

Library of Birmingham Archives & Collections

REFERENCES TO SLAVES IN THE ‘ARCHIVES OF SOHO’.

The ‘Archives of Soho’ are three substantial collections of records from 18th-19th centuries. They comprise firstly the business records of Boulton & Watt, steam engine manufacturers in Birmingham; secondly, the business and personal records of Matthew Boulton and Family; and thirdly, the personal records of James Watt and Family.

No records have yet been found in these collections which include any particular debate on the issue of slavery.

The personal records of both Boulton and Watt reveal little about their attitude to slavery. They had friends who were actively involved in the anti-slavery campaigns, such as Josiah Wedgwood, and other friends who wrote on the subject, such as Thomas Day who wrote a poem with John Bicknell called *The Dying Negro, a poetical epistle supposed to be written by a black, who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the River Thames; to his intended wife* (London, 1773).

Watt’s younger son, Gregory, also wrote a poem called against slavery. However, the steam engine business made substantial profits from the supply of engines to the Caribbean for use on sugar plantations. The records do not necessarily reveal whether the introduction of new technology to the production of sugar would lessen dependence on the labour of slaves, or just increase the profits of the plantation owners.

The other appearance of slaves within the records is in the accounts of James Watt of Greenock, the father of James Watt the engineer, who was a merchant in the Scottish port of Greenock in the mid 18th century. He owned interests in several ships and their cargoes, trading with Carolina, the West Indies, Norway and elsewhere. Much of the trade was in tobacco, wood, rum and sugar.

Some of the financial records also show instances of the sale of ‘negroes’ in the West Indies. There is also evidence that a Black boy called Frederick was brought to Scotland for Lady Spynie in 1763.

The list that follows has extracts from some of the documents in the Archives of Soho where slaves are mentioned.

*There are detailed catalogues available for these collections in Birmingham City Archives. Numbers given in **bold** in the list below are the reference numbers required to order the document described. The documents are listed in chronological order within each collection.*

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MS 3147

RECORDS OF BOULTON & WATT

The firm of Boulton & Watt supplied the Caribbean islands with nearly 200 steam engines designed for sugar mills. There are engineering drawings for most of these and, in many cases, correspondence about the engine. Most can be found listed in the engine book under the section for Independent engines or Bell Crank engines. This gives the name of the person ordering the engine; the date; the intended destination of the engine and details of the engine required.

In one of the portfolios of drawings is a watercolour drawing of an engine for crushing sugar cane being operated by a Black man. c. 1814.

[MS 3147/5/1353b]

For an introduction to this area of their business, see Jennifer Tann : ‘*Steam and Sugar: the diffusion of the stationary steam engine to the Caribbean sugar industry, 1770 – 1840.*’ History of Technology, Vol. 19, 1997 (pp. 63-84)

[B&W pamphlets T/4]



Letter. John Dawson (Liverpool) to B&W (Soho). 9 November 1790.

‘Sirs, I have been considering of the conversation Mr Galton & I had respecting the merits of the Steam Engine as I am going to have some Sugar Works erected in the Island of Trinidad & wish to have your Ideas & the opinion of experienc’d people how far it would be practicable to erect them on that plan: the want of Wind & Water the principle on which they are at present work’d, retards the progress so very much, particularly in crop time, That if an engine could be invented with a certainty of answering the purpose, the Rolers so contriv’d that if possible to have a greater effect in the pressing of the Cane than what is at present used but I must observe to you that without wood fire will answer the same purpose as coal, the undertaking would be very hazardous, Coals could not be laid in at that island for less than 71/6 pr Chaldron, the duty being 15/6.

I shall thank you to give me every information of the practicability of this scheme for could it be made to answer, a large field would be open in that quarter of the Globe, the King of Spain having granted a loan of a million Dollars to the Inhabitants of Trinidad for the purpose of erecting Sugar Works & purchase of Slaves which I am to have the supplying of. Should be happy to give every encouragement in the introduction of such a plan with yourself & I can engage the Governor will do the same.

Your reply will oblige Sir

John Dawson

Could it not be contriv'd that the waist Fire assist in the boiling house by a damper to stop it occasionally —'
[MS 3147/3/88/9]

James Watt replied on 14 Nov. 1790 in letter book [MS 3147/3/87], but mentioned only engineering matters.



In 1790, Vincent Ogé led a campaign to claim voting rights for Black people in St Domingue (Haiti), which was crushed. In August 1791, there was a further revolt by the slaves in the Northern Province.

Copy press letter written by James Watt, B&W to Beguye & Co. of Nantes.

' Messrs. Beguye & Co.
Nantes

Birmingham
31 Oct. 1791

Gentlemen

The late unpropitious news from St. Domingo has made us suspend the prosecution of the order for your Engine until we hear from you. We have written to the foundry for that purpose & expect that no material expense has yet been incurred.

We thought it our duty to give you this information, to relieve part of your anxiety in case any fatal accident should have befallen your friend Mr. Bertrand.

We sincerely condole with the unhappy sufferers, though we heartily pray that the system of slavery so disgraceful to humanity were abolished by prudent though progressive measures.

We remain etc.

Boulton & Watt.'

[MS 3147/3/88, p. 119]



John Woodward, who was the senior clerk in Boulton & Watt's London Banking Agency, had an uncle called William Voce, who was a surveyor in St Ann's, Jamaica. Voce died in 1809, and left a considerable fortune to Woodward. There are four surviving bundles of documents about the estate.

[MS 3147/30/2, 3, 4, 5]

There is also a letter in MS 3219 which shows that on his death his slave, Caesar, was to be set free. [For this, see list in next section].

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Other papers of William Voce in the Boulton & Watt records include: bundle of miscellaneous papers: accounts; ship insurances; will of Mary Carter of London; papers concerning the Atkinson Estate in Dominica; stamp office papers etc. 1793-1835.

[MS 3147/26/24; 27/7; 28/14]

MS 3219
PAPERS OF JAMES WATT AND FAMILY

From the papers of James Watt of Greenock:

Letter. James Watson (Little River) to James Watt of Greenock. 14 May 1739.

' The returns of [Mr Hunter's] cargo are Rum, Molasses, Salt & Negroes with which & ye goods now on Hand I Design to purchase a Load of wheet for Madeira wherof I have engaged a small Qu[anti]ty already.'

[MS 3219/3/91/4]

Letter. James Hunter (St Eastatus) to James Watt of Greenock. 2 July 1740.

'Sir I wrote you from Sett Christophers dated the first of June leeting you know the badness of the market att Bass Stare.....

As negroes turn out dear Bought six three men and three women....'.

[MS 3219/3/100/51]

Letter. James Castellan to James Watt of Greenock. 11 Dec. 1741.

' Mr Watt

I ship'd on board Mr Hunter a negro man to be sold in the west indies, I assign'd over the bill of sale I had from Samuel keel to him, Mr Scottay tells me aafter Mr Hunter died he was hired by Mr McFarlane to the countrey att 50 shill: p[er] month Jamaica money with an allowance of 27£: the same money to the owner if kill'd in the service, I have never heard a word from Mr McFarlane, it's possible the effects may be remitted home either as Mr Watt's goods or Mr Hunter's, I beg you would enquire into the affair one half of the fellow before he went off I sold to Mr Watson, and it is now his property, if any thing can be had for the other half pllease to buy such goods as you think necessary, and ensure them to

*Sir your sincere friend and humble servant
James Castellan*

a negroe man to be sold on James Watts account '

[MS 3219/3/100/94]

Receipts of James Watt of Greenock, merchant

' Greenock 17 March 1762

*Re[ceive]d from John Watt[:] a Black Boy which I promise to deliver to Mr John Warrand Merch[an]' in Glasgow
Walter McAdam'
[MS 3219/3/71b/61]*

Receipt: *' Directed to y^e Care of Mr John Warrand Mer^{ht} in y^e Salt Market Glasgow
to be forwarded to Lady Spynie at Broody House '*

On reverse, ' List of Cloths for Black Boy March 1762'

*' Fridrick The Black Boy Cloths
1 big blew Coat
1 Coat & waist Coat & Britchess
2 pair Stockings & 1 pair Shoes
three check Shirts
a black Gravat & pocket Handkerchefe
a hate & woset keap '
[MS 3219/3/71b/62]*

Letter. James Brodie (St. Andrews) to James Watt of Greenock. 3 Oct. 1762.

Brodie says :

'I am surprised I have never heard anything of my Black boy. If he is not gone North I beg you will send him by the first opportunity directed for Brodie House near Forres. I shall be glad to have your answer in course of post and an account of what he has cost you since his arrival at Greenock and the cost of my Letters. I am sensible you have been at a good deal of Trouble upon my account. I shall be glad of an oportunity [sic] to show my Gratitude.'

[MS 3219/3/92/96]



From the papers of James Watt:

Henry Smeathman had a plan to resettle poor Black people from London in a free colony in Sierra Leone. Many of the settlers were freed slaves. The following letter was part of his fund raising appeal.

Letter. Henry Smeathman (London) to James Watt (—). 21 Jun. 1786.

[He encloses a plan [not present] concerning his attempt to open a new trade with Africa by establishing a colony of poor Black people in Sierra Leone].

' A more important pursuit engages my attention at present, an attempt to open a new and beneficial system of commerce with Africa. Enclosed is a Plan, of which I request your

acceptance, also two, one of which I request you will do me the honour to present to Mr Southern and the other to Dr. Priestl[e]y.

I purpose to take with me Draughtsmen and Assistants to collect and make observations and experiments in Natural History, Philosophy, Chemistry etc. I am a mere Tyro in everything, and therefore wish for necessary instruction. To obtain it I have drawn up various hints and queries, rather with a view to get philosophical Gentlemen to direct my enquiries, and propose experiments, than to offer information

That being the intention I could wish to submit them to your judgement and shall send them without further apology, if I receive any encouragement from Mr Boulton, who I hear is in Town. I shall with great pleasure make any experiment in my power which may conduce to promote science.

You will observe my plan of settlement, that Blacks and Persons of Colour, have a most favourable opportunity, through the benevolence of Government of enjoying great advantages, & the Public will be relieved from a great burthen for the greater part of those unfortunate persons come to the Parish. If I could have the same bounty with whites, for it amounts to £14 — each person, it would be possible to engage ten thousand in a month. Upward of 340 have entered voluntarily to go with me. Many of the Black Men have white wives and the Black Women white husbands, and there are among them all kinds of useful tradesmen.

I sail the third week in the next month.

.....Henry Smeathman.'

[MS 3219/4/94/29]

See *Black Poor & White Philanthropists; London's Blacks and the foundation of the Sierra Leone Settlement, 1786 - 1791*, Stephen J. Braidwood. (1994)

There is no reply from James Watt in the outgoing letter book for 1786.

Cash book of James Watt. 1787-1789.

Entries for 25 Jan 1788 and 13 Apr 1789 show subscriptions of 1 guinea to 'the negro bill'.

[MS 3219/4/158]

Letter. Josiah Wedgwood (Etruria) to James Watt (Birmingham). 14 Feb. 1788.

Docketed: About China stone & clay

'I take it for granted that you & I are on the same side of the question respecting the slave trade. I have joined my brethren here in a petition from the pottery for the abolition of it, as I do not like a half measure in this black business.'

[MS 3219/4/95/20]



From the papers of James Watt jr.:

Thomas Cooper was a Manchester businessman, involved in textiles and bleaching, with radical tendencies in politics. He became a friend of James Watt jr.'s when he was based in Manchester in the early 1790s. Cooper emigrated to America with Joseph Priestley in 1793.

Letter. Thomas Cooper (Philadelphia) to James Watt jr. (Soho). 4 Apr. 1796.

'...The difficulty of hiring servants makes Mrs C very uncomfortable, but I am seeking out for a set of negroes for here. They are purchaseable here till they are 28 years old..'

[MS 3219/6/2/C/126]



John Woodward was left a considerable fortune by his uncle, mainly in West Indian assets. The following letter has a transcript of the will of his uncle, William Voce, land surveyor, of the parish of St Ann, Jamaica, which includes the following:

Letter. John Woodward to James Watt jr. 17 Nov. 1809.

'Item I will that my Negro Slave named Caesar be manumited [sic] and set free immediately after my decease And I do hereby Manumite and Make him free Accordingly. Item I give to my said slave named Caesar Ten Pounds current money per annum for the term of his life, the first payment to be made at my Death.'

[MS 3219/6/2/W/433]



From the papers of Gregory Watt:

Poem on a slave, by Gregory Watt

Volume of essays on philosophical and classical themes and verses by Gregory Watt. At the end of the volume is the following poem, at the end of which is written in Gregory Watt's hand:

'This was wholly written by me without the assistance of any book.

G. Watt '

[MS 3219/7/8]

I.

When angry Death, tremendous, shakes his darts,
And fire-eyed Vengeance waves her brass bound rod;
Christian, what direful pangs shall wound thy heart !
How canst thou answer to thine angry God ?

II.

How for the many, varied, ills atone
Thou' st heaped on bleeding Afric' s injured head ?
How for the deep the agonising groan ?
How for the tears in bitter misery shed ?

III.

Beneath the Manchineel's Pestiferous shade,
Seized by the icy fangs of haggard Death,
Th'expiring Negro, all forlorn, was laid,
And drew, with agony, his parting breath.

IV.

There was a day, with feeble voice he cried,
There was a day, when, midst the sable train,
Exulting in my might with youthful pride,
I shone unmatched on Benins sunny plain.

V.

No painful cares pervaded, then, my breast;
I had no haughty, captious, lord to please;
No want ungratified, no wish suppress,
I spent my days in soft delicious ease.

VI.

When proud Dahomai' s haughty monarch rose
To hurl his vengeance o' er our prostrate land,
In brilliant arms I rushed to meet the foes,
And snatch my country from th'invaders hand.

VII.

In vain I fought, my base companions fled,
And left me single to sustain their rage:
Behold me now a wretched captive led;
For who can with a thousand Chiefs engage.

VIII.

Soon to European hands was I consigned,
Reluctant forced to cross th'extended main;
Ah me ! what words can paint my tortured mind ?
Torn from my friends, Torn from my native plain.

IX.

Torn from the soft endearments of my wife,
Torn from my aged parents fond embrace,
Who, Who shall guard them in the close of life ?
Who fill a sons and tender husbands place.

X.

Too prosperous brezes filled each swelling sail,
Too soon, the hoary bosomed ocean crost,
Our vessel nimbly shot before the gale,
And anchored safe beside Jamaicas coast.

XI.

Me, as his slave a haughty master chose;
Forced me to labour with incessant toil;
Repaid each effort with abuse and blows;
And made my sweat to fertilise the soil.

XII.

Ah who can all the varied ills relate
This hapless form endured from lawless power ?
Oh how I greet the near approach of Fate !
Oh how exult to see my parting hour !

XIII.

Compelled to toil, the Sols refulgent rays
Poured their full splendour on my throbbing head,
I durst not strive to shun the scorching blaze,
Nor seek for shelter in the cooling shade.

XIV.

Oft-times, with wanton rage, the bloody rod
Made my torn shoulders one continued gash;
While streams of Gore distained the verdant sod;
Of Gore, that flowed from 'neath the vengeful lash.

XV.

Worn out, and spent with racking endless woes
I haste for e'er to quit lifes dreary scene;
In other distant worlds to seek repose,
And not a trace remaining what I've been

XVI.

No pitying friend my woe worn corse to bear
No loving wife to mourn my hapless doom,

No tender child to shed the pious tear,
I sink, unknown unpitied to the tomb.



It is not evident whether the Black man called Pompey in the following reference was a slave or not:

**Papers of James Watt of Greenock:
Account book for North Carolina business.**

This volume, dated 1741-1744, appears to be a record of items purchased on a day by day basis, by various named persons, from an unidentified person, perhaps with a warehouse, which may have been at Edenton, North Carolina, as there are a couple of references 'To bills at Edentoun' on a loose page, dated June 1744.

The goods sold include mainly textiles and clothing, including deerskins; buttons and buckles; food (corn, meat, sugar, rum); and some knives, tools, gunpowder etc.

An entry under 14 October 1743 reads:

'Dr. Negroe Pompey to 1 lace —6; to ½ yd. Ozenbriggs —5—; to 1 pr Sleeve butt[on]s.

An entry under 5 November 1743 reads:

'Dr. ½ bush pease to Negroe Pompey. —8—0.'

Under 12 November 1743 is listed,

'Dr. John Lett...to 1 pr. Negroe Stockines 0—15—0.

Under 27 January 1744 is listed,

'Dr. Negroe Pompey to 1 pr Shoe buckles. 0—7—6.'

[MS 3219/3/23]

The Black men in the following reference were hired labourers, not slaves:

**Account of Captain Ninian Stewart with Buchanan & Hill, merchants of Norfolk,
Virginia.
17 May 1749.**

5 June do[cash] p[ai]d Negroes at Landing Goods 0 --1--3

7 Sept. 2 days hire of a Negroe p[ai]d for you	0--2--6
By 3 pair Shoes for Negroes [@] 5/6	6--16--6

[MS 3219/3/80]

MS 3782 MATTHEW BOULTON PAPERS

Letter. Josiah Wedgwood (London) to Matthew Boulton and James Watt (London). ? 1785.
*(Dated at Frith Street. Directed to Messrs. Boulton and Watt at Mr. Matthews',
Green Lettice Lane. Docketed "Suppose 1785," but noted below in pencil "It relates
to Suppression of Slave Trade, & is later than 1785.")*

[MS 3782/12/81/62]



Miscellaneous Bills.

A bill for books bought by Matthew Boulton:

Bill. J. Johnson to Matthew Boulton. 20 Feb.-20 Mar. 1788.

*Books: Calonne's Requets au Roi et Reponse à M. Necker; Kirwan on Phlogiston
and Latitudes; Newton's Thoughts on Slavery; Considerations on Slavery; Calonne's
Defence; Chesterfield's Letters, 4 vols.; Guthrie's Geography, 4to. £4 16s. 6d.
(Docketed 1792, which was presumably the year of payment.)*

[MS 3782/6/194/49]



Letter. Josiah Wedgwood Jr. (Etruria) to Matthew Robinson Boulton (Soho). 7 Feb. 1826.
*"Requisition for an anti-slavery meeting." (Annexed is the text of a notice intended
to be presented to the sheriff of Staffordshire.)*

To the High Sheriff of the County of Stafford

We request that you will call a meeting of the Gentlemen, Clergy, &
Freeholders of the County of Stafford to consider of petitioning Parliament for the
mitigation, & gradual abolition of Slavery throughout the British dominions; in
pursuance of the Resolutions of the House of Commons, & the Regulations of His
Majesty's Government founded upon them.

Etruria Feb^y 7—1826

My dear Sir

I am not quite sure that the Requisition is not losing the advantage of your
support, from my not clearly understanding your objection. Having 53 respectable
signa[tures on] the Requisition, it is out of my power to alter it, but in my opinion
that document does express approbation of the proceedings of Parl^l. & of the
Government, & does imply, by a reference to the 3^d Resolution of the Commons,
that compensation shall be made to the Planters if injury be done to them.

I presume, that it will fall upon me to prepare the Resolutions for the
Meeting, & I should think it right to express those objects distinctly, and from
similar resolutions having passed at other County Meetings, I cannot anticipate that

they will not at Stafford. I shall certainly be very glad if what I have said induces you to return me the Requisition with your signature, but if I have not met your objection, pray do not give yourself the trouble of writing to me—I am

My dear Sir

Very truly yours

Josiah Wedgwood

[MS 3782/13/26/136]



Copy letter. Matthew Robinson Boulton (Soho) to Josiah Wedgwood Jr. [Etruria]. 9 Feb. 1826.

“Confirmation of my objections to concur in the requisition for the meeting on the abolition of slavery.”

Soho Feb^y 9th 1826

My dear Sir

I almost mistrust my own judgement in demurring to concur in a measure which has the sanction of yourself & my friend Watt & I fear I can add little to the exposition of the motives of my hesitation communicated in his several letters. You must be assured I should be proud to be enrolled in a list with such names could I feel equal confidence with yourself in the result of the discussion & in the spirit & tone with which it may be carried on at the intended Meeting, but so entirely opposed to the view I entertain upon the subject has been the issue of more than one meeting convened under a similar requisition that I must confess my doubts of it's expediency still remain.

Believe me to be

My dear Sir with great regard very truly yours

M: Robⁿ Boulton

To J Wedgwood Esq^r

[MS 3782/13/26/220]



There are 5 letters between William Wilberforce and Matthew Boulton, 1800-1807, but none of them mention the slavery issue.

[MS 3782/12/45,46,48; MS 3782/13/16/]

Commemorative medal.

The Soho Mint produced a medal for Sierra Leone in 1807 to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade.

[MS 3782/3/210 p. 84]

‘ Obverse. An European An African shaking hands with this inscription “We are all brethren” An Arabic inscription commemorative of the abolition of the Trade.’



THOMAS DAY (1748-)

Son of Thomas Day, collector of customs. His father died in 1749, leaving Day moderately wealthy. Entered Oxford at age 16 as a gentleman commoner of Corpus Christi College. In 1766 while spending a vacation with his mother & stepfather on the Day family estate in Berkshire, he heard of a neighbour called Edgeworth who was also a student at Corpus & travelled to see him. Day was interested mainly in social reform & education rather than in science but became very friendly with William Small and Erasmus Darwin and the Lichfield circle.

His most famous works were childrens' books; The History of Sandford and Merton, particularly, was written with the purpose of instilling 'correct' purpose in young minds. In 1773, he heard of a black slave who had escaped in London, been christened in order to marry a white servant woman, been recaptured, & shot himself in despair. Day and a friend, John Bicknell, wrote a poem called The Dying Negro, a poetical epistle supposed to be written by a black, who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the River Thames; to his intended wife (published London, 1773).

This was the first of his publications to be popular and went through four editions in English and one in German. Day later added a postscript, in which the spirit of Africa is roused and virtuously destroys Europe.