

Net Slave Register To Help Brits Trace Roots

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The names of 100,000 Barbados slaves have been launched online today, helping Brits with roots in the Caribbean to trace their ancestry.

There are more than half a million people of black Caribbean origin living in the UK, and the majority of them have slave ancestors.

And around half of these come from the former British colony of Barbados, which was one of the busiest slave trade hubs at the height of the British Empire in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

The register, which contains the names of all the slaves and their owners in Barbados in 1834, has been published online today by Ancestry.co.uk as part of their black history collection.

All Saints singer Shaznay Lewis, newsreader Moira Stewart and journalist Gary Younge all have Barbadian ancestry, as does John Harper, the first person of African descent to be elected into public office in Britain, whose grandfather was a freed slave.

And Walter Tull had the double distinction of being the first black infantry officer in the British Army, and one of the first black professional footballers.

After the Abolition of Slave Trade Act, which was passed in 1807, made the trading of slaves from Africa to colonies illegal, plantation owners in Barbados had to complete a slave register every three years after 1812.

By monitoring the slaves and their owners, the British government could monitor slave ownership and stamp out illegal slave trading, as no slave could be bought, sold, conveyed or inherited without first being registered.

The registers, which number 186,000 pages of names, were lodged between 1815 and 1834, when slavery itself was abolished and the slaves were freed.

Many of the slaves stayed on the plantations, but they were free to come and go as they wished, and entitled to be paid for their work.

The registers included the names of the owners and slaves, who were usually given a Christian name and their owner's surname. They were taken to London, where they now reside in the National Archives.

The 1834 register, which is now available online, contains the names of 99,349 slaves and 5,206 owners. There were an average of 19 slaves to each owner, although some owners had as many as 400 slaves.

Of the slaves, 46,347 were male and 52,982 were female. A total of 26,747 were aged 10 or under.

Also released today is the English Settlers in Barbados 1637 - 1800 collection, which contains church records of all the baptisms, marriages and wills of the 200,000 British settlers living in Barbados at the height of the British Empire.

Slaves were imported from Africa to the Caribbean, most of which was colonised by the British, to work on plantations to meet the huge demand for sugar across the Empire and in Europe. It was this trade that helped to make England the wealthiest nation in the world in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Barbados was one of the most British islands in the Caribbean, and was therefore one of the most effectively governed, so the registers are more reliable than others.

The slaves are listed firstly by parish, owner, and then name of slave, approximate age and in some cases birthplace.

The launch of the register online is the beginning of a process which will see the entire Former Colonial Dependencies' Slave Register Collection from 1812 to 1834 placed online.

This consists of slave registers kept by 23 colonies which used slaves, including Jamaica, the Bahamas, South Africa and Ceylon, and contains the names of around three million slaves.

Ancestry.co.uk spokesperson Simon Harper said that the registers cover an important period in history as the slave trade disintegrated.

And he said that because there are no other documents which prove the existence of the slaves, they registers are vital for anyone who is trying to trace ancestors in Barbados.

He said: "It was illegal to trade slaves from 1807, but it wasn't until 1834 that owning slaves also became illegal.

"There was a delay because the British knew that it would have a huge impact on the Empire. It was a hugely controversial move, and there was a particularly movement in British politics that was fighting to have the slavery abolished.

"There was a six year period between 1834 and 1840 which was a transition period where the slaves were technically free but they were put on apprenticeships to get used to the idea of being independent.

"A lot of them stayed with the plantation owners, because where do you go? They had no money or independent experience.

"There are very few documents in existence that are from the perspective of a slave, and it's a shame. I think this will be the only document which even shows these people existed, so it's very important for people with ancestors in Barbados who are looking into their heritage.

Blackhistory-month.co.uk founder Mia Morris added: "It is terrific that Ancestry.co.uk is making these slave registers and records available online for the first time. They provide a much needed piece in the puzzle for those of us wanting to find the truth about our ancestors."