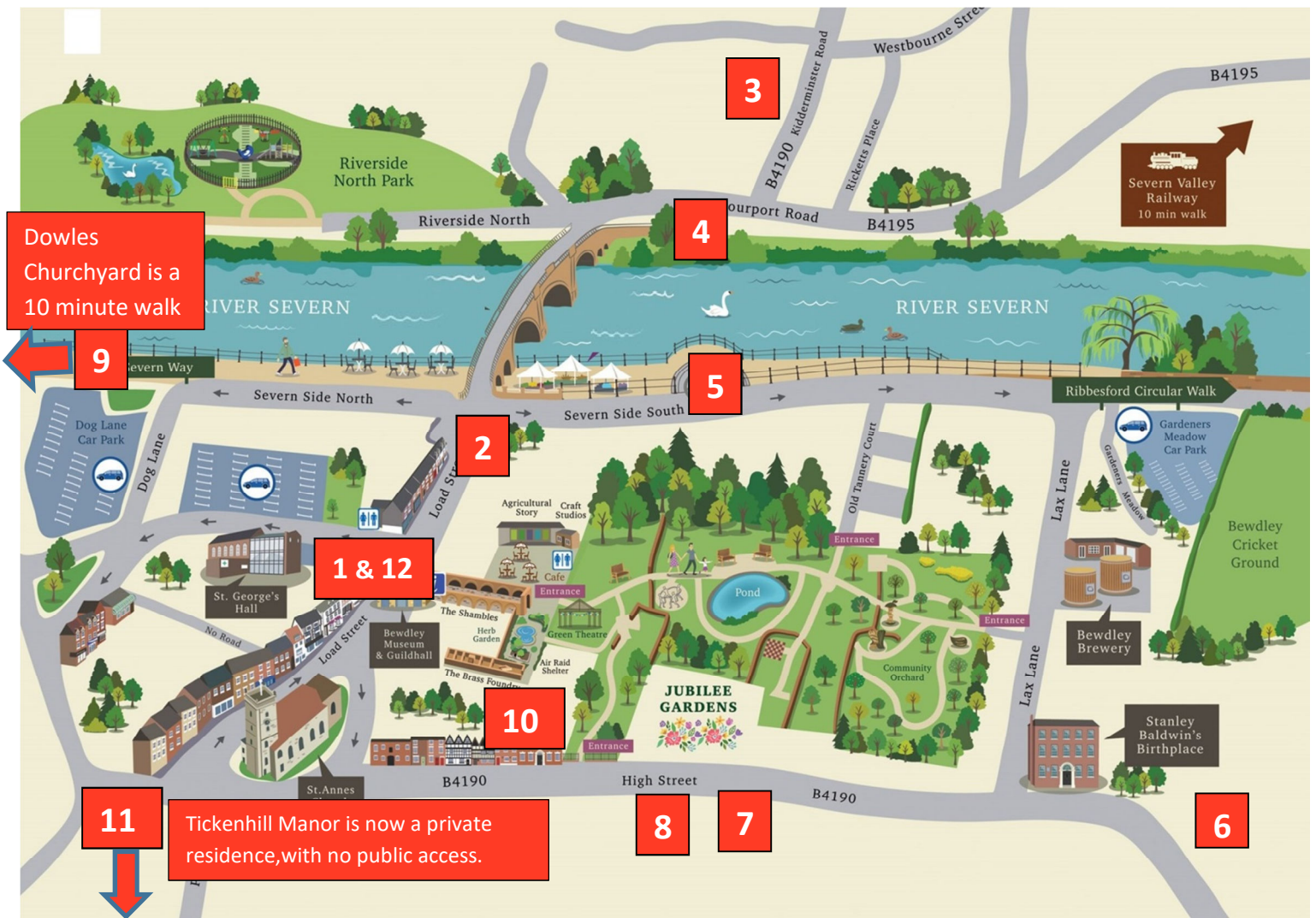
A large, horizontal brushstroke in the colors of the rainbow (green, yellow, orange, red) serves as a background for the main title text.

# **BEWDLEY'S BLACK HISTORY**

## **A WALKING TOUR**

BEWDLEY  
ANTI-RACISM GROUP 



# BEWDLEY'S BLACK HISTORY – A WALKING TOUR

## Introduction

How can we learn collectively from the past to ensure a future that is anti-racist and without discrimination?

This leaflet tells a story about the history of Bewdley, demonstrating historical connections between the town and slavery whilst also celebrating the town's history of radicalism. It explores two issues:

- That Bewdley's Georgian grandeur is in part the result of wealth derived from slavery; that we are therefore surrounded by, and still benefit from, the historical results of racism and oppression; and that this is an issue much closer to home than people might realise.
- That we can also trace a path back to those in our town's history who fought for the abolition of slavery; that we are historically a radical town that stands up for those who are oppressed.

The tour is designed to introduce people inquisitive about Bewdley's black history to places and people forming part of that story.

## 1 Guildhall – Thomas Wootton and the Bewdley Grocers

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, on the site of the present Guildhall, stood a house owned by Thomas Wootton, the first well-documented Bewdley grocer. The Bewdley grocers were wholesalers who benefitted enormously from the expansion of trade with the North American colonies and the West Indies through the port of Bristol. Besides foodstuffs, they also traded in dyes, medicines, spices, liquors, sugar and tobacco.

Tobacco is first mentioned as being carried from Bristol to Bewdley in 1647. It is Virginia tobacco that is usually listed, and by 1700 Bewdley grocers were handling about 10% of all tobacco coming up-river, it being the second most frequently carried cargo after foodstuffs. In the same period, the amount of sugar from the West Indies being traded by Bewdley grocers rose fivefold.



*The George Hotel was owned by one of Bewdley's grocers, Thomas Burlton*

There is no evidence that the Bewdley grocers had anything other than indirect links to the Atlantic slave trade triangle, but the exotic goods now arriving in Bewdley certainly contributed greatly to their prosperity. Nearly 20 grocers have been identified in eighteenth century Bewdley, and an analysis of their inventories shows an average wealth of over £2,000 at a time when that of a Bewdley person was around £100 on average. Much of this wealth was invested in property, and their wealth and social position was evidenced in the size of their houses.

Thomas Wootton's house on the Guildhall site consisted of a shop and eleven rooms. A series of store rooms and warehouses ran behind the house on the site of the current-day Shambles for the storage of tobacco and sugar, among other goods. Wootton also owned part of what is now Jubilee Gardens (in those days it was called Coles Meadow) and a warehouse on Severnside South.

Wootton was Bailiff (Mayor) of Bewdley from 1660 – 1661, and died in 1667, bequeathing in his will a total of 8 houses in Bewdley, Wyre Hill, Areley Kings, Astley, Tenbury and Ludlow.

## 2 Nos. 4 and 5 Load Street - George Knight and Samuel Brown

Following Wootton's death, the wealthiest grocer in Bewdley was George Knight, who lived at **4 Load Street**. Like Thomas Wootton, Knight supplied a wide range of goods to customers throughout the Midlands. His large townhouse comprised a shop and twelve rooms, and in addition he leased from Bewdley Corporation (the Town Council) a warehouse on the quay where No.19 Severnside South (Telford Court) now stands.

When Knight died in 1716, his inventory showed that sugar from the West Indies was by far the bulkiest commodity, though it also included tobacco and "Jamaican pepper" (allspice).

Another grocer, Samuel Brown, lived next door to Knight at **5 Load Street** (shop and nine rooms). Tobacco arrived in Bewdley packed as bundles of leaves, which then had to be separated, pressed and cut ready for smoking. Brown was one of the few grocers in Bewdley to own a tobacco press.

## 3 Wribbenhall – Black Boy Pub

Across the river in Wribbenhall stands one of Bewdley's "Black Boy" pubs. Two "Black Boys" remain in Bewdley today (the other is at the top of Wyre Hill), but local historian George Jorden (1783-1871) listed five pubs of that name in the town in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This Wribbenhall "Black Boy" dates from the late 17th century, and was originally called the "Blackamoor's Head".

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was owned by Edward Penn, whose business card incorporated a picture of a black figure leaning against a barrel of Jamaica rum, and (according to Jorden) formed the basis for the sign that hung outside the pub.

*Trade card for Edward Penn*



*© The Trustees of the British Museum*



Jorden described the signs hanging outside all five “Black Boy” pubs in Bewdley at that time, and each depicted a picture of a black boy, naked or nearly so. Another, the “Labour in Vain” on Severnside North, boasted a sign depicting a black boy being scrubbed in a bath tub. At the end of his list, Jorden adds that:

*“The black boys are named from the great quantity of grocery deposited here from Bristol, mostly produced by slave labour and conveyed up the river”.*

This would seem to debunk the “politically correct” theory advanced by some that all “Black Boy” pubs were named after Charles II on account of his dark complexion.



*Wribbenhall Black Boy Inn*

*Neither of the remaining Black Boy pubs in Bewdley continues to carry the offending signs.*



*Black Boy Inn on Wyre Hill*

## **4 Wribbenhall - Beales Corner**

In the course of the 17th and early 18th centuries Bewdley sailing barges - the Severn trows - dominated trade between north Worcestershire and Bristol. Along with the Bewdley grocers, owners of the Severn trows profited greatly from this highly lucrative business. As the seventeenth century progressed, Bristol could supply a range



*The last surviving Severn Trow is preserved at Ironbridge Museum.*

of highly-valued imported goods from the Caribbean and the American colonies, and the records show that such goods transported to Bewdley included many which were the result of slavery - namely sugar, tobacco, dyestuffs, medicines, spices, rum and brandy.

Those who owned trows on the Severn were given the prefix ‘Owner’, a kind of hereditary title. The largest of the Bewdley trow companies was owned by the Beale family, whose name is now given to the quayside area in Wribbenhall where

*Beales Corner in 1890.*

their cargo was loaded and unloaded. Other Owners were Glover, Millard and Reboll.

With the gradual decline of Bewdley as a port after the opening of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal at Stourport in 1772, most of the trows left the town, and Samuel Beale (the last in the line of Beale river carriers) fell into bankruptcy.



## The Quayside – Severnside South

As Bewdley became the base for merchants engaged in river trade, their offices and warehouses were established on the quayside of Severnside South, and inventories from the time show the wide range of exotic goods stored there.

*Along the quayside, metal plaques signify commodities traded at the docks during Bewdley's golden years.*



*Bewdley in 1776, the quayside bustling with activity.*



*A view of Severnside South, before major changes were made to frontages in the 1970s.*

*Still visible is the lifting gear at no.19 (centre) which is on or near the site of George Knight's warehouse.*

Also along Severnside South are further examples of houses built on the wealth accrued from Bewdley's prosperous river and grocery trade.

**RIVER HOUSE (Number 10)**, built at the end of the 17th century and **KIMBERLEY HOUSE (Number 11)**, of about the same date, are fine examples of this.



*River House*



*Kimberley House*

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## Friends Meeting House – The Quakers and Joseph Sturge

Moving away from the river to Lower Park, we encounter part of Bewdley's positive contribution to black history. Here stands the Friends Meeting House, which for a time in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was the spiritual home of Joseph Sturge, Quaker, abolitionist and activist who founded the *British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society* (now *Anti-Slavery International*). Throughout his life, Sturge was a champion for the universal emancipation of slaves.

Joseph Sturge grew up on his father's farm in Gloucestershire, and came to Bewdley in 1814 to earn a living as a corn factor. The abolitionist Sophia Sturge was his sister, and they lived in Wribbenhall for eight years before moving the family business to Birmingham in 1822. Sophia was a co-founder of the *Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves*, (later the *Female Society of Birmingham*) which spawned over seventy similar anti-slavery organisations in the UK and also became a model for other ladies' groups in the USA.



By 1831, Joseph Sturge had ceased to be an active partner in the family business, leaving operations to his brother Charles, and concentrated on issues and causes in public life.

After slavery was (supposedly) abolished in 1833, Joseph visited the West Indies several times and witnessed firsthand the abuses of an "indentured apprenticeship" system designed to give former slave owners control of the labour of their former slaves for 12 years. It was Sturge who was responsible for the campaign which led to full emancipation in 1838.

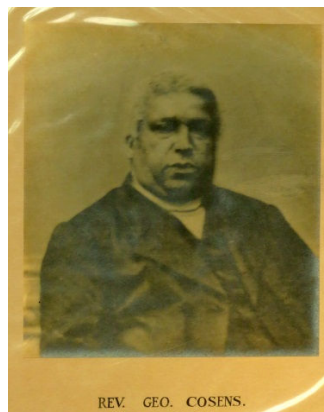
*The Joseph Sturge memorial by sculptor John Thomas at Five Ways, Birmingham.*

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## Bewdley Baptist Church – Rev. George Cosens

Along High Street, we find another example of Bewdley's radicalism. George Cosens was born in Jamaica in 1805, the son of a white plantation owner and a slave woman. He came to Britain to study in London where, in 1823, he was converted to Christianity. It is speculated that Cosens senior sent his son to be educated with a view to him running the plantation, but the family disowned him on his conversion. At first a Methodist, Cosens later joined the Baptists, and became the first known Afro-Caribbean Minister in the UK.

Cosens spent 8 years (1846-1854) as Baptist Minister in Bewdley. In 1851, he was living at **61 High Street** (now the Baptist Chapel offices). His life and achievements are becoming celebrated in Britain's black community.



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## Manor House – William Nichols Marcy

William Nichols Marcy was born in Jamaica in 1810. His father, George Marcy, owned a sugar plantation and was a slave owner until abolition in 1833. His annual register of slaves for 1823 states:

*'Number of slaves on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1823, one hundred and forty nine.  
Births since last return 2. Deaths since last return 25.'*

After emancipation, George Marcy fell into financial difficulties. William came to Bewdley to join his uncle John Nichols, who was in banking here, and trained as a solicitor. William became very successful in his own right, a rich and prominent citizen who lived at the **Manor House (No. 62)** in High Street (so named after Marcy bought the title of "Lord of Bewdley Manor" in 1870).

Interestingly, his uncle's bank (Nichols, Baker & Crane), was the last name of the Bewdley Bank before it was purchased by Midland Bank (now HSBC) in 1862. Its closure in 2016 marked the end of 237 years of banking in Bewdley.



Manor House

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William Nichols Marcy was buried at Dowles churchyard, (just outside Bewdley), in 1894.

The church has since been demolished, but Marcy's headstone still stands and is clearly legible. On it his legacy is written:

*'A Squire of Bewdley, J.P.*

*40 years Town Clerk of Bewdley.*

*52 years Clerk of the Peace for the County of Worcester.'*



10

## Redthorne House – The Prattinton dynasty

The importance of the Prattinton family to Bewdley, and to the merchant community served by the River Severn, is undeniable. The first of the line to set up business in Bewdley was John Prattinton (who came from a well-established Hartlebury farming family) in 1696. By 1727 he had acquired the "Corner House", at the corner of Load Street and High Street, along with four adjoining properties;



purchased all the stock goods of the late George Knight, creating the largest grocery business in Bewdley; built a new house in Park Lane, and a warehouse that is now called “Snuff Mill Warehouse”; and owned land and holdings on Wyre Hill, including the “Old Town Hall”.

The business was now being run by John’s son, Adam and subsequently by Adam’s son, William. There are no references at this time to the Prattintons being involved with tobacco, but importing sugar from the Caribbean through their agent in Bristol was an important part of their grocery business, important enough for William to go down to Bristol each summer and select his supply as soon as the sugar fleets began arriving from the Caribbean.

In the summer of 1772, William’s agent wrote to him *‘we have several ships arrived with sugars from Jamaica, two from Barbados and we shall now have daily arrivals from the sugar plantations so that I think you will not be so early at Market if you accompany your son hither’.*

From 1775 another consistent subject within the letters from William’s agent is that of sending materials from Bristol for the building of Prattinton’s new house on High Street – Redthorne House.

Mahogany wood from the Caribbean was used as part of the structure, and his agent writes:

*‘Mahogonay is to be bought at the same prices as it has been sold for sometime past, but as that article differs so much in quality, would wish you here to purchase for yourself.’*



*Redthorne House*

For a couple more generations, William’s nephews remained in the family business but, as with the other Bewdley grocers, the opening of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal in 1772 made it increasingly difficult to be a successful wholesale grocer and by 1819 the Prattinton grocery businesses were probably all at an end.

## **11 Tickenhill Manor – Catalina de Cordones**

When we think of Tudor England, we don’t immediately imagine black Africans being part of that society, but the period was significant for black settlement in England, and Bewdley does even have a tenuous link to that Tudor past.

One of Bewdley’s claims to fame is that Tickenhill Manor was once one of the seven royal palaces of Tudor England, established by Henry VII for his eldest son, Prince Arthur. In 1499, as part of a political treaty with Spain, Arthur was married by proxy to Catherine of Aragon in the chapel of Tickenhill Palace.

Catherine travelled with a multinational entourage that included Moors, Muslims and Jews, and though she probably only stayed at Tickenhill on one occasion (when Arthur’s

body lay in Bewdley on its way to Worcester Cathedral for burial), the black Iberian Moor Catalina de Cardones, who served as Lady of the Bedchamber to Catherine for 26 years, would certainly have accompanied her on this royal visit.

Catalina's story is told in a historical TV drama, "The Spanish Princess". When the film was shown, the director was inundated with hateful messages from people claiming that the show's "liberal" creators were trying to "rewrite European history" by "pretending" there was diversity in that era. In fact, the show was based on real lives, and historians have long established the presence of hundreds of black individuals in Tudor England – some servants, some skilled professionals.



*The original east wing of Tickenhill Palace, built around 1470.*

**PLEASE NOTE THAT TICKENHILL MANOR IS NOW A PRIVATE RESIDENCE, AND THERE IS NO PUBLIC ACCESS.**



*The Manor was substantially altered in 1735, when most of the east wing (on the right of the picture) was demolished.*

## **12 Guildhall**

Our tour starts and ends at the Guildhall. William Prattinton had earlier acquired the premises previously owned by Thomas Wootton, and on his retirement in 1779 sold them on to the Corporation of Bewdley for £600. Subsequently, the Butchers' Shambles were built on the site of Wootton's storerooms, and these are now the home for the town's Craft Museum. The present sandstone building was built in 1808 as the Town Hall, and now houses the Museum shop and Council chamber above. Do the voices of the slaves on whose shoulders much of Bewdley's fortunes were made still echo through these empty halls at night?

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