

From Sugar Cane to Spa Water: The Greatheeds and the Development of Leamington Spa

Vicki Slade and Ben Richardson

At first glance there is little that connects the Caribbean island of St Kitts with Royal Leamington Spa. But the success of the spa town at the beginning of the 19th century can be directly linked to the sugar industry that flourished on the island, which was made possible by the labour of enslaved people from Africa.

The island of Liamuiga, meaning ‘fertile land’ was originally inhabited by the Kalinago.¹ In 1493 it was spotted by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the Americas; he renamed it St Christopher after the patron saint of travellers.² The island was little more than a wayfinding marker until 1623, when it was colonised for the English by Sir Thomas Warner. The English colonisers, who renamed the island St Kitts, grew tobacco and cotton, although it was the cultivation of sugar cane that came to be the dominant industry on the island.³

Sugar was increasingly popular in Europe, where it was used in foods and to sweeten drinks such as tea and coffee. It was labour intensive to produce: people were needed to prepare the land, tend to the crops, harvest, mill and boil the sugar cane. This work was carried out by men, women and children who had been forcibly transported from Africa to work on the sugar plantations. The sugar and rum they produced was then shipped to ports such as Liverpool and Bristol. This triangular trade from England to Africa, the Caribbean and back to England, made the plantation owners, merchants and traders very wealthy.

The profits of this trade helped to fund civic buildings, town development and country estates across England,⁴ and Royal Leamington Spa was no exception. A number of slave-owners lived in the town, and some even invested in it, but it was the Greatheed family who arguably had the biggest impact on its success as a fashionable spa resort. John Greatheed, originally from Yorkshire, emigrated to St Kitts in the early part of the 18th century, just as the sugar industry was taking off, and established a plantation called Canaries near to the capital Basseterre. John settled on the island and was Chief of Justice from 1721 to 1727, unlike his descendants who became absentee owners.⁵

On his death in 1739, the sugar plantation passed to his son, Samuel (c.1710-65). Shortly after he inherited the plantation he came to Warwick where he rented, and later bought, the Guy’s Cliffe estate. The plantation was managed by his brother Christopher (known as Craister), while Samuel set himself up as an English country gentleman, becoming MP for Coventry from 1747 until 1761⁶. A year after becoming MP, Samuel married Lady Mary Bertie Percy (c.1727-1774), daughter of the 2nd Earl of Ancaster. After her husband’s death, Mary bought 236 acres of land in Milverton and Leamington,

¹ See St Kitts Tourist Information, *History of St Kitts and Nevis*. Available at: [History of St Kitts and Nevis 1493 - 1983 - St Kitts and Nevis visitor guide \(mystkittstouristinformation.com\)](https://mystkittstouristinformation.com) [accessed 23 May 2022]

² Mills, Gladstone E.M. and Momsen, Janet D., ‘History of St Kitts and Nevis: Early Settlement’, Encyclopaedia Britannica website. Available at: [Saint Kitts and Nevis - History | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/place/Saint-Kitts-and-Nevis) [accessed 23 May 2022]

³ National Archives, St Kitts, ‘The Sugar Factory’, Historic St Kitts website. Available at www.historicstkitts.kn/places/the-sugar-factory [accessed 1 June 2022]

⁴ See Dresser, Madge and Hann, Andrew (eds) (2013) *Slavery and the British Country House*. Swindon: English Heritage and Wills, Mary with Dresser, Madge (2020) *The Transatlantic Slave Economy and England’s Built Environment: A Research Audit*. Published online: Historic England

⁵ See Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum with Layton, Brenda Tai, *Myrtilla’s Trail*, 2007. Available on request from Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum and at: [Myrtilla’s Trail · Antislavery Usable Past](https://www.leamingtonspa.org.uk/Myrtilla%20s%20Trail-Antislavery-Usable-Past)

⁶ See ‘Samuel Greatheed’, Legacies of British Slave-ownership website, UCL Department of History 2020. Available at: [Summary of Individual | Legacies of British Slavery \(ucl.ac.uk\)](https://www.lbsos.com/summary-of-individual-legacies-of-british-slavery) [accessed 23 May 2022]

including 65 acres to the north of the village of Leamington Priors.⁷ At the time Leamington was a village of little more than 45 dwellings,⁸ but this was soon to change.

In the last two decades of the 18th century, Leamington Priors developed into a fashionable spa resort to rival the likes of Cheltenham and Harrogate. A mineral spring was first recorded by John Rous in 1480, and villagers knew of the benefits of the water. However, it wasn't until 1784 that a second well was discovered on the land of William Abbott. He and his business partner Benjamin Satchwell were the first to commercially exploit Leamington's waters, quickly building a bath house above the spring. By 1806 there were four bath houses in addition to the original spring, alongside hotels and other amenities. Such was the demand from visitors that the town needed to expand.

In 1808 work began on the expansion of the town north of the river, on the Greathead land now owned by Samuel and Mary's son, Bertie Bertie (1759-1826). Bertie was openly sympathetic to the abolition of slavery and referred to the plantation as "that odious property".⁹ The plantation accounts attest to the inhuman way that the slaves were treated; neck collars for the slaves were bought from the same supplier as equipment for the cattle.¹⁰ His distaste for the means of his wealth didn't prevent him from using it to fund his lavish lifestyle and the refurbishment of Guy's Cliffe.¹¹ He was, though, living beyond his means and although he had little interest in the development of the spa town, he was in need of the extra income that selling his land would bring.¹² He was convinced by the banker John Tomes to join the development scheme. Bertie sold parcels of land for the development of the elegant Parade, the main thoroughfare through the 'new' town.¹³

To be successful, the new town would need baths, hotels and amusements to attract visitors. It was hoped to build a new bath house on the higher ground along the Parade, but after much searching, the only spring that could be found was on the north bank of the river Leam, again on Greathead land. Construction began in 1811, funded by a syndicate comprising Tomes, Bertie, J.W. Tancred and Mr Parkes of Warwick. When it opened in late June 1814, the *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser* proclaimed, "Leamington... has now to boast of its Pump Room and Public Baths; which for convenience, elegance of structure and beauty of design are perhaps unequalled in this or any country."¹⁴ Indeed, little expense was spared in the construction of the new baths. They were designed by the architect C.S. Smith of London at a cost of almost £30,000, equivalent to £2.5 million today.¹⁵ The two-horsepower Boulton and Watt steam engine was the first application of steam power to pump mineral water in England.

Bertie also invested in a new Assembly Rooms on the corner of Regent Street and the Parade, where concerts and balls were held to entertain those coming to 'take the waters', and it is likely that he was one of the backers of the Regent Hotel on the east side of the Parade. As a result of the development of the new town, Leamington became one of the most fashionable spas in the country. The first class

⁷ Croom, Jane N. (2019) 'The Speculative Development of the Parade, Royal Leamington Spa, c. 1808-c. 1838', *Warwickshire History*, 17: 5, p. 222; Cave, Lyndon (2009) *Royal Leamington Spa: A History*. Chichester: Phillimore, pp. 21-22.

⁸ See 'The Borough of Leamington Spa', British History Online website. Available at: [The borough of Leamington Spa | British History Online \(british-history.ac.uk\)](https://www.british-history.ac.uk/leamington-spa) [accessed 30 May 2022]

⁹ Bertie's politics on this matter were influenced by his close friend John Henry Williams. See Haydon, Colin (2007) *John Henry Williams (1747-1829): 'Political Clergyman'*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, page 67.

¹⁰ 'Annual Accounts of the Sugar Plantation belonging to Bertie Greathead in Detail' (1782-1786), Warwickshire County Records Office, CR1707/30, accessed 2007.

¹¹ See Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, *Myrtilla's Trail* (2007)

¹² In February 1807 his net income was £1,600 per year and his expenditure was £2,000. See Croom (2019) 'Speculative Development', page 222.

¹³ See Cave (2009) *Royal Leamington Spa* and Croom (2019) 'Speculative Development'

¹⁴ *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 2 July 1814. It was stated in *The Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser* of 25 June 1814 that, "Our new and splendid Baths... are expected to open Monday next". As they were open by the following week's edition, this would suggest that they opened on 27 June 1814.

¹⁵ *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 2 July 1814

facilities that had been created attracted eminent visitors including the Prince Regent, the Duke of Wellington and Princess Victoria, who stayed with her mother at the Regent Hotel in 1830. This success can be directly linked to the investments made by the Greatheed family, which were made possible by the incomes they received from the sugar plantation in St Kitts, reliant as it was on the exploitation of enslaved people.

By the time Britain abolished slavery across its colonies in 1833, Bertie's granddaughter Ann and her husband Charles Bertie Percy owned the St Kitts plantation. As evidenced in the wills of Greatheeds and other slave-owners, enslaved people were considered possessions, which were passed on like land and property. When slavery was ended, those slave-owners were compensated by the British state for the loss of property. On 12 October 1835, Charles received £1,223 6s 7d compensation for 85 enslaved people – around £165,000 in today's money.¹⁶

¹⁶ See 'Charles Bertie Percy', Legacies of British Slave-ownership website, UCL Department of History 2020. Available at: [Summary of Individual | Legacies of British Slavery \(ucl.ac.uk\)](#) [accessed 23 May 2022]