

## Sharpham's Colonial Past

Is history a list of dates or a list of people? Both, of course. With the people come their life-stories, and a glimpse into the world they lived in; both in their immediate surroundings, and in their much wider world.

If, in some cases, we feel repugnance for much of what may have informed their circumstances and thinking, do we now condemn and hide our history? Or do we tell their story whilst showing how our attitudes and ways of living are dramatically different, using this occasion to genuinely regret profit and privilege that was gained at such a high cost for so many?

The focus of Sharpham in the 21st century is on healing, restoring, revitalising, rewilding but the Estate has had many owners, and many different life stories.

### Colonialism

The establishing of colonies in the far-distant past has a great deal to do with our modern lives.

Those who financed, organised or took part in expeditions all over the world had many motives, and their legacy lives with us today. Expeditions were organised and financed by those who wanted to send ships to trade, to establish ownership of land and to have access to (and control of) goods and raw materials.

For example, once spices were introduced into the often-dull diets of those at home, then direct seaways to obtain them were desperately sought to avoid the high prices paid to the Turks, who bought from Asian caravans.

The British Empire began in the 1500s, flourishing and growing dramatically, and lasting until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. People's lives were changed, as was so much else, for hundreds of years.

Elizabeth I (1533–1603) granted charters for expeditions to many seafarers based in the West Country, including Sir Humphrey Gilbert (whose family lived close to Sharpham at Greenway), to his half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh and to his cousin Sir Francis Drake.

Sir John Hawkins from Plymouth was second cousin to Francis Drake and is often referred to as England's first trader in enslaved people. There is a local story that Walter Raleigh, whilst staying with his half-brothers the Gilberts, smoked the first pipe of tobacco in England on the Anchor Stone off Dittisham.

Francis Drake spent nearly a year raiding Spanish settlements and ships up and down the west coast of South America. In 1579 he landed in California, which he named New Albion, and claimed it for the Queen – the first Englishman to proclaim an English possession overseas. Though no exact boundaries were ever established, this laid the ground for further charters and expansion.

Humphrey Gilbert claimed Newfoundland for the Queen as the first British colony in 1583. This opened up new opportunities not only for English fishermen, but also for all those keen to establish trade with local people. By the late 1600s, England had established colonies in North

America and the Caribbean with perhaps 38,000 people a year emigrating by 1700 from a population of five and a half million.

The colonies were exporting increasing numbers of goods such as dried fish, lumber, rice, sugar, tobacco and, increasingly, manufactured goods, and importing products such as woollen cloth. The tobacco, rice and sugar plantations began to be supplied with men, women and children, taken in violation of all basic human rights from Africa against their will, and transported to work on plantations halfway round the world from their birthplace.

### **Sharpham's history**

Sharpham has had merchants, lawyers, traders, Naval Commanders and MPs amongst its owners. During the reign of Elizabeth I, Sharpham had five owners, including an advisor to the Queen.

With famous seafaring families flourishing in the South West, it seems all too likely that there were connections with the colonies or involvement in colonial trade. In the reign of George III, Captain Philemon Pownoll RN was born in Plymouth to a relatively humble background, the son of a Master Shipwright. By the time he purchased Sharpham in 1765 using his recently acquired fortune, his life had changed.

As Master and Commander of the Royal Navy sloop Favourite, his was one of two ships that captured the Spanish frigate Hermione in 1762, in a war between Great Britain and Spain declared in late 1761.

The Hermione was bound for Cadiz in Spain with a valuable cargo of dollars, gold coin, ingots of gold and silver, cocoa, and blocks of tin. This remains the single richest capture to the present day and Captain Pownoll was allocated a one-eighth share of the estimated net value of the Hermione - £64,963 - as prize money by the Royal Navy.

The Spanish treasure the Hermione was carrying undoubtedly represented profits made from colonies in South America. But that treasure ended up in England, not Spain, after Captain Pownoll, sent as part of a squadron to guard Cape St. Vincent, and working with the frigate Active, took the Spanish ship as part of his Royal Naval duties.

He resigned from the Navy and commissioned the rebuilding of Sharpham House from Tudor manor house to the Palladian villa we know today, from the renowned London architect Sir Robert Taylor. The work was begun in 1770 and not completed for over 50 years, long after Captain Pownoll's death.

After Captain Pownoll, there were several more owners - some lavishing care and attention on the house and estate; some neglecting it and living irresponsibly, resulting in sales of land and assets. Many were philanthropic owners, generous to the nearby village of Ashprington and town of Totnes.

The last family to live there came when Maurice and Ruth Ash bought the house and estate in 1962, generously endowing it to the Sharpham Trust in 1982. Since then, the heart of the Sharpham Trust ethos is our desire to build a more mindful, compassionate and environmentally sustainable world.

*This document prepared by Polly Morrow, Sharpham Trust Archive Co-ordinator*

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