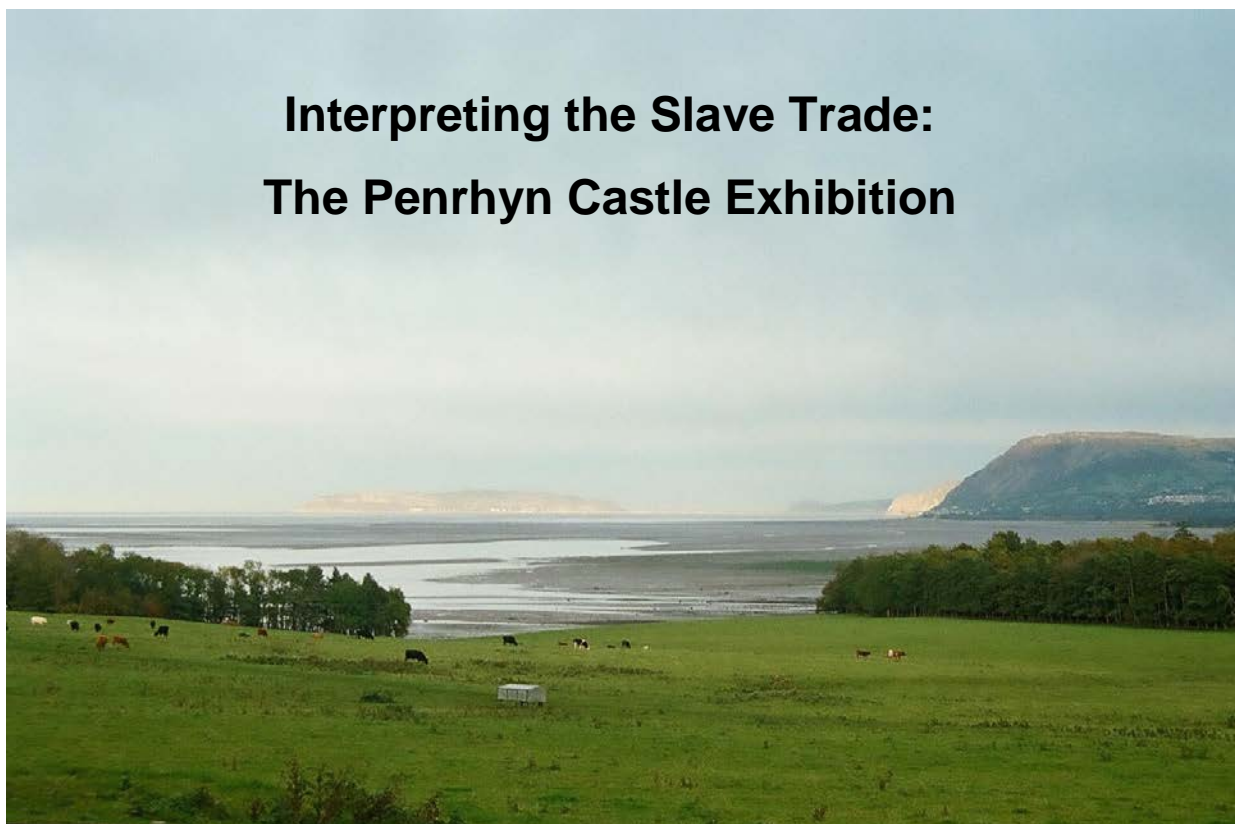


## **Interpreting the Slave Trade: The Penrhyn Castle Exhibition**



The Penrhyn Estate in North Wales from which the Pennant family administered their Jamaican plantations

### **Background to the exhibition**

2007 was the bicentenary of Britain's abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. The National Trust marked this at Penrhyn Castle on the outskirts of Bangor, Gwynedd, Wales, with a special exhibition and accompanying events, which enabled a broad range of people to engage with the anniversary in a variety of ways. 'Sugar and Slavery – The Penrhyn Connection' opened in March 2007. The exhibition was originally only intended to be open for 2007 but the National Trust is responding to popular demand by maintaining it for another year.

### **The Penrhyn connection**

Penrhyn Castle, once owned by the wealthy Pennant family, was built on a massive fortune made from Jamaican sugar.



Gifford Pennant, originally from Flintshire, began acquiring land in Jamaica during the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and came to own one of the greatest estates on the island – twenty times larger than the average.



His son Edward (1672-1736) became Chief Justice of Jamaica; of Edward's sons, Samuel (1709-50) became Lord Mayor of London, and John (d.1781) added even more to the Jamaican estate by a judicious marriage. John invested his fortune in buying land in North West Wales – half of what had been the medieval Penrhyn estate. John's son, Richard, 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Penrhyn (1737?-1808), by his marriage to heiress Anne Susannah Warburton (1745-1816) and owner of the other half, united this estate once more. Richard invested his fortune in this estate, giving employment to many and riches to some. Roads, railways, houses, schools and Penrhyn quarry – once the largest slate quarry in the world – are testament to this investment and have changed the landscape forever.



### **Absentee landowner, businessman and MP**

By 1750 the Pennant family had returned to Britain and were controlling their Jamaican properties by letter. From these documents, the Pennants' link to the slave trade is clear – enough is known about Richard Pennant, 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Penrhyn, as plantation owner and businessman. As an absentee landowner, Pennant wrote hundreds of letters to his agents in Jamaica. These letters, now held in the archives of the University of Wales, Bangor, provide a remarkable insight into plantation life and the business interests of a canny entrepreneur. As MP for Liverpool, Britain's



largest slaving port, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Richard's parliamentary interventions are recorded in Hansard as he stridently fights against abolition.

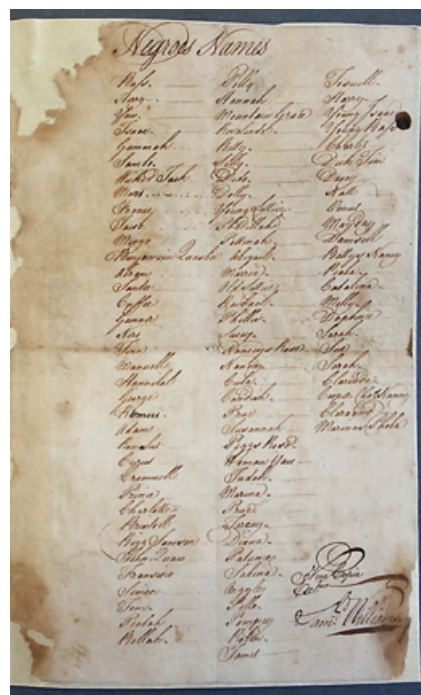


### **Plantation management**

Richard Pennant's letters reveal his attitudes to plantation life, the complexity of sugar production and towards the management of his 'chattels' – a term which covered both cattle and slaves; in one of his letters he states 'I do not wish the cattle nor the negroes to be overworked'. Denbigh estate, their largest plantation, in the parish of Clarendon, in 1805 needed at least twenty different occupations to keep it operating.



These included 135 cane cutters, twenty-one carpenters, nine coopers and fourteen distillers. Initially surprising is that there were also three midwives, but it was financially advantageous to the plantation owners to support the survival of their own slaves' children to maintain the workforce, due to the high death toll among those newly transported from Africa.



## **Planning the exhibition**

The discipline of applying for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant helped me focus on the detail of the exhibition, and the success of the application meant it could be put into action. I decided on an exhibition supported by a range of events, allowing people to access the story in a variety of ways.

Concentrating on the direct Penrhyn connection to the slave trade would, I felt, add another dimension to the general exploration of slavery that was taking place elsewhere around the country. I wanted to say how the Pennants got their money and what they did with it.

## **Community involvement**

However, local feelings towards the castle meant that the exhibition could not be a simple recording of evidence. Between 1900 and 1903, many of the men at Penrhyn quarry went on strike. This turned the quarrying community against the Pennant family and went on to divide the workforce itself as some returned to work. The confident strike committee issued demands to Lord Penrhyn, some of which have resonance today, such as the call for a minimum wage and the introduction of cooperative piecework. Others are a reflection of the massive social change that was taking place in Britain at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the waning powers of the aristocracy were being superseded by the growing confidence of the trades unions: they called for the right to discuss union business and collect dues in their lunch breaks, the right to control their own sick club and the reinstatement of victimised leaders. At the same time, there was, however, a slump in the demand for Welsh slate due to foreign imports; Lord Penrhyn would probably have had to have made some of his men redundant anyway. As it was, when quarrymen began returning to work six months into the strike, he was able to satisfy the market. This put him in a strong position – he did not have to concede to any demands as the quarry was working to order.



The strike dragged on for three years, with the quarrymen feeling more and more betrayed as some of their comrades returned to work, some went to the coal mines of South Wales, and others to chase riches in the New World. With crumbling support, the strikers called an end to the dispute, having not achieved a single demand. The bitterness of the dispute still smoulders in the former quarrying villages today, influencing attitudes towards the castle and The National Trust. A crucial factor in the exhibition was, therefore, not only what was said but who should do the telling. Community involvement proved to be the answer and has been the most rewarding part of the entire project.

Heritage Lottery funding enabled us to employ a part-time coordinator who arranged training for local people in archive research.



They then explored the plantation documents held at Bangor University.



Reading lists of slave names and their prices, and advice on the care of slaves and cattle – as equivalents – had considerable impact on the researchers and they have contributed moving accounts of their feelings to the exhibition.



Working with schools proved to be another powerful tool of interpretation and community involvement. We live with world insecurity, where concern over



immigration and terrorism influences our attitudes towards those we consider alien. To help combat this, the National Curriculum encourages schools to study global citizenship and so I wanted, as part of this project, for young people of different backgrounds to explore the shared heritage that linked them through the Pennants.

Primary schools from Bangor (Ysgol Llanllechid), Jamaica (Mavisville, Kingston) and Liverpool (Banks Road) have all contributed to the exhibition. An audio-visual presentation reveals the friendships forged between the children of Ysgol Llanllechid and Mavisville. Striking hand-drawn images of slavery, linked by paper chains, adorn the walls; poems, prose and pictures – the passion of the young children was no less real than that of the adults and has given the exhibition colour and vitality.



Artefacts, some original, some replica, add impact to the interpretation panels. To place a delicate 18<sup>th</sup> century bone china tea service between two cases of shackles needs no interpretation.

## Events

Accompanying events held during 2007 broadened the story further. A study day of illustrated talks gave people the opportunity to explore in depth the issues around Britain and the slave trade; practical art days encouraged the exploration of symbolism in plantation paintings through personal involvement and creativity; and a

Caribbean weekend brought together Wales and the West Indies in contemporary style.



We invited a multicultural group of teenagers from Liverpool to spend a day with us at the castle; they joined in an art workshop in the exhibition and then gave a presentation on their own commemorative activities in Liverpool earlier in the year. The day ended with the group planting trees around the castle grounds: a memorable way of bringing Liverpool back to Penrhyn Castle.



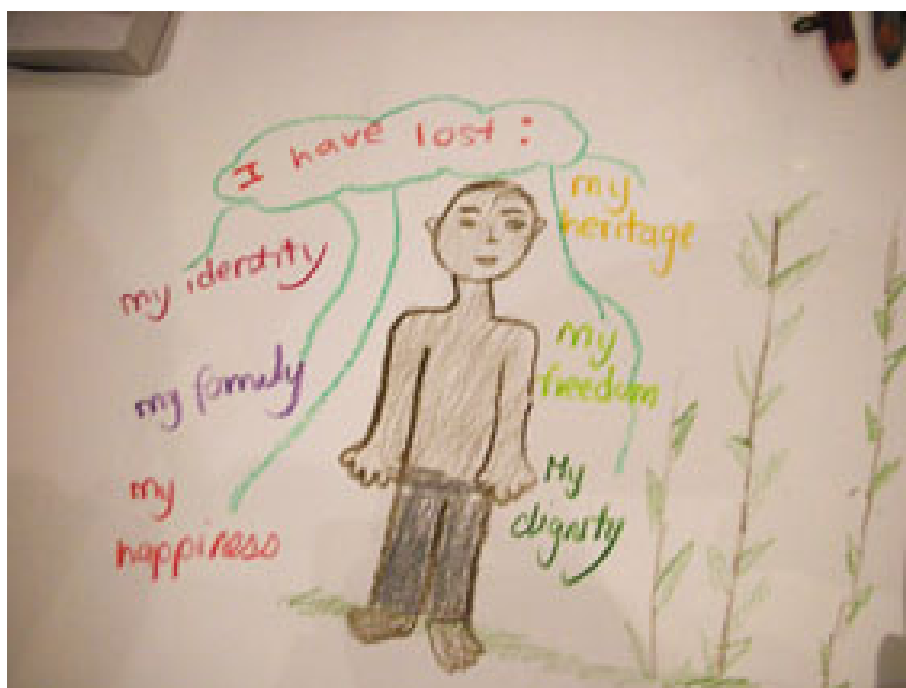
## Evaluation

This project has brought together so many people: members of the community – young and old, different ethnic groups, educational associations and many other organisations. A response zone encouraged visitors to contribute their own views on the exhibition and has been significant in revealing its success. Teachers wrote of its

worth as an educational resource: Sue, a teacher from Gosport wrote, 'This is interactive education at its best!'



And it has made children think. Ten year-old Molly wrote, 'It made me go quiet. It made me read'. A lady from Pennants, Jamaica (a town named after its former owners, of course), whose ancestors were Penrhyn slaves, wrote 'This needed to be done'.



Once the bicentenary is over the story will not be lost; a DVD of all information gathered will be given free to schools and libraries. With slavery still endemic in the world, I am moved that people who have seen the exhibition state that they will consider where next to buy their goods. This is a tribute to those who took part and to the interpretative tools used to tackle an issue over which people still feel guilt and anger.

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