

¹⁸ [Bank Of England Inflation calculator](#) [accessed 5 March 2023]

¹⁹ William Thomas Beckford 1760-1844, The National Gallery

As I end this narrative, I am reminded that we are reckoning with the legacy left by the wealthy few who used the money they gained through the exploitation of enslaved Africans, to memorialise themselves, to keep their names alive for generations to come. Those who either lost their own identity, or survived the horrors of enslavement were meant to stay anonymous and unseen, forgotten. However, their legacy lives on, visible through their descendants. 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.

Co-authored by Rachael Minott

Peer review by Dr Carol Ann Dixon

This text was co-authored by Rachael Minott, in collaboration with an intergenerational panel, project steering group and academic peer review. The text was commissioned by the City of London Corporation as part of the 'Revealing the City's Past' project.