

Slave Grave at Oxhill

How did a slave girl from the island of Nevis in the Caribbean end her days in Oxhill, Warwickshire in 1705?



The island of Nevis, marked in red



Myrtilla's journey: Nevis in the Caribbean to St Lawrence's, Oxhill

Myrtilla's grave is on the south-east side of St Lawrence's in Oxhill and reads:

Here lyeth the body of Myrtilla, negro slave to Mr. Thos Beauchamp of Nevis. Bapt. Oct. ye 20th. Buried Jan ye 6th, 1705.

Thomas Beauchamp was probably a sugar planter in Nevis and was married to one of the twin daughters of the Rector of Oxhill, Perletta Meese.

Perletta and Thomas had four children whilst at Oxhill: Thomas, baptised March 8th, 1705, Margareta Perletta, baptised June, 1706, Robert, baptised September 11th, 1711, and Letitia, baptised October 1714.



The local parish registers also have evidence of a number of baptisms and burials of slaves including that of Myrtilla. In 1700 the baptism of Will Archus, 'an adult male black' is recorded. In nearby Idlecote on January 1st, 1690, the rector baptised a negro girl with the name Margaret Lucy 'belonging to ye Lady Underhill'. It is likely that she was also a slave originally belonging to Thomas Beauchamp.

Thomas Beauchamp, like most plantation owners in the eighteenth century, lived in Britain. They brought their household slaves back with them from trips to the Caribbean, and used them to perform domestic duties in Britain.

An owner's right to his slave's labour was challenged in court in Middlesex in 1690. Katherine Auker accompanied her master, Robert Rich, a Barbados planter, to England. She was tortured and expelled from his home in England, but Rich refused to allow her to work for anyone else. The court decided that Auker was at 'liberty to serve any person until such time as Rich shall return from Barbadoes'.

In Britain, 18th-century laws were designed to support a trade in slaves that was sanctioned by the king and parliament. A decision by the Solicitor General stated that 'Negroes' ought to be 'esteemed goods and commodities within the Trade and Navigation Acts'. Such a ruling permitted slave owners to use property law with regard to their slaves 'to recover goods wrongfully detained, lost or damaged' as they would any other property.

The use of property law meant that the enslaved were considered not humans, but commodities.

In 1729 a joint opinion by the Attorney General (Sir Philip Yorke) and Solicitor General (Charles Talbot) attempted to answer a number of questions concerning the status of slaves. The Yorke-Talbot ruling stated:

We are of the opinion, that a slave, by coming from the West Indies, either with or without his master, to Great Britain or Ireland, doth not become free; and that his master's property or right in him is not thereby determined or varied; and baptism doth not bestow freedom on him, nor make any alteration to his temporal condition in these kingdoms. We are also of opinion, that the master may legally compel him to return to the plantations.

As well as performing domestic duties, black slaves were also status symbols for their British masters and mistresses and even a fashion statement.

Ladies 'preferred small, plump faced boys whom they dressed exotically and teased as pets'. They brought silver padlocks for them, one vendor advertised padlocks for 'Blacks or Dogs'.



Louise de K roualle, Duchess of Portsmouth by Pierre Mignard 1682

It is likely that Myrtilia, Will Archus and Margaret Lucy were exotic additions to the rural Warwickshire landscape in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. The fact that Thomas and Perletta invested in a grave stone for Myrtilia implies that she was highly valued and esteemed. In 1807 trading in slaves was eventually abolished by Parliament and in 1833 all existing slaves in the Caribbean were finally emancipated.