

Hill House, Elizabeth Lechmere - and some unwelcome news from Jamaica

Slavery and the slave trade tend to be associated mainly with the great sea-ports like Bristol and Liverpool, but their tentacles also reached deep into the British countryside. Recent research at University College London (UCL) has uncovered an unexpected link with Steeple Aston. William and Elizabeth Lechmere came to live at Hill House off Sixty-Foot Road in 1802. William Lechmere was already a seasoned naval officer, and in 1805 he commanded one of the ships fighting the French off Cape Finisterre. He only missed the Battle of Trafalgar later that year because he returned to London to give evidence at the court-martial of his senior officer, Admiral Calder. Lechmere was a Vice-Admiral by the time he died in 1815.

While William pursued a naval career, his slightly elder brother Nicholas Lechmere joined the Ordnance Service, the government agency in charge of military supplies. In the 1780s Nicholas was posted to Jamaica as the Ordnance Store-keeper at Port Royal, with an annual salary of around £200. By the late 1790s he had also acquired a coffee plantation in St Andrew, known as Mount Atlas - thus becoming a slave-owner. (Britain halted the slave trade in 1808, but slavery in the Colonies was not abolished until 1834.)



Nicholas seems to have adopted the free-and-easy ways of Caribbean life. Between 1795 and 1812 he had at least six - probably seven - children with Sarah Letitia Webster. Sarah was described as a "free mulatto", and she was the daughter of a similar liaison. Nicholas died in November 1817, just short of the fifty years of service that would have earned him a bonus of £5,000. At the end of his life, in unexplained circumstances, he seems to have lost control of his plantation.

In 1821, six years after the death of her husband William, Elizabeth Lechmere was living in Hill House, a large property on the edge of Steeple Aston, when she was faced with an unexpected demand. The Board of Ordnance wanted her to make good deficiencies in the Port Royal accounts of her husband's brother Nicholas. These were estimated at somewhere between £3,000 and £9,500. Unknown to Elizabeth, her late husband had signed a bond in 1811 rendering him liable for his brother's debts. Elizabeth protested, but it is not yet clear how the matter was eventually settled. To give the figures involved some sort of context, Hill House and its 16 acres of grounds had been acquired in March 1800 by Elizabeth's brother, George Dashwood, for just £1,300. It was George's unexpected death in June 1801 that had brought the Lechmeres to the village in the first place.

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Sources: UCL: Legacies of Slave-Ownership (www.acl.ac.uk/lbs): articles by Jim Brennan on Nicholas Lechmere senior & junior. Oxfordshire History Centre: Hill House documents 1691-1800 (Marshall V/1-10).