

Dear Friends

Last week I shared with you some of my memories of Yorkshire.

As some of you will know I am fascinated by history and this week's letter focusses on history and the relationship between the past and the present, especially because it is Black History month.

The first part of the letter is a historical narrative about the peoples who have called Yorkshire home over the last two thousand years. The second is a reflection by Myrna Moore. As you read, I hope you will see the link between them. I want to thank Myrna for her permission to include her reflection in this letter.

If you had lived here two thousand years ago you would have lived in the homeland of a tribe called the Brigantes. These were the people who lived in Yorkshire when the Romans came. The Romans built a fortress called Eboracum on the banks of the river Ouse, a city four Roman emperors would visit in the course of more than three hundred years of Roman presence in the British Isles.

The legion that was stationed in York was called the Hispania, the ninth legion. When I was a child, I watched a serialisation of a wonderful novel by Rosemary Sutcliffe called the Eagle of the Ninth which is inspired by what is said to have happened to that legion. They are reputed to have marched north of Hadrian's wall never to return and nobody knows what happened to them.

Pause for a moment and think about their name. The Hispania. York was the home to a Spanish legion and people from all over the empire that stretched to the borders of modern Syria made it their home.

Centuries after the Romans abandoned Britain the Romano-British tribes were displaced by the pagan Anglo-Saxons who came from the heartlands of Europe. These were the people who first named as English. Yorkshire became part of the great Anglo-Saxon-Kingdom of Northumberland. This kingdom included a smaller Kingdom that included West Yorkshire called Elmet, a name that survives to this day in place names like Sherburn in Elmet.

Although they were pagan kingdoms at a time we usually call the dark ages, these kingdoms were evangelised by Christian evangelists who had come from Ireland sharing the good news of Christ. They created the first great monastic communities including the community of men and women at Whitby on the Yorkshire coast whose Abbess was named Hild. It was Hild who welcomed the great men of the church to decide when Easter should be celebrated at the council of Whitby in 664 A.D.

Yorkshire faces the sea. The Kingdom of Northumberland was eventually dismembered and occupied by the Danes who sailed up the river estuaries of

Yorkshire and gave the city at its heart a new name. Jorvik. You can visit the Jorvik museum and discover the amazing wealth and mythology of the Vikings today.

The last Viking incursion was in 1066 was Harold the English King defeated the Norwegian Harold Hardrada at the battle of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire. Within a month Harold himself was dead after marching south to meet William of Normandy at Hastings. The Normans displaced the old Anglo-Saxon hierarchy and rapidly subdued the whole country, making a doomsday book and building their trademark mote and bailey castles all over the place.

There is too much to write about in the next one thousand years, but Great Britain became a great trading nation and maritime power at the centre of a global empire. The empire also practised slavery which enabled the British to import products such as sugar, tobacco, cotton and rum. While there are stories of heroism and courage, exploration and discovery I was taught as a child we have found it much harder to face the dark side of our own history.

The recent toppling of the statue of a Bristol Merchant called Edward Colston reminds us that much of Britain's wealth was built on slavery and that when people in slavery were finally set free it was the owners not the former slaves who were compensated for this.

As a nation we still find it difficult to face this legacy. Yet there are hidden histories that are worth celebrating such as that of Sam Sharpe who was a Baptist deacon who led a revolt against the slave owners in 1831 for which he was hung. This revolt was called the Baptist revolt and it was a decisive moment in the movement to abolish slavery which happened less than ten years later.

The relationship between Britain and her former colonies is a complex one and that complexity continues today. It was headline news when Barbados a commonwealth nation, where half of my family comes from recently decided to become a republic

It's also a little amazing that men and women from the very Islands where their forebears had been transported responded twice over to our request for help in the twentieth century; serving in the armed forces during the second world war and in the forties, fifties and sixties coming to fill the vacancies in our labour market. In doing so they made this island nation their home.

I vividly remember the outgoing president of the Jamaican Baptist Union, Heckford Sharpe visiting the church I was responsible for in East London and describing his own experience of hostility and racism and of welcome and embrace when he was a young man in London on the nineteen fifties.

One of my favourite poets Benjamin Zephaniah celebrates British identity in a poem called 'The British' in which he imagines our nation as a recipe in which different

peoples are added to the mix. It doesn't matter who we are, all of us if we trace our family tree back through the generations will find we are descended from people who came from somewhere else. It's part of what makes us who we are. Black history is part of our history and the history of the Christian Church in the British Isles. As one of my tutors at the Northern Baptist College said. Its 'A tree God planted.'

The Baptist Union now hosts an annual lecture in partnership with the Jamaican Baptist Union. It is called the Samuel Sharpe lecture. Myrna Moore who many of you know, a member of our Church here at New North Road has written this reflection about Edward Colston and Samuel Sharpe. I commend it to you.

Your friend and pastor

Mark

Archive of the Mind: Edward Colston and Sam Sharpe

Seeing the statue of Edward Colston removed in such a dramatic way, last week, felt like poetic justice though I would normally disapprove of daubing, let alone pulling down statues, adorning the British landscape. Seventeenth century images of black children, men and women being dumped in the sea during the middle Passage from Africa (because they were ill, dying or pregnant) on their way to the greater hell of British slave plantations, are haunting. Once there branded, set to work from sun - up to sun -down. Latterly chains wrapped round Colston's neck, while arguments raged, had provided context.

I was reminded of our trip to Jamaica, August 2013. We were trying to finalise the sale of my parents' home in Montego Bay.

Dawn comes suddenly in the tropics, like a light being switched on at 6am and switched off again at 6.00 pm. A pint of water and a cup of tea is the only way to start the day. The irony of forgetting to bring sugar had not escaped me. I would learn to drink tea without sugar. Showered, mozzzy -prepped, we sat to eat a fresh fruit - salad of Pineapple, mangoes and guava, followed by toast and coffee on the kitchen veranda. Perfect timing for a pair of iridescent green parrots to swoop across our vista and set up a chat room in the Bread - fruit tree, opposite.

Our appointment with the solicitor would be at 11 am. Dishwasher loaded, water - bottles filled we set off. We would have a look at the town centre, visit the Sam Sharpe memorial.

A pristine sky, turquoise sea glistening between the houses. The warm - bath - air made us scuttle for shelter in the air-conditioned car. From Coral gardens, on down through lush vegetation, past pastel coloured mansions with sweeping verandas, waving to Mum and Dad's friends sitting on their verandas, exclusive shopping villages, private beaches, we followed the signs to Sam Sharpe square.

Flowers, benches Georgian buildings and in the middle, seemingly ignored by the locals, 3 figurines cast in bronze. One, Sam Sharpe, holding a bible preaching to an audience. This was supposed to be a hero, a freedom - fighter yet he looked so ordinary. Sham trial followed by execution in the square and buried in obscurity. There would be no hero worship. Fourteen whites were killed; Five hundred slaves died. This was the man who led the Christmas Rebellion of 1831, precipitating the end of slavery. The British were fighting abolitionists at home and trying to quell regular uprisings on the plantations. The promise of massive compensation - for the slave-owners finally (completed in 2015) secured a kind of freedom.

1838 saw emancipation. British rule continued until 1962 when finally, Jamaican Independence arrived; Sam Sharpe was resurrected and remembered.

I still think about that low -key image and I wonder why the Jamaican people have not made more of their heroes, like they have with Bob Marley.

Maybe surviving the atrocities is its own tribute. Massive outcry for a man who made a fortune from slavery, apathy and shame for a freedom fighter.

Myrna Moore