**Tony Butler and Dr. Susanne Seymour**

**Tony:** Hello. I'm Tony Butler and I'm the Executive Director of Derby Museums. Welcome to our latest in a series of podcasts from ‘Derby Museums From Home’.

So, over the last decade in the UK, many museums have been confronting the legacies of slavery, empire and colonialism. Most museums and heritage sites will have been touched by these connections, from the way wealth was derived in order to own a country house or estate, to the acquisition of works of art from the profits of empire. And to the taking of cultural heritage from around the world, often by violence as part and parcel of aggressive colonial wars.

And Derby museums and art gallery, opened in 1880s, perhaps no different it's part of that system. Ostensibly, it was founded to educate local citizens. But the act of collecting and displaying objects around the world, wasn't just an expression of civic pride, but also one of cultural superiority. And it's taken about 140 years to acknowledge this. So, in our World Collections gallery, we explicitly state that we recognise that the legacy of this history continues today in institutions, social attitudes, and a sense of individual and national identity.

In particular, the legacy of slavery is evident in the continued structural racial inequalities in many of our institutions and society at large. And I'm acutely aware as a museum director that many of our audiences, now galvanized by the Black Lives Matter movement, demand that museums take a stand and play a full and honest part in creating positive social change and commit to being anti-racist.

So, to fulfill this role, museums can tell compelling, complex, and at times uncomfortable stories. But importantly, this work though has to be underpinned by rigorous academic research. So today I'm really pleased to be joined by Dr. Susanne Seymour, the Deputy Director at the Institute for the Study of Slavery at the University of Nottingham.

We're going to talk about her work and in particular, how the legacies of slavery are visible in heritage sites in our region. So, hi, Susanne.

**Susanne:** Hello

**Tony:** Great to have you with us today. Can you tell me about the Institute and the Institute for the Study of Slavery at the University and give us an idea of the work it does.

**Susanne:** Okay. Yeah, the Institute was established in its first form in 1998 by the late Thomas Velderman, a classicist. It's really an Institute which engages with the study of slavery across different time periods and in different parts of the world. So, it includes work on classical world, slavery, Viking era slavery, the transatlantic, the more commonly known historical transatlantic trade, and even modern slavery.

And we're a virtual grouping, with members drawn from different specialisms, different schools and disciplines across the university, which include History, Classics, English, Area studies, Sociology, and Geography, my home school. And we really set out to, generate comparative and cross-cultural approaches to the study of slavery.

And the types of events we run are things like public lectures, we host conferences, we support a whole range of different workshops and other events, including those with local communities, particularly we've done work with local communities of African descent.

**Tony:** So it's a very wide ranging school taking in lots of different subjects areas. Now I know that amongst your field of interest is historical geographies - you said the school of geography was your home patch - and the historical legacy of enslavement and colonialism associated with the British countryside and rural heritage sites.

So, it would be really interesting to know a little bit more about that work and how it relates to Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.

**Susanne:** Yes, my work has really been very much focused on rural and provincial settings, which aren't those which immediately spring to mind when people think about Britain's links with historical slavery, really. There's, normally more of a focus on major port cities, like Bristol, Liverpool. Glasgow and London, but I think people are really beginning to examine the impacts of transatlantic slavery, right across the country, in that wider countryside and in provincial centres like Nottingham and Derby and places which are inland, not necessarily on the coast. So, we're moving away from this idea that slavery only touched our coasts, but had a, a touch right through the whole country.

And then in relation to the British countryside, I think there are a number of challenges there. It's typically presented to us through, through really quite a white cultural lens. And we often don't associate black and minority ethnic groups with the countryside. We tend to see them within our culture as more associated with the spaces of the city. Although some do live and work in the countryside, and many actually have family roots in rural areas in other parts of the world.

And that sort of cultural lens of the countryside as a sort of white space does mean that, that black and minority ethnic groups often report feelings of being an outsider in the British countryside. And some of them actually talk about the actual fear that they experience going there.

So, it is a challenging space to work in. And I think that rural heritage centres as well, heritage sites, often don't explicitly focus on black and minority ethnic audiences or their histories. That has been something that's been more taken on board in our big cities, rather than in the countryside, which has also been a challenge for the work that I've been doing.

**Tony:** Yes, it appears that only fairly recently has that been addressed. Obviously in the news a lot at the moment is the National Trust report - The Colonial Countryside, where they've looked to identify the impacts of slavery on particular country houses within their portfolio.

You talked before about work with Newstead Abbey. I wonder if you could give me a little bit of detail about that.

**Susanne:** Over the years, I've done work on a number of country estates in Britain, but more recently I've been working at Newstead Abbey. Looking at the historical links of that property to slavery, and working with a local community group, the Legacy Makers group, to sort of tell that history actually in the site more coherently to give a wider picture of that contribution to the development of Newstead Abbey. One of the things the community group really led on was making a film called Blood Sugar, which is a creative reflection on the historical links of the owner in the early 19th century to Jamaica and transatlantic slavery as an owner of a plantation and of enslaved African people.

**Tony:** Our paths have crossed through the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site. It's a 15-mile long river Valley from Matlock Bath to Derby. It contains a series of historic mill complexes, including some of the world's first modern factories and in our own museum portfolio, Derby Silk Mill. The southern gateway to the site dates from 1721.

So you've been involved in contributing to the research framework for the valley's mills and especially in the context of the cotton industry and empire. And you've been looking at slave trade and pressures of global demand and supply. So, can you give us a few examples of how this was manifest in Derwent Valley?

**Susanne:** Okay, so really right from the start of production at Cromford Mill 1770s, the Derwent Valley was drawing on raw cotton supplies from places in the Americas where cotton was being grown and produced by enslaved African people who had been forcibly transported there through the transatlantic slave trade.

So, we know that the early cotton supplies were coming from places like, like the West Indies, the Caribbean colonies there, and then a bit later Brazil. So, Brazil was a major, a major source of cotton in the later 18th century. And then in the early 19th century, the supplies start coming in from the Southern States of America.

So we know there's this really very strong connections through the supply of raw cotton.

**Tony:** We know from our own research at Derby Silk Mill, that silk was coming into, into Derby in the mid 18th century from plantations in Georgia which would have been worked on by enslaved Africans too. So, even before the cotton trade, I think there's certainly a degree of imprint of the exploitation of enslaved Africans there.

In the past we've talk about some work that you've done about the Strutt family. Certainly the Strutts were kind of industrialists that have a very strong imprint in the life around Derby.

**Susanne:** Yeah, so the, the work I was referring to earlier, we did a very precise study of where the Strutts were getting their raw cotton from. And part of that was also to think about the Strutts and their, I guess, their beliefs and their attitudes towards slavery and the slave trade. And we can find connections within the family and ideas within the family which were against slavery. So they have abolitionists sort of friends, members of the family in the 1830s lobby parliament to abolish slavery. But we also see the really strong connections through their sourcing of the raw cotton to this whole system of transatlantic slavery and, you know, they're defacto supporters of that system through their business networks.

And, and recently I've come across a series of, of letters, which suggests. That one of the strengths through a marriage and family connection through marriage has a relation who was actually based on the gold coast in Africa, working for the company of merchants trading to Africa. And we're not quite sure yet whether he was supplying goods to his relative, but there's a connection there with, with the actual slave trade on the African coast, potentially.

**Tony:** That's really interesting. We've got a, there's a, a wonderful picture of Jedediah struck in our gallery in Derby Museum painted by Joseph Wright. And I was having a conversation with one of our staff members of the day, because we've just reinterpreted the story of Wright’s portrait and we've included some of this new research that's been unearthed about the connections that Strutt had with the slave trade and she said to me, Oh, I thought Strutt was one of the was one of the good guys!

I'm surprised that you've been able to make the link there, but clearly the, the trade with enslaved people was so endemic in the early years of capitalism within Britain, that everyone was almost touched by it.

**Susanne:** I think, you know, there, there are, there are different sort of ways in which if you like the moral geographies of these business people play out. And, I think there's certainly an expression of distaste for the African slave trade coming out from these families, but sometimes families who, you know, had those views, if pressed, they would still become involved in businesses, which were reliant on slavery because it's so prolific, it's so common, it's so endemic and they needed the types of cotton. And in that early period, they needed the long stable cotton that was coming from places like, like Brazil, where slavery was established. So they really needed it. And then later the American cotton was cheaper than other types of cotton. And it was, it was a good enough quality for them to use. So that didn't seem to be this objection.

And we even find people like Quakers. We think of Quakers as having very strong, moral objections to harming people, but they were also involved initially in the slave trade. And then in trading in slave produced goods as well. So they didn't avoid that, that type of a business and the Strutts are Unitarians and that didn't prevent them from using other types of cotton as they became available.

**Tony:** Yeah, absolutely endemic. In that context, it’s interesting that we've got this prevailing narrative of the industrial revolution as a heroic period - one of scientific discoveries and entrepreneurialism. And you can see this as kind of the, almost the sort of default model in much of our industrial heritage sector. Yet clearly the industrial revolution couldn't have occurred without the exploitation of the environment. And if people, so what do you think needs to happen to ensure that that story and the origins and effects of industrial societies more complete?

**Susanne:** I think we really need to sort of move away from a focus on these elite white men of a valley. And also to look at other groups, to look at the mill workers and their contribution. To look at the contributions made by the enslaved African people who are growing the cotton. To look at the relations with the cotton industry of India, which was the predominant ]industry of the world, the cotton industry of the world before Britain's own industry rises. So, we need to think about the history of, of, of places like the Derwent Valley from outside perspectives, as well as inside perspectives. And we need to think more critically. I mean, you know, sometimes we tend to idolize some of these speakers like, like Arkwright. But you know, they, we have to accept that people are, are mixed in achievements in their lives. You know, there's good and bad going through them and we need to see them, if you like, warts and all, in our heritage sites.

And for me, I think it's been really important in my work to work collaboratively with black groups and people of Asian descent to get their perspectives on the histories and to really understand how, how they view the experience of industrial growth in Britain and, their experience of the stories that are told in heritage sites as well.

**Tony** So following on from that you've been working on work places in the Derwent Valley and investigating how the stories that are told are viewed by British diaspora groups, particularly those of African and an Asian descent. What did, what did you find?

**Susanne:** Okay. So, we found that, when we went with the groups to the heritage sites, initially we found that immense sense of frustration and hurt coming through from those groups that their part in the story of the Derwent Valley was not really being told there. There were, there was some information, but there wasn't sufficient and, and it really made them feel unvalued and in some cases really quite unwelcome. And some people felt that a version of history being presented was, was whitewashed. It was very much from a white perspective of, of the history of the Valley.

And I think it was one flashpoint for the group of African Caribbean descent in particular, was this question about where cotton came from. And they were told a story that, that they, Cromford, that they only knew that the cotton coming to Cromford came from Liverpool by pack horse. And that was a story that really upset a lot of people, but it was also an inspiration to work, to make change, to bring a more accurate story, to bring a deeper story of where cotton comes from to Cromford and, and throughout the Valley altogether. So, that was really important. So, while we did sort of want to understand people's views and their experiences of encountering heritage sites, really our main focus was to try and look at the changes the groups wanted to see and how we could enact them. So, moving from focusing on, on the perspectives of ethnic minority groups, to working with them to embed their understandings, their perspectives and their calls for change into the heritage sites. And that's, that's really, I think what we've managed to do at the visitor center at Cromford.

**Tony:** And it's certainly something that is very much. In our minds, as we develop narratives around the growth of well the industrial system and the factory system as a whole, before we open the Museum of Making at Derby Silk Mill.

So, you've been working on these issues for, for a number of years, and very recently that social justice movements like Black Lives Matter are adding to the urgency for much of this work to be translated into action. And from my own perspective, I can see now that we have a much more radicalised workforce within cultural heritage, museums and heritage than at any other time during my career. So, what do you think will change within the heritage sites, which you're familiar over time, and what might be the barriers to that progress?

**Susanne:** Okay. So I think maybe just say a little bit more about what, what we did, what we did achieve at somewhere like Cromford, which, which was, to work with the heritage professionals there. And they, they, they reached out to us to say, we want to include the academic, but also the, the perspectives of, of the, the community groups of Africa and India and South Asian Heritage in, in that heritage site. So that was, that was a really positive step. I think it we really saw our work as a learning journey for everyone involved and we try to reflect and learn together with heritage professionals, as academics, as community members. So I think that three way working has been really important and you need to continue that and to keep the levels of interaction and trust going.

I think that there are challenges is in these small heritage organizations. They don't often have professionals who can specialise in dealing with ethnic minority groups or ethnic minority perspectives on history. One of the issues in these smaller heritage sites is that they’re very reliant on volunteers, as tour guides. And that's another level to reach out to the people who are volunteers and to work with them.

So I think one of the challenges is to really get, get the message going right through organisations, organisations that often don't have the resource to, to have the specialist staff in house.

**Tony:** You talked earlier in the conversation about the interpretation of heritage through the lens of whiteness. So, you know, here we are two white people talking about an issue we both feel very strongly about, and we want to see, you know, social change, we want to see, or belong to organisations that are anti explicitly anti-racists.

So I wonder if you could just talk a little bit more about that white lens?

**Susanne:** I think, you know, it's really, it's really challenging, isn't it? We’re working in areas, an academic, I'm working in a context where white culture is, is very dominant and, you know, implicit white values are, are there in academia. They're there in the heritage industry, perhaps even more strongly in these smaller rural heritage sites. They're there amongst the guides and the volunteers who work in heritage sites. So how can we sort of think about our own implicit sort of white, white perspectives on issues? Well, I guess one, one way in which we can do that is to listen to the voices, the voices of, of people of African descent, people of South Asian descent and, and listen respectfully to what they have to say about the history and to take their criticisms on board and to learn from them.

And I think if there's anything that I could say that I needed to do in my research, and what I think is really important is, is to be able to take that step back and to say, well, I can learn from you as well as me being able to sort of give you some information about historical materials. So, I think that's, that's really important.

And for me, it's made me ask my research questions in different ways I think. To try and center much more on, on the enslaved people who are key workers who are key founders of the Derwent Valley. And to think about the perspectives of the skilled crafts people of India and the Indian sub-continent and how their skills in making these very fine cottons are absolutely integral to, actually, you know, supplying fine cotton markets in Britain, but also supplying the slave trade on the African coast itself.

I think it's really important to take a step back from your own expertise and to, to acknowledge the perspectives and expertise of others.

**Tony:** that's something that's very, apparent to us as an organization. And certainly, within the museum sector we're still very unrepresentative of the workforce as a whole. The numbers of people from black and Asian and minority ethnic communities employed in museums is lot lower than the general workforce.

Certainly when we've spoken to communities within our city, the message we get is, if you want to tell our stories, work with us. Nothing about us without us. No longer are those communities prepared to accept a version of their histories or history told by, told by an institution.

So, that's something that we are very mindful of and, you know, and hope really to address over the coming years.

**Susanne:** I think it's really important for me, from my perspective, it's been really important for me to, to work for the group as well. So, with Legacy Makers, they now have their own national heritage lottery fund project. And I think it's been important for me to, to work on as it were their project, as well as for them to collaborate on what might be seen as my project. So it's really important to, to, to sort of be available and to, to be there for groups who are running their own projects and designing. Well at Cromford, the group designed their own materials they came up with their own, reflective, heritage, cotton material, cotton, weaving to represent the, transatlantic, so-called triangular trade. You know, they were creative in their creation of, of, narratives drawing on past, autobiographies of enslaved people. And, and I think that's really important to get the, the authentic voices of, descendant groups into museums has really been very important and to allow their words to come through and for people like me, the white academics, just to take a bit of a step back and just be there to support and facilitate rather than lead I think on these things, it's been really important.

**Tony:** Right. So, social change happens, but only when there are the representative voices in that room.

**Susanne:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think, you know, it's really, really important to give, give groups the space to come forward to do that. And I think there are like, then the heritage lottery initiative has allowed a number of ethnic minority groups to gain their own funding. So that has been a very positive thing.

And there have been university and academic initiatives which have encouraged collaborative working with, with communities too. But there's, there's always like danger that the big institution can take over. So, we do still see a lot of groups who prefer to set up their own heritage organisations, run their own projects, and I can see a really great need for that because I don't define our implicit bias is challenging as white institutions.

So it's an ongoing project. We've only taken the first few steps forward. I can see exactly why, ethnic minority groups want to have their own projects and run them themselves. And then for them to tell us what to do. And it's a really important lesson for us to learn that we can, we can work to support as well as expecting people to work with us on.

**Tony:** It feels that this work is. Is that the start of a process?

**Susanne:** Well, I think I've already seen really positive impacts on the groups that I've been working with, you know. They’ve moved from, sort of working on a cotton related project that I was leading, they've led their own small project alongside that, but now they've got a large project which has been led by them, which is a really positive thing.

And I've seen people go back to the Derwent Valley with much more confidence and, and sort of seeing, they can see their ancestors, their ancestors’ stories, their ancestors’ contributions in that place now. And they can take pride their work has achieved that, and they can take pride that they have a place there now.

And, you know, I know one of the group actually ended up working in the Derwent Valley. It was a place that previously quite intimidating to go to, but he felt that he could go there because he knew the history. He said, you know, that made him confident to go and work within the Valley because he knew he had a place in the history of that, that Valley.

So, I've seen people grow. I've seen the tremendous skills that people have brought to, to this process. And I've seen people with more confidence to go to heritage sites, to go to the countryside and to tell those stories. And that's a really important first step forward.

I think it's our, in our institutions where we've got a lot of work still to do with changing our frames and our attitudes.

**Tony:** Thank you very much, Susanne, for joining us. And thank you so much for your insights and expertise.

**Susanne:** Thank you very much, Tony, for inviting me to, to take part in this conversation. It’s been a real privilege and I've been very happy to share my experiences, but perhaps we should do this in ten years time and see, see where we are then!

**Tony:** We should! Definitely our equivalents.

It feels like this is the we've only just begun this journey and. I hope that in five, ten, twenty years times our institutions are very different places, more representative, richer, newer perspectives on these issues and something that will tangibly add to a more just and fairer society.

We really hope you've enjoyed listening to our conversation today. And, for context, this audio production was produced remotely during the second COVID lockdown in November, 2020. Now Derby Museums is a charity and we rely on donations to support our programs and activities. We currently have an Endowment campaign on the go where every pound donated can be doubled by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

So, if you feel you are able to support, please, please donate by visiting www.derbymuseums.org/donate. That's www.derbymuseums.org/donate

Thank you for listening and thank you so much for your support.