

Not in our Name: the Slave Ship ‘Neston’

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Residents of Neston may be surprised to know that, of the many slave ships that sailed from Liverpool when it was at the forefront of the transatlantic slave trade, one was a vessel named after the town. The *Neston* undertook two slaving voyages during 1758 to 1760. This article explains the background to her naming and what happened on her voyages; it also reveals how the quest to profit from slavery led to the early death of the local man who named her.

John Evans’ Background

While surviving records more than 250 years after the event are inevitably fragmentary, the available evidence firmly points to the *Neston* being named by a well-off young man born in the town in early 1734, John Evans. John was the son of a local yeoman and one-time churchwarden, also named John. The father held leases on large amounts of land in various parts of Neston as well as having land elsewhere in Cheshire.¹ He died while John junior was still a boy; his will provided money for his wife Alice as well as generous settlements to John junior and his elder sister Elizabeth when they reached the age of 21.² Thus it was that in 1755 21-year-old John Evans was already a man of considerable means; it seems he also chose to marry that year, in Neston.³

After inheriting his money young John wasted little time in investing in shipping in the thriving port of Liverpool. By September 1755 he was part-owner of a Chester-built single-masted sloop named the *Charming Betty* and ten months later he registered his share in a larger vessel, the *Lintot*.⁴ By the end of 1756 he was also part-owner of a 218-ton ship which had been built in New England in 1750 or 1751 – the largest of the three in which he had shares.⁵ The original name of this three-masted square-rigged vessel is unknown but it was surely John Evans who proposed she now be named the *Neston* (Figure 1). His three fellow investors were Liverpool merchants William James and William Ingram, and a Joseph Griffiths.

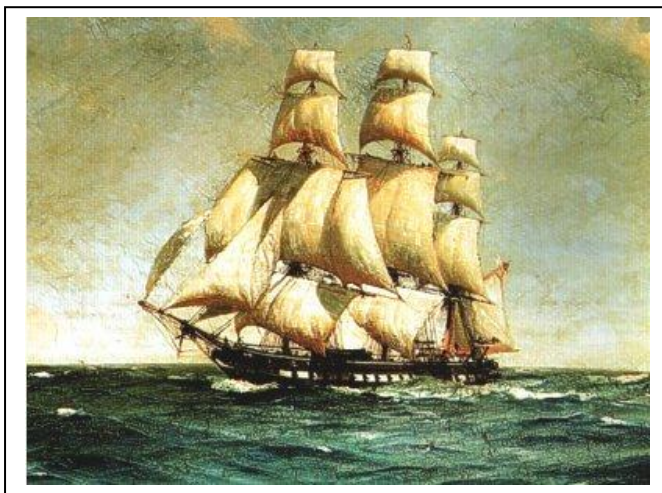


Figure 1: A square-rigged eighteenth-century ship, similar to the *Neston*.

Early Voyages

The first voyage of a vessel in which John Evans had an interest was by the *Charming Betty*; she sailed directly to the West Indies (either or both Barbados and St. Kitts) in early 1756, returning to Liverpool

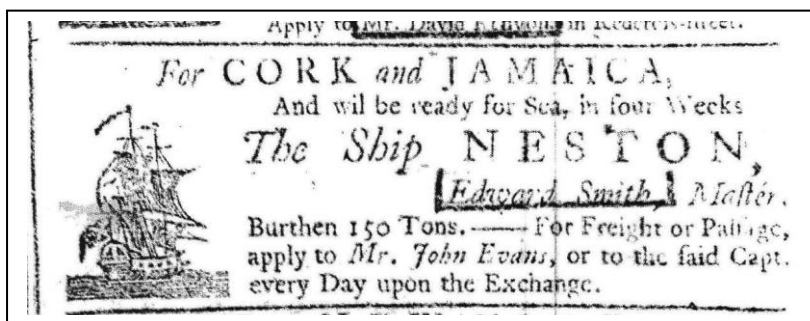


Figure 2: Newspaper notice of the Neston's intended sailing from Liverpool to Cork and Jamaica in 1756. John Evans is mentioned. Williamsons' Liverpool Advertiser, 29 October 1756.

in September that year – the same month in which the *Lintot* set sail to take on board slaves in Africa.⁶ Soon after, the *Neston's* intended first voyage was announced in a Liverpool newspaper; John Evans was named as the contact in the October 1756 advertisement (Figure 2). Like the *Charming Betty's* voyage, this was not a slaving trip. Instead the vessel was bound first for Cork in southern Ireland, where she presumably dropped off trading goods and collected Irish exports, before heading for Jamaica. Despite the newspaper advertisement appearing in October, she did not actually depart Liverpool until early February 1757 and was back there by December that year.⁷ She probably brought back sugar grown on slave plantations and, presumably, Evans and his fellow investors made profits from this and the *Charming Betty's* venture.

However, it seems that at this point Evans chose or was forced to sell his share in the *Neston*. An Admiralty record of March 1758 lists five owners – his three previous co-owners and two new ones who were both experienced in the slave trade, ship's master John Maddock and prolific investor Richard Powell; Evans, though, was no longer involved.⁸ It is possible that, despite his previous success, he was experiencing financial difficulties as the *Lintot* had been lost earlier that year. The vessel had successfully reached Africa where 230 slaves embarked, before going on to South Carolina and offloading 197 souls:⁹ it seems that 33 had died en route – a 14% mortality rate which, tragically, was not particularly exceptional. However, the ship was severely damaged on her voyage back to Liverpool and was last reported beached at Crosby, Lancashire with her cargo of plantation-grown goods lost.¹⁰ It is quite possible that Evans' insurance for such an event was inadequate or non-existent.¹¹ There is no indication, though, that Evans sold his interest in the less valuable *Charming Betty*.

The Neston's Slaving Voyages

The *Neston's* new owners were intent on using her for slaving. Thus, she set out for Africa in April 1758, commanded by John Maddock (Figures 3 and 4).¹² Detailed Admiralty records show, amongst other things, that she had a crew of forty men, including a cook, a carpenter and a surgeon, and carried fourteen 'carriage guns' (cannon) for use against enemies.¹³ Her specific destination was not stated. Around this time many Liverpool ships headed for the Bight of Biafra (off Cameroon in West Africa in today's terms)¹⁴ but, wherever exactly it was, records show she loaded 353 Africans – almost certainly a mix of men, women and children who had never been on a large ship before. After weeks in chafing chains, experiencing (as those on slave voyages invariably did) overcrowding, stifling heat, virulent sickness and barbaric treatment they arrived in Barbados in February 1759 where 288 slaves disembarked – apparently 65 had died, an 18% mortality rate.¹⁵ The slaves were destined for a (probably short) lifetime of cruelty and back-breaking work on plantations, most likely producing sugar. Meanwhile the *Neston* returned to Liverpool, presumably loaded with the island's produce, arriving in late May.

22. Griffin, Furrens, Dublin	Elizabeth, Clark, Campea
SHIPS Entered OUTWARDS.	
Hopewell, Barbar, Barbadoes	Nelson, Maddock, Africa
Honeycomb, M'Kivitt, Newry	Exped. Stirling, N. Ebery
Tipping, M'Meaken, Treby	Anne & Mary, Compto, New
Hopewell, Caldwell, New-York	Jenny, Rathbone, Dublin
Douglafs, Tunstall, Isleman	P. Eugene, Kewley, Africa
John and Mary, Price, ditto	Andreas, Ratchbake, Offen
Peace, Otte, Hamburg	Sincerity, Ormandy, Dublin
SHIPS SAILED.	
19. His Majesty's arm'd Vessel	Wallatey, Drap, Belfast
Macclesfield, Capt. Francis,	Draper, Roach, Whitehan

Figure 3: Confirmation of the Neston's forthcoming sailing from Liverpool on her first slaving voyage.
 Manchester Mercury, 28 February 1758

Before the end of that year the Neston was ready to sail again, still under the command and joint ownership of John Maddock.¹⁶ In February 1760 she reached Africa (Anomabu in modern-day Ghana), collecting 255 slaves before heading for Charlestown (Charleston today) in South Carolina. Rice was a commonly grown plantation crop there (and was often brought back to England on the large vessel *Fair American* which regularly sailed into the Dee Estuary, mooring at Parkgate).¹⁷ Just 208 of the slaves she had carried are recorded as being sold in Charlestown – apparently a loss of 47; again, pitifully, 18% – before the *Neston* headed back to Liverpool arriving in December 1760.¹⁸

Within months she was sold again – a pattern of changing ownership was not unusual for ships, especially slavers. This time though, the vessel was renamed, becoming the *York*. The new ownership was short-lived. In early July it was reported that the *York* had been captured 10 days out of Liverpool by a French frigate.¹⁹ Nothing more is known of her; the former *Neston* has vanished from the record books. A summary of her known journeys is given in *Table 1*.

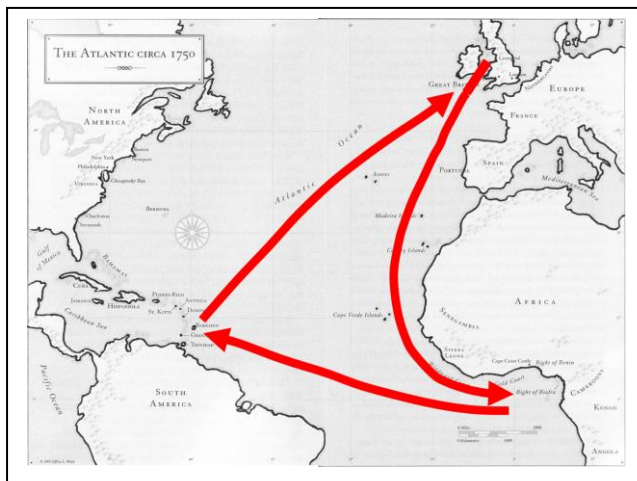


Figure 4: The route of the Neston's first slaving voyage.

The Fate of John Evans

We have seen that John Evans' investment in the *Lintot* had failed, possibly forcing him to sell his share in the *Neston*. He fared no better with the *Charming Betty*. On her first slaving voyage, started in Liverpool in June 1758, she took on 83 slaves in Africa of whom 65 are recorded as disembarking in the Caribbean (18 people (22%) fewer). But the vessel was then captured by a French frigate off the island of Guadeloupe and nothing more is known of her.²⁰ There were many such instances of the capture of English vessels by the French, and vice versa, during the Seven Years War of 1756-1763.

<i>Left Liverpool</i>	<i>African Destination</i>	<i>Slaves Embarked</i>	<i>Non-African Destination(s)</i>	<i>Slaves Disembarked</i>	<i>Slaves Lost</i>	<i>Returned to Liverpool</i>
3/2/1757	N/A	N/A	Cork; Jamaica	N/A	N/A	12/12/1757
7/4/1758	Unknown	353	Barbados	288	65	20/5/1759
Autumn 1759	Gold Coast/ Anomabu	255	Charlestown, Sth. Carolina	208	47	10/12/1760
June 1761 (as York)	(intended) Bonny [Nigeria]	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Captured by the French before reaching Africa

Table 1: A summary of the Neston's voyages. Sources – see text.

With no remaining shares in shipping it seems John Evans' attention turned to the direct opportunities presented by the slave plantations of the West Indies. No records have yet been found to confirm the reason, but we do know he was in Jamaica in late 1761. Thousands of white Englishmen went to Jamaica around this time, many working as merchants and hoping to become slave-owning plantation holders. Potential profits were great, and the society there was 'highly materialistic, secular, competitive, exploitative and violent'.²¹ But with the high rewards came equivalent risks and Jamaica was a dangerous place for white immigrants. Unlike their African slaves they had no innate immunity to tropical diseases; yellow fever was a particular problem in the colony. The white mortality rate in Kingston in the mid-eighteenth century was extremely high, sometimes over 20% per annum (including deaths of some transient whites such as sailors); many settlers died within months of arrival.²² It seems likely, then, that disease accounts for young John Evans' death in Jamaica in December 1761, with his burial in the cemetery of Kingston Parish Church. His wife Mary may well have accompanied him to Jamaica; certainly someone took care to provide a neatly engraved gravestone which ensured that his home-town was remembered to the end: it reads 'Here Lieth the body of Mr John Evans, late of Neston in Cheshire who departed this Life the 5th of December 1761 aged 27 Years' (Figure 5). There is some irony in the fact that his early demise apparently resulted from his continuing quest for wealth when that same quest had resulted in misery and, often, death for many enslaved Africans.

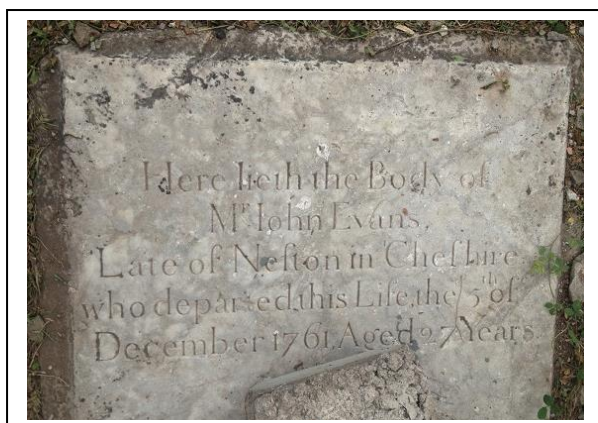


Figure 5: John Evans' gravestone in Kingston, Jamaica.

The vessel *Neston* was to be the only slave ship named after the town. However, the area's involvement with the evil and hazardous 'triangular trade' was not over as other local investors sought moneymaking opportunities, and Parkgate-built ships carried captured Africans – an account set down elsewhere.²³

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- ¹ Personal correspondence with Clare Johnson, to whom I am most grateful, and ‘Will’ in note 2 below.
- ² CALS: Will of John Evans, stated in catalogue as ‘1755’ (but written and dated on 31 March 1734).
- ³ This paragraph: Neston Parish register – baptism of John Evans, 9 May 1734; burial of John Evans senior, 5 April 1740 or 4 April 1744; marriage by banns of John Evans to Mary Gotty, December 1755.
- ⁴ Unless indicated otherwise, all ship registration, ownership and construction details in this article are taken from Liverpool Maritime Museum (LMM), C/EX/L/3/1 – Plantation Register, 1743-1756. *Charming Betty* registered 24 September 1755; *Lintot* registered 8 July 1756; *Neston* registered 4 January 1757.
- ⁵ The quoted figure is ‘Standardised tonnage’ which may vary from that given in other sources (see, for example, *Figure 1*). Absolute and comparative tonnage calculations at this time are not straightforward. Thus, this is an imputed figure taken from the source in note 9 where information on the methodology of tonnage calculations is also given.
- ⁶ *Charming Betty* return and *Lintot* departure – *Williamson’s Liverpool Advertiser* (hereafter *WLA*), 10 September 1756 (mentioning St. Kitts); TNA: ADM 2/1321 Mediterranean Pass for Barbados, 24 September 1755.
- ⁷ *WLA*, 11 February and 16 December 1757.
- ⁸ TNA: HCA 26/9/48, Letters of Marque, 2 March 1758.
- ⁹ Throughout this article, details of slave numbers embarked and disembarked, and associated dates, are taken from the database at [slavevoyages.org](https://slavevoyages.org/voyage/database) (<https://slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>). N.B. the database incorrectly lists the *Neston* as the ‘Nestor’.
- ¹⁰ *Lloyd’s List*, 16 and 20 December 1757.
- ¹¹ Although slave vessels were generally insured, it was often left to individual investors to make arrangements for their own share, with cover levels varying for each leg of the journey. Premiums in wartime – the period covered by this article fell within the Seven Years War – could be double those in peacetime. We cannot say for sure but it is possible that Evans chose not to insure his interest for that leg or omitted to do so, or it may have been underinsured. See David Richardson, ‘Profits in the Liverpool slave trade: the accounts of William Davenport, 1757-1784’ in *Liverpool, the African Slave Trade, and Abolition* ed. by R. Anstey and P.E.H. Hair (Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire, 1989; 60-90), p.71. See also instances of non-insurance in ‘Insuring the Transatlantic Slave Trade’, *The Journal of Economic History*, 79 (2), June 2019 (417-446).
- ¹² *Neston* dates in this paragraph: *WLA*, 7 April 1758 and 25 May 1759.
- ¹³ TNA: HCA 26/9/48.
- ¹⁴ Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, ‘African Agency and the Liverpool Slave Trade’ in *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* ed. by D. Richardson, S. Schwarz and A. Tibbles (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 47.
- ¹⁵ Some caution is expressed in stating the difference in numbers as representing a definite mortality rate. Multiple sources of numbers of slaves embarked and disembarked exist and they were not always consistent or complete. Further, sometimes, a small number of individuals may have been retained on board for bringing to England.
- ¹⁶ LMM: C/EX/L/3/1, 17 September 1759 which records John Maddock and William Ingram as the owners.
- ¹⁷ See Anthony Annakin-Smith, *The Neston Collieries, 1759-1855: An Industrial Revolution in Rural Cheshire* (Chester: University of Chester Press, 2019), 182.
- ¹⁸ *WLA*, 12 December 1760.
- ¹⁹ Registration – LMM: C/EX/L/3/1, 19 February 1761; capture – *Lloyd’s List*, 3 and 16 July 1761.
- ²⁰ *WLA*, 5 January 1759.
- ²¹ Trevor Burnard, ‘European migration to Jamaica’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 53 (4), Oct. 1996 (769-796), pp. 790 & 793.
- ²² Trevor Burnard, ‘“The Countrie Continue Sicklie”: White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655-1780’, *Social History of Medicine*, 12 (1999), (45-72) (pp. 53, 67 & 71).
- ²³ Anthony Annakin-Smith, ‘Neston and Parkgate: their links to the slave trade in the mid to late eighteenth century’, *THSLC* 160 (for 2011), 27-54.

It may be possible for further information to be added to the article once relaxation of lockdown allows access to various additional archival sources.