

## Review of Dr Todd Gray's 'Devon and the Slave Trade' 12<sup>th</sup> May 2022

in Exmouth Pavilion

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Todd\\_Gray\\_\(historian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Todd_Gray_(historian))



A welcome return by Todd; we have been most fortunate to listen to and see Todd's work in the form of presentations both at the Pavilion and via 'Zoom' and once again it was a privilege to learn about his important work. Todd kindly agreed that we could run the session as a hybrid meeting and with 33 members logging on we were pleased that members could join us from their homes.

Throughout it was so good to see the results of Todd's methodical and conscientious approach; examining written documents, visual images and artefacts. A 'true' historian at work looking for evidence for his subject and in this instance not an easy task. There is a fair amount of published work on the slave trade in London, Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow but less known about Devon's links. In the early 90s Todd had a conversation with the writer Maya Angelou. She was interested in whether there were any documents relative to slavery in the local archives. Todd showed her some documents and his research and books followed on from there. Then in 2007 The Black History Foundation awarded his book 'Devon and the Slave Trade' 'Outstanding Contribution to Black Studies'; very well deserved.

As Todd stressed it is all about the evidence and backing up what you say with notes of your sources and in Todd's case he has trawled through thousands of handwritten documents, some of them not that easy to decipher as age has taken its toll. Future historians will have Todd's vital work to look at and examine and their task will be much easier because of the vast extent of his work.

As Todd explained in his presentation the name 'Devon' was first used as a personal name when slave owners 'named' their slaves. Almost 190 years ago Devon had 34 slave owners with 5,000 men women and children serving as slaves with names such as 'Devon' given to them.

Devon has a number of huge houses and indeed mansions but how many were built and sustained with money from the slave trade? Todd set out to find out being careful to mention "It would appear that ....." if the evidence wasn't completely solid. Millcombe Villa, Rockbeare Manor, Stoodleigh Court and Winslade House being places that from the evidence were financed with money from the slave trade.

Todd started and ended his talk by mentioning the challenge of researching such a topic, not so much about the amount of material you need to locate, examine and analyse but more about the sensitivity of the subject. It is history that hurts, there is no escaping that when you present the evidence; the slave trade was brutal, exploitative and racist. Todd has been confronted by some people who are not comfortable with his work and indeed have argued with what he has said and published but as he explained he is determined that it is history that must be told, particularly as very little has been written about the lives of people who were slaves and associated with the county of Devon.

As I thanked Todd it was so good to acknowledge his essential work knowing that his descriptions of Devon's links with the slave trade were not related to personal bias and unsubstantiated claims but rather based on solid evidence and importantly if questioned or challenged Todd can quote his sources and explain his reasoning and analysis.

Indeed one of his sources relating to the Devonian Swete family who were associated with the slave trade in sugar, is currently displayed under glass at the 'In Plain Sight' exhibition in the RAMM, Exeter until 29<sup>th</sup> May 2022.



<https://rammuseum.org.uk/in-plain-sight-resources/>

Once again Todd, many heartfelt thanks for a superb presentation. We look forward to Todd joining us again at **10:45 on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2022 with his 'Christmas in Devon'**.

Review and photos by Christine Chittock, Chair Exmouth and District u3a