



Beyond the grave

Who was Myrtilla, and could the details of her life help to shape the identity of today's black Britons? Alison Benjamin reports on the quest to know more about the UK's slaves

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Barbara Willis-Brown stands in a windswept graveyard in the heart of the Warwickshire countryside reading the inscription on a headstone that is more than 300 years old. It is not the age of the grave that is as surprising as whose it is - a female slave called Myrtilla. This is Willis-Brown's third visit to the grave. On her first, she laid flowers in remembrance of "this lone Black woman who died in 1705 so far from home". On the second, she promised to uncover her story, and what it means for the modern British black identity.

St Lawrence church, Oxhill, near Stratford-upon-Avon, is in a sleepy backwater that would be a perfect setting for the Midsomer Murders television series. "What it would have been like in the 18th century to a black woman from the Caribbean, goodness knows," says Willis-Brown. With the help of a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Found (HLF) for her In the Beginning project, she is hoping to find out why Thomas Beauchamp, named on the headstone as Myrtilla's owner, brought her all the way from the small Caribbean island of Nevis, where he is believed to have been the owner of a sugar plantation, and what happened to her here.

"She must have meant a great deal to him," she says. "In those days, when the ordinary populace was illiterate, a pauper's grave would have been the norm. Yet here was Myrtilla, buried right outside the church door for the whole world to see."

Willis-Brown's attempt to uncover the story of Myrtilla comes 200 years after Westminster began to dismantle the slave trade, and as the bicentenary of the abolition of the British trade fuels interest about the presence of black people in Britain prior to the wave of large-scale immigration from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 60s.

Willis-Brown founded and runs a community development organisation, Scawdi, which started life 10 years ago as the Sparkbrook Caribbean and African Women's Development Initiative, but she now works predominantly with young men and families to widen opportunities for Birmingham's poor inner-city black community. She says the search for Myrtilla is crucial for the identity of the people she works with. "It serves to 'ground' you," she says. "It helps you to belong, and everyone needs roots. It demonstrates to people that we have a share in English history too, that we can trace ancestry back a couple of centuries. Often, people can feel invisible, or even apologetic, with a sense of not belonging here. Our history project can help overturn that perception, and that is very powerful."

It is a view shared by sociology professor Stuart Hall, who notes: "National heritage is a powerful source of meaning; those who can't see themselves reflected in the mirror are therefore excluded."

Although there is evidence of black soldiers among the Roman legions stationed in Britain, the first African presence in the West Midlands is associated with the development of the English slave trade, according to Ian Grosvenor, professor of urban educational history at Birmingham University.

It was his research into black history in the area, commissioned for a HLF Hidden Histories project in 2005, that uncovered Myrtilla's grave. He also found in the Oxhill parish register of 1690 the first entry for the baptism of a slave, Margaret Lucy, "belonging to ye Lady Underhill"- followed in 1700 by the baptism of Will Archus, "an adult male black".

The Oxhill village website connects all three slaves with Thomas Beauchamp, who is believed to have married one of the twin daughters of the rector of Oxhill, and he may therefore have given or sold Margaret

Lucy to Lady Underhill. "As he obviously ensured that all three slaves were properly baptised, and that Myrtila was decently buried, with a headstone to mark her grave, we may perhaps assume that he was not an unkind master," suggests the website. "There is no evidence as to the cause of her death. It may well have been that she was unable to stand the rigours of our climate."

Willis-Brown, however, is unconvinced by this version of history. As a black English woman, she says her perspective differs. "Perhaps he was in love with Myrtila, perhaps they were having an affair, perhaps she died in childbirth, perhaps she was really his illegitimate daughter, and perhaps she was even related to Margaret and Will."

Freelance curator Sarah Blackstock, who is employed part time on the HLF-funded Scawdi project, has been digging around parish registers, and documents and letters relating to the slave trade and its abolition, to find the answers. But to date she has unearthed no new clues.

For Blackstock, who is mixed race and has traced part of her own family back to journeymen in 1812 England, the search is essential, not least because writing about slavery tends to focus on black male slaves and white women abolitionists. "Black women are forgotten," she says. But, moreover, it is about "building history to build communities", says Blackstock. "Large numbers of black males have dropped out of education and are in the judicial system. I'm not saying that knowing about their history will solve all the ills of society, but lots of problems facing black males are about a lack of identity, not knowing where they come from."

Blackstock is also involved in Connecting Histories, a partnership between Birmingham City Archive, the universities of Birmingham and Warwick, and the Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures project, which links community outreach workers, archivists and researchers to help diverse communities access archive material and create their own historical records of black and minority ethnic people's lives and experiences in the city.

Sense of belonging

Grosvenor, who is an academic adviser to the programme, hopes that giving people the tools to research their hitherto hidden history will foster a common sense of belonging. He says: "It allows people to engage with their own history, but also to look at common areas of struggle and in doing so to help build a more cohesive society."

But Willis-Brown accuses the "heritage industry" of being "the almost exclusive province of the elite, white middle and upper classes", who she says are "terrified of the S word." Nowhere is this more apparent, she says, than in the descriptions given of a black boy in a painting hanging at Charlecote Park, the Warwickshire home of the Lucy family, where legend has it that William Shakespeare was caught poaching deer.

It was here, while on a visit 18 months ago to the National Trust estate near Stratford-upon-Avon, as part of a Scawdi project to encourage black people to enjoy historic houses and gardens, that Willis-Brown's own journey to uncover centuries-old black British history began. In the poorly-lit Tudor great hall, the boy in a blue livery coat and red stockings, standing in the background of the Captain Thomas Lucy portrait, could easily be missed if it were not for the gleaming, metal collar around his neck. "It's clearly a slave collar," says Willis-Brown "but no one wants to admit it". The National Trust's Charlecote brochure describes the boy as a "black page boy".

Grosvenor's research found the 1680 painting by Sir Godfrey Kneller to be one of the earliest depictions of a black presence in the West Midlands. But he refuses to accept that the shackle means the boy was a slave. "It is a collar of some nature, indicating subservience," he says. "It is indicative of the status of black people at the time, either servants or slaves. But there is no evidence of the Lucys having anything to do with the slave trade."

Grosvenor's research also revealed that, in 1735, a black child called Philip Lucy was baptised at Charlecote. "If we are going to find this hidden history, the answers will be there - in the archives, records, paintings and stories of these great houses," Willis-Brown says.

Mesmerised

It was the boy in the painting who persuaded her to apply for HLF funding for the In the Beginning project. "I was mesmerised by him," she recalls. "I wanted to know who he was, where were his parents, how did he come to be where he was, what's his history?"

Although the trail has gone cold for both Myrtila and the boy, Blackstock has written to the archive office on the island of Nevis asking for access to the plantation records. The project needs to raise additional funds to visit Nevis.

In the meantime, In the Beginning is offering trips for local groups to visit Myrtila's grave and has been approached by a woman bearing that name, also originally from Nevis, and who is anxious to set up a local history group to find out more about her 18th-century namesake. "Uncovering our history is the start of a rather remarkable journey," Willis-Brown says. "And there is much simply waiting to be explored."

- If you have any information about Myrtila or would like to help track down her history, contact bwillisbrown@hotmail.com

- Email your comments to society@guardian.co.uk. If you are writing a comment for publication, please mark clearly "for publication"

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