

PRINCE WARIBO: NEW LINKS WITH THE FAMILY OF FRODSHAM'S 'BLACK PRINCE'

Heather Powling

December 2014 brought new links with the descendants of King Jaja of Opobo - the father of Prince Waribo, buried in the graveyard of St Laurence Parish Church. There has long been local interest in the background of the Nigerian Prince who was sent to England to be educated in 1881. A chance phone call to the Vicarage enquiring about a family grave revealed that descendants of King Jaja of Opobo, Prince Waribo's father, are currently working on a book about King Jaja. So Jaja, descended from the house of King Jaja's first wife, Queen Osunju, visited Frodsham and brought with him pictures and information about King Jaja's life, the clans and Chieftain Houses of Opobo, all of which provided a context for what we already knew about Prince Waribo.

Arthur Smith's books 'Discovering Frodsham's Old Schools' and 'Brief Lives' both tell the story of how Prince Waribo was placed into the care of palm oil trader Walter Johnstone and brought to England. We know about the school to which he came, that he died in April 1882 after picking up a respiratory infection, and how local people came out to watch the funeral procession when he died. We know very little about the background from which he came, nor did we know that much of the story had been lost to the Jaja dynasty themselves.



Prince Waribo – picture courtesy of frodshamhistoricimages.co.uk



Prince Waribo's grave in St Laurence graveyard

The inscription on the Prince's grave gives his name as 'WARABO SON OF KING JA JA OF OPOBO AFRICA'. We understand, now, however, that his name should

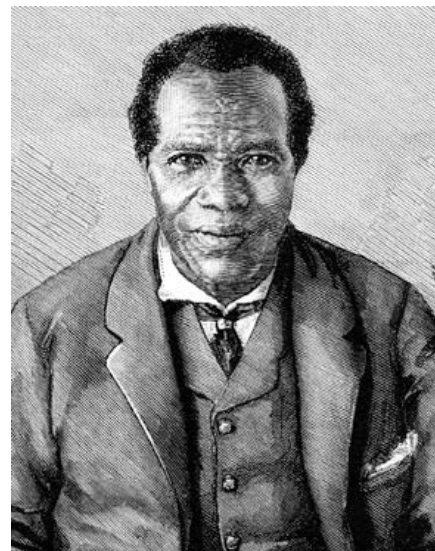
more properly be spelled 'Waribo' meaning 'Guardian of the House'. The spelling on his grave may be a literal transcription of the sound to English speakers of the day.

The story of the prince's presence in a small private school in Frodsham begins with Britain's trading interests in Nigeria. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a trade was built up with coastal communities in the Niger Delta, exchanging manufactured domestic goods and liquor from Britain originally with timber, elephant ivory and slaves from the interior, but later, when slavery was abolished, with palm oil grown by inland communities.

The Chiefs of coastal communities acted as intermediaries between the European traders and the people of the interior. They guarded their rights jealously, and were not allowed to trade outside their agreed 'zones of interest'.



The Niger Delta in the 19th century (Wikipedia)



King Jaja of Opobo in Western dress © Corbis

Jaja, born in 1821, was kidnapped at the age of 12 by slave traders and was taken to the Kingdom of Bonny. He was taken into the Opubo Annie Pepple House (whose Head was an ex-slave, Maduka - or Madu-Annie Pepple). He was trained to work in the trading workhouse, first as a 'pull-away' boy (canoe paddler) and then as a trade learner whose job it was to go up the river with the House trading agents to the fairs in the interior. By the 1850s he was trading on behalf of the House as an agent. He gained a reputation as a successful leader and built up a considerable personal fortune, but his humble origins were a cause for concern. Social mobility had existed in Bonny for some time and amongst the population of the day there were many freed slaves. Europeans were surprised to find that some ex-slaves were Head Chiefs in the region (like Madu). By the 1870s, after a struggle amongst the Pepple House Chiefs of Bonny, Jaja broke away from them and established a new settlement named Opobo. He became King of Opobo in 1873.

As King, Jaja established a number of clan houses, including a Chieftain House for Cookey Gam, his political advisor and for the first of his thirteen wives, Queen Aya Ngobonimiagh Osunju, from whom So Jaja and his family are descended. He had learned English in Bonny. In Opobo he lived in a European style house and employed an American teacher, Emma Johnson (nee White) to teach his young

children. Today, there are 67 Houses, or family compounds in Opobo. Each is a collection of residences of connected family members of the Opobo nobility. From So, we learned that in Opobo, women do not assume chieftaincy roles but Jaja created a Chieftain House for Queen Osunju. This House remains the only one ever established for a woman in Opobo Town. It was an extension of King Jaja's palace throughout the 1870s and 1880s. As late as the 1950s, King Jaja's flag was hoisted in front of Queen Osunju House during annual festivities. The most senior elder of the House is not called a Chief, but carries the following titles - Ama Opu Senibo or Jeki Opu Senibo. So Jaja's father has both titles before his name. Due to illness, he no longer represents the House as the Chairman at the seat of King Jaja Executive Authority in Opobo Town, but he is still the elder - most senior - member of the House and remains a member of the Executive Authority.

King Jaja's children are listed as Prince Saturday and Prince Albert, Prince Eugene, Princess Nai, Prince Waribo and Prince Frederick Sunday. There is some uncertainty about the House from which Waribo's mother (not Queen Osunju) came. So Jaja believes that Prince Waribo's mother lived in the King Jaja House. For various reasons Saturday seems to have shown himself to be quite unsuitable to follow his father as King. It is therefore possible that, in sending Waribo to England, Jaja may have recognised him as the crown prince who would succeed him.

Of all Jaja's children, Waribo is the one about whom very little was known in the oral traditions of Opobo. It is, however, known that Jaja had founded a free school in Opobo in 1874 and Waribo is likely to have received his early education there prior to being sent to school here in Frodsham. Emma Johnson, the African American lady, born in Kentucky who emigrated to Liberia and from there was recruited by King Jaja, was governess to the King's children. She also taught at the school and maintained the King's business and private correspondence, as well as appearing at Queen Osunju's social occasions and becoming one of her trusted aides.

So why Frodsham? One of the trading companies trading palm oil with King Jaja was that of Couper, Johnstone & Co. of Glasgow. Their representative in the early 1880s was Walter Johnstone fifth of seven children of the Revd James Barbour Johnstone, a Free Church minister in the parish of Hobkirk, Scotland. It was to Walter Johnstone that King Jaja entrusted the education of Prince Waribo.

The Johnstone family - the Revd James and his wife Mary seem to have been a family of intrepid travellers. Our Walter Johnstone's grandfather (also Walter) had twice travelled to Prince Edward Island with a view to emigrating, and Walter's brother James Carlyle Johnstone was also a West African Trader. The Revd James, his wife, and their children appear on the 1851 Scottish census living at the Free Church Manse, Wolflee (a small hamlet in the parish of Hobkirk). After the death of his first wife in 1860, the Revd James moved to St John's Presbyterian Church in Warrington and it was in Cheshire that he married his second wife, Janet Stavert, in Altrincham in 1868.

Walter does not appear on a UK census return after 1861 - possibly because he spent much of his time abroad. However, we do know that he married Amelia Cunningham Fairlie. She was born in Langholm in Scotland, but her family also moved to Warrington and were living there in 1871.

We know little of the details of Walter Johnstone's visits to Opobo, but So Jaja has quoted for us an account of a reporter's visit to Opobo in the early 1880s when Mr Walter Johnstone was amongst the party visiting. The reporter accurately describes his location - he was within the confines of King Jaja House (the compound). The reporter and members of his party then proceeded towards a house adjoining Jaja's private residence where they were received in the porch by one of King Jaja's wives, whom we believe may have been Prince Waribo's mother. The report states:

'She is not in good health, and therefore does not join in the festivities, but she anxiously inquires from one of our party who has recently arrived from England and has charge of her son Saturday at school there, how the boy is. The poor woman cries as she thinks she may never see him again.' Note that he names Waribo "Saturday" in error. We know that Saturday was never sent to school in England.

Walter Johnstone and Amelia had five children: Archibald, Mary, Amelia, James and Annie. Whilst her husband was abroad, Amelia lived at Bothwell, Lanarkshire, and on the 1881 census is described as the wife of a West African merchant. Walter Johnstone died in 1884 (just two years after the young prince he had brought to Frodsham). After his death, Amelia and her children moved to Glasgow and then in 1904 we find them travelling by ship to Bulawayo in Natal, though the ship's log does not give us any clue about why they were on their way to South Africa.

Contemporary with the Revd James Johnstone in his ministry in Scotland was the Revd Robert Pringle Borwick, born in Orkney, but, by the 1860s, living in the parish of Glencairn in Dumfriesshire. Then, by 1881 the Revd Borwick had moved to Cheshire and become Boarding School Proprietor of Manor House School, Frodsham, run with the help of his daughter, Euphemia C Borwick and his nieces Agnes B and Isabella Melross (Mrs Borwick was a Melross).

This connection meant that Walter Johnstone brought Prince Waribo to an English school known and recommended by his father, and so he came to Frodsham.

When Waribo died, his younger brother, Prince Frederick Sunday was sent to Scotland to be educated and it was he who was eventually to become ruler of Opobo.

As for King Jaja, during the 1880s he regulated trade and raised duties in his area but this brought him into conflict with the British, who were beginning to extend their own control over the area. He sent a deputation to London in September 1887, which included his son, Prince Frederick Sunday (now heir, after the death of Prince Waribo) and his trusted adviser, Cookey Gam in an attempt to resolve the crisis in Opobo, but without success. Backed by the presence of a British gunboat, HMS Goshawk, the British representative Henry Johnston issued Jaja with an ultimatum: he must either surrender or be pursued and his kingdom attacked. Preferring to maintain his kingdom intact, Jaja was escorted to the gunboat to be taken for trial. There were many, including Alexander Miller of Miller Brothers with extensive trading rights in the Niger Delta, who felt that the trial was unfair. Johnston had pursued a personal vendetta with Jaja. Nevertheless, Jaja, accompanied by Prince Frederick Sunday and three attendants, was deported to the island of Grenada and then on to

St Vincent in the West Indies in 1888. Prince Frederick Sunday subsequently returned to continue his education in the UK. Jaja's health deteriorated and in early 1891, and he was allowed to return home on condition that he would be loyal to Her Majesty and her representatives in Opobo. In March 1891, he moved to Barbados and from there was to continue to Opobo. Sadly, he died before he could reach Opobo. He was initially buried in Tenerife, but later exhumed and re-patriated to Opobo. Jaja had not been able to halt British ambitions in Nigeria and after his removal the way was set for the development of British colonialism in the area.

Chance enquiries often lead to some of the most interesting avenues of historical research. The story of Prince Waribo's grave has proved no exception and we look forward to ongoing contact with his family.



So Jaja pictured during his visit to St Laurence Church in December 2014

References:

1. Arthur R Smith 1994 *Discovering Frodsham's Old Schools - an Illustrated History*:
2. Arthur R Smith 2012 *Brief Lives*
3. *Map sources: www.wikipedia.org*
4. *Information on the family of Walter Johnstone from census and other records www.Ancestry.co.uk*
5. *Information on King Jaja and the royal household of Opobo from personal communications with So Jaja during 2015.*

The editors would like to thank So and his family for sharing with us so much of the history of Opobo and the background from which Prince Waribo came.
