



SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Episode 2: The Caribbean Prisoners of Portchester Castle

Josie: Hello, it's Josie Long here. Thank you so much for downloading Speaking with Shadows. It's the podcast that listens to the people that history forgot.

It's the autumn of 1796, and stumbling off the vast ships docked in Portchester Lake are hundreds of soldiers who've been detained as prisoners of war. They move in small groups, or one by one in small boats, across the deep water channel to the castle where they'll be held.

These are people from the French Republic in the eastern Caribbean and many of them are black – free men, women and children who have been captured defending their islands from British forces. One such figure stepping weakly from the boat is General Marinier, commander-in-chief of the French forces on St Lucia. Alongside him are the wives of some of his fellow black officers.

The prisoners arrive after an arduous and cramped four-month journey across the high seas and are checked over by officials. Some have died in the wretched pox-ridden conditions. Those that make it disembark into the gales and driving rain of an October day in the south of England, with only the clothes they were captured in some 4,000 miles away. They're issued with woollen vests and socks, and given bowls of hot soup, potatoes, and ginger-flavoured beer.

Today we'll hear about some of those soldiers, women, children and civilians. Who were they, how did they live at Portchester, and then where did they go?

.....

I've just stepped off the train in the Hampshire town of Portchester, which is on the northernmost bit of Portsmouth Harbour, and I've walked down the quaintest residential street you've ever seen in your life. I'm talking little cottages full of rose gardens. I'm talking very charming multiple-colour paintwork jobs, and then you turn the corner and – wow! Out of nowhere, you've got the keep of Portchester Castle, which is so imposing, and yet you can imagine in winter how stark and how serious and kind of foreboding it must have seemed.

You can see the estuary of water stretching out. You can see, right over it, the houses on the other side; up in the distance the barracks – so it's still a real, kind of military place. You get that feeling quite implicitly wherever you are.

This harbour has seen centuries of action, and like many castles, this old beaut has been a priory, a royal palace, and a thriving community before it became a prison. And standing under the massive stone keep now, I can really feel that it was not a welcoming place for the people that we're going to be talking about today.



So I'm walking up to the gatehouse to meet Abigail Coppins, who's a historian that can tell me a little bit more about this story, but it's such large grounds and it's quite impressive.

Josie: Hi Abigail, how are you?

Abigail: How are you?

Josie: I'm good, thank you. I'm a little bit overawed by this building!

Abigail: It's a fantastic site, isn't it?

Josie: Yeah, it really is! So please, tell me about the research that you've been doing here.

Abigail: So I've been looking at the prisoners of war who were incarcerated here during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. They were incarcerated here for about, on and off, 20 years, and because there was so little known about that particular period I just went into the archives and started digging around to see what I could find.

Josie: So that's how you discovered about General Marinier.

Abigail: Yes. I was repacking a load of the finds from the excavations that were done at the castle during the 60s and 70s, and I was kind of getting a bit bored with Roman animal bone, because there were hundreds of boxes of it, and it was a cold winter – long winter.

Josie: You can only see so many goats!

Abigail: Yes! So basically, I just started looking at some other boxes that held some of the more complex small finds, and I came across all these objects that had been made by prisoners of war from the castle. They were making things like buttons, brushes, gaming boxes and gaming counters, right up to very complex model ships.

Josie: Can you tell me a bit more about General Marinier and his contemporaries? Who were they? Why were they captured? Why were they there?

Abigail: General Marinier and the other black officers who were incarcerated here, and the black soldiers as well, were all captured on the islands of St Lucia, St Vincent, Grenada and possibly Antigua as well.

Josie: So the war was being fought between France and England but it was being fought in the Caribbean.

Abigail: Yes, that's right. So when Britain and France went to war again in 1793, it wasn't just France and Britain going to war, it was their colonies as well. And the war in the Caribbean is particularly complicated because, not only is there this sort of revolutionary push by France, to spread the ideals of the French Revolution, but it's also – it's a very complicated message – tied up in a whole pile of



other things that are going on in the Caribbean at the time: the fight against slavery; the conflicting ideas of various French European settlers, i.e. the plantation holders; but also the fact that some of them are royalists sympathisers –

Josie: Wow – who have fled?

Abigail: Yes, who have fled, and are fighting with Britain against the French, but are changing sides. So you can't generalise with this war because it's always in a state of flux.

Josie: But also, it's almost a conflicting idea that if you're saying to people in the French colonies: 'Right, we've abolished slavery because all men are equal and all men are free, but you can't have independence. You're still French citizens of our colony.' I mean, it's sort of a weird, hard road to hold isn't it? So there's a lot going on in terms of who's fighting whom?

Abigail: Yeah, absolutely.

Josie: The other thing that is slightly unusual about this story is just how far these prisoners have been moved from. You know, they've been moved from the Caribbean, to here.

Abigail: Yes.

Josie: What was that about? Why would they have been taken on that journey?

Abigail: Firstly, they are thought of as prisoners of war. So the almost 3,000 black and also white European prisoners that arrive here from St Lucia and Grenada and St Vincent – they are soldiers. And there are negotiated settlements during the surrender of the fort on St Lucia that ensure that these people are treated as PoWs.

Also the situation, particularly on St Lucia, is very fluid still. So what the British army need to do is remove all the French soldiers off the island so that they can continue to pacify the island and repel the rebellion. It's also a supply issue because when you capture large numbers of prisoners of war you have to guard them, so you need manpower, and you have to feed them, which takes up supplies.

Josie: So it's easier to bring them all the way back here.

Abigail: Yeah, and so they were brought back here to Portchester, which did have room for them all.

.....

Josie: We caught up with Steve Martin, an author, writer, researcher, and historian who focuses on the multi-ethnic peopling of Britain.

Steve: I first came into the Portchester project indirectly. I'd always had a very strong interest in the black and Asian presence in the British military. So I was contacted by Abigail and it suddenly opened up a whole new area of, frankly, obsession for me.



The cliché is still, unfortunately, to state that it was on 22 June 1948, with the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury, when 492 (approximately) Jamaicans walked down the gangplank, that this is the official beginnings of the creations of multi-ethnic Britain. Of course, it's very evident – it's obvious – that the history is much more deeply rooted and vigorous than that.

What this group of – oh what, 2,080 – who arrive at Portchester prompts reflection on, is the impact that they would have had locally. That is a lot of black people to arrive in one spot in the English countryside. So what would be their impact locally?

We know that in this part of Hampshire, there was a very low profile black presence. There were people serving in various houses of the great and the good, there would have been sailors passing through. They found themselves in a Britain which was starting to seriously reconsider, I should say, the ideas behind abolition. This is something which is sweeping the country and will continue to do so until 1807. But this is the first mass popular movement in British history.

.....

Josie: I'm back with Abi now, and we're at the castle entrance.

Abigail: We've come through the gatehouse and we're now in the inner bailey of the castle. If you follow me, we'll walk through the gift shop and go into the keep so I can tell you a bit more about the prisoners.

Josie: Great.

So you've got people coming from the Caribbean, all the way to Portchester and, not to be rude about Portchester, but it must have seemed really bleak and difficult. You know, that journey must have been horrendous. What will people have known about their fate?

Abigail: Well interestingly, I think that some of the prisoners had probably been prisoners of war before. Certainly, one of the black officers, Louis Delgrès, he had been a prisoner of war of Britain before.

Josie: Quite high-ranking soldiers, aren't they?

Abigail: Yeah, these are officers, they're professional soldiers, living a mobile life, which incorporates spending time in the Caribbean, which is where they're from, but also spending time in France and spending time as prisoners of war. It's part of the –

Josie: It's part of the job.

Abigail: Part of the job – yes.

Josie: I'm right in thinking that their families travel with them as well?



Abigail: Yes, there were at least a hundred women and children on board the ships with the prisoners. Now we know that some of them are wives of the officers. Children were being born in prison almost as soon as the black prisoners arrived here. You know, if you do the math, the women were pregnant during the fighting on St Lucia and then during the voyage across the Atlantic and just made it over here, and then managed to get into prison and then give birth. It just shows how tough people were.

Josie: What would it have been like to be imprisoned here?

Abigail: Well the families – the women and children – got separated. They got sent down the road to Forton Prison in Gosport, which is about 8 miles south of here. It's probably likely that their husbands were in with them. One of the prison commissioners, Dr Johnston, wrote that this had been allowed the last time that they'd had large numbers of women and children arrive at the castle. So he couldn't see any reason why it couldn't be allowed again.

Josie: Hang on, but people were still kept here though, so...?

Abigail: Yeah, so there are probably about 6,000 prisoners in total in the castle at that time and they're housed in the keep and a number of other buildings here in the inner bailey. But there are also –

Josie: So prisoners were kept right here?

Abigail: Yeah, in here, and we will see the hooks and things on the beams from where they slung their hammocks in a bit as we climb up through the keep. But there were also barracks for prisoners out in the outer bailey. And in fact, you can sometimes, when it's been really dry, you can still see the imprint of those buildings out in the outer bailey.

.....

Josie: We've just walked up through the keep, we're in the top floor of it now, and we saw, as we walked up, the hooks where people's hammocks would have hung. It's a much more inter-racial society this, and it's like a much more mixed society that they're coming from, to here.

Abigail: Yes and current research is showing that actually, on the islands, particularly on the islands furthest away from the centres of Empire – say France or Britain – there is more fluidity within society. So particularly for black women, there are free black women. They are businesswomen and they are moving around as well, so they're not just staying on the island. Sometimes they are coming to London or Paris, and their children are being sent to Europe to be educated.

Josie: So Marinier, who ends up here having fought for the French, was also involved in revolutionary activities, trying to overthrow the colonial power before the French Revolution came in, and those ideas changed everything and kind of galvanised people against the different enemy.

Abigail: Yes, I guess so. It's really difficult to find out how long Marinier was leading all these rebels in the woods, but certainly around 1794.



Josie: But that's only two years prior to him ending up here!

Abigail: Yeah, he's a leader, basically. He fought successful campaigns against Britain on St Vincent, St Lucia.

Josie: So that's kind of a big scalp for Britain to be taking him home.

Abigail: Yeah, I think, yes it is. And in fact, the captain of the *Ganges*, who had Marinier on board, called him the 'famous black General Marinier, who so often defeated the English at St Lucia and St Vincent'.

It's alleged that he couldn't write. When he arrived here the antiquarian Woodward said that Marinier was asked to sign the prison register and he declined, saying: 'I do not know the mystery of the pen. It is by this, (touching the hilt of his sword) that I have been given the rank that I have. Here is my aide-de-camp, he knows how to write and he will sign it for me.'

Josie: Wow...

Abigail: Yeah, I mean, what a bloke!

Josie: Yeah, that's some power isn't it – just to be like: 'Nay, I live by the sword not the pen. If you want someone to sign, this guy can sign for me, thank you.'

Abigail: Yes that's right. Yes! And actually, again the antiquarian Woodward, writing in 1840, he remembered the black prisoners and General Marinier, and he said that Marinier was: 'soldierly and gallant', and that the local commander of the defences at Portsmouth, who was called General Pitt, 'showed him off to the local gentry, as if he were a lion'.

Josie: How strange! To be so like, exoticised as a person, and treated like a sort of –

Abigail: Yes, like a show.

.....

Josie: Next I think I'm heading to meet a local councillor called Nick Walker. Nick has some very special items that give us clues as to how the prisoners passed their time here.

Hi Nick, it's really nice to meet you. So you've been in Portchester a long time, and you are also a local councillor. How long have you been a local councillor?

Nick: I went on Fareham Borough Council in 1982 –

Josie: Which I should say is the year that I was born.

Nick: Yes.

Josie: You've been a councillor as long as I've been on this Earth.



Nick: Best part of the last 30-something, 35-odd years I've been a councillor.

Josie: Can you tell me a bit about your collection? Like, why did you start collecting?

Nick: Yes, that's an interesting one. I knew a chap who lived on a houseboat locally, well-known character, and he had some fascinating stuff that he'd acquired, dug up, found in the castle, before they ever put embargoes on taking anything away.

Josie: Oh, so he was a bit of a rogue guy.

Nick: Yeah, but he had a fascinating collection of Portchester stuff, which I've now managed to acquire. I have it.

Josie: There are objects right in front of us that you've brought in. This is a kind of ... a – I want to say scrimshaw, but only because I know the word. What's this one?

Nick: A typically bone item made by the prisoners. It's a gaming board on legs, all the pieces for doing it, it's marked around the sides as well.

Josie: Can I pick it up?

Nick: Yeah sure.

Josie: Ahh this is so exciting! Wow, so it's really delicate, isn't it? It's got a lot of decoration. I feel like I'm on Antiques Roadshow right now, and I want to be like – 'Nick, this is worth £10,000!'

Oh, wow. Yes. It's got a lot of little design features and it's got all the dominoes in here. So you can imagine if prisoners are crafting this, it's going to take a really long time.

Nick: Well, that's the one thing they did have, they had plenty of time on their hands to do these things, and it was a way of eking out a sort of living, I suppose. They got the bones from the food and they carved them up into various shapes. There's all sorts ... there's spinning jennys – I've got one of them. Don't forget, they were captured – Army, Navy, whatever – but they had a previous trade. So making things was nothing unusual.

Josie: And we should talk about this other thing because this is – it's a big box.

Nick: It's a box which is covered in straw-work, and has compartments and it has scenes which they've made out of straw and dyed. Don't ask me how they did it, I have no idea what dyes.

Josie: And the outside of the box is faded because it's 200 years old!

Nick: Exactly, it's been in the sun and it's faded, but when you look inside where it's been protected, the colours of the straw-work and how they've dyed it, is still completely apparent.



Josie: Oh gosh, I've opened the bottom drawer and the colours are so vivid still. So exciting to get to handle them as well!

.....

Josie: I could spend a long time looking through the objects in the collection, but I want to know a bit more about what life was like for prisoners at Portchester. To do that, I've got a little bit more climbing to do because Abi's waiting for me at the top of the keep.

Abigail, we're right on top of the keep and we're so lucky, it's not windy at all. And the view – I mean the view is wonderful!

Abigail: It's phenomenal isn't it?

Josie: Yeah!

Abigail: You can see over to the Isle of Wight over there, see across the mud flats to Portsmouth.

Josie: What would it have been like day-to-day to have been imprisoned here?

Abigail: The space – the large green space that we're looking out across at the moment, opposite the church – would have been filled with two-storey barrack buildings, which would have held the prisoners. And the prisoners would have all come out of their barracks at about 7 o'clock in the morning, they'd have had breakfast, and then they'd have gone across to the airing ground, which is the large green space at the other side of the church, and they would have walked around, done whatever they were going to do ... But at 9 o'clock, the gates into the castle would have opened and stalls would have been set up all along that road there that goes down towards the church. And the local tradespeople would have set up stalls. But also, the prisoners would have had stalls just inside the prison fence.

Josie: So the castle was a kind of marketplace.

Abigail: Yes, so there would be a daily market and the prisoners would sell the things that they'd made and they would have been able to use that money to buy themselves extra clothing, food, you know, the necessities of life.

Josie: So they were prisoners, they were given some rations, but unless they were able to find money through other means, life would be really, really difficult.

Abigail: Well, you've got to remember that they were given meat, and vegetables, and soup, and other rations, once a day, and that was more than the poor people working on the farms and in the villages outside the castle would have been able to have. So although we might look at it as you know, sounds a bit grim, the food ration certainly was better than anything lots of poor people could get outside.



Josie: And would that have led to any sort of resentment from the community?

Abigail: Well actually a lot of the local community were very supportive of the prisoners. And in fact, some prisoners had a gambling addiction and would sell their food, their clothes, everything, to fund that addiction, and then would be seen, you know, tottering around, semi-naked, looking starving, and the local community would often complain and say they were being starved by the prison community. So you know, obviously the prisoners weren't getting the right rations, which in fact, they were, they were just selling it for gambling.

Josie: Can I ask, do you think there was also a little bit of a spread of revolutionary ideas?

Abigail: Certainly there was always the risk that the French Revolution, or the ideas, would spread amongst the British population, and some of the French soldiers who are out on parole in the villages did manage to escape and get back to France because locals helped them.

Josie: Well, they're quite near to France. It's a dangerous game isn't it!

Abigail: Yeah, there was a bit of an underground network that got you across to the Kent coastline and then across to France from there.

Josie: What gives us the clues as to finding out about the daily life of the people here?

Abigail: Well we're really lucky because at the time, the British civil service, who are managing all this, they're expanding, and they consist of a lot of clerks; and clerks write things down, and they write everything down! So there are constant barrage of reports and letters going up to the Admiralty in London who are administering all this, and so the archives are absolutely jam-packed full of the documents relating to the prisoners of war at Portchester, and all the other prisoner-of-war prisons at the time.

One of the things that surprised me was how a job at the prison, for members of the local community, was seen as something that was actually quite desirable. So I've found lots of letters from local people all asking for jobs as, you know, prison warders – they call them 'turn-keys'. There's women also applying for jobs here, so the local community were coming in and out, there was lots going on, probably secret messages, then possibly assignations between young ladies and ...

Josie: Wow ... of course.

Abigail: Yeah, there are records that show that some of the French prisoners married local people.

Josie: Wow.

Abigail: Yep, and so it was a big mix.



Josie: So people got married, people found each other. Am I right in thinking that everyone was mixing quite happily?

Abigail: For the black prisoners here, they had a slightly tougher time, because when they got here the other French white prisoners started bullying them and started robbing them of the extra clothing that they had been given by the prison authorities. So that was noticed fairly quickly and the prison commissioner Dr Johnston decided that there was only one thing that he could do, and that was to get the black prisoners out of the castle.

And in fact, they commissioned two new prison ships that were moored out in the deep water channel, just out in the harbour there.

Josie: Oh gosh, which probably was not an easier existence.

Abigail: Well, Dr Johnston felt that the wood of the prison ships was warmer than the stone-cold damp of the keep and so that was why – because basically they were coming down with a lot of – because the damp of the keep was causing them to come down with lots of fevers and chest infections.

Josie: Why do you think finding out about this story is so surprising to people, in the context of what people thought black British history was in the 18th and 19th centuries?

Abigail: Well, I think that for a long time black British history is seen as being rather niche. It's certainly under-researched and because it's under-researched people think that there is no black British history, or it's a very small part. We often think of, certainly black people in the 18th century, as just purely defined by the experience of slavery. They're either slaves or servants in grand country houses. Well, this research shows that they are active players in world events and that they are mobile.

Josie: Thanks Abigail. It's been really great to meet you and hear about your research, and just learn about some of these people and the lives that they led.

Abigail: Yeah, and I've got stacks more to uncover, and I just keep uncovering more and more of this extraordinary story. There's a long way to go.

Josie: Thank you.

.....

Josie: As Abi says, there's so much more to uncover here. After a year or so at Portchester, most of the black prisoners including General Marinier were sent to France in exchange for British prisoners. And from there, some made their way back to the Caribbean, but we know that others remained in Britain. I asked Steve for a final word on how the prisoners' story is changing our understanding of black British history.



Steve: What's revolutionary about it? It's two things really – one of which is the presence and activity of British prisoner-of-war camps during the Napoleonic era. However, what this in turn exposes is the multi-ethnic nature of the prisoners who were being held by the British – people of all backgrounds. So, their impact on local economies, their impact on the histories of their cultures, and countries of origin – it's a huge amount which has been opened up.

It hasn't exactly been a trail of breadcrumbs, it's been like a tsunami of them! There are so many interesting characters. There are so many fascinating events. And just on the level of numbers alone, there is a huge amount to deal with. What for me is most fascinating are the individual human stories – the fact that you don't simply have, out of that 2,512 French people collectively who arrived in October 1796, you don't just have the 333 white French, you also have the 2,080 black people who were with them – black men, I should say – and 99 women and children.

We do have the fact that there were black officers there – General Marinier is particularly interesting, but as you go down the scale of commissioned officers and just ordinary hands of all sorts, you find what I think are the really interesting stories.

We're fairly certain that probably several dozen of the black prisoners neither returned to France nor to the French Caribbean, but in fact percolated through the local community. We know that some of the young children were sent out for an education at local schools. We are fairly certain as well, that some of the black prisoners who had familiarity with small boat handling and other maritime affairs, would have been just *subtilisé* into the Royal Navy – a very common practice, which is what the Royal Navy did, always needing hands, even Frenchmen, to fight against other French, as you find all throughout ships in the British fleets at Trafalgar and elsewhere.

So those stories, I think, are the really fascinating ones – what were their life trajectories and what were their impacts locally?

Also, they're moving into a Britain which, in its port cities and larger urban centres – particularly across the capital – is to some degree familiar with the black presence. There are already black people living in many of the places they will go to, not just as sailors and soldiers, but also people who are political philosophers, as businessmen – on one occasion one was the Sheriff of Monmouthshire. So they're moving into an area where they're not entirely unknown. Those who did have a trade would have found, outside of London, that they could have practised their trades quite freely. Those who were unskilled would have found their numbers just glutting that already existing body, particularly in the port cities, of the population of the black poor, black beggars – many of whom were already former soldiers and sailors from Britain's colonial wars.

.....

Josie: I'm standing right by Portchester Lake at the moment. This has been such an interesting day as a snapshot on that period in the history of the Caribbean, and how it relates to what was happening



ENGLISH
HERITAGE

over here and in France, in terms of how new ideas were taking hold with people, and this idea that identities were shifting all the time.

And then on top of that, there would have been people in charge at Portchester who, on one hand, would have had to acknowledge the slave trade because it was legal in this country, but also who were fully engaging with these free men and generals who were prisoners of war.

What I find really interesting about this story is that it's a window into the big ideas at that time. It gets me thinking about how black history was taught to me in school – almost as a little niche, which is so wrong when it connects to all of the wider national histories. Like here, it's such a part of the stories of these wars and these revolutions that we're taught about in a broader sense.

You can find out more about the story today at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows, and if you have a question, or would just like to tell us your opinions on this stuff, we've got a hashtag which is #SpeakingWithShadows.

On our next main episode, I'm travelling to York to hear more about the tragic events of 1190, when the city's Jewish population were persecuted to their deaths.

[Clip] For me, the responsibility that we have is to draw lessons from the past and to ensure that what happened here, nearly a millennium ago, is not forgotten and is something that one can learn from.

Josie: Thank you so much for listening. My name is Josie Long and you've been listening to Speaking with Shadows.