



The rediscovery of Dido Elizabeth Belle

an article for Black History Month by John Campbell, minister of High Cross URC Tottenham, London

In the second half of the 18th Century it is estimated that the black population in and around London was around 15,000 people. Some of them were enslaved. Most of them were free, but the majority were not particularly well off. Dido Elizabeth Belle, who lived in one of the most distinguished families in the land, was something of an exception. Her story was lost until the 1980s when it was rediscovered. Her picture, **above**, remained in the family and still hangs in their Scottish grand house, Scone Palace, to this day.

The family knew that the white woman in the picture was Lady Elizabeth Finch Hatton, a family member who had been effectively adopted by her childless uncle and aunt, Lord and Lady Mansfield, and who lived with them at Kenwood House (by Hampstead Heath) and in their town house in Bloomsbury Square. They just assumed that the black woman was an unknown servant. But how many servants would wear such rich clothes and be held with such a gesture of endearment?

Once the investigations began, it emerged that the black woman in the picture was Dido Elizabeth Belle, who was also the daughter of a nephew of Lord and Lady Mansfield. This nephew was a naval officer who had had a liaison with a black enslaved woman called Maria whilst he served in the Caribbean, whom, it would seem, came back to England on board ship with him and gave birth to Dido shortly thereafter. Whilst Dido was still young, she was brought to London to become part of the family of Lord and Lady Mansfield, alongside the other Elizabeth. Hence, the double portrait painted at Kenwood.

We don't know a lot about Dido (the 2013 film *Belle*, about Dido, took some imaginative leaps). But we do know a lot about Lord Mansfield. He was, for many years, Lord Chief Justice and the premier judge in England, famed for his legal decisions and for his development of English legal practice. He was a key figure in several cases that were of huge significance in the struggle to get Britain to stop its slave trade and abolish slavery. Perhaps the most famous was the Somerset case, in which he ruled that Somerset, who had been brought to England as a slave, could not be shipped back out as a slave against his will, and so was effectively free. It made the London black community feel much more secure.

Lord and Lady Mansfield shared their home with Dido right up until Lord Mansfield's death. He seems to have been immensely fond of her and quite reliant on her, and left her a lump sum and a pension. She was clearly much more than a servant. She was family - even if, as the portrait suggests, not quite an equal.