

Hester Woodley, the faithful slave

Even though we know Britain was heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade, we tend to think of those who were enslaved living in the Caribbean or America. This is the moving account of Hester Woodley - she was brought to England to work as a house slave for the Woodley and Parson families who were both established sugar planters in the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean for at least three generations.

In 1741 Bridget Woodley accompanied her daughter Mary Parson and son-in-law Edward Parson from St. Kitts and sailed to England in order for Edward to build a large three-story mansion from wealth their families had amassed.

For Hester

You also accompanied Bridget, Mary and Edward along with several other indispensable house slaves on that long six-week voyage from St. Kitts - lightening their load and making their journey tolerable. You belonged to Bridget Woodley.

You were brought here to Little Pardon that we now call Harlow. You were 35 years old and almost certainly the mother of several children that you were forced to leave behind. It is likely though, that you came with one of your daughters, Jane, as we can see from the parish records, that

a negro woman of the age of 25 years and upwards was baptised by the name of Jane Woodley on the 6th day of August 1761.

But sadly, we know that Jane was ordered back to St. Kitts to be in service to some other member of the Woodley family. That must have added to your continuous pain and grief only a mother would feel for the loss of a child.

I sincerely hope, however, that your pain was alleviated by the arrival of your granddaughter, also named Hester, when she was sent to Little Pardon in 1755 to work as a servant to Mary Parson. I find comfort when I imagine that you bonded in the unconditional love you would have had for each other.

You were called 'the faithful slave' - performing your duty as a house slave to the fullest. And still, you gave the love and due care you should have reserved for your children.

This makes me sad.

Before Bridget Woodley died in 1756, she had a discussion with her eldest son John Woodley, who would have inherited you. They made a reciprocal agreement in which you were given to Mary Parson until her death.

You would have come to this church in your lifetime with Bridget and then later with Mary until you passed away. You were put to rest beside the church wall, right here on these grounds.

Your exemplary service to Bridget and Mary afforded you a fine headstone rarely ever bestowed to a slave. It reads...

*Here lieth the body of Hester Woodley who died the 13th of May 1767 aged 62.
This Stone was erected by John Woodley Esq of Cork Street London.
As a grateful remembrance of her faithfully discharging her duty with the utmost attention and integrity in the service of his late mother Mrs Bridget Woodley to whom she belonged during her life and after her death to her daughter Mrs Mary Woodley by virtue of a reciprocal agreement between the said Mrs Bridget Woodley and her son John Woodley whose property she would otherwise have been at her decease.
These are the facts.*

Young Hester died aged thirty-two in 1788. And yet I find myself further deeply saddened by the fact that in her last will she requested to be buried in the Woodley and Parson family vault inside the church or with you in your grave. The parish records tell us that she was buried somewhere here at St Mary's Little Pardon church, but her body was not put in the family vault nor was she given a headstone.

Nothing remains today of the grand mansion house you once worked in, but you ARE remembered here in Harlow. You are commemorated in the name chosen by the former rectory, now a temporary accommodation, Hester House.

Hester Woodley, may you rest in ETERNAL peace.

Words written by Elsa James