

Rev. John Swete

Peter Wingfield-Digby, *Legacies of Devon Slave-ownership Group*

Summary

The Rev. John Tripe (1752-1821), curate of the village of Kenn near Exeter from 1776 to 1782, changed his surname to Swete in 1781, in order to benefit from the will of Esther Swete who died that year. She bequeathed him her large Swete sugar estate in Antigua, as well as her family estate of Trayne in Modbury, South Devon, and a part-interest in four plantations in Jamaica. He had also inherited from his father the family home at Oxton House in Kenton, which is where he lived for the rest of his life. Having private means, he was able to indulge his interest in art, and painted many watercolours, particularly of country houses around Devon.

Swete's origins

The Rev. John Swete was born John Tripe on 1 July 1752 and baptised in Ashburton on 13 August 1752. He was the son of Nicholas Tripe, a surgeon in Ashburton, by his second wife, Rebecca Yard of Kingsteignton. He was educated at Ashburton Free School. He spent a year (1769/70) at Eton College, and then went to University College, Oxford, graduating B.A. in 1774 and M.A. in 1777. He was made a deacon in 1775 and priest in 1776. He appears to have been a curate at Highweek, Newton Abbot, for a short while in 1775 after he was made a deacon, but as soon as he was priested in 1776 he took over as curate of Kenn, remaining in this position until 1782. In 1784 he married Charlotte Beaumont. He died on 25 October 1821 at the age of 69.

How Swete acquired his surname

The Rev. John Tripe changed his name to John Swete in 1781 in accordance with the will of Esther Swete who died that year. She had been born Esther Prickman, the daughter and sole heiress of Thomas Prickman of Falmouth, Cornwall who had died in 1728. She was (incidentally) related to the Yarde family of Chudleigh, and therefore may have been related to John Tripe, whose mother's maiden name was Yard.

At the time of her father's death Esther was still a minor, and he left her in the guardianship of Adrian Swete of Trayne, Modbury and his sister Philippa Swete. They immediately married her off, aged only 16, to their 55-year-old younger brother Captain Mayne Swete, whose first wife Grace Walrond (died in 1727) had left him a large sugar estate (Swetes) in Falmouth, Antigua, inherited from her deceased first husband William Wainwright. A recent publication gives an idea of the state of this plantation; the author comes from the area that he is describing:¹

¹ Hewlester A. Samuel, *The Birth of the Village of Liberta, Antigua*, p. 44, Llumina Press, Coral Springs, Florida, 2007

I hate to close this chapter without saying something about the village of Swete (better known to the people of Liberta as Sweetes Village). The original estate was a 337-acre sugar plantation originally owned by Captain Main Swete and his wife Esther Swete. The estate, and thus the village, is in the northwestern section of Liberta. The Swetes came from a long line of Antiguan-born British families. The estate, in its hey-day, was home to hundreds of slaves. According to the Ermington Parish Register, Main Swete died in England and was buried on July 8 1735, leaving the estate to his wife Esther who resided in England at the time of his death.

Esther was living at Bedford Row, London, and later at 30, Great George Street, Westminster. A spinster named Mary Hynes, who lived in St George, Bloomsbury, owned considerable land in Port Royal and St Elizabeth, both in Jamaica. She died in 1763, leaving her Jamaican property (including Beeston Spring) to 'her friend' Esther Swete.

Esther Swete and her husband had had a child, Adrian John Swete, in 1731, who graduated from Oxford in 1751 but died unmarried in 1755. He had been a godfather to John Tripe. He was also the last of the Swetes of Modbury, and bequeathed his estates to his mother Esther, who treated her son's godson as the grandson she never had, and made him her heir, on condition that he changed his surname to Swete. After her death in 1781 John Tripe came into possession of the Swete estate in Antigua as well as the Swete's family estate of Trayne in Modbury. He also became joint owner, along with the Dean of Bristol (Very Rev. Henry Beeke), of four estates in Jamaica. The Rev. John Swete appears to have completely rebuilt Trayne House soon afterwards. It is now listed as Grade II by Historic England.

How Swete acquired Oxton House

The mother of Nicholas Tripe was Susannah Martyn, and the Martyn family owned Oxton House in Kenton. Susannah's father (and therefore John Tripe's great grandfather) was Nicholas Martyn, who had inherited Oxton House. Oxton House was then passed down through the male heirs, but when William Clifford Martyn - the grandson of Nicholas Martyn - died in 1767 without heirs, he bequeathed Oxton House to his cousin Nicholas Tripe, who around 1775 passed it on as a residence for his son John.

Later, in 1781, after John Swete received the Esther Swete inheritance mentioned above, he pulled down the old house of the Martyn family and erected a Georgian building. He also spent considerable sums (Swete estimated the amount at £6,000) in developing the grounds surrounding the house. Oxton House and park are now Grade II listed by Historic England. He purchased other properties in Devon, including Moreleigh Court near Totnes.

Swete's travels

Swete's wealth enabled him to indulge his interest in his native county, and between 1789 and 1800 he undertook a number of lengthy excursions around Devon. Swete initially made sketches of the places he visited. He recorded these in his notebooks, along with handwritten notes. Later, sometimes much later, and usually during the winter, he reproduced his sketches as watercolours in his 20-volumes of journals entitled *Picturesque*

Sketches of Devon, now held in the Devon Record Office, though three of these journals are now lost.

All his watercolours from his travels around Devon are now included in an excellent four-volume publication by Todd Gray and Margery Rowe.² Todd Gray writes (page xi):

It may have been due to embarrassment that Swete in his autobiography neglects to mention that Esther Swete also bequeathed him substantial property in the West Indies. The sugar plantations in Jamaica and Antigua, with its 'slaves, negroes and pickaninyes' provided Swete with a considerable income.

2 March 2020

² Todd Gray and Margery Rowe, *Travels in Georgian Devon*, 4 volumes, Devon Books, 1997-2000