

# THE PRIVATE LIFE OF A SLAVE TRADING FAMILY

By Clare Taylor

The Hibberts were Manchester merchants who established themselves in Kingston, Jamaica by the mid-eighteenth century, among other things buying and selling black Africans as slaves in the Caribbean. Hibberts continued to dominate West Indian trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, though by this date none chose to live permanently in Jamaica. Indeed, in spite of monumental remains and the finest town house in Kingston, few of them lived long in the island. By Jamaican standards they were newly arrived, and though they married into island society, their wives were not from established families either, and were more often merchants' daughters. A firm commitment to business was the Hibbert creed, as well as an affection for their numerous daughters, matrimonial pawns in their business affairs; but they were also known for eccentric religious beliefs, often expressed in monuments or buildings of some kind, or small philanthropic trusts to help the poor.

The founder of the Hibberts' Jamaican fortunes was Thomas Hibbert the Eldest (1710-1780) who came to Jamaica in 1724, followed much later by his brother John. His brother Robert, like their father Robert before them, remained in Manchester, both noted merchants. A sister, Elizabeth, married Nathaniel Phillips, a fellow merchant, further consolidating family interests in Britain.

Thomas the Eldest was one of the wealthiest merchants in Jamaica when he died in 1780, unwed like his contemporary Simon Taylor, and also the father of a mulatto child. In his will he provided for his free mulatto housekeeper, Charity Harry, and her daughter Jane, whom he had sent to England. This he did as carefully as he ensured the security of his estate so that it was not solely in the hands of younger members of the family. He also made strict provision for his burial, in a deep vault in the garden of his house in Kingston, because he abhorred and detested 'the prevailing superstitious custom of interring dead bodies in Churches and churchyards' and did not wish his body to be added to 'the noxious map that is daily corrupting in the centre of the town'. He was in fact buried on his property at Agualta Vale in the country.<sup>1</sup>

His brother John was a shadowy figure by comparison.

He was a much younger man, and died young, but he married respectably in Jamaica, Janet Gordon, sister of the Attorney General, and when widowed she took her family of five back to England. She too died young, burdened with cares for her young family - the youngest son John was posthumous. He became a Fellow of Kings College, Cambridge, (the family had a literary turn) and was buried at Bray in Bedfordshire where his son erected a monument to his memory, but at least one daughter died of consumption, to the distress of the extended family.

Janet's second son, Robert Hibbert of East Hyde, Bedfordshire, by accident nearly stole the family thunder when he founded the Hibbert Trust in 1847 shortly before his death, his aim being 'the spread of Christianity in its most simple and intelligible form'. Effectively 'East Hyde Bob' became founder of a Unitarian charity with special concern for scholarship and for accommodation for young people.<sup>2</sup>

As a Bedfordshire Justice of the Peace, he built almshouses in Luton as early as 1819, showing more concern for the rural poor than for his slaves in Jamaica, for though he sent out a Unitarian missionary Thomas Cooper to meliorate their conditions in 1817, he agreed to his recall in 1820 and no changes were made.

The rest of the family seem less fond of this short-lived, clever but poorer branch, even boasting a little of the good health and looks of their daughters by comparison with the consumptive Cambridge Hibbert girls. Their main concern was for Thomas Hibbert the Elder, the founder of their later fortunes, who went to Jamaica, but also founded the firm of Hibbert, Fuhr and Purrier in London, securing the family fortunes by an apparently prudent marriage in 1784 to Sophia Boldero, daughter of a London banker linked to the West India interest.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas the Elder was born in 1744, the first son of Robert, the Manchester merchant who backed his brother Thomas the Eldest after he went to Jamaica. The lure of West Indian wealth attracted the family, however. Thomas the Elder went to Jamaica, but returned, wealthy enough to retire in 1791 and buy Chalfont in Buckinghamshire.

This became the family seat, possibly to the annoyance of his younger brother Robert, (1750-1835) who also went out to Jamaica and like his brother bought an English estate in 1791. His choice was Birtles in Cheshire, near the Virral and sensibly close to home in Manchester.

At this point the fortunes of the two brothers sharply divided. Robert had five children, whilst Thomas' marriage was childless. He later adopted one of the consumptive Cambridge Hibbert girls but sharing the family affection for daughters, he was distraught by signs of her approaching death. Worse, his marriage failed, and Sophia Boldero was sent to live at Dorking taking with her Gainsborough's portrait of her husband, he retaining the painting of his wife. This arrangement was held to be most amicable, but Thomas was thought something of a hypochondriac before he died in 1819.

These were the views of his youngest brother George, (1757-1837) one of the wildest members of the family, who was established in London and served for many years as the Agent for Jamaica. How wealthy he was was never clear. There are glowing testimonials to his ability and uprightness, not least in maintaining opposition to the abolition of the slave trade. There are fine reviews of his magnificent art collection and library which he was forced to sell when he moved from a roomy house in Clapham to a smaller home in Hertfordshire. His brothers made generous bequests to his nine pretty, healthy daughters, so that George seemed to have few worries, and these were probably ended by his prudent marriage to Elizabeth Fonnereau.

If George had not been a Hibbert his marriage would have accounted for his success. The Fonnereaus were Huguenots with a fortune in the linen trade, and related to members of the West India interest. They gave Hibbert lifelong support; Elizabeth's sister Mary married one of the Huguenot Thellussons, rich bankers with large West Indian holdings; her uncle Rogers Parker left them his home in Hertfordshire; and a kinsman, Thomas George Fonnereau was an art patron on a par with George Hibbert.

By 1820 the head of the family was Robert Hibbert of Birtles, who in Jamaica in 1785 had married Letitia Nembhard, daughter of Dr John Nembhard, a Dutch or perhaps German immigrant with a large family, all with

names suggesting kinship with most of the Jamaican plantocracy. They remained close to her, including the Nembhards 'of Nuremberg', and Letitia Hibbert became the family matriarch, mother of a large family and keeper of the family 'memorandums' in the family Bible. She desired to be buried at Chalfont, 'her home', rather than at Birtles, for though her husband was a Cheshire magnate they seem to have preferred to live close to their family and its business firm in London.

Letitia had a central place in the family, for her sister Eliza Jane married East Hyde Bob, a cousin, in Jamaica in 1792. They had no children, and with their return to Britain in 1803 the Hibberts' personal contact with the island was almost over, though one of George's sons died there in 1825.

Robert of Birtles inherited Chalfont, but he left it to his second son, and insisted Birtles should go to his eldest son; but though his heir built a memorial chapel on the Birtles estate, family memorials are divided. Some are at Chalfont St Peter, Buckinghamshire, others at Prestbury Church, Cheshire or the new St Catherine's chapel, Birtles, an indication perhaps that the family were not well established. They received compensation as slave holders after 1833 and soon ceased to have significant links with the island. By the end of the century Birtles and Chalfont had passed out of their hands, and the Hibberts today are remembered by the Hibbert Trust, or by Headquarters House, the Hibbert mansion in Kingston, Jamaica, once the House of Assembly and now home of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust Commission. Their literary or artistic abilities are perhaps recalled, but few now reflect on how the wealth was amassed by this efficient, home loving but not entirely kind family of slave traders.

#### REFERENCES

1. 'Mr Hibbert of Stanton Street', paper by Marguerite Curtin, Research Officer Jamaica National Trust Commission, 1983.
2. H. G. Tibbutt, 'Robert Hibbert, Slave owner Philanthropist', *Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol 12, no 91, Winter, 1969.
3. For details of the Hibbert family see V. L. Oliver, *Caribbeana*, vol IV, (1915) *passim*.