

Chapter 3

1769-1773 Owned by Sir Alexander Grant

In which we learn about our link with the slave trade; our role in the writing of the enduring song 'Amazing Grace'; Our involvement in the development of the Forth and Clyde canal; friendship with the Prime Minister and subsequent link with King George III

In the late autumn of 1769 Sir Alexander Grant's carriage turned into the sweeping driveway of his newly purchased property, Grove House in the glorious Surrey countryside ¹. The colours of the leaves on the multitude of trees matched the warmth in his heart. Alexander smiled at Elizabeth, his wife of 32 years - he enjoyed making purchases and surprising her. He watched her face and spoke:

Alexander met Elizabeth Cootes in Kingston and they married in 1737 ²

'I have purchased this elegant seat of the lately deceased Admiral Broderick, here at Bookham, near Epsom in Surrey ¹ to be a retreat for myself and an habitation for you my dear Elizabeth, in case you shall survive me.' ^{3,4}

As the carriage rounded the corner and the horses pulled to a stop at the grand porticoed front doorway, a shaft of sunlight lit her momentarily, jolting Alexander back to when they first met in the sun drenched Jamaican town of Kingston back in 1737 ². At this time he had been successful but he was driven to achieve even more.

Perhaps this was because of his upbringing; he had been born on the 1st July 1705 on a farm in Dalvey, Moray in Scotland, but his father, (a barber as well as a farmer ⁵), like many of his contemporaries had supported the Jacobite cause and had suffered greatly financially. The Grant clan was a once powerful family who had deep roots in the Central Highlands of Scotland ⁴.

Sir John Grant was a renowned warrior who helped William Wallace defend Scotland against the English in the 13th century ⁴.

Alexander had found his prospects at home bleak. At the turn of the century, "North Britain" was an economically depressed region. War with France closed off its export markets; famine ravaged its people; and rising rents,

overcrowded tenancies and England's animosity toward a country where many supported the Pretender stood in the way of assistance from Whitehall ⁴.

So at the age of 17 he had studied a 'rudimentary correspondence course in pharmacy' at the University of Aberdeen, and then sailed to the West Indies to carve out a new life for himself in search of 'prodigious Riches' ⁴.

By 1721 he had arrived in the 'od but yet pleasant' paradise of Jamaica ⁴ and began work as an itinerant country doctor (a 'Practitioner in Physick and Chiurgery' ⁶), in the western parishes where 2 cousins had settled plantations, curing the ills of transplanted Scots ⁴. He had high hopes of earning great wealth and returning to Britain in comfort ⁴. He had seen opportunities, like many of his fellow Scots had done ⁷, and had seized the chance to make money from sugar grown by slave labour ⁵. This had been profitable for him as a planter, for by 1730 he owned 300 acres of land, and was leasing a storehouse with his partner Peter Beckford in the south-west parish of St. Elizabeth, one of Jamaica's largest parishes, from where he sold supplies to the other planters. As it developed he had moved it to Kingston in the south-east part of the island ⁶. He reflected that it was that move which had thrown him and Elizabeth into the same orbit, because that is where she lived. Beckford had introduced him to her ⁴.

He helped her alight from the carriage and arm in arm they walked into their new house. He could tell she liked it, by the lightness in her step.

Later that evening, after dinner in the dining room, Alexander kissed his wife on her cheek and said that he had some work to attend to. He walked across the hallway into his study and sat at his desk. In front of him was a portrait of Isabella, their only child; he felt sad. She had been born in Jamaica just one year after their marriage. But poor Isabella had died at the age of 4 in 1742 ⁸ - a time of great sadness for himself and Elizabeth. He wondered how many years ago it was now and swiftly calculated, 29 - he had always been good with numbers and this partly explained his business success.

Isabella is buried in the Church of St John-at-Hampstead ⁸

Alexander cast his mind back to this time in his life; the Jamaican supplies business and plantation had been well established and profitable, but he had realised his financial prospects were greater back in London ⁴, so the family had moved to London, England in 1739 ⁶.

This had been a clever move on his part; as he had seen further opportunity to expand his operation.

There was a need to provide supplies to the plantations throughout the West Indies, and sales of the new product, Caribbean sugar, would benefit from marketing ⁶.

Billiter Lane ran north-west from Fenchurch to Leadenhall, entirely in Aldgate Ward ⁹.

So he had set up business in Billiter Lane, London, with Alexander Johnston and by 1740 he had become a leading West India merchant ⁷.

His wealth, influence and standing in society had steadily increased as a result.

He felt pleased with himself as he turned his mind to the paperwork on his desk. This was related to his work as family banker, which he had taken on many years ago in line with his successful business. He had provided 'a full range of cash-management services: accepting, holding, and forwarding cash; paying bills; making loans; and buying lottery tickets' ⁶.

He reflected, somewhat ruefully, that despite staffing this counting house with members of his extended family he had remained an outsider to his Highland kin ^{6,4}. Maybe they were jealous of his success, or maybe he just was different than them. He had tried to be part of that life, for although he did not visit Scotland regularly (he only travelled there 7 times in 50 years and on 4 of those occasions he was campaigning for a seat in Parliament ⁴), he had purchased extensive estates through the 1740's and beyond ⁷, in the shires of Elgin and Nairn, including the estate of Grangehill, which he renamed Dalvey estate (where he was born), and property in Inverness and surrounding towns ⁶. He had even been unanimously elected as a Member of Parliament for the Inverness Burghs between 1761-8 and tried to represent them well - for goodness sake how much more had they wanted?

Of course he had become known as an 'especially well informed spokesman for West Indian and North American affairs' ^{6,10,11,12,13}, so he could ensure his own financial interests were well looked after too.

He was generally well thought of in this position:

In 1762 there was a move to form a Scots militia, which various counties were for and various against. Fortrose county, whilst 'seemingly against it, refer the matter to Sir Alexander Grant of Dalvey, their representative in parliament in whose judgement and attention to the interests of his country and constituents, they have a very great confidence' ¹⁴.

However, Alexander had not been universally liked; one of his opponents for his Parliamentary seat was Captain D Brodie who had described Alexander as a 'purse proud citizen too vain to be ever warmly attached to his Grace...I wish there may not be too many of his stamp endeavouring to get into Parliament' ⁷.

He had tried to be present:

It is noted that he departed Billiter Lane, London for his country seat near Inverness on the 18th or 19th May 1763 ¹⁵.

It is noted that he arrived in Edinburgh from London at the start of August 1766 ¹⁶.

And supportive of Scottish industrial developments:

He was one of the supporters and financial subscribers of the plan to make a navigable canal between the Forth and the Clyde, attending a meeting on the 27th May 1768 at the St Alban's tavern in London. There were various surveys drawn up and a plan was accepted by November ¹⁷. It is reported that by May of 1767 he had subscribed an amount of £5000 ¹⁸.

In mid April 1761 Alexander gave his HONEST HEART speech to the 'numerous gentleman of the four neighbouring counties' which was 'received with great applause' ¹⁹:

'Honourable Gentlemen, my worthy constituents and friends! You have been pleased this day to honour me with your trust and confidence; and in by electing me your representative in Parliament, to confer on me the highest trust in your power to bestow, a trust that invests me with the custody and disposal of your liberty and property. The trust is great and important; I value it much; but the value is greatly increased by the very warm and unanimous manner in which it was bestowed.

To find myself so generally and sincerely regarded and distinguished in my native country, will be ever considered by me as the most exalted honour of my life. An endeavour to merit it has been the most constant and arduous object of my attention.

Very sensible of the tie I am under, I promise in the most solemn manner to exert every power I have, in a faithful discharge of my duty to my country, and to this district in particular.

Gentlemen, I beg leave to assure you I speak the language of a heart overflowing with gratitude; an honest heart, that hopes to continue free; not to be awed by power, biased by party, nor corrupted by interest. Fidelity shall govern, and diligence attend my conduct.

If by these I can attain any influence, it shall be exerted for your benefit. Further I can promise nothing. Court interest I do not pretend to; for prior to the present most glorious reign, it used to be purchased at a price I could not afford to give.

The happy, though humble sphere, I move in, as a merchant, gives me some opportunities of establishing and promoting deserving young persons in various stations in remote and different regions. I will enlarge and extend this power as far as I can, should it produce no other profit or reward than the great, the pleasing one of serving industrious youths of my country.

Gentlemen, we live in a glorious period of time, which yields us happy prospects, under the rule and protection of a young sovereign, who is justly celebrated - so raised up in virtue and accomplishments, that he is an ornament to humanity, as well as a blessing to his people.

Let it then, gentlemen, be our constant endeavour to render ourselves obedient and useful subjects to such an illustrious monarch, and, in our various stations, zealous supporters of his administration.

Happy at present, superlatively so in your good opinion, I shall conclude with begging the continuance thereof, while I merit it: how soon ever I am found unworthy, may I be abandoned by you, and despised by my country." ¹⁹

He had taken his political manoeuvring seriously - this was how he was going to advance even further in society. Alexander thought he had been rather clever in attaching himself to the Earl of Bute in politics, although the Earl had been politically devious and power hungry. The Earl had become Prime Minister in 1762 - a good friend to have!



John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, was a Scottish nobleman who served as Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1762 to 1763 under George III ²⁰



George III by Allan Ramsay, 1762

George had succeeded his grandfather to the throne on the 25th October 1760 at the age of 22, to become George III. After George's mother the most intimate personal influence over the new young king was exercised by the Earl of Bute ²⁰.

Just a few days after George had become king (on the 4th November), Alexander had written to the Earl of Bute ⁷

However, following the end of the Seven Years War, Bute had advised that Britain should maintain a large military presence in America to deal with the French and Spanish threat.

His policy of taxing the colonists in America to support this, catalysed the resistance to taxes which led to the American Revolution ²⁰.

King George began to dislike Bute shortly afterwards, so it had not been all good for Alexander. 'Such is politics' he thought! But he had still done well out of it all.

I have firmly secured my election into next Parliament for the boroughs of Inverness, Fortrose, etc. etc. As a Member of Parliament and a merchant of eminence and credit in London I most humbly offer myself to his Majesty's service and to your Lordship's direction.

I hope I know the sphere I move in, out of which I aspire not to be elevated. In it I am a useful subject, as I annually pay many thousand pounds to his Majesty's revenue and have for some years been (not an insignificant) supporter of and contributor to the public credit.

I am to come up soon at the head of many hundreds of merchants of great opulency and zealous as myself to present our Address of duty and cordial obedience to our revered young King, whom your Lordship was pleased to honour me with an introduction to, some years ago, which has ever since procured me his gracious notice whenever I appear before him

... My rank and situation in life gives me all the honour and felicity I wish to have, except my Sovereign's countenance.' ⁷

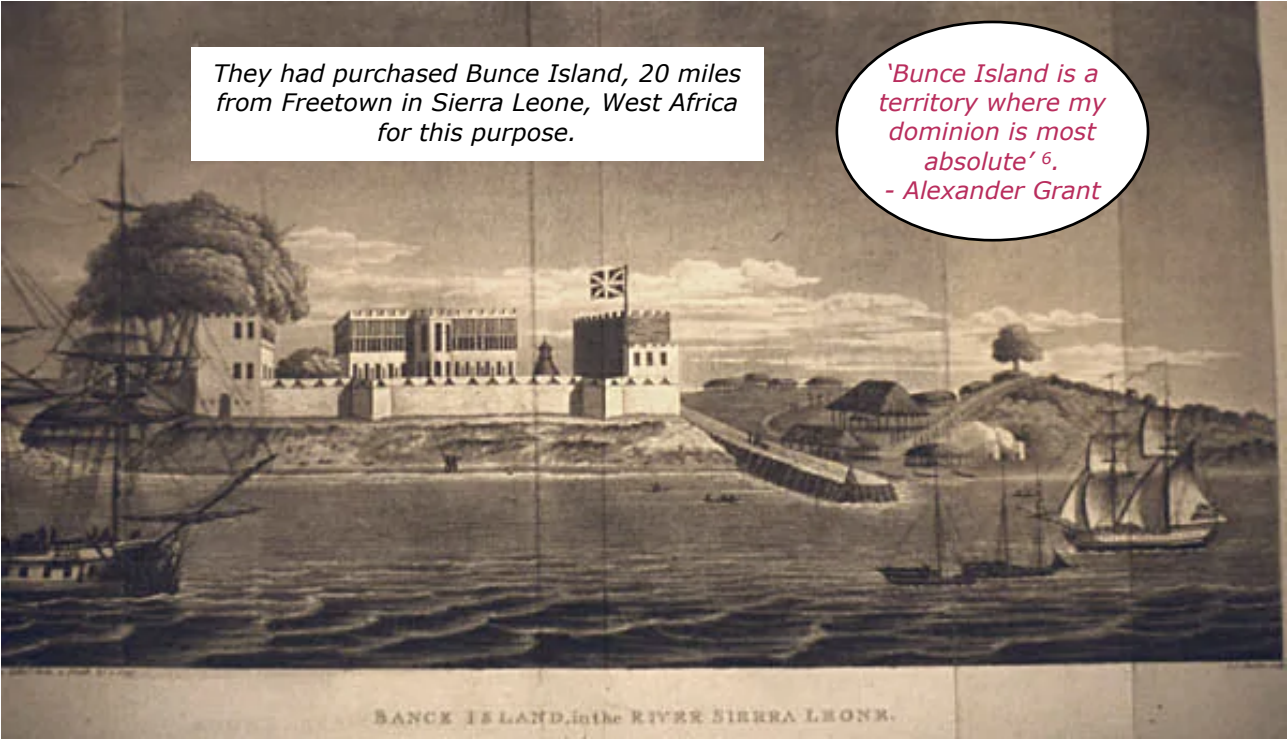
He was for instance a notable shareholder in the East India Company ⁶.

On the following morning, Alexander walked around into the yard to take a good look at the outbuildings which formed part of his new estate here at Grove House. In the yard he noticed the large octagonal building, the dovecote. This was a relic from the feudal days when the Lord of the manor was the only person entitled to keep pigeons, which he used to supply his table.

He had met Richard Oswald in Jamaica. Richard was an astute businessman, and he traded in partnership with Henry Laurens, a successful rice planter and slave dealer in South Carolina. Laurens was an American founding father ²¹.

Alexander felt like the lord of the manor. It was not the first time in his life; his business had developed in 1748 to trading slaves, under the corporation name of 'Grant, Sargent and Oswald' ²¹. Bunce Island had been his domain.

Oswald and Laurens were later influential in finalising the Treaty of Paris (1783) - the legal document that freed America from Britain ²¹.



They had purchased Bunce Island, 20 miles from Freetown in Sierra Leone, West Africa for this purpose.

*'Bunce Island is a territory where my dominion is most absolute' ⁶.
- Alexander Grant*

Bunce Island in Sierra Leone, 1805. From an original watercolour by Joseph Corry

Tens of thousands of slaves were cruelly transported in horrific conditions from Bunce Island slave castle to places like Georgia and South Carolina where they were forced to work on rice plantations ⁵. That is, if they arrived alive. By the 1750s demand for Sierra Leonean slaves had increased amongst Southern planters in the United States since those who had been taken before had proved adept at growing rice ²¹.



Bunce Island Administrative Building. Credit: Joseph Kaifala

Alexander Falconbridge was a doctor on the slave ships before becoming an abolitionist; he describes the experience ²¹:

'The men negroes, on being brought aboard the ship, are immediately fastened together, two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons riveted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks and placed in an apartment partitioned off for that purpose. The women also are placed in a separate apartment between decks, but without being ironed. An adjoining room on the same deck is appointed for the boys.....

...they are frequently stowed so close, as to admit of no other position than lying on their sides. Nor will the height between decks, unless directly under the grating, permit the indulgence of an erect posture; especially where there are platforms, which is generally the case. These platforms are a kind of shelf, about eight or nine feet in breadth, extending from the side of the ship toward the centre. They are placed nearly midway between the decks, at the distance of two or three feet from each deck ²¹.'

The slaves remained shackled below deck with no knowledge of their fate. For many, whatever awaited them, they had already had enough. They went on hunger strike, which was not allowed, because slave buyers, like other wholesale purchasers of goods, expected flawless commodities. Every death was a loss – bad for business ²¹.

Those who went on hunger strike were subjected to:

"threats of forcing them to swallow the coals if they any longer persisted in refusing to eat." ²¹

"coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel and placed so near their lips as to scorch and burn them" ²¹

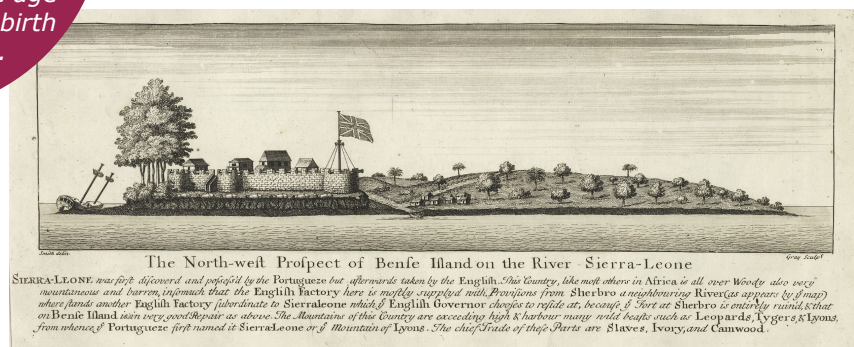
"The deck, that is the floor of their rooms, was so covered with the blood and mucus which had proceeded from them in consequence of the flux, that it resembled a slaughter-house." ²¹

This was still just the journey. It was what awaited these people as they walked through the "Door of No Return" on Bunce Island, to labour under sun and rain, wondering what they had done to deserve such violence ²¹.

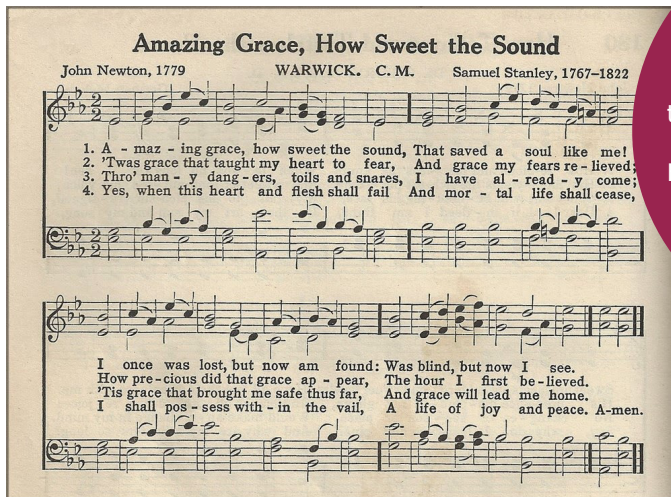


Bunce Island: Grass covered Door of No Return. Credit: J Kaifala

One of the youngest people to pass through Bunce slave castle was 10 year old Priscilla who was taken in 1756. Amazingly she survived the transportation and life of slavery and when she died at the age of 65 she had given birth to 10 children ²¹.



Bunce Island and Fort, Sierra Leone, 1727, William Smith ²²



John Newton was a trader of slaves, who later became a preacher. He had visited Bunce a few times and in 1753 traded his long boat for 4 tons of rice. He wrote the enduring hymn 'Amazing Grace' to express his regret to participating in this inhumane trade ²¹.

The original business set up in 1740 with Alexander Johnston was closed in 1753 with the pair dividing their cash and stocks. Alexander Grant continued in business alone as a sugar merchant, slave trader and navy supplier ⁶.

He had worked hard to cement his wealth and standing in society. For instance, between 1752 - 1768 he had purchased quite a number of plantations and pens in Jamaica ⁶:

- Charlemont, Crawle, Berwick & Rio Magno pen in St Thomas in the Vale
- Albion & Eden in St Mary
- Epsom pen in St Catherine

Along with land in Florida:

On the 9th August 1766 it is noted that 'Sir Alexander Grant of Dalvey, Bart. an eminent West India Merchant, and Member of Parliament, has obtained the grant of a considerable tract of fine land in the province of East Florida' ²³.

He had deliberately developed friendships with influential Scots in London, including the Duke of Argyll, Lord Erskine, Lord Findlater, Lord Hopeton, (the most politically and socially prominent Scots peers of the day ^{6,4}), Lord Loudoun, Lord Home and their regimental agent John Calcraft ⁷.

Thus enabling him to hold army contracts and business interests extending from the Mediterranean to the West Indies, America, Africa and India ⁷.

He also became the 5th Baronet Dalvey. Quite a rise given how he had started out. As he continued to stroll around his new estate he could not help but feel pleased for himself enjoying one of the many fruits of his years in business.

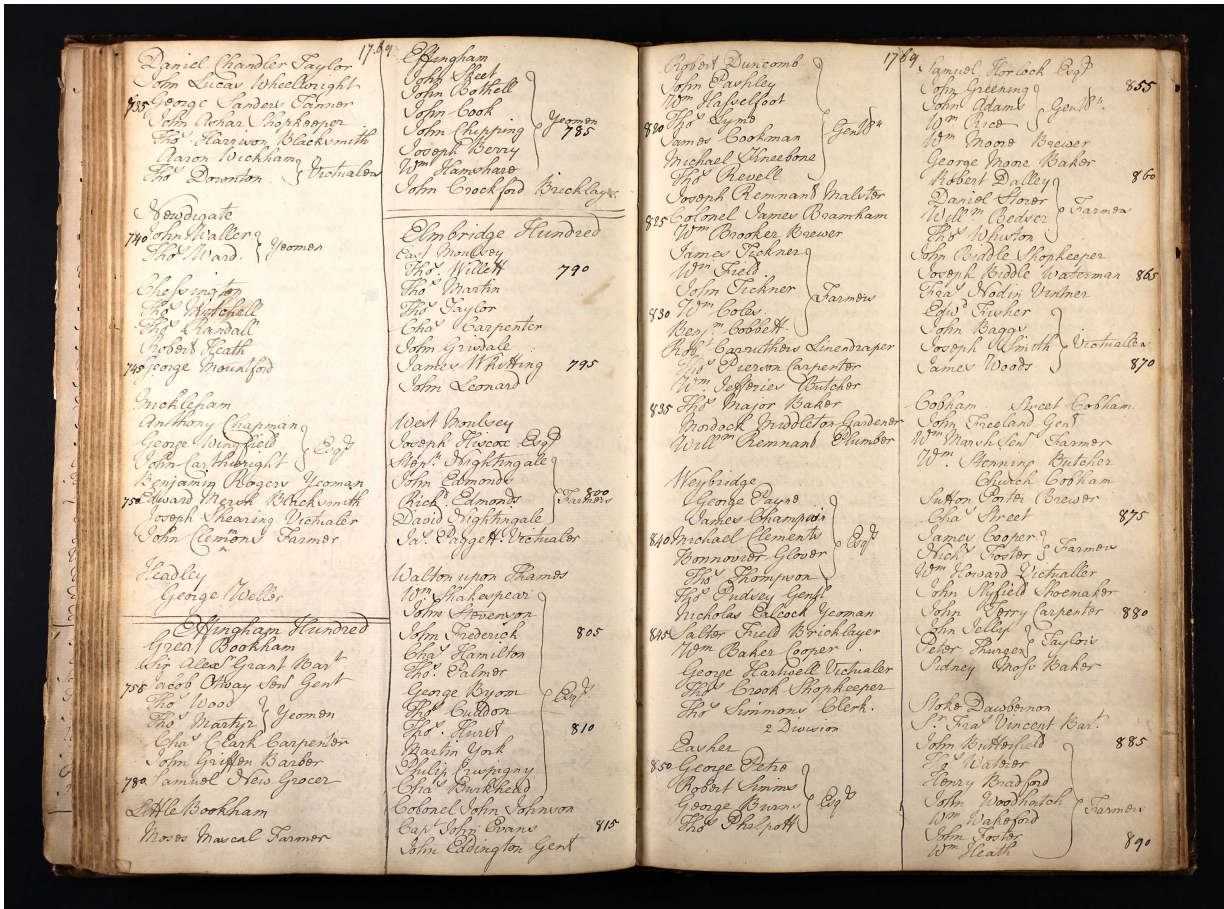
Baronets are a rank in the British aristocracy. The current Baronetage of the United Kingdom has replaced the earlier Baronetages of England, Nova Scotia, Ireland, and Great Britain.

The Baronetage of Nova Scotia was devised in 1624 as a means of settling the plantation of that province. King James VI announced his intention of creating 100 baronets, each of whom was to support six colonists for two years (or pay 2000 marks in lieu thereof) and also to pay 1000 marks to Sir William Alexander, to whom the province had been granted by charter in 1621.

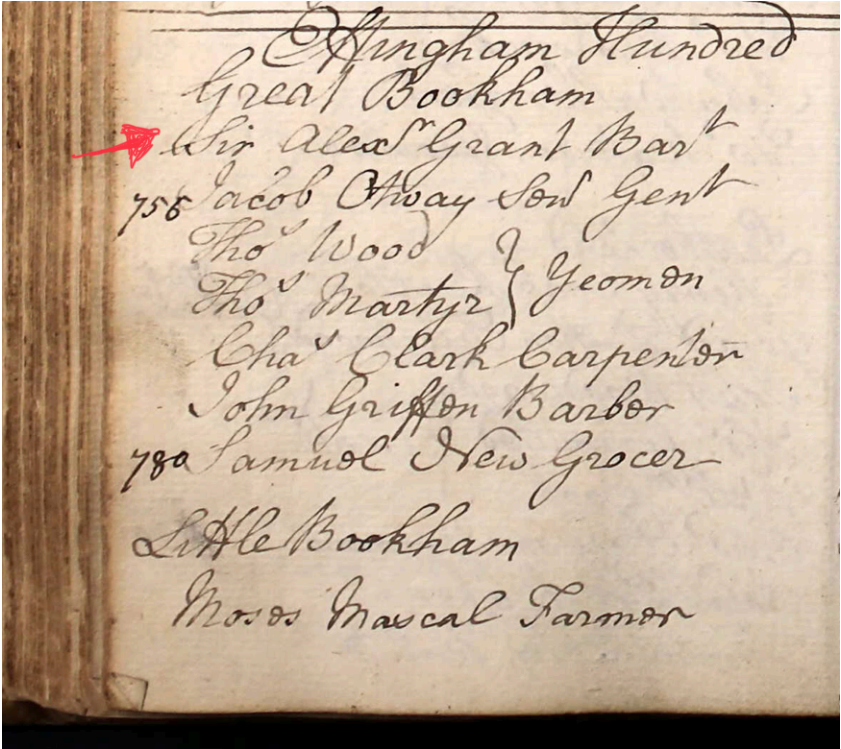
James died before this scheme could be implemented, but it was carried out by his son Charles I, who created the first Scottish baronet on 28 May 1625, In 1638 the creation ceased to carry with it the grant of lands in Nova Scotia, and on the union with England (1707) the Scottish creations ceased, English and Scotsmen alike receiving thenceforth Baronetcies of Great Britain ²⁴.

The baronetcy was only achieved via some manoeuvrings which enabled him to lay claim to a title that had been granted to an ancestor 4 generations previously (this baronetcy had been called Grangehill ²⁵) but had since fallen out of use. He had become rich and powerful from slavery and this enabled him to obtain a Crown charter for the full baronetcy for this father in 1752 and then when his father died on the 10th April 1755 he claimed it for himself ⁶. He renamed it 'Dalvey' ⁵.

'Grants of Dalvey' is the name of the Grant's family business today (a luxury Scottish menswear company and a 15 000 acre deer estate) ⁵.



Electoral Role, 1769, showing Sir Alexander Grant, Baronet, as the owner of Bookham Grove - see bottom left corner



In 1770, the year after he purchased Grove house, Alexander retired from his business - handing it over to 3 relatives. Bookham Grove was where he wanted to spend his retirement ⁴.

However, slave ownership stayed in the family for several more generations ⁵.

In 1883 when the UK government ordered slaves to be freed, Alexander Grant's great nephew, Alexander Cray Grant, owned 600 slaves and he was awarded £1.29 million pounds in compensation (at today's value) for the loss of these slaves - of course, as was the way, his former slaves received nothing! ⁵

Alexander was a man of his time, who had taken opportunities to develop wealth and status. By any standards it was not an ethical or laudable manner in which to achieve what he did, but he forms part of the history of Grove House, albeit for only a few years.

Just as a slight counterpoint to all of this, do you recall in the chapter about Thomas Brodrick, the first owner of the house, that he was involved as an Admiral in the Battle of Lagos in 1759 ²⁶? In fact he saved the day and it is possibly the reward from this that enabled him to purchase the land and build Bookham Grove House. A young slave named Olaudah Equiano, was involved in that same battle and describes it in his autobiography ²⁶. Olaudah had been kidnapped from Nigeria and sold multiple times before being purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy ²⁷.

Olaudah would eventually become a prominent abolitionist in England. His autobiography is valued as the most extensive account of an eighteenth-century slave's life and the difficult passage from slavery to freedom ²⁸.

Michael Henry Pascal, a naval officer in the British Royal Navy, was Olaudah's slave master from 1754 to 1763. Pascal was a descendant of the Huguenots, a sect of French Protestants who largely followed the teachings of theologian, John Calvin. Due to religious persecution, they were forced to flee France, to various parts of Europe, the United States, and Africa ²⁹.

Note that the next owner of Bookham Grove House was also a Huguenot who had fled France - Charles Dalbiac.



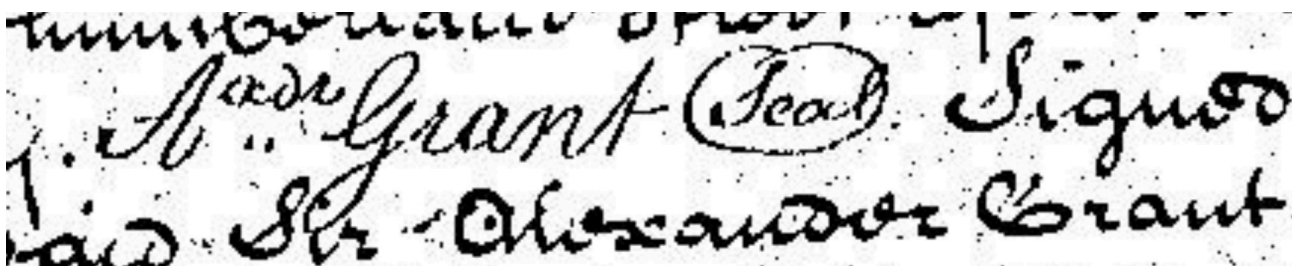
Olaudah Equiano, also called "Gustavus Vassa" Daniel Orme, after W. Denton 1789 ²⁷

Alexander only enjoyed his retirement and the house for 2 1/2 years, as he died on the 1st August 1772 ⁶, at Bookham Grove ²⁵. He had accumulated a vast wealth by the time of his death - estimated at £13 million at modern value ⁵.

Probate took place in 1773. At this point his slave ownership was recorded as 343 adult males and 329 adult females. The total value of his estate at this time was £102 052.74 Jamaican currency, of which £61 345 currency was the value of enslaved people. He had £38 071.94 debts ⁶. The value of his estate today would be around £13 million (date 2018) ⁵.

In his will he leaves Bookham Grove to Elizabeth, his wife: ³

'I hereby leave and bequeath to my said wife, Dame Elizabeth Grant during all the days of her natural life the said Bookham Grove near Great Bookham in the County of Surrey aforesaid, in case she shall choose to reside there with the whole lands and estates purchased, or to be purchased, by me at any time hereafter in the said County of Surrey, with the whole buildings, edifices, houses, gardens, orchards and other appurtenances whatsoever thereto belonging. But in case my said wife shall not choose to inhabit and reside at Bookham Grove then my will is and I hereby divest my executors hereinafter named with all convenient speed to sell and dispose of the same with my whole property in the County of Surrey aforesaid, and to apply the price arising therefrom in payment of my debts and to the other purposes hereinafter directed.'

A black and white photograph of a handwritten document, likely a will, showing a signature and a seal. The signature is written in cursive and reads "Alexander Grant". To the right of the signature is a circular seal containing the word "Seal". Below the signature and seal, the name "Alexander Grant" is written in a larger, more formal cursive script.

Alexander Grant's signature and seal on his will 1772

Elizabeth obviously decided not to live at Bookham Grove following her husband's death, as the whole estate was put up for sale in 1773 and purchased by Sir Charles Dalbiac.

28th October 1769
Alexander paid
£4000 for the
property worth some
£7-8 million at 2019
values ³⁰

References and Notes

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2. Note that both Burke's Peerage <http://www.thepeerage.com/p42499.htm#i424990> and the History of Parliament website <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1754-1790/member/grant-sir-alexander-1772> record that Alexander Grant married a second time to Margaret Grant on the 1st October 1764, but his will, which was written in 1772, gives his wife's name as Dame Elizabeth Grant and names her as a beneficiary, executrix and trustee. The will of Dame Elizabeth Grant, written in 1787 with codicil in 1790, clearly identifies her as the widow of Sir Alexander Grant. So a second marriage is inaccurate.
3. <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk> PROB11/982/355
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