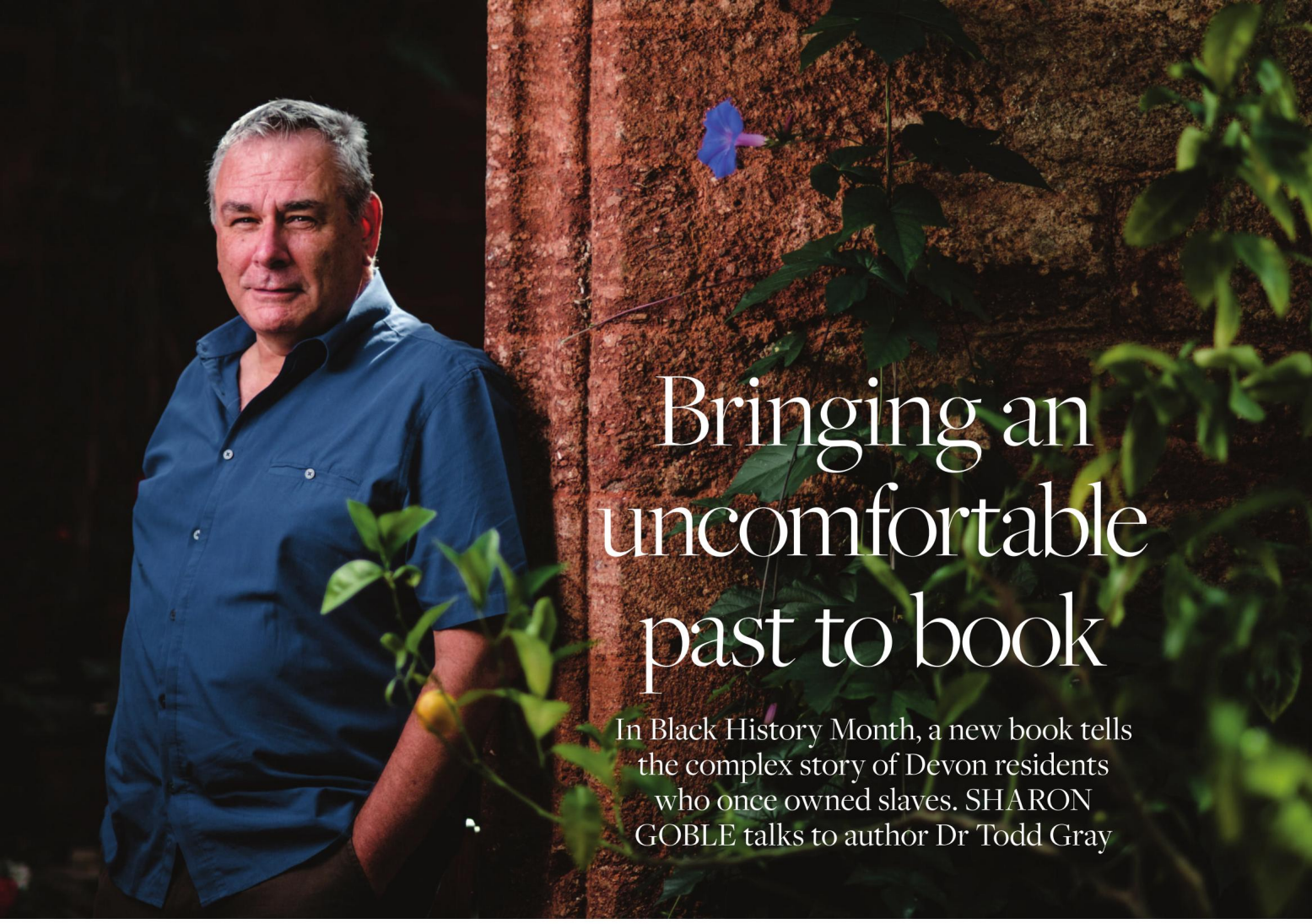


Bringing an uncomfortable past to book

In Black History Month, a new book tells the complex story of Devon residents who once owned slaves. SHARON GOBLE talks to author Dr Todd Gray

Historian Dr Todd Gray at his home in Exeter.

The Exeter home of Dr Todd Gray, MBE, could be fresh from a period drama. Stepping into the walled garden of this quirky, historic property in a little-known backwater of the city is like walking through a time portal. And that's what Todd does, metaphorically speaking, on a daily basis.

Todd is the author of myriad books about the history of Devon and its capital city, including *Devon & The Slave Trade*. He was made an honorary freeman of the city of Exeter in 2018. He's also an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter. However, his latest publication, a hefty tome entitled *Devon's Last Slave-Owners*, has proved challenging even for a historian and writer with his wealth and breadth of experience.

"Of all the projects I've worked on, this one had the most bizarre birth," he tells me. "Maya Angelou came to Exeter University for a few weeks in the 1990s to teach in the English department. A friend of mine had organised her visit so we all had coffee together.

"She asked me, in a Maya Angelou sort of way, what history had been written of plantation investment in Devon and who owned slave plantations. I didn't know. It hadn't even occurred to me that anybody might have written it up because I'd never seen anything in the archives in all my years of research.

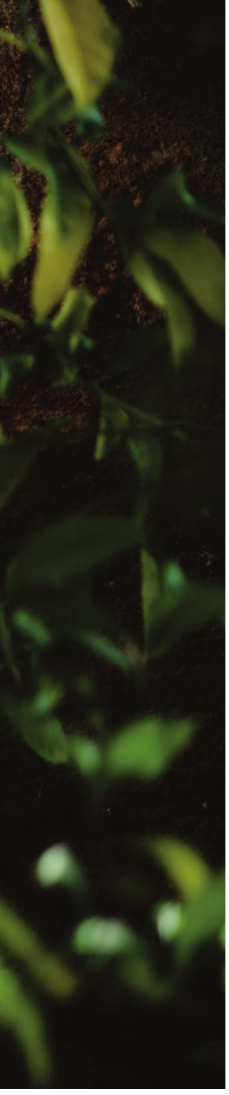
"The next day I pulled out everything I could find, basically a few slave plantation accounts. Maya went back to America and I kept a file from then on. Over the years, the file built up and, by the end of that decade, I became interested in writing about black history and added further research.

"I wrote *Devon & The Slave Trade* based on that. But, to be perfectly blunt, I never felt totally comfortable with the material because it was so sketchy and lacked context. The subject of slavery started to become popular and people made assumptions. I wanted to discover the facts. So, eventually, I fixed upon the emancipation records of 1834 as a fixed point in time on which to base this book."

Devon's Last Slave-Owners begins with a single question: How many Devonians owned

HEAR TODD AT EXELITFEST

Todd is chair of the Exeter Literary Festival which takes place in the city this autumn. Join him and fellow historian John Allan for Celebrating Exeter at Exeter Library on Friday, November 5, 4pm-5.30 pm to hear about some of the most exciting discoveries that have shaped the city's history. ***Tickets for the full programme can be booked at exelitfest.com***



Picture: Steven Haywood

slaves on August 1, 1834? That date marked the emancipation of enslaved people across the British Empire.

Using this legislation as his reference point, Todd embarked on the process of unravelling a complex history involving not only the men and women who received compensation money for the loss of their enslaved workers but also many others who had financial, legal and social associations with slavery.

'Devonians owned nearly 5,000 slaves and they received the equivalent in today's money of a £9m compensation payout'

Over lockdown, he finally pulled together all this material and his new book was born. The historical facts he painstakingly pieced together reveal who Devon's slaveholders were, where they lived and what kind of lives they led.

He says: "Much of the content was previously unknown; Devon is the first county in England to have such a comprehensive study of former slave ownership. I'm hoping that people will recognise that this is factual history from which they can begin to make an informed opinion. It's not propaganda, it's not denial, it's not falling into political arguments. This is just what the documents say.

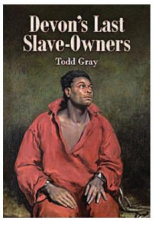
Picture: Todd Gray

Enslaved people picking cotton in an image from Todd's new book.

"37,407 people across the British Empire were paid for their slaves. Of those, we know 34 were living in Devon in 1834. You could say that's insignificant, you can juggle the statistics to conclude what you want, but these Devonians owned nearly 5,000 slaves and they received the equivalent in today's money of a £9m compensation payout when their enslaved workers were released."

The book also gives a fascinating insight into the lifestyle of this wealthy group of Devon residents, whose numbers grew after 1834 when they were joined by another 50-odd former slave-owners who retired to Devon, usually to the coast. To find out more about their stories, you'll have to read the book for yourself. ◆

Devon's Last Slave-Owners is published by The Mint Press and can be ordered through stevensbooks.co.uk



ABOVE: Devon's Last Slave-Owners shines a light on the county's past.

Picture: Alamy Stock Photo

RIGHT: The late American poet Maya Angelou was the inspiration for the book.

FOUR FAMOUS QUOTES FROM THE WOMAN WHO INSPIRED THE BOOK

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Prejudice is a burden that confuses the past, threatens the future and renders the present inaccessible.

You may write me down in history with your bitter, twisted lines. You may trod me in the very dirt, but still, like dust, I'll rise.

My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.