

16/12/2022 by Gillian Allen

The Morice family and their connections to slavery, Devon houses and other families

Humphrey Morice (1679-1731) was one of Britain's largest slaver-traders and an influencer of government policy in favour of the slavery interest. The Morice family was connected with Churston Manor and Werrington House, and with the Prideaux family.

Links with Devon houses

The Morice family was connected with two Devon houses: Churston Manor (West Putford, Soldon, nr Holsworthy, not to be confused with Churston Manor in Brixham) and Werrington (near the Devon/Cornwall border). The connection with Churston came through a link by marriage to the Prideaux family who had owned the house (See family tree at the end of this article).

Churston Manor had been inherited by one Sir Nicholas Prideaux (1550-1627) but he moved away from Churston in 1600 to his newly-built Prideaux Place in Padstow. Churston was later inherited by Sir Nicholas' stepson, Sir William Morice (1602-1672) who, in 1651, bought Werrington and relocated to it¹. Churston Manor and Werrington Park still exist. (Note, this Nicholas Prideaux was not the slave-owning Hon Nicholas Prideaux (1635-before 1702) 'of Barbados').

William Morice became prominent through his association with a distant cousin, George Monck, and they assisted with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. William was knighted and was made a Secretary of State. This same George Monck was related to John Colleton and was influential in the establishment of the colony of South Carolina (see article on Colleton).

William and his wife Elizabeth (grand-daughter of Sir Nicholas) had a son, Humphrey Morice (1638-89) who became a London trader but was buried at Werrington. This Humphrey had a son, also Humphrey (1679-1731), who became a large scale slave-trader. This last Humphrey was therefore the great-great-grandson of Sir Nicholas Prideaux of Churston Manor and Prideaux Place. Humphrey was raised at Werrington, the seat of his uncle William Morice.

Links with slavery

Humphrey Morice (1679-1731) was deeply involved in slave-trading and exerted a strong influence on British government policy towards the transatlantic slave-trading and slave plantation system.

Morice was a slave-trader on a vast scale. Slavevoyages.com website shows that he owned or jointly owned 34 slaving ships, which made 87 voyages over the period 1704 to 1732, carrying nearly 25,000 captive Africans from their homelands to the New World plantations. His ships were based in London, and carried cargoes to West Africa where the captains bought captives and transported them to destinations such as Barbados and Jamaica. In return, profitable products of the plantations, mainly sugar and rum, were sent back to London. Morice had several ships plying the West African coast at once, and carried on a very efficient operation claiming minimal loss of life of Africans on the middle passage. Morice himself remained in London but gave his captains detailed instructions on how to go about the business.

As well as owning ships, Morice was able to influence government policy. He was a friend of Sir Robert Walpole (British Prime Minister) and a director and then governor of the Bank of England between 1716 and 1729. He was active in arguing for independent slave-traders and against the government's monopolistic Royal Africa Company. This conflict came to a head in 1726 with a Board

¹ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Werrington

of Trade inquiry into the option of opening up the trade. Morice argued that the RAC was not able to supply the enslaved labour needed to run the West Indian plantations and that the plantations were 'now the most considerable branch of trade in this kingdom'², pointing out the vital role of slavery in the British economy. He reinforced this argument by pointing out that the African trade 'occasioned a great exportation of our own manufacturers'. It was therefore a stimulus to the early industrial revolution in Britain. Morice and his allies succeeded in convincing the Board of Trade to decide in favour of the independent traders, which allowed the slave-trade to continue apace and not be held back by the RAC monopoly.

Morice exerted other influences on government policy. For example, he joined a City of London petition against Virginia's imposition of a tax on imported enslaved Africans, which would have hindered British slave-trading to that North American colony. And he urged the passage of the 1731 Recovery of Debts in American Plantations Act which made it easier for creditors such as London bankers to recover their debts from defaulting planters, thereby smoothing the growth of the financial system that enabled the plantation economy.

Humphrey Morice was a pillar of the British mercantile community. However, after his sudden death in 1731 – possibly a suicide – it emerged that he had been a large scale fraudster; he had issued fictitious bills and abused funds with which he had been entrusted. He left debts of £150,000 for which his widow was sued. His elder son, another Humphrey (1723-85) inherited Werrington from his uncle William Morice, dying childless in Naples, having followed his passion for animals and Italian art.

Another testament to the Morice family's slavery connections is a plaque on the wall of Werrington church in memory of an African, Philip Scipio, who had been a servant to Sir William Morice and who died in 1784. As an African 'servant' who had been brought from St Helena, it is quite possible that he was, or had been, an enslaved person who did not freely choose to be a servant to the Morice family. He is praised as: *"An African whose quality might have done honour to any nation or climate and give us to see that virtue is confined to no country or complexion. Here weep uncorrupted fidelity and plain honesty."* It was fashionable in the eighteenth century for grand families to have African servants, and dozens have been identified in Devon. A portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of Admiral Ourry, which includes an African servant/slave boy, can be seen at Saltram House near Plymouth³.

Conclusion

The Morice family is an example of a family which made it big in the slavery business but to do so had to leave their Devon roots and move to London, the commercial centre of the industry at that time. The original William had inherited Churston Manor through marriage to Elizabeth Prideaux and then bought Werrington house. The family kept a link to Werrington throughout several generations. The Morices were not descended from the slave-owning branch of the Prideaux family so any link between the slavery activities of the two families is quite tenuous. However, bearing in mind the widespread international trading of the latter family it is a possibility but there is no evidence of a link.

² J. of the Commissioners for Trade 1723-8, pp.249-50

³ MacKeith, L. (2003). Local Black history: A beginning in Devon. London: Archives and Museum of Black Heritage.

References

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Vol 39, p.163-5. Entry for Humphrey Morice.

Prideaux, R.M. (1989). *Prideaux: A Westcountry clan*. Sussex: Phillimore.

Slavevoyages.com

Family tree showing relationship between Prideaux and Morice families

