

Beckford *and the* Slave Trade

The legacy of the
Beckford Family
and Slavery



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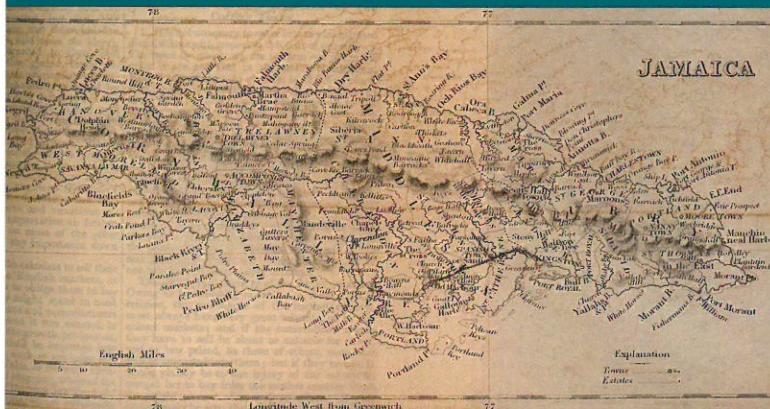


The Beckford Family

The history of the Beckford family is a tale of social ambition, political manoeuvrings and inexhaustible collecting all made possible by a huge family fortune built on the back of the slave trade.

In 1661 Peter Beckford embarked on a voyage to Jamaica in search of wealth. Jamaica offered vast areas of fertile land ideal for growing sugar, but it was a dangerous frontier and Peter Beckford first built up money through the risky business of capturing and selling horses.

In 1710 his eldest son, also named Peter, was held at sword point during a session in the House of Assembly and rushing to his aid the elder Peter Beckford had a stroke and died. At his death the head of the Beckford dynasty had a huge £1.5million in the bank, had 20 estates on Jamaica and owned 1200 slaves.



By 1675 he was a wine merchant in Port Royal, the wickedest city in the West Indies. Beckford's wealth increased and he progressed from shipping and trading, to owning land in the parish of St Catherine's.

In 1675 he was elected to the House of Assembly in Jamaica. It was the start of an illustrious career in island politics, and he rapidly moved up to the post of Lieutenant Governor in 1702. A loud, brash and arrogant man, he became renowned for getting his way by carrying a large stick, and using it to beat his colleagues.

The second Peter Beckford, also worked his way through most of the official posts on the island, and continued to add to the family's wealth. He never left Jamaica, but did send his six sons to England for their education. When he died in 1735 his personal property was huge and included ownership of 1737 slaves.

Top Left: William Beckford's Coat of Arms, published in John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823.

Top Right: William Beckford Engraving by T. A. Dean after Reynolds, published 1891.

Left map: Map of Jamaica from 1882 showing towns and plantations.

Right map: Map of Jamaica from 1794 indicating the parishes of the Island.



Far left: Detail of *Sketch for the statue ordered to be erected to the memory of the late William Beckford Esq.* Engraver and publication date unknown.

Left: *Alderman William Beckford*, Sir Joshua Reynolds, ca. 1770, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Parham House, West Sussex.

Below: *Alderman William Beckford*, John Francis Moore, 1767, Marble. Courtesy of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers of the City of London.

Alderman Beckford

In 1737, William Beckford became head of the family. Educated in England, he spent time as a medical student before learning to manage the plantations in Jamaica. He returned to England in 1744 and embarked on a campaign to raise the Beckford family through the ranks of polite society and British politics.

He became an Alderman of the City of London, then Sheriff of London in 1755 and Lord Mayor in 1762. He collected around himself a group of plantations owners known as the Beckford Cousinhood who used money and power to influence trade and colonial policies.

An absentee planter, Alderman Beckford ruled his land in the West Indies with tyrannical strength, rapidly increasing the Beckford fortune. But these great profits were at the expense of the brutal treatment of the slave labour. In 1760 slaves on one of the Beckford estates rebelled. Over 400 were killed and punishment was uncompromising. The leader of the uprising was burnt alive, and two of his lieutenants were hung to dry in irons.

In 1770, while Lord Mayor of London, Alderman Beckford petitioned George III. His speech to the King was heralded as an honourable assertion of the rights of the people and Beckford became the hero of political reformers. He died the same year and to celebrate his career a statue was commissioned to stand in the Guildhall in London.

One of the initial sketches for the statue shows Alderman Beckford with his arm protecting a figure of Britannia. He stands proud as one of the most powerful men in England – sole owner of 13 plantations, 22,021 acres of land and 3000 slaves – with his foot pressed down upon the back of a man in manacles.





Fonthill Splendens

When Alderman Beckford moved the headquarters of the Beckford empire back to England the essential requirement for launching into British society was a family estate, and in 1744 he purchased Fonthill in Wiltshire.

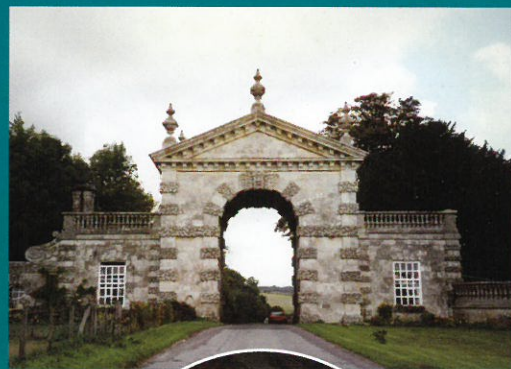
In 1755 Fonthill House was destroyed by fire, and seizing the opportunity to flaunt his wealth to the neighbouring landowners, the Alderman commissioned a new mansion to be built in the modern and highly fashionable Palladian style.

Alderman Beckford poured money into amassing an impressive collection of art, objects and books. Moving into the new mansion allowed him to commission new works of art and furniture to fill the house; later Fonthill House became known as Fonthill Splendens, owing to its grandeur and the splendid things it contained.

For many years the Alderman had enjoyed the freedom his money could bring, and had several illegitimate children. In 1756, at the age of 47, he made an advantageous marriage to further raise the standing of the family in society.

With all his wealth, success in politics and marriage into one of the great aristocratic families, Alderman Beckford could not escape the fact that he was nouveau riche he had earned his money. He was loud, brash, spoke with a Jamaican accent, was sometimes vulgar and possessed a violent temper. He entertained in lavish splendour and built a palatial mansion, but such ostentatious displays of wealth found little favour with high society.

His only legitimate son, William, would be brought up as a true British gentleman, a far greater man of refinement and taste than his father, yet equally able to spend on an immense scale the profits of slavery.



Top: Detail *View of Fonthill House from the North*, Thomas Higham after John Buckler, engraving, 1806.

Middle: Gateway to Fonthill Estate at Fonthill Bishop, built ca. 1755. This is the only significant part of Fonthill 'Splendens' that remains.

Above: *William Beckford*, Andrea Casali, ca. 1766, oil on canvas. Courtesy of The Hamilton Collection, Lennoxlove, East Lothian.

The second Schedule to which the above written Indenture refers

| In the East in the possession of George Satter Esquire as Attorney for Harbour Head Plant the Property of William Beckford Esquire on the 28 th day of June in the year of | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---------|-----|-------------|-----------------------|-------------------|--------|-----|-------------|---------|
| Names | Colour | Age | Particulars | Remarks | Names | Colour | Age | Particulars | Remarks |
| Jenny | Black | 10 | Croto | Mother Catherine | Grace Henry | Black | 11 | Croto | |
| Littchen | d. | 10 | d. | d. | Helen Williams | d. | 11 | d. | |
| Robert Edwards | d. | 11 | d. | d. | Margaret Williams | d. | 25 | d. | |
| See Nelson | d. | 9 | d. | d. Elizabeth | Samuel Bennett | d. | 17 | d. | |
| Dublin | d. | 8 | d. | d. Catherine | Mary Miller | d. | 52 | d. | |
| Duke | d. | 8 | d. | d. Phillis | Helen James | d. | 55 | d. | |
| William Kearney | d. | 8 | d. | d. Rose Neely | Emmy | d. | 24 | d. | |
| Joseph Monkhouse | Mulatto | 8 | d. | d. Jane Crawford | America | d. | 20 | d. | |
| John Henry | Black | 8 | d. | d. Cecilia Kearney | Amelia | d. | 22 | d. | |
| Rames | d. | 7 | d. | d. Helen Williams | Maria Mason | d. | 23 | d. | |
| Thomas | d. | 6 | d. | d. Elizabeth | Sally Johnson | d. | 19 | d. | |
| Quashie | d. | 3 | d. | d. Judy | Margaret Beckford | d. | 19 | d. | |
| Demales | | | | | Finis | d. | 15 | d. | |
| Jane Crawford | Black | 28 | Croto | Mother Henry Beckford | Juliana Harvey | d. | 16 | d. | |
| Ann Maxwell | Mulatto | 18 | d. | d. Agnes Kearney | Bella | d. | 13 | d. | |
| Hannah Gault | Black | 61 | African | | Elsy | d. | 14 | d. | |
| Mary Beckford | d. | 71 | Croto | | Hagar | d. | 14 | d. | |
| Juannah Williams | d. | 57 | d. | | Sue | d. | 13 | d. | |
| Margery Kearney | d. | 41 | African | | Sarah | d. | 10 | d. | |

William Beckford

Above: Detail, Conveyance from William Beckford on the occasion of the sale of Harbour Head plantation on the island of Jamaica, June 4 1821. Courtesy of Guildhall Library, City of London. This conveyance lists the names, ages and particulars of the slaves included in the sale.

William Beckford, the only son of Alderman Beckford, was born in 1760 and had a gilded yet lonely childhood. His mother refused to send him either to school or university and instead he had a series of tutors including Mozart. William was destined for a career in politics, but soon found that the pleasures of society great wealth could provide far outweighed those of parliament.

When the Alderman died he left the entire Beckford family fortune to his son, including the control of the Jamaican estates. William was not yet ten years old, and in the 11 years between his father's death and his turning twenty-one in 1781, control of the family business was placed in the hands of solicitors, stewards and agents.

Loans to other planters through unsettled mortgages, disputes over farm leases and the conflicting claims of many of the Alderman's illegitimate children soon began to damage the profits of the Beckford plantations.

In the aftermath of the Powderham scandal in 1784, gossip surrounding William Beckford's involvement with William 'Kitty' Courtenay forced Beckford and his wife Lady Margaret into exile in Europe, where in 1786 following the birth of their second daughter, Lady Margaret died.

In 1787 the family decided it was time for Beckford to visit the plantations in Jamaica. He reached as far as Portugal, where he disembarked and refused to travel further. He never went to Jamaica, and as an absentee planter took little interest in the Jamaican estates, including the fate of those who worked on them.

His lack of attention allowed those running his estates to start helping themselves to his fortune. However, what had the biggest impact on the Beckford family wealth was William's ability to spend his money with great abandon – a pastime that eventually began to feel the impact of the abolitionist movement.

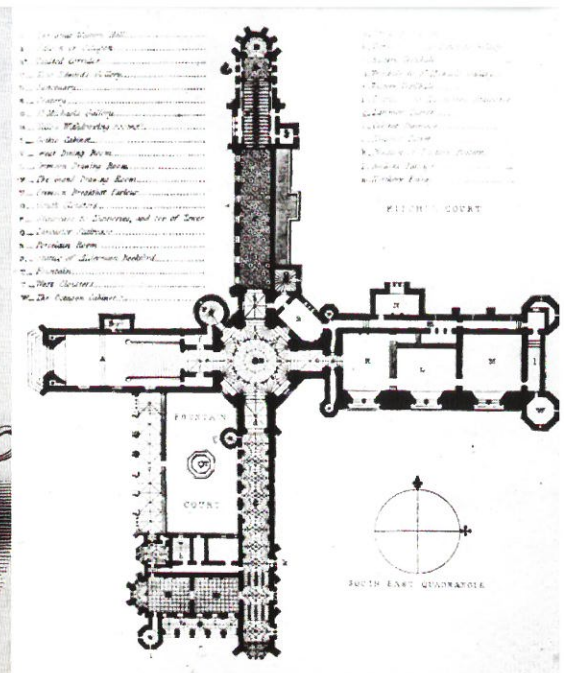
'No one embarked on transportation with a heavier heart'

William Beckford on the aborted trip to Jamaica in 1787



Far left: Pair of Candlesticks, attrib. Benjamin Thomas Vulliamy, ca. 1800, Gilt Bronze. Private Collection.

Left: Cup and Cover, James Aldridge, Mounts 1820-1, hardstone and coral 18th century. Private Collection.



Fonthill Abbey

In 1790 William Beckford employed the architect James Wyatt to design a garden building on the Fonthill estate. What began life as a folly soon developed into the Gothic Revival masterpiece, Fonthill Abbey.

Bad management of the plantations meant fluctuating income from Jamaica, which soon affected the building of the house. Periods of intense work would be followed by months when construction ceased owing to lack of money.

In 1807 the abolition of the slave trade caused Beckford's income to drop significantly and work on the Abbey almost came to a standstill. To add to his funds he sold much of his father's collection and demolished most of Fonthill Splendens.

Beckford's great wealth allowed him fill the Abbey with a fantastic collection of books, furniture, objects and art. Many of his plantations, slaves included, were sold and by 1822 he was massively in debt. He sold Fonthill and moved to Bath. He began building Lansdown Tower in 1825, the same year Fonthill Abbey collapsed.

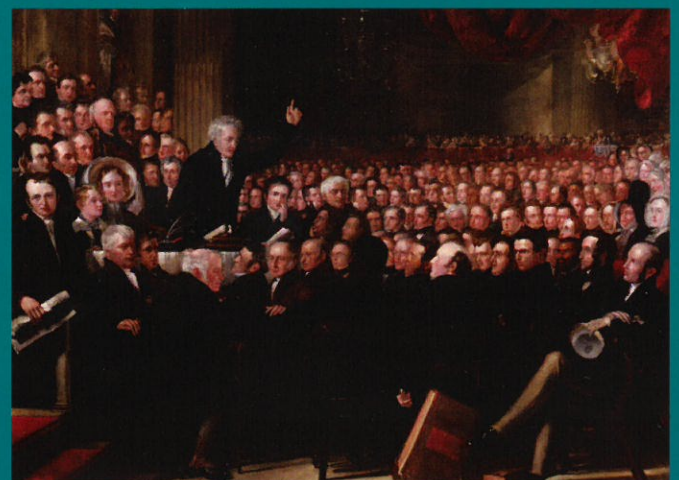
Following the abolition of slavery in 1838 Beckford received financial compensation for the loss of his enslaved workforce. He continued to use money from slavery to add to his collections up until his death in 1844

'One of my new estates in Jamaica brought me home seven thousand pounds last year more than usual. So I am growing rich, and mean to build towers'

William Beckford 1790

The legacy of the Beckford family and their involvement with slavery can not only be traced in the buildings and collections they created but also through the enslaved Africans they owned. Branded with the surname of their owners, slaves were marked as possessions of the Beckford family.

Following the 1838 abolition many freed slaves came to England still carrying their Beckford slave names. In 1840 the Anti-Slavery Society held a convention to celebrate the abolition of slavery. One of the delegates, representing freed slaves from Jamaica, was called Henry Beckford.



Top left: *Rarest articles of Virtu*, from John Rutter *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823. This shows the scope of Beckford's collecting interests.

Top right: *Plan of Fonthill Abbey*, John Rutter *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823

Above: *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention*, 1840, Benjamin Robert Haydon, 1841, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.