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1. Introduction

The Legacies of British Slave-ownership database (

As noted in the LBS database, Thomas Phillpotts and his wife Mary are recorded in the British census returns for 1851 and 1861. He is shown as a West India merchant who was born in Gloucester around 1785. He died in Somerset in 1862.

For me, the key question was: "Could he be some relation of the eminent bishop?" I did some research online and found several clues that indicated that Thomas Phillpotts was indeed related to the bishop's brother, and I found confirmation of this fact when I belatedly consulted the bishop's papers in the Exeter Cathedral Library.

2. Thomas Phillpotts in Jamaica

Early in 1832 there were riots in Jamaica, and Thomas gave evidence to the Committee of the House of Commons appointed to inquire into the causes and remedy of West India Distress .

Another prominent West India merchant was a man called Samuel Baker. In April 1832 a prominent group of 47 West India merchants, including Baker and Phillpotts, submitted a protest to the Colonial Secretary about the actions of the Government, insisting on their need for compensation if they lost property in the West Indies as a result of government policies. Their protest letter appeared in the Times of London. These signatories form a fascinating list of names, which reappear a few years later in the LBS compensation records.

In 1835 Thomas Phillpotts is shown as a provisional director of the Gravesend and Dover Railway. He was also Chairman of Directors of the Anti-Dry-Rot Company, which he set up to manufacture mercuric chloride, used for the preservation of timber.

As late as 1840 Baker and Phillpotts are shown as owning more than 1,000 acres at Mammee Ridge in Jamaica. This is the same plantation for which Phillpotts had received compensation of more than £1,500 in 1836 as mortgagee for about 80 slaves.

In addition to their London activities, Thomas Phillpotts and his partner Samuel Baker were very active in the development of Gloucester, buying up key plots of land for development, and selling them on to local merchants. Together, Baker and Phillpotts helped to develop Gloucester as a major port.

Many of the warehouses beside the quay (which are named after their first occupants) are still standing today, and now provide luxury flats, offices, restaurants and bars. One of them is called Phillpotts Warehouse. In fact it is not named after Thomas himself, but after his eldest son Abraham Hodgson Phillpotts, who had been born in Jamaica and who became an important corn merchant in Gloucester. Originally father and son had a business partnership as import merchants, but in 1844 Thomas withdrew from this partnership, and left his son to carry on the business by himself. The warehouse was built in 1846.

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