

# The eccentric from Antigua who dreamt of England

A show of the work of Frank Walter at Harewood House reveals unexpected connections with the grand pile and the artist's ancestors, says **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

**H**arewood House is a splendid Yorkshire mansion. Designed by Robert Adam in the 18th century, it has a lofty pilastered façade, a flamboyant coat of arms carved into its pediment, and expansive views over a rolling Capability Brown park with magnificent beeches, spreading oaks and the tallest grand fir in the county, apparently, which soars like a steeple above the mirroring lake.

The artist whose work is now on show in the gallery of this boastful monument to British social ambition is called Frank Walter. He was born in 1926 on the Caribbean island of Antigua. His ancestors would almost undoubtedly have been slaves. And his apparently simplistic but peculiarly striking little paintings were for the most part created in a tiny wooden shack, perched high on the saddle of a mountain, with nothing but thorny acacias and spiky agaves about.

There was no running water or electricity supply. Walter's shed was not even reachable by car. Yet it was there, with only the croaking tree frogs and darting hummingbirds for company, that he spent the last 25 years of his life (he died in 2009) painting and carving and writing his fantastical journals. In these, over the course of some 25,000 pages, he captured his thoughts on history, philosophy, sociology, genetics, genealogy, nature and atomic science.

You may wonder what could possibly link this Antiguan loner to the aristocratic ostentatiousness of Harewood House. The answer, it turns out surprisingly, is quite a lot. Harewood, created for Edwin Lascelles, an extremely wealthy sugar plantation owner, was built on the back of the proceeds from the very people to whom Walter belonged. And Walter was obsessed by such interconnections.

As a talented and clearly eminently capable youth, he was appointed in 1948 at the age of 22 as the first black manager of an Antiguan plantation. But, perhaps already showing symptoms of the undiagnosed mental illness that would become increasingly manifest as he grew older, he refused further offers of advancement and travelled to Britain instead.

Walter wanted to learn about modern industrial practices. He dreamt of discovering a way to free his



Harewood House near Leeds, seat of the Lascelles family

fellow islanders from poverty. Instead, touring Scotland and the north of England he found himself facing ubiquitous racial prejudice. The only jobs he could get were menial. When he didn't have a hammer, cleaning rag or broom in his hand, he would take refuge in libraries. There, pursuing his myriad courses of thought, he researched his ancestry, discovering what he believed to be

**“**He styled himself the 7th Prince of the West Indies, Lord of Follies

links between himself and the European aristocracy, of which he acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge.

Returning in 1961 to Antigua, Francis Archibald Wentworth Walter found himself to be a misfit. He retreated to his mountainside shack, where, styling himself the 7th Prince of the West Indies, Lord of Follies and the Ding-a-Dong Nook, he painted, sculpted and cogitated, and cooked up a theory that he was in fact a “Europoid” (a dark man of white ancestry).

It was during these last 25 years that he worked most prolifically as an artist, producing hundreds of pieces with whatever materials came to hand: scraps of wood, the backs of photographs, the side of a soap powder box. His work encompassed landscapes, abstracts, bizarre

narratives (a man being eaten by a shark, Hitler enjoying a game of village cricket), self-portraits (in the company of Charles II, Franz Joseph, the Queen), heraldic carvings, hand-painted signs (“beware of cross dog”) and explorations of everything from atomic science to diode valves.

A selection of 63 of these are on show at Harewood. Together they offer a glimpse into a visionary mind. The exhibition, called *Flamboyant Trees*, makes a series of arboreal “portraits” a focus. They have a haunting quality. Eerily still, the trees stand alone and calm. Boughs cut strong architectural silhouettes against the sky. The light filters through translucent smudges of foliage.

There are also several of the huge series that he called his “Tiny Landscape Paintings”. Each measures precisely 10cm x 8cm and often they are framed by the little metal trays that once held Polaroid film. Whether real or imagined, they capture the atmosphere of place: the burn of a sunset; the deep calm of a green hill; the intensity of a hurricane, which like “the hand of God” (as he described it), “punched his house to bits”.

Perhaps Walter might conveniently be labelled an “outsider”. He was certainly an eccentric. Yet his works, possessed of a striking compositional clarity, seem more than merely naive. They arise from what feels like a powerful empathy with nature. A haunting atmosphere of all-pervasive melancholy speaks of some deep awareness of the human predicament. Couple this with their peculiar spiritual aura, with the



From top: **Yellow Shirt (Man in Tree); Flamboyant Trees; Four Trees Amongst Yellow and Blue Blossom.** Right, from top: **Frank Walter in 1992; White Bird; Diving Birds**

**Frank Walter: Flamboyant Trees is at Harewood House, Leeds (0113 218 1010), to October 29**



COURTESY OF THE FRANK WALTER ESTATE AND INGLEBY, EDINBURGH; GETTY IMAGES

# A plantation tale with a twist

A documentary tells the story of an English woman slave owner oddly revered on the island of Nevis, says **Julia Horton**

**I**t is 1634. A young English woman, Philippa, fleeing poverty and plague in Devon, embarks on a perilous voyage to Nevis. Hundreds of years later, in 1985, another woman from England arrives to holiday on the tropical island, by then a newly independent nation (with neighbouring St Kitts) and a popular haunt for the 20th-century jet-set. Walking up a peak called Saddle Hill, the historian June Goodfield meets an old islander, who introduces himself as Roland Archibald. He asks her to accompany him to a place near by. Curious, Goodfield follows him through the thorny undergrowth, until they come to a tomb.

The name on the crumbling headstone is Philippa Prentis Phillips. The date of her death, 1683. “She loved it up here,” says Archibald. “I come up every day to talk to her. When I die I’m going to be buried here too.”

Goodfield was baffled. “Why on earth would this elderly black man living in the 1980s feel so close to a 17th-century white woman — to whom his ancestors were probably enslaved — that he came to ‘speak’ to her daily?” she says. Intrigued, Goodfield began a three-decade journey that she recounted in a book, which has inspired a documentary film by the director Robin Bextor.

*The Time Detective: Who was Philippa?* charts Goodfield’s investigation. What emerged as she pieced together the scant records was not just a rags-to-riches tale, but also a nuanced picture of Britain’s colonial history. While more brutal and autocratic plantation owners went bankrupt, Goodfield speculates that Philippa’s early-life hardships may have led her to adopt a more co-operative and benevolent approach when her fortunes were suddenly transformed — winning her greater success and lasting respect as a slave owner who helped to found Nevis.

Goodfield says: “I know of no other example in Caribbean history where someone coming from the poorest of the poor went to a place as foreign to her as another planet, yet when she died she was such a recognised and loved matriarch that her family went to the expense of buying a marker tablet [headstone] for her. In those days most women were lucky to get a line at the end of their husband’s headstone.

“Then her broken tablet was found nearly 300 years later by someone who not only looked for and found the other piece, but rebuilt it, in one of the few redemptive acts in the bloody business of slavery — it’s astonishing.”



Philippa Prentis’s headstone. Below: Roland Archibald and June Goodfield



As she pored over limited paperwork — French forces burnt all official records in 1706 when they stormed the island — and quizzed islanders, Goodfield learnt that Archibald’s estate on Saddle Hill was known as Prentis Works. When he saw Philippa’s surname on the headstone he would have realised that she must have been from a white family who once owned not just the earth, but the slaves who toiled on it.

“I think he built a memorial in recognition of the life of this woman who probably owned his ancestors as slaves because he recognised that, while they were divided by time, gender, ethnicity and slavery, they had a common humanity. They both loved this land,” says Goodfield.

A trawl through archives in Bristol, where many set sail for the new world, revealed a Philipp (sic) Stephens of “Ashberton”, listed as a “spinster aged



Slaves working, West Indies, 1852

28 or thereabouts”, among passengers on a ship for St Christopher (now St Kitts) on February 20, 1634.

The headstone Archibald restored, which Goodfield discovered was made on Nevis, gave her husband’s name as Clement Prentis, a surname Goodfield found was still listed on the Nevis Slave Register as late as 1817. While others failed, the family were thriving planters for generations.

“From the first moment I set foot on Nevis I sensed a completely different attitude from almost every other Caribbean island I’ve ever been to,” says Goodfield. “Too often history is just about kings and queens. This is an example of the impact of the individual actions of ordinary people who are largely unsung.”

Asked by Goodfield in the film whether Nevis enjoys unexpected historical racial harmony despite past slavery, the island’s premier, Vance Amory, says that the community’s “hallmark” is its lack of “racial divide”.

Since last year Nevis has experienced a rise in tourism thanks to the surprise global sell-out success of *Hamilton*, the hip-hop musical about the life of the American founding father Alexander Hamilton, who was born on the island. The Nevis island administration hopes that Bextor’s film will provide another boost and increase understanding in the Caribbean and the UK, as people learn about the island’s lesser-known founder.

The first public screening in the UK will be this weekend in Ashburton in Devon, and money raised from the events — and sales of the DVD and Goodfield’s book *Rivers of Time* — will help to preserve Philippa’s tombstone on Nevis and a medieval chapel in Ashburton where she may have sought solace. Nick Laity, Ashburton’s portreeve — a historic mayoral role — says: “Philippa left in poverty, but she was such a special person that hundreds of years later the things that she did are still making a big difference.”

**A public screening of *The Time Detective: Who is Philippa?* is at Ashburton Town Hall on Sunday. Tickets are available on the door. The film will be broadcast on television later in the year**