

## **John & Thomas Hodgson and their involvement in slaving**

[Information from The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (Richardson et al.), The Liverpool Registry of Merchant Ships (from notes made by Philip Gooderson) and from Melinda Elder. Letters quoted are the property of Thomas Hodgson's gt-gt-gt-granddaughter, my cousin Jenny Smith]

I know nothing about the early lives of the two brothers - John born around 1735 & Thomas in 1738. They came from Caton, Lancs, sons of a yeoman farmer who died in 1748, aged 47, when the boys were still only 12 and 9. How they came to be involved in the shipping & slaving world is unclear.<sup>1</sup>



*Thomas Hodgson*

The first sea-going record I have (part of a journal he kept on the voyage) is of Thomas, aged 25 in 1763, on the *Marquis of Granby*, a slave ship owned by Miles Barber and partners of Lancaster, captained by John Kitchin. His role on board was 'supercargo', in charge of the goods being brought back from South Carolina, after they had sold 200 Africans from the Gambia there into slavery. The ship left Lancaster on 26<sup>th</sup> March 1763 for Africa and took on 225 Africans, 25 of whom died on the 'middle passage' to the West Indies and America. Having loaded an unspecified cargo for the homeward voyage, they left Charleston on 24<sup>th</sup> September, aiming to arrive back home by Christmas. However, they ran into stormy weather off Ireland, and instead of sailing back up the Irish Channel, they were forced to go up the west coast of Ireland. They then had to put into what the captain thought was the Mull of Galloway to avoid being wrecked. It turned out to be the Mull of Kintyre, and having taken shelter in Campbeltown for a few days, they eventually put in to Sunderland Point at the mouth of Lancaster's river Lune on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1764.

In 1765 Thomas was appointed captain of the *Pitt* for Miles Barber out of Lancaster, destination S. Carolina with 64 slaves. The following year he captained the *Marquis of Granby*, again out of Lancaster, but became stranded near Whitehaven. The intended African destination was the *Iles de Los* where Barber had a slaving depot on *Factory Island*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas is referred to as "Jnr" in Liverpool slaving records; He had an uncle called Thomas. I wonder if he was one of the 'other' Thomas Hodgsons trading out of Liverpool?

After 1766 Barber moved his slaving operation to Liverpool, and Thomas was ‘captain-owner’ on a further 3 ships, in 1767, 1769 & 1770, before becoming an agent for his brother John & himself (and possibly Miles Barber) on the Gambia river. It seems that there was a gradual separation from Barber, who was the cause of considerable frustration to John, witness a letter of his to Thomas in the Gambia in 1771:

*“No more being half a Ship’s Husband for me – Had I taken the whole upon myself I had done much better.”*

From 1766, until 1789, both brothers bought *shares* in a number (18) of merchant voyages. I am uncertain how many of these were to trade in slaves. By 1771 they were clearly ship owners in their own right as well, though still had a “joint account” with Barber.

I have carried out an ‘analysis’ of slaving voyages by ships owned by John & Thomas, from *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, which reveals a total of 60 voyages under the Hodgson ‘flag’, two of which only involved John.

Their first voyage was in the newly and aptly named *Two Brothers* – previously known as the *Kildare*. This conveyed 245 Africans from the Gambia River to Charleston, S. Carolina, 45 of whom died en route<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting to speculate which event dismayed the brothers more – the death of these people, or the loss of the *Two Brothers* on its return to England. I fear the latter.

Undaunted, they named their next ship the *Two Brothers* as well. This time they were in partnership with Samuel Sandys, and this trio organised and financed nine voyages up to 1775 - an average of 2 a year - when the American War of Independence brought an abrupt end to their slaving operation – until its resumption in 1783. From 1771 to 1775 they used 5 different ships, and sold slaves 4 times in Charleston, once in Savannah, and the remainder in Dominica, Jamaica & St Vincent. They shipped 2808 Africans over this period, 418 (15%) of whom died before reaching their destination. Crew statistics are incomplete; mortality varied. On one voyage 18 out of a starting complement of 31 died – 58%.<sup>4</sup>

In 1773, Thomas, whose health had been the cause of considerable alarm while living for a time – we don’t know how long - on the Gambia River, completed his final voyage home to join his brother in Liverpool.

The brothers resumed their slaving in 1783, after the interruption to the trade occasioned by the American War of Independence. This time, though, their approach to ownership was different. They joined up to 7 other merchants<sup>5</sup> to spread the risk. This was a serious consideration, witness their loss of 10 vessels over the next 14 years – almost a fifth of the

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<sup>2</sup> This had been established in 1755, and to quote Bruce Mouser (*A Slaving Voyage*):

*“Here Barber maintained supplies necessary to refit vessels... He employed coopers, carpenters, rope-makers, sail-makers, and pilots, and had a large number of grumetes or laborers-for-hire that could be loaned to a captain for tasks that were unique to the coast.”*

Factory Island was used as a stepping-stone to the slave-purchasing points along the adjacent coast, usually accessed by pinnace. As far as I can tell, no slaves were actually ‘housed’ on Factory Island itself.

<sup>3</sup> Apparently the Africans rioted at some stage during the voyage.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Mouser, in his edited *A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica – the Log of the Sandown, 1793-1794*, shows what deadly effects tropical disease could have on ships’ crews.

<sup>5</sup> These included Isaac Capstick and his brother Richard, also from Caton, married to the Hodgson brothers’ older sister, Elizabeth.

total – six “condemned” as unseaworthy, two shipwrecked, and finally two captured by the French – in 1794 & 1796 – the latter of these *after* they had purchased 226 Africans – a ‘double-whammy’.<sup>6</sup> They used 30 different ships<sup>7</sup>, and sold their slaves in 10 different Caribbean ports, the most popular being Dominica, followed by Jamaica.

The *frequency* of slaving voyages after 1783 also increased: 1783 (7); 1784 (6); 1785 (5); 1786 (5); 1787 (7); 1788 (6). Then there was a sudden drop – 1789 (1); 1790 (4); 1791 (1); 1792 (2); 1793 (92); 1794 (1); 1795 (0); 1796 (1). Three of the last 4 voyages only involved the two Hodgson brothers.

Over their slaving careers the two brothers and their partners bought 14,099 Africans to sell as slaves, 1626 of whom (12%) perished before reaching ‘market’. I don’t know how this compares with other slavers’ statistics. Crew mortality was proportionately higher at 26%, though this may be an overestimate, as the Database records appear incomplete in this respect.<sup>8</sup>

John Hodgson’s letters of February 1771 to his younger brother out in Africa are revealing, and make fascinating reading. The predominant theme is his overwhelming frustration and despair occasioned by uncooperative captains and mates, the huge problem of recruiting seamen, the slowness of preparation for the voyage, and the unreliability and dilatory attitude of his senior associate<sup>9</sup>, Miles Barber. He refers to a row of some sort between brother Thomas and “the Grand Association”<sup>10</sup>. There was clearly a race between owners – and their captains - to get to the African coast before other ships, in order to procure the ‘best’ – most profitable – natives. It seems that Thomas had crossed swords with other agents & captains, and seriously bad feeling had resulted. Some of the lack of cooperation John experienced back in Liverpool may have had something to do with this issue.

*“They must be an abandoned set of wretches!”*

One gets a strong impression that John, at this stage of his career at least, was rather out of his depth. Nobody that he needed to carry out his instructions seems to have paid him much attention or respect. His letters suggest that it was his younger brother who was the more ‘commanding’ of the two.

But it seems that the profits were rolling in, at least at the start:

*“...the Yanimarew & St John cannot clear less than £2000 [over a hundred times that in today’s money] – if the remainder come as well off it will be a fine affaire – but you must be sensible it is owing to the very high sales – had they sold at £30 for instance they would not have cleared a shilling.”*

There was at least one occasion when they, and their families, had a major financial scare, involving losses incurred by one of their partners in 1788, Samuel Hartley. Other family archives<sup>11</sup> suggest that this proved to be a short-lived crisis, however.

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<sup>6</sup> I imagine that the loss of these last two ships proved the final straw for the Hodgson brothers, who by that time had a number of mills in their home village of Caton. There are no recorded Hodgson voyages after 1796.

<sup>7</sup> One ship was named the *Isaac* – a very short time after Thomas’ son Isaac was born. He grew up to become an abolitionist.....

<sup>8</sup> The anti-abolition camp actually argued that putting a stop to the trade would deprive the Navy of a vital supply of trained crew!

<sup>9</sup> I am unclear as to their exact relationship at the time.

<sup>10</sup> This may be their nickname for these people.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas’ sister-in-law Hannah Greg’s diary, edited by David Sekers.

Presumably the brothers had trading interests other than the 'African', though I am unaware of these as yet. It would be interesting to know how they managed during the War of Independence. Cotton-spinning at Caton became their main business, where they opened Low Mill in 1783, followed by a number of other mills in the vicinity.

Very little has emerged about John Hodgson's subsequent life. He lived at Caton, where he died in 1813 aged 78. Thomas married & had 7 children, three sons and four daughters. Isaac – already mentioned – and Adam became active *abolitionists*, both much influenced by non-conformist and evangelical campaigners, several of whom were their close friends. Thomas died at Caton in 1817, clearly, judging by his church memorial tablet, held in affection by the locals.



*Thomas in later life*

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