



Interpreting the Slave Trade The Penrhyn Castle Exhibition

The Penrhyn Estate in North Wales from which the Pennant family administered their Jamaican plantations

Background to the exhibition

2007



Gifford Pennant, originally from Flintshire, began acquiring land in Jamaica during the latter half of the 17th century and came to own one of the greatest estates on the island – twenty times larger than the average.

His son Edward (1672-1736) became Chief Justice of Jamaica; of Edward's sons, Samuel (1709-50) became Lord Mayor of London, and John (d.1781) added even more to the Jamaican estate by a judicious marriage. John invested his fortune in buying land in North West Wales – half of what had been the medieval Penrhyn estate. John's son, Richard, 1st Lord Penrhyn (1737?-1808), by his marriage to heiress Anne Susannah Warburton (1745-1816) and owner of the other half, united this estate once more. Richard invested his fortune in this estate, giving employment to many and riches to some. Roads, railways, houses, schools and Penrhyn quarry – once the largest slate quarry in the world – are testament to this investment and have changed the landscape forever.

Absentee landowner, businessman and MP

By 1750 the Pennant family had returned to Britain and were controlling their Jamaican properties by letter. From these documents, the Pennants' link to the slave trade is clear – enough is known about Richard Pennant, 1st Lord Penrhyn, as plantation owner and businessman. As an absentee landowner, Pennant wrote hundreds of letters to his agents in Jamaica. These letters, now held in the archives of the University of Wales, Bangor, provide a remarkable insight into plantation life and the business interests of a canny entrepreneur. As MP for Liverpool, Britain's

largest slaving port, at the end of the 18th century, Richard's parliamentary interventions are recorded in Hansard as he stridently fights against abolition.

Plantation management

Richard Pennant's letters reveal his attitudes to plantation life, the complexity of

These included 135 cane cutters, twenty-one carpenters, nine coopers and fourteen distillers. Initially surprising is that there were also three midwives, but it was financially advantageous to the plantation owners to support the survival of their own slaves' children to maintain the workforce, due to the high death toll among those newly transported from Africa.

They then explored the plantation documents held at Bangor University.

Reading lists of slave names and their prices, and advice7d0 T0dd2p11780d/P <</[1(an09(10(f)-8(

immigration and terrorism influences our attitudes towards those we consider alien. To help combat this, the National Curriculum encourages schools to study global citizenship and so I wanted, as part of this project, for young people of different backgrounds to explore the shared heritage that linked them through the Pennants.

Primary schools from Bangor (Ysgol Llanllechid), Jamaica (Mavisville, Kingston) and Liverpool (Banks Road) have all contributed to the exhibition. An audio-visual presentation reveals the friendships forged between the children of Ysgol Llanllechid and Mavisville. Striking hand-drawn images of slavery, linked by paper chains, adorn the walls; poems, prose and pictures – the passion of the young children was no less real than that of the adults and has given the exhibition colour and vitality.

Artefacts, some original, some replica, add impact to the interpretation panels. To place a delicate 18th century bone china tea service between two cases of shackles needs no interpretation.

Caribbean weekend brought together Wales and the West Indies in contemporary style.

We invited a multicultural group of teenagers from Liverpool to spend a day with us at the castle; they joined in an art workshop in the exhibition and then gave a presentation on their own commemorative activities in Liverpool earlier in the year. The day ended with the group planting trees around the castle grounds: a memorable way of bringing Liverpool back to Penrhyn Castle.

Evaluation

This project has brought together so many people: members of the community – young and old, different ethnic groups, educational associations and many other organisations. A response zone encouraged visitors to contribute their own views on the exhibition and has been significant in revealing its success. Teachers wrote of its

Once the bicentenary is over the story will not be lost; a DVD of all information gathered will be given free to schools and libraries. With slavery still endemic in the world, I am moved that people who have seen the exhibition state that they will consider where next to buy their goods. This is a tribute to those who took part and to the interpretative tools used to tackle an issue over which people still feel guilt and anger.

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