

PROPERTY, LEGACY, HERITAGE,
AND A CASE FOR
CONNOISSEURSHIP



Project Borderlands – [\[Link\]](#)

More reflections on the entanglement of property and colonialism, taste and upbringing, class and inequality. [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#) [\[Link\]](#)

In the early 1700s Admiral George Delaval, wealthy from a career in the Royal Navy, diplomatic service and from overseas investments, bought his old family estate from an impoverished cousin. He hired Sir John Vanbrugh, playwright, architect, member of the Kit-Cat Club, to rebuild the house. Seaton Delaval Hall is now considered a paradigm of Vanbrugh's English baroque, one of the great country homes of England – precious heritage.

Most of the house was abandoned after a great fire in 1822 destroyed the interior of the central block, the *corps de logis*. In the 1980s a titled member of the family moved back into residence. In 2009 the National Trust [\[Link\]](#) raised £6.3 million to buy the house and gardens from him and open them to the public.



In October 2020 the National Trust published its *Interim report on the connections between colonialism and properties in the care of the National Trust, including links with historic slavery.*

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The story is unsurprising. Global trade between the 17th and 19th centuries, along with early adoption of industrial capitalism, brought empire and wealth to Britain. Much of this was invested in property, buildings, and in collections of fine and decorative arts. In the early nineteenth century the formal abolition of slavery was accompanied by Parliament's agreement to deliver financial compensation for the loss of 'slave property'. Even more spending on private buildings and the arts followed.

The figures are staggering. Never mind the direct profit made from empire and colony, the Slavery Abolition Act (1833) made provision for £20 million to be paid in compensation to slave owners. This was 40 per cent of the British government's total annual expenditure at the time, about £100 billion today. The debt incurred in this massive transfer of public wealth to private slave owners was only paid off in 2015.

The connections between the influx of wealth from colonialism and slavery and the Trust's portfolio of 500 historic properties is all too evident in the report:

- About a third of all National Trust properties can be directly connected to colonial histories,
- 29 of their properties have links to successful compensation claims for slave-ownership,
- At least 50 of their properties have a connection to the East India Company in a large or smaller way.

Here is what the report says about Seaton Delaval Hall.

Admiral George Delaval (c.1668–1723) purchased stock in the South Sea Company in 1711, the year of its formation, and maintained his shares until at least 1720.

Sir John Hussey Delaval, Baronet (1728–1808), assumed a

leading role in his family's estates, and in 1766 sought advice on how to set up and manage a sugar plantation from Joseph Manesty (d.1771/2), a Liverpool slave-trader. Manesty's detailed response includes, for example, lists of necessary tools and equipment, appropriate furnishings for the 'Masters House' and the number of people required, including '3 white servants ... 10 Negro Men ... 10 negro women'. It is not known whether Sir John Delaval followed Manesty's advice, but he did obtain an allotment of 20,000 acres in East Florida in 1766. He held this land for at least five years, but a letter of 1771 indicates he was looking to sell.

The actor, soldier and MP Sir Francis Blake Delaval (1727–71), the great-nephew of George Delaval, had an illegitimate son, Lieutenant-General Francis Delaval (c.1752–1824), who was Governor of St Lucia and a resident of Martinique. His will included an instruction to bequeath an enslaved person in his ownership to 'my friend' Mr Alexander (?) Glennie.



Damage to the fine classical fittings from the fire of 1822.

Some of the responses to the report are disturbing and have become distressingly familiar (*The Spectator* – [Link]). It is held that liberal intellectuals (the authors of the report) are undermining national treasures with stories that belong to the past and don't need to be voiced. Don't lecture us, says *The Independent*, we just want to admire the furniture – [Link].

A group of Members of Parliament even threatened the National Trust with removal of public funding, their charge being that the leadership has been captured by “elitist bourgeois liberals ... coloured by cultural Marxist dogma, colloquially known as the ‘woke agenda’” [Link].

Here is how Peter Mitchell expresses it in *The Guardian* – [Link]:

... the dispute also stirs darker feelings. As Nesrine Malik wrote earlier this year, the narrative that the culture of these islands is being stolen from the (implicitly white, native and straight) majority is now disturbingly commonplace in our politics. Suggestions that demographic change – orchestrated by the treachery or connivance of a “cosmopolitan” liberal elite – threaten British identity, or indeed the entirety of western civilisation, have been around since the late 19th century, but they have become ever more insistent in recent years, and have characterised much of the commentary surrounding Black Lives Matter and the statue protests of the summer.

I grew up in a colliery port in the border county of Northumberland in the UK. Scattered through the many colliery villages were the grand homes of the owners.

Down the road was the grandest country house of them all, Seaton Delaval Hall. It was occasionally open to the public when you could go look at the fine paintings and porcelain, and regret that the great hall was but an empty shell after the fire so long ago. In the 1970s I went with my parents to a mock medieval banquet in one of the wings of the house. My mother and father loved the theatricals, and so did I; it was a night to remember.

Yes – it's complex

What are we to do with such experiences?

What is needed is more of what we read in this report. Research into the history of place and collection that we might understand context, understand that our experiences today are often founded on contradiction. Research that delivers deep knowledge, *intimate* knowledge of places and things, their contexts, associations, entanglements in matters so specific and yet also often so extensive, so global. A fine piece of mahogany furniture, a chocolate pot: distant relations of profit and property in small things so often forgotten.

See my comments on Alan Bennett's satirical quotidian and the National Trust –
[Link]

Connoisseurship – intimate knowledge of things and places

A name for such intimate specific knowing in and through context and association is *connoisseurship*. The concept and all that it entails has been too often associated with the specialized expertise that offers authorized valuations of property in the world of art and antiques markets. We should reclaim the concept, ironically.

I will have more to say about connoisseurship in later posts.



John Piper – wartime Seaton Delaval, 1941