



James Dick (Falconer Museum, Forres)

James Dick and the Dick Bequest

A legacy of slavery

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**(Updated 25 March 2021 on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims
of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade)**

Summary

James Dick (1743–1828) was born in Forres and was active in the slave trade in Jamaica for twenty years from c.1762. He then returned to London where he added to his wealth. At his death in 1828 he left the larger part of his fortune to create a fund to support parish schoolmasters in the three north-eastern counties of Scotland – Aberdeen, Banff and Moray – excluding the royal burghs within these counties. When the trust was established in 1832 the value of the fund was £119,000 and the annual income was equal to the annual salaries of all 137 schoolmasters in that area.¹

The Dick Bequest continues to operate, with a series of amendments to the Trust scheme having been agreed by the Court of Session and under the Education Endowments (Scotland) Acts. The present scheme was framed in 1979 and the Trust is a charity registered in Scotland (Scottish Charity: SC013641). The value of its investments at 31 December 2019 was £1,691,949.

The benefits derived from the Dick Bequest are a direct legacy of slavery and the slave trade. The authors of this report contend that the funds should, as soon as possible, be returned to Jamaica to be used for the benefit of schools in Jamaica. The Governors of the Dick Bequest Trust have made clear that this is beyond their powers and will require action by Government.

James Dick, slavery and slave-trading

James Dick went to Jamaica at the age of nineteen, that is in 1762/63, and was later joined by his younger brother John Dick (1752–93). By 1779 James Dick, Robert Milligan and Alexander Forteath were partners in Kingston in James Dick & Co and Alexander Forteath & Co. Robert Milligan (1746–1809) – whose wife Jean Dunbar was from Forres – was a Scottish merchant, slave-factor in Jamaica and on his return to Britain, the driving force behind the construction of London's West India Docks.² His statue was removed from London Docklands in June 2020.³

Slave factors in the Caribbean islands – also known as Guinea factors – bought slaves from ships' captains in the trans-Atlantic slave trade and sold them on to local slave-owners or 're-exported' them to markets in other colonies.

The earliest and fullest account of James Dick's life was published in the *Forres Gazette* and reprinted in the *Elgin Courant* in 1844.⁴ According to this source he went to London, trained in modern methods of book-keeping and then went to Kingston as clerk in a merchant house. He then opened a wharf and storehouse and was joined in a partnership by Robert Milligan. All early accounts seem concerned to distance him from involvement in slavery, one describing him as a 'storekeeper' and the Memoir in the newspapers referring to the sale of 'home commodities' from Britain in Kingston and the 'sale of colonial produce' in London.⁵ However, his partnership with Milligan establishes the extent of their business and its connection to the slave trade.

The 'cargo' of the *Nancy*

In June 1779 Dick & Milligan offered for sale both the captured French ship *Nancy* and two hundred and eight enslaved Africans who had been embarked at Cape Verde in Senegal.



Kingston, June 10. 1779.
ON MONDAY the 24th instant,
 at Twelve o'Clock,
WILL BE SOLD,
 at our Wharf, the
 PRIZE OF BRIGANTINE
Sir William Erskine,
 With all her Guns, Ammunition, and other Warlike
 Stores and Materials, just as she arrived last *Saturday*
 from a Successful Cruise. —Inventory and Vessel may
 be examined any time before the Sale, by applying to
 Capt. HAMILTON at said Wharf, or to
DICK & MILLIGAN.

And, next Day,
 At the same Place, at Nine o'Clock,
WE WILL BEGIN TO SELL,
 In Lots agreeable to the Purchasers,
 Two Hundred and Eight choice Young
GOLD COAST NEGROES,
 who have all had the Small-Pox;
 They being the Negro Part of the Cargo of the Snow
NANCY, Prize to the Brig. *SIR WILLIAM*
ERSKINE.

Also on the following Thursday,
 At Twelve o'Clock, at same Wharf,
WILL BE SOLD,
The said Prize SNOW NANCY,
 With all her Materials, as she came from Sea.
 INVENTORY, &c. may be seen any day before the Sale,
 by applying to
DICK & MILLIGAN,
 Agents for the *Sir William Erskine.*

Neither VESSELS nor NEGROES will be delivered
 till paid for. —Sole of the Negroes will continue
 from day to day 'till all are sold.

What their advertisement in the *Jamaica Mercury* did not reveal was that two hundred and thirty eight Africans had already died during the 'middle passage' to the Caribbean.⁶ This was a mortality rate of fifty-three percent.

The deaths were probably due to an outbreak of smallpox. But Dick & Milligan turned this to their advantage by advertising the remaining 'choice Young Africans as having already 'had the Small-Pox'.

In the same year (1779) Dick & Milligan sold three hundred enslaved Africans who had been transported on the vessels *Rose* and *Spy*.⁷

Statues and memorials



In 1928 a memorial to James Dick was unveiled in Forres Academy to mark the 100th anniversary of his death and of his legacy which created the Dick Bequest. The memorial remains in place in what is now Anderson's Primary School, the property of Moray Council.

A portrait of James Dick was presented to the Town of Forres in 1873 and hung in the Council Chamber until transferred to the Falconer Museum in 1975.⁸

The Moray Council's *Forres Conservation Area Interpretation Plan* (2013) list James Dick among 'Forres Heroes'.⁹

In June 2020 a statue of Dick's partner, Robert Milligan, was removed from its plinth, opposite the Museum of London Docklands. Originally made by Sir Richard Westmacott, it had been moved in 1997 to West India Quay. In June 2020 the Museum issued a statement which included the following:

We advocate for the statue of Robert Milligan to be removed on the grounds of its historical links to colonial violence and exploitation.

They described this as a continuing part of a ‘processes of learning and unlearning’.

If the memorial to James Dick remains in Anderson’s Primary School, it should be used to explain to current and future pupils the history of the area’s involvement with slavery and the African slave trade.

Reparation and contributive justice



Sir Geoff Palmer OBE was brought up in Kingston, Jamaica – where James Dick made his money. He became the first black professor in a Scottish university in 1989 and is a human rights activist, campaigning and speaking out about the legacies

of slavery and the slave trade. He is passionate about the importance of education and has recently campaigned successfully for the reinterpretation of the monument to Henry Dundas in St Andrew’s Square, Edinburgh, in order to highlight Dundas’s role in delaying the end of the African slave trade. He has summed up his approach in the phrase ‘Don’t take down statues – take down racism’.

Conclusion

Generations of teacher and pupils have benefitted from the Dick Bequest in Aberdeenshire, Banff and Moray (including schools in the parishes of Abernethy and Duthil now within the The Highland Council area).

There is now an opportunity both to return this money to Jamaica and to make reparations for Scotland's involvement in slavery.

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¹ For a history of the Dick Bequest – but with no mention of its origins in slave trading – see Marjorie Cruickshank, 'The Dick Bequest: The Effect of a Famous Nineteenth-Century Endowment on Parish Schools of North East Scotland' in *History of Education Quarterly* 5:3 (Cambridge, 1965), 153–65.

² See entry for Robert Milligan in UCL Legacies of British Slave-ownership online at <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146645741>>.

³ 'Robert Milligan: Workers remove statue of slave trader in London', *Independent*, 10 June 2020.

⁴ 'Memoir of Mr Dick' in *Elgin Courant*, 11 October 1844.

⁵ Alexander Menzies, *Report of twenty-one years' experience of the Dick bequest* (Edinburgh, 1844).

⁶ *Supplement to the Jamaica Mercury*, Saturday 12 June, 1779; *Slave Voyages* database online at <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>, voyage ID 32325.

⁷ *Royal Gazette of Jamaica*, Saturday 18 September, 1779; *Slave Voyages* database, voyage IDs 92434 and 92458.

⁸ http://libindx.moray.gov.uk/people/people_report_view.asp?REF_ID=NMO38147 and https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/james-dick-166201/search/venue:falconer-museum-6630/page/1/view_as/grid

⁹ <http://www.moray.gov.uk/downloads/file104407.pdf>

Governors of the Dick Bequest

The Governing Body consists of ten elected Governors. Five are elected by the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet; two are elected by the Senate of Aberdeen University; and three are elected by the Local Authorities of Aberdeenshire (2) and Moray (1).

Only Moray Council has been prepared to provide the name of the Governor it elects.

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