

A portrait of Dido Belle, a young woman of mixed heritage, wearing a white turban and a white dress. She is looking towards the viewer with a slight smile, her hand resting near her chin. The background is a soft, greenish-blue landscape with trees.

Slavery and Justice

THE LEGACIES OF DIDO BELLE AND
LORD MANSFIELD



ENGLISH HERITAGE

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Introduction

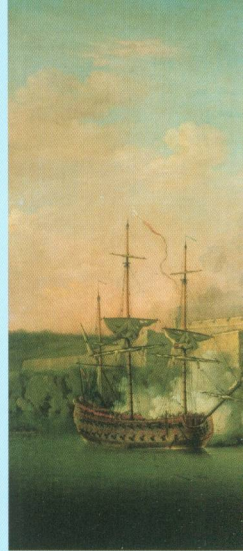
Kenwood House is closely connected to the history of the slave trade. Its links are not through the building itself, but are traced through the lives of two very different people who lived here in the later 18th century.

The 1st Earl of Mansfield was Kenwood's owner and England's most powerful judge. He made a famous ruling in 1772, which was interpreted by many to mean that slavery had no legal basis in England. It marked a significant milestone along the long road towards the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

Dido Elizabeth Belle is believed to have been Lord Mansfield's illegitimate

great-niece. It was not unheard of for a powerful aristocrat to be legal guardian to such a relation. The fact that Dido was black and probably born to an enslaved mother was very unusual. The affection with which Mansfield watched Dido grow up at Kenwood probably influenced his personal thoughts on slavery. As Lord Chief Justice, however, Mansfield had to balance any such feelings against his careful reading of the law.

Both intimate personal and wider social dimensions of the British slave trade are thus intertwined with the history of Kenwood.



Above
The Bombardment of Morro Castle, 1762, by Richard Paton.
The scene depicts the British attack on Havana. John Lindsay is in the longboat being rowed between ships.
National Maritime Museum, London

Left
A View from Caenwood [Kenwood] House over London, 1755, by John Wootton
Trustees of the Titey Foundation

Cover image
Dido Belle
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scone Palace,
Perth, Scotland



Dido Elizabeth Belle



Dido's father is thought to be John Lindsay, nephew of Mansfield. Her story begins after Lindsay joined the navy during the Seven Years War (1756–63), a global conflict between Britain, France and their allies. From 1757 to 1763, Lindsay was Captain of the *Trent*, a warship based in the West Indies, which took part in the capture of Havana from the Spanish in 1762. It has previously been suggested that Dido's mother was an enslaved African on board one of the Spanish ships that were captured during this battle, and that this was how she and Lindsay met..



Mansfield related this incident to a visitor, Thomas Hutchinson, who recorded:

'Sir Jno [John] Lindsay having taken her mother prisoner in a Spanish vessel, brought her to England, where she was delivered of this girl, of which she was then with child, and which was taken care of by Lord M.'

However, we now know through her baptism record that Dido was born in 1761, while Lindsay was abroad in the West Indies, and that her mother's name was Maria Bell. Lindsay's obituary in the *London Chronicle* of 1788 assumes his paternity:

'... he has died, we believe, without any legitimate issue but has left one natural daughter, a Mulatto who has been brought up in Lord Mansfield's family almost from her infancy ...'*

*A contemporary term for a person of mixed race.

On Wednesday last died, at Marlborough, on his way from Bath, where he had been for the recovery of his health, Sir John Lindsay, Knight of the Bath, and Rear Admiral of the Red, to which latter rank he was raised in September last. Sir John Lindsay was nephew to Lord Mansfield; he has died, we believe, without any legitimate issue, but has left one natural daughter, a Mulatto, who has been brought up in Lord Mansfield's family almost from her infancy, and whose amiable disposition and accomplishments have gained her the highest respect from all his Lordship's relations and visitants.

Above
An account of the death of Sir John Lindsay, from the *London Chronicle*, June 7–10, 1788. The daughter to which it refers is Dido. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford

Above right
Portrait of Sir John Lindsay by Nathaniel Hone, c.1772. Lindsay is on board ship, wearing his captain's uniform. Private Collection

Growing up at Kenwood

Lord and Lady Mansfield had no children of their own, but raised both Dido and another great-niece, Lady Elizabeth Murray, daughter of the future 2nd Earl, David Murray, 7th Viscount Stormont. His wife had died when Elizabeth was young. The two cousins grew up together at Kenwood from the 1760s to the 1780s.

Dido would have had little contact with her father, as Lindsay was abroad for long periods, marrying in 1768 and then living elsewhere in England and Scotland. He had no children with his wife, Mary Milner; but it appears that he had two other, illegitimate children. Lindsay's will names *'John and Elizabeth Lindsay, my reputed son and daughter'*.

The first real glimpse we have of Dido is of her as a young lady of eighteen. She is described by Thomas Hutchinson, ex-Governor of Massachusetts, on a visit to Lord Mansfield in 1779:

'A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having her arm within the other...'



Far Left
William Murray, later 1st Earl of Mansfield, c. 1742, after Jan Baptist Van Loo
English Heritage

Left
Lady Elizabeth Finch, the future Lady Mansfield, by Charles Jervas, c. 1732
English Heritage

Picturing Dido

The next view we get of Dido is far more revealing. She appears in a remarkable double portrait with her cousin Elizabeth, when the girls are probably in their late teens. This painting is unique in British art of the 18th century in depicting a black woman and a white woman as near equals.

The girls are shown on the terrace at Kenwood. Unlike most pictures of black people in this period, Dido is not a servile figure hovering on the margins of the painting. She shares a number of attributes with Elizabeth, including a luxurious silk gown, expensive pearl jewellery and a direct, confident gaze. Elizabeth is also touching Dido's arm to show their connection.

However, the painter also suggests subtle differences between the girls. Dido's animation contrasts to Elizabeth's calm. Compare Dido's turban and the exotic fruit she carries to Elizabeth's rose garland and book. These details might indicate differences in character rather than differences in status. Is Dido, for instance, pointing to her cheek in a playful gesture or to stress her different skin colour?



Above

Dido Elizabeth Belle (later, Mrs Davinier) and Lady Elizabeth Murray (later, Lady Finch-Hatton), late 1770s by an unknown artist, formerly attributed to Zoffany
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland

Right

David Murray, 7th Viscount Stormont, later 2nd Earl of Mansfield, by Bacciarelli
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland



Dido's Kenwood

After Lady Mansfield's death in 1784, Anne and Marjory Murray, Lord Mansfield's unmarried nieces, moved to Kenwood to provide support to the grieving and increasingly infirm earl. Elizabeth left Kenwood on her marriage in 1785, but Dido remained.

Dido's precise position in Lord Mansfield's household is a matter of debate. The available evidence suggests she was brought up as a lady within the family, but with a lesser status than her cousin Elizabeth.

Dido was taught to read, write, play music and practise other social skills, not without success, indicated by the *London Chronicle* in 1788, which reported in her father's obituary, that '*... [her] amiable disposition and accomplishments have gained her the highest respect from all his Lordship's relations and visitants.*'

She also supervised the dairy and poultry yard at Kenwood. Such activities were quite common as hobbies for genteel ladies in the 18th century. Dido received an annual allowance and further annual payments after Lady Mansfield's death. Purchases for Dido

included a chintz bed cover and asses' milk as a health tonic.

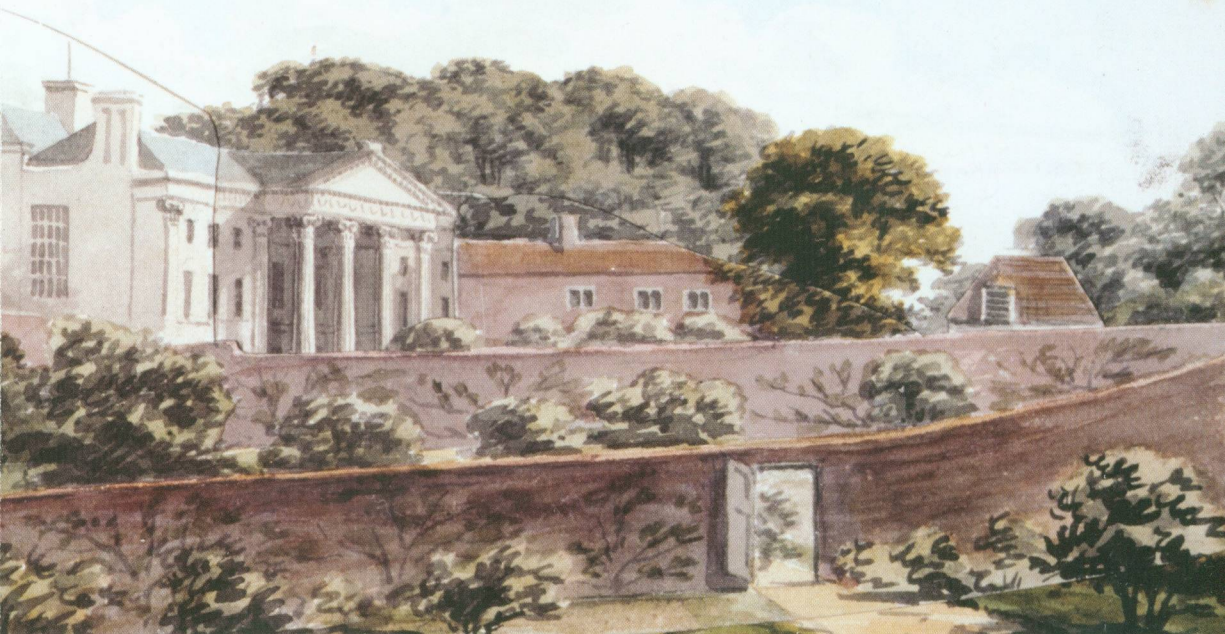
Mansfield left Dido considerably less in his will (£500) than he did to Elizabeth (£10,000). He had in his own words increased Dido's bequest '*considering how she has been bred and how she has behaved*'. Dido's African origins may have played a part in the disparity, yet it was also usual to treat illegitimate children as 'lesser' family. Another likely reason is that Elizabeth's father was Lord Mansfield's heir and destined to inherit his title and fortune.

Dido's Kenwood had been very visible to passers-by. Its fashionable Adam brothers' architecture, its location and the fame and influence of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, had drawn many visitors and sightseers. Dido had grown up, therefore, on a semi-public stage, at the heart of elite society. The year 1793 marked Mansfield's death and Dido's departure from Kenwood.



Below
Reference to Dido's allowance in
the Account Book of Anne
Murray, her aunt
From the Collection of the Earl of
Mansfield at Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland

Dido's 1/4 Allowance Octo: 1784 5.



Above
View of the north front of
Kenwood House, as Dido would
have known it, by Humphry
Repton, 1793
*From the Collection of the Earl of
Mansfield at Scone Palace, Perth, Scotland*

Right
End of a letter written out by
Dido on behalf of Lord Mansfield to
Justice Buller, 1786. It shows Dido's
handwriting to be perfectly legible,
so Mansfield's final comment is
perhaps playful.
The Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn

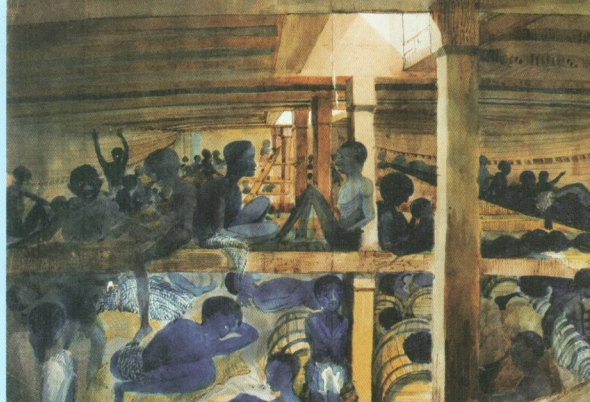
*This is wrote by Dido I hope you will be able to
read it*

Friday May 19th 1786

Slavery and the Law

As Lord Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield presided over cases concerning commercial interests in the slave trade, and the legal status of slaves in England. By the 1760s, Britain's slave trade was at its height, with great wealth built upon the labour of enslaved Africans in her Caribbean and American colonies. With profits at stake, slavery in the distant colonies was easy to ignore for many people in England.

Slavery on the streets of London was another matter, but legal protection for black people here was uncertain. There was always a threat that they could be kidnapped and shipped off to the plantations. The question of whether this practice, or indeed slavery itself, was legal on English soil, lay at the heart of cases brought by or on behalf of black plaintiffs.



Public opinion in England had been turning slowly against the inhumane trade in people as property, known as 'chattel slavery'. Mansfield's own conduct, opinions and rulings suggest a man in two minds, torn between revulsion against slavery, and yet a deep reluctance to set principles that would sweep away the whole system and its economic benefits. His relationship to Dido Belle may well have played a part in this dilemma.

Above
View of the Deck of the Slave Ship Albanoz, 1846. Conditions during the voyage across the Atlantic, or 'Middle Passage', were brutal.
National Maritime Museum, London

Below left
The transatlantic slave trade was based on a roughly 'triangular' pattern. Ships laden with trade goods sailed from Britain to Africa, where ship captains bartered these goods for cargoes of captive people. Across the Atlantic, they sold or exchanged these slaves for slave-made goods, like rum, sugar and cotton, to sell back in Europe.



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Mansfield's Legacy

The Case of James Somerset

'... shaking each other by the hand [they] congratulated themselves upon the recovery of the rights of human nature and their happy lot that permitted them to breathe the free air of England'

Newspaper account of the reaction of black spectators at the Somerset trial, 1772

The James Somerset trial was Lord Mansfield's most famous case, and the most important legal test of slavery in England prior to the abolition of the slave trade. Despite an ambiguous summing up, Mansfield went much further than any judge before in undermining the legality of slavery.

James Somerset was for twenty years an enslaved servant to customs officer Charles Stewart. Eventually brought to England, Somerset ran for freedom in 1771. He was soon recaptured and imprisoned on a ship bound for Jamaica.

Somerset appealed to Granville Sharp, renowned anti-slavery activist, who employed lawyers for him. Sharp saw the

best opportunity in years to test the principle of whether a person could be made into property in England.

Mansfield let the trial drag on over five months. Perhaps this indicated a personal struggle between his caution as a law lord and his closeness to Dido. When he finally delivered his verdict, on 22 June 1772, it sent shockwaves through and beyond the courtroom.

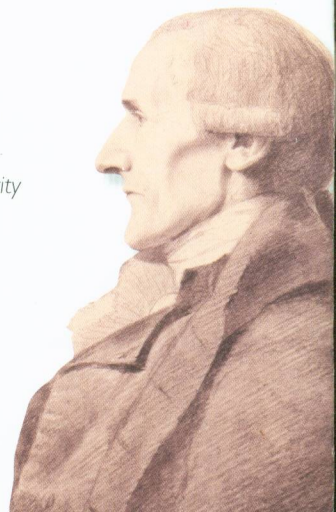
That Mansfield freed Somerset is not in question. What Mansfield said more generally about slavery in summing up is the subject of debate. He described slavery as 'odious', but did not clearly declare it illegal. One version has him saying:

'Slavery is so odious that it must be construed strictly. No master was ever allowed here to send his servant abroad because he absented himself from his service or for any other cause. No authority can be found for it in the laws of this country and therefore we are all of the opinion that James Somerset must be discharged.'

Left

An account of a ball held to celebrate Somerset's release, from the *Public Advertiser*, 27 June 1772

The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford



... made their Escape.
On Monday near 200 Blacks, with their Ladies, had an Entertainment at a Public-house in Westminster, to celebrate the Triumph which their Brother Somerfet had obtained over Mr. Stuart his Master. Lord Mansfield's Health was echoed round the Room, and the Evening was concluded with a Ball. The Tickets for Admittance to this black Assembly were 5s. each.

Left

Pendant by Josiah Wedgwood, depicting an enslaved man in chains and bearing the words, 'Am I not a Man and Brother'. The iconic image of a passive slave begging for help suited the propaganda needs of the abolition cause and became its symbol. In fact, enslaved people were often very active in demanding and pursuing their own freedom.

English Heritage, Kenwood

Mansfield later insisted he was simply limiting the rights of slave-owners to remove slaves from England by force. Yet, willingly or not, he had crossed a great boundary. Whatever his exact words, as far as many were concerned he had outlawed slavery in England.

The Somerset Case was a legal landmark. Outside the courts, however, the kidnappings and the slave trade across the Atlantic continued. In his will, Mansfield wrote, 'I confirm to Dido Elizabeth Belle her freedom'. No-one was more aware than the Lord Chief Justice of the need legally to protect Dido – a privileged, free, but black woman – from the threat of enslavement.

It was not until 1807 that the British slave trade across the Atlantic was officially abolished by parliament, whilst it took a further long campaign before an act for the abolition of slavery itself was passed in 1833. During that time, Mansfield's Somerset ruling, however phrased or intended, had been a beacon of hope to many seeking freedom and justice.

Granville Sharp, leading anti-slavery activist
National Portrait Gallery, London



Above

Term Time, or The Lawyers all Alive in Westminster Hall, 1785 by Robert Dighton. Mansfield presides (top, centre) in the Court of King's Bench, where the Somerset case was heard.

The Honourable C.A. Lennox-Boyd

Further reading:

James Oldham, *The Mansfield Manuscripts*

(North Carolina, 1992)

Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: Life Before Emancipation*

(New Jersey, 1995)

James Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery*

(London, 1992)

Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution*

(London, 2005)

James Summerset, an adult Negro about 30 years of Age Baldwins Gardens 12

Above

Record of Somerset's baptism as 'James Summerset', 20 February 1771 at St. Andrew's, Holborn. Many enslaved people wrongly believed that baptism as a Christian could guarantee their freedom.

Guildhall Library, City of London, MS 66671/2

Right
St. George's Hanover Square
Church, 1809
City of Westminster Archives Centre

Dido's Legacy

Lord Mansfield died in March 1793 leaving Dido an annual allowance. In December that year, Dido married John Davinier at St. George's Church, Hanover Square. Davinier had arrived in England about ten years earlier, but we do not know where from, nor how and why he had come here.

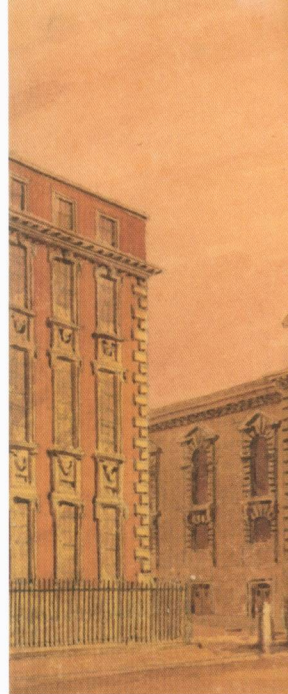
The couple lived in Ranelagh Street (later renamed Ebury Street) in Pimlico, then on the edge of London's urban centre. They had twin boys, Charles and John, in 1795 and another son, William Thomas, in 1800.

Dido's domestic life must have been comfortable but not luxurious – a dif-

ferent world from her upbringing at Kenwood. John Davinier was a senior servant, a gentleman's Steward, but with Dido's allowance from Lord Mansfield, they could afford staff of their own. It seems they also paid for Charles to attend nearby Belgravia House School.

Dido died in July 1804, at the early age of 43. She was buried at St George's Church burial ground in Tyburn. The cemetery was redeveloped in the 1960s and the graves removed.

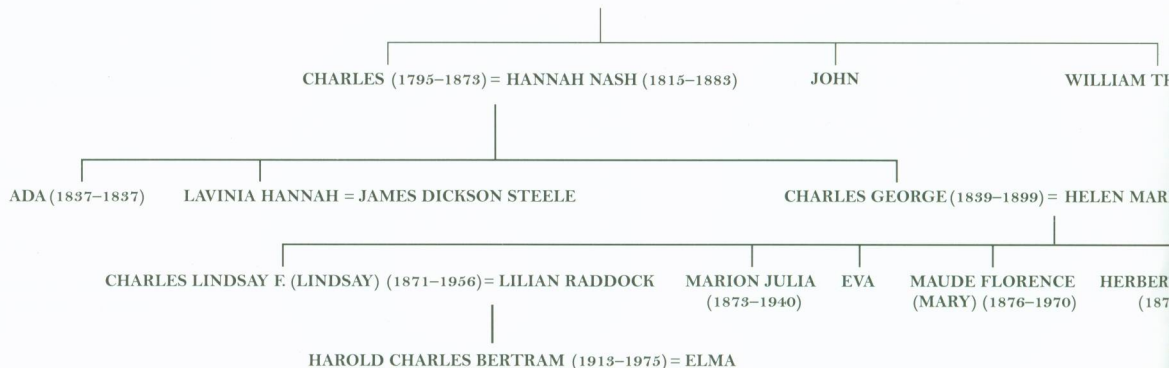
Although Dido's memorial has been erased, her descendants have now been traced, revealing a family integrated into London society, mainly living around



Far right

The marriage register signatures of Dido Elizabeth Belle and John Davinier, 1793
City of Westminster Archives Centre

(1) DIDO ELIZABETH BELLE (1761–1804) = JOHN DAVINIÈRE

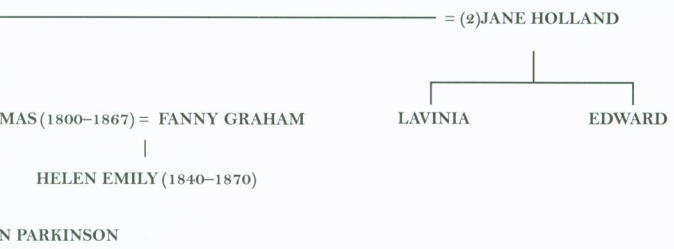




*Curate
John Daviniere
Dido Elizabeth Belle*

Notting Hill and Kensington. One of Dido's nine great-grandchildren was called Lindsay Daviniere, raising the intriguing possibility that he was named after Dido's father:

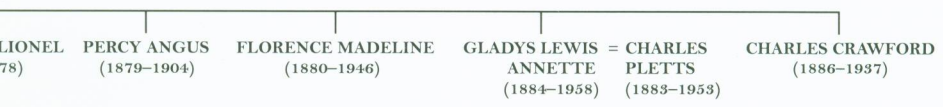
Lindsay Daviniere's son, Harold, became Dido's last descendant, born in South Africa, a former British slave colony. It is a final irony that he should die there in 1975 – white and free – in a racially segregated society, whose black population still struggled for justice.



*Charles S of John & Elizabeth Daviniere
John S. of John & Elizabeth Daviniere*

Above
Record of the baptisms of Dido's twin sons, Charles and John, at George's Hanover Square Church, 8 May 1795

Below
The Daviniere family tree
BBC London Inside Out and Sarah K. Minney, Genealogist and Record Agent



With grateful thanks to BBC London *Inside Out* and Sarah K. Minney, Genealogist and Record Agent, for the research provided on Dido Elizabeth Belle and her descendants