**Chapter 6 – Part I**

**Intimate relations: The colonies**

Every unmarried white man, and of every class, has his black or his brown mistress, with whom he lives openly; and of so little consequence is this thought, that his white female friends and relations think it no breach of decorum to visit his house, partake of his hospitality, fondle his children, and converse with his *housekeeper*… the most striking proof of the low estimate of moral and religious obligation here is the fact, that the man who lives in open adultery, - that is, who keeps his brown or black mistress, in the very face of his wife and family and of the community, has generally as much outward respect shown him, and is as much countenanced, visited, and received into company, especially if he be a man of some weight and influence in the community, as if he had been guilty of no breach of decency or dereliction of moral duty!

John Stewart, *A view of the past and present state of the island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1823), p. 173

‘Thomas Hibbert, the Eldest, of Jamaica… died a bachelor 20 May 1780’ read the entry in the ‘Pedigree of Hibbert’ compiled for *Caribbeana*.[[1]](#endnote-1) With a thriving business, wealth, property, and political position, Thomas senior was extremely marriageable and yet according to the published genealogical record he died unmarried with no mention of any children. In truth Thomas senior had conducted an intimate relationship for over thirty years with a mixed heritage woman called Charity Harry. Together they had three daughters; Jane, Margaret, and Charlotte. The sprawling family tree, spread out over four pages, documented multiple generations of the Hibberts giving details of their marriages, children and accumulated property. The representation of family relations prioritised masculinity, whiteness, and legitimacy; excluded from its branches were any details of daughters and their marriages as well as any mixed heritage or illegitimate children. The Hibbert men, like many of their colonial counterparts, engaged in sexual relations with both free and enslaved women in Jamaica. Barbara Bush has stated that the practice was ‘regarded as an integral part of plantation life, inextricably woven into the social fabric.’[[2]](#endnote-2) For the merchant classes this behaviour extended beyond the plantation to the urban environs of the city. Kingston’s population included 40 per cent of all white females resident on the island but they made up just 7 per cent of the population total. [[3]](#endnote-3) This feature of Jamaican society was noted by Robert junior who lamented ‘Most of the ladies married or widows.’[[4]](#endnote-4) This combined with an unfettered access to the bodies of enslaved women, helped to create a climate in which inter-racial sex was commonplace. As John Stewart noted, neither the presence of a wife nor the traditional boundaries of respectability served to halt these practices. Enslaved women were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation - rape and sexual violence were endemic. Relationships like that of Thomas senior and Charity raise difficult questions about agency and consent.[[5]](#endnote-5) The unequal raced and gendered power structures within the slave societies of the Caribbean complicated women’s ability to exercise free will. That said, some of these relationships, including that of Thomas senior and Charity, offered women a degree of influence which would otherwise have been unthinkable.

The ways in which systems of concubinage were structured, as well as attitudes towards it, were geographically and temporally specific. As Adele Perry has explained ‘Heterosexual intimacies were honed to particular colonial economies and societies… they were also informed and interpreted through wider discussions and insurgencies.’[[6]](#endnote-6) Whist women of colour and their children were a common sight in every echelon of Jamaican society, their presence was commented on by metropolitan visitors to the country. Lady Nugent, the wife of the Governor of Jamaica, wrote in her journal about her encounter with ‘a little mulatto girl’ at Simon Taylor’s plantation Golden Grove. She commented that ‘Mr. T. appeared very anxious for me to dismiss her, and in the evening, the housekeeper told me she was his own daughter, and that he had numerous family, some almost on every one of his estates.’[[7]](#endnote-7) His response to seeing his daughter with the wife of the Governor suggests that Taylor was aware of his transgression from metropolitan norms of respectable behaviour. As the movement to abolish slavery intensified in the 1820s, the treatment of enslaved women and its implications for the character of the slave owners became a focus for the campaign.[[8]](#endnote-8) The accusations of sexual impropriety levelled at George Hibbert Oates by Reverend Thomas Cooper was indicative of the moral condemnation increasingly being directed at slave holding societies. To his damning indictment of the practice of inter-racial sex, John Stewart added that ‘This profligacy is, however, less common than it was formerly.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Pressure exerted from the imperial centre was designed to force slave owners into reforming the system, or at least appearing to do so. Writing in 1824 in his capacity as Agent for Jamaica George informed Earl Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, that the island Assembly had passed a Bill ‘declaring it a felony to commit a Rape upon a Slave not ten years of Age.’[[10]](#endnote-10) The need for this kind of legislation and the exclusion of children over the age of ten is demonstrative of the vulnerability of enslaved people to this form of exploitation.

Legitimate family relationships were also established by the Hibberts in Jamaica. Marriage played a key role in reinforcing their presence within the island elite. Like the family in Manchester, the production of children was necessary for the provision of a trusted workforce capable of maintaining their newly established interests in the management and ownership of plantations. With Thomas senior’s refusal to enter into the bonds of matrimony, it was his brother John senior and his nephews that helped to cement the family’s place. These unions changed the nature of the Hibberts’s engagement with Jamaica; no longer simply a place of commercial opportunity, relationships of flesh and blood reconfigured their ties to the island, solidifying their status as a transatlantic family. Marriages with Creole women raised the issue of colonial difference. Robert junior’s mother Abigail was a key conduit of family communications and throughout her lifetime she kept up a correspondence with her children. Her letters reflected a degree of ambivalence towards her West Indian daughter-in-law; subtle forms of othering gave a clear sense of her belief in the superiority of metropolitan social mores. Suspicions of the negative effects of prolonged colonial contact were also cast upon Abigail’s grandchildren. The Hibbert matriarch’s shock at witnessing the ministrations of an enslaved nanny underscored the relative distance both physically and psychologically that separated the two worlds that the family inhabited.

The Hibberts had to negotiate family politics within the context of both metropole and colony. Their intimate relations were transformed through their engagement with slavery; it created new structures and changed the ways in which family was both imagined and lived. Great distances separated what had been a close-knit network in Manchester. New kinds of relationships developed to take the place of physical proximity. Paper bonds became substitutes for embodied family exchanges. Letters circulated within the family acting as both the carriers of important personal information and as the material traces which confirmed the relationships between different members. Their contents reveal the shifting patterns of allegiances, the private squabbles, the fears, the humanity of these long dead figures. Unlike the forced migration of the Middle Passage, the Hibberts chose to leave Britain for Jamaica. Whilst there can be no equivocation with the violent rupture that tore African families apart, leaving home sometimes represented a painful severance. Life in Jamaica could be brutally short, the pervasiveness of death, disease and violence was a constant worry for family members and their letters anxiously fretted about the safety of loved ones. Curtailed by war, the demands of the business and family obligations on the island, years might pass between visits to Britain. By his death in 1780 Thomas senior had lived in Jamaica for longer than he had lived in Britain. Of all the Hibberts it is perhaps he alone who embraced a sense of Creole identity, an affinity with island life that none of the other family members shared. By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century there were no legitimate Hibberts left on the island. If illegitimate offspring remained they have been lost to history and memory. Banished from both the official and private recollections of the family tree they became a branch of colonial relations best forgotten.

**Outside families**

Thomas senior’s relationship with his ‘housekeeper’ Charity Harry has fascinated historians for over a century.[[11]](#endnote-11) Thomas senior arrived in Kingston in 1734 when he was twenty-four years old. By the 1750s he had begun a relationship with Charity. In 1756 Charity gave birth to their eldest daughter Jane; a further two daughters followed, Margaret in 1765 and later Charlotte. What Charity’s status was when she met Thomas senior is unclear, however, an Act of Assembly in 1775 described her as a ‘free mulatto woman’ and gave her and ‘the issue of her body hereafter to be begotten by White Men’ the same rights and privileges as English subjects ‘with certain restrictions’ on holding office and voting.[[12]](#endnote-12) As the legal wording made clear – the rights of Charity’s children were contingent on their proximity to whiteness. In 1761 the Jamaica Assembly limited the property rights of the free coloured population. These limitations could be circumvented if a petition was made and granted. A large number of these petitions were sponsored by the island’s slave holding elites and they speak to some of the complicated relationships that existed across both the class and colour lines. The granting of additional freedoms allowed Charity to amass increased property and wealth, and entitled her to a greater inheritance. Jane and her sisters were privately acknowledged by their father, however, he did not give them the Hibbert name and his name does not appear as a sponsor on the petition. Jane’s sister Margaret was baptised in the Anglican faith at Thomas senior’s house in Kingston. *Rider’s British Merlin* stated that Mrs Charles Hall, Miss Sally Gordon and Henry Croasdaile acted as godparents.[[13]](#endnote-13) Charity’s name and association was notably missing from the announcement. The brief entry described Margaret as ‘Mr. Thomas Hibbert’s Child’ adding that she was given the name Margaret ‘after Mr. Hibbert’s mother.’ As respectable trustees of the Cross Street Chapel one wonders what Thomas senior’s family in Manchester must have made of this tribute. This level of recognition was not enjoyed by all mixed heritage children. If the mother was enslaved her offspring inherited her status so that any children born out of these sexual encounters represented a potential increase in property in people and labour. Some fathers could not afford to purchase the freedom of their offspring and others chose not to. In some remarkable instances manumitted children were given ownership of their enslaved mothers and siblings.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Charity’s relationship with Thomas senior ‘propelled her into the upper ranks of Jamaica’s society of colour.’[[15]](#endnote-15) Framed by an official sense of public morality and respectability, Charity’s petition to the Assembly reported that she had been baptised and attended church regularly. It also remarked that she was in possession ‘of lands, Houses and Negroes in the Town of Kingston in this Island to a very Considerable Amount and Value so as to put her above the Common level of Free Negroes and Mulattoes.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Discourses of culture and class intersected to strengthen Charity’s claims for preferential treatment before the law. In 1777 she was living in one of the Hibberts’s properties within sight of their grand house in Kingston on Mark Lane.[[17]](#endnote-17) The free coloured population tended to concentrate in urban areas as they afforded greater opportunities for making a living and socialising. Thomas senior was free to see Charity whenever he pleased – he never married, enabling him to associate with his young family unencumbered by the emotional conflict which could accompany liaisons where a wife and legitimate offspring were involved.[[18]](#endnote-18) ‘Miss Charity’ or ‘Mrs Harry’, as Robert junior uniformly called her, was mentioned on numerous occasions in his diary. She was part of daily life; she socialised with the family and their friends, accompanied them to Agualta Vale, she even took an active interest in the affairs of Robert junior’s heart. When he showed a liking to a ‘Miss G’. she became ‘the eternal theme’ of conversation for Charity.[[19]](#endnote-19) She maintained contact with the Hibberts after Thomas senior’s death and was invited to take part in the christening of Robert junior’s illegitimate child.[[20]](#endnote-20) Despite her material comfort and good relations with the Hibberts, the fact remained that her relationship with Thomas senior ‘involved the unequal status of male and female, colonizer and colonized.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

# In 1771 Jane and her sister Margaret were sent to England for their education.[[22]](#endnote-22) Owing to the colonists’ preference for schooling their children in the English style, few quality educational facilities existed in Jamaica. Many who sent their children back to Britain believed in the innate superiority of home, viewing life in the colonies as a means to an end with the ultimate badge of success a return to the mother country. Parents wanted their children to acquire the social finesse of a metropolitan education, in some instances to fit them for life there. There is nothing to suggest that Thomas senior felt this way; he never purchased property in Britain, choosing to live and die in Jamaica. Perhaps his decision regarding his daughters stemmed from a realisation of the limits placed on free people of colour in a slave society. In a culture obsessed with gradations of skin colour Jane’s ‘quadroon’ complexion would have elevated her position, but knowledge of her parentage might have circumscribed hopes of a respectable marriage. Whiteness was a form of power and anxieties around the destabilisation of racial hierarchies were present in the writings of a number of slave owners. In a letter to Thomas senior’s nephew George, Taylor recounted that

When I returned from England in the year 1760 there were only three Quadroon Women in the Town of Kingston. There are now three hundred, and more of the decent Class of them never will have any commerce with their own Colour, but only with White People. Their progeny is growing whiter and whiter every remove... from thence a White Generation will come.[[23]](#endnote-23)

A fear of racial slippage could also be read in the work of the historian of Jamaica Edward Long. Long viewed inter-racial sex as a pollutant of racial purity. Describing the practice as a ‘venomous and dangerous ulcer’, he wrote despairingly that ‘The nation already begins to be browned with the African tint.’ [[24]](#endnote-24) As Catherine Hall has noted, in the eyes of Long ‘English blood, every English family, was in danger of contamination.’ Henrice Altink has argued that the ‘quadroon’ woman in particular ‘threatened Jamaica’s social structure more than Coloured women because they were so similar to White women that they could easily pass as White and also because their offspring of relations with White men were four generations removed from their Black ancestors and hence were legally free.’[[25]](#endnote-25) An ability to transcend, or at least subvert, the colour line would perhaps have been more effective in England where racial categorisations were, according to Roxann Wheeler, still a ‘paradigm in transition’ and therefore less socially limiting than in Jamaica.[[26]](#endnote-26)

What Charity felt about the removal of two of her daughters to England is unknown. Jane was fifteen and Margaret was six - their departure marked the last time they would ever see Jamaica or their mother. Charity and Jane continued to correspond, when Jane wanted to marry she and her husband-to-be Joseph Thresher wrote to her to ask for her blessing to wed. Daniel Livesay has argued that the ‘couple’s desire for Charity’s permission demonstrates that the mothers of mixed-race migrants could remain actively involved with their children’.[[27]](#endnote-27) Charity’s will reveals that she kept a token of her daughter - a painting by Jane - bequeathing it to a free woman of colour named Sarah Wynter.[[28]](#endnote-28) Despite the majority of the Hibbert family residing in England the two children were not sent to live with them. Thomas senior instead arranged for his daughters to reside with his old partner in the Kingston slave trading firm - Nathaniel Sprigg who had left Jamaica, married, and settled into the life of a country gentleman at Barn Elms in Surrey. In a discussion of the mixed race family of John Tailyour, Livesay posits a number of reasons why he chose not to send his illegitimate child to live with his relatives. The discomfort Tailyour felt about his son meeting his family can be read in his own words

as soon as he has Sense to know the disadvantages with which he has been ushered into Life, & by keeping him at a distance from his own Relations I think there is the greater chance of concealing from him his Inferiority and preventing the Mortification of being slighted by relations who from early habits he might consider himself perfectly upon a footing with.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Despite Wheeler’s contention that racial categorisations in Britain were more elastic than those in the colonies, race and legitimacy still mattered for metropolitan families. Respectability was at the heart of the Hibberts’s claims to social position and whilst some members certainly indulged in affairs in the colonies, it was quite a different matter to bring the offspring of such liaisons into the bosom of the family at home.

Jane’s life at Barn Elms was comfortable and she reported to her father that ‘Mr. and Mrs. Sprigg... were very kind and friendly to me’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Jane described herself as ‘of a grave and solid turn of mind’ with a ‘great thirst for learning’ although she ‘could not easily pursue this inclination for reading and study at Cheltenham’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Like many young women of her status she was expected to focus on the niceties of polite society. She wrote that ‘I did not exempt myself from the fashionable amusements of the place I lived in’ although by her own inclination these pursuits did not hold great interest for her.[[32]](#endnote-32) She complained that ‘I loved retirement rather than the company of those who delight in triffling conversation.’ Her preferred enjoyments included ‘hearing a few select friends discourse on moral subjects’ this to Jane was ‘the highest entertainment in the world’. Schooling Jane in the art of female sociability was part of the process of fitting her for marriage. Painting was an area in which she excelled and was encouraged, as she told her father ‘Mr. Sprigg, finding I had a Taste and genius for drawing, was so kind to let me have a drawing Master’. Paid for by Thomas senior, her teacher was Sir Joshua Reynolds. Such was Jane’s success with the brush that in 1778 she was awarded a gold medal from the Society for the Encouragement of Arts and Commerce.

In around 1775 Jane’s sister Margaret died leaving her disconsolate with grief. Jane wrote of Margaret’s death that ‘When she died I no longer wanted to live’, she felt that she had ‘lost a part of myself’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Her loneliness perhaps exacerbated by the isolating sense of difference which she must have felt as a relative outsider in England. This marked a turning point in Jane’s life; it was the moment at which ‘Religion at length (and for a time) presented herself’. She began to study scripture commenting that ‘I knew little of them before... thinking, as alas! the generality of people do, that the Bible was a Book for Priests only to study’.[[34]](#endnote-34) This led her to critique the Church of England, arguing that ‘the ceremonial observations of the established Church were but the remains of Popish superstition.’[[35]](#endnote-35) In the wake of the trauma of loss, an interest in religion provided Jane with a period of reflection which ‘blunted the edge of sorrow’.[[36]](#endnote-36)

At around the same time, Jane was introduced by the Spriggs to the Quaker artist and wit Mary Morris Knowles. The two women shared a love of art and Knowles advised Jane on improving her skills.[[37]](#endnote-37) The friendship transformed Jane’s life, significantly influencing her burgeoning interest in religious non-conformity. Mary brought Jane to London to meet her circle of literary friends. On her return to Barn Elms she confessed to Sprigg that she wished to convert to Quakerism. Jane had been baptised as an Anglican by her father and in choosing her own spiritual path she was acting in defiance of both her guardian and her family by challenging the authority of the men in her life upon whom she relied. Whilst a number of the Hibberts were dissenters, the distinctions between non-conformist denominations ‘While ostensibly based on doctrinal issues... often covered latent social distinctions.’[[38]](#endnote-38) The Hibberts’s religion formed part of a wider identification with the mercantile classes who were strongly represented in the elite ranks of Unitarianism. Religious sentiments aside, the Hibberts may have wondered how Jane - an illegitimate mixed heritage female dependent - could have been so impudent as to flout her father’s choice of religion. The autonomy of Jane’s decision displayed a liberty of mind which subverted her status as both a woman and the descendent of enslaved Africans. Recognising that her actions might well lead to an estrangement Jane wrote to her father pleading that ‘I hope you will not also be irreconcilable, for I have much need of your parental love, and who have I else in this World to look unto?’[[39]](#endnote-39) Thomas senior’s reply was has been lost. In the wake of her conversion Jane left Barn Elms and her father’s day-to-day financial support was withdrawn. She did remain in her father’s will suggesting that the parental tie was not completely lost. After a brief stay with the Knowles in London, Jane went to Birmingham to work as a governess for the Quaker Lloyd family. Samuel Lloyd made remembrance of ‘the courageous’[[40]](#endnote-40) Jane Harry in his family biography, lamenting that she was ‘very cruel treated by her father, quite in the old spirit of persecution to which the early Lloyds were accustomed.’[[41]](#endnote-41)

Jane’s conversion is one of the reasons that historians still have access to her life and letters, a number of which were carefully transcribed by the Quaker historian Joseph Green. Her connection to the London literary scene has also helped to secure her memory. Jane’s apostasy featured in James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* following an altercation in 1778 between Knowles and Johnson on the subject of women’s liberties. According to the poet Anna Seward, Jane ‘came home in tears’ after Johnson snubbed her when she encountered him on the street in London.[[42]](#endnote-42) At Jane’ request Knowles interceded in the matter at a dinner hosted by Charles and Edward Dilly. Johnson was incensed and raged that ‘I hate the arrogance of the wench for supposing herself to a more competent judge of Religion than those who educated her’ and that she ‘ought not to have presumed to determine for herself in so important an affair.’[[43]](#endnote-43) Situated within a wider discourse on the position of women, Johnson’s words are indicative of the expectations of gender; as a woman and a dependent, Jane should have been content to allow decisions of import to be made for her by those (men) who knew better. Jane recognised that her shunning was a result of her choice to live against the grain. She wrote to her father wryly noting that ‘I am not put away from my friends for entering into the pursuits and pleasures of this World, but because I scrupled to conform to them’.[[44]](#endnote-44)

On 20 May 1780 Charity was at Agualta Vale with Thomas senior when he died. She remained there for over a month afterwards and on her return to Kingston Robert junior recorded that ‘Mrs Harry talks business with my Bro’.[[45]](#endnote-45) It is possible that she had some matters to settle as a result of the will. Thomas senior provided an inheritance for both Charity and Jane. Charity received ‘a small House to live in, and 1000 pounds Jamaican currency, payable in ten annual instalments’, as well as a number of enslaved Africans.[[46]](#endnote-46) This was deemed by the executors of the will to be ‘inadequate to the Wants, as well as the Merits of the Person to whom it was bequeathed’ therefore the annuity was increased. Jane received £2,000, the maximum amount a person of colour could legally inherit under Jamaican law. Although significant sums, their portion was dwarfed by that of Jane’s cousins Thomas junior, Robert junior, and Thomas who inherited the bulk of her father’s estate. Jane disputed both her own and her mother’s share, describing the disparity as ‘a Privation of the several Rights of Justice’.[[47]](#endnote-47) In response she received a letter from her cousin Thomas junior which spoke to the precarity of family bonds within the context of ‘outside’ relations. Thomas junior informed Jane that his uncle had been mindful ‘of the Obligations of a Parent to a Child’ and that he had made provisions for her that were ‘equal to the Fortune, which any person, in the Rank of Life *he* [italics original] had no wish to take her out of, ought to expect in Marriage.’ According to Thomas junior, the money was intended to help Jane secure a decent marriage. In a passage designed to remind Jane of her inferior status, Thomas junior stated that

if this should be a Legacy inadequate to your Estimation of my Uncle’s Fortune, permit me to call to your Recollection, how many Daughters of some of the best Families in England, with whose Education and Style of Life and Company you yourself would not compare your own, are little better portioned.

In an effort to distance Jane from any familial claim on his uncle’s wealth, Thomas junior did his best to cast doubt on the validity and intimacy of the parental relationship. Becoming increasingly spiteful in his tone Thomas junior wrote that his uncle

never claimed the parental Relation: for how freely soever you may have used the word ‘Father’, you will not find, that in speaking of you he ever used the word ‘Daughter’... So far was my late uncle from desiring that you should be ‘held up to the world as his child’, that no consideration gave him more uneasiness, than that of your being so publically known to be so; of which the Change of your name is of itself sufficient proof.[[48]](#endnote-48)

# The advertisement of Jane’s sister Margaret’s christening would suggest that perhaps Thomas senior’s attitude towards his mixed heritage children was more nuanced than his nephew implied. With Thomas senior dead the remaining Hibberts were free to reconfigure the boundaries of familial belonging. Jane’s claim on her father’s estate was a challenge, albeit merely rhetorical, to the ways in which power was structured in a patriarchal racially stratified society. It was rejected out of hand and with a venom that represented a severance of any notion of familial obligation outside of the parental relationship that had expired with Thomas senior. There is no further record of any contact between Jane and the Hibbert family in either England or Jamaica.

# In 1782 Jane met and married Joseph Thresher, a Quaker doctor. The couple lived with Joseph’s brother Ralph at an address on Foregate Street, Worcester. In May of 1784 Jane gave birth to their son Edwin. In August of the same year she died and was buried at Friends’ Burial Ground, New Meeting House, Worcester. For Joseph the blow of his wife’s death was compounded when four months later Edwin also died. Within two years Joseph himself was dead following a brief illness. Jane’s death was commemorated with an obituary which revealed that prior to the birth of her son she had ‘formed an idea of going to Jamaica, the residence of her mother, with a view to procure the freedom of her mother’s Negroes’.[[49]](#endnote-49) The American Revolution forced Jane to abandon the idea. However, her obituary went on to state that ‘she has requested her husband that, if the said Negroes be liberated at her mother’s decease, he will pay the premium to the island for such liberation.’ It is fascinating to imagine what might have been had Jane survived. The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787 with Jane’s friend and mentor Mary Morris Knowles an early supporter. Given Jane’s personal convictions, alongside her connection to one of Jamaica’s most prominent slave trading families she could have been deeply embarrassing for the Hibberts. With Jane’s death it was her cousin George who became the family’s foremost spokesperson on the subject.

# Charity died in 1793 in Kingston. Her will revealed she was a wealthy woman and a slave owner in her own right. The size of her estate enabled her to ‘bequeath hundreds of pounds to her family, as well as several plots of land.’[[50]](#endnote-50) Her possessions included ‘a gold watch, clothes, furniture, linen, mahogany furniture, silver, and enslaved men, women and children… a map of England, jewellery made with her daughters’ hair, and paintings, drawings, and a sampler by her daughter, presumably Jane.’[[51]](#endnote-51) Over twenty years after she had last seen her daughters, the inclusion of these tokens of her children amongst the inventory of her personal possessions stands testament to the ways in which the bonds of family were sustained across time and distance. These objects embodied, quite literally in the case of the jewellery, the physical and emotive ties that bound mother to child. Charity’s will also contained a request that the enslaved people she held should be manumitted. Charity’s youngest daughter Charlotte had died in 1774 and she also outlived her son-in-law Joseph Thresher. This left the question of who might fulfil the request for manumission. She appointed John Boyd of Britain, likely one of the Hibberts’s ship’s captains, to take care of this final wish. There is however no evidence either way to indicate whether or not this request was carried out. With Charity’s death the last of Thomas senior’s ‘outside’ family died with her. Thomas senior had raised a fortune but it would be his brothers’ children and not his own who would enjoy the full benefits of his legacy, being what his own daughters could never be - white, male, and legitimate.

Thomas senior was not the only family member to have children outside of marriage in Jamaica;John senior, Thomas junior, Robert junior, and George Hibbert Oates all fathered illegitimate children. In 1757 an entry in the parish records of Kingston noted the birth and baptism of Samuel Wynter, the son of John senior and Dorothy Wynter, a ‘free mulatto’.[[52]](#endnote-52) Nicholas Hibbert Steele has documented that John senior fathered a further three children with Henrietta Smith.[[53]](#endnote-53) Robert junior noted some of his sexual liaisons in his diary, in particular with Sally, Jenny, and Molly. There is no indication as to the status of the women but Sally and Molly’s repeated presence at the Hibberts’s Agualta Vale Pen suggests they could have been enslaved women. Both Robert junior and his brother were sexually interested in Sally; Robert junior recorded that ‘I go to the Pen at night. My Bro. merry seizes Sally’ and for his own part Robert junior noted he got ‘home late; attempt Sally but am disappointed.’[[54]](#endnote-54) A ‘romp’ with Jenny Boswell took place at ‘Mrs Harry’s’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Charity owned enslaved people so it is possible that Jenny could have belonged to her. By 1776 Robert junior had contracted a venereal disease, something noticed and commented upon by the Hibberts’s client Nathaniel Phillips.[[56]](#endnote-56) His symptoms made horse-riding uncomfortable and after a day in the saddle Robert junior complained that ‘This ride retards my cure much… Have a wretched sleepless night.’[[57]](#endnote-57) Both Thomas junior and Robert junior fathered illegitimate children in 1780.[[58]](#endnote-58) Robert junior’s diaries between 1780-87 are missing, however, and later entries made no further reference to this child. There are, however, three mentions of an enslaved woman called Harriet and her two children. ‘I very uneasy about Harriett’s child, but it wears off and I hear no more about it’ wrote Robert junior.[[59]](#endnote-59) Following a gap of three years he noted ‘I then return to Town being uneasy about Harriet’.[[60]](#endnote-60) Finally two days later he commented ‘Sell Harriet & her two children.’[[61]](#endnote-61) It is impossible to say with any certainty what the cause of his unease was; by the time he wrote these entries Robert junior was married, the presence of an enslaved mistress and illegitimate children could be a source of family tension. It is interesting to note that the decision to sell Harriet and her children came within a week of his wife Letitia having been delivered of a daughter who died after just a couple of hours.[[62]](#endnote-62) Any connection is, however, purely speculative. Thomas junior also had a son - ‘christened Thomas Robert’ - the child’s mother was not documented.[[63]](#endnote-63) Three weeks after the birth Robert junior wrote ‘My Bro’s little boy very ill. Melancholy quartetto dinner. My Cousin & I down soon. In returning are informed the child is dead.’[[64]](#endnote-64) Thomas junior’s son was buried in the family vault in the garden of the house in Kingston.

John senior’s legitimate son Thomas left an indication that he had a connection to a free woman of colour and her children. In his will of 1805 Thomas left annuities to both Jeanott Smith and William Oakum, the children of Harriet Cook Smith, ‘a free mulatto of Kingston.’[[65]](#endnote-65) He also left a bequest of £100 for Harriet herself. Thomas later removed the clause relating to Harriet, although this could have been due to her death rather than a breakdown in the relationship. Was there any connection to the Harriet and her two children that Robert sold in 1793? Or perhaps Harriet Cook Smith was related to the woman his father John senior had two children with? Were Henrietta Smith and Harriet Cook Smith the same person, making Jeanott and William his half siblings? Thomas also inserted an additional codicil which entitled Sarah Winter ‘a free quadroon of Kingston’ to £50. Although no further detail is given as to Sarah’s identity she shared the same surname as Thomas’s mixed heritage half brother Samuel and could possibly have been a relation. Sarah was certainly close to the Hibberts’s extended family circle – Charity also remembered her in her will. Thomas’s legitimate family received considerably more; his wife Dorothy was entitled to £300 annuities with an additional £1,000, plus furniture and plate. His legitimate children received £10,000 each on reaching 21, and for each son who lived to 25 a further £10,000 was settled on them. Laid out in bald monetary terms the difference between the acknowledged Hibbert family members and those who were denied the family name is clear.

The last of the Hibbert men to father illegitimate children in Jamaica was George Hibbert Oates. His sexual practices became the source of notoriety following a public *exposé* by the Reverend Thomas Cooper in the mid-1820s.[[66]](#endnote-66) Ann Cooper accused Oates of impregnating a sixteen-year-old girl on the Georgia plantation, where he was the attorney. Oates’s will confirmed that he did in fact have a ‘reputed’ daughter called Mary Oates who was ‘a free girl of colour formerly a slave on Georgia estate’.[[67]](#endnote-67) Oates used the Hibberts’s connections to different plantations to gain access to enslaved women. His will detailed a further set of intimate relationships which spanned across various properties the family were linked to. He had a daughter Jane Oates who was ‘formerly a slave on Whitney’, where his brother Hibbert Oates was the attorney. There was a son - George Thomas Oates - who was ‘formerly a slave on Hals Hall’, a property which the Hibberts were mortgagees of. Finally the will documented a ‘mulatto child’ called Anna Maria. Her mother Elizabeth Williams was ‘formerly a slave on Great Valley’, a plantation owned by Oates’s uncle Robert junior and for which he acted as attorney. Oates left £100 to each of his children and land to Elizabeth. The bulk of his fortune was split between his brother Hibbert Oates and sister Anna Maria who both received £2,000, with an annuity settled on his mother Mary.

# Inside families

# With his elder brother Thomas senior eschewing a state of matrimony, John senior was the first of the Hibberts to make a match in Jamaica. Having arrived in Kingston in 1754, after six years of life as a bachelor John senior married twenty year old Janet Gordon in 1760. The Gordons were originally from Scotland but had emigrated to Jamaica to overcome the prejudices that circumscribed their prospects at home.[[68]](#endnote-68) Evidence of the prejudice directed towards the Scots can be read in comments made by Janet’s brother Thomas who wrote that ‘In spite of the great disadvantage of being a Scotch man I have made very genteely by my profession.’[[69]](#endnote-69) By the time of the marriage Thomas was both the member of Assembly for Port Royal and the Attorney General, as his father Samuel had been before him.[[70]](#endnote-70) John senior and Janet began a family immediately and had seven children – four boys and three girls. John senior died in 1769 aged thirty-seven, leaving Janet pregnant with their youngest son Robert.

# Janet stayed in Jamaica for a further three years. However, in May of 1772 she prepared to depart for Britain. Robert junior’s diary noted that Janet was engaged in a passionate affair with Dr David Grant, the son of another Scottish émigré family. Two days before Janet left Robert junior noted that ‘Dr. G is here very early in the morning and makes violent love almost till dinner time.’[[71]](#endnote-71) On the night of her departure the family gathered on board the ship to say their goodbyes before leaving her with Grant. Despite Janet’s flouting of the usual rules of morality attached to women, her dead husband’s nephews were saddened at her leaving. Robert junior wrote ‘The Ship gets under way and we take leave of Mrs H... My spirits depressed beyond what I never before experienced... My Bro and self indulging separately our feelings, decline supper and retire early.’[[72]](#endnote-72) The brothers discussed Janet a few weeks later. There seemed to be some disapproval registered at her behaviour, although the language was ambiguous, ‘My Bro. Mentions to me some instances of Mrs H.’s conduct which confirms me in the opinion I had of her disinterestedness.’[[73]](#endnote-73) Over the years the Hibberts continued to do business with Janet’s family acting as mortgage holders for their plantations Windsor Lodge and Paisley. Hibbert & Co., a later branch of the London-based operations, successfully counterclaimed against the Gordons for their slave compensation money. They were eventually awarded £6,252 12s for 353 enslaved people attached to Windsor Lodge and £3,135 for 167 enslaved people on Paisley.[[74]](#endnote-74) They also had further dealings with Janet’s lover Dr David Grant; her youngest son Robert acted as his attorney and managed his estate Spring Garden for several years.[[75]](#endnote-75)

# When Janet left for England she took her daughters Cecelia and Margaret, and her youngest son Robert with her. Her son Samuel died in Kingston in 1764 and it seems she may have left her eldest son Thomas in Jamaica with his uncles. It is not clear where her son John junior and her daughter Janette spent their youth. There is also some mystery over why it was that John junior, who was born in Manchester in 1768, was ‘unprovided for’ in his father’s will. According to Janet’s own will this circumstance led to her coming to an agreement with her brother-in-law Thomas senior, her nephew Thomas junior and their former business partner Samuel Jackson who paid ‘£1000 and £100 apiece for his [John junior’s] education.’[[76]](#endnote-76) In 1778 Janet added a codicil requesting that in the event of her death her daughters should be cared for by her sister-in-law Abigail Hibbert and Arabella Sprigg, the wife of Thomas senior’s former slave trading partner. She entrusted her two youngest sons to her brother Samuel Wilkinson Gordon, a London merchant. Janet died at Mortlake in Surrey in 1779. Having only recently dispatched Jane Harry from their house, Arabella and her husband took in Janet’s daughters. Neither Cecelia nor Margaret married and they remained living with the Spriggs for the rest of their lives. Though not a blood relation, Arabella cared for Janet’s daughters up until her death in 1824. In her will she bequeathed her home to her only living charge Margaret.[[77]](#endnote-77)

# Between 1784-87 Janet’s youngest son Robert was educated at Warrington Academy in Nottingham, under the tutelage of Gilbert Wakefield at a cost of £200 per year.[[78]](#endnote-78) Wakefield remembered Robert fondly in his *Memoirs*, stating that ‘The society of this ingenious and amiable youth was a source of perpetual satisfaction, and he usually passed his vacations with me till the completion of his academical career’.[[79]](#endnote-79) The two men remained close; when Wakefield was imprisoned in 1801 for writing a pamphlet in support of the French Revolution, Robert sent him £1,000.[[80]](#endnote-80) During his time in England, Robert’s older cousin George took on a parental role, acting as his guardian. George spoke highly of his young charge, writing to Simon Taylor that ‘Your... good opinion of young Robert Hibbert is very pleasing to me… I have known him intimately from his infancy and have always found him acute, attentive and honourable.’[[81]](#endnote-81) As Robert grew and matured he was eventually taken into the London family partnership by George.

Following on from his brother John senior’s marriage, Thomas senior looked next to his nephews Thomas junior and Robert junior to make advantageous matches. Both men harboured aspirations towards marriage with Robert junior documenting some of their early attachments. Thomas junior formed a serious relationship with a Miss Reeves to whom he was engaged in 1772. To his deep sadness Miss Reeves fell ill and died. Robert junior described the event in his diary

Miss Reeves… Very ill on Wednesday, but recovers a little, and addresses all her friends in a very pathetic & sensible manner, acquits my Brother of any breach of promise, etc. On Thursday morng. a little better, but relapses in the aftn. & dies at night, to my Brother’s and, I may add, to my unspeakable regret.[[82]](#endnote-82)

Her death was a blow to Thomas junior whose brother George recorded in his diary that ‘My Bro. T. writes in very bad spirits. The Lady whom of all others he lik’d best and to whom he was engag’d had died abo’t 10 days before he wrote he had sat up with her 5 Days and 3 nights and this join’d to the lowness of his spirits we are afraid will bring on some illness.’[[83]](#endnote-83) Such was his grief that in the days following Miss Reeves death Thomas junior told his uncle that he wanted to return to England.[[84]](#endnote-84) In the end he left Jamaica still a bachelor in 1780.

In 1775 Robert junior took an interest in a Miss Goulburn (possibly Sarah Goulburn, the daughter of Edward Goulburn and Thomasin Roberts) - the ‘Miss G.’ that Charity had taken such a keen interest in. Thomas junior met with the lady and her mother when they arrived from England, following which the brothers had ‘some talk on the subject.’[[85]](#endnote-85) Having seen Miss G. at a play a couple of days later Robert junior confided in his diary that ‘I think her very handsome.’[[86]](#endnote-86) Three days after this encounter Robert junior proclaimed that ‘I was to have dined on board *Boyd* but cannot yet relish society but where she is the theme.’[[87]](#endnote-87) The next day he added that he was ‘rather touched and sick with wine & love combined.’[[88]](#endnote-88) Despite Robert junior’s private declarations of love nothing transpired of this infatuation.

A decade later on the 3 September 1785 Robert junior was married to twenty-year-old Letitia Nembhard. Letitia was the daughter of Dr John Nembhard and his wife Ann Payton Hamilton. The Nembhards owned the 300 acre estate Konigsberg in St. Mary’s, the same parish as the Hibberts’s Agualta Vale plantation. The family were of good social standing and on his death in 1777 John left each of his four daughters £1,200.[[89]](#endnote-89) The year after their marriage and with a newborn daughter Anna, Robert junior purchased Whitehall plantation. He pulled down the old house and made plans to build a new home for his family.[[90]](#endnote-90) From entries in Robert junior’s diary it seemed the couple enjoyed a good relationship; they attended the usual social functions of people of their station including social calling, balls, exhibitions, auctions, theatre performances, church, and family occasions. When Letitia was pregnant or ill, Robert junior was attentive and concerned. In his earlier diaries he had written about his sexual encounters with women, venereal diseases, and an illegitimate child. The diaries spanning 1787-1802 contained two references in 1787 and 1788 to Robert junior sleeping at the Spanish Town property of a woman named Kitty Hinks, although the nature of this relationship is unclear.[[91]](#endnote-91) After that there were no more references to this kind of behaviour, although that is not necessarily to say that it did not persist.

Robert junior and Letitia had five living children. In his diary and private letters Robert junior recorded his wife’s seven miscarriages (including one during a voyage to England). Alongside this there were two babies that died within a day of birth. Between 1786-1802 Letitia went through fourteen pregnancies. In 1790 Robert junior wrote to his sister Mary on the impending birth of his son Robert. His description indicated that constant pregnancy and miscarriage had taken a physical toll on Letitia ‘My Wife is as well as Ladies so weighty [original emphasis], in general are’ he added that they would soon return to England as ‘Mrs. H’s health requires cold weather.’[[92]](#endnote-92) Robert junior’s diaries recorded the many weeks of illness both leading up to and after his wife miscarried. Eight days after a miscarriage in 1797 Letitia was ‘again seized with violent discharges’.[[93]](#endnote-93) During June 1798 she suffered from sustained periods of breast pain. Robert junior attended to his wife, summoned the doctor, and cancelled their engagements.[[94]](#endnote-94) In July of 1790 ‘Mrs. H. taken ill about 5 o’clock with a violent headache & lowness of spirits… Saturday morn’g she complains of violent spasms in her stomach.’[[95]](#endnote-95) In August 1800, a year after suffering another miscarriage, Letitia was again experiencing problems with her reproductive health. Robert junior noted that ‘Mrs. H. not well; her disorder an inflammation so near the womb as to frighten her.’[[96]](#endnote-96) The impact of multiple miscarriages and child deaths was emotional as well as physical. Robert junior noted periods in which both he and his wife were ‘low spirited’ following these events.[[97]](#endnote-97) Robert junior’s diary was littered with anxious references to his wife’s ill health, although in the end she outlived him by nineteen years, dying at the age of eighty-nine.

By his own admission Robert junior loved children; writing to his sister Mary he enthused ‘I am so fond of Children that if I was in England I should be loading my Nephews and Nieces with Whistles and Trumpets and Dolls etc.’[[98]](#endnote-98) He shared a loving relationship with his sons and daughters; he used his diary to note down each of their births and as they grew he kept a record of their heights. As a proud father Robert junior recalled that at a dinner party at Whitehall ‘little Anna is brought and exhibited in crossing the table.’[[99]](#endnote-99) Letitia was supported in motherhood by her mother and sisters, as well as the enslaved women who served her. When Letitia was nearing the birth of their first son Thomas, Robert junior waited eagerly for the new arrival. There was a false alarm on the 15 June, however, the danger of a premature birth passed and after weeks of anticipation Thomas was finally born on the 29 July 1788.[[100]](#endnote-100) A month later the child was given over to the care of a nurse.[[101]](#endnote-101) The children’s health was a serious and regular concern for both parents. Sore throats, disorders of the bowel, fever, chicken pox, boils, thrush in the mouth, prickly heat, measles and scarlet fever were just some of the childhood ailments Robert junior documented in his diary that his children suffered with. Proving himself a thoroughly modern father he insisted that his son Robert was inoculated against smallpox after an outbreak in Jamaica in 1791, his son John followed suit in 1796.[[102]](#endnote-102) The image of Robert junior as a gentle and attentive father is difficult to reconcile with the hard headed business of slavery - a business responsible for the dismantling of enslaved family units. Did Robert junior believe that enslaved men and women were incapable of the kind of parental affection he felt for his own offspring, or, was it simply commercially expedient to adopt this mentality? There is nothing in his diaries, letters or evidence to Parliament that reflected on how the practice of slavery emotionally affected the families who laboured under it. Perhaps he never thought of it at all.

Following the births of his children Robert junior’s family structure became increasingly transatlantic. As they grew their parents determined to send them to England for their schooling. In contrast to Thomas senior’s daughters Jane and Margaret, the children were cared for by their immediate Hibbert family. Letitia and Robert junior visited as often as they could and eventually settled at Birtles Hall in Cheshire, a country house which Robert junior purchased in 1791. Breaking up the family unit was difficult; with three generations of Nembhards in Jamaica, the family bonds were strong. Unlike Robert junior, this was the only place that his wife knew as home. Letitia was very close to her mother and sisters and they were very involved with family life. In 1790 as his young family prepared to visit England, Robert junior wrote to his sister of his concern for his wife stating that ‘I almost dread the parting between her and her Mother which in all human probability will be a final one. Nothing can reconcile such sacrifice to the mind but the prospect of meeting and living with those dearest of all Relations Children.’[[103]](#endnote-103) His fears did not come to fruition and in the end both Letitia’s sister and mother chose to relocate to London rather than break up the family.

In 1791 Robert junior handed his two eldest children Anna and Thomas into the care of his English relations. Having left both his wife and his youngest son sick after an inoculation in Jamaica, Robert junior reflected on the conflicting emotions of living between metropole and colony

I hardly recollect any voyage where, all things considered, I had greater cause for anxiety & apprehension than at present. The unsettled situation in which I left my new purchase, Birtles, the state of Fuhr’s health & dread of the consequences in case of accident to George, the leaving of my two children; the reason I have to apprehend injury from dry weather - fire; or what of worse than all, Insurrection of Negroes. All these and a thousand others are swallowed up by fears for the health and welfare of my wife & child.[[104]](#endnote-104)

Robert junior’s sentiments expressed the way in which business and family were absolutely enmeshed within the transatlantic world. George was both his younger brother and the head of the Hibbert counting house in London; with their business partner Fuhr sick, any accident or illness that affected George could have a serious impact on their commercial enterprise. Parts of Robert junior’s life – his new country house and his eldest children – were anchored to Britain. Yet he had left his wife and younger child in Jamaica where he owned multiple properties (including human ‘property’), held political position and had a business of his own. It was his involvement with slavery that sustained his family life, but reliance on such a volatile and violent practice caused deep uncertainty. Both merchant capitalism and transatlantic slavery were risky trades; the angst that Robert junior expressed was not related to any moral uneasiness with his situation, but rather a realisation that despite his great wealth, his style of life was reliant on the maintenance of two interlocking systems that were inherently unstable.

In 1792 the bonds between the Hibbert and the Nembhards were strengthened when Robert junior’s cousin Robert married Letitia’s sister Eliza. Having returned from England in 1791 to take his place in the family business, Robert was in a good position to provide for a wife and any children. In spite of the pre-existing connection it seems that Robert’s initial marriage proposal was rejected by Eliza’s mother.[[105]](#endnote-105) Whatever the reason for this refusal, the obstacle was overcome and four months later the families were preparing for the wedding. In a return to the bawdy language of his earlier years Robert junior reported that on the 12 September 1792 ‘my Cousin storms poor Eliza’s fort.’[[106]](#endnote-106) The couple remained childless, however, they were devoted to their ‘darling adopted Child Sophy’, the daughter of Robert’s brother John.[[107]](#endnote-107)

Despite the multiple marital ties that bound them, there remained a lingering sense of difference between the colonial and metropolitan branches of these families. Robert junior’s mother Abigail expressed some of these perceived divergences in her letters to her own daughters. The discourse within which Abigail situated her criticisms spoke to some of the prevailing suspicions about the un-English nature of the Creole.[[108]](#endnote-108) West Indians were not viewed as transplanted Englishmen and women, prolonged colonial contact had distanced them from the social mores and habits of their metropolitan counterparts. Richard Cumberland’s play *The West Indian* (1771) is perhaps the best known literary example of the ways in which the Creole was constructed in the English imagination. Fiery, generous and idle, they were considered prone to over-indulgence, gluttony, irreligiosity, and promiscuity. The climatic influence of the Torrid Zone, alongside extended periods spent in the company of enslaved Africans, created a sense of colonial difference that was expressed by both residents of, and visitors to, the Caribbean. Edward Long criticised Creole women in particular as corrupted through their contact with the enslaved. He wrote disdainfully of ‘a very fine young woman aukwardly dangling her arms with the air of a Negroe-servant, lolling the whole day upon beds or settees… her speech is whining, languid and childish.’[[109]](#endnote-109) These views were reinforced in the journal of Lady Nugent who penned a passage outlining some of her opinions on Creole society:

It is extraordinary to witness the immediate effect that the climate and habit of living in this country has on the minds and manner of Europeans… In the upper ranks, they become indolent and inactive, regardless of anything except eating, drinking and indulging themselves… The Creole language is not confined to the negroes. Many of the ladies, who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is tiresome if not disgusting.[[110]](#endnote-110)

Abigail’s letters articulated some of these tropes in relation to Letitia and her children. Letitia’s ill health was scrutinised by her mother-in-law; in response to her delicate constitution, Abigail recommended bathing in the sea at Blackpool. The letter relating to this expedition was dated 29 September – a bracing time of year to enjoy the restorative powers of the North Sea, particularly for someone used to the warmer waters of the Caribbean. Abigail reported to her daughter Mary that ‘Mrs. R. H. bathed 4 times, but not a word of what effect it had.’[[111]](#endnote-111) Letitia’s response was immediately compared to that of Abigail’s other daughter-in-law, her son Samuel senior’s wife Mary Greenhalgh. ‘Mrs. S. H.’ Abigail reported ‘had bathed the day before merely for the pleasure of it, but had found such benefit that she meant to Continue.’ Mary’s family hailed from Horton in Lancashire – good hardy northern stock comparable to Abigail’s own family background. Dismissing Letitia’s health problems, her mother-in-law added that ‘Mrs. R. H. complaints are merely from a weak, relaxed habit’. In the figure of the Creole woman Abigail, Lady Nugent and Edward Long all identified unwelcome deviations which marked them out as inferior.

Letitia’s mothering skills were also called into question by Abigail. She disapproved of her daughter-in-law’s practice of letting her children suckle for too long. This was a habit that Robert junior associated with enslaved mothers in a questionnaire he wrote in order to prepare for giving evidence to Parliament in 1790.[[112]](#endnote-112) In one of her letters Abigail wrote about a communication she had received from Letitia giving an update on the progress of her grandson. Abigail relayed the information that ‘all was well, her little boy has ten teeth & speaks many words quite plain, but she does not tell the whole truth, for I find he was not wean’d when his father returned, & perhaps sucks yet, as she avoids saying anything about it.’[[113]](#endnote-113) Is it possible that having lived her whole life in Jamaica Letitia was aware of the lactational amenorrhea method of birth control practiced by African women on the plantations? Katherine Paugh’s work on slavery and reproduction has suggested that the planter class were well aware of the link between breast feeding and a reduction in fertility.[[114]](#endnote-114) Does this explain why Abigail chose to breastfeed for long periods? Perhaps she simply took pleasure from this form of maternal bonding. Abigail was firm in her condemnation and urged the letter’s recipient not to follow Letitia’s example.

Abigail’s opinions about her Jamaica-born grandchildren were also inflected with the language of Creole difference. She wrote that ‘I have a poor heart of my Guests, the Children are delicate, & have not had the small pox, the boy suffers much from his teeth, & has a Negro Nurse.’[[115]](#endnote-115) The tone of disapproval in Abigail’s letter was notable. The presence of an African woman in the household, fulfilling such an intimate family role, would have been entirely alien to Abigail. Although her husband, sons, and nephews were heavily involved in the slavery business the ‘Negro Nurse’ was neither a tidy entry in a ledger book, nor one of the fearful savages conjured in the newspaper reports of events like the revolution in Saint Domingue. This was transatlantic slavery brought into the heart of the metropolitan home. Writing from Manchester a month afterwards, Abigail relayed yet more troubling news about her Creole granddaughter Eliza. A friend of the family, Miss Parker, had informed Abigail that she ‘observed Eliza with great attention when with her & cannot find that she uses her tongue at all in speaking, neither is her Language in the least intelligible but to those who are Constantly with her.’[[116]](#endnote-116) Again this differencing of accent and pronunciation can also be found in both Edward Long and Lady Nugent’s writings. On her return to England, Lady Nugent presented her children to their metropolitan relations and reported that they ‘amuse all the family very much, by their little funny talk, and Creole ideas and ways.’[[117]](#endnote-117) Abigail it seemed was more alarmed than entertained. With the children safely ensconced in England there would be time enough to correct the habits they had learned in Jamaica. Coming of age during the tumultuous period of abolition, none of Robert junior and Letitia’s children returned to the island to settle there.

**Conclusion**

The Hibberts, like so many other families forged under the shadow of slavery, were transformed both as economic agents but more intimately as private individuals - as mothers, fathers, sons and daughters. The existence of an inside / outside dynamic based on legitimacy and skin colour, and shaped by religion and place, created a hierarchy which enabled the wealth and privileges of the plantation system to circulate within defined boundaries. Jane and Margaret existed on the periphery of the Hibberts’s family circle. When they arrived in England they were sent to live with business associates and not with their family. Their position was entirely contingent on the status of their father Thomas senior. On his demise Jane’s ties to the family were effectively severed. Her decision to flout the raced and gendered rules that dictated acceptable behaviour made this estrangement a more straightforward decision, however, it was her claims to financial equality that triggered the final separation. Despite her family’s rejection, Jane’s social position as the daughter on a powerful merchant with private wealth of her own mitigated the worst effects of her disownment. Having enjoyed some of the privileges of class prior to her expulsion from the family, she was able to access key radical figures within the elite circles of the metropolitan cultural world. Helped by the bonds of religion, her relationship with Mary Morris Knowles gave her the opportunity to fashion an identity of her own. None of the Hibberts attended Jane’s wedding in 1782, instead Mary and her husband acted as witnesses. In the absence of, or perhaps more properly in preferment to, her blood relations, the Knowles became the family of Jane’s choosing. As a Quaker, an abolitionist and a woman of colour she was a remarkable figure for her time, rendering her visible where the majority of mixed heritage children born during slavery have fallen into obscurity.

Jane was absent from both the public and private accounts of the family lineage. In amongst the Blathwayt papers there is an extensive handwritten family tree in which it stated ‘Thomas Hibbert died unmarried’.[[118]](#endnote-118) Despite the Hibberts’s efforts to exclude Jane from the family story, her archival erasure was not complete. Her life intertwined with influential friends and in this way her memory was preserved. When her extraordinary story came to the attention of the Quaker historian Joseph Green, he continued to search for further fragments with which to piece together her narrative. He was particularly interested in Jane’s paintings but he wrote that ‘Upon the break-up of the Kingston establishment they disappeared, and never reached England; and possibly the Hibbert family, from the sad circumstances of Jenny Harry’s birth, would hardly care to perpetuate her memory by retaining such mementoes.’[[119]](#endnote-119) On the other hand Jane’s husband’s family kept and treasured one of the single surviving objects that had been owned by the couple – their silver wedding spoons. Passed down a somewhat convoluted family line they made their way into Green’s hands. He wrote of them that they ‘are greatly valued as a memorial of a most interesting and excellent personality – Jenny Harry.’ Just over a hundred years on from when Green wrote his article, Jane has been reclaimed by Hibbert family historian Nicholas Hibbert Steele. His website, whilst focusing primarily on Jane’s cousin George, has a section in which Jane is acknowledged as part of the family story.[[120]](#endnote-120) The stigma of illegitimacy and race is perhaps no longer the barrier it once was to intimate recognition, although the ability to grapple with the slaving past remains a difficult personal issue for some families.

The archival presence of elite planter-merchant families contrasts sharply with the absences faced by those who attempt to document enslaved ancestors. The lack of official records between the last of the triennial slave registers and the first census in the West Indies has created a gap in our knowledge. The *Solomon and Elizabeth Hibbert Network* is a family website that has tried unsuccessfully to trace their relations back into the period of enslavement.[[121]](#endnote-121) They have been in contact with Hibbert Steele to try and ascertain if their forebears were once the property of the family. Despite their efforts they have been unable to find any evidence documenting the lives of their relatives under slavery. The asymmetry of the historic record is a reflection of both the power structures of society and of the archives that they create. Recovering enslaved families – their humanity and agency – is extremely difficult given the nature of the sources that historians have to work with. Slave registers, plantation accounts, attorney letters and reports all occasionally offer some skeleton information about the connections that bound people to one another on the estates, but in most instances they lack the detail that would allow a deeper penetration of enslaved family life. Colonial intimacies radically altered the experience and meaning of family – the legacies of these shifts continue to shape the lives of people in both the former spaces of empire and the former metropole. The Hibberts’ story serves as a reminder of what is gained through an analysis of imperial family relations, what is lost and also, for some, what is ultimately unrecoverable.

1. **Notes**

   Oliver Vere Langford, *Caribbeana being miscellaneous papers relating to the history, genealogy, topography, and antiquities of the British West Indies*, vol. IV (London, 1919), p. 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Barbara Bush, *Slave women in the Caribbean 1650-1838* (London: James Curry, 1990), p. 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Trevor Burnard, ‘Credit, Kingston merchants and the Atlantic slave trade in the eighteenth century’, unpublished paper for British Group of Early American Historians, Stirling (3 September 2009), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hibbert Family Archives and Collection, Melbourne, Australia, Diary of Robert Hibbert junior, 1 October 1779. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an in depth discussion of these issues in relation to Simon Taylor and Grace Donne see Meleisa Ono-George, ‘“Washing the Blackamoor White”: Interracial intimacy and coloured women’s agency in Jamaica', in Will Jackson and Emily Manktelow (eds), Subverting empire: Deviance and disorder in the British colonial world (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Adele Perry, *Colonial families: The Douglas-Connolly family and the nineteenth-century imperial world* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Philip Wright (ed.), *Lady Nugent’s Journal* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002) p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Henrice Altink, *Representations of slave women in discourses of slavery and abolition 1780-1838* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Stewart, *A view of the past and present state of the island of Jamaica*, p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. National Archives, England, Colonial Office and Predecessors, CO/137/158/28, Letter from George Hibbert to Earl Bathurst, 5 February 1824. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Thomas senior described Charity as his housekeeper in his will. The historiography of their relationship, and that of their children includes; Joseph J. Green, ‘Jenny Harry, later Thresher’, *Friends Quarterly Examiner* (1913), pp. 559-82; Joseph J. Green, ‘Jenny Harry, later Thresher (concluded)’, *Friends Quarterly Examiner* (1914), pp. 43-64; Judith Jennings, ‘A trio of talented women: Abolition, gender, and political participation’, *Slavery & Abolition*, 26:1 (April 2005), pp. 55-70; Judith Jennings, *Gender, religion, and radicalism in the long eighteenth-century: An ‘Ingenious Quaker’ and her connections* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Judith Jennings, ‘‘By No Means in a Liberal Style:’ Mary Morris Knowles versus James Boswell,’ in Ann Hollinshead Hurley and Chanita Goodblatt (eds), *Women editing / Editing women: Early modern women writers and the new textualism*, (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 227-47; Judith Jennings, ‘Jane Harry Thresher and Mary Morris Knowles speak out for liberty in Jamaica and England’, in Amar Wahab and Cecily Jones (eds), *Free at last? Reflections on freedom and the abolition of the British transatlantic slave trade* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); Katie Donington, ‘Jane Harry 1755/6-1784’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/107/101107509/> [Accessed 28 September 2017]; Daniel Livesay, *Children of uncertain fortune: Mixed race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic family, 1733-1833* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. TNA, CO 139/31, Jamaica Acts, 1774-75, quoted in Daniel Livesay, ‘Children of uncertain fortune: Mixed race migration from the West Indies to Britain, 1750-1820’, (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2010), p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Green, ‘Jenny Harry’, p. 560. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rachel Lang, ‘The Whitemans of Grenada: Illegitimacy and the ‘ownership’ of family members’, <https://lbsatucl.wordpress.com/2013/10/11/the-whitemans-of-grenada-illegitimacy-and-the-ownership-of-family-members/> [Accessed 31 August 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Daniel Livesay, ‘Children of uncertain fortune: Mixed race migration from the West Indies to Britain 1750-1820’ (Unpublished PhD theses: University of Michigan, 2010), p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. TNA, CO 139/31, Jamaica Acts, 1774-75, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Danielle Goodman, Sophia Seebom and Chloë Stewart, ‘Headquarters House, Kingston, Jamaica, 1755-1990’, (Unpublished paper, Jamaica National Heritage Trust), p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a description see Reverend R Bickell, *The West Indies as they are: or a real picture of slavery: but more particularly as it exists in the island of Jamaica*, (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1825), pp. 27-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. HFAC, Diary of Robert Hibbert junior, 5 May 1775. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibid.*, 30 September 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Jennings, ‘Jane Harry Thresher and Mary Morris Knowles’, p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. There has been some speculation over the date of Jane and Margaret’s departure. Thomas senior left Jamaica for London in 1771 and it is possible they traveled with him. Judith Jennings has suggested they might have left earlier, possibly in 1769. Jennings, ‘Jane Harry Thresher and Mary Morris Knowles’, p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Letter from Simon Taylor to George Hibbert, 14 January 1804, quoted in Daniel Livesay, ‘Extended families: Mixed race families and the Scottish experience, 1770-1820’, *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 4 (2008), p. 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Edward Long quoted in Catherine Hall, ‘Whose memories? Edward Long and the work of re-remembering’ in Katie Donington, Ryan Hanley and Jessica Moody (eds), *Britain’s history and memory of slavery: The local nuances of a ‘national sin’* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Henrice Altink, ‘Forbidden fruit: Pro-slavery attitudes towards enslaved women’s sexuality’, *Journal of Caribbean History*, 39:2 (2005), p. 211. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Roxann Wheeler, *The complexion of race: Categories of difference in eighteenth-century British culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Livesay, *Children of uncertain fortune*, p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Island Record Office, Jamaica, Will of Charity Harry, Wills LOS 58, (fo. 71), 13 November 1793. Transcription provided in a private communication by Daniel Livesay, 5 August 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Letter from Robert Taylor to John Tailyour, 27 August 1791, quoted in Livesay, ‘Extended families’, p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Letter from Jane Harry to Thomas Hibbert senior, date unknown, quoted in Green, ‘Jenny Harry’, p. 565. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 563-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid.*, p. 563. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid.*, p. 564. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid.*, p. 565. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.*, p. 567. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. *Ibid.*, p. 565. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Green, ‘Jenny Harry’, p. 566. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, *Family fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 2002, p. 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Letter from Jane Harry to Thomas Hibbert senior, date unknown, quoted in Green, ‘Jenny Harry’, p. 566. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Samuel Lloyd, *The Lloyds of Birmingham*, vol. II (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Ltd., 1907), p. vii. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibid.*, p. 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Anna Seward quoted in Jennings, ‘Jane Harry Thresher and Mary Morris Knowles’, p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Several versions of the conversation exist, *Gentleman’s Magazine* (London: John Nicholls, 1791), pp. 700-1; *Dialogue between Dr. Johnson and Mrs. Knowles* (London: J. & A. Arch, 1799); James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, vol. III (London: Routledge, Warnes & Routledge, 1859), pp. 199-200; Samuel Lloyd, *The Lloyds of Birmingham*, Second Edition (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers Limited, 1907), pp. 114-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Letter from Jane Harry to Thomas Hibbert senior, date unknown, quoted in Green, ‘Jenny Harry’, p. 576. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. HFAC, Diary of Robert Hibbert junior, 9 June 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Letter from Thomas Hibbert junior to Jane Harry, 15 December 1780, quoted in Green, ‘Jenny Harry (concluded)’, p. 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Jane Harry quoted by Thomas Hibbert junior in *Ibid.*, p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. *Gentleman’s Magazine* (London: John Nicholls, 1784), p. 716. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Island Record Office, Wills LOS 58, (fo. 71), Will of Charity Harry, 13 November 1793. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Jennings, ‘Jane Harry Thresher and Mary Morris Knowles’, p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Jamaica Family Search Genealogy Research Library, Kingston Parish Registers 1722-1825, the record noted he was born on 12 Jul 1756 and baptised on 26 Oct 1757, <http://www.jamaicanfamilysearch.com/Samples/regkgn01.htm> [Accessed 31 August 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. <http://www.georgehibbert.com/hibbertsjam.html> [Accessed 10 April 2011]. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. HFAC, Diary of Robert Hibbert junior, 15 July 1779, 5 April 1776. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *Ibid.*, 2 July 1773. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Ibid.*, 28 May 1776. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *Ibid.*, 2 June 1776. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *Ibid.*, 30 September 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibid.*, 19 September 1790. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Ibid.*, 23 January 1793. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Ibid.*, 25 January 1793. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Ibid.*, 15 January 1793. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. *Ibid.*, 3 February 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. *Ibid.*, 25 February 1780. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Langford, *Caribbeana,* p. 197. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
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86. *Ibid.*, 4 May 1775. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. *Ibid.*, 8 May 1775. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. *Ibid.*, 9 May 1775. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
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112. HFAC, a questionnaire written in the hand of Robert Hibbert junior and kept with his diary. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. GA/BFDP, D1799/C153, Letter from Abigail Hibbert, Highfields, 16 April. No year or recipient included although it is likely that the letter was intended for her daughter Mary Oates as part of a series of correspondence on the subject of breastfeeding. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. Katherine Paugh, *The politics of reproduction: Race, slavery, and fertility in the age of abolition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 85-121. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
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