Henry de la Beche: Halse Hall

Gillian Allen, Legacies of Devon Slave-ownership Group

The Halse Hall property

Henry de la Beche inherited the 4,500 acre Halse Hall property at the age of five years on the untimely death of his father. It was in Clarendon, a prime sugar-growing region of Jamaica. Halse Hall had been granted to an ancestor, Major Thomas Hals, who had been part of the British army who routed the Spanish from the island in 1655. It came down to Henry through many generations and it was 'entailed', meaning that he was not allowed to sell it but had to manage it for life and then pass it on to his heir. This was fine when it was profitable but it became a burden after Emancipation when it was no longer a viable enterprise.

According to the will of Henry's grandfather (Thomas Beach I, 1715 – 1774, Attorney General of Jamaica), the property was valued at £54,000 Jamaican currency of which £41,000 currency was the value of enslaved people. Estate valuation included £0 currency cash, £5,000 currency debts and £300 currency plate. It is clear that the estate was in debt and there were no liquid assets. Most of the value was that of the people enslaved on their property, not the land or buildings

themselves. A further problem arose when Thomas Beach I left Halse Hall to his three children, meaning that the son (Thomas Beach II) who wanted to have it was required to pay off his siblings. He had to borrow this money from a West India merchant, Hibbert and Co, and by the time of Emancipation had failed to pay off the debt. Thus the 1835 compensation money all went to Hibbert and de la Beche received nothing: £3,500 for Halse Hall (130 enslaved), and £1,700 for the associated Hanbury Pen (81 enslaved).

At end of Henry's life Halse Hall was heavily in debt. It had become a crippling liability mainly from general deterioration of West Indian affairs. The debt was settled after Henry's death by his Welsh son-in-law, L.L. Dillwyn, who eventually broke the entail and sold the estate for £2,500. In his old age, Henry went to live with his daughter and son-in-law in South Wales, which is why his papers are kept in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (Donovan p.26).

Henry de la Beche was in a financial situation common to many owners of West Indian property, of owning valuable assets but being in debt to W.I. merchants. Perhaps as an absentee landowner he lived above his means and failed to manage his property wisely.

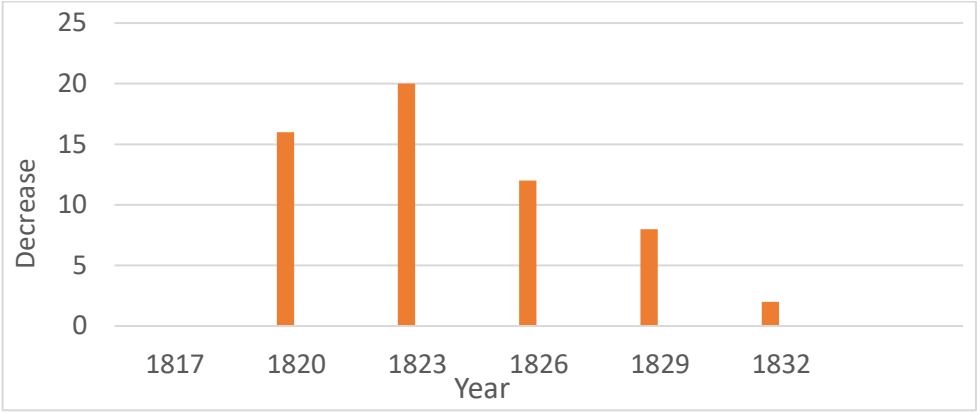
Other interesting facts about Halse Hall are that it was said to have been visited by Hans Sloane, the naturalist, during his 1687-89 visit as physician to the governor of Jamaica. He collected numerous tropical plants which eventually formed a

foundation of the Natural History Museum. This could be true as Sloane was related to the Hals family through the wealthy planter Fulke Rose and his niece Mary Rose. Before the English invasion Halse Hall had been a Spanish property called Hato de Buena Vista.

In more recent years, Halse Hall was bought by Alcoa minerals to use as an office (1969). It is the oldest English building in Jamaica that is still used as a residence and is an attractive venue for social functions. It has a memorial plaque to de la Beche as the founder of Jamaican geology.

Enslaved people at Halse Hall

Between 1817 and 1832 careful registers were required to be kept by slave-owners. This was in the attempt to ameliorate conditions for the enslaved with the aim of halting their fall in numbers after the abolition of the slave trade. The numbers of births and deaths had to be recorded every three years. De la Beche had 247 people enslaved at Halse Hall in 1817 but this number had fallen to 186 by 1832. This was because deaths outnumbered births on his, and most other, Jamaican sugar plantations. The decreases in numbers are shown in the graph.



Graph showing the decrease in numbers of enslaved workers at Halse Hall 1817-1832

It is clear that the fall in numbers was greatest over the period 1820 to 1823, when there were 20 more deaths than births. This fell to only 2 in 1829-32. The figures from which the graph is constructed are given in the table below. (There is much more information given in the Registers which enables an analysis of deaths by age, gender and colour.)

Halse Hall births, deaths and totals 1817-1832

Year	Total	Births since previous census	Deaths since previous census	Natural decreases since previous census	% natural de-crease	Total de-crease
1817	247					
1820	231	11	27	16	6.5	16
1823	211	6	26	20	8.7	20
1826	198	15	27	12	5.7	13 (one manumitted)
1829	189	10	18	8	4.0	9 (two manumitted and one substituted by purchase)
1832	186	11	13	2	1.0	3 (one workhouse for life)
Total 1817 - 1832		53	111	61	24.7	

De la Beche had been rightly concerned about problems on his plantation leading up to 1823 and he decided to visit. Not only did he visit his own estate but he toured the eastern part of the island visiting other estates and trying to make an objective assessment of the 'conditions of the negroes'. He gave a detailed description of what he observed in terms of work regime, diet and housing, and publishing his account to inform the bitter controversy raging at that time over the issue of slavery. He considered the enslaved people that he owned to be 'well-fed, well-treated and contented'. But how did he square this with the great loss of enslaved people, with 53 deaths and only 17 births being recorded in the previous six years, dying on average in their forties?

He attempted to introduce reforms to reduce the death rate. He discussed punishments of enslaved workers, saying that the slave-drivers at Halse Hall were not allowed to carry whips. Whipping was only by order of the overseer, and he abolished use of the whip on women. Five enslaved people had been branded as a punishment, others were put in the stocks or had extra allowances stopped.

He expressed his dislike of the slavery system, acknowledged the difficulties of changing it, and blamed not merely the owners but the whole British nation because British laws had encouraged the slave trade and it was considered a 'national object'. Besides, it was by 'accidental circumstance' that he had inherited his property.

There is much more detail that could be gone into from de la Beche's own account and from the Slave Registers. Suffice it to say that, centuries after his own observations, access to the Slave Registers enables us to see that he did indeed manage to reduce the death rate and increase the birth rate so that numbers on his plantation stopped falling so rapidly.

Conclusion

De la Beche presents a fascinating example of a slave-owner who had a bad conscience about his position yet who could not simply free the enslaved people that he owned. He was happy to enjoy the income from his estate while it lasted, taking a trip to the Continent and following his hobby of geology. It is interesting that he attempted to apply the objective methods of science to the social situation of slavery, yet failed to see that his 'objective' point of view was biased in favour of the slave-owner; he did not ask the enslaved for their point of view. His tract on the 'conditions of the negroes' contributed an unemotional account of what he observed into a highly charged political debate about slavery and emancipation. He honestly attempted to improve conditions on his own plantation and the evidence is that he met with some success here. At the end of the slavery system he did not make a fortune but he could say that he had used his profits over the years to build a foundation for the science of geology which formed an important part of the intellectual basis for the industrial revolution which ensured British prosperity for the future.

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