

Calderstones Park and its links to slavery

What we know so far

The history of Liverpool is inseparable from the transatlantic slave trade. Between 1695 and 1807, 5,300 voyages left the port of Liverpool to participate in the trade, funded by the city's merchants and ship owners. The profits they made were used to build many of the city's historic mansions and public buildings. This has led many to wonder if the Mansion House at Calderstones Park has a link to the transatlantic slave trade.

As the current custodians of the Mansion House in Calderstones Park, Liverpool, we believe we have an important role in trying to help people understand the story of the Mansion and in sharing as much about its past as we can find out. By working with the historian, Laurence Westgath, we have begun the process of researching the links that the building and the surrounding park have to slavery. Although there are still many unknowns, to help answer some of these questions, we've set out what we do and what we don't know here.

Understanding the heritage of Calderstones, its people and their stories is an ongoing process. We want to involve people who care about the site's heritage, and will be asking people to get involved in a number of ways as soon as we are able.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The transatlantic slave trade involved ships making a triangular journey across the Atlantic. The ships would start in Liverpool, where they would be loaded with British manufactured goods. These vessels would travel to West Africa, where the cargo was traded for captive people. The ships transported these enslaved people to the Americas, for sale to British, Spanish and French colonies. Here, they were forced to work on plantations, growing and picking goods such as sugar, coffee, cocoa, and cotton. These commodities were then loaded onto the ship for its journey back to Britain, where they were sold as luxury items, or raw materials for industry. This made large profits for the ship's owners and for those who invested in them.

Transporting enslaved people across the Atlantic was made illegal in 1807, but links between Britain and slavery continued well beyond this. Owning slaves remained legal in British colonies until 1838, the date that the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act became law. It also remained legal in about half of US states until 1865. These dates are significant because they correspond to when the Mansion House was built.

Joseph Need Walker

The Mansion House at Calderstones was built in 1828 for Joseph Need Walker. Our research on Joseph is still ongoing, however, this is what we have found so far:

He was born in 1790, so in 1807, when the slave trade was made illegal, he was 17 years old. Need Walker manufactured lead shot (a type of ammunition) in Chester, and then exported it, probably via Liverpool's docks. However, we do not know exactly where or to whom he sold his products.

We know that Joseph Need Walker inherited his wealth, which was accrued through the family business set up by his grandfather. His grandfather established an ironmongery business near Rotherham, Yorkshire, manufacturing iron goods. Later, the family business

diversified into the lead industry and banking, and by the time Joseph Need Walker was born, the firm was very well established. We don't know any details of where or with whom his predecessors were trading.

Charles Maclver

In 1875, the house was sold to the shipping magnate, Charles Maclver. Charles was born in 1812, and in 1845 took on the day –to-day running of the Cunard Line, which transported passengers and mail between Britain and North America.

One of Cunard's most notable passengers was the abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass, who travelled to Britain in 1845 on the ship *Cambria*. On the voyage, he encountered pro-slavery supporters who objected to his passage and demanded he should return to his cabin. Several argued that he should be sent back to slavery, and he was even threatened to be thrown overboard.

He wrote about his experiences in a letter:

"From the moment we first lost sight of the American shore, till we landed at Liverpool, our gallant steamship was the theatre of an almost constant discussion of the subject of slavery commencing cool but growing hotter every moment as it advanced...the truth was being told and having its legitimate effect on the ears of those who heard it...the slave-holders, convinced that reason, morality, common honesty, humanity and Christianity, well all against them, and that argument was no longer any means of defence...[so] they actually got up a mob – a real, American, republican, democratic, Christian mob and that too, on the deck of a British steamer..."

The full letter can be read here: <https://glc.yale.edu/letter-william-lloyd-garrison-september-29-1845>

After 19 months lecturing on the subject of Abolition across Britain and Ireland, Frederick Douglass arrived in Liverpool in 1847 to board the return Cunard vessel. However, he was refused the first-class berth he had paid for and was instructed by Charles Maclver to take his meals alone, and not to mix with the saloon company, an experience that prompted Frederick to write a public letter of complaint to *The Times*.

He wrote that after questioning why his first-class ticket was invalid:

"Mr. M'IVER (the Liverpool agent) answered that the London agent, in selling me the ticket, had acted without authority, and that I should not go on board the ship unless I agreed to take my meals alone, not to mix with the saloon company, and to give up the berth for which I had paid."

In response, Charles also wrote a letter to *The Times* explaining his actions, but the issue became so controversial that Samuel Cunard, the owner of the shipping line, found it necessary to issue a public apology to Douglass. These letters can be read here: [Documents: 1847 \(bulldozia.com\)](#)

Charles Maclver also helped to navigate the Cunard Line through the American Civil War, when the slave-owning Confederate States fought the northern Union States over their right to own slaves. The war temporarily reduced emigration to America, making passenger ships like Cunard's less profitable. This caused the company to diversify into carrying cargo, as both Union and Confederate states were importing supplies¹. Many Liverpool merchants and ship builders supported the slave-owning Confederate states during the war, as the cotton

produced there was the city's most economically important cargo². However, we don't know whether Cunard Line prioritised supplying one side over the other.

John Bibby

The Calderstones estate later became Calderstones Park, but it is not the only property that was purchased by the Liverpool Corporation to create the public space. They also purchased the next-door estate, Harthill, and although the house no longer stands, its former grounds make up what is now the North West corner of the park.

Harthill was lived in by John Bibby, son of John Bibby senior, the founder of *John Bibby & co*. The company was set up in 1807 with a £2,500 dowry John Bibby senior received when he married Mary Mellard, the daughter of a wealthy Stoke potter, and made its money running a regular 'packet service' between Parkgate (on the Wirral) and Dublin.

Although *John Bibby & co* was founded in 1807, the year Britain abolished the slave trade, the family's business activities and investments can be traced back further. Prior to abolition, as a metals trader and ship broker, John Sr. held a stake in three slaving voyages on the ships *Harmonie*, *Eagle* and *Sally*, in order to transport and sell goods in West Africa.

The ships can be searched for on this database: Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Database (slavevoyages.org) using the voyage IDs 81106, 81732, 83481.

In 1827, John Sr. diversified into metal manufacture and it was in this side of the family business that John Bibby of Harthill worked after his father's death in 1840.

The Liverpool Botanic Garden

John Bibby's Harthill estate later became part of Calderstones Park, and between 1964 and 1984, this site was home to the Liverpool Botanic Gardens. An interconnected series of 16 greenhouses stood in the park, of which only the vestibule remains today.

However, Calderstones Park was just the latest location for the Liverpool Botanic Garden, which has a long history that can be traced back to 1800. The original garden was located on a site bordering Myrtle Street and was founded by a group of intellectual men that included plant collectors, doctors and the abolitionist William Roscoe. The first president of the Botanic Garden was Richard Walker who, - with his uncle Richard Watt, was a partner in the firm of Watt and Walker, Jamaican plantation owners and one of the largest importers of slave produced sugar and rum into Liverpool. Walker also invested in two slave voyages before his death in 1801, prior to the official opening of the gardens in 1802.

The original gardens contained plants from all over the world, transported to Liverpool on ships engaged in international trade, including the transatlantic slave trade. There is evidence for this in the form of a letter from Roscoe to the captain of a slave ship anchored off the coast of Angola. In the letter, despite being an abolitionist, Roscoe asks the captain to bring him "a small quantity of such seeds of African or West Indian plants as may conveniently fall in your way".

In the letter, Roscoe also appeals to the Captain to do his job with humanity:

"That you will discharge this serious duty [the slave trade] with fidelity, and with as much humanity as is consistent with the nature of this business, I make no doubt. I have observed, with pleasure, that your natural disposition is kind and liberal, and you can never have a fitter opportunity of exerting these qualities than your present situation affords"

The letter can be read in full on p.614 - 615 of [this book](#).

In 1836, the Liverpool Botanic Gardens were moved to Edge Lane to escape encroaching pollution. The plant collection remained there until 1941 when the glasshouse was destroyed by a bomb in the Second World War. In 1964, the remaining plants were moved to the new greenhouses in Calderstones Park.

The Four Seasons Gate

The Four Seasons Gate is the park's entrance on the corner of Calderstones and Harthill Roads. It is surrounded by statues of giants and women who represent the seasons. The park is not the original location of these statues, they were relocated to the park in 1926 but in their first home they were purchased with wealth accrued through slavery. They originally adorned the 1863 Browns Building on Water Street, the property of William Brown. William Brown was a merchant, banker, well-known philanthropist and one of the main importers of slave produced cotton into Liverpool in the first half of the 19th Century. The Brown family also owned many enslaved people on their plantations in the United States.

Next steps

We know that none of Joseph Need Walker, Charles Maclver and John Bibby owned slaves, but they were a part of Liverpool's 19th Century maritime merchant elite. The fortunes of this wealthy group grew from their links to the Port of Liverpool - Britain's most prolific slave port. By the 19th Century, the trade and forced labour of human beings had shaped many of Britain's industries and economy. This makes it impossible to separate the fortunes of Liverpool, including those associated with Calderstones, from slavery.

We welcome the opportunity to find out more about Calderstones Park and the Mansion's relationship to slavery. Please contact programmes@thereader.org.uk if you feel you can help.

Sources and references

- 1) Cunard: A Photographic History, By Janette McCutcheon
- 2) <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/american-civil-war/liverpool-and-american-civil-war>