

## **Cesar Picton – the full story**

We are lucky to have a great deal of information about two Africans in particular living in Surrey before the twentieth century, namely John Springfield and Cesar Picton. Both men have one rare thing in common – as Black people living in Britain, they were never associated with the slave trade in this country. Slavery was illegal in Britain, and Black people were not slaves but considered free. Other Black people, who were brought to Britain from the Caribbean plantations, never regained their proper status in the eyes of society within their lifetime, unless they lived to see the emancipation of slaves in 1834.

### **Background and Early Life**

Cesar Picton (1755-1836) was most likely born into a Muslim family in Senegal, where both the French and the British were involved in shipping West African slaves to America and the West Indies. Cesar probably spoke a little French before his journey and learnt some English on the voyage to Britain.

Much of the information on Cesar's life comes from research by the Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society (KUTAS, SHC Ref. 8623/2/7). A little background information about Cesar's place of origin is helpful here.

### **The West African situation**

In 1756, Britain declared war on France and Austria, in support of Frederick the Great of Prussia. This heightened tensions in West Africa, where the French were in control of the region to the north of British settlements in Gambia, rallying the local people against the British with tales of their violence towards Africans.

Britain's naval campaign saw conquests in Senegal and the Gambia region in 1758-9. However, as the Europeans sickened in the unsupportive climate, we find evidence in the letters of Colonel Worge, Governor of St. Lewis and commander of a number of companies maintaining the new ground, referring to the employment, rather than enslavement, of local Africans ('negroes') as nurses and labourers in the army hospitals while they waited for the arrival of European doctors. Certainly not all Senegalese faced slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (collection of letters, ed. Paget Toynbee).

### **Sir John Philipps**

Sir John was an MP, a philanthropist and a supporter of education, building many schools – 23 in his home county of Pembrokeshire alone. He also funded and instituted a number of Oxford scholarships at Pembroke College, Oxford. On 8th November, 1761, Sir John Philipps, baronet and representative of his native Pembrokeshire in Parliament, wrote of a return journey to his home at Norbiton Place (his weekend refuge from London while Parliament was sitting), accompanied by 'a Black Boy from Senegal given to me by Capt. Parr, also a paraquet and a foreign Duck.' Parakeets and ducks were often sold by local dealers and were typical souvenirs of the local wildlife.

The six-year-old African boy was brought to Norbiton Place and baptised 'Cesar' by Rev. Dr. Philipps on Sunday 6th December 1761. He was given three godparents, Elizabeth Cooper, Thomas Davies and Thomas Lewis, and Sir John gave each of them 7s 6d. The Philipps family seem to have accepted Cesar as simply another young member of the family. It was fashionable to treat African boys in a certain way; they were given rich clothing and Sir John bought a 'velvet Turban for black boy' for 10s 6d. Two centuries earlier, Elizabeth I began the trend by dressing her own Black court musicians and page-boy in elaborate and exotic costumes. Painters from the

Renaissance period onwards would often give the same treatment to Black subjects, or paint European nobility and gentry with their richly-dressed Black page-boy or servant.

In June 1762, Cesar was taken to Picton Castle, Pembrokeshire. Cesar was provided with 9s breeches by Peter Turnbull of Churchyard Row, Kingston, and probably made the journey on horseback. They returned to Norbiton on 31st October 1762, where 5-day-old snow was waiting. Like many of the West Africans who arrived in Britain, Cesar had no problems with British food and drink, but the weather was a real complaint, especially during winter.

### **Joining the Philipps Family**

In Sir John's absence at Picton Castle, Cesar was trained in household labour and given an education. The reason for his benevolent treatment by the Philipps family and why he never became a servant, lay in the fact that Sir John's only surviving son already had a servant, named John Rothero. On Sir John's death, his son became Lord Milford.

Lady Philipps died when Cesar was about 33, and he is mentioned in her will, receiving the large sum of £100. He would have cared for Lady Philipps and her daughters for about 25 years and would have been a very well rewarded servant, possibly even considered one of the family. His skillful management of this inheritance helps secured his business interests.

In May 1787, the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade had been founded. The signatories of petitions and letters concerning the slave trade usually reveal a number of Black activists in London and elsewhere, but Cesar never seems to have been one of them. Though he was not active in the Abolition movement, one of Horace Walpole's letters from Strawberry Hill, 19th October 1788 (see Paget Toynbee (ed.), 1905), provides a small piece of evidence telling us what Walpole might have thought of British interactions with Africa:

‘As you will allow me to fill my letters with any scraps I can amass, I will tell your ladyship how I was struck lately by a sentence of a negro. I was at Kingston, with the sisters of Lord Milford, who are my relations, and who have lately lost their very aged mother. They have a favourite black who has lived with them a great many years and is remarkably sensible. To amuse Lady Philipps under a long illness that had to read to her the account of the Pelew Islands. Somebody happened to say we were sending, or had just sent, a ship thither; the black, who was in the room, exclaimed, ‘Then there is an end of their happiness.’ ... What a satire on Europe.’

The ship Walpole mentions was the sloop, HMS ARIEL, fitted out with ‘a cargo of seeds and useful animals’ and sent as a gift to the Pelew islanders in 1788, after the Islanders had rescued and welcomed the crew of the Antelope, a ship belonging to the East India Company when it ran aground in 1783 (George Keate, 'An Account of the Pelew Islands'). The Pelew islanders had attracted a lot of sympathy, especially when one of the princes, Lee Boo, died of smallpox in London having been taken there to be educated. However, the ARIEL was not intended to initiate trade or enslave the islanders, as the cynical Cesar apparently suspected.

## **Business in Kingston**

In 1788, Cesar received his inheritance from Lady Phillips and began a new life. Norbiton Place was sold by Lord Milford and the daughters moved to Hampton Court, while Cesar rented a coach house and stables with a wharf in Kingston, on the High Street, suitable for a coal merchant. Though the house was only small, it is described as 'an unusually lavish and richly decorated house of extraordinary quality' on account of its unique moulded ceilings, among other features (Surrey Comet, 2nd October 1976).

5

At some point between the Kingston Poor Rate assessment of Michelmas 1788, and in the next assessment (they took place roughly once a month), Cesar bought the house and had also assumed his surname, from the name of the castle in which he spent much of his younger life.

Cesar's choice of business undoubtedly came from Sir John Philipps' interest in the coal industry. Sir John and his brother, Erasmus, would go on tours of the coal production areas of Milford, where they had grown up, as well as further afield in Newcastle and Sunderland. Sir John's connections may possibly have even set Cesar up with some helpful contacts.

As regards his influence upon Cesar, he was also a member of the Holy Club, a philanthropic society. The Club was associated with the causes of the Evangelists, Methodists and Quakers and was officially pro-abolition and included Charles Wesley, George Whitfield and A.W. Boehme. Sir John died in 1764 and it was the generation following him who secured the abolition of the slave trade across the Atlantic, in 1807.

As we do not have evidence for any abolitionist activity by Cesar we can only assume that Philipps' membership of the Holy Club led him to take great care for Cesar, even if Cesar did not adopt any of the Club's ideals. Local men were allowed to trade on the River Thames in Kingston, but Cesar was charged a customary £10 for his Thames-side coal merchandise at the Kingston Corporation meeting on 19th July 1792. The Kingston Corporation initially failed to determine whether or not Picton was even a trading coal merchant, possibly because his actual trade took place elsewhere in Surrey rather than on his wharf. There are a variety of places where it could have taken place but his property in Kingston was close to the maltings, fuelled by the coke from adjacent coking ovens, meaning he would not have been short of local trade.

Financial and local matters were important to Cesar. In terms of his involvement with the local parish, Picton attended 3 vestries (parish meetings of local importance) and these were larger occasions, focused on public expenditure.

## **Senegalese Gentleman in Thames Ditton**

The kind of company Cesar kept seems to have included the tradesmen of the local area. He is even mentioned in the will of the wealthy maltster, William Porter, in 1807, as 'Caesar Picton of Tullworth, gentleman'.

Picton appears to have moved to a rented cottage in Tolworth in 1807. It is possible he did not in fact live in this cottage; it would have been a great downscaling in size compared to Picton House, but we know that he let his property in Kingston to others during this period. In Tolworth, his name appears as a witness to the deeds of sale of properties of the wealthy Neale family. He may perhaps have lodged with the Neale

family until 1816. In 1816, Cesar arrived in Thames Ditton, where he bought a large cottage for the sum of £400 without being allocated a mortgage or selling any of his other properties. By now he was a wealthy businessman in his own right, beyond the hefty patronage of the Philipps family and the bequests from Lady Philipps and her daughters (£100 from Mary, £100 from Joyce and £50 from Katharine plus £30 annuity).

From 1807 to the end of Cesar's life, his property on Kingston High Street comprising the main house, the coach-house, stables, yard and wharf, was let out for part residential, part industrial use. He seems to have kept in contact with Lord Milford (Sir John's son), and acted as a witness to confirm the signature for two codicils at the time of Lord Milford's death in November, 1823. It is possible that Milford, with his ongoing connection with Pembrokeshire and its coal regions, would have remained a handy business contact for Picton.

### **Death and Legacy**

When Cesar died on 10th June 1836, aged 81, he paid for 16 mourning rings of no more than £5 each, for certain named friends. The identities of these friends reveal much about his social life, as does everything about his will (transcribed in KUTAS's study, SHC Ref. 8623/2/7). He had no heirs but his main bequest was to his goddaughter, Sarah Lock Pinner, who married William Pamphillon, later mayor of Kingston. In the will, she was granted Picton House.

Items in the will include a horse and chaise, a tortoiseshell tea chest with a silver caddy-spoon, a silver half-pint cup and tankard, two watches with gold chains, brooches, gold rings, shirt pins and a number of paintings – including a portrait of himself. He left this portrait to his friend Thomas Bushell, 'dealer in wines and spirits', along with two portraits of his friends, but unfortunately no one knows the whereabouts of these today.

Another prominent beneficiary was William Ramyard, a witness of approval when the will was brought before probate on 30th June 1836. Ramyard was a 'tallow chandler', a candle-maker with his own business.

Generally speaking, Cesar was well accepted in society and business. His funeral was a modest one, apparently attended by around 8 mourners, according to receipts bearing details of clothes and suits rented for the occasion. Cesar, the prosperous merchant, apparently grew very large in his old age and his coffin required 10 bearers, rather than the 4 or 6 normally required (Kingston Borough Archives, Ref. KX21). His coffin entered the church on a four-wheeled trolley, and was lowered into a vault with the use of planks and rollers.

The current inscription on the vault – 'C.P. 1836' – is not the original, which disappeared during renovations of All Saints' Church, but a plaque indicates Picton House on Kingston High Street today, and the other Picton House on Thames Ditton High Street.

Cesar's life is celebrated along with the lives of other ethnic minorities in Kingston society, and in Britain as a whole, in the annual Cesar Picton Lecture by Kingston University and Kingston Racial Equality Council.

Text by Sean Canty

### **Sources at Surrey History Centre:**

Deeds of Picton House, Thames Ditton, 1709-1841 (SHC Ref. 8263/1/1-15).

Press cutting: Surrey Comet, 2nd October 1976 (SHC Ref. 8263/2/6).  
Record of inquiries by Joan Wakeford into funeral arrangements of Cesar Picton (SHC Ref. 8623/2/7).  
Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society, 'Picton House and the People Connected with It', Occasional Papers 2 (1979). (SHC Ref. 8263/2/7).  
An engraving of All Saints Church, Kingston-upon-Thames where Cesar's burial vault is located. (SHC Ref. PH/84/8),

**Sources held elsewhere:**

The following documents relating to Cesar Picton are held at The National Archives: PROB/11/1184/4, HCA32/872/168, CO 700/WESTAFRICA1E, MPI/1/111, MPH 1/625;

Kingston Local History Room: Kingston-upon-Thames Archaeological Society, 'Picton House and the People Connected with It', Occasional Papers 2 (1979), (KX79/54)

**Books:**

Dabydeen, Gilmore & Jones, The Oxford Companion to Black British History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Toynbee, Paget (Ed), The Letters of Horace Walpole. 16 volumes. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903-5).

Jones, Patrick, Pembrokeshire and the slave trade : the strange case of Cesar Picton (Pembrokeshire Life, 2008)

**Websites:**

For a short film comprising an evocative narrative of Cesar's early life by Anna Brass and Lily Mehrbod, based on records held at The National Archives and in Kingston's Local History Room, click here <http://vimeo.com/93257425>

<http://www.ancestry.co.uk>

<http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk>

<http://www.culture24.org.uk>

<http://www.elmbridgemuseum.org.uk>

<http://www.findmypast.co.uk>

<http://www.historyhome.co.uk>

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<http://www.janeaustensworld.wordpress.com>