

Debbie Manners - 4<sup>th</sup> speaker –

CIGH seminar talk with LDSG at Exeter university, 22 Oct 2025

I joined the LDSG group relatively recently – after being invited by Peter.

I became interested in the subject of slavery connections after doing a dissertation on the abolition of slavery. This was part of a History Masters that I did here at Exeter University a few years ago. Ryan was my dissertation supervisor.

We have heard from Lucy, Jill and Peter about some of the research that our group have been doing. They have mentioned some of their research sources. I also just wanted to stress that some of the South West's archives are useful for slavery research, particularly if you are researching individual local families. So there's the Devon Heritage Centre in Exeter. And don't forget the archives in Taunton and Bristol. Of course Bristol was hugely active in the slave trade, and there are plenty of primary sources to look at there. And here at the university there are the Gale and Morant papers, which relate to plantations in Jamaica. Lots of primary research still to be done here.

So to finish off our discussion – I just want to make a few general points, before we take any questions that you might have. I want to move away temporarily from the Devon angle and give you a bit of context regarding research into slavery. So that you can see what an important area of research it is, and how topical it is too.

The past couple of decades have seen a big increase in organisations researching their past links with slavery. There are several drivers for this.

1. The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade. (This was the year that Todd Gray's book on slavery in Devon came out.) Lots of academics used this occasion to revisit the subject.
2. Also the publication of the UCL database on slavery compensation in 2014 which generated a lot of interest.
3. The Black Lives Matter campaign in 2020.

Several organisations are worth mentioning that have been actively researching their slavery links – in particular the **National Trust**, who have many properties with links to slavery. They have published a major report into Colonialism and Historic Slavery connections to their historic houses and their report says there are links to 93 of its properties. Here in Devon for example, Buckland Abbey in south Devon, which was owned by Francis Drake, who was a slave trader with his cousin John Hawkins – this was at the very start of Britain's involvement with the slave trade.

Museums are also now looking at the connections between their exhibits and slavery – a good example is the **National Gallery**. This obviously raises further questions about colonial items within their collections, and who owns them.

In the last couple of years the **Guardian** newspaper has been an important voice in this debate. It launched its own investigation into the connection between the founder of the Manchester Guardian John Edward Taylor and American slavery. He had connections with the cotton plantations which supplied Manchester with cotton that was grown by slaves.

The **Bank of England** has also researched its links with slavery. It held an important exhibition exploring those links. The Bank had provided financial services which supported the slave trade, and it owned plantations itself with hundreds of slaves.

**The Church of England** – has also done its own research and apologised for its connections to slavery. In 2023 it launched a one hundred million pound fund to back projects that can help communities particularly in the Caribbean.

**Cathedrals** – for example **Liverpool Cathedral**. Of course Liverpool was at the heart of the slave trade. And the Cathedral has researched its own links, and is taking part in the Slavery Trust Project. This is a project that helps Churches to explore their links with slavery.

Closer to home, **Wells Cathedral** in Somerset has been very open about its slavery connections and it commissioned research into its links with slavery, including research from Exeter University. A lot of the clergy at Wells had connections with slavery. And also the head of Wells Theological College the Rev Pinder, who was himself a slave owner. The Cathedral held a conference several years ago, which I was lucky enough to be involved with, as I did some research on the connections that their bishops had with slavery. The Cathedral has worked with the local people in the town to set up a walking trail relating to its slavery connections.

Not all Cathedrals have been so open about their links to slavery. As we have heard from Peter, Exeter Cathedral is one of them.

### **Backlash against slavery research**

It's important to know that there are many people who don't feel comfortable with this research into slavery. They don't feel it is necessary. For example the National Trust has come under fire from a group known as the Restore Trust. They think the National Trust is being unnecessarily sensitive about its slavery connections. The **Restore Trust** thinks the research is unbalanced, and takes the National Trust away from its core mission. Some academics are unhappy with the slavery research too.

### **There's also debate about whether Britain should pay reparations**

Should Britain be giving money back to countries which are still economically weak because of the slave trade? Should Britain be giving money to the descendants of slaves? Obviously a very complex issue. There have been calls from many countries – not just Caribbean – asking for reparations. Recently African countries have also joined this campaign.

And should individuals be giving money back, if their own families benefitted financially from slavery? Look for example at Alex Renton and Laura Trevelyan. Alex Renton is a journalist who discovered that his family had strong links to slavery, owning plantations in Jamaica and Tobago. Laura Trevelyan is a TV broadcaster – she discovered that her family owned plantations in Grenada and was given a very large sum of money in compensation after slavery was abolished in 1833.

Alex and Laura helped set up a group called **Heirs of Slavery**. This aims to support moves towards reparative justice. For example giving money to projects in the Caribbean, encouraging more research and openness among institutions that have a connection with slavery. Supporting the CARICOM nations – with their 10 point plan for reparatory justice – they want funding in the Caribbean countries for health and education, from places like Britain who benefited from the slave trade.

So, to sum up, lots of different threads and arguments. Lots of emotion too. Sometimes your research into slavery connections will require you to tread a fine line, and to understand the sensitivity of the subject matter you are dealing with. Sometimes you will feel uncomfortable. Sometimes you will feel angry and upset. Sometimes you will feel appalled at what you are reading and finding out. We think this research is so important – and that these stories must be told. So that's why we'd like to invite you to consider finding out a bit more about the legacies of Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade.