

The Drake family: their connections to slavery and Devon houses

Sir Francis Drake is well known as being on some of the first British slave-trading voyages. However, his fortune was made through privateering and he used this money to buy Buckland Abbey. The family later inherited Nutwell Court.

Biography and slavery connection

Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596) participated in some of the first British slave-trading voyages, with his cousin Sir John Hawkins, capturing people from West Africa to take on the infamous 'middle passage' to sell to plantations in the New World. As such, he was in at the beginning of the whole slave-trading business and the subsequent development of the sugar/slave plantation system, though it was Hawkins rather than Drake who was the leader.

Drake was born near Tavistock and as a child lived with the Hawkins family of Plymouth who were traders and seafarers, including slave-traders. Drake sailed as a crewmember under Captain Hawkins on slave-trading voyages to Sierra Leone in 1560, 1562 and 1564, carrying captive Africans across the Atlantic to sell in Spanish and Portuguese American ports, making a vast profit. However, the Spanish and Portuguese governments protested this incursion into their mercantile sphere and Hawkins was forbidden by Queen Elizabeth I from repeating the venture, whereupon Drake transferred to a different captain and went on further slaving voyages, in 1569 and 1571.

He was also a privateer, attacking Spanish ships and New World settlements and stealing their treasure, having his first independent venture in 1572. Five years later he embarked on his circumnavigation of the globe in the Golden Hind, returning after three years with immense booty. In 1581 he was knighted by the Queen and had a well-known miniature painted by Exeter painter, Nicholas Hilliard. He was second in command of the victorious English fleet against the 1588 attack of the Spanish Armada, where legend has it that he calmly finished his games of bowls on Plymouth Hoe before going into action. He died, childless, on a later expedition to Porto Bello in Panama in 1596.

After Hawkins' and Drake's voyages there was very slow growth of slave-trading until the 1660s when the sugar industry with its high labour demand started to take off in Barbados.

Houses

With part of his loot from the round-the-world voyage Drake bought **Buckland Abbey**, between Plymouth and Tavistock (not to be confused with Buckfast Abbey near Buckfastleigh). He bought it in 1581 for £3,400 from Sir Richard Grenville the younger. Drake lived at Buckland Abbey for fifteen years until his death in 1595. Sir Francis' heir was his brother and fellow voyager, Thomas Drake, who inherited Buckland. Thomas' son, Francis, became first baronet in 1622 after making financial contributions to King James I, and he made use of his uncle's journal to write the first account of the circumnavigation¹. The house stayed in the Drake family until 1937 and in 1947 it was presented to the National Trust².

Nutwell Court, on the Exe estuary, was another house owned by generations of the Drake family. Nutwell Court had been owned by a Sir John Prideaux of the Ashburton branch of the Prideaux family (distinct from the two John Prideauxs in the separate article on Prideaux) who sold it in 1685 and it was inherited in 1699 by Henry Pollexfen, husband of Gertrude Drake, daughter of the third

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Francis_Drake,_1st_Baronet

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buckland_Abbey

baronet Sir Francis Drake of Buckland Abbey. As the couple died childless, in 1731 Nutwell passed into the hands of the fifth baronet and thence to a series of nephews until it was sold in 1941. The Drake family preferred living at Nutwell to living at Buckland; they tended to neglect the latter house and leave it to tenants, but they returned to Buckland in 1902. Rev John Swete, the watercolourist made at least four paintings of Nutwell Court during the Drake era.

Werrington, on the River Tamar bordering Devon and Cornwall, was owned by the Drake family from 1620 to 1651, being bought by Sir Francis' nephew the first baronet and sold to Sir William Morice by the second baronet (see entry for Morice).

Netherton Hall at Farway near Honiton was owned by Sir Bernard Drake who disclaimed any relationship to his contemporary, Sir Francis, though in fact he was distantly related; he sold it to Sir Edmund Prideaux (1st Bart, died 1628) and it remained in the Prideaux family until 1875. Edmund Prideaux was a trader of Lyme Regis, mentioned in the Prideaux section, possibly involved in the slave trade but no evidence has been found of this.

Conclusion

Francis Drake participated in several slave-trading voyages under different captains. This would have brought him some profit and perhaps enabled him to switch to the more lucrative business of privateering, by which he was able to buy Buckland Abbey, to be enjoyed by further generations of the Drake family. Wealth and marriages led to family descendants acquiring Werrington and Nutwell in later years. The associations with Prideaux and Morice through these houses were not through family relationships but through commercial transactions.

References

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Gillian Allen
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