

Introduction

Kenwood House is closely connected to the history of the slave trade. Its links are not through the building itself, but are traced through the lives of two very different people who lived here in the later 18th century.

The 1st Earl of Mansfield was Kenwood's owner and England's most powerful judge. He made a famous ruling in 1772, which was interpreted by many to mean that slavery had no legal basis in England. It marked a significant milestone along the long road towards the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807.

Dido Elizabeth Belle is believed to have been Lord Mansfield's illegitimate

great-niece. It was not unheard of for a powerful aristocrat to be legal guardian to such a relation. The fact that Dido was black and probably born to an enslaved mother was very unusual. The affection with which Mansfield watched Dido grow up at Kenwood probably influenced his personal thoughts on slavery. As Lord Chief Justice, however, Mansfield had to balance any such feelings against his careful reading of the law.

Both intimate personal and wider social dimensions of the British slave trade are thus intertwined with the history of Kenwood.



Above
The Bombardment of Morro Castle, 1762, by Richard Paton. The scene depicts the British attack on Havana. John Lindsay is in the longboat being rowed between ships.
National Maritime Museum, London

Left
A View from Caenwood [Kenwood] House over London, 1755, by John Wootton. Trustees of the Titsey Foundation

Cover image
Dido Belle
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scane Palace, Perth, Scotland

Dido Elizabeth Belle

Dido's father is thought to be John Lindsay, nephew of Mansfield. Her story begins after Lindsay joined the navy during the Seven Years War (1756–63), a global conflict between Britain, France and their allies. From 1757 to 1763, Lindsay was Captain of the *Trent*, a warship based in the West Indies, which took part in the capture of Havana from the Spanish in 1762. It has previously been suggested that Dido's mother was an enslaved African on board one of the Spanish ships that were captured during this battle, and that this was how she and Lindsay met.

Mansfield related this incident to a visitor, Thomas Hutchinson, who recorded:

'Sir Jno [John] Lindsay having taken her mother prisoner in a Spanish vessel, brought her to England, where she was delivered of this girl, of which she was then with child, and which was taken care of by Lord M.'

However, we now know through her baptism record that Dido was born in 1761, while Lindsay was abroad in the West Indies, and that her mother's name was Maria Bell. Lindsay's obituary in the *London Chronicle* of 1788 assumes his paternity:

'... he has died, we believe, without any legitimate issue but has left one natural daughter, a Mulatto who has been brought up in Lord Mansfield's family almost from her infancy ...'*

*A contemporary term for a person of mixed race.



Growing up at Kenwood

Lord and Lady Mansfield had no children of their own, but raised both Dido and another great-niece, Lady Elizabeth Murray, daughter of the future 2nd Earl, David Murray, 7th Viscount Stormont. His wife had died when Elizabeth was young. The two cousins grew up together at Kenwood from the 1760s to the 1780s.

Dido would have had little contact with her father, as Lindsay was abroad for long periods, marrying in 1768 and then living elsewhere in England and Scotland. He had no children with his wife, Mary Milner, but it appears that he had two other, illegitimate children. Lindsay's will names *John and Elizabeth Lindsay, my reputed son and daughter*.



Far left
William Murray, later 1st Earl of Mansfield, c.1742, after Jan Baptiste Van Loo
English Heritage

Left
Lady Elizabeth Finch, the future Lady Mansfield, by Charles Jervas, c.1732
English Heritage

Above
Dido Elizabeth Belle (later Mrs Davinier) and Lady Elizabeth Murray (later Lady Finch-Hatton), late 1770s by an unknown artist, formerly attributed to Zoffany
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scane Palace, Perth, Scotland

Right
David Murray, 7th Viscount Stormont, later 2nd Earl of Mansfield, by Bacciarelli
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scane Palace, Perth, Scotland



Picturing Dido

The next view we get of Dido is far more revealing. She appears in a remarkable double portrait with her cousin Elizabeth, when the girls are probably in their late teens. This painting is unique in British art of the 18th century in depicting a black woman and a white woman as near equals.

The girls are shown on the terrace at Kenwood. Unlike most pictures of black people in this period, Dido is not a servile figure hovering on the margins of the painting. She shares a number of attributes with Elizabeth, including a luxurious silk gown, expensive pearl jewellery and a direct, confident gaze. Elizabeth is also touching Dido's arm to show their connection.

However, the painter also suggests subtle differences between the girls. Dido's animation contrasts to Elizabeth's calm. Compare Dido's turban and the exotic fruit she carries to Elizabeth's rose garland and book. These details might indicate differences in character rather than differences in status. Is Dido, for instance, pointing to her cheek in a playful gesture or to stress her different skin colour?

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The first real glimpse we have of Dido is of her as a young lady of eighteen. She is described by Thomas Hutchinson, ex-Governor of Massachusetts, on a visit to Lord Mansfield in 1779:

'A Black came in after dinner and sat with the ladies and after coffee, walked with the company in the gardens, one of the young ladies having her arm within the other ...'

Dido's Kenwood

After Lady Mansfield's death in 1784, Anne and Marjory Murray, Lord Mansfield's unmarried nieces, moved to Kenwood to provide support to the grieving and increasingly infirm earl. Elizabeth left Kenwood on her marriage in 1785, but Dido remained.

Dido's precise position in Lord Mansfield's household is a matter of debate. The available evidence suggests she was brought up as a lady within the family, but with a lesser status than her cousin Elizabeth.

Dido was taught to read, write, play music and practise other social skills, not without success, indicated by the *London Chronicle* in 1788, which reported in her father's obituary, that *'... [her] amiable disposition and accomplishments have gained her the highest respect from all his Lordship's relations and visitants.'*

She also supervised the dairy and poultry yard at Kenwood. Such activities were quite common as hobbies for genteel ladies in the 18th century. Dido received an annual allowance and further annual payments after Lady Mansfield's death. Purchases for Dido

included a chintz bed cover and asses' milk as a health tonic.

Mansfield left Dido considerably less in his will (£500) than he did to Elizabeth (£10,000). He had in his own words increased Dido's bequest *'considering how she has been bred and how she has behaved'*. Dido's African origins may have played a part in the disparity, yet it was also usual to treat illegitimate children as 'lesser' family. Another likely reason is that Elizabeth's father was Lord Mansfield's heir and destined to inherit his title and fortune.

Dido's Kenwood had been very visible to passers-by. Its fashionable Adam brothers' architecture, its location and the fame and influence of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice, had drawn many visitors and sightseers. Dido had grown up, therefore, on a semi-public stage, at the heart of elite society. The year 1793 marked Mansfield's death and Dido's departure from Kenwood.



Below
Reference to Dido's allowance in the Account Book of Anne Murray, her aunt
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scane Palace, Perth, Scotland

Above
View of the north front of Kenwood House, as Dido would have known it, by Humphry Repton, 1793
From the Collection of the Earl of Mansfield at Scane Palace, Perth, Scotland

Right
End of a letter written out by Dido on behalf of Lord Mansfield to Justice Buller, 1786. It shows Dido's handwriting to be perfectly legible, so Mansfield's final comment is perhaps playful.
The Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn

Dido's 1/4 Allowance Octo: 14 5

This is wrote by Dido I hope you will be able to read it
Friday May 19th 1786