

MMT NEWS

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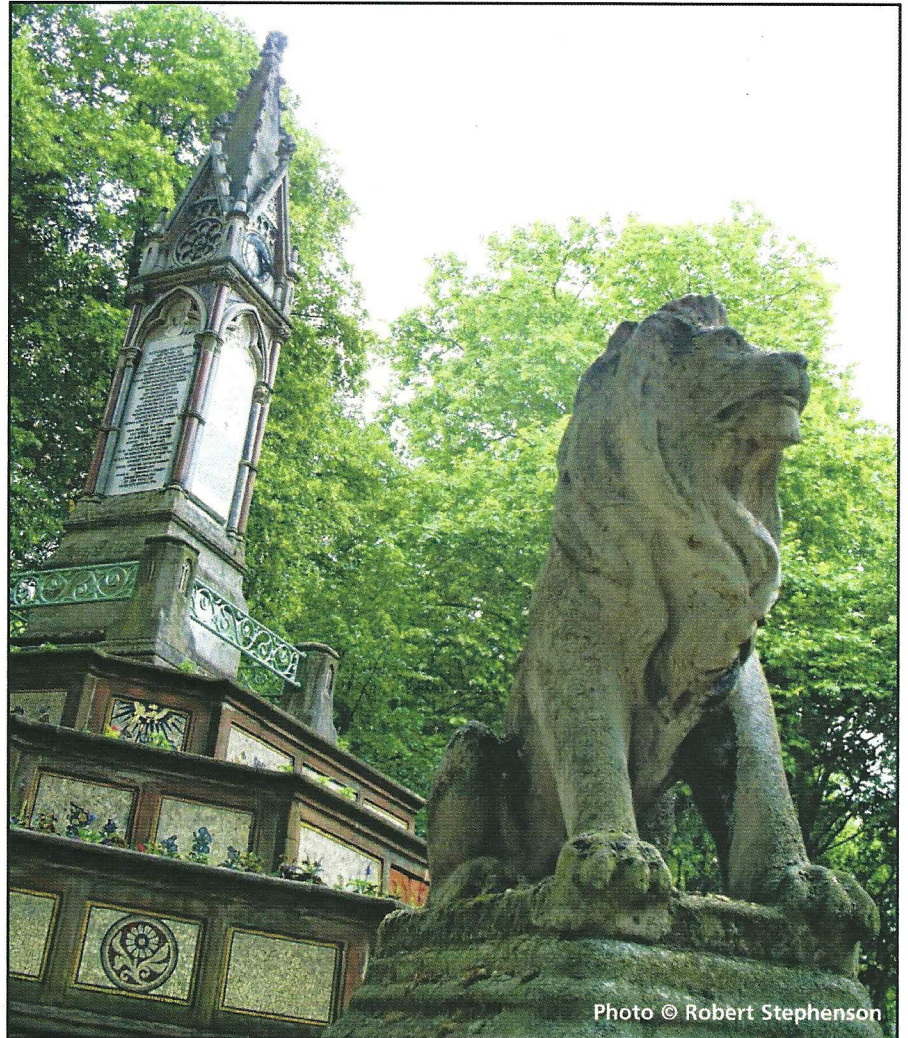
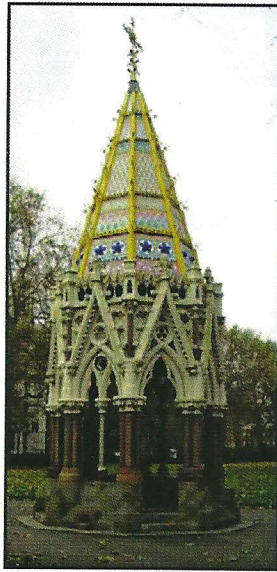


Photo © Robert Stephenson

ST. PANCRAS GARDENS

DESIGNATING HISTORY: SLAVERY & ABOLITION

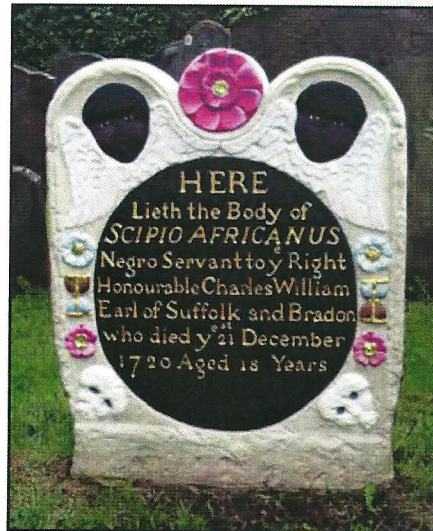
DESIGNATING HISTORY



The bicentenary of the 1807 Abolition Act, which outlawed the slave trade in Britain and her colonies, was commemorated throughout the country in ways which reached far beyond the glorious Act itself, to cast light into a shameful and not-so-distant period of our history. English Heritage took the opportunity to look at the way that special historic interest can be reflected in statutory designation: 43 sites associated with slavery in particularly telling ways are now listed as places of national importance with descriptions which recognize this connection.

The 'Designating History' project included commemorative structures such as the Anti-Slavery Arch at Stroud, Gloucestershire, and the Buxton Memorial Fountain in Victoria Tower Gardens, Westminster, together with statues and tombs of abolitionists. The project also acknowledged the far-reaching and (until recently) comparatively little-studied influence of the slave trade on England's wider society and built environment: country houses, warehouses, public buildings and churches were amongst the

sites considered. Besides revisions to existing list descriptions, the project resulted in six sites' being upgraded from Grade II ["of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve them"] to Grade II* ["particularly



ABOVE The Buxton Memorial Fountain by Samuel Sanders Teulon, commissioned by Charles Buxton MP abolition of slavery within the British Empire in 1834, and erected in Victoria Tower Gardens, Westminster, in 1865 (coincidentally, the year in which the United States abolished slavery; upgraded from Grade II to Grade II*. PHOTO © JACQUELINE BANERJEE 2008, COURTESY OF WWW.VICTORIANWEB.ORG.

LEFT The headstone of Scipio Africanus (d.1720) in the churchyard of St. Mary, Henbury, near Bristol. PHOTO © THE ARCHITECTURE CENTRE, BRISTOL.

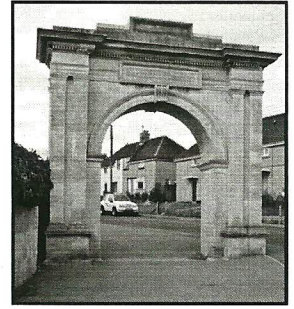
important, and of more than special interest”], plus seven entirely new listings at Grade II.

Britain’s raw involvement in slavery took place far away on West Indian plantations, which must partly explain why the enormity continued so long; making the British public comprehend the terrible reality of slavery was one of the abolitionists’ great achievements. Today, we are increasingly aware of the significant presence of black people in Britain since the 16thC. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the project was the investigation of a number of monuments commemorating black people who died in Britain in the 18thC and 19thC, all connected with slavery.

The legal status of slavery within England itself had been in question since the 16thC [when, in 1655, black African slaves are first recorded in London and, in 1562, John Hawkins led the first known slaving expedition on the ‘triangular route’ between England, Africa and the Americas]. Although the Somerset ruling of 1772 led many to believe that slaves in England were free, and the keeping of slaves could not have been tolerated after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the legal position was not completely clear until the abolition of the institution of slavery throughout most of the British empire in 1834.

Graves represent one of the few forms of tangible evidence regarding the existence of slaves in England. Such graves are rare and very precious – the vast majority died without trace – and in many cases the grave itself provides the starting point for piecing together a more complete individual history. These tombs offer a unique and invaluable window (or squint) on the lives of black people in 18th- and 19th-century Britain. They demonstrate that black people lived in England for many different reasons – and in remote rural areas, not just near major ports such as London, Liverpool, and Bristol – and give information not recorded elsewhere about origins, age and occupations.

Monuments also provide clues regarding the status of the individuals commemorated, and relationships between masters and slaves (or former slaves) in England, although these should be interpreted with caution. The objects of the powerful and often poetic inscriptions found on these tombs were exceptional; only a valued slave or servant would have been given a monument, and the vast majority



The Anti-Slavery Arch, Farmhill Lane, Paganhill Estate, Stroud – Britain’s oldest anti-slavery memorial; upgraded from Grade II to Grade II*. PHOTO © JAMES PURKISS, COURTESY OF WWW.GEOGRAPH.ORG.UK.

of the many thousands of black people living in England during this period – by no means all of whom were in service – received no stone memorial.

Those monuments that do remain speak across more than three centuries of an elusive and important aspect of our history. Most of those examined for the EH Designating History project were previously unlisted, whilst two have been upgraded. Five arresting examples are described below; though some have been listed principally for their historical interest, all are handsome, and most bear inscriptions which would be remarkable in any context.

Myrtilla, Oxhill

A modest headstone stands in the isolated rural churchyard of St. Lawrence, Oxhill, in Warwickshire. Of the same local ironstone as the church and most of the other monuments, in a design that follows the charming local template, it is not immediately distinguished from its companions. But it marks the grave of a woman named Myrtilla, who died in 1706, and is thus the earliest known to have been erected in Britain to commemorate a person of African descent; its importance is reflected in the upgrading of its listing to Grade II*.

The tomb illustrates how a fuller story may grow out of an elliptical inscription as attention turns to this previously neglected branch of British history, and of the way our imaginations may – tentatively – fill in remaining gaps.

The headstone (*photo, page 8*) informs us that Myrtilla was 'Negro slave to Mr Tho Beauchamp of Nevis', and the burial register describes her as 'a negro girl of Mrs Beauchamps'. Recent research has identified the Beauchamps of Nevis as

sugar-plantation owners, though little else is yet known. Favoured slaves, serving in the houses of planters, were sometimes brought to England; it may be that Myrtilla was to care for the Beauchamps' son, born in 1705. According to the headstone she was baptised a few months before she died; it is possible that this event took place soon after her arrival in England, although we do not know where (it is not recorded in the Oxhill registers), and that the shock of her first English winter hastened her demise. This dignified and ornamented memorial indicates that she was held in some esteem by the Beauchamp family.

Scipio Africanus, Henbury

The role of black servants in England, paid and unpaid, was often decorative as well as domestic. Black figures appear as counterfoils to their employers in fashionable portraits of the 17thC and 18thC, and Scipio Africanus – whose elaborate tomb in the churchyard of St. Mary, Henbury, near Bristol, has also been upgraded to Grade II* – evidently found special favour in the household of Charles Howard, 7th Earl of Suffolk and Bindon.

The enchanting headstone and footstone, embellished with black cherubs, were erected in 1720, following Scipio's death at the age of eighteen. A poetic epitaph informs us that he was born 'a pagan and slave', which suggests that he began life in the colonies. It is not known how Scipio came to live and die in this quiet village, where the family of Howard's wife occupied the Great House, but it may have been through some connection with Bristol's booming slave-dependent trade.

The name 'Scipio Africanus' – that of one of the great generals of the ancient

world – was given to the boy by the Earl or a previous owner; Roman names were frequently chosen for slaves, putting a heroic gloss on lives frequently characterized by horror and degradation. Whilst Scipio's exotic heritage may have recommended him to his master, his conversion to Christianity is celebrated in verse that displays ambivalence about the colour of its subject: 'What tho' my hue was dark my SAVIORS sight / Shall Change this darkness into radiant Light'.

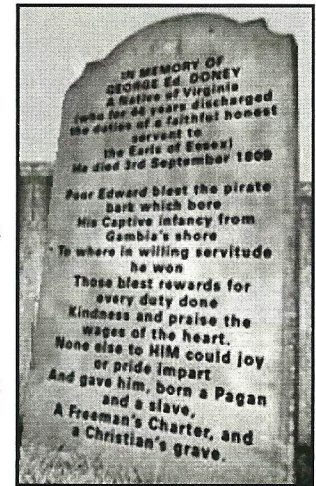
George Doney, Watford

J.M.W. Turner's painting *Harvest Home* (c.1809) depicts a harvest dinner at Cassiobury House, Hertfordshire, overseen by a high-ranking black servant. This was probably George Doney, whose monument in the graveyard of St. Mary's, Watford, has been listed at Grade II.

The journey described on his headstone marries the slave narrative with a morality tale: we read that Doney was born in the Gambia, where he was presumably sold into slavery, and that he 'blest the pirate bark' that bore him to the plantations of Virginia, because it opened the passage to 'willing servitude' which led to 44 years in the service of the Earls of Essex at Cassiobury, earning at last 'a Freeman's Charter and a Christian's grave' in 1809. The suggestion is that, by the time Doney died, at the age of 51 – two years after the abolition of the slave trade – he had been given his freedom legally, though no other evidence has been found.

William Anne Capel, 4th Earl of Essex (1732-1799) and his second wife subscribed to the autobiography of England's leading black anti-slavery campaigner, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), and the colourful 5th Earl,

George Capell-Coningsby (1757-1839) – whose childhood companion Doney may have been – moved in abolitionist circles. The inscription on



Doney's headstone, which the 5th Earl must at least have approved, suggests that he rejoiced in his servant's freedom, though the verse implies that Doney earned that freedom through devoted service and Christian faith rather than as a natural right:

*Poor Edward blest the pirate bark which bore
His captive infancy from Gambia's shore
To where in willing servitude he won
Those blest rewards for every duty done –
Kindness and praise, the wages of the heart;
None else to him could joy or pride impart,
And gave him, born a pagan and a slave,
A freeman's charter and a Christian's grave.*

Rasselas Belfield

The tomb of Rasselas Belfield, 'A Native of Abyssinia', in the churchyard of St. Martin, Bowness-on-Windermere, raises interesting questions about attitudes to race and slavery in early 19thC England. The 1822 headstone, now listed at Grade II, declares: 'A Slave by birth I left my native Land / And found my Freedom on Britannia's Strand: / Blest Isle! Thou Glory

