

Admiral J. T. Duckworth of Wear House, Countess Wear

Gillian Allen, July 2024

Admiral Duckworth of Wear House was not a slave-owner but a naval officer whose role was to protect the British slave/plantation system and even extend it.

Wear House

Wear House, Countess Wear, Devon, was the home of Sir John Thomas Duckworth, 1st Bart (1748-1817), and is now the Exeter Golf and Country Club. The house, once known as Heneaton, had a succession of owners until it was purchased in 1760 by William Spicer (Sheriff of Devon, MP for Exeter) and sold on in 1804 to 'the late gallant admiral Sir John Thomas Duckworth, who greatly improved [it]'. He was succeeded by his son, Sir John Thomas Buller Duckworth, M.P. for Exeter and president of the Royal Devon and Exeter hospital. The Duckworth family memorials are prominent in St Margaret's church, Topsham.



Exeter Golf and Country Club, formerly Wear House

The land belonging to Wear House adjoining the River Exe formed Wear Barton Farm which was tenanted by the Davy family (see separate article) from the 1760s; it also included the river channel (the Gut) where Robert Davy started his ship-building business. It was compulsorily purchased in 1946 from descendants of Admiral Duckworth in order to build the Glasshouse Lane council estate¹. The land to the east of Wear House was used from the

¹ City of Exeter (Countess Wear) Compulsory Purchase Order 1945. Devon Heritage Centre, City Surveyors' Papers Box 63.

1940s by the U.S. Navy for their stores, once required for the D-Day landings, until the Newcourt housing estate was built on it in the 2010s. The house still retains the land immediately around it as a golf course.

The Revolution in St Domingue

In the days of West Indian slavery, various colonial powers vied for control of the sugar-producing islands. The Royal Navy played a key role in protecting the British islands and vying for control of islands owned by other European countries. Indeed, the British role was an extraordinarily complicated one in relation to the French territory of St Domingue. As a naval officer, Duckworth played a part in this scenario.

St Domingue, the former name of Haiti, the western half of the island of Hispaniola, was an important French sugar-growing colony. At the turn of the nineteenth century its population consisted of a majority of enslaved black Africans, many of whom were young men newly captured, and minorities of whites and mixed race 'mulattos', each forming a caste with different interests. When a rebellion of the enslaved Africans began, in 1791, a violent and complicated series of events ensued until, in 1804, Haiti gained its independence and with it the ending of slavery and of white rule. It remains the only example of a successful slave revolt. The British Navy played a part in all this.

This was the era of the French Revolution, which had its repercussions on this Caribbean island far away from Europe. Some of the French believed that 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' encompassed blacks as well as whites – but others clung to the traditional social structure of white domination over blacks. This divided the white population, so that the Revolutionaries (sometimes) sided with the black and mulatto rebels while the Royalists and plantation owners (sometimes) fought against them.

When the rebellion erupted, the British navy had the dual purpose of attacking the beleaguered French in order to try to capture the profitable island from them, but also of protecting the white French from the common enemy, the black revolutionaries who were demanding their freedom.

Duckworth's role in naval operations

In 1793, the British had invaded St Domingue and occupied its southern portion, taking advantage of the ongoing chaos to extend their territory. However, in 1794 they were routed from Fort Léogane on the south-west peninsula by the forces of Rigaud, a Haitian mulatto leader who was rival to the black leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture. A British counter-attack took place two years later with the aim of recapturing the fort², in which Duckworth had a role. At that time he was captain of the *Leviathan*, one of a naval squadron of nine ships which landed troops to attack the fort. But the enemy proved to be more numerous and more tenacious than expected and the British had to withdraw with much loss of life. The attack was described as 'ill-conceived and fruitless' (ONDB, 2004, Vol 17).

² [The Disastrous Expedition to Leogane - 21-23 March 1796 - more than Nelson](#). Accessed 22/07/2024.

Over the five years from 1793 to 1798 the British occupied parts of the territory of St Domingue but were ultimately unsuccessful in holding it against the black and mulatto armies, and thousands of soldiers and sailors died of yellow fever. One of these was Lt-Col Arthur Irvine of the Yorkshire Hussars whose wife's memorial in Exeter Cathedral records that he 'died of yellow fever at San Domingo on July 8, 1796'³.

Duckworth had various other postings and in 1799 he was promoted to rear-admiral⁴. He was commander-in-chief of the 1801 capture of the Swedish and Danish Leeward Islands (now St Bartholomew and the US Virgin Islands) but the British occupation only lasted until the following year.

From 1798 to 1801, the French presence was greatly reduced and the black leader, Toussaint, held power in St Domingue. He introduced a constitution which abolished slavery and racial hierarchy, the first western society to do so. However, this was to be short-lived as the French sent an invasion force in 1802 with the intention of re-establishing slavery and white supremacy, beginning a bloody two-year war during which Toussaint was captured and died in a French dungeon. Nevertheless, the blacks, now under the leadership of Dessalines, were gaining the upper hand in the conflict.

By 1803 the British and French were engaged in the Napoleonic Wars, not just in Europe but also in the Caribbean. The British were afraid that a French victory in St Domingue would empower them and threaten the neighbouring island of Jamaica. This is where Duckworth came in. He was given chief command of the Navy in Jamaica with orders to counter this threat. He commanded the Blockade of St Domingue⁵ where his ships cut off the French ships in ports on the north coast of the island with the aim of isolating and destroying them. The blockade succeeded, hastening the end of the French occupation and their surrender to Dessalines in late 1803. On 1 January 1804 the independent republic of Haiti was declared.

In fighting the French, Duckworth had, perhaps inadvertently, helped the black revolutionaries gain their independence and their freedom from future enslavement.

His service in protecting the island of Jamaica and its sugar exports was recognised by a presentation from the island Assembly of a ceremonial sword and kettle⁶. The naval protection provided by Duckworth allowed the slave/plantation system to continue to operate smoothly on the British Caribbean islands.

In 1804 he returned home with a cargo of mahogany logs and mahogany furniture for his newly acquired Wear House, which got him into trouble with the naval authorities⁷.

³ Wingfield-Digby, P. (2022). Exeter Cathedral memorials with links to Empire. Exeter: Short Run Press.

⁴ [The Disastrous Expedition to Leogane - 21-23 March 1796 - more than Nelson](#). Accessed 19/07/2024

⁵ [Blockade of Saint-Domingue - Wikipedia](#). Accessed 7/10/2024

⁶ McAleer, John (February 2009). "'Eminent Service': War, Slavery and the Politics of Public Recognition in the British Caribbean and the Cape of Good Hope, c. 1782–1807". *The Mariner's Mirror*. **95** (1). Portsmouth, United Kingdom: The Society for Nautical Research: 33–51.

⁷ [CONDUCT OF ADMIRAL SIR JOHN DUCKWORTH. \(Hansard, 7 June 1805\) \(parliament.uk\)](#). Accessed 7/10/2024

The Battle of Santo Domingo

Duckworth is mainly celebrated in Britain for a later defeat of the French navy at the Battle of Santo Domingo on 7 February 1806. This is considered the final naval battle of the Napoleonic Wars and it had repercussions for the newly independent country of Haiti.

Following the 1804 declaration of Haitian independence and the expulsion of the French from that country, a threat still remained because the French at that time occupied the eastern part of the island of Hispaniola, later to become the Dominican Republic. This could form the base for a later French re-invasion. To obviate this possibility, in 1805 Dessalines invaded the eastern section but was alarmed by the arrival of a French fleet off the south coast of Santo Domingo. He beat a hasty retreat, devastating the countryside as he did so⁸. However, this was a false alarm because Duckworth's British naval squadron arrived and destroyed the French squadron. The French no longer had the capacity to re-invade Haiti, leaving it safe to begin its development as an independent black nation, free from the scourge of slavery.



Duckworth plaque in St Margaret's Church, Topsham, depicting a naval battle

⁸ Popkin, J.D. (2012). *A concise history of the Haitian Revolution*. Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. p.144.

A consequence of the French defeat in Haiti and their loss of this rich source of income was the Louisiana Purchase. In order to raise money, Napoleon sold the French territory of Louisiana on the North American mainland to the United States in 1803, a deal brokered by Alexander Baring of Barings Bank. Baring was another family with Exeter connections (see article on Barings). This expansion of U.S. territory greatly expanded the area under slave-grown cotton and sugar.

Duckworth's role as a British naval commander in regard to slavery in St Domingue was contradictory and ambiguous. Initially supporting the French against their rebelling enslaved Africans, the British then tried to grasp the rich sugar colony for themselves but were defeated by the same Africans and by the toll of yellow fever. However, at a later date, Duckworth found himself fighting against the French. Eventually, by defeating a French fleet he drove the final nail into the coffin of French ambitions in Haiti and ensured the emancipation of the former slaves in their independent republic.

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