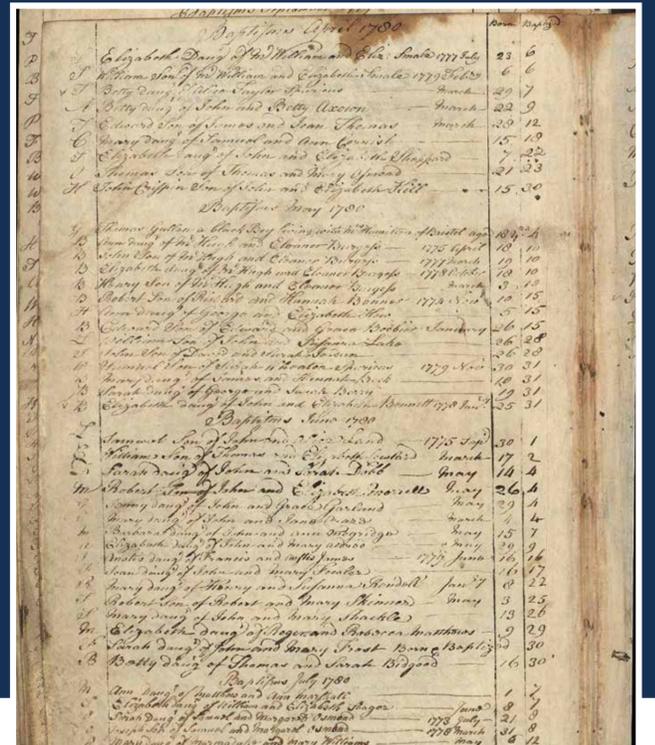


Telling Our Stories, Finding Our Roots



Thomas Gullan: a Young Black Man in 18th Century Tiverton

The presence of black people in Devon during the eighteenth century, whilst not unknown, was not commonplace. Our research uncovered the story of Thomas Gullen (also spelt 'Gullan' and 'Gallan'), a young man baptised in Tiverton on 4th May 1780, and referred to as a 'black boy living with Ms Hamilton of Bristol'.

Records identify a young 'negro boy' named Thomas Gullan, enslaved person to a Dr George Millegen of South Carolina. Dr Millegen, a loyalist, fled from South Carolina early in the American War of Independence to escape to England. Before leaving in 1775, Millegen granted Thomas Gullan his freedom 'in consideration of the favour and affection' which he held for him. Records show that Thomas would have been around thirteen years old at the time. In coming to England he would still have been at risk of being forcibly taken back into slavery or press-ganged into the Royal Navy.

At some point before 1780, Thomas became a servant to Elizabeth Hamilton, possibly in Bristol (Dr Millegen was a close neighbour of the Hamilton family). It's difficult to know the form and strength of the relationship between Thomas Gullen and Elizabeth Hamilton, but it's clear that even at her death, Elizabeth Hamilton held him in her thoughts,

and it was because of her that Thomas was baptised in Tiverton. In her will, Elizabeth grants a 'Thomas Gallan' the protection of her son, George, and daughter, Mrs Elizabeth Stevens, as 'a faithful honest good servant'.

The relationship between the Hamilton family and Thomas may have been quite a complex one. We know that Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton was the wife of David Hamilton, a leading sugar merchant and plantation owner who was heavily involved in the slave trade. He owned slaving vessels and records show that a number of them named a 'Captain Thomas Gullan' as ship's master.



No firm proof exists of a connection between the Captain Thomas Gullan and the black servant Thomas Gullen - but it is an association worth investigation. It was common for slave ship masters and plantation owners to father children with enslaved women, and to give them their name. Similarly, it is known that enslaved children were often taken on as personal servants and given the name of their owners.

Top photos: Archival records show Thomas Gullen being baptised in Tiverton.

Bottom photo: Sugar was brought to Britain by traders such as David Hamilton. Image courtesy of Tiverton Museum of Mid Devon Life.