

# Dealing with the past: a local and global imperative. Part III.

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## Part III

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### Blog post content

In Parts [1](#) and [2](#) of this reflection some of the issues arising on a global level in the Slavery and Reparations debate were considered. In this final Part, a glance is cast at a local level and on the legacies of enslavement in our more immediate environment.

### Local connections

On a stroll around the charming, cobbled streets of Old Aberdeen, it is impossible to miss the imposing pillars of the Powis Gate. This gateway, once the portal to Powis House, now [owned](#) by the University of Aberdeen, holds a [plaque](#) acknowledging its links to slavery. The Gate was built by the [Leslie](#) family with the profits from their plantations in Jamaica and from compensation received for the loss of their enslaved "property" due to the Slavery Abolition [Act](#) of 1833. The University of Aberdeen has published a 2024 [Report](#) on its own links with slavery, which exposed the extent to which the University benefited from the labour and suffering of enslaved people. This emulates a similar project [undertaken](#) in 2018 at Glasgow University and one currently [underway](#) at Edinburgh University.

### Scotland and Slavery

Overall, Scotland was [disproportionately](#) represented among slave owners. In the 1830s, 10% of the British population lived north of the border while 15% of absentee slave owners (such as the [Gladstones](#), who received the [largest](#) payout under the 1837 Slave Owners Compensation [scheme](#)) had Scottish addresses. Scotland's involvement in the slave trade increased after Union with England in 1707, as can be seen from this [account](#): "The clearest indication of Scottish merchants' enthusiasm for the slave trade is illustrated by a series of petitions from Dundee, Inverness, Aberdeen, Montrose, Edinburgh and Glasgow sent to

Parliament between 1709 and 1711. All protested that a proposed monopoly by the English Royal African Company was contrary to the Union, which guaranteed freedom of trade for British vessels."

Recent scholarship which focuses on Scotland's role in the slave trade includes Sir Tom Devine's comprehensive 2015 [book](#), as well as others such as *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World* ([2005](#)) and *Slavery and the Scottish Enlightenment* ([2024](#)). Devine observed that, for generations Scots had engaged "in a form of collective amnesia" by believing that "their country has few or no connections to slavery". Stephen Mullen ([2009](#)) has similarly coined the phrase 'it wisnae us' to capture what he sees as Scottish cultural denialism about its role in the slave trade, which is seen as an 'English' trade. When the UCL Legacies of British Slavery [research](#) was undertaken, it was [remarked](#) that it was "very striking how many slave-owners there were in Scotland. The empire offered opportunities to the Scots on a very significant scale and working on the plantations was a favoured choice for Scots seeking their fortunes in the late 18th and early 19th century."

While slave ownership outwith Scotland was legal [until](#) 1834, the different legal position within Scotland is well known, due to the pronouncement in the 1778 *Knight v Wedderburn* [case](#). The case was heard in Perth Sheriff Court and, on appeal, at the Court of Session, and it was [decided](#) that "the state of slavery is not recognised by the Laws of this Kingdom and is inconsistent with the principles thereof". Joseph Knight, from Guinea, had been purchased by John Wedderburn in Jamaica and subsequently brought to Perthshire to serve as a "house slave". The judgment in his case allowed Joseph Knight to be set free from Wedderburn's ownership.

## Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Slavery

Even though Aberdeen may not have had the same level of involvement in this ignominious trade as, say, [Bristol](#), [Liverpool](#) or [Glasgow](#), there are several indications of Aberdeen's connections with the slave trade around the city. Aberdeen City Council has undertaken a detailed [survey](#) of local sites with connections to historic chattel slavery. As the survey says, "Aberdonians were involved in historic chattel slavery. Some owned plantations in the Americas, others traded in goods, built ships or set up companies and made substantiable profits." The [sites](#) within Aberdeen with the most associations with slavery include the Art Gallery (where around a quarter of the founding subscribers are recorded as having links to plantations in the West Indies), Jamaica St., Sugarhouse [Lane](#), Virginia St., Shiprow, Powis Place, Gladstone Place (two such), Marischal College and many more of the Granite City's well known locales.

As a counterpoint to some of the slavery connections found in Aberdeen, there is the more edifying local account of the anti-lynching campaigner and writer, and former enslaved woman, Ida B. [Wells](#). In April 1893,

Wells [gave](#) a lecture on "Lynch Law" in the Music Hall on Union Street. It is remarkable that a woman, born enslaved, informed Aberdonians in the 1890s about the degradations, oppression and violence to which African Americans were subjected to, even after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the US. Although not a trained lawyer, Wells vividly informed her Aberdeen audience about the lack of due process, the lack of fair trial, the discrimination and the barbarity which was then prevalent in the Southern States of the US.

It is unlikely that Wells would have been aware of the fact that the brother of the original funder of the Music Hall (James Duff, Earl of Fife) [received](#) in the 1830s, £4101 (equivalent to around £3 million today) in compensation for the "loss" of 202 enslaved persons on his plantation in Jamaica, under the [scheme established](#) by the Slave Compensation Act of 1837. The recipient of this ill-gotten compensation, General Sir James Duff, has illustrious contemporary [connections](#) also, his relative being former Prime Minister, Lord David Cameron. While he was Prime Minister, David Cameron [presaged](#) both Sir Keir [Starmer's](#) and Rishi Sunak's [refusals](#) to apologise for, or to [consider](#) any reparations for, slavery, insisting on the need to "move on" from its legacy.

And what of Robert Gordon of this parish? He was a local merchant, who lived from 1668 until 1731. While it would have been feasible for this prosperous trader to have engaged in transatlantic slavery (his lifetime being roughly coterminous with that of the slave trader Edward [Colston](#)), his focus was on Gdansk in the Polish Lithuanian [Commonwealth](#), where he made a considerable fortune. The latter was put towards a charitable hospital on Schoolhill, which eventually evolved into a [school](#) and a [university](#). RGU has a [statement](#) on Modern Slavery, but there is no reference to any associations between historic chattel slavery and the University. However, some distant links do exist in the [background](#); "Gray's School of Art, now part of RGU, was founded in 1885 by John Gray. Gray was a partner in McKinnon & Co., an iron foundry in Aberdeen. Much of McKinnon & Co.'s commerce came from trade with plantations. The foundry specialised in creating equipment for use on sugar, rice, cocoa and rubber plantations."

Many of Scotland's universities, including RGU, have use of The [Burn](#), a property owned by an educational charity and used as an academic retreat, located near Edzell, south of Aberdeen. Although not mentioned on the history of The Burn's on its [website](#), there are some links between enslavement and this attractive location where many Scottish academics spend time in intellectual contemplation. The estate was purchased in 1814 by John [Shand](#), who owned several plantations in Jamaica, and passed after his death to his brother William [Shand](#) (also an owner of numerous plantations in Jamaica). It was then subsequently [sold](#), in 1836, to a former slave owner, William McInroy, who had received [compensation](#) in 1835 for the loss of ownership of over 500 enslaved persons in British Guiana.

Aberdeenshire generally is well known for its many castles, several of which are now owned by the National Trust for Scotland. The Trust has carried out recent research into the connections between its properties and historical enslavement, as part of its "Facing our Past" [project](#). This survey finds, for example, extensive enslavement connections at [Leith](#) Hall in Aberdeenshire; Sir James Leith was Governor of Barbados when he was responsible for the brutal suppression of a slave revolt there in 1816. Afterwards, he issued a proclamation directing the enslaved people of the island to "return with cheerfulness to their unchanged and unchangeable condition".

There are other bucolic locations close to Aberdeen which are also tainted by enslavement associations. For instance, if you wander in Dunnottar Woods, it may be helpful to know that they were established in the 1780s by Alexander Allardyce, MP and Rector of Marischal College, using the [profits](#) he had made from the trade in enslaved persons in Jamaica. Dunnottar Castle itself was once owned by the Keiths, the last of whom, the 10<sup>th</sup> Earl Marischal, is featured in a 1733 [portrait](#) with an unnamed black groom. Further afield, in Monymusk, is Cluny Castle, the former home of John Gordon; it is still owned by his descendants and used as a luxury wedding [venue](#). John Gordon of Cluny is perhaps better known for his [role](#) in the Highland Clearances on his estates the [Hebrides](#), which he purchased in 1838, but he was also the owner of several plantations on the island of Tobago. In 1836, he was [compensated](#) for the loss of almost 700 enslaved people on these plantations. Finally, in Finzean, lies the small primary [school](#) that was set up in the 1730s with a bequest from the will of Reverend Gilbert Ramsay, a slave [owner](#) in Barbados in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This prevalence of connections between Aberdeenshire and the Caribbean had been [noted](#) as early as 1900, "It is surprising how many landed estates in Aberdeenshire and the adjacent counties were purchased by means of fortunes acquired in the trade of the West Indies".

The people of Aberdeen did have some opportunities to reflect and be informed about chattel enslavement. In 1770, James [Beattie](#), professor of Moral Philosophy at Marischal College, and a rare voice on the morality of slavery in his era, mounted a forceful critique of (philosopher) David Hume's much [debated](#) racial inferiority [position](#), in his [Essay](#) on Truth. Beattie's *Elements of Moral Science* (1790) also contains an extended argument for the abolition of slavery, which he stated to be "utterly repugnant to every principle of reason, religion, humanity and conscience". Given Beattie's interests, he may well have been in attendance on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1792, at a premises in Marischal [Street](#), for a book signing event. This was a book signing with a difference; the author was Olaudah Equiano, who came to Aberdeen to publicise his bestselling [book](#). *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa the African*, first published in 1789, detailed how the formerly enslaved [Equiano](#) was captured, aged eleven, in a region of modern Nigeria and transported by slave ships to the British colonies of Barbados and Virginia. The

publicity for the book indicated that it gave an insight into a trade that was "disgraceful to humanity and fixed a stain on the legislature of Britain".

## Conclusion

The toppling of the [Colston](#) statue in 2020, itself engendered by the [killing](#) of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement and the [debate](#) which it generated, continues to [reverberate](#) widely within the UK. It has brought about an increased level of awareness of the need to question and research the connections there are between past injustices and the legacies of colonial racism and enslavement. The reparations for slavery discussion will not subside but is, instead, destined to gather momentum over the coming years as the "the global tide is moving in [favour](#) of reparations". Prime Minister Starmer is likely going to have to think again about his [refusal](#) to face up to this issue. As for all of us, and our individual responsibility in this essential debate about processing the past, perhaps it begins with casting careful and conscious eyes over the very streets and paths upon which we walk. Or, otherwise put, and as depicted by the Sankofa [symbol](#) below, the imperative is a critical evaluation of the past in order to better [inform](#) the future.

