

Starting to trace Black History in Devon

People of African descent are not immediately visible in the history of Devon.

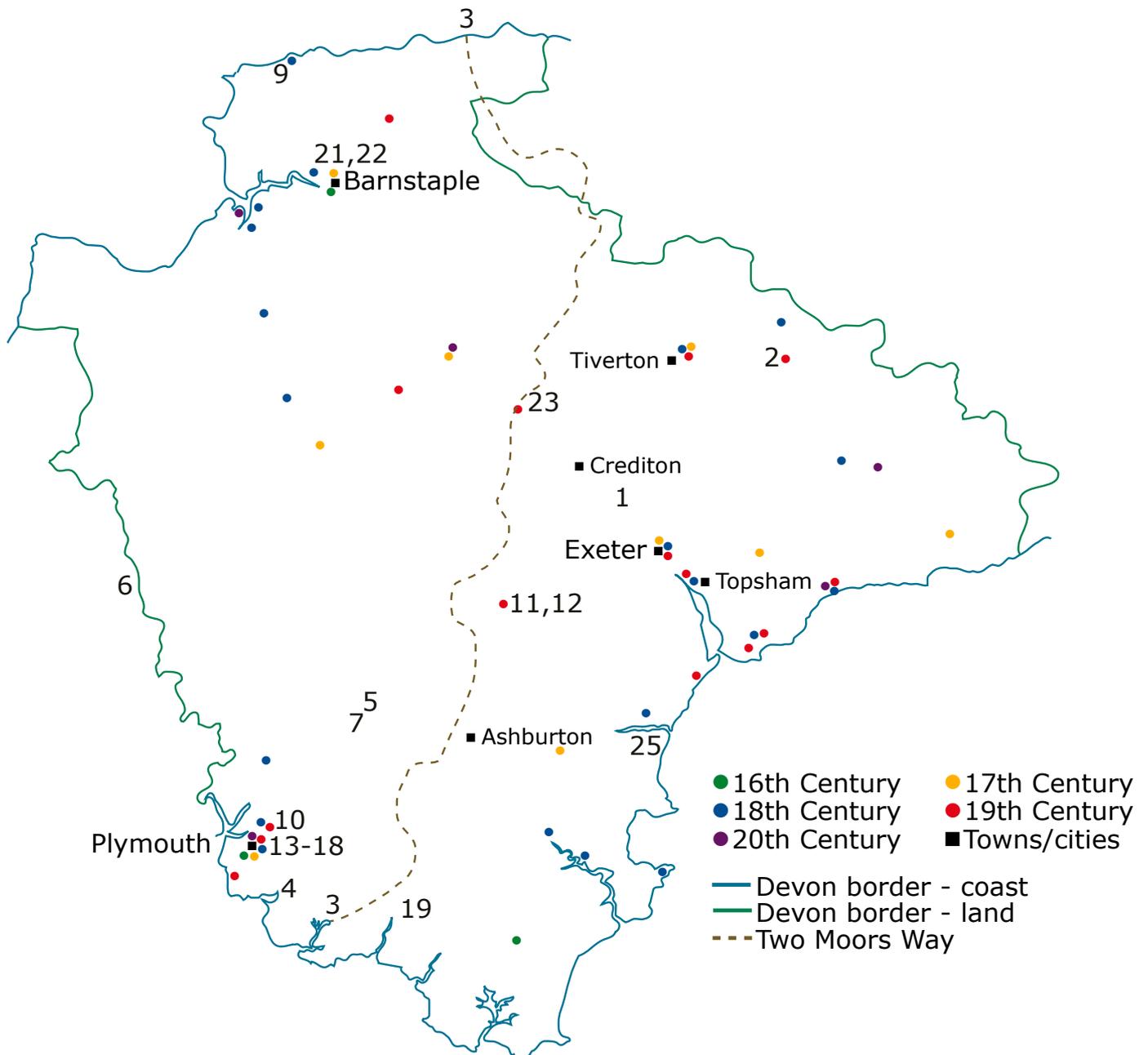
These two 'trails' offer a starting point for uncovering the evidence to help us build up a picture of members of this group and their contributions to the county's history.

They offer scattered examples of evidence; not a neat trail.

We are at the beginning of uncovering black history in Devon. There is much more to uncover...

If you find evidence of black history in the county, please share it with other researchers by emailing blackhistindevon@yahoo.com

Thank you!
Lucy MacKeith
Trail Author



- 1 In the eighteenth century the daughter of Thomas Coster, merchant and sometime mayor of Bristol, married Sir John Quicke of Newton St Cyres. Mrs Quicke had a black footman, Joe Green.



- 2 In Uffculme parish church there is an ancient carving of a black saint in the side chapel altar. It is probably St Maurice.



- 3 The Two Moors Way footpath roughly follows the old Mariners' Way between the north and south coasts of Devon. Sailors walked this path seeking work. Since there were many black sailors throughout history, this means that black people would have been seen in inland Devon as well as the coastal areas.

- 4 Admiral Ourry's portrait at Saltram House shows his African servant/slave.



- 5 Ockery Cottage, just outside Princetown: French speaking Peter Courlon, a black prisoner from the Napoleonic wars, probably spent the night of May 2/3 1811 here.



- 6 At Werrington there is part of the gravestone of Paul Scipio who was buried 10 September 1784.

Deposited Here
 Are the Remains of Philip Scipio
 Servant to the Duke of Wharton
 Afterwards to Sir William Morice
 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

In a pious regard to which virtue's approv'd
By a brother and husband.....

It is now fixed to the north wall of the church. (Werrington was part of Devon up to the 1980s when the county boundaries were changed. It is now in Cornwall.)

- 7 Dartmoor Prison: many black prisoners were held here during the Napoleonic wars and the American War of Independence.
- 8 Meetings to call for the abolition of the Slave Trade were held all over Devon, including Ashburton, Topsham, Crediton, Tiverton, Exeter and Plymouth.

MORETONHAMPTSTEAD, March 18. Last Friday evening, in consequence of public notice, a respectable Meeting was held at the White Hart, in this town, to consider the propriety of petitioning Parliament for the Abolition of the African Slave Trade; where it was unanimously resolved, that the petition then adopted, and signed by all the gentlemen present, should be left to receive the signatures of those gentlemen of the town and neighbourhood, who could not be present at the meeting; and that before the middle of the week it should be transmitted by the Chairman to one of the honourable Members for the county, to be presented to the House of Commons. It has already been signed by above a hundred persons, who, at the same time, expressed their sanguine hope, that this inhuman traffic shall not long remain a disgrace to Great-Britain.

PLYMOUTH, March 20. The David frigate, Capt. Ellison, is nearly ready for the West-Indies; a Lieutenant, two midshipmen, and thirty-nine seamen from each guardship, are ordered to finish her rigging, and get her fit for sea. — The Sullivan sail-indiaman is in the Sound, and ready for sea. — The Perseus frigate, Capt. Palmer, sailed on Sunday for the Leeward Islands. — This afternoon it came on to blow very hard indeed at S. S. W. and the men of war and the indiamen struck their topmasts to meet the gale.

- 9 On 9 October 1796 a ship, *The London*, was wrecked at Rapparee Cove, Ilfracombe. Africans were amongst those who drowned. There is still a controversy over whether they were prisoners of war from the Anglo-French wars in the West Indies, and/or whether the captain of the ship was planning to sell them as slaves in England.

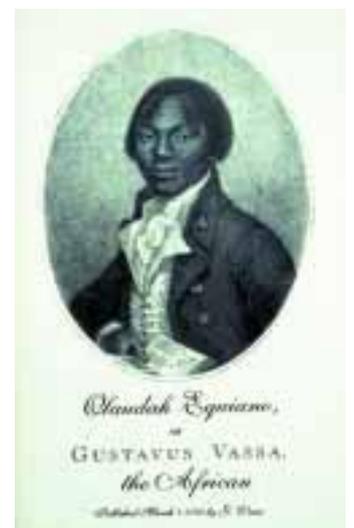


- 10 John Naimbanna, the son of a ruler in Sierra Leone, left England to return to West Africa from Plymouth.



- 11 Moretonhampstead
 - a On 17 October 1808 a French speaking African, servant of General Rochambeau, a prisoner of war, married Susanna Parker in Moretonhampstead church. *'the bells rang merrily all day because it was the first time a negro was married in Moretonhampstead'*
 - b On 4 December 1808 *'people of many colours and languages'* helped to fight a fire which threatened to spread through the town.
- 12 In World War II black American soldiers camped on Mardon Down outside Moretonhampstead. Evidence is still visible today of the road which was built. Joe Lewis, a famous black American boxer, did an exhibition fight to entertain the troops.

- 13 Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, landed in Plymouth as a freeman in 1777. He is reported as saying he had *'friends in Devon and Exeter to visit'*.



14 Equiano worked in Plymouth as Commissary for Supplies for the Sierra Leone expedition to send Africans back to West Africa. He complained about corruption amongst the white people in charge of different aspects of organising the expedition.



15 1780 Two black bandsmen of the Somerset Militia were in a fight with two white soldiers from the Brecknock Militia.



16 A recent photography project in Plymouth celebrated the diversity of black women's lives today.

17 In the nineteenth century, Ira Aldridge, a black actor, performed in Plymouth.

18 William Miller was a city councillor in Plymouth from 1925 to 1970. He was Chairman of the Housing Committee from 1945-1950 and 1953-1959, leading the postwar housing reconstruction.



His son, Charles, is now a city councillor.

19 In 1699 the Swete family of Modbury, in south Devon, took over the lease of a property on the island of Antigua in the West Indies. Profits from the labour of their African slaves contributed to their comfortable standard of living.

20 Black soldiers have served Britain for many years. There are records of them in many places, including Plymouth, Barnstaple and Bideford.



21 In World War II black people again contributed to Britain, including in forestry and the armed services. Some went on to live in Devon. Laurieston Davis raised his family in Barnstaple.

22 Families settled throughout Britain, some grew up in Devon.



23 Black Dog in mid Devon is marked in the map of 1890 as 'Black Boy'.



24 There are numerous records of black people throughout Devon. The dots on the map indicate some of them.

25 In 1698 Devonian Elias Ball of Stoke-in-Teignhead inherited half a 740-acre farm in South Carolina where slave labour contributed to his family's wealth.

26 Smuggling was an important activity in Devon for a long time. There were black smugglers in Devon.

Reading recommendations

Peter Fryer: *Staying Power*. Pluto Press, 1984. The standard introduction to the history of black people in Britain.

Sylvia Collicott: *Connections: Haringey. Local-National-World Links*. Haringey Community Information Service in Association with the Multi-Cultural Support Group, 1986. An example of work in one area which links local history with events worldwide

Lucy MacKeith: *Local Black History – a beginning in Devon*. Archives and Museum of Black Heritage, 2003. This introduces the story of black people in the county, and at the same time gives useful hints and methodologies for researching the black presence in all parts of Britain. Notes for educators in schools, museums and libraries, on resources for learning, extensive notes on the text, and an index provide access to many avenues for further inquiry and sharing information about the local black British heritage.

Acknowledgements for images

- 1, 2, Lucy MacKeith: *Local Black History – a beginning in Devon*, AMBH, 2003.
- 4 National Trust
- 5 Thanks to Elisabeth Stanbrook.
- 8 Devon County Council
- 9 Ilfracombe Museum
- 13 Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter City Council.
- 14 Plymouth City Council.
- 16 Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery.
- 18 Evening Herald, Plymouth.
- 20 Duke of Cornwall's Military Museum.
- 21,22 Zena Burland.
- 23 Ordnance Survey reprints of 1890 edition, sheet 83: *Tiverton*, David and Charles, 1980.

This trail leaflet was made possible with the support of the following organisations



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