

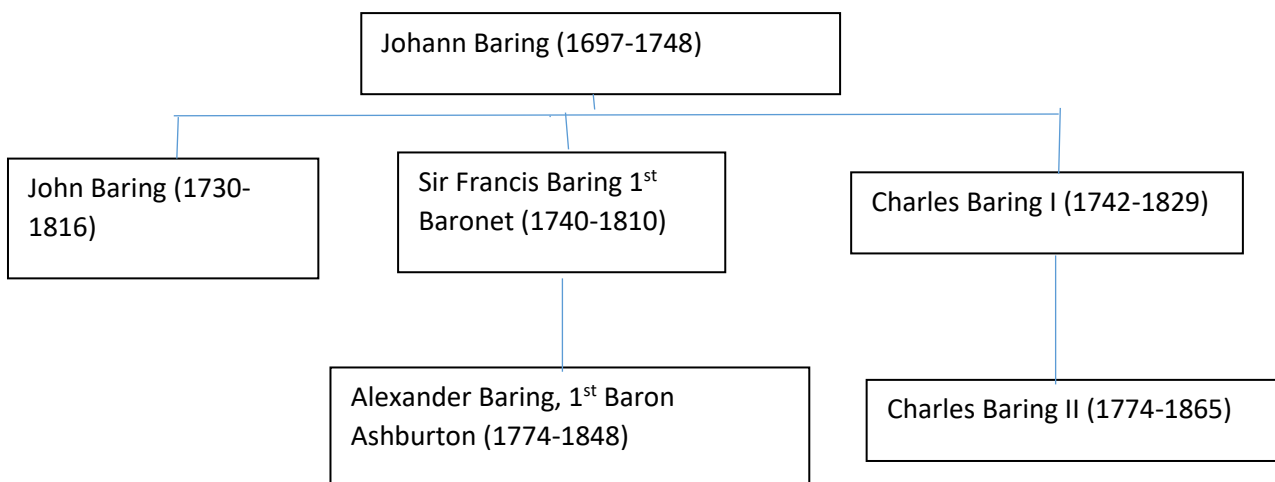
The Baring family: Their connections to slavery and Devon houses

The Baring family were wool manufacturers of Exeter. The sons of the original German immigrant founded Barings Bank of London and provided financial services to slave traders and to plantation owners in the West Indies. They owned Devon houses: Larkbeare, Mount Radford, Courtlands and Buckland Filleigh.

Early Baring family in Exeter

The first member of the Baring family to arrive in Exeter was Johann Baring (1697-1748), in 1717, a wool manufacturer who came from Germany. Johann's sons John (1730-1816), Francis (1740-1810) and Charles (1742-1829) became involved in the slavery business through their banks.

This family tree shows the kinship links between those Barings who have close slavery connections¹.



Barings' slavery connections

Francis Baring and Barings Bank

Johann's three sons, John, Francis and Charles, built on their father's wool fortune to invest in banking. Several banks were founded in Exeter between the 1760s and 1790s as the wool trade was in decline and prosperous merchants were looking for more profitable investments. Most did not last long, or were merged to form the high street banks of today. But Francis based himself in London where he and John established their first bank in 1762, and from 1777 to 1804 he led the firm almost single-handedly. Barings Bros survived until it was brought down by Nick Leeson's fraud in 1995. Francis was the leading character in the bank's success due to his special talents and personal qualities.

Barings Bank played a key role in international finance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including in financing the slave trade and slave/plantation system.

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baring_family

The bank's profits arose from:

- Trading on joint account with other merchants
- Acting as London agent for overseas merchants
- Buying and selling consignments
- Making and collecting payments
- Arranging shipping and warehousing
- Trade finance through making advances or accepting bills of exchange.

All of these activities enabled overseas trade under the mercantile system².

Baring and Atkinson

It has not proved possible to identify material on the extent and nature of Barings Bank's involvement in slavery and the slave trade. However, there is a Baring Archive held in Moorgate, London, and in 2020 its trustees announced their intention to establish a working group to consider the archives related to the Bank's slavery involvement³. This suggests that relevant material will be made available to the public in the future. In the meantime I have picked a few specific examples of Barings' dealings with one particular family of slave-owners and West Indian merchants, the Atkinsons, as documented in 2020 by a descendant, Richard Atkinson, who was able to gain access to the Baring Archive.

Francis Baring had become friends with an earlier Richard Atkinson (1739-1835) while they were both apprenticed to an influential London merchant called Touchet from 1755. Francis' mother had spotted his potential and sent him from Exeter to London to learn business. When Richard, together with other Atkinson family members, invested in Jamaica, he was sometimes financed by Francis Baring in his role as banker. When, in 1781, the Atkinsons bought two sugar plantations in Jamaica, Bogue and Dean's Valley, which were going cheap, they went into a partnership which was not honoured, but Baring bailed them out through a £6,000 loan; this was eventually bequeathed to Baring's heirs on Atkinson's death in 1835. In this example, Barings Bank helped to finance the continued operation of a Jamaican slave estate.

Barings also assisted the Atkinson firm in their slave trading operations. In 1800, for example, the Atkinsons' Kingston firm handled six human cargoes comprising 2,350 people. They advanced bills drawn on their corresponding London merchant house, Barings, to pay the ship owner for the cargo, extending credit to Jamaican planters to buy the enslaved Africans, and securing guarantees from those planters to sell their produce through Barings. This was risky for Barings because they depended on the planters sending produce of sufficient value to pay for the slaves recently purchased, but at this time sugar prices were falling so success was by no means guaranteed. In fact, Barings sent a representative out from London to investigate Atkinson's Kingston office and to warn them against over-extending themselves in buying enslaved Africans.

Another Atkinson slave trading venture financed by Barings was the purchase of African men to support soldiers in the West India Regiment, known as 'pioneers'. The West India Regiment was needed to defend British islands against competing colonial powers such as the French and Spanish and also to defend the whites against slave uprisings. (It seems ironic that some of these soldiers were enslaved themselves!) It was not possible to recruit enough white men for this job due to their high death rate from mosquito-borne diseases to which Africans had better immunity. In 1804, Matt

² Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

³ baringarchive.org.uk/archive-materials-relating-to-slavery-in-the-baring-archive/#more-1099

Atkinson was Agent General to Governor Nugent in Jamaica and, as such, he and two equal partners purchased 180 enslaved Africans as 'pioneers' for £90 each. For this he had to draw on Barings Bank. By the time of Emancipation this loan was paid off; as seen in the Legacies of British Slavery⁴ records Barings did not receive any compensation for the pioneers.

A less direct way in which Baring supported the British slave/plantation system was through financing the Atkinson firm to pay for naval and military supplies. In 1779, Atkinson was in trouble over a contract to supply the Navy with rum, for which he had overcharged the government. He asked Francis Baring to act as referee in the dispute. In 1793, when the British invaded St Domingue with the aim of capturing it from the French at the time of the revolt of the enslaved Africans, the Atkinson firm seized the chance of financing the army's and navy's needs. They overextended themselves but their bankruptcy was avoided by a loan of £36,000 from Francis Baring – this connection was very prestigious for them and from then on they could rely on credit from Barings Bank. If the British had succeeded in capturing St Domingue they would have greatly extended their slave/plantation system but, in fact, the expedition was an expensive failure due to the fierce resistance of Toussaint L'Ouverture's army and the scourge of yellow fever.

These are just a few specific examples of how Barings Bank financed the slavery system through one particular intermediary firm – no doubt they performed similar services for the many other West India merchants.

Post Emancipation, Barings enabled the Atkinson descendants to continue living off their profits. For example, Dick Atkinson retired from Jamaica at the age of 43 in 1856 and lived off his investment in American railroad stocks which had been floated by Barings.

Alexander Baring

Financial role as banker to slaveholders:

Francis Baring was succeeded by his son, Alexander (1774-1848). Alexander was brought up in Barings Bank and, on his father's death in 1810, Alexander became head of the bank, as well as head of Hope and Co. Bank, merging the two to form Baring Bros. He negotiated financial arrangements for the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and French reparation bonds after the defeat of Napoleon, being regarded as the most powerful financier in Europe. The bank's financial dealings included loans to slaveholders⁵.

Alexander retired from Barings Bank in 1830, so that the large amount of slavery compensation secured by the bank in 1835 came into the hands of his son Francis and nephews Thomas and John. This amounted to over £37,000 for 1,015 enslaved people on seven plantations in British Guiana. This younger generation had London, rather than Devon, addresses.

Alexander received personal compensation too as he had lent money to a slaveholder, Bosanquet, who was unable to repay. In total he received £1,650 as his share of compensation for 409 enslaved people on St Kitts⁶.

⁴ Ucl.ac.uk/lbs; under notes search 'pioneers'

⁵ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Baring,_1st_Baron_Ashburton

⁶ Ucl.ac.uk/lbs

Political role in opposing abolition of slavery:

Alexander Baring was Tory MP for various constituencies between 1806 and 1835, in which role he, unsurprisingly, argued against the abolition of slavery, maintaining that the enslaved were well treated and that abolition would endanger the colonial system. For example, in this key 1823 debate in the House of Commons led by Buxton and Wilberforce⁷ Baring said:

My own opinion, however, is, that, as far as the physical sufferings of the negro go, they have been much over-stated;

My own opinion is, that the condition of the slaves is undoubtedly, in many respects, superior to that of most of the European peasantry. They are well clothed, well fed, and, I believe, generally treated with justice and kindness.

But certainly the question of the actual emancipation of the slaves is one which appears to me to be attended with the greatest difficulties.

And I will only say, that if any measures are taken for abolishing slavery, either directly or circuitously, they must have the effect of endangering the peace and tranquillity of our colonies.

It would be absurd to suppose that a free black population, so enlightened and cultivated as to value their rights, and duly to appreciate their strength; that a population so instructed and so civilized, would consent to continue to devote their labours to proprietors, the greater portion of whom are resident in England.

Arguments such as these, coming from a person of Alexander Baring's stature, helped to defeat the Abolition bill and ensure the continuation of servitude for hundreds of thousands of West Indians.

Charles Baring II

Grandson of Johann Baring through his son Charles I, Charles Baring II (1774-1865) was a cousin of Alexander Baring. He was born at Courtlands, Lymptone, but emigrated to South Carolina where he started buying up land in 1831 to create Barings Plantation. By 1850 he had 4,500 acres and 140 enslaved African-Americans, growing rice as the main crop. The plantation is situated in Parkers Ferry, Charleston County. He died at Flat Rock, North Carolina⁸.

Barings' Devon houses

Barings family members owned, at various times, Larkbeare House, Mount Radford, Courtlands and Buckland Filleigh House.

Larkbeare House, St Leonard's, Exeter. Johann Baring, the wool manufacturer from Germany, bought Larkbeare House on Holloway Street in 1737 and it remained in the family until 1832⁹. Part of this house remains as 38 Holloway Street, the house by the pedestrian crossing with the strange gnome in a niche in the wall; it is not the present-day Larkbeare House, which is owned by Devon County Council and run as a meeting venue and registry office, on the opposite side of the road.

⁷ Hansard, Parliamentary debates, series 2, vol 9, cols 274-5

⁸ I am indebted to Joanna Traynor for information on Charles Baring II.

⁹ exetermemories.co.uk

Mount Radford House no longer exists. It was built in Elizabethan times on a rise on the north side of what is now the Topsham Road, adjacent to Larkbeare House, in the area of Barnado Road. After a succession of owners, it was bought by Johann's son, John Baring, from the bankrupt John Colesworthy in 1755¹⁰. Baring rebuilt the house in the Georgian style and built a tree-lined carriageway from Magdalene Road which followed the line of the present-day St Leonard's Road. It was sold out of the Baring family in 1826 and demolished in 1902¹¹.

Courtlands, Lymptone, is described in Meller (2015). Overlooking the Exe estuary, it was bought by Charles Baring I in 1760 and was the birthplace of his son Charles Baring II. The house stayed in the Baring family until the death of Charles Baring I in 1829. It is now a Michael Caines restaurant known as Lymptone Manor¹².

Buckland Filleigh House, Torrington, is also described in Meller. It was bought by Alexander Baring in 1843 from J.D. Inglett-Fortescue, himself a slave-owner¹³. Apparently Baring never lived in the house.

The Barings' ownership of these imposing mansions illustrates how the wealth acquired from slavery was spent. It shows a legacy that remains 'in plain sight' but which we would do well to ask questions about today.

Baring memorials

The Baring family have memorials in St Leonards' Church, opposite their former homes of Larkbeare House and Mount Radford on Holloway Street. Their name is remembered in the nearby Baring Crescent and in the university building of Baring Court.

Conclusion

The Baring family used wealth derived from the wool trade to invest in banking, and through their bank became heavily involved in the transatlantic slavery economy. This led them to become some of the most powerful British financiers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who were able to put their weight behind the anti-abolition movement and thwart attempts to liberate the enslaved people of the West Indies. The Barings used some of their wealth to buy Devon country houses.

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¹⁰ Bayer, P. (2019). Mt Radford and the Colesworthys. *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*. Vol 151.

¹¹ Roach, A. E. (1967) *Eight hundred years at St Leonard's*. Exeter.

¹² lympstonemanor.co.uk/sense-of-place/history-and-historic-restoration

¹³ Ucl.ac.uk/lbs. J.D. Inglett-Fortescue was owner 88 enslaved people on Hope Estate, St Vincent.