

Vassall Devon/Jamaica connections

I have been fascinated, over the course of researching Devon/Jamaica historical connections, to identify three quite different descendants of a family called Vassall, who arrived in Devon in three different centuries. This is the story of how I got interested and what I have found so far.

It all started with an amazing coincidence. One evening at a French conversation group I met a man with whom we struggled to converse in French. It gradually came out – making shivers run down my spine! – that he had grown up in Jamaica, in Mandeville, on Manchester Road, near the soldier's camp (all where I had lived) and two doors away from our house! - although he was there a decade before we moved in. He had gone to a local school and walked home along roads I was very familiar with. He and his sister had been white children with ginger hair, who attracted a lot of attention (not always welcome), as I had done with my ginger hair. Who was he and what was his family history? Why did he live there? and what was his life like? And why did he now live in Exeter? I was intrigued to find answers to these questions and, luckily for me, he had a well-worn copy of a book of his family history which he was willing to lend me (now available online).

It turned out that this chap – I'll call him David to preserve his anonymity – is descended from a long line of white Jamaicans, from the prominent Vassall family. The Vassalls had been Huguenots who fled to England from France due to persecution of Protestants in the sixteenth century. They had been early to take advantage of the opportunity of settling in the West Indies and North America, and had divided their lives over the years between islands such as Jamaica, the New England colony of Massachusetts, and England, amassing great fortunes from slavery. Nevertheless, David lives a normal life in Exeter, working as a gardener and pursuing his hobbies in music, art and cycling.

The first Vassalls in the New World

William Vassall (1592-1655), cloth worker born in Stepney, was the first of the family to go to New England, which he did as an assistant in the Massachusetts Bay Company. At a formal meeting in 1629 he was appointed to 'go over' and took his whole family across, settling in Plymouth (Mass.), but then in 1648 removing to Barbados. This was at the time of the English Civil War when Devon royalists such as Modyford, Walrond and Colleton were also settling on that island and beginning the cultivation of sugar through slave labour. William's son, John (1625-1688), seems to have been very active in the adventure in which Modyford and Colleton were also involved, of unsuccessfully attempting to settle Cape Fear in the Carolinas, appealing for relief in 1657. John seems not to have been involved in Barbados but took more of an interest in Jamaica, as records show him taking important roles on that island before moving there permanently in 1672. From the State papers relating to Jamaica, it appears that Sir Thomas Lynch, the then Governor of that Island, wrote March 10, 1672, "*from Virginia comes one John Vassall, a sober rational man,*" And again, "*Col. Vassal and Mordecai Royes to undertake the drawing of a most exact and particular map of the whole Island*"¹. In 1673 he was engaged by the Governor to do a survey to make '*a true account of all the families in the Island*'. A key factor in the family's later fortune must have been the legacy received in the will of Thomas Modyford in 1669 of 1,000 acres of land near the mouth of the Black River on "Luana Bay", in the parish of St. Elizabeth, - a gift indeed! From these beginnings the Vassall family multiplied and prospered in Jamaica, and from this family three lots of descendants eventually settled in Devon, as will become clear.

¹ Calder p.14

Vassalls' Jamaican property

There are such good records of the Vassalls' history that one can get an idea of the extent of their ownership of slave plantations. I have recorded a list of all their properties mentioned on the LBS website from documents between 1714 and 1827 (taken mainly from Calder). Of the 27 Vassalls on the website, 18 properties are found, spread over parishes in the west of Jamaica. (The numbers in the table refer to their locations on the map. Properties in bold were still in the family in 1835.)

Parish	Property in records 1714-1827
St Elizabeth	1. Content 2. Lower Works Pen 3. Luana 4. Middle Quarter 5. Middlesex Pen 6. New Savannah 7. Pond Pen 8. Top Hill Pen 9. Vineyard Pen 10. Y.S.
Hanover	11. Abingdon 12. Green Island River (Green Castle?) 13. Newfound River
Westmoreland	14. Friendship and Greenwich 15. Sweet River Pen
St James	16. Seven Rivers
Manchester	17. Greenvale
St Catherine	18. Un-named



From that gift of Luana from Modyford to John Vassall, the family greatly extended their holdings across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. How had they managed this?

Vassall marriages into other prominent slave-owning families

One way the Vassalls prospered was by consolidating their position in the slave-owning elite of Jamaica through marriage into other prominent families. In 1685, for instance, Leonard Vassall (1678-1737) married Ruth Gale, daughter of Col. Jonathan Gale, Custos of St Elizabeth. The Gale-Morant papers which record the finances of the Gale properties are kept at the University of Exeter. Florentius Vassall (d.1710) was brother-in-law to Peter Beckford, who was grandfather to the notorious William Beckford of Fonthill in Wiltshire, one of the largest slave-owners and scandalous lover of 'Kitty' Courtney of Powderham Castle. Another Florentius Vassall (1709-1776) was brother-in-law to Joseph Foster Barham, owner of two large sugar plantations and a subject of R.S. Dunn's *A tale of two plantations: Slave life and labor in Jamaica and Virginia*. Thus it is clear that the Vassall family were central figures in the heyday of the Jamaican sugar/slave economy of the eighteenth century, and closely linked with the other powerful families.

To what extent were the Vassalls involved in the running of their plantations?

Calder's book *John Vassall and his descendants* is very informative about where the Vassalls lived. This is a complicated story because they divided their time between Jamaica, England and New England. Our interest is whether they lived on their plantations and took control of running them or

whether they lived in greater comfort at a distance, leaving attorneys to manage the unsavoury business of ensuring the forced labour of their workforce. The book shows that five generations of Vassall men, from the first John to settle in Jamaica in 1672 through his descendants over the eighteenth century, died in different countries to where they were born; mainly either born in Jamaica and died in Massachusetts or England or vice versa. It is clear that they were able to live in grand style in Massachusetts at times, and at other times took an active interest in their plantations to ensure their efficient running.

Were the Vassalls cruel slave-owners?

When they were actively involved in their estates, it is clear that appalling cruelty was the norm. When Florentius Vassall (1709-1776) engaged Thomas Thistlewood to manage his Vineyard Pen property in 1750², he personally showed how to maintain white supremacy in challenging circumstances. He ordered the lead slave driver to be bound to an orange tree and given nearly 300 lashes *'for his many crimes and negligences'*, which sent the man to his hut for the next nine days. Thistlewood's notorious diaries record the round of floggings administered to the men and women on the estate and his sexual predations of the female slaves. The Vassalls' fortunes and social standing in Jamaica and New England was based on this extremity of violence and exploitation, for which the law did not hold them accountable.

However, at a later time (1821), during the period of Amelioration when the British government was under pressure from the Abolition movement to enforce improvements in the conditions of slavery, another Vassall got into trouble for his quite indirect murder of an enslaved man³. This was the case of Robert Oliver Vassall of Abingdon estate, who was Custos (chief magistrate) of the parish of Hanover where one William Dehaney was accused of involvement in a plot (not sure about what) a crime punishable by death, but was instead sentenced to transportation. He somehow managed to return and steal a horse, which led to his recapture upon which he was immediately hanged by order of the magistrates. Vassall was away in Kingston at the time but he was the chief magistrate so was held responsible. He feared for his life, escaped and hid for four months, but was eventually tried and the case was dismissed. He was reinstated into his position but was said to be a broken man from then on. The Crown, despite not having won the case, thought that the magistrates of Jamaica had been taught a useful lesson in being more responsible towards the enslaved population. The story illustrates that the enslaved were still subject to cruelties in the nineteenth century but that the rule of law put more constraints on the power of slave-owners

To what extent do the compensation records give an accurate picture of the Vassalls' Jamaican property?

While the Vassalls clearly had a heyday in the eighteenth century, the records show that, by the time of Emancipation (1835), there were only seven properties in their name for which they successfully claimed compensation, as listed below.

² Dunn p.148

³ Curtin p.99

Compensation in 1835
Content , £561, 32 enslaved (Owner Elizabeth Vassal)
Un-named , £213, 12 enslaved
Newfound River , £2595, 133 enslaved
Friendship and Greenwich with Sweet River Pen , £7211, 401 enslaved
Greenvale , £133, 5 enslaved

Were the other properties sold? Unsuccessfully claimed because of debts? Merged with other properties or abandoned? Whatever the reason, this table shows that the compensation records only provide limited evidence of a family's slave-ownership over time, especially over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Why did Vassalls own fewer properties at Emancipation than in the 18th century?

From the LBS database it appears that the Vassalls lost their major properties (Luana, New Savannah, Abingdon, Middlesex Pen, Seven Rivers) in the fifty years before Emancipation. Some clues as to what happened can be found on the LBS website and in *'John Vassal and his Descendants'* though records are incomplete and sometimes contradictory. Two properties, Luana and New Savannah, were inherited by other family members not called Vassal. Regarding Luana, for instance, records seem contradictory, but it appears that other family members owned it by 1835, as compensation was received by John Fisher of Greenwich, who was related to the Gale family, who were related to the Vassalls. New Savannah was inherited through the Vassal line (Lewis snr, Lewis jnr, Florentius) but then Florentius' widow married John Salmon, explaining the name John Salmon on the successful claim. Two properties had been sold: Abingdon was owned by merchants in 1829, two years after the death of its previous owner, Robert Oliver Vassall, even though he had children living at the time; Middlesex Pen was owned by a large slave-owner, Caleb Dickinson, by 1820 and he received the compensation. Another two properties were mortgaged: Seven Rivers was held by Vassalls up to at least 1795 but compensation was received by the mortgagee; Green River was still listed as being owned by William Vassall of Berry Pomeroy but the compensation was paid to his mortgagee. Thus the majority of these Vassall properties (four out of six) had been either sold or mortgaged, with the rest (two out of six) being passed to other family members. Perhaps the Vassalls had decided to sell their Jamaican plantations to invest in other areas, such as British industry as the industrial revolution was advancing or in government bonds which would pay a steady return. However, it could also be a case of mismanagement and extravagant living, leading to falling profits and mounting debts.

William Vassall (1753-1843) of Berry Pomeroy

William Vassall of Berry Pomeroy was one of these disappointed claimants. According to the LBS database, this William Vassall made a claim for compensation for the 198 enslaved on his Green River estate in Hanover, Jamaica. However, unfortunately for him, the compensation of £3,870 was instead paid to his mortgagee, Andrew Colvile, of London. The Green River estate had been owned by William's grandfather then father since at least the beginning of the eighteenth century and

inherited by William on his father's death in 1800. So presumably the debt to Colville had not been incurred to buy the property but had more likely been due to poor management and extravagant living.

How was this William related to our present-day David? William and David came from the same line of Vassalls with the Huguenot ancestors. William's great-great grandfather had ventured to Barbados and New England in the first part of the seventeenth century; his great-grandfather had lived in New England and then was granted land in Jamaica; and his grandfather, Leonard (1678-1737), had substantial estates in Jamaica and Boston, Massachusetts. At this point the family lines diverge, between two of Leonard's sons: John (1713-1747) from whom David is descended, and William's father (another William, 1715-1800). So the short answer is the William and David would be cousins seven times removed. (See the family tree below)

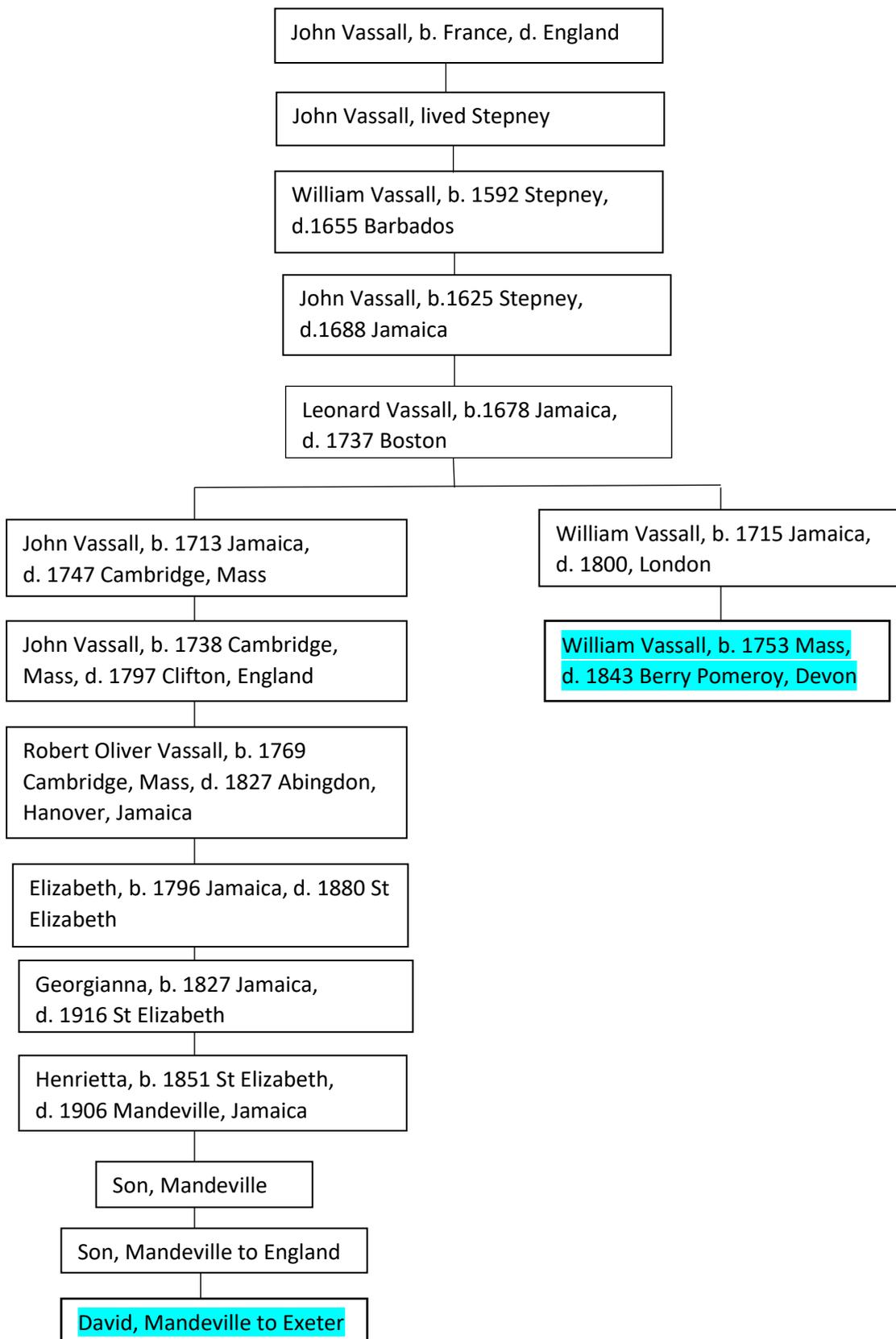


The Longfellow House, Cambridge, Mass.

This house, surpassing in interest almost any other in New-England, for having been so long the head-quarters of Gen. Washington, and for now being the home of the poet Longfellow, stands on Brattle St. It was probably built in 1755 by John Vassal, since which it has undergone several changes of ownership.

A Vassall residence in New England

Family Tree showing relationship between 'David' and William Vassall of Berry Pomeroy





Portrait of William's father with his younger brother, Leonard, painted in 1771 in New England by John Singleton Copley, shortly before they were forced to flee to Britain⁴

A little more about William Vassall

William was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1753, the fifth male child of his parents and the only one to survive the first year of life; he must have been a much-treasured eldest son. He lived to the advanced age of 90 years but left no children of his own. He matriculated at Harvard College in 1771 at the age of 18 years. However, at this time the American colonists were becoming restive about paying tax to the British crown and revolution was brewing. As the Vassall family were prominent Loyalists, supporting the British side over that of the Americans seeking independence, they were endangered and in 1772 had to flee the country, never to return, and the family estate was confiscated. This was not too serious a problem as they still had substantial Jamaican property! It appears they settled in Battersea, London. The following year William went to Magdalen College, Oxford.

It appears that William had an uneventful life as there is very little about him in the records. He must have moved down to Devon by 1792 as it was in this year that he married Ann Bent, a Devon girl, in Plympton St Mary. By 1802 he was living in Totnes where he appeared on the voters' list⁵ and in 1812 he took out a 21 year lease on Weston House on the eastern outskirts of the town but in the

⁴ [William Vassall and His Son Leonard, c.1770 - c.1772 - John Singleton Copley - WikiArt.org](#)

⁵ Transactions of the Devonshire Association 34/708

parish of Berry Pomeroy⁶. He leased it with Christopher Farwell from the Duke of Somerset for £315, and renewed the lease⁷ for a further 14 years in 1831. He died childless in 1843 and was buried at Totnes church. Thus while the Vassalls had made great fortunes it does not appear that this descendant was particularly wealthy.

Eleanor Vassall and her Glanville children

At this point I will bring in another slave-owning Vassall, this time a woman of mixed race who, unlike the aforementioned William, made a successful claim for £133 for her five enslaved people (shown in the table). Living at Greenvale in Manchester, Jamaica, Eleanor Vassall was the common-law wife of Samuel Glanville of Greenvale and Ottery St Mary (Devon). His compensation claim for his 226 enslaved workers (for £4,652) was unsuccessful because he still owed money to his mortgagee. Her Devon connection is that five of her children with Samuel Glanville left Jamaica where they had been born and raised and went to live in and near Ottery St Mary when they were young adults, in 1851 (1851 Census). The eldest daughter, Caroline aged thirty, lived on Mill Street with her grandfather Thomas Glanville, solicitor of Ottery, while the others lived at Alfington House (now Alfington Farm) in the nearby village of Alfington. The youngest of the family, another Thomas, was made the head of the household and by the end of the century had become the largest landowner in the village⁸.

A little more about Eleanor Vassall

Less is on record about Eleanor than about the other Vassalls because she was a woman of mixed race. Her existence was unofficial; her baptism (if any) does not seem to have been registered and her relationship with Samuel was not legalised by marriage. The events of her life have to be inferred. Eleanor was born in St Elizabeth, Jamaica, probably around 1800, and had died by 1851. The colours of her children were described by the vicar at their baptisms as 'mestee' or 'quadroon', based on their appearance, indicating that Eleanor was somewhere between mulatto (half black, half white) and quadroon (quarter black, three-quarters white) (jamaicanfamilysearch.com). While I haven't found any records of her baptism, those of other mixed race children of Vassall men with mulatto women in St Elizabeth were recorded; for example, in 1775, three 'reputed' children of one John Vassall by Rosy Lamb were baptised, and in 1784 two sons of John Vassall jnr (dec) by Sally Watts. But Eleanor's father may not have acknowledged her so she does not appear in the records.

What would their experiences of the move to Devon have been like?

These three lots of Vassall descendants arrived in Devon in different centuries: William possibly in the late eighteenth, Eleanor's children in the nineteenth, and David in the twentieth century. Their experiences may have been very different, based on their level of wealth, their colour, and their previous lives. One imagines that William would have had the easiest time in light of his elite education and his income from the Green River plantation which enabled him to live a fancy life in the stately home of Berry Pomeroy. Eleanor's children also had a level of wealth from their father's investments based on his income from Greenvale; they lived in a once grand house and did not have to earn their livings. But they must have found life very dull in the hamlet of Alfington, where they did not have a circle of families to visit as they would have had in Jamaica. Their colour would have been a handicap to them socially – but how would this have compared with their situation in Jamaica? Livesay, in *Children of uncertain fortune*, writes about mixed race Jamaican children having

⁶ Devon Heritage Centre 3799M/O/L/92/6

⁷ Devon Heritage Centre 3799M/O/L/92/7

⁸ Kelly's Directory of Devon 1914

very limited opportunities in Jamaica in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with legal barriers to their advancement, and their white fathers sending them back to Britain under the patronage of their white families in the hope that they would have better prospects. Their futures were then dependent upon their acceptance by these white families. Perhaps that's why Samuel Glanville sent his children 'home'? But other authors (Olusoga, 2020; Hall, 2020) have examined how racial discrimination became fiercer in the late nineteenth century, at the time that Eleanor's children were in Alfington, supported by the writings of Thomas Carlyle and the social Darwinist movement. So their lives may not have been very satisfactory.

Lastly, David's parents decided to move the family to England in 1962 when Jamaica gained independence; the long line of eleven generations of Vassalls in Jamaica had come to an end. David described his life in Jamaica as one which sounds typically colonial. His parents had an active social life and left their children in the care of a nanny whom they loved more than their own mother. They went to local schools in which black and white children and teachers mixed, but they were forbidden to invite any black friends home. I was amazed to learn how racial attitudes had been transformed in the ten years since David left the island and I arrived, two doors down the road. I was probably totally naïve and broke social norms with abandon, being married to a black Jamaican and mixing with his family and black and white work colleagues. It was all a social minefield which I didn't know how to navigate. Nevertheless, since independence, racial attitudes had vastly changed, partly due to the Black Power movement from America and also simply from independence. From 1972 Michael Manley's socialist government promoted fundamental changes in attitudes, where blackness and black culture were appreciated and no longer denigrated. White politicians took pains to associate with black people and adopt features of African culture in things like music, dance, dress and foods. Perhaps this was exactly what David's parents had feared and so had removed their children from these influences. Nevertheless, I think it was hard for David as a white Jamaican to integrate with British children or succeed in the school system. As Jamaican immigrants in 1962, they should have been seen as part of the Windrush generation; yet this label only seems to be applied to the black working class West Indians who arrived. Whites were able to mingle with white Britons on the surface, while their difference in accent, outlook and expectations may have made a deeper integration quite difficult. The sudden loss of white privilege would also have been something difficult to deal with.

Conclusion

This has been a broad sweep across the centuries of one family's involvement in Jamaican slavery and their later moves to Devon. I have looked at three lots of Vassall descendants who came to Devon – William Vassall, the five young Glanvilles, and 'David' – and speculated about their motives and experiences, and attempted to find out how they were related. I have looked in a general way at the Vassalls' Jamaican properties, the rise and fall in their fortunes, and their role in enforcing the enslavement of their African workers.

What I find interesting is to see how one family's involvement with slavery and colonialism changes over the years as the political climate, the economy and social attitudes change. It is interesting to follow a global family as they move to and fro across the Atlantic, showing that globalisation is nothing new; also to see how some early good fortune could enable a family to gain enormous wealth but then to gradually lose it again. It is also interesting to follow how relationships between the races play out in different eras, how these issues are still current today, and how these people places and events have touched my own life.

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