

A Proposal for Re-naming Leamington's Streets

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A year on from George Floyd's murder, we must work to further our commitment to anti-racism. It has been a year since the lethal effects of institutionalised racism were, once again, brought to the world's attention. If we are to honour George Floyd, and the countless victims of racism everywhere, we must start by acknowledging our role in the dark and unsettling history of racial violence. It is only by confronting our historical involvement with racism that we may begin to move towards a more just future, endeavouring to learn from the mistakes of the past. By untangling Britain's murky involvement with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we can uncover the ways in which our towns, cities, and country prospered at the expense of those brutally oppressed. In uncovering these legacies, we make it easier to recognise the ways in which contemporary racism functions so as to better dismantle it.

The trans-Atlantic slave trade resulted in the enslavement of millions of Black people who were forcibly transported from Africa in horrible conditions, to be sold in America and the Caribbean's between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. While not many enslaved people were taken to Britain, many Brits owned plantations across the Atlantic where they exploited slave labour. These British slave-owners directly benefited from the wealth generated by plantations which relied on the dehumanising and violent treatment of enslaved people. This blood money returned to England and was reinvested in the development of British towns and cities, funding industry and underpinning the nation's economy. Even following abolition, the British government paid out compensation to slave-owners for loss of property (i.e., their formerly enslaved people.) This money was similarly reinvested into Britain and allowed slave-owning families to prosper even after the end of slavery. Meanwhile, formerly enslaved people were never paid reparations for the awful harm that was done to them. There are many nods to the individuals and families that helped finance Britain's development with money from plantations and the slave trade. These come in the forms of statues, plaques, memorials, place names, and more. However, by honouring these slave-owners, we commit a grave injustice towards the millions of Black people who suffered and died through slavery as we erase them from history while glorifying those who oppressed them.

It is thus in the interest of justice and reparation that we should investigate Leamington's own ties to the slave trade. Much work has already been done by local historians, particularly the Leamington History Group, on the Greatheed family who established Guy's Cliffe and helped develop Leamington Spa's town centre with the money from their plantation in St Kitts. Bertie Greatheed, son of Coventry MP, Samuel Greatheed, was said to have deplored slavery, ostensibly taking a stance as an ardent abolitionist. However, he continued to own enslaved people and earned considerable income from the plantation he inherited. We should thus seriously reconsider to what extent he should be applauded as a true abolitionist. Many streets in Leamington pay tribute, in some way, to the Greatheed family, such as Bertie Road, Bertie Terrace, and Bertie Court; Beverley Road; Brownlow Street; and Greatheed Road.

Similarly, Greville Road and Greville House are named after the Greville family who were the Earls of Warwick, and still are. In the eighteenth century, the Greville family was involved

with plantations in Tobago, capitalising on slavery. The Greville family also had marital ties to the Earl of Aylesford, after which Aylesford Street is named. There may also be a link between Beauchamp Hill, Road, Avenue, and House, and the Beauchamp family who are part of the history of Myrtila, an enslaved woman buried at Oxhill, Warwickshire. Further research into UCL's 'Legacies of British Slave-ownership' database also revealed George Goodin Barrett's ties to plantations and slavery. While there are no streets named after Barrett, he was partly responsible for the development of Milverton and Stratheam, which was in part funded by his earnings in the Caribbean. There is also Elizabeth Virgo Scarlett, a slave-owner infamously buried behind All Saints Church; or Frederick Manning, a slave-owning merchant who lived at Byron Lodge, in Leamington, leaving £80,000 on his death but with no identifiable legatees. These stories of historic Leamington residents involved in slavery are amongst many others. They help to elucidate the hidden ties the town has to the slave trade. While there is much more research to be done, we can – and should – start by renaming the streets that commemorate those with blood on their hands, in the interest of restorative justice.

Jolán Toth, Final Year History Student Ambassador, has written a walk around Guy's Cliffe where you can learn about the hidden colonial history of the area.