

The Erles of Drax

By **Paul Lashmar**

Reader in Journalism at City, University of London, **Paul Lashmar** first began studying the history of slavery when he developed a Channel 4 series on Britain's slave trade in 1999. This month he writes about one of the West Country links from his latest book.

Richard Drax—the Conservative MP for South Dorset until July 2024—has made the Drax name famous across the globe. At the beginning of the decade, he inherited the family's Drax Hall sugar plantation in Barbados that was one of the earliest created in the British Empire around 1630.

Until the abolition of slavery in 1834, over a period 200 years and some eight generations, Richard Drax's ancestors had owned as many as several hundred enslaved African captives at any one time. His family are now unique as an original settler family that still owns a working sugar plantation. Despite pressure from reparation campaigners in the Caribbean, UK and elsewhere, Richard Drax has refused to make a formal apology or a public gesture of compensation for the years of slavery.

Richard Drax's family live in Charborough House, a mansion famous for being enclosed by the landmark 'Great Wall of Dorset' which runs alongside the A31 near Wimborne. But the name Drax is a relative newcomer to Dorset. The former MP and BBC reporter's full name is Richard Grosvenor Plunkett-Ernlé-Erle-Drax. It's a rare four barrelled name where the final addition was approved by George V in 1916. It is the Erle branch of the family that is longest associated in the Marshwood Vale magazine's circulation area. And there have been some remarkable and some controversial characters in the Erle line.

According to 18th Century historian John Hutchins, 'The Erles were a very ancient and knightly family. The first that occurs in the pedigree is Henry de Erle, Lord of Newton, County Somerset. They were subsequently styled of North Petherton in that county, and seem afterward to have removed to Culhampton, County Devon. They held the manor of Parva-Somerton, or Somerton-Erleigh, in the reign of Edward II by grandserjeancy of being the king's chamberlain; by service of pouring water—on the King's hands on Easter or Christmas day,' (Hutchins 1774 Vol. I. 184). The first Erle we have some records of was Walter Erle, the son of John III Erle of Cullompton in Devon, by his wife Thomasyn.

Circa 1540, a 20-year-old Walter Erle (I) was sent up from Devon to Hampton Court to serve in the Courts of King Henry VIII. Musicologist



General Thomas Erle early 18th Century.

and emeritus professor at the University of Exeter Nicholas Sandon has researched the life of Walter Erle and has shown that he was a musician and composer as well as a servant in various courts. 'His successful exploitation of his position, and his employers' evident appreciation of his services, are reflected in the numerous grants of property and other perquisites that he received over more than thirty years,' says Sandon.

When home in Devon Walter Erle resided at Colcombe House in Colyton. He married Mary, a daughter of a local gentleman, Richard Wyke, at St Andrew's Church, Colyton in 1549. When her father had died Mary inherited the Charborough Estate and Walter and Mary moved to Dorset. Walter lived until 1581 and left Charborough to his son Thomas Erle (1) who died quite young in 1597. An elaborate memorial to Thomas with him in armour and separate tomb can be seen in Morden Church near Charborough.

One of Thomas's sons, named after his grandfather,

would become English Civil War colonel and MP Walter Erle (II), a leading Parliamentarian and Puritan. He was in charge of the siege of Corfe Castle but infamously failed to take the Royalist stronghold. While he took refuge in London for many months, the Royalists burnt down the Tudor Charborough House probably in revenge for the destruction of a Turbeville family's manor house. At the end of the Civil War he rebuilt the house. His grandson, Thomas Erle (II) who was born 1650 was a lawyer. He first fought as a militia officer in the Battle of Bridport during the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. The Drax family legend has it that Thomas Erle (II) initiated the Glorious Revolution of 1688 by plotting in a Charborough icehouse with fellow conspirators to rid England of the popish James II and replacing him with William of Orange. (Although it is probably a myth). Present at Monmouth's defeat at the Battle of Sedgemoor, Thomas Erle took to the soldier's life. With William on the throne, Colonel Erle went on to fight the Irish Catholics at the Battle of the Boyne, Battle of Aughrim and the Siege of Limerick being seriously wounded on several occasions. Hutchins provides a detailed account of Thomas Erle's part in the battle of Aughrim. The battle was fought partly

in a bog, was difficult and the Protestant army came under heavy fire from the Irish:

'But the Irish had so well ordered the matter that they had an easy passage for their horse among all these hedges and ditches, which yet being observed by the valiant Colonel Erle, he encouraged his men telling them 'there was no way to come off but to be brave.'

Promoted to General, Erle served for many years and also fought in the Low Countries and Spain. He died in 1720, the last of the Erles as such. The year before his only grandchild Elizabeth had married Henry Drax from the sugar rich family who owned Drax Hall plantations in Barbados and Jamaica. Henry and Elizabeth combined three family fortunes. From then on the family were known as the Erle-Draxes.

With the addition of slave-based revenues, the Erle-Drax ancestors expanded their mansion and land and today the estate covers 23.5 square miles and has at least 125 properties. It is the largest estate in Dorset owned by a family.

Drax of Drax Hall: How One British Family Got Rich (and Stayed Rich) from Sugar and Slavery. An unauthorised history of the Drax family. Pluto Press (March 2025). Hardcover ISBN: 9780745350516. eBook ISBN: 9780745350523.



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