

Sir Edward Channing Wills Bart (1861-1921)

Gillian Allen, Legacies of Devon Slave-ownership Group

A centrepiece of the Museum is the stuffed tiger; shot in India by King George V, the financing of its stuffing and situating in the museum was by E.C. Wills of the Bristol tobacco firm W.D. & H.O. Wills. To what extent was his fortune derived from slavery? That is the question I shall attempt to address here.



*Accession number 88/2000. FELIDAE: Panthera tigris (Linnaeus):
tiger*

Who was E.C. Wills?

E.C. Wills moved to Devon some years before his sudden death at Harcombe House, Chudleigh, in 1921 (see Figure 2). Educated at Clifton College, Bristol, and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, he took a keen interest in hunting, shooting and fishing. He was a generous benefactor to key Exeter institutions, notably the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, the fledgling university college, the RD&E Hospital and the Devonshire Association for the advancement of science and art.

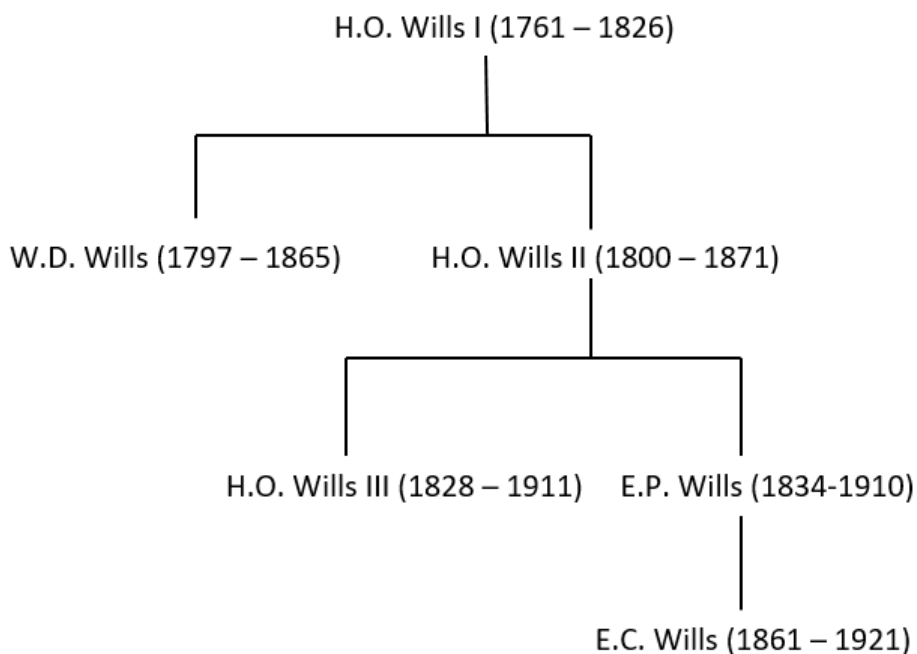


Harcombe House, Chudleigh, home of the late E.C. Wills (photo taken by Jill Allen on 26 Sep 2019)

E.C. Wills was chair of the Museum and Fine Arts Committee from 1912 to 1921 and Governor of the Museum from 1911 to 1921. It was due to his financial assistance that the museum was able to accept the offer from Oxford of the Peel collection of big game, which still forms a central attraction, though his

most notable contribution, in 1914, was meeting the cost of the tiger. On many occasions he wiped out the museum's debts and met expenses which the curator could not meet. It is clear that the success of RAMM was greatly assisted by Wills' contributions (Western Times, Devon and Exeter Gazette, 1921).

E.C. Wills was a great-grandson of the founder of the WD & HO Wills firm, Henry Overton Wills I, who started as a tobacconist in Bristol in 1786. EC's relationship to HO Wills I is shown in this very simplified family tree.



Wills Family Tree

E.C. was one of sixteen Wills family members who were active in the firm between 1786 and 1901. It was a family firm run by male members of the family who had a financial share in the business. In 1893 it became a public limited liability company, with E.C. having £5000 out of the total £750,000 shares. In 1901 it amalgamated with other tobacco companies to form the Imperial Tobacco Company, of which E.C. was a director (Alford, 1973).

What did WD and HO Wills do?

WD & HO Wills was a tobacconist's based in Bristol. They imported tobacco leaf and from it manufactured different types of tobacco to be chewed, smoked in clay pipes or sniffed as snuff. The leaf arrived in hogsheads (barrels) presumably (I need more evidence on this – see Appendix 2) from the English colonies on the Eastern seaboard of North America. They purchased the tobacco from agents, paid the hefty import duties, then put it through processes that took three to five days: removal of the stem, moistening, fermenting, slicing, drying, pressing and wrapping. The chemistry of the processes was not understood so it was risky; things could go wrong and ruin the product.

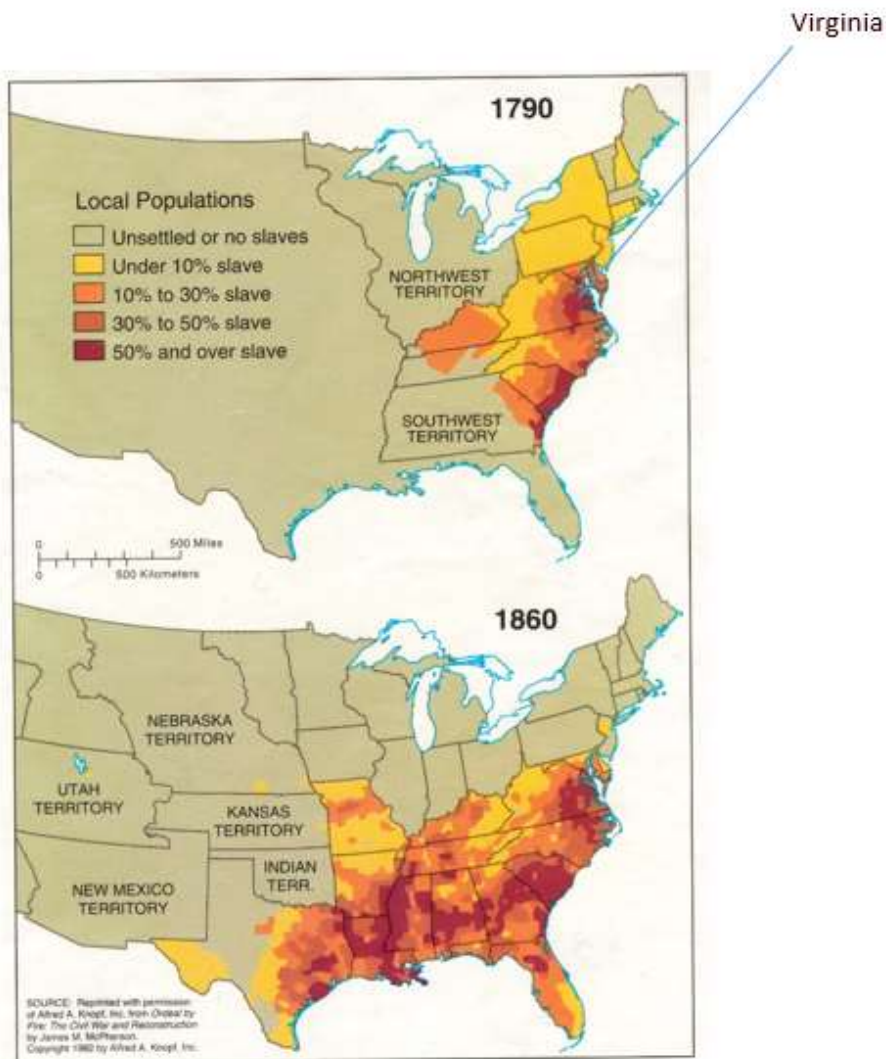
Bristol was a suitable location for a tobacconist, being a port facing the Atlantic, already established in the slave and West Indian sugar trades, and possessing the necessary commercial and banking facilities. Furthermore, it had access to markets in South Wales, the South Midlands and the West Country, including Exeter. HO Wills I travelled on horseback to

surrounding towns carrying his samples of tobacco and snuff to sell to retailers, competing with other tobacconists.

Competition was based more on quality than on price; due to the high duties, of typically three to four times the purchase price of the leaf, prices were fairly uniform. However, from 1810, due to problems with Bristol's large tidal range, Wills started to transport leaf to Bristol from Liverpool and London, by canal or coastal vessel, adding to their expenses (Alford, 1973).

Tobacco and links with the transatlantic slave trade

Virginia exported tobacco to Britain from 1619; it was found to grow well in that area and soon there was a boom in the crop. Virginia experienced a golden age of tobacco from the late seventeenth century until the War of Independence (1775-1783), facilitated by its position on the Chesapeake Bay with its many river inlets for easy transport. After Independence, tobacco cultivation in the neighbouring states of Maryland, North Carolina and Kentucky gathered momentum. Thus, the life of the Wills tobacco firm, from 1786 to 1901, began after Virginia's golden age but while tobacco cultivation was still thriving in the Eastern seaboard states (Middleton, 1953). Tobacco crops in Virginia were largely grown by enslaved workers.



Maps showing the concentration and percentage of enslaved people in local populations of North America, Source: <https://sites.google.com/site/apushheritage/home/unit-three-1750-1914/the-old-south-peculiar-institution>

These maps show the distribution of enslaved people in N. America at two dates during Wills' existence. It is clear that there was a high concentration of enslaved people in Virginia in both 1790 and 1860, even though there had been a movement to the cotton growing areas to the south and west by the latter date. In 1860, Virginia had half a million 'slaves', who produced 122 million pounds weight of tobacco leaf. Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that the tobacco bought by Wills was slave-grown (Walvin, 2006).

However, unlike the case with West Indian sugar, the tobacconists did not own the plantations or the enslaved labourers on them. Nevertheless, they played a key role in the system by purchasing the tobacco. Moreover, some individuals were involved in both the sugar and tobacco trades, Captain Prust for example. In 1820 he was Wills' most important creditor. A Bristol merchant in the provisioning trade with the W.I. from whom Wills had bought leaf, he exported manufactured goods to the plantations in exchange for sugar, rum and American tobacco. Prust's credit helped the Wills firm through a very difficult patch when it might have gone under, as did several competitors at that time of economic depression (Alford, 1973).

Did the fact that tobacco was grown by enslaved people help Wills to increase their profits?

It would be expected that the use of unpaid labour on tobacco plantations would lower the price of tobacco leaf and thus enable UK tobacco manufacturers to sell more and increase

their profits. Before the importing of enslaved Africans to work the tobacco fields, the British colonists had cultivated small scale tobacco fields themselves and with the use of British convict and indentured labour. But it had proved impossible to fuel the seventeenth century boom with just these workers, so slave traders had supplied Africans to Virginia, with the legalisation of slavery occurring in 1661 (Walvin, 2006). There followed problems of over-supply of tobacco leaf to the British market with consequent falls in price, which would have helped the Wills firm but been injurious to the planters (Middleton, 1953).



'A Tobacco plantation', the title page for 'The Federalist' (1788). Authored by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist* is a collection of essays that is considered, even today, the "foremost commentary on the United States Constitution". Source: [Africans in America/Part 1/A Tobacco Plantation \(pbs.org\)](https://www.pbs.org/africans/am/part1/a-tobacco-plantation/)

On the other hand, the retail price of tobacco products in the UK depended mainly on the customs duties applied, which were several times the price of the tobacco leaf itself. According to Alford, the demand for tobacco products changed with the general condition of the British economy rather than with the price at which leaf was imported. This would have reduced the contribution of the price of labour to the retail price of the tobacco, and therefore reduced the gains to the firm from enslaved labour.

When did Wills make their fortune, before or after slavery?

Tobacco in Virginia had been predominantly grown by the enslaved from the opening up of the slave trade (after the ending of the Royal Africa Company monopoly in 1698) until the Emancipation proclamation in 1863 during the American Civil War. Thus, over the 80 years from its inception in 1786 until about 1866 (allowing for delay in purchase) the Wills company would have been buying tobacco that was largely grown by enslaved people. This was before cigarettes became popular. However, cigarettes gradually gained in popularity from the 1860s and Wills were able to corner the market when they obtained exclusive UK rights to the Bonsack cigarette-making machine in 1883. Wills had made a small net annual profit of £600 in 1804, and subsequently suffered many ups and downs as the British economy had times of growth and depression. However, by the late 1850s their profits were exceeding the £10,000 mark, reaching a high of £14,000 in 1863, but this fell abruptly as the effects of the American Civil

War and Emancipation were felt. Profits recovered by 1872 and, after the introduction of the Bonsack and subsequent growth in cigarette sales, really took off in the 1880s to reach £750,000 by 1901. About half of all cigarettes sold in Britain were theirs – predominantly Woodbines. Thus the Wills' fortune was largely secured *after* the emancipation of enslaved Americans and (according to Alford) resulted from the skilful branding, advertising and marketing of their products. It was the smoking habits of their mainly working class customers that gave them their handsome income (Alford, 1973).

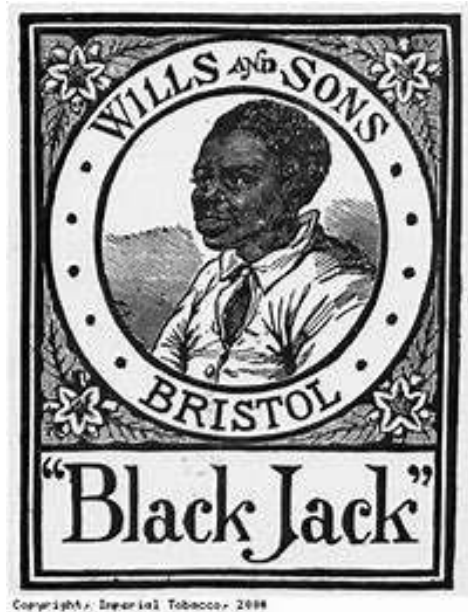
Nevertheless, the foundations of their later success were laid in their earlier years when they were steadily expanding and improving their business operations, and when they were importing tobacco grown by enslaved people.

What was the effect of the 1863 Emancipation on Wills' profits?

The American Civil War (1861-5) disrupted the tobacco trade and led to Emancipation. Did this lead to a long-term rise in the price at which British importers bought tobacco leaf because it was now grown by paid labour? Alford (p.473) reports an index of leaf prices year by year which shows that leaf prices were generally higher after the 1863 emancipation than before it. There were some short term price rises caused by the Civil War: from 1861 to 1866 the prices were higher than 1860 levels by 24% to 64%. This substantial increase could be explained by the lack of supply from N. America and imports being sought elsewhere, such as China and Japan (p.115).

However, there was a longer term rise in prices after the War, when from 1867 to 1877 prices were maintained at 5% to 21% above 1860. Was this due to paying wages to the formerly enslaved workers? After this, though, prices remained near the 1860 level for the rest of the nineteenth century, though this was substantially higher than pre-1860 levels (Alford, 1973). The evidence here, then, tends to support the contention that tobacco prices had been kept low before Emancipation through enslaved labour.

After Emancipation, there was not a decline in US tobacco production. Many formerly enslaved people continued to work on their former plantations, maintaining tobacco cultivation, although others became subsistence farmers on marginal lands or migrated to towns. While Virginia lost its predominance in tobacco production, overall US tobacco production boomed in the later decades of the nineteenth century. It seems that tobacco production could thrive without enslaved labour (Kerr-Ritchie, 1999).



*Wrapper for Wills and Sons' Black Jack tobacco, date unknown.
Source: Foster Collection A13/47; Bristol Museum and Art
Gallery*

Conclusion

The evidence presented here gives a mixed picture of the benefits to the Wills firm of the slave-grown nature of their tobacco purchases. On the one hand, enslaved labour led to occasional over-supply, and Emancipation resulted in price rises, suggesting that tobacconists had benefitted from enslaved labour; on the other hand, Emancipation did not lead to a crisis in the industry (in contrast to sugar and coffee in post-Emancipation Jamaica), demand for tobacco remained fairly insensitive to price changes anyway, and Wills' massive increases in profits came with the popularity of cigarettes which was after Emancipation. It seems that, while enslaved

labour had undoubtedly helped the Wills firm to get established, it was only partly responsible for their later financial bonanza.

The money spent by E.C. Wills in mounting the tiger would have come mainly from the cigarette boom, but this would not have been possible without the earlier exploitation of enslaved labour in the American tobacco states.

Appendix 1

Slavery in Virginia tobacco compared to Jamaica sugar plantations

The experience of slavery on a Virginia tobacco plantation had commonalities but also differences from that on a Jamaican sugar plantation. Tobacco plantations were generally quite small scale with most employing fewer than 25 'slaves', whereas, as with de la Beche's Halse Hall, sugar plantations with around 250 slaves were the norm. Tobacco was a more exacting crop than sugar and needed to be cultivated carefully and skilfully. It exhausted the soil after a few harvests necessitating up to 20 years of lying fallow, meaning that only a small area of a plantation was under cultivation at any one time.

Tobacco planters were not absentees like de la Beche, living an ocean away and leaving an attorney to run the farm, instead they lived on the plantation, close to their slaves, and oversaw

them directly. There was a closer relationship between blacks and whites.

Demographic statistics reveal a key difference between the two types of slavery: in Virginia the enslaved population grew in numbers whereas de la Beche's, typical of Jamaican sugar, continually declined. From the institution of the legal basis of slavery in Virginia in 1661, enslaved Africans were only imported into the state until 1720. From then their numbers grew by births exceeding deaths at much the same rate as for the white population. In contrast, Jamaican sugar planters regularly had to buy new Africans until this was forbidden by the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. After this, numbers fell, as on de la Beche's Halse Hall estate, from 247 in 1817 to 187 in 1832, as deaths exceeded births (Slave Registers). Jamaican enslaved people were more underfed, overworked and subject to tropical diseases than those in Virginia. However, while Virginian enslaved people were more likely to live and have surviving children, their families were more vulnerable to the emotional distress of being broken up as the owners disposed of people they didn't want, preferring to keep the skilled males and sell young women and girls to other areas. Selling people became a source of income for them.

This demographic difference had cultural repercussions as Virginian enslaved workers' memory of Africa became more and more distant over the 145 year period between the last of the slave trade and their emancipation in the US. In Jamaica,

however, new Africans were continually arriving, bringing memories of language, food and customs in the only 31 year interval between the ending of the slave trade and emancipation in the W.I. There was always a proportion of African-born people on a plantation, keeping African culture alive despite the enslavers' efforts to suppress it.

Another demographic difference lay in the proportion of blacks to whites in the population. In 1750, in Virginia there were three whites to every two blacks, whereas in Jamaica there was only one white to every ten blacks. This made the enslaved harder to control and revolts more likely.

The experience of slavery on a Virginia tobacco plantation, from this evidence, was a less harsh one than on a Jamaican sugar plantation, though with the added emotional hazard of family separation (Dunn, 2014).

Appendix 2

Visit to Bristol Record Office

I visited BRO to try to find documentation on the origin of tobacco imported into Bristol in the years WD&HO Wills was operating (1786 onwards). I did not find a clear answer to my enquiry, for the following reasons:

1. The books on Bristol history refer mainly to its tobacco trade of the seventeenth and earlier part of the eighteenth centuries, the Golden Age of Virginia tobacco.

But Wills operated in the later part of the eighteenth century and then the nineteenth century, about which the books don't have much to say (Macinnes 1939; Minchinton, 1957).

2. Eighteenth century records are incomplete and can only give an impressionistic account of Bristol imports and their origins (Minchinton, 1957).
3. I found the best source to be the *Bristol Presentments* (published by the Bristol Custom House), which record where ships came from and with what cargo. In the later years of the nineteenth century they also record warehousing of tobacco, imports from other parts of Britain, and duties received on tobacco. This introduces a puzzle because, in 1858 for example, only one import of tobacco was recorded yet tobacco duties of £20,350 were paid. Could this have been for tobacco imported in earlier years and warehoused until the duties were paid?

I sampled three years of *Presentments*: 1801, 1810 and 1858. I found:

- ▶ 1801 – 5 ships brought in tobacco from Virginia, totalling 1144 hogsheads (one hogshead contains about 1000lb).
- ▶ 1810 – 2 ships brought in tobacco, one from Virginia (378 hhd) and one from New York (100 hhd).
- ▶ 1858 – one ship brought in 62 bales of tobacco from Cuba (bales vary but are much smaller than hogsheads). Cuba had not abolished slavery at this date.

What I learned is:

1. Not much tobacco was being imported to Bristol in the nineteenth century.
2. The tobacco that was imported came mainly from Virginia, especially in the early years of the century.
3. There was no sign of any large scale import of tobacco from other, non-slave, countries.

In conclusion, while I cannot say definitely how much of Wills' tobacco was slave-grown, the evidence points to most of it coming from the slavery area of Virginia.

What I haven't done but would like to do:

Find out whether the Wills family, who were ardent Congregationalists and benefactors to many churches and other good causes, supported emancipation. Which side did they support in the American Civil War? What did they think of their moral position in buying slave-grown produce?

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