

Houses painted by Reverend John Swete with slave-ownership connections: watercolours in the Devon Heritage Centre, Exeter

Reproductions of Rev John Swete's watercolours from his travels around Devon can be seen in a four-volume publication by Todd Gray and Margery Rowe, *Travels in Georgian Devon*, Devon Books, 1999.

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Oxton House

Near Exeter

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F2/7.

Oxton House was the home of the Rev. John Swete. He had inherited a previous house on this site from his father in around 1776, when he became curate of Kenn. In 1781 he received a substantial legacy from Esther Swete, including property in Jamaica and the Swete plantation in Antigua, as well as property in England, but one condition of her will was that he adopt the surname Swete (he had been born John Tripe).

This new wealth enabled him to indulge his passion for houses and landscape. He pulled down the old Oxton House and built this new structure. He also spent a large sum on beautifying the grounds surrounding the house. Once the work was complete, he embarked on a series of tours around Devon between 1789 and 1800, looking at country houses. His notes on these travels, along with an extensive set of watercolours, are recorded in his impressive journals, which are now deposited at the Devon Heritage Centre.

The Retreat

Topsham

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F6/159

The Retreat was first recorded as the site which Samuel Buttall, sugar baker from Plymouth, bought in 1684 in order to build a sugar refinery. It was bought by Richard Orme in 1769, who had been in Virginia in 1755, as part of the British army's defence of colonies from French attacks – each nation wanting to protect their considerable financial interests in plantations there. His new house, the Retreat, was completed by 1773.

The next owner was Alexander Hamilton, whose wealth came from sugar plantations in Grenada and the East India Company. Hamilton had sugar plantations (including Samaritan) in Grenada previously owned by his brother Robert. Alexander Hamilton Kelso changed his surname to Hamilton on inheriting his uncle's properties in Grenada and England, and received almost £4,000 in 1835 as compensation for 140 persons enslaved in Grenada.

In 1774 John Swete wrote. 'This is now an excellent house. It was about 30 years ago a Sugar House', so Swete was aware of that history.

It is now surrounded by the motorway bridge and new housing and garages.

Lindridge

Bishopsteignton

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F8/133

Sir Peter Lear, wealthy owner of sugar plantations in Barbados, bought and rebuilt Lindridge in 1673.

Lindridge was sold in 1747 to John Baring of Larkbeare House who was one of the wealthiest cloth merchants in Exeter. In 1762 John and his brother Francis (who was based in London) founded the company which later became known as Barings Bank, and John founded Devonshire Bank in 1770. Francis's son, Alexander Baring, became head of Barings in 1810, and he was the beneficiary of compensation paid for more than 400 enslaved people in St Kitts. Two of his nephews, Thomas and John, received extensive payments as mortgagees for plantations in British Guiana.

Lindridge House was destroyed by fire in 1963, but the gardens have been restored and are Grade II listed.

Maristow

Near Plymouth

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F12/137

Maristow House was owned by families with slavery connections from 1695 until 1938. It was owned by the Modyford, Heywood and Lopes families in turn. Each owned Jamaican estates run with the labour of enslaved Africans.

Originally a chapel, the Maristow site had been bought at the Reformation by ancestors of Sir Andrew Slanning, on whose death in 1695 it passed to his aunt, Elizabeth Modyford, widow of Sir James Modyford, Lieutenant-Governor of Jamaica and large scale plantation owner. Their daughter, Grace Modyford, married Col. Peter Heywood, another governor of Jamaica and owner of plantations, and in 1734 the house was inherited by their son, Col. James Heywood, and in 1740 by their grandson, James Modyford Heywood. This Heywood became High Sheriff of Devon in 1759 and was honoured by a visit from King George III in 1798.

Manasseh Lopes, West India merchant, bought the house in 1798 for £100,000. His Jamaican-made fortune enabled him to become a Tory MP protecting the interests of slave owners in Parliament. His descendant, Henry Lopes, was a benefactor of the University of Exeter, and Lopes Hall is named after him. Swete noted this charming situation of Maristow House with its view over the confluence of the rivers Tamar and Tavy on his 1795 journey across Dartmoor following the Dock Leat near

Tavistock. He noticed that the coarse grounds of 10,000 acres, belonging to the Lord of the Manor, Mr Heywood, were like Dartmoor, 'wild, boggy and strewn with rocks'.

Shute House

Near Axminster

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F7/85

On 1 June 1619, the parish register for Colyton records the burial of 'Katheren, blackmore, servant of Sir William Pole'. This suggests some involvement in trading with Africa.

The building (Old Shute House), some of it dating from the 1380s, was originally in the hands of the Bonneville and Grey families. It was sold to William Pole I in 1560. A later member of the family, Sir John Pole 5th Bt, (?- 1760) married Elizabeth Mills, whose father John Mills owned extensive plantations in St Kitts.

Their son Sir John William de la Pole 6th Bt pulled down part of the old house in 1785, reusing the stone to construct a new Shute House at the end of the drive. The new Shute House (listed as Grade II*) remains a private residence, in single occupation. In the next generation, his son Sir William Templer Pole 7th Bt received compensation of over £5,000 in 1835, shared with another descendant of John Mills, for the 340 people enslaved on two plantations in St Kitts.

The old house is one of the most important non-fortified manor houses of the Middle Ages still in existence, and was Grade I listed in 1955. It was known as Shute Barton in the 18th and 19th centuries. The old house was described by Rev. John Swete during his visit in 1795.

Newton House

Newton St Cyres

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F11/153

Newton House was home to the Quicke family. In 1759 John Quicke married Jane Coster, heiress of £40,000 from her father who was a Bristol merchant with interests in the slave trade. Newton House was rebuilt in about 1776, and again in 1909 following a fire.

Werrington

Near Launceston

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F3/63

On 10 September 1784 Philip Scipio, personal Black servant to Lady Lucy Morice, was buried at Werrington. He had been brought to England from St Helena by the Duke of Wharton. Part of his gravestone is now fixed to the north exterior wall of Werrington church.

Mamhead Kenton

Near Exeter

Devon Heritage Centre reference DRO 564M/F9/57

Mamhead was home to the Ball family of shipping merchants from 1547. They built the obelisk that you can see in the far distance in 1742. It was a landmark to guide ships. In 1810 Mamhead was occupied by the Ellis family who were major plantation owners in Jamaica. The house was replaced in 1823 but the obelisk is still there.

Nutwell

Woodbury

RO 564M/F16/84

Through the centuries Nutwell Court has been associated with a number of prominent west country families. Land and the property on the site above the River Exe, in the parish of Woodbury, was owned by four generations of one branch of the Prideaux family from early in the sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century. The Prideaux family was large with a number of branches active in the slave economies of the Caribbean, including Nicholas Prideaux of Barbados and his descendants,, who traded in trafficked Africans and used their enslaved labour on their plantations.

In the following two centuries, at various times, Nutwell 's owners included the Ford, Pollexfen, Bampfylde (of Politimore House) families, and to the Drake family of Buckland Abbey.

Swete painted one picture of the house before its partial demolition in the mid eighteenth century. It was later remodelled in the neo-classical style, which is what can be seen today, and which Swete painted when he re-visited the house in 1799.

The story of this property demonstrates the complexity of wealthy Devon families' histories and their connections to the history of slave-ownership. It is one of the many properties in Devon, some of them painted by Swete, which would benefit from detailed further research.

Sources

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