

Henry de la Beche (1796 – 1855)

Summary

Henry de la Beche (1796-1855) inherited a Jamaican sugar plantation which supported him while he established himself as a geologist. He was intrigued by the fossils he and Mary Anning discovered in Lyme Regis. His discoveries contributed evidence towards the revolution in geological ideas of the early nineteenth century in which views of the earth's early history moved away from the biblical account of creation to those nearer to modern science. He demonstrated skills in investigating geological 'facts', in mapping the geology of places as diverse as Devon and Jamaica, in writing geological textbooks, in illustrating imagined Jurassic scenes, and in persuading governments to set up institutions of geology. A reluctant slave-owner, he made attempts to study the conditions of enslaved people objectively and to alleviate the lot of his own enslaved population, while nevertheless living off the proceeds of their enforced labour. His life and work exemplify how modern intellectual advances have sometimes been underpinned by racial exploitation.

Biography

Henry de la Beche was born in 1796 in Wimpole Street, London, an area popular with wealthy slave-owners. On inheriting the family sugar plantation in Jamaica in 1800, his father took his wife and children on a visit but, unfortunately, died on the trip. This wasn't the only mishap, as the returning family were shipwrecked in the Bahamas on the return voyage, though clearly they survived. Henry then inherited the property, which would be held in trust until he reached his majority.

In 1809 Henry entered the Royal Military College at Marlow where he honed his talents as an observer and draftsman, talents which would later stand him in good stead as a geologist. However, in 1811 his military career was cut short when he was expelled for insubordination, ending his formal education. He then moved with his mother and her new husband to the Devon/Dorset area and in future referred to himself as 'of Lyme Regis'.

He arrived in Lyme Regis at a crucial time in the development of the new science of geology. It was just after Mary Anning, a young woman whose family business was collecting curious fossil remains and selling them to tourists, had completed the recovery of a hitherto unknown fossil reptile, the ichthyosaurus or 'fish lizard'. Henry's interest was sparked and he developed the 'habit of exploring the cliffs of Lyme Regis with Mary Anning' (ref: Coneybeare 1855, letter to Hamilton, President of Geological Society of London). Despite this, in his later obituary of Mary he failed to mention their earlier association.

At the age of 21, Henry came into control of his Jamaican plantation, giving him freedom to spend his money as he wished. In 1818 he married an Irishwoman, Letitia Whyte, and in 1819 he set off on a grand continental tour with his wife and mother-in-law. Leaving them in Geneva, where his daughter Elizabeth was born, he took the opportunity to study the geological formations he had previously read about. He was especially taken with the Alps and the evidence of 'debacles' which was evident there, where avalanches and glaciers had moved heavy material great distances from its original site. He met well known geologists

(such as G. Cuvier in Paris) and examined their collections of minerals and fossils. On communicating his findings on his return to England he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society.

A few years later, in 1823, Henry set out to visit his Halse Hall sugar plantation in Jamaica, where he took a keen interest in the geology of the island and in the condition of his enslaved workers. He seemed to be both indefatigable and immune to the tropical diseases that decimated the British troops stationed there. Making journeys on horseback covering most of the central and eastern parts of the island, he made geological observations which he communicated regularly to William Coneybeare at Oxford. In his published 'Remarks on the geology of Jamaica' (1827) he took Robertson's 1804 map of Jamaica and coloured the eastern section according to the types of rocks he found, which accords closely to modern geological maps. This was the first geological map of any part of the New World.

On returning from Jamaica at the end of 1824 Henry's marriage had foundered and in 1826 he was divorced from his wife. The treatment which she had received at the hands of her husband had made it impossible for her to live with him, according to her mother. Henry then set out on several geological expeditions to the European continent, followed by publications. In 1834 he had a daughter born in Taunton, Rosalie Torre. A photograph taken 20 years later shows Henry with his two daughters.

It was at this time, approaching Emancipation, that the income stream from Halse Hall dried up; he could no longer benefit from the unpaid labour of his 200-odd enslaved workers. Instead of being a self-financing gentleman geologist, he now needed to work for a salary and, fortunately for him and as a result of much self-promotion, he was able to obtain the sum of £300 to carry out his detailed, one inch to the mile, Ordnance Survey map of the geology of Devon, completed in 1834, which 'for extent and minuteness of information and beauty of execution, has a very high claim to regard' (G. B. Greenough, First President of the Geological Society). From here on, Henry was able to earn his living as a geologist employed by the government. His ambition was to use the newly drawn one inch to the mile Ordnance Survey maps of the whole country as the basis for compiling detailed geological maps; thus was born the Geological Survey of Great Britain, of which Henry was the director.

As a government geologist, Henry turned his attention towards the utility of geology. During his survey work, Henry had collected specimens of rocks and fossils which he used as the basis the Geological Museum in South Kensington, now incorporated into the Natural History Museum. Rock specimens were grouped according to their practical uses for the industrialising nation. Henry also played a key role in the organisation of geology as an essential science in the modern world, for example persuading the government to set up the Government School of Mines and the Mining Record Office. In 1842 he was knighted and in 1848 made a Companion of the Order of the Bath.

Henry had artistic talents which he used, not only in drawing maps and fossils, but also to bring geology to life. His best known drawing is 'Duria Antiquior' or 'Ancient Dorset', showing a scene of the various reptiles of the Liassic period as they might have lived, busily preying on each other. This was probably the first imaginary vision of 'Jurassic Park'.

Henry was said to be a handsome man of strong frame, a swimmer and walker, with a cheery nature and inexhaustible enthusiasm which stimulated those around him. In 1851 he developed a paralysing disease from which he died in 1855. His younger daughter Rosalie died soon after (1858) and is buried with him in Kensal Green cemetery. His papers remained with his elder daughter's family who lived in South Wales and were eventually left to the Museum of Wales in Cardiff in the 1930s.

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Halse Hall: de la Beche's Jamaican sugar plantation

The Halse Hall property

Henry de la Beche inherited the 4,500 acre Halse Hall property at the age of five years on the untimely death of his father. The property was in Clarendon, a prime sugar-growing region of Jamaica. It had been granted to an ancestor, Major Thomas Hals, who had been part of the British army who routed the Spanish from the island in 1655. It came down to Henry through many generations and it was 'entailed', meaning that he was not allowed to sell it but had to manage it for life and then pass it on to his heir. This was fine when it was profitable but it became a burden after Emancipation when it was no longer a viable enterprise.

According to the will of Henry's grandfather (Thomas Beach I, 1715 – 1774, Attorney General of Jamaica), the property was valued at £54,000 Jamaican currency of which £41,000 currency was the value of enslaved people. Estate valuation included £0 currency cash, £5,000 currency debts and £300 currency plate. It is clear that the estate was in debt and there were no liquid assets. Most of the value was that of the people enslaved on their property, not the land or buildings themselves. A further problem arose when Thomas Beach I left Halse Hall to his three children, meaning that the son (Thomas Beach II) who wanted to have it was required to pay off his siblings. He had to borrow this money from a West India merchant, Hibbert and Co, and by the time of Emancipation had failed to pay off the debt. Thus the 1835 compensation money all went to Hibbert and de la Beche received

nothing: £3,500 for Halse Hall (130 enslaved), and £1,700 for the associated Hanbury Pen (81 enslaved).

At end of Henry's life Halse Hall was heavily in debt. It had become a crippling liability mainly from general deterioration of West Indian affairs. The debt was settled after Henry's death by his Welsh son-in-law, L.L. Dillwyn, who eventually broke the entail and sold the estate for £2,500. In his old age, Henry went to live with his daughter and son-in-law in South Wales, which is why his papers are kept in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

Henry de la Beche was in a financial situation common to many owners of West Indian property, of owning valuable assets but being in debt to W.I. merchants. Perhaps as an absentee landowner he lived above his means and failed to manage his property wisely.

Other interesting facts about Halse Hall are that it was said to have been visited by Hans Sloane, the naturalist, during his 1687-89 visit as physician to the governor of Jamaica. He collected numerous tropical plants which eventually formed a foundation of the Natural History Museum. This could be true as Sloane was related to the Hals family through the wealthy planter Fulke Rose and his niece Mary Rose. Before the English invasion Halse Hall had been a Spanish property called Hato de Buena Vista.

In more recent years, Halse Hall was bought by Alcoa minerals to use as an office (1969). It is the oldest English building in Jamaica that is still used as a residence and is an attractive venue for social functions. It has a memorial plaque to de la Beche as the founder of Jamaican geology.

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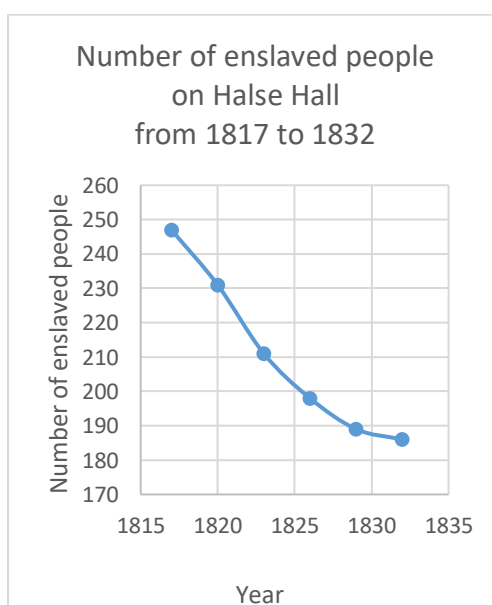
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Enslaved people at Halse Hall

Between 1817 and 1832 careful registers were legally required to be kept by slave-owners. This was in the attempt to ameliorate conditions for the enslaved with the aim of halting their fall in numbers after the abolition of the slave trade. The numbers of births and deaths had to be recorded every three years. De la Beche had 247 enslaved at Halse Hall in 1817 but this number had fallen to 186 by 1832. This was because deaths outnumbered births on his, and most other, Jamaican sugar plantations. These numbers are shown in the table and on the graph.

Halse Hall births, deaths and totals 1817 – 1832

Year	Total number of enslaved	Births since previous census	Deaths since previous census	Natural decrease since previous census	% natural decrease	Total decrease
1817	247					
1820	231	11	27	16	6.5	16
1823	211	6	26	20	8.7	20
1826	198	15	27	12	5.7	13 (one manumitted)
1829	189	10	18	8	4.0	9 (two manumitted and one substituted by purchase)
1832	186	11	13	2	1.0	3 (one workhouse for life)
Total 1817-1832		53	111	61	24.7%	



It is clear that the decrease in numbers was greatest over the period 1820 to 1823, when there were 20 more deaths than births. This fell to only two in 1829-32. (There is much more information given in the Slave Registers which enables an analysis of deaths by age, gender and colour.)

De la Beche had been rightly concerned about problems on his plantation leading up to 1823 and he decided to visit. Not only did he visit his own estate but he toured the eastern part of the island visiting other estates and trying to make an objective assessment of the 'conditions of the negroes'. He gave a detailed description of what he observed in terms of work regime, diet and housing, and publishing his account to inform the bitter controversy raging at that time over the issue of slavery. He considered his own enslaved workers to be 'well-fed, well-treated and contented'. But how did he square this with the great loss of workers, with 53 deaths and only 17 births being recorded in the previous six years, dying on average in their forties?

He attempted to introduce reforms to reduce the death rate. He discussed punishments of slaves, saying that the slave-drivers at Halse Hall were not allowed to carry whips. Whipping was only by order of the overseer, and he abolished use of the whip on women. Five enslaved had been branded as a punishment, others were put in the stocks or had extra allowances stopped.

He expressed his dislike of the slavery system, acknowledged the difficulties of changing it, and blamed not merely the owners but the whole British nation because British laws had encouraged the slave trade and it was considered a 'national object'. Besides, it was by 'accidental circumstance' that he had inherited his property.

There is much more detail that could be gone into from de la Beche's own account and from the Slave Registers. Suffice it to say that, centuries after his own observations, access to the Slave Registers enables us to see that he did indeed manage to reduce the death rate and increase the birth rate so that numbers on his plantation stopped falling so rapidly.

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Conclusion

De la Beche presents a fascinating example of a slave-owner who had a bad conscience about his position yet who could not simply free his enslaved workers. He was happy to enjoy the income from his estate while it lasted, taking a trip to Europe and following his hobby of geology. It is interesting that he attempted to apply the objective methods of science to the social situation of slavery, yet failed to see that his 'objective' point of view was biased in favour of the slave-owner; he did not ask the enslaved for their point of view. His tract on the conditions of the negroes contributed an unemotional account of what he observed into a highly charged political debate about slavery and emancipation. He honestly attempted to improve conditions on his own plantation and the evidence is that he met with some success here. At the end of the slavery system he did not make a fortune but he could say that he had used his profits over the years to build a foundation for the science of geology which formed an important part of the intellectual basis for the industrial revolution which ensured British prosperity for the future.

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