

Frank Utten Purchas 1861—1909: Physician in Wales and descendant of slave owners

Rachael Jones

Abstract: Frank Utten Purchas was born into a family which had a long history of benefitting from slavery. He was born in Jamaica where both his paternal and maternal lines owned slaves who were forced to work on their sugar plantations. Purchas left this life behind him, however, trained in Medicine in Edinburgh and became a respected and committed physician in Wales. He married into a prominent local family, and lived through a time that saw significant political, religious and medical changes. He contributed to the founding of an infirmary that exists to this day although he himself did not live to see its opening.

On June 25 1891, the wedding of Dr. Frank Utten Purchas and Elizabeth Pryce-Jones took place in Newtown, Montgomeryshire, now in the county of Powys. The wedding was the first such ceremony to take place in the new All Saints church, built by Miss Pryce-Jones's father, Sir Pryce Pryce-Jones. The event was described in the *Montgomeryshire Express* as one 'in which so much public interest of a flattering character was evinced'. [1] As is usual, much more detail was given about the bride than the groom but it is surprising that only one member of Dr. Purchas's family was mentioned as being present at the ceremony — a maternal cousin, the Reverend James Utten Todd of London. However, inspection of the 1901 census throws some light on the reason. Dr. Purchas was born in Jamaica.

European interest in the West Indies began during the 16th century and made many merchants and bankers wealthy during the following three centuries owing to the lucrative sugar and coffee plantations created there, and to the slave trade. [2] Jamaica was first settled by Europeans in 1664, and by 1673, there were 7700 whites on the island and 9500 people of African origin brought in as slaves. Over the next 50 years, the number of whites remained constant while the number of Africans rose to 74,000 as the slave trade boomed. [3,4,] The wealth and climate attracted settlers, providing them with a comfortable lifestyle and fortunes that enabled plantation owners to send their sons back to Britain to receive the classical education that prepared them for entry to university and the professions. [5] Objections to slavery towards the end of the 18th century resulted in the end of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1807, followed by the emancipation of slaves on British territory in 1833. [6]

Religion played a part both in the promotion and in the abolition of slavery. Nonconformists, for example, supported slavery prior to the end of the 18th century. Some Welsh settlers in America were slave owners, and their Calvinistic beliefs allowed justification of the practices theologically. However, feelings began to change, and Nonconformists were leaders in the fight to end the slave trade. Quakers began the campaign for abolition, and the founder of Wesleyan Methodism, John Wesley, famously described the trade as 'That execrable sum of all villainies'. [7] Baptist minister, Morgan John Rhys, published essays attacking slavery and these became influential in the abolition movement. [8]. As the Industrial Revolution grew from the end of the 18th century, Nonconformists — typically ordinary, working people — felt an empathy with other groups of disadvantaged workers including slaves. There is at least one contradiction to this, however. During the early 1800s, Gulliford Nonconformist chapel near Lypstone in Devon was financed by investments with the South Sea Company, which was involved in slave trading. [9,10,11].

The connection between the Todd and Purchas families and the West Indies goes back to the 18th century. In 1795 the marriage took place in Surrey, England, of Thomas Todd and Jamaica-born Elizabeth Rochefort Utten. [12] Todd was a former Royal Navy captain turned West-India merchant. They had two sons, Utten Todd and Richard Todd. The elder son, Utten Todd, made his way back to his mother's land of birth to manage properties inherited from his maternal grandparents, and in 1828 married Louisa Lamont in Trelawny parish, on the north side of the island. He made his home there and had interests in several properties either as owner or as manager. These amounted to about 2000 acres, with nearly 400 slaves at the time of emancipation, for which the Todds obtained over £8000 in compensation. He and his wife produced twelve children, and one of the daughters, Harriet, married Henry Purchas in 1858. Later, their son — the future Dr Frank Utten Purchas — was born in 1861. [13] Back in England, Richard Todd married and raised a family of several sons and daughters, including the James Utten Todd who later attended Dr. Purchas's wedding in Newtown. Richard Todd maintained links with his elder brother in Jamaica, for in 1851 his occupation was given as West India Merchant. [14,15,16,17]. A family tree is shown in **Figure 1**.

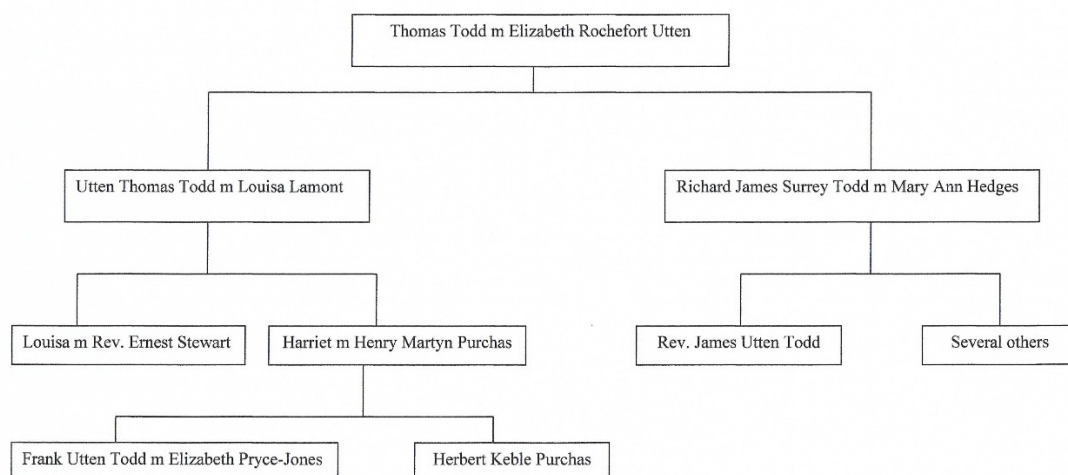


Figure 1: Todd/Utten/Purchas family tree

Frank Utten Purchas was sent from Jamaica to Britain to acquire his education, and attended the Godolphin School in Hammersmith. [18] Upon finishing his education, he returned to Jamaica to work on his father's lands. [19] The prosperity of the West Indian plantations had taken a downward turn after emancipation, and by the time Dr. Purchas was born, half the plantations in Jamaica had closed down. This was partly because the labour previously available free of charge was now gone and partly because the protected sugar market had been opened to free trade. [20] However, half the plantations did survive and Frank Purchas's role probably involved observing and learning how to manage the day to day work carried out by the labourers, including planting, harvesting, and operating the mills and boiling houses. He may have supervised the work of the overseers and the so-called bookkeepers who kept tallies of the sugar produced and of other quantifiable amounts.[21]

After a few years, he returned to Britain, this time to Edinburgh, to commence training for a future in Medicine. He attended Edinburgh University's medical school, which was becoming increasingly famous for its advances in new fields of health including physiology and pathology, and for the great names among its staff. [22] James Simpson introduced chloroform anaesthesia in 1847, and in the decade prior to Purchas's arrival, Joseph Lister, pioneer in the use of antiseptic, became chair of clinical surgery. [23,24] The university's tercentenary celebrations took place while Purchas was a student and were attended by Louis Pasteur among other famous names. [25,26] Purchas registered with Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery status in December 1887, [27]

and after a year spent working as a medical assistant in Kincardineshire, arrived in Newtown as assistant to Drs Hall and Ferguson.

This was at a time of religious unrest in the area where many of the people held an attachment to Nonconformity, with the Anglican, or Church of England, faith being associated with the land-owning and ruling classes. [28] Dr Purchas will have been aware of violent protests over tithe payments and rents to the Church and occasional aggressive threats to church personnel. Meanwhile, he achieved his Doctor of Medicine status in 1890 and was appointed physician to the local workhouse and post office. [29] In early 1891, he travelled to Germany to find out more about a revolutionary treatment for tuberculosis. [19,30] This was Robert Koch's important but controversial discovery of tuberculin, found in experiments to cure but also to pose great risks. [31,32] A photograph of Dr. Purchas is shown in **Figure 2**.



Figure 2: Dr Frank Utten Purchas (*Montgomeryshire Express* 6 February 1909)

Dr. Purchas's wealthy background, education and professional status made him a very suitable match for Sir Pryce Pryce-Jones's younger daughter. Sir Pryce at that time was High Sheriff of Montgomeryshire and had been M.P. for Montgomeryshire Boroughs twice during the late 1800s. [33] Purchas joined his future father-in-law as a freemason in 1890. [34] The wedding was celebrated with lavish decorations in the area around Pryce-Jones's main business premises, and along the route to the church, there were flags to be seen and banners bearing good luck messages.

From early morning cannon sounded from grounds of the Pryce-Jones family home, and the schoolchildren of the town, as well as all Pryce-Jones's employees, were given a day's holiday. Dr. Purchas's best man was his friend Dr. Scott Thompson from Scotland, and his cousin, Rev. James Utten Purchas, conducted part of the ceremony along with the Bishop of St. Asaph and a vicar from a neighbouring parish. During the late afternoon, the newly married couple left by train for their honeymoon in Scotland. [1].

The Purchases made their home in The Bank, one of the streets in the centre of town, which had a pleasant, elevated position overlooking a cobbled area that used to be part of the old horse market. Their household included four servants and Dr Purchas ran a surgery at the house, which remained in place until a new surgery in another part of the town was built. [35,36] In 1896 a baby girl was born to the couple and given the name Eleanor, the same name as the child's maternal grandmother. She was also given the middle names Margaret Utten.

As well as the surgery at The Bank, Dr. Purchas worked at the Montgomeryshire Infirmary, situated at the other end of town, next to the river and the flannel exchange. Six months after his wedding he was invited to open the annual New Year infirmary ball and, two months later, was thanked for his work at the institution along with the other medical staff. [37,38] The infirmary was to become a large part of his life and fourteen years later, at the annual meeting of the directors in February 1906, Dr. Purchas, now senior medical officer, was given a special vote of thanks:

Following upon his valuable efforts in 1904, Dr. Purchas has again kindly come to the assistance of the institution in procuring donations to a special fund for the refurnishing of the operating room at the cost of £37.0s.5d. The Board desires to express their sincere thanks.

Dr. Purchas returned thanks on behalf of himself and his colleagues, who, he said, undertook the work connected with the infirmary as a labour of love. [39]

By the time of this meeting of directors, however, the infirmary was proving inadequate and thoughts turned to building a new infirmary. Dr. Purchas supported plans for a new establishment and gave advice on the requirements and on fundraising. [19] This new infirmary did indeed come to be built — on a prime site surrounded by open fields by the side of the road leading out of town,

the plot being gifted by Sir Pryce's other son-in-law, Edward Powell. [40] But Dr. Purchas was never to see it. Two years before it opened its doors and shortly after his 48th birthday in January 1909, he died after a lingering illness. Ironically, he died in the Purchas's new family home named 'Homestay', adjacent to the site of the soon-to-be built replacement infirmary. The funeral took place at a church a few miles away where the grave within the Pryce-Jones family plot was lined with violets from the garden at 'Homestay'. **[Figure 3]** At the opening ceremony of the new infirmary, a tribute was paid to Dr Purchas and his efforts. [41]



Figure 3: Dr Purchas's grave (foreground). The pillar to the rear marks the Pryce-Jones grave

Conclusion

Frank Purchas was born into a slave-owning family in Jamiaca. After working in that environment for a number of years, he left it and entered the medical profession via training at the prestigious medical school in Edinburgh. He accepted a permanent position in Montgomeryshire and, like other incomers, came to love life in the Welsh county. He settled down, established a family, and became admired and respected for his work with the community. His obituary in the Montgomeryshire Express ends with the words:

Removed in the prime of life from a sphere where he was eminently useful, this estimable citizen will be much missed but he will long live in the memory of a people by whom he was universally esteemed.

References

1. Marriage announcement. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 30 June 1891.
2. For example, Thomas Leyland, a Liverpool merchant originally trading with Ireland, gained great wealth directly through slavery. One of his ships delivered 412 slaves to Havana in 1802 and made him a profit of £24,000. With this, Leyland went into banking, founding Leyland & Bullins. British Banking History Society. Leyland and Bullings, www.banking-history.co.uk/leyland.html (accessed 26 February 2018). He later bought and lived on a Montgomeryshire estate. Lord Penrhyn made part of his fortune from sugar plantations in Jamaica; one of his daughters became Lady Sudeley of Gregynog, near Newtown, the town where Dr Purchas eventually settled. Sudeley, Lord. Gregynog before 1900, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, (1972); 62: 178:179.
3. 'Slave trade' and 'West Indies'. In: Hay D (ed) *Local and Family History*. Oxford: Oxford, 1996, pp. 419 & 493.
4. Reid A., Sugar, slavery and production in Jamaica, 1750–1807. *Slavery and Abolition*, (2016); 37: 159–182.
5. Anon. *Marly; or, a Planter's Life in Jamaica*, is a novel written by a European who had lived in Jamaica, and was first published in 1828. It gives details about life on the island in the 19th century, including the work and treatment of the slaves and makes shocking reading at times. There are

useful notes giving background information. *Marly; or, a planter's life in Jamaica*. Oxford: Macmillan Caribbean, 2005. See also Vasconcellos CA. *Slavery, Childhood, and abolition in Jamaica, 1788-1838*. Athens (GA): University of Georgia Press, 2015.

6. Craton M. *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 1978.

7. Tomkins, S. *John Wesley: A Biography*. Oxford: Lion, 2003, p.177.

8. Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion. Rhys, Morgan John. In: *Dictionary of Welsh Biography down to 1940*. London: Cymmrodorion, 1959, p.846.

9. Davies J. Slavery. In: *The Welsh Academy Encyclopaedia of Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008, p. 819.

10. Coles A. *The Lympstone Story*. Lympstone: Lympstone Society, 2005, p.29.

11. Paul H. The South Sea Company's Slaving Activities.
file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/2NcV95be3kuuF__DUzfgJg.pdf (accessed 13 March 2018).

12. Marriage announcement. *The Times* [London, England], 23 May 1795, p.3.

13. Jamaica Church of England Parish Register Transcripts, 1664—1879, p.328.

14. National Censuses, 1841—1861.

15. Will of Thomas Todd. Public Records Office: London, PROB 11/1868.

16. The Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slave-ownership. Legacies of British Slave Ownership. www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs (accessed 12 March 2018).

17. Jamaican Family Search. <http://jamaicanfamilysearch.com> (accessed 12 March 2018).

18. A trust devoted to education was created from money left by Sir William Godolphin (1634-96), and in 1856 the Godolphin school was founded in Great Church Lane, Hammersmith. It was successful and moved to premises in Iffley Road in 1862. It later became unable to compete with St. Paul's School and closed in 1900. It reopened in 1905 as a girls' school. Victoria County History. Latymer and Godolphin Schools. www.britishhistory.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol1/pp305-306 (accessed 15 March 2018).
19. Obituary of Dr Purchas, *County Times*, 6 February 1909.
20. Ingraham J. *Labour in Jamaica after Emancipation*.
<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/emancipation/jamaica5.htm> (Accessed 15 March 2018).
21. The International Slavery Museum in Liverpool gives a very good description of the tasks involved in sugar processing. Dr. Purchas's birthplace, a property called The Ridge, still is a working sugar plantation. Figures for The Ridge are unavailable but a nearby plantation known as Worthy Park, currently produces about 24,000 tonnes of sugar per annum. Personal correspondence with Maurine Nuttall, California, USA, related by marriage to the Utten Todd family: 31 December 2017; Worthy Park Estate Ltd 'Heritage'. www.worthyparkestate.com/heritage/ (accessed 18 March 2018).
22. Emerson R. L. The Founding of the Edinburgh Medical School. *J. Hist. Med. Allied Sci* 2004; 59: 183—218
23. Guthrie D. *The Medical School of Edinburgh*. Edinburgh: Medical School of Edinburgh, 1959, p.17.
24. Miles A. *The Edinburgh School of Surgery before Lister*. London: Black, 1918, pp. 170 – 173.
25. Tercentenary of the University of Edinburgh, *The Times* (London, England), 18 April 1884, p.12.
26. At this time there will have been West Indians of African origin studying at Edinburgh.
Donaldson G. *Four Centuries: Edinburgh Life, 1585 — 1983*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh 1983, p.92.
27. Wellcome Trust. London, England. *The Medical Directory, 1890*; Reference: 21330724_i13765504

28. Calculations made from the 1851 Religious Census show that at least 30 per cent of the county population were practising Nonconformists whereas the corresponding figure for practising Anglicans was 11 per cent. Census of Great Britain, 1851, Religious worship. England and Wales, 89, pp. 126 and 127.

29. Wellcome Trust. London, England. *The Medical Directory, 1895*; Reference:

b21330724_i13765589

30. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 27 January 1891.

31. Dr Koch's remedy. *The Times* (London, England), 15 January 1891, p.5.

32. Munch R. Robert Koch. *Microb. Infect.* 2003; 5, 69 — 74.

33. Burke, AP. *Family Records*. New York: Heraldic Publishing, 1965, p.353.

34. United Grand Lodge of Freemasons Register. Cedewain Lodge: 1887—1909.

35. *National Census* 1901.

36. Davies T. *Newtown in 1901*. Newtown: Newtown Local History Group, 2008.

37. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 5 January 1892.

38. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 2 February 1892.

39. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 13 February 1906.

40. Oliver, HN. The Montgomeryshire Infirmary. In: Oliver H.N. *Llanllwchaiarn: Church and Parish* Private Publisher, 2000, p.125.

41. *Montgomeryshire Express*, 17 October 1911.

