

Letter from Hercules Ross (1745 -1816), 1901. Gifted to the Lloyd's in 1932

Hercules Ross

Hercules Ross (1745-1816) was a Scottish merchant, possible slave trader, plantation and slave owner in Jamaica, builder of Rossie Castle and later an abolitionist. Lloyd's Collection holds one letter by Ross to his friend, Admiral Lord Nelson of 1801.

Provenance

Hercules Ross' letter is a single item in Lloyd's Collection and an example of the many items gifted when Lloyd's were acquiring items relating to Admiral Lord Nelson, but as an item has no direct connection to the Lloyd's market. It was gifted by a Lloyd's member, E S Lamplough in 1932, from the 'Symington Collection' and forms part of the 'Nelson Collection' at Lloyd's.

The Lloyd's Nelson Collection was initiated in 1910. In the 1920s and 1930s gifts relating to Nelson, including hundreds of manuscripts, continued to be acquired and gifted.

Hercules Ross letter

The letter provides evidence that Hercules Ross, who financially benefitted from slavery, was a friend of Nelson and later became an abolitionist. It was written by Ross to Nelson on 22 December 1801.

By 1779, Ross had become a close friend of Captain Horatio Nelson, who was serving in the Caribbean and 'whom he evidently helped out of a financial difficulty'.¹ Nelson became godfather to Hercules Ross' son Horatio (5 September 1801-1886), who is mentioned towards the end of the letter, and Horatio later became MP for Aberdeen Burghs 1831-1832 and Montrose Burghs 1832-1834.

The letter recounts how Nelson agreed to be introduced to Ross' friend, a Mr MacDonald, and how Ross detected Nelson's 'uneasiness' and hoped for another war for him. Ross then comments on where Nelson's letter was written from, a property called

Merton in Surrey which Nelson had purchased to live with his lover, Emma Hamilton. He then described how he has built up his own estate including a 'New Mansion in the ancient Castle style' and a new town where he planned to establish ship building in a dry dock. Ross refers to 'your Lordship's handsome eulogium on the parents of darling Horatio' which probably refers to Nelson's acceptance of the Ross' invitation to become their son's godfather. See the full letter and read the transcript in [Lloyd's Collection Catalogue](#)

Ross and his links to historic enslavement

Hercules Ross was born in Scotland in 1745. He left around 1761 to go to Kingston, Jamaica. Ross obtained a post as a clerk in the Naval Office, run by William Murray. He then became a merchant, running a store, and in partnership with John Hanbury, he was reputedly 'trading slaves to the French colonies'.²

By 1777, Ross had shares in two trading sloops, one of which held a Letter of Marque and he became Prize Agent for the island in the American War of Independence. Eventually, he owned four privateers and had a lucrative business, which he invested in the purchase of plantations. Ross is associated with two estates in Jamaica. The first, with John Grant, at [Castle Hill in St Thomas-in-the-East, Jamaica](#), was said to be in their possession in 1776. The second was the 200 acres, Bushy Park estate in St Andrew's.³

When Ross left Jamaica in 1782 he returned to Scotland where he was elected an Honorary Burgess of Glasgow. Two years later, from the fortune he made in Jamaica, he bought the Rossie estate in Angus. He demolished the old mansion and commissioned a new country house, Rossie Castle, which was completed in 1805 and is mentioned in his 1801 letter. In 1785, Ross became a Commissioner of Supply for Angus County and a Justice of the Peace. By 1797 he became Deputy-Lieutenant of Forfar. His expertise on Jamaica made him useful to government: 'Ross had been consulted by Lord Grantham, foreign secretary in the Shelburne ministry, on matters relating to the West Indies and the Spanish colonies, and in 1787 he

¹ <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/ross-horatio-1801-1886>, accessed 17/02/2023

² Fiona Scharlau 'Hercules Ross: A Successful Sojourner' in *Ten Taysiders: Forgotten Figures from Dundee. Angus & Perthshire*, Abertay Historical Society, Dundee, 2011, 26

³ UCL Legacies of British Slavery have not been able to verify Ross' ownership of Bushy Park estate. It is cited as being owned by Ross in Eric J. Graham, 'Hercules Ross of Rossie and Jamaica', *Scottish Local History Issue 94 Spring-Summer 2016*, 61 and Fiona Scharlau, *ibid.*, 26.

placed his expertise at the disposal of Pitt's foreign secretary, Lord Carmarthen.'⁴

Around 1790, Ross became acquainted with William Wilberforce. He gave evidence in favour of the abolition of the slave trade to the Select Committee of the House of Commons. As somebody who formerly benefitted and was an active participant of the slave economy, Ross' evidence was singled out by abolitionists as a case for converting to the abolitionist cause. The motion to abolish the slave trade failed in

1791 but was enacted in 1807. In a letter to William Wilberforce, Ross said that his 'testimony before the House of Commons', in support of the abolition of the slave trade had earned him 'a plentiful load of abuse' and cost him 'all my West India connections'.⁵

Lloyd's Collection

We have been exploring our archive to better understand our historical links to the transatlantic slave trade through a research collaboration with Black Beyond Data, from Johns Hopkins University, and independently funded by the Mellon Foundation.

The research will be published in early November 2023 along with our plan of action to create a more inclusive and equitable future for Black and ethnically diverse individuals in our market and communities.

Harmful content

You may encounter harmful content and language especially as we contextualise items in Lloyd's Collection which records enslaved people experiencing trauma and harm. We believe it is important to bring to the foreground the absent and hidden histories of enslavement. If you have any feedback or comments about the issues raised please email archives@lloyds.com

⁴ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/ross-horatio-1801-1886> [accessed 03/02/2023]

⁵ Quoted at: [Summary of Individual | Legacies of British Slavery \(ucl.ac.uk\)](#) [accessed 26/09/2023]