

# Sharing Marginalised Histories at National Trust Properties

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# Interpreting Histories

- High quality and robust research
- For everyone
- Sharing full histories
- Listening and learning
- The right approach for the place





# Addressing our histories of colonialism and historic slavery



L to r: Teresia Khan, Lady Shirley, 1622, by Van Dyck (Petworth); Portrait of an unknown coachboy, late 18th century (Erddig); Ranjitsinhji, the Maharaja Jam Sahib of Nawanagar, 1922 (Polesden Lacey) | © National Trust Images

## Jump to

- [Introducing the report into colonialism and historic slavery](#)
- [The links between wealth and slavery at places in our care](#)
- [Records and depictions of people of African and Asian](#)

The National Trust cares for places and collections on behalf of the nation, and many have direct and indirect links to colonialism and historic slavery. Our interim report on the 'Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust' examines these links as part of our broader commitment to ensure that they are properly represented, shared and interpreted.



## Slavery in plain sight

Two items of furniture at Dyrham Park evoke the realities of the late seventeenth-century colonial system, especially in the Caribbean. Two stands (side tables) feature sculptural enslaved men. Though shown as well-dressed servants, their collars and chains are unambiguous.

Thomas Povey sold many of his possessions to William Blathwayt to furnish Dyrham Park. A letter of 1701 described, 'In these several Apartments your... two black boys have a Proper Place on Each side of an Indian Tambour in one of the Best Rooms'.

The stands were designed for entertaining, to hold pot pourri, scented rose water or trays of sweetmeats (sweetened foods). The enslaved figures referred to Povey's status as a colonial expert.



Stand depicting an enslaved figure, 1680-1700.

## Summary

A pair of giltwood and polychrome painted stands, English, late 17th century.

Each stand depicts an enslaved figure, kneeling and chained at the ankle and the neck holding aloft a scallop shell and raised on a tri-form plinth with moulded edge and scroll carved pierced apron to each of the three sides.

## Full description

The stands were sent to Dyrham Park in 1700 from house owner William Blathwayt's uncle, Thomas Povey, but they may be of earlier date. They have historically been described as 'Black Boys' (i), 'Blacks' (ii) and 'stands for flowers' (iii). For many years, they were catalogued as 'nubian slaves' and 'blackamoor stands' until 2019 when they were re-catalogued as stands.

The motif of the 'blackamoor' has existed in European decorative art since the late medieval period, but developed into a recognisable type during the Venetian Renaissance. In early modern European and English literature, the term 'blackamoor' was an ill-defined stereotype of an African Muslim – a conflation of the notion of an Arab or Muslim with that of a Black African. In material culture, it was used to describe representations of unnamed non-European peoples, especially Africans, as figures of adornment in glass, jewellery, ceramics, silver, furniture and architectural features.

The bodies of these figures are sometimes incorporated into furniture, forming a support for a chair, a table or lamp; in the Dyrham stands, the figures kneel and support a shell, designed to hold some form of offering, probably food. Integrated into furniture in this way, the 'blackamoor' represents a double objectification, employed as a figure of ornamentation on the one hand and a figure of literal physical support on the other. The stands evoke contemporary aristocratic





Portrait of George Nathaniel Curzon, 1907-14,  
by Sir Hubert von Herkomer.  
© National Trust Images/John Hammond



Dancer, Kesha Raithatha during the making of 'Adornment in My Power' with Anisha Parmar  
© Ofilaye: Photographer/Filmmaker





Sarah Biffin, 1821, engraving by R.W. Sievier (after Sarah Biffin). Wellcome Collection

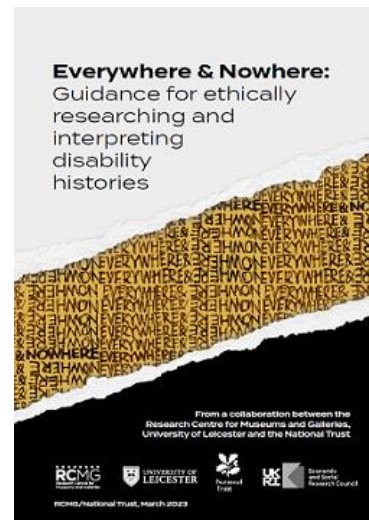
## Alternative reading

We invited the project team to offer their own personal reflections on some of the stories in *Everywhere and Nowhere*. In the section below RCMG Co-Director Prof Suzanne MacLeod offers an alternative reading of Sarah Biffin's story.

Sarah Biffin's life is often reduced down to her physical differences – present day writers and curators often start from a perceived lack – what Sarah Biffin didn't have, rather than simply accepting that disability is something everyday, that we all come in different shapes and sizes and that the reason we are aware of Sarah Biffin is a result of her artistic skill and talent. Of course there were aspects of her life that were driven by prejudice – the fact that she worked in a travelling fair as a kind of novelty act but ultimately her talent meant that she built a very successful career as an artist. I relate to her as a woman and admire her as an artist but I am also interested in what her life was like as she navigated such a complex world.

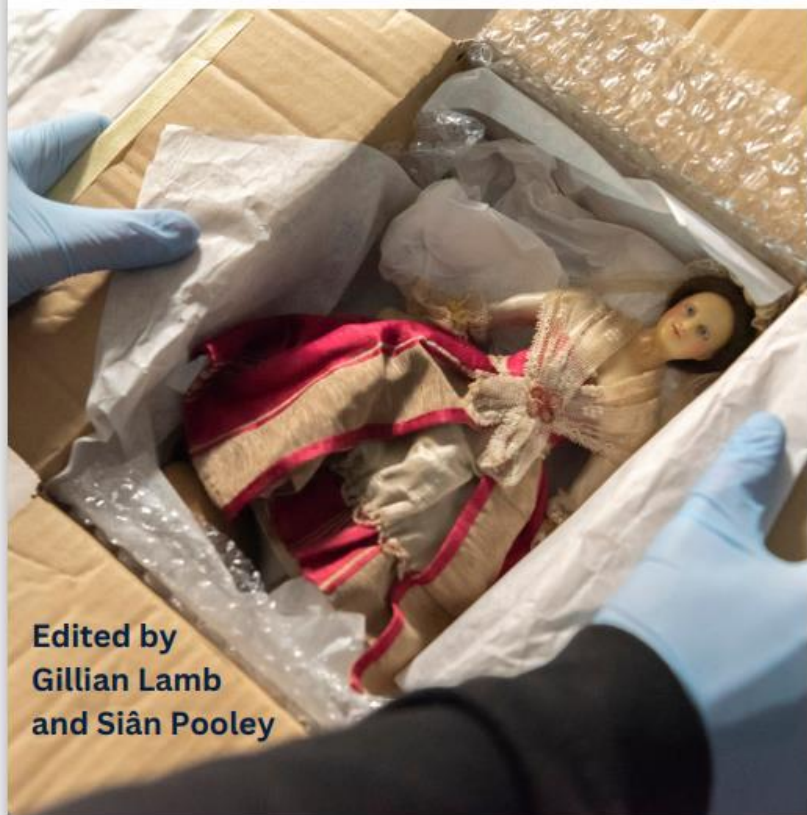


*The Marchioness of Abercorn at the Cottage of Industry at Llanerchaeron, Wales*, watercolour portrait by Sarah Biffin. ©National Trust Images/James Dobson



# Histories of Childhood

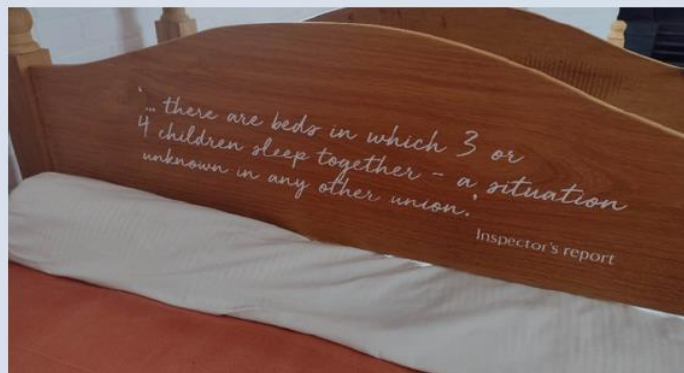
Uncovering New Heritage Narratives



Edited by  
Gillian Lamb  
and Siân Pooley



## SOUTHWELL WORKHOUSE



Credit: National Trust/Nancy Wilson

### Tips

- Use a variety of sources to piece together information to add more depth and understanding to stories.
- For sites with smaller collections of records on site, external archives can be an invaluable resource.

### Pitfalls

- Be careful when piecing together the jigsaw not to end up with composite stories that do not feel 'real'.
- Look beyond the obvious sources to make sure you are not missing other important stories.
- Recognise that the sources you are working with are written by adults, in some form of authority.
- Many valuable 20th century records that would help to tell the later story of the site are closed, because they contain confidential personal data. They will not be available until 100 years after they were created.

47



## THE BEATLES' CHILDHOOD HOMES

houses through the back door and into the kitchens. The tour guides are paid interpreters, not volunteers. They are carefully selected and trained, but each has their own anecdotes and interests within the wider narrative of time and place that provide a unique and personal experience. They tell stories about John and Paul as teenage boys in the 'smallest bedroom' of their respective houses, reading, writing, drawing, and listening to music.

Visitors are able to contrast Paul's 'threadbare' bedroom in his small terrace with John's more comfortable room, which, while still the smallest, is comfortably furnished with 'classic 1930's bedroom furniture' and posters of Elvis Presley and Brigitte Bardot on the walls. Using copies of John's sketches, we see his playful, often satirical wit, his talent for art supported through his school life. A Pathé News reel film playing on a converted period set in Mendips gives context to the world in which John grew up.



Credit: National Trust Images/ Paul Harris

The lives of these two boys are well studied with countless books, radio and television programmes, films and podcasts devoted to the history of the Beatles. The place that these two houses occupy in that narrative is to explain how it all started. These houses, carefully dressed and cared for, allow visitors to connect with these stories and to glimpse what an early 1950s childhood was like.

### Tips

- For person-led interpretation, **recruitment is key**.
- The tour is not scripted, but the guides are given content to convey, which they do as well as adding their own personal memories- it complements brilliantly the comfortable and domestic feeling of the houses.
- It is important to be a stickler for the detail, especially when the stories are so well known and the presentation is of a really recent period. Lots of visitors know a lot about the subjects we're talking about and it is essential to get it right.

58