ENGLISH HERITAGE

SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Series 2, Episode 3: The Heroic Servant of Kirby Hall

Josie: Hello, I'm Josie Long and you're listening to Speaking with Shadows. English Heritage have sent me on my way to Kirby Hall in Northamptonshire today. And as far as untold histories go, this one's still a bit of a mystery. I'm going to be following the story of a heroic man who in 1672 saved the life of the owner of this fine house.

> [Clip] James Chappell was woken by the explosion and led the search for members of the Hatton family. He pulled Christopher Hatton from the rubble.

Josie: This act earned the lifelong gratitude of the man he rescued, who granted his servant a generous and life-changing bequest in his will. Not only did this servant turned hero live on in local legend, the scant fragments of his story have historians questioning some fundamental assumptions about this era. Why? Because James Chappell was also black. Who was this servant living as a free man, honoured by his employer, in the middle of Northamptonshire, at a time when Britain was intensifying its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade? And what new insight and complexity does this add to the under-documented experiences of being black in Britain at that time?

> [Clip] Speaker 1: We feel there is more work to be done in this area. We feel there's missing links.
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> Speaker 2: He's an exception. We know about him because he left a record about his life behind whereas so many others didn't.

Josie: I'm Josie Long, and this is Speaking with Shadows.

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Before we head out into the Northamptonshire countryside, let's have an introduction to Kirby Hall and the legendary man we're on the trail of. I'm joined by Dr Megan Leyland, who's a senior properties historian at English Heritage. Hi Megan, it's really nice to see you again.

Megan: Hi Josie, lovely to see you too.

Josie: Hi! Now, Kirby is a big, grand house and it's beautiful and I can't wait to look around, but I'm more interested in the fact that we're here to talk about one of its staff, James Chappell. Could you tell me a bit about him, who was he?

Megan: So James Chappell was a servant in the household of Christopher Hatton, First Viscount Hatton, in the 17th century. We believe he joined the Hatton household in around 1663, aged about 15. So that means he was born in the late1640s, around 1648, and he would have been one of a large

contingent of servants who ensured the smooth running of family life at Kirby Hall and, as we'll hear, elsewhere.

Josie: But James isn't just present in those historical records, is he? Why are we talking about him today?

Megan: James is fascinating, because his life and his actions have long been talked about in local and family legend and in oral tradition, and particularly in Gretton, where he has a very personal link – this is the nearby village. And he is said to have been England's first black pub landlord, at the Hatton Arms. But alongside this, he also played his part in a really dramatic series of events which took place away from Northamptonshire, on the island of Guernsey. Christopher Hatton inherited Kirby in 1670 and also inherited the position of Governor of Guernsey. So he spent an awful lot of time there rather than at Kirby Hall, and left Kirby really for the ladies of the household and the staff to keep ticking over in his absence. And around the new year in 1672, Christopher Hatton was in Guernsey, but also his wife Sicily, as well as his mother Elizabeth and children. You know, they're ringing in the new year together. And this is where James really comes into the picture and he effectively becomes a hero of what happens next. He was there as well. And accounts tell us that it was really stormy night and lightning struck Castle Cornet, which is the official residence of the governors of Guernsey. But it didn't just strike the castle, it struck the gunpowder store.

Josie: Oh, wow.

Megan: And Christopher Hatton apparently said there was something like 250 barrels of gunpowder in there, so forget the Gunpowder Plot, this was a serious explosion which brought incredible damage on the castle. But, of course, there's people in it as well. James Chappell was woken by the explosion and led the search for members of the Hatton family. He pulled Christopher Hatton from the rubble, he went and searched for his daughters, who he found alive, but very sadly Christopher Hatton's wife and mother died. And after the series of events he seems to have stayed with the Hatton family and moved back to Northamptonshire and Kirby.

Josie: When you find out the detail of what he did, it's so heroic and you really do understand that these people owed their entire lives to him. Could you tell me a bit about how we know these details?

Megan: It is remarkable and it's because there is a remarkable sort of survival of a document from back in the early 18th century. So here in front of me I have a ballad published in 1872 by a descendant of one of the Hattons that we've just been talking about, George James Finch Hatton – in fact, a descendant of the one of the young girls pulled from the rubble. It's a ballad and appended to the end of it is an account and as it says, 'taken down from James Chappell's own mouth'. So incredible.

Josie: And really cool to feel that there is some part of this that's told in his words, because I feel that particularly as a servant and particularly at that time, these are the voices that you didn't get to hear so much.

Megan: Very true, very true. It's so rare to have a servant's own voice and it was written down by a man called Joshua Lankart so we have to assume, you know, there's a degree of writing and editing going in.

Josie: Sure.

Megan: But to be this close to a first person account – first of what happened – is incredible. And it was nearly lost. The original account written down in 1727 by Lankart was lost. A copy had been made, which was rediscovered by this member of the Hatton family who then thought it was so fascinating that he wrote a ballad about it and he published this alongside. So it's kind of a copy of a copy! James in his 80s when he's recounting this.

Josie: Let's look at this in a bit more detail. What parts sort of jump out at you?

Megan: This incredible moment, when it's all happening, is well worth the read. I'll read you a bit of it out. It starts, 'By one o'clock in the morning, which was New Year's Day, this informant' – so that's James – 'was waked by another servant of the said lord, and was by him told he did believe the house was falling. This informant, borrowing a pair of shoes from the soldiers, with some difficulty got on the castle wall and crept on his hands and knees to his lordship, where he found him with the mattress and feather bed under him, and the bedclothes over him. And then, this informant turning himself back again, his lordship got on his back and this informant crept back in the same manner he went there, and so brought His Lordship entirely off the wall and carried him into the guard room.' So he's not only been woken up, he's going straight to the aid of Christopher Hatton, borrowing shoes to do so, to find various members of the Hatton family. So it says, 'This informant borrowing some of the soldiers' clothes, went with them up and down the castle to see for His Lordship's lady, mother and sisters, and then found that the castle had blown up and the Dowager Lady dead in her bed. And in the next apartment, they found His Lordship's two sisters both alive in bed, but almost suffocated with a beam of the house falling in betwixt them.' He returns again and again, finding the rest of these daughters and servants alive. So he really did everything he could to help Christopher Hatton.

Josie: It really shows the extent of the heroics here as well. Can we talk a bit in a wider sense about what is known about everyday life for servants at Kirby Hall?

Megan: There are some places that we can get these little tantalizing hints, and it is in one of these that we find that little piece of the puzzle of James being at Kirby Hall. And one of my favorite resources when I'm going in the archives and looking at documents is going and reading the letters of the ladies of the household.

Josie: Oh, wow.

Megan: Remember, they're there pretty much dealing with everything while their husbands are in London or in Guernsey or doing other things, and there's some remarkable correspondence from Christopher Hatton's wives. I say wives because he had three throughout his lifetime. And it's in one of these that we find a reference which must be to James at Kirby. So I'll get it for you. This is a letter. You can see at the bottom 'C Hatton'. So that's Christopher Hatton's wife who we've just been talking

about who very sadly died. So this letter was written before she went to Guernsey, so the late 1660s, early 1670s. So if we turn it on its side, we have this little note sort of appended to the end and added on after she signed her name. And as you can see on the first line, it says, 'I desire that you will ask Black James for the key of his chamber door where John Wormstall lay, for it cannot be found. James must be trying whether it would open the cellar and pantry.' And it's just this tiny little reference to James. So, I think the first really interesting thing is that he has a key to a chamber door and servants at this time would be lucky to have a chamber of their own, or even a locked chamber that they might share. So, if indeed this is his, and he has somewhere to sleep in Kirby with a locked door, he's clearly a servant of some status. He's also having access to keys to the cellar and pantry. He's clearly a trusted servant.

Josie: What else do we know about James?

Megan: What is really interesting about James is, through the hard work of local historians and the Northamptonshire Black History Association, we know a bit more about his life outside of service. So we've principally spoken about what he did in the household of the Hatton family, and they've gone through parish records in minute detail. And what they've uncovered is that James seemed to have married twice. First to a lady called Elizabeth, and they had a child in Gretton who very sadly died. He did remarry to another lady called Mercy Peach. Great name.

Josie: Incredible name.

Megan: I know! In 1705 and again had children, and sadly one did die again. So to actually even have those details of family life is remarkable for someone in this period. We think that he was baptised, and then we also know of course that he had this sort of other life in Gretton that we spoke very briefly about when we started talking together, of becoming this pub landlord.

Josie: Let's talk a bit about this pension that he was given. How much was it and what does that translate to if we think about it in today's terms?

Megan: So if you look through this quite long document with all this spectacular handwriting, you come to one small section which relates to James and, in fact, the servants at Kirby Hall. And it says, 'To every one of my servants I give one year's wages over and above what should be due to each of them at the time of my death.' So he's giving something to his servants in his will, but it continues: 'And to my servant James Chappell I give one annuity of 20 pounds a year during the term of his life.' He's been picked out specifically in Christopher Hatton's will and from everything we've said it's not in the slightest bit surprising that he has. And that amount of money was a lot in the period. So it equates to around something like 220 days' work for a skilled tradesman. So each year, he's getting this money which, actually, for a skilled tradesman is quite – that's a lot of hours.

Josie: So he's basically getting a good salary every year as his pension.

Megan: Yeah, effectively. And you know, he's got this other life, this married life. It's nice after all these traumatic events that have gone on, all the hard work, to kind of imagine this second life in Gretton

with this family comfortably provided for by the man whose family he played such an instrumental role in saving.

Josie: This is quite a well-documented story, especially for somebody of that social class, especially for somebody of that background. There are lots of questions as well, aren't there?

Megan: I have so many questions! As you say, you feel really invested in James, hearing everything about his life, but there are so many gaps – gaps which is difficult to fill in with the sources that we have. I mean, what was his life like before the Hatton household? Where was he born? We don't know. What was it like for him living in rural Northamptonshire, so far away from sort of traditional immigration routes?

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Josie: Thanks, Megan! It's so interesting to find out a bit more about James and his life. I'm heading off to explore Kirby to see where James would have lived. And I'm hoping that I'll bump into Beryl Spearman, Kirby's site manager, who's going to show me around. I've arrived at the inner courtyard at Kirby Hall. As you drive up, you see the grand wing of the hall that's still functioning as a building. You don't really realise how much the rest of it is a very beautiful ruin. So I'm standing in the doorway and I can see right out through this courtyard, through a second courtyard, the arches all line up with one another. It's a place that feels very much like it's whispering about what it used to be. Hi Beryl, it's nice to meet you.

Beryl: Hello, Josie. Lovely to see you. Welcome to Kirby Hall.

Josie: Thank you. Is this the central courtyard that we're in at the minute?

Beryl: Yes, this is the inner courtyard, one of two. This building was begun in 1570 by Humphrey Stafford, who was a local landowner, and he wanted a property that would portray his status. It took five years for the shell of the property to be built and then poor old Humphrey died and he didn't live long enough to enjoy living at Kirby Hall. The shell of the property was taken on by Christopher Hatton, who was one of Elizabeth's courtiers.

Josie: So with this in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I?

Beryl: Yes, that's right, yes. Christopher Hatton was one of her favourites.

Josie: Oh good, because that's quite a treacherous time to be a courtier.

Beryl: Yes, yes. And he was such a favorite that rumors abounded, and he would want a property for Elizabeth to come and visit.

Josie: And did she come and see it?

Beryl: No.

Josie: No!

Beryl: She never came.

Josie: Brutal!

Beryl: But we did have royal visits. We know that James I came to visit on more than one occasion and Anne of Denmark stayed here as well.

Josie: Well, let's take a walk through. I'd love to find out more about the different parts of the house. The ceilings are so high. Is this the Great Hall?

Beryl: This is the Great Hall. This is where you would be entertained. James I came to visit Kirby on more than one occasion and was welcomed by the fourth Christopher Hatton and his family. So entertainment would have been splendid in this Great Hall.

Josie: Well, I should mention we're stood at the most beautiful bay window. It's gigantic and it runs from practically the floor right up to the ceiling, and you get a real kind of sweeping panoramic view outside as well. So this is a really beautiful part of the house and it is so grand, and I can imagine that this would be where the most royal guests would stay. Where would the everyday people who lived and worked in this house have lived?

Beryl: You're right. These are the state rooms. These are the very best. But there is another side to the story, and we could look at the kitchen wingt, where folks such as I would be working.

Josie: I mean, I'd be right there with you! Beryl, we're sheltering in what feels like a fireplace, is that right?

Beryl: We are, we're in the fireplace next to the bread oven.

Josie: Oh, it's a bread oven! I thought it looks like a pizza oven, but that's a bit of an anachronism.

Beryl: No, that's the bread oven where the poor old baker's boy would have to be up at dawn to make the dough and light the fire. So the fire was lit in the oven. This whole area was the beating heart of Kirby Hall – the kitchen area, full of hustle and bustle. Today it's very difficult to interpret. There's odd drains and odd walls left and evidence of staircases.

Josie: Yeah, it looks like a ruined abbey or something. You can barely put the pieces together.

Beryl: But it would have been an area full of servants. Of course, some of the servants were more important than others. So the poor old baker's boy was probably down at the bottom. The cook would have ruled the roost, and other servants would have popped in and out to complete their duties and collect things to take into the main house.

Josie: What was life like for the servants here?

Beryl: I believe that very few servants would live on-site. I understand that most would walk across the fields in the morning from the nearby village of Gretton. Perhaps the lowliest of low would sleep under the table in the kitchen. It would be, dawn to dusk, hard work.

Josie: So we know that James settled in Gretton. Do we know where he lived before then?

Beryl: We don't know where he lived. He was a high-status servant and would have accompanied Christopher Hatton.

Josie: People were keeping records of the owners and not the servants – that's sort of the story of old, isn't it?

Beryl: Yes.

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Josie: The written accounts from James may only be interpretations of his words and actions, but these are critical flags that there are histories yet to be explored by present-day historians. If James hadn't committed that heroic act of rescue, it's unlikely we'd have any sense of this black man who lived and worked in Kirby in the 17th century. It makes you realize how much we rely upon official documents for insights into other lives. And, of course, that's why oral histories are so important, because they give us a concept of the lives that didn't exist within a framework of white power and class hierarchies. So how else can we seek a truer representation of history if the usual sources can't tell us? To find out more, I'm leaving Kirby behind. The village of Gretton became home to James. It's not clear how much time he spent in the household at Kirby or with Lord Hatton, but it was here that his first daughter was born and where he chose to settle his family. I'm off to the Hatton Arms pub where James is said to have become the first black pub landlord in Britain. I'm meeting the current landlord, Julie Smith. Hi Julie!

Julie: Hi Josie, welcome to the Hatton Arms.

Josie: Thank you.

Julie: Please come on through, up to the bar.

Josie: You actually grew up in this pub, didn't you?

Julie: Yes, I did. I moved here when I was eight.

Josie: And your dad was the landlord at the pub when you were growing up?

Julie: Yes, he was, yeah.

Josie: How did you come to hear about this story of James Chappell?

Julie: People have just talked about it all of the time. I don't think there are many people that come in the pub that don't know the story of James Chappell. It's just a piece of Hatton history, one of the other stories that gets passed down, you know?

Josie: Can I ask you about the relationship with Kirby Hall down the road – has there always been a close relationship between the pub in the village and the…

Julie: I have a lot of people that visit Kirby Hall and then they come here afterwards, and I always mention the fact that this used to be the gatehouse for Kirby Hall. And of course, we're called the Hatton Arms after Christopher Hatton and the sign outside is the coat of arms for the Hatton family.

Josie: Wow, so like his ghost is still here.

Julie: Yeah. I'd love to go back and see what it was like. A lot of stuff happens in the pubs around here, you know. But it's just life, isn't it? It's just village life I think.

Josie: Yeah. Well, also when I talked to Beryl in Kirby Hall, she was saying that a lot of the people who would work in Kirby Hall would live in Gretton and kind of walk across the fields over to work there.

Julie: You can still walk it! It's not that far. And it's still part of Gretton Parish. It's still part of the village.

Josie: Thanks for talking to us and thanks for letting us come in the pub. It's great.

Julie: It was a pleasure.

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Josie: We're going to stay in the pub a little bit longer, but there is a good reason. I'm meeting Morcea Walker MBE, Deputy Lieutenant from the Northamptonshire Black History Association, who worked to piece together stories like James's from a patchwork of local and national resources. Also joining us is historian Dr Angelina Osborne, the co-author of *100 Great Black Britons*. So, Morcea, what are the challenges to researching black history in a place like Northamptonshire?

Morcea: The battle with Northamptonshire is that it is a shire county. And when you talk about black history, people often think of the big cities, London and Birmingham and all those places that you would get information from. But as far as I'm concerned, the shires are probably more exciting. And Northamptonshire has so many big houses – I mean, it's a county of squires and spires. I don't know if it's an issue. It's the time and the energy levels to actually dig deeper, to actually rummage, not show us the bit they want to show us, show us the bits that are down in the cellar that we're happy – not necessarily me, but researchers like I've got beside me – to say, 'Get in there!' and find the materials. First in Northamptonshire, it was traveling as well. You know, when you get a little lead, you may have to go to London to pick up or reaffirm or the documentation found in graveyards, in churches.

Josie: Can we talk a bit more broadly about what was happening in a wider sense, about the beginning of the trading of enslaved people?

Angelina: If you're asking about organised transatlantic enslavement – economic endeavor – that would have been after the Restoration. That would have been around 1663, is the charter that Charles II and his brother, James of York, the Company of Royal Adventurers trading to Africa. They had a monopoly of 1,000 years to trade between what is present-day Guinea and Bridgetown, Barbados. There were all these syndicates of slave traders prior to 1663, but it was a very small scale and it normally involved the aristocracy because they had the money, they were the ones, and merchants, they could afford to finance these voyages. But actually, the Company of Adventurers Trading to Africa lasted from 1663 to 1672. And then from 1672 to 1698 would have been the Royal Africa Company, which was again introduced by James and Charles II. And that had a monopoly on trading of enslaved people from the African continent, usually West Africa, to the colonies or so-called colonies that Britain had at that time. They had the monopoly until 1698. They didn't stop trading, but they were no longer the pre-eminent slave trading organization. But then it went to free trade because then merchants in Bristol and Liverpool and other people around the country, other merchants started to campaign saying they shouldn't have monopoly. We should have the right to 'the freedom', as William Pettigrew writes in his book, 'the freedom to enslave'.

Morcea: And you've got James in the midst of all of this. He's done well, he's going to get, when Christopher passes, 20 pounds. In our research, there's a gap, you know, where you're not quite sure where he's ventured from or what has happened prior. But he comes and he joins the Hatton family at a time when Charles has issued this charter. And then you're looking at the discrimination that is occurring at that time. James somehow is able to marry an English lady, Elizabeth, and there's records of that. And they have a child that doesn't seem to live long – there's a record of birth and then a record of death. And then he's on his feet, he's doing all right, and he meets Mercy, marries, and there's Amy, and we think that there needs to be a bit of research going on in Gretton because we think there's some mixtures here, surrounding areas, you know? How did the family spread? There may be many other children. And then as a result of him getting this money, he's able to set up, and we feel that the pub was here, that Mercy's father probably ran a pub. He, we believe, is the first black pub landlord because, obviously, if he's able to marry Mercy and her father is getting on in years, he would have sort of said, 'Come here, mate, need a hand. If you're going to marry my daughter, you need to work in the pub. It's not so easy! You're not just taking my daughter away – you've got to do some work.' So whichever way around it is, this man has established himself, established good homes. And there's a difference between being called a servant and a slave, yes? And I think he was a goodly servant to the family, as opposed to being a slave of the family. That's a personal view. And that opened lots of doors for him.

Josie: But it would make sense if he's traveling with the family, if he's got that status in the family as well.

Morcea: And I think, you know, over a period of time, certainly in Northamptonshire, we found some lovely people who are recorded because they are more servants than slaves. They have graves, proper graves, you know, and not even servants, white servants had proper graves, you know – it's common in and then you lost it. But we've got headstones and things like that in the county, for black people

that had the status, and James is no exception to the rule. James is sort of making it. But at the same time you've got all these people in London and other places who are definitely not making it, you know? And I just wondered how much knowledge he had of that. Did he ever travel or did he just stay in Northamptonshire, in this safe haven, for him – I'm not saying for everybody, because what was happening underneath his time was appalling.

Josie: It speaks to the whole society living in denial of what they're actually doing around the world. But even the way that we were talking about James, I feel speaks to that. It's like, 'Oh, well, no, this person is a member of the community. That's allowed. But we'll sort of ignore the rest of what's happening.'

Angelina: I think there's still much more to be uncovered throughout the history of Great Britain in terms of researching the presence of African and Caribbean people. In terms of ordinary lives, there's still much to be uncovered. It's a matter of being quite dedicated in looking in local archives. It's really about local – what do they say, 'Think local act global', right? So it's about looking in the local archives.

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Josie: It's been so interesting finding out about the story of James Chappell and, in particular, talking to Angelina and Morcea and being able to put it within such a complicated and shifting context. Compared to most records of black lives from this time, James is one of the most well documented, and thanks to the work of Morcea and the Northampton Black History Association we know certain details about his life, his baptism, his marriages, his children. And we know the story as passed down by the ballads and oral history and local legend. But it's so frustrating not to be able to find out more about his perspective, you know? How he felt about being a black man living in Britain at that time – what his experiences were, what his opinions were, where his family lived, how they lived, you know? There's so many more questions and it would be so fascinating to be able to hear more of their voices.

It's so important that we continue to dig into the archives to build a better picture of black experience in Britain, and maybe to uncover more stories of the individuals who were able to document their experiences themselves. But there must be so many black people living in Britain at this time whose stories have been completely lost, who will always remain absent and silent. And it's so frustrating! That's why I think getting to know the wider context is so important, so we can understand the significance of these gaps in history. People who are notable by their absences but who were there, and maybe start to think of that as a kind of presence in itself, a part of our shared history. This story really made me understand better what it means to study and to think about history, and also what it might mean to study and think about history in the future – this idea that history is always with us to be reinterpreted, and that so much of what perhaps we were told was studying history was only studying a very a small strata of society. And for me what is so much more important is finding out all of the other stories, all of the other histories that perhaps were sidelined.

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On the next episode of Speaking with Shadows…

> [Clip] I think when we think about a lunatic asylum – it's not the ideal language for now – I think you'd imagine, you know, a big brick building with, like, railings around it and tiny windows and no one going out. Whereas this was the polar opposite of that. It was all very open.

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