

John Gladstone: Colonial Wealth Comes to Leamington

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In June 1830, John Gladstone took up residence at his newly furnished house on Lansdowne Place in what is now part of Boots at 31 Parade. Gladstone was a Scottish merchant and former MP based in Liverpool, who first made his fortune trading corn and cotton. By the time he moved to Leamington, he had also become a major slaveowner. Many of the West Indian plantations that he supplied with goods had paid with mortgages in lieu of cash. Believing that he could succeed where others were failing, he began to acquire ownership of the sugar estates through foreclosure or outright purchase, eventually owning seven in Demerara (in modern-day Guyana) and six in Jamaica.¹

Gladstone was in Leamington because his wife and daughter were receiving medical treatment from Dr Jephson, a renowned doctor after whom the gardens opposite the Pump Rooms are named. Gladstone had been introduced to Jephson by a mutual acquaintance in 1828 and it seems the doctor made a favourable impression. Gladstone and his family returned to Leamington again and again from 1829, staying for the season in rented town houses or in hotels like the Regent further down the Parade.² Significant sums of money were spent on accommodation and on medical bills. One of Jephson's bills for treating Gladstone's daughter Helen for addiction to laudanum (opium mixed in alcohol) came to 79 guineas, equivalent to around £10,000 today.³ In fact, the two families became very close.⁴ Gladstone provided financial advice to Jephson – who was himself becoming very wealthy⁵ – whilst his son William, a future four-time Prime Minister, would dine with Jephson at his Beech Lawn home when visiting his parents from university.⁶ When the Jephson Testimonial was organised in 1845 out of which the Jephson Gardens and memorial statue would be built, another of Gladstone's sons, Thomas, subscribed to the value of £10.⁷

During his time in Leamington, Gladstone was also drawn into the town's social circuit, attending balls and contributing to appeals. In 1833 he even managed to get a mail coach to come from Birmingham to Leamington with letters from Manchester and Liverpool, presumably to aid his management of the business, prompting the local newspaper to declare the town "indebted...to the indefatigable exertions of that steady friend to Leamington, J. Gladstone, Esq".⁸

That year of 1833 was a signal one for Gladstone. The *trade* in slaves had been abolished in 1807 but *ownership* of slaves continued. 1833 was the year this was legally overturned and 800,000 slaves in the British Empire emancipated.⁹ Gladstone had been one of the strongest opponents to the abolition of slavery. He firmly believed in his right to property in slaves and their duty to serve. In fact, he thought it was in their best interests, writing that enslaved Africans find that "all their wants, whether in infancy or old age, in health or in sickness, are duly and effectively provided for them by their owners, without

¹ Checkland, S. G. (1954) 'John Gladstone as Trader and Planter', *Economic History Review*, Volume 7, Issue 2, pp. 222-223.

² The Gladstones stayed in Leamington from 1829 to at least 1837. Members of the family carried on receiving treatment until at least 1847.

³ Baxter, Eric G. (1980) *Dr. Jephson of Leamington Spa* (edited by Joan Lane and Robert Bearman).

Leamington Spa: Warwickshire Local History Society, p. 33. See also Isba, Anne (2003) 'Trouble with Helen: The Gladstone Family Crisis, 1846-1848', *History*, 88: 2, pp. 249-261.

⁴ Gladstone's son Roberston, and his wife, were also treated by Jephson in the 1840s. Checkland, S. G. (1971) *The Gladstones: A Family Biography 1764-1851*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 227.

⁵ Jephson took a leading part in the establishment of the Warwick and Leamington Banking Company, and the Leamington New Gas and Coke Company, both in 1834. Like Gladstone, he also invested in the railway boom in the 1840s.

⁶ *Dr. Jephson*.

⁷ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 16 May 1846, p. 2.

⁸ *Leamington Spa Courier*, 2 February 1833, p. 2.

⁹ With the exception of slaves held by the East India Company and on the islands of Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka) and Saint Helena.

care or exertion on their part”.¹⁰ However, as the political tide turned against him and the other West India planters, they lobbied instead to secure compensation. In this endeavour they were much more successful. The government paid £20 million to slave-owners for their loss of property; equivalent to 40 per cent of the Treasury’s annual income at the time and around £2.5 billion in today’s money.

As the owner of 2,508 slaves, John Gladstone was one of the biggest recipients of compensation, much of which was reinvested in railway development. He was also the prime mover to replace the freed slaves with immigrants from British India to ensure a continued supply of cheap labour on the plantations. His plan was to give them free passage to and from the West Indies whereupon they would work for a fixed number of years at a certain wage. In 1838 the first indentured labourers arrived in British Guiana: 396 people known as the ‘Gladstone coolies’.

This system was immediately criticised by anti-slavery campaigners who believed that the labourers were unaware of what they had signed up for and endured pitiful wages, physical violence, and abysmal living conditions. Nevertheless, an estimated 500,000 Indians ultimately made the voyage as indentured labourers before its abolition in 1920, many fleeing famine or family strife. Two-thirds remained in the region, changing Caribbean society forever. We may well wonder how much of Gladstone’s activity against emancipation and for indentured labour were conducted whilst he was in Leamington, during this pivotal moment in British imperial history.

¹⁰ Gladstone, John (1830) ‘A Statement of Facts Connected with the Present State of Slavery in the British Sugar and Coffee Colonies, and in the United States of America: Together with a View of the Present Situation of the Lower Classes in the United Kingdom’, Public Letter to Robert Peel, page 7. Gladstone was at best ill-informed and at worst disingenuous. The condition of the slaves on the Gladstone sugar plantations in Demerara were so harsh that deaths exceeded births. Sheridan, Richard (2002) ‘The Condition of the Slaves on the Sugar Plantations of Sir John Gladstone in the Colony of Demerara, 1812-49’, *New West Indian Guide*, Volume 76, Number 3-4, pp. 243-269.