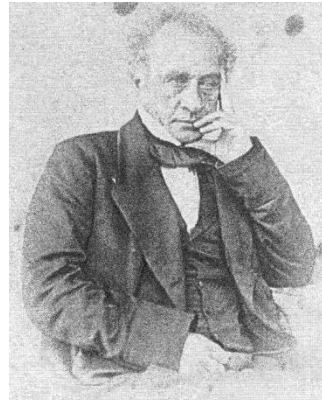




The Sewell Family 2: Henry Sewell of Jamaica and Steephill Castle

Last week's article described how Thomas Sewell arrived in the Isle of Wight and raised a family of clergymen, politicians and teachers. This week we tell the story of his cousin's son, William, who travelled to Jamaica and made a fortune from sugar, and whose son, Henry, bought Steephill Castle in 1872.

William Sewell was orphaned young, and travelled to Jamaica around 1820, possibly to join his cousin Robert Moses. Jamaica then was a place where a young Englishman with no connections or wealth could make a fortune. But the climate was punishing, and few women made the journey from England. William found work on sugar plantations as an overseer, and later as a bookkeeper on the Knocklava Estate, where he formed a liaison with Mary McCrea, a Creole and former slave. When his employer, Colonel Neil Malcolm, ordered him to end the relationship, William left, taking Mary and their two children, Elizabeth and Henry, and opening a shop in a small town nearby, selling rum and other supplies.



William Sewell 1801-1872



Henry Sewell 1838-1906

Although reputedly a forceful and short tempered man, William clearly had a good head for business. Jamaican slaves were emancipated in 1838 (the year his son Henry was born), and many plantation owners believed that with the ending of slave labour the glory days of fortunes made from Jamaican sugar were over. Estates, often owned by absentee landlords, could be bought very cheaply, and William raised money to buy one after another, establishing an empire based on his own financial acumen rather than slave labour. By the time his son Henry was 12 he was being educated at a private school in England, his father a very wealthy man. William Sewell died in Jamaica in 1872 having spent his life amassing a fortune - which his son Henry then spent his life pleasurably spending.

Henry married Margaret Crowther, the daughter of a wealthy Cumbrian businessman, and they had six children. The family spent their time between Britain and their Jamaican estate, Arcadia. They had large house in Wales, on the edge of Snowdonia, where some of the children were born but in September 1887 Henry bought Steephill Castle from Major Dudley Hambrough, who was moving to the mainland. He purchased all the fittings of the castle and grounds, and also many of the important pieces of furniture in the drawing room, library and dining room - it was a very well appointed residence. Henry was distantly related to the Sewells of Bonchurch, but they seem not to have met or socialised - perhaps they had lost touch - Montague Owen in his book *The Sewells of the Isle of Wight* suggests that there was an old family rift over a will - or perhaps Henry's Jamaican heritage had something to do with it.

The family photograph here was probably taken in the early 1890s at Steephill Castle. It is curiously posed, with Henry looking down at his son Horace and wife Margaret looking out of the picture, while the children stare straight at the photographer. Henry died in Arcadia in Jamaica in 1906; he was described then as *Henry Sewell of Steephill Castle, Isle of Wight and Arcadia, Jamaica* although Steephill had been sold to John Morgan Richards in 1903.



His children were well provided for, although only Horace (standing beside his father in the family group) had a notable career. Educated at Eton and Trinity College Cambridge, in 1900 he joined the 4th Royal Irish Dragoon Guards, where his regimental nickname was 'Sambo'; the youngest British cavalry general in the Great War, as well as one of the most distinguished, he was mentioned in dispatches five times, awarded the DSO as well as the Légion d'Honneur, and in WW2 served as a Brigadier General attached to the British Information Service in New York.

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#), with thanks to James Rayner, whose book *The Isle of Wight's Missing Chapter*: includes the story of Henry Sewell, and is available to buy in the Ventnor Heritage Centre. Photographs of Henry Sewell and his family from the Sewell family. Other sources used include information in our archives, *The Sewells of the Isle of Wight* by Montague Charles Owen, and information on Brigadier General Horace Sewell from Wikipedia.