Edward Long, Roque Ferdinand and the Church of England's Unrelinquished Burden of Slavery

Lecture Given for Chichester Diocese's Black History Month Closing Service, Sunday 25th October 2026, St Mary's Church, Slindon

Alan Lester

Today we are convening in two places redolent of the Anglican Church's conflicted relationship with slavery. Over there is a memorial to Edward Long, a man who did his utmost to justify the dehumanisation of generations of enslaved African men, women and children. In St Mary Magdalene Church Madehurst, to which we are heading this afternoon, is another memorial to Roque Ferdinand, one of the individuals caught up in the web of atrocities that Anglicans like Long sought to perpetuate. Around us are edifices designed to bring Britons closer to God and overseen by an institution grappling with the unresolved business of its own deep-rooted complicity in what the UN now calls 'the gravest crime against humanity'.

In this talk I will try to pull at some of the threads of history offered us by Long's, Ferdinand's and the Church of England's entanglements with Atlantic slavery. As we will see, it is easier to trace some threads than others. We know far more about the enslaver and writer Edward Long, perhaps the best known proponent of racism in British history, than we do about Roque Ferdinand, whose words were, as far as we know, never recorded and preserved. The story of the Anglican Church's complicity in enslavement has only recently begun to attract as much public attention as its boast that it led the crusade against slavery. The telling of that story is itself being fiercely contested by high profile commentators. These facts gesture to the disparities of power that Atlantic slavery has bequeathed us.

Let me start with Edward Long, and here I must acknowledge my appreciation of the work of Professor Catherine Hall the historian who has done most, at least since Eric Williams, to link Britain's history with the that of the Caribbean. She wrote the interpretation board that now sits beneath Long's memorial. Without her book *Lucky Valley*, and her having shared the notes of the talk she gave upon the new board's unveiling in March 2024, I would have had much less to say.

Edward Long and Jamaica

Edward Long has been described as the 'father of English racism'. His great-grandfather Samuel was one of the first English settlers in Jamaica, accompanying its invasion by Cromwell's expeditionary force and witnessing the Spanish capitulation in 1655. Four generations on from Samuel, Edward Long inherited the family plantation, Lucky Valley, and its enslaved workers. He went to Jamaica to manage it in 1758 and returned to Sussex just over a decade later in 1769, confident that it would continue provide for his growing family.



Edward Long, by William Sharp, after John Opie line engraving, 1796, NPG D37426

Edward Long's spell in Jamaica coincided with the boom in British slave trading and plantation productivity. Between 1740 and 1806, British ships carried around forty per cent of all the African captives trafficked to the Americas. From Samuel Long's time until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, some 13,000 British investors trafficked around 3 million captives between Africa and the Americas. The plantation system that Britons and other

Europeans built on this constant supply of enslaved people – 12.7 million altogether – was unlike any form of slavery that had preceded it. It had little in common with the more intimate, domestic forms of slavery practised across much of the world beforehand, or even with the contemporaneous trafficking of African captives by Muslim polities across the Sahara, to the Ottoman Empire, or over the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The system developed by Christian Europeans was about the making of wealth rather than its display. It was about turning people into commodities and capital assets as well as unpaid labour. In this system, Black people, and only Black people, as Hall explains, 'could be separated, and sold to settle a debt; marriages had no formal recognition; women had to submit sexually and children could be taken away. Enslaved women bore the cruel double burden of labouring in the cane fields or the great house and reproducing the next generation of the enslaved from their own bodies'. The historian of slavery Orlando Patterson described 'Jamaican society' in Edward Long's time as 'possibly the most pitilessly cruel and exploitative in modern history'.

Britain's relative prosperity was accelerated significantly thanks to the cruelty of this system. By the time Long returned from Lucky Valley Jamaica alone was producing around ten per cent of the private wealth of England and Wales. Plantations in Britain's colonies were almost three times as economically valuable as Scotland, twice as valuable as Ireland and perhaps equivalent to industrialising Lancashire and Yorkshire combined. Joseph Inikori estimated that in 1770, the slave trade and the broader plantation economy combined were furnishing as much as fifty-five percent of Great Britain's gross fixed capital formation investment – a measure of how much of the new value added in an economy is invested rather than consumed.

Those who want to deny any collective British advantage from this system, argue that it was only the wealthy elites who profited from it, but they overlook the downstream effects of plantation-derived investments. Despite the appalling working conditions and pay of many white British workers, their wellbeing was being enhanced thanks to the enslavers' disbursements of capital acquired through captive labour in the Caribbean. Not only did these investments provide a crucial ingredient for the rise of steam-driven factory productivity, helping to make Britain the world's first industrial power; enslavers also cleansed their Christian consciences and burnished their earthly reputations by founding schools, alms houses, charities and hospitals. Edward Colston was literally put on a pedestal for his charitable contributions in Bristol, but less well known is that he also gave London's St Bartholomew's Hospital the funds needed to purchase its buildings. Bristol's, Liverpool's and Glasgow's Royal Infirmaries were also funded by people traffickers. Around one-tenth of Edinburgh Royal Infirmary's annual income came from the Red Hill pen in Jamaica, which it owned along with its captive workforce.

Enslaved people needed no external encouragement but only favourable circumstances 'to rise against their oppressors'. Olaudah Equiano described the plantation system as a 'perpetual state of war', with new fronts opening at any moment. Jamaican captives initiated Tacky's Revolt, a full-scale insurrection, two years after Edward Long settled at Lucky Valley. He and his compatriots were saved from a wholesale revolution like that which would occur in Haiti thirty years later only by the return of large numbers of troops and the cooperation of the maroons –

escaped captives who helped the enslavers in return for being left alone in the mountainous interior.

Long was profoundly shaken. Tacky's Revolt made him appreciate the fragility of the race-based, hierarchical order upon which his family's wealth depended. The plantocracy compensated for their anxiety by inflicting the most vicious punishments on the insurrectionists. Captured rebels were burned alive or hung up in chains for days until they died.

When he came, years later, to write his famous *History of Jamaica* from the comfort of his Chichester home, Edward Long painted a picture of the island hosting 'a benevolent form of slavery – a "legitimate, equitable species of servitude … founded on the principles of reason"', but the unsettling reality crept in to his text regardless. He had to admit that 'a constant virtual hostility exists'. I will come back to Long's *History of Jamaica* – what it was about and what it sought to achieve – in a few moments, but first I want to place the Church of England into his and the broader slavery system's story.

The Church and Slavery

The Anglican church was established in Jamaica a few years after Samuel Long's arrival, at the restoration of Charles II in 1660. It arrived in the form of the colonial state itself, with the governor being also the supreme head of the provincial church. Anglican clergy tended mainly to the weekly services, births, marriages and deaths of the white colonists, who were vehemently opposed to any attempts to convert their captives in case they were inspired to revolt by ideas of their equality before their enslavers' own God.

Long saw slavery as ordained by God. For over 250 years Anglican doctrine underpinned his conviction. The Church's missionary wing, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, declared that it 'cannot condemn the Practice of keeping Slaves as unlawful, finding the contrary very plainly implied in the precepts given by the Apostle'.

As well as providing the planters and traffickers with spiritual legitimacy, the Church benefited from the slave system financially. Slave traders, owners and their associates contributed about a third of the donations to The Church of England's permanent fund for the support of clergy, while much of that fund, known as Queen Anne's Bounty, was invested in shares and annuities in the South Sea Company. During the period in which the Church held its shares in the 1720s, the company trafficked 19,758 people, around one in eight of them children under ten.

The SPG itself also owned two Barbados sugar estates, which it had inherited in the will of the planter Christopher Codrington. The bishops who oversaw the estates from London justified their retention throughout the eighteenth century by claiming that they were running them as a model slave plantation, demonstrating to other planters that captives could be converted to Christianity not only without the risk of insurrection but with enhanced productivity. As J, Harry Bennett jnr put it, 'Christianity would leave the Negro a slave, reconcile him to his chains, and make him a more diligent and docile servant'.

In reality the main Codrington estate was managed by local agents much like any other Barbados sugar plantation – in the interests of profit maximisation. It brought

in the equivalent of £630 million over a period of 126 years, while the hostility of planters to their captives' conversion continued.



*Thomas Secker (1693–1768), Archbishop of Canterbury, **Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792)**, **Lambeth Palace***

Until 1732 the Society was still branding its captives on the chest with a hot iron to form the word 'Society'. Acknowledging the high death rates on the estate, the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Secker wrote, 'I have long wondered and lamented that the negroes in our plantations decrease, and new supplies become necessary, continuously'. Even after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, when measures for the 'amelioration' of slavery were designed in Britain, the Codrington plantation was as resistant as any other in enforcing the reforms. Women as well as men were still flogged, punishments went unrecorded, and manumissions and marriage between captives were discouraged.

Only in the dying days of legalised slave ownership in the early 1830s did the SPG's pious words about better treatment than that of other slave-owners begin to be realised. Aside from the £630 million the Codrington estate yielded for the SPG, under the terms of the Emancipation Act in 1833, it was 'able to collect the goodly sum of £8,823 …'. This is worth about £1 million today. Bennet argues that the effect of the Church's insistence that slavery could be rendered compatible with Christianity was to prolong the plantation system. In 1833, ninety-six members of the Anglican clergy still owned hundreds of enslaved people. The British government paid them the equivalent of £46 million in compensation for the loss of their human 'property'. Nothing was ever paid as compensation to the enslaved or their descendants.

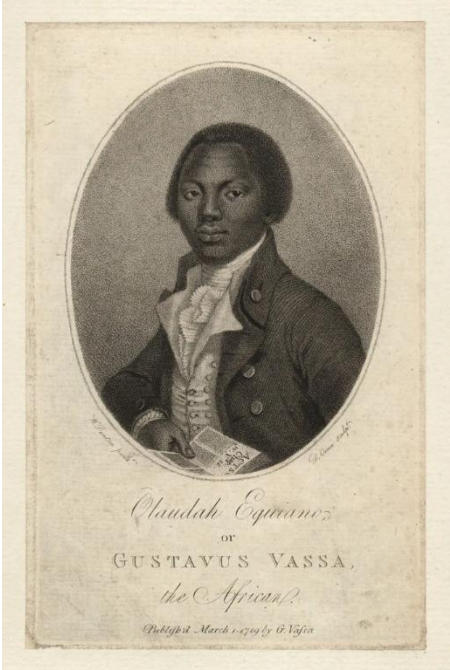
Long, the Church and Abolition

Now I want to come back to Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, making two claims about it. First, as Catherine Hall has argued, it can be understood only as a response to the challenge of the abolitionist movement. Long's notorious book was a reaction against the most serious progressive provocation of his lifetime. Secondly, I would argue that it foreshadows the backlash that we have seen in recent years against Black Lives Matter – the most serious provocation in recent times for those invested in structural racism.

Even as the Anglican Church was conniving in the establishment of the British slave system, Christians were divided over its morality. Morgan Godwyn, a minister who witnessed slavery first hand in Virginia and Barbados, declared that it was immoral and an offence against God in a sermon at Westminster Abbey in 1685. Publishing the sermon, he accused King James II of making a Faustian bargain with the Devil by heading up the slave-trading Royal African Company. The sermon was censored and Godwyn disappeared, only to be found dead two years later.

Disquiet could not be entirely suppressed though. In the 1760s, the Quakers, prohibited slaveholders from the fellowship, and in 1774, John Wesley, founder of the Methodists denounced them in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. Granville Sharp, an Anglican civil servant, forced a definitive legal ruling on the question of whether any enslaved person brought to Britain could be compelled by an owner to leave again. In 1772, he helped the escaped captive James Somerset secure a ruling from Lord Chief

Justice William Mansfield that his owner was not allowed to force him back to the Americas. In 1778, Joseph Knight, who had been brought to Edinburgh by his 'owner' cited Mansfield's judgement to force the verdict that 'the regulations in Jamaica, concerning slaves, do not extend to this kingdom'. The formerly enslaved Olaudah Equiano directed Granville Sharp's attention to the key legal case that brought the cruelty of slave trafficking to public attention in 1783: the Zong case, in which an insurance company contested a claim to cover the cost of the captives deliberately thrown overboard on a disastrous slaving voyage as if they were livestock.



Olaudah Equiano ('Gustavus Vassa') by Daniel Orme, published by Olaudah Equiano ('Gustavus Vassa'), after W. Denton published 1 March 1789 NPG D8546
In 1787 Equiano co-founded the Sons of Africa, a group of Africans living in London who had been freed from slavery and were determined to get the trade abolished. Ottobah Cugoano was a prominent co-founder. Together they built upon foundations already laid in Britain by Phyllis Wheatley, 'the extraordinary Poetical Genius', who had visited London in 1773, her poems widely reviewed and acclaimed. Ignatius Sancho, a grocer who had been born on a slave ship was another powerful Black antislavery voice in Britain. His letters and essays, according to the 1784 *Monthly Review*, embarrassed those 'half-informed philosophers' who insisted that Black people 'are inferior to any white nation in mental abilities'.

The Sons of Africa allied with the newly founded Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, presenting personal testimony of the horrors of slavery in the Society's public meetings and persistently lobbying members of parliament to vote with Willam Wilberforce for abolition of British trafficking. In just three months during 1788, over 100 petitions calling for its abolition, with over 100,000 signatures, were presented to the House of Commons.

Equiano and the other Black abolitionists pointed repeatedly to the hypocrisy of their Christian co-religionists who trafficked and enslaved Black people. Equiano wrote: 'I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice?'

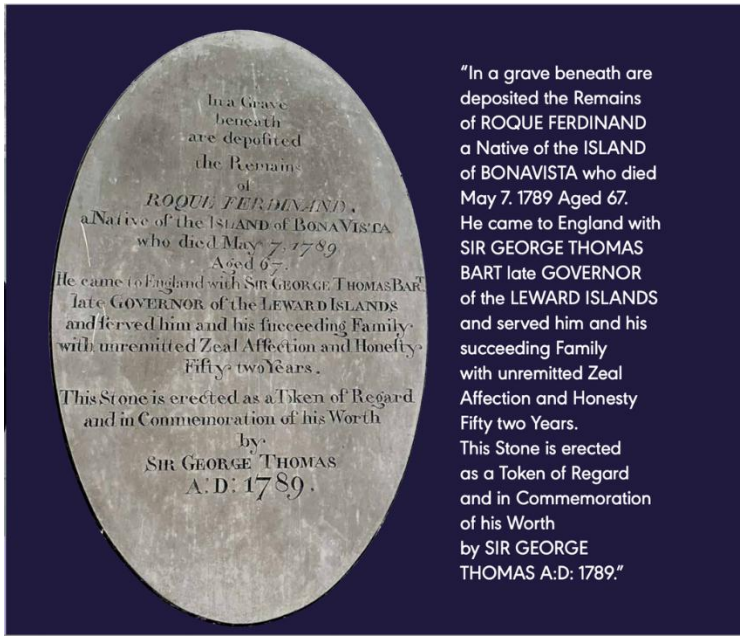
By the time Long returned from Lucky Valley to West Sussex, the antislavery campaign was creating 'a very different atmosphere from the England he had left in 1757'. *The History of Jamaica* was Long's desperate attempt to hold off abolition – to persuade fellow Britons that the Jamaican planters held the key to Britain's prosperity, that their right to own Black people was an essential aspect of their own liberty, and that slavery was a just and natural state for Africans to be in given their inherent and intractable inferiority.

I would argue that Long's *History* was the antecedent for today's backlash against Black Lives Matter, which also lit a glimmer of institutional reform. Long's political heirs see in BLM's challenge to the structural racism that persisted beyond abolition, beyond formal decolonisation and beyond the reluctant granting of equal legal rights to enslaved people's descendants in Britain, a spectre almost as daunting as abolition was to Long.

Everything that Long wrote about Black people, enslaved or free, is difficult and disturbing to read and I have decided not repeat any of it here. Suffice it to say that his defence of the plantation system relied on propagating the conviction that African people were more animal than human: a separate species. What is so disturbing about Long's rhetoric right now is its undying echo. 'Long talk' is being amplified even as we meet. How different is the Great Replacement myth from Long's horror at the idea of a 'numerous race of walnut-coloured beings' emerging from what he called 'miscegenation' – a horror, by the way, that belied completely his view that the offspring of mixed-race unions would prove infertile because of the difference in species. How far removed are the groups of black-clad, masked men amassing to terrorize people seeking asylum from the 'patriotic societies' that Long encouraged to resist abolitionists?

Long warned that Mansfield's judgment in the Somerset case would open the doors to 'thousands more Quacos and Quashebas', flocking to 'our' shores, assisted by unpatriotic 'Negroe solicitors'. Are these the forerunners of today's 'lefty liberal lawyers'? I need hardly labour the point when Long wrote of the whole nation in danger of 'becoming like the … Moors, both in skin colour and in morals', and every family within it 'in danger' from an influx of freed Black beggars, a burden on the poor rates, and a barrier to Englishmen 'gaining employment'. I will return to Long's echo in my conclusion, but first I want instead to turn to the faint traces of one of those whose lives Long sought forever to obscure.

Roque Ferdinand and Long's Intellectual Heirs



Roque Ferdiand Plaque, St Mary Magdalene Church, Midhurst: image thanks to Vitalis Ngwambi, Sarah Lee, Mira Knox and Erica Smith, Chichester Diocese, Black History in Church Spaces Exhibtion, Oct 2026.

Roque Ferdinand is one of only two enslaved Black individuals commemorated in English churches. The memorial to him in St Mary Magdalene Church reads:

In a grave beneath are deposited the Remains of ROQUE FERDINAND a Native of the ISLAND of BONAVISTA who died May 7. 1789 Aged 67.
He came to England with SIR GEORGE THOMAS BART [Baronet] late GOVERNOR of the LEEWARD ISLANDS and served him and his succeeding Family with unremitted Zeal Affection and Honesty Fifty two Years.

This Stone is erected as a Token of Regard and in Commemoration of his Worth by SIR GEORGE THOMAS A: D: 1789.

Bonavista, or Boa Vista is an island in Cape Verde archipelago, about 450 km off the west coast of Africa. Its proximity to the Guinea Coast encouraged traders to purchase captives for early Portuguese plantations and it remained an important staging post in the transatlantic slave trade. Sir George Thomas, who was on his way to become governor of the British colony of Pennsylvania, "purchased" the 15-year-old Ferdinand in 1737, and released him from enslavement only upon his own death in 1773, by providing for Ferdinand's freedom and £20 a year in his will. Ferdinand had in the meantime travelled to Pennsylvania, London and the Leeward Islands, where Thomas was governor during the period that Edward Long was in Jamaica.
I could tell you much about Ferdinand's 'owner' Thomas. He has an entry in the Oxford History of National Biography and left an archive full of detail about his career across multiple sites of the British Empire. But what more can I say about Roque Ferdinand? Although he died at the age of 67, he experienced freedom only for his last 16 years, during which he carried on in domestic service for Thomas' son. I do not know if he was ever taught to read and write but I know of no written records by him and only the church engraving about him. The Thomas family appear to have thought of Ferdinand differently from the other African captives they 'owned' on their two sugar plantations on Antigua. Named Winthorpe and North Sound, these were managed for them by Dr. Walter Tullideph.

A letter from Tullideph in 1749 references Thomas' purchase of the Yapton estate in Sussex, on which Ferdinand lived out his final years of service, at the same time as he was purchasing more captives for his plantations and bringing back the sugar they were made to produce: 'There are many Vessells gone to the Coast of Guiney, so that it is probable Slaves will be in Plenty this year. I think to buy four young Girls and two Men boys, for Winthorpes, in the Crop, and I suppose as many at least for [North Sound]. I Congratulate you on the agreeable purchase you have made in England [the estates of Yapton and Ratton in Sussex]. By this Vessell there is 15 hhds. [hogsheads] of … Sugar gone to Mr. Douglass, which I wish safe.

After Thomas' death his son inherited the Antiguan plantations and built the country house Dale Park in Madehurst. His great-grandson obtained the equivalent of around £240,000 today in compensation for the loss of the family's human "property" when slavery was abolished.



Dale Park, British Library HMNTS 10362.b.2.

Roque Ferdinand's memorial reminds us that people of African heritage have been part of Sussex communities for centuries, their contributions woven into the history of this nation. The plaque honours a man enslaved and brought to Britain. Yet we will never know as much about him as we do either his 'owner' or Edward Long. We may never discover traces that will enable us to pick up the trail of his life. We

can only speculate about how Ferdinand maintained his identity, dignity and faith. Did he manifest loyalty and obedience to the Thomas' out of a sense of duty, or the lack of any alternative? Did he think that working for the appreciative family was the lesser of a world of potential evils, or did he find genuine companionship and perhaps even friendship within the family's embrace, as Thomas jnr suggested in the plaque's wording? Did Ferdinand socialise with any other African captives or free people in Britain, perhaps swapping stories of relatively 'good' and relatively 'bad' enslavers and employers? Was he accepted or even celebrated by the white community in Sussex, or was discrimination and ostracism the constant backdrop of his life?

We will never know because even the repository of our knowledge – the way we can attempt to understand the world around us – is blinkered, skewed and warped by the racist afterlives of enslavement. This is perhaps why Archbishop Sarah Mullally has stated that 'The Church cannot undo its history, but it can choose how it respond to it'.

The Church Commissioners for England launched the Fund for Healing, Repair and Justice, or Project Spire, in 2019. On an annual basis, it will absorb £10m per year of the interest the Commissioners earn on their £11.6 billion fund, over a ten-year period. That compares to £533m per year currently being spent on church repairs and maintenance.

Let me conclude with the words of the Anglican who, aside from William Wilberforce, is cited most often in defence of the Church – Thomas Fowell Buxton, the parliamentary leader of the campaign to abolish slavery in 1833. A decade earlier he said that something more than the mere cessation and suppression of enslavement was needed: 'We owe large and liberal atonement … We still have it in our power to make some compensation'. Buxton did not at that stage mean compensation for slave owners like Long, although in the event, it was Long's descendants who were awarded over £250,000 in today's terms, upon abolition. Buxton meant that abolition should be followed by compensation for the enslaved – for people like Roque Ferdinand – and their descendants. They are still waiting.