William Beckford (1709 – 1770) - An enslaver who became the richest man in England

by Steve Cushion

Statue of William Beckford atop the huge monument in his memory, Guildhall, London

The Beckford family had been involved in both the West India trade and as contractors supplying the Royal Navy since the mid-1600s. The London branch of the family, Richard Beckford (1619-1679) and his brother Sir Thomas (1628-1685) supplied the Navy with cheap clothing for the sailors, indeed, in 1668, Thomas is on record as bribing Samuel Pepys, Chief Secretary to the Admiralty, with a gift of £50 [£204,900] and a silver warming pan, which helped secure naval contracts worth £24,800 [£101,600,000].[1]

Meanwhile, another branch of the family made their money in the West Indies. Peter Beckford (1643–1710) arrived in Jamaica in 1662, just seven years after the island had been seized from the Spanish crown. It was a violent, lawless place in the early years, largely dominated by buccaneers who lived by preying on Spanish shipping. Peter Beckford started his career on the island as a horse trader, some said horse rustler. However, he quickly realised that landowning based on enslaved labour was a surer route to profits. So, when he managed to secure a land grant of 1000 acres, he changes his political coat and swapped his political allegiance from Sir Thomas Modyford, governor of Jamaica from 1664 to 1671 and representative of the pirates, to Sir Thomas Lynch, who had been sent from England to curb piracy and encourage slave-based agriculture. His new friends served him well and Peter Beckford, now Colonel Peter Beckford, soon built up his holding to 4000 acres. He represented St. Catherine in the House of Assembly, was appointed President of the Council and later Chief Justice of Jamaica in 1703. He commanded the island's defensive fortresses in 1683, and in 1702 was appointed Lieutenant Governor. He was particularly adept at changing political loyalties, skilfully navigating the dangerous waters of the changes of monarch from James II to William III and then to Queen Anne. When he died in 1710, he was the richest landowner in Jamaica with 20 Jamaican estates, 1500 slaves.[2]

1 Perry Gauci, *William Beckford: First Prime Minister of the London Empire* (Yale University Press, 2013) pp.15, 219 n.15.

2 Matthew Parker, *The Sugar Barons, Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies* (New York: Random House, 2011) Chapter 11.

His son, also called Peter (1672 - 1737), served as Speaker of the House of Assembly as well as Controller of Customs. This last post gave him plenty of opportunities for corruption and Lord Archibald Hamilton, Governor of Jamaica, accused him of profiteering from his position. When he died in 1737, he owned seventeen plantations valued at £146,000 [£424,300,000] including 1,669 enslaved workers, valued at £33,600 [£97,650,000]. These properties produced sugar, rum, and molasses to the value of £28,600 [£83,120,000] annually. There were also outstanding loans to other Jamaican businessmen and landlords valued at £96,400 [£280,200,000].[3]

He sent his sons, of whom William Beckford (1709-1770) was the second, to England to be educated at Westminster School. Thence, William Beckford went to Balliol College, Oxford, and, in 1731, he was admitted to the University of Leiden as a medical student, then on to Paris where he studied at the *Hôpital des Invalides*.[4] Following the death of his father in 1735, he returned to Jamaica and was heavily involved in the colony's politics while managing and increasing his estates. He was renowned for his ruthless pursuit of those to whom he lent money, foreclosing at the first opportunity. He returned to England from 1738 to 1740 to engage in litigation with his mother over his father's will, and, while there, involved himself in the London West India Interest's campaign for war with Spain, the War of Jenkin's Ear (1739 to 1748). Such advocacy of imperialist military agression would be a characteristic of his later political career.

William Beckford returned to London permanently in 1744. He was now rich enough to think that he could insert himself into the ruling class in England. This was easier said than done. Power in England in the mid-1700s was firmly under the control of the landed aristocracy, old families who had long held land, and derived an income from that land, between £5,000 [£13,150,000] to £50,000 [£131,500,000] a year. They generally sat in the House of Lords and frequently used their dominant position in the locality to select who represented a constituency in the House of Commons. Lesser landlords, often referred to as the gentry, were also able to use their patronage to secure a place in Parliament for themselves or their placemen. This is not to say that this ruling class were politically united. While there were no political parties in the modern sense, they were broadly divided by economic interest, political and religious opinions, as well as personal hatreds, into two factions, known as Whigs and Tories. Nevertheless, they were united in their efforts to maintain control

Beckford and the Slave Trade https://beckfordstower.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Beckfords-and-Slavery-leaflet-2007.pdf

3 Perry Gauci, *William Beckford: First Prime Minister of the London Empire* (Yale University Press, 2013) p.32

4 Richard Sheridan, *Beckford, William* (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004)

within their own ranks. This was the world into which William Beckford wanted to break.

By the middle of the 18th century, there were an increasing number of businessmen who had made vast sums of money from all aspects of the business of slavery, as well as from the profits generated from the control of India and by supplying the Royal Navy. They had enough money to buy land and were starting to do so, thinking that they could thereby buy their way into the ruling elite.[5] This is the context in which William Beckford purchased the Fonthill estate in Wiltshire in 1745 for £32,000 [£91,530,000].[6]

His first entry to the House of Commons came shortly after, in 1747, when he was elected MP for Shaftesbury with the support of the 4th Duke of Shaftesbury.[7] His first intervention in Parliament was, predictably, in support of the West India sugar interest. Following a short return to Jamaica to sell some land and call in some of the money owed him, he began to advance his political career in earnest. In 1752 he bought his way into the Ironmongers Company and secured election as an Alderman in the Billingsgate ward of the City of London, from which power base he secured election as one of the MPs for London in 1754. He represented the City of London until his death in 1770, also serving as Sheriff of London (1755) as well as twice Lord Mayor of London (1762 and 1769). He also secured Bristol, for his brother Richard and Salisbury for his brother Julines. In addition, he won Petersfield and Hindon, where he was also a candidate, but he handed Petersfield on to Sir John Philipps, and Hinden to James Dawkins.[8] He was now one of the richest men in England and his position as Alderman in London and member of the Ironmongers' Company gave him the excuse to entertain lavishly; indeed his banquets and other parties outdid any other during a time when extravagant entertaining was very much part of the political process.

His principal interests in Parliament were the defence of the West India Interest, the promotion of imperial expansion and reform of the electoral system. He was recognised as the parliamentary leader of the West India Interest.

His efforts on behalf of the business of slavery are hardly surprising, his advocacy of reform might need further explanation. As a Member of Parliament for the City of London, William Beckford represented the growing financial services industry, which had different interests to the old landowning aristocracy and needed to break their

5 Timothy Rooks, *The Social and Political Contexts Which Led to the Building of Harewood House* (Berlin, Grossbritannien-Zentrum, n/d)

6 Amy Frost, "The Beckford Era" in Caroline Dakers (ed.) *Fonthill Recovered, A Cultural History* (London, UCL Press, 2018) p.61.

7 Gauci, *William Beckford*, p.57

8 Lucy Sutherland, "Beckford, William (1709-70), of Fonthill, Wilts" in L. Namier, J. Brooke (eds.), *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1754-1790*, (www.historyofparliamentonline.org, 1964)

stranglehold on political power. While Beckford had a reputation for radicalism, even breaking protocol as Lord Mayor by answering back to King George III when heading a delegation from the City, his radicalism was limited in practice to demanding a place at the table for the arriviste bourgeoisie. Beckford's speech in the House of Commons on 13 November 1761 supported the rights of:

> the middling people of England as the manufacturer, the yeoman, the merchant, the country gentleman, they who bear all the heat of the day. … They have a right, Sir, to interfere in the condition and conduct of the nation. … [They] are a good natured, well-intentioned and very sensible people who know better perhaps than any other nation under the sun whether they are well governed or not.[9]

There is no sense that he wanted the franchise to be extended to the urban working class, the rural landless labourers or any other section of the poor, deserving or not. Even this limited radicalism by the oligarchs of the West India Interest was not to last. They bought land, built stately homes, learned upper class manners and, probably most importantly, married their sons and daughters into the old aristocracy. Within a couple of generations, they had overcome the snobbery of their noble neighbours. There was also a convergence of interest as both the absentee West Indian planters and the Nabobs of the East India Company diversified their wealth and started to derive more of their income from being rural landlords. William Beckford had an annual income of £6,500 [£14,820,000] from his Fonthill Estate. This was a very useful steady income. His annual income from the West India trade averaged £14,500 [£33,070,000], but varied from a low of £3,500 to a high of £30,000, depending on the price of sugar on the London market.[10] As we shall see when we eventually arrive at the time of abolition of the slave traffic and then emancipation of the enslaved labourers themselves, the West India interest and the majority of rural landlords buried their differences and combined their efforts against the growing power of the manufacturing bourgeoisie who had very different needs from the State machine.[11]

However, in the 1750s there was still political animosity between the West India Interest group and the old landed aristocracy over the question of war. The West Indians wanted to ensure the defence of the colonies, while the landed aristocracy resented paying the increased taxes that would be necessary to to fund wars. The relationship was not helped by Beckford's successful opposition to an increase in the duty on sugar to pay for the war, which might have relieved the burden on the land tax. Beckford spoke frequently in Parliament urging an aggressive stance against

9 quoted in Sheridan, *Beckford, William*

10 Sidney Blackmore, "The Wealth of the Beckfords", in Caroline Dakers (ed.) *Fonthill Recovered, A Cultural History* (London: UCL Press, 2018) pp.253-4

11 See Chapter 6

Spain and France. He urged support for the North American colonies in French and Indian War which started in 1754 which, spilling over into the Seven Years War in 1756. His bellicose rhetoric increased, reaching a crescendo in 1762 following the British military victories in Quebec, Cuba Martinique and Guadeloupe. He was a close friend and supporter of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, who was the main parliamentary proponent of aggressive imperialist expansion at the expense of France and Spain.

The 1760 uprising in Jamaica, known as Tacky's Rebellion, sobered him somewhat and diverted his attention to demanding that 2,000 regular British soldiers might be permanently stationed on the island.[12] He continually urged that defence and expansion of the trans-Atlantic colonies be made a priority, while, at the same time defending the autonomy of the colonial assemblies.[13] He frequently raised the concerns of the North American colonists, but it is unlikely, had he lived, that he would have supported their war of independence starting in 1776. One of the early centres of Tacky's Rebellion in 1760 was the Esher Estate owned by William Beckford. It was the most dangerous slave rebellion in the British Empire until the Baptist War of Samuel Sharpe in 1831-32, proving that, without the support of the British Army and the Royal Navy, the numerical superiority of the African descendent population on the West Indian islands would make slavery unsustainable.

Despite loud protestations to the contrary, Beckford and the West India Interest were not displeased that the Treaty of Paris 1763, which terminated the Seven Years' War between Great Britain and France, returned Cuba to Spain as well as Martinique and Guadeloupe to France. An increase in the number of sugar islands in the British Empire would have reduced the price of sugar and hence their profits.

William Beckford died on 21 June 1770 on his way from Fonthill to London. He had garnered considerable support amongst the financiers and traders of the City of London but, despite his great outlay of wealth on both entertainment and monumental building projects, he was only ever tolerated by the aristocratic ruling class of the time and his attempt to buy himself respectability eventually failed. However, after his death, his friends and fellow oligarchs did their best to promote his memory, in part in order to facilitate their own entry to the snobbish elite circles, as well as sanitising the colonial origins of so much City money.

A statue was commissioned in his memory to be placed in the Guildhall where it remains today. In January 2021, responding to the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter campaign the City of London Corporation voted to remove two monuments to British politicians linked to the transatlantic slave trade, one of which

12 Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (2020, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press)
13 Gauci, *William Beckford*, pp. 77-106.

is the statue of William Beckford. However, in October of that year, when the agitation had died down and following the intervention of the Ministry of Culture, the Corporation voted in favour of retaining two statues linked to the transatlantic slave trade in their Guildhall headquarters. They did agree to add plaques to the statues of William Beckford and the merchant John Cass to explain how they profited from the 18th century slave trade. At the time of writing, these plaques have still to be erected.

Why do they go to such lengths to defend these statues?

It is part of their propaganda and self-justification. It creates a narrative of nobility which forms an ideological justification for the money-making of the present oligarchs and reinforces their feeling of entitlement.

I would like to propose that the statue of Beckford be replaced by a monument to the courage of those who fought for their freedom in Tacky's Rebellion of 1760.

The Fonthill Estate website says:

> Fonthill Estate, situated in the heart of south west Wiltshire, consists of farmland, woodland and formal gardens. From our website you will not only be able to see the outstanding natural beauty of the Estate, but also its incredible history and all the activities that take place within it.
>
> We have a number of fabulous venues available to hire for weddings & parties; it is also possible to rent commercial space as well as residential; you can board a mare at our Stud, and even buy timber or agricultural produce direct from the farm

In the section "History":

> The house, and the estate were sold to Alderman William Beckford, Lord Mayor of London, in 1745. He redesigned the landscape, building a bridge, a temple (a banqueting house) and a pagoda. He also demolished St Nicholas' church which was close to the house and rebuilt it on the site of the present Holy Trinity church at Fonthill Gifford.
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> But within 10 years the house burned down. A new house was built by him, known later as Fonthill 'Splendens'. He also built the archway to form a grand entrance to his estate.[14]

There is no mention of the slave-based origin of the money William Beckford used to buy and develop the estate. However, recent work on the relationship between the British country estate and slavery illustrates the importance of the role of absentee planters in the shaping of the British countryside.[15]

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14 https://fonthill.co.uk/

15 Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann, *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013); Stephanie Barczewski, *Country houses and the British Empire*, 1700–1930 (Manchester University Press, 2017); Caroline Dakers (ed.) *Fonthill Recovered, A Cultural History* (London: UCL Press, 2018)