

# DIDO ELIZABETH BELLE

## A BLACK GIRL AT KENWOOD

An account of a protégée of the 1st Lord Mansfield  
by Gene Adams

It is fascinating but little known that during the later eighteenth century Kenwood was the home, for perhaps the first 30 years of her life, of a young black girl called Dido Elizabeth Belle (or Lindsay), born c 1763. She was a member of the family and household of William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield (1705–93) and Lord Chief Justice of the King’s Bench. According to family tradition a painting attributed to Zoffany, now at Scone Palace the Scottish seat of the Earls of Mansfield, shows Dido with her half-cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (c 1763–1823) walking in the grounds of Kenwood. Dido was a “mulatto” and the natural daughter of Sir John Lindsay (1737–88), a captain in the Royal Navy and later Rear Admiral of the Red. Lady Elizabeth’s father was David, 7th Viscount Stormont; both he and Sir John Lindsay were nephews of Lord Mansfield. Dido was known as Elizabeth to her father to judge from the mention of her in his will; at Kenwood she may have been called Dido after the famous African queen. There is no information on the origin of Belle; perhaps this was the name her mother was known by.

From the painting of the two girls, and from glimpses provided by contemporary letters and diaries, we can build an idea of Kenwood as a country home some distance from Town along rough roads with a small working farm surrounded by hayfields, and of the family that lived there and of the friends who visited Lord Mansfield’s “sweet box at Caen Wood”, to quote the description by Ignatius Sancho, one of several liberated slaves who made names for themselves in 18th century London. Lousia, Lady Stormont, a visiting niece, wrote a letter from “Ken Wood, which Lord S. says is the right way of spelling it” in the spring of 1776, in which she remarked:

... You did not see enough of Lord Mansfield to know how diverting he is, he says with the gravest face, the most comical things imaginable. ... This place is delightful, I never saw anything I liked more ... I am sitting in a very pleasant room, which is the one I have always been in ... There is something in the noise of the wind and the quietness, and altogether not being used to being the country in England, I cannot persuade myself I am not in Scotland ...

The public image of Lord Mansfield is of a brilliant judge and a man of impeccable integrity. He was famous for his silver-tongued oratory, speaking with perhaps just a trace or intonation of his Scottish ancestry. In appearance he was stated to be short of stature, with bright dark eyes and a ruddy complexion. But seen through the eyes of Louisa Stormont at least he begins to assume the character of a favourite uncle, and this pleasant side of his personality must have been much to the fore while he relaxed at Kenwood. From 1755 onwards he and Lady Mansfield would be there during summer holidays, and between strenuous law terms spent travelling or in their Bloomsbury Square house in London while he attended Parliament or the Law Chambers. It was particularly appropriate that the kind and untimidating private personality of Lord Mansfield should be seen at Kenwood, because it was there from about 1763 till the end of his life in 1793 that he enjoyed the company of his two great-nieces who were brought up from infancy by their great-uncle and aunt. They had no children of their own and the presence in their country household of the two little girls must, one imagines, have been more a source of consolation and pleasure than an added responsibility to the Mansfields.

Lady Elizabeth’s mother had died tragically early leaving the father with an infant to care for, a serious problem in view of his position as Ambassador in Austria and Paris. He must have been intensely grateful for the help given by the head of his family at Kenwood. Presumably the offer to care for Dido as well as Elizabeth was partly to provide her cousin with a playmate and later a kind of personal attendant, and also of course to better the circumstances of Dido herself. It is not known if Dido was willingly parted from her mother, but materially speaking it would certainly have helped both mother and child.

### Dido at home

One of the fullest descriptions of a visit to Kenwood at a time when the two girls were almost grown up comes from the Diary of Thomas Hutchinson (1711–80),

an American loyalist living in London. He writes:

### August 29th 1779

... Dined at Lord Mansfield’s in Caen Wood; only Lord Rob. Manners besides the family. My Lord, at 74 or 5, has all the vivacity of 50 ... He gave me a particular acct. of his releasing two Blacks from slavery, since his being Chief Justice ...

Lady Mansfield must be about 80 ... has the powers of her mind still firm, without marks of decay; her dress perfectly simple and becoming her age — is said to be benevolent and charitable to the poor. Lady Say, of the same age I saw at court with her head as high dressed as the young Duchesses etc. What a caricature she looked like! How pleasing, because natural, Lady Mansfield’s appearance.

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. She had a very high cap and her wool was much frizzled in her neck, but not enough to answer the large curls now in fashion. She is neither handsome nor genteel — pert enough. I knew her history before, but My Lord mentioned it again. Sir 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., and has been educated by his family. He calls her Dido, which I suppose is all the name she has. He knows he has been reproached for showing fondness for her — I dare say not criminal.

A few years ago there was a cause before his Lordship bro’t by a Black for recovery of his liberty. A Jamaica planter being asked what judgement his Lordship would give? “No doubt” he answered “He will be set free, for Lord Mansfield keeps a Black in his house which governs him and the whole family.”

She is a sort of Superintendent over the dairy, poultry yard, etc, which we visited. And she was called upon by my Lord every minute for this thing and that, and shewed the greatest attention to everything he said.

It is remarkable how much more attention Hutchinson gives to Dido than to anyone else, indicating a scarcely suppressed hostility. He presents a lively visual picture of her in the context of the elegant company at Kenwood but in common probably with many of his contemporaries he seems to have been racially prejudiced. I would suspect from his description that Lord Mansfield was aware on that occasion of his young ward’s probable feelings; hence the demonstration of family affection “calling upon her every minute” for “this thing or that” . Hutchinson’s



*Lady Elizabeth Murray and Dido; painting attributed to Zoffany, at Scone Palace, Perth.*

comment “I dare say not criminal” on Lord Mansfield’s fondness for Dido sounds very displeasing to modern ears. When he saw Dido she must have been almost grown up, perhaps fifteen; she can have been only seven or eight years Old in 1772 at the time of Lord Mansfield’s famous judgement in the case of James Somersett the runaway slave hardly in a position to govern Lord Mansfield and the whole family or certainly not in the chauvinist way suggested. Hutchinson made quite clear that he could not or did not accept the position adopted in the celebrated Somersett case (1772) and concluded: “I wished . . . to have discovered, if I am capable of it, the nice distinctions he must have had in his mind . . . but I imagined such an altercation would be rather disliked and forbore . . .”

Lord Mansfield’s involvement in the abolition of slavery was complex and easily misunderstood both by those for and those against the campaign. With his

great knowledge of commercial law he understood better than most the upheaval that would be caused by dismantling the ugly system upon which the property of so many people was based, indeed upon which the prosperity of whole cities such as Bristol and Liverpool was built. Nevertheless in the end the interests of humanity had to take precedence over that of property because English law itself demanded it. He expressed himself forcibly: “The state of slavery . . . is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it, but positive law. Whatever inconvenience, therefore, may follow this decision I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and, therefore, the black must be discharged.”

#### **Dido and Elizabeth**

To return to that summer evening in August 1779 at Kenwood, it is interesting that Dido came and sat with the ladies after dinner. At that time in fashionable

country houses breakfast would have been at 9.30 am, dinner normally at 4 pm and supper at 10 pm. So at perhaps 5 or 6 pm Dido would have joined the ladies, no doubt nervously hoping her fashionable cap would gain their approval. It is not known in which rooms they may have dined and had coffee before going in the early summer evening for a long walk round the grounds, inspecting perhaps the lake, the “sham bridge” and then Dido’s dairy and poultry yard in the adjoining farm buildings. In any case, it is evident that Dido did not dine with the company. Doubtless she occupied the uneasy social position of one who was neither servant nor gentry and as such perhaps she dined alone. This may seem a melancholy situation for a fifteen-year-old girl to our eyes but at that time it would have been normal enough.

Dido’s position was of course vastly superior to that of many young negro slaves



*The 1st Earl of Mansfield aged 80; engraving by Bartolozzi after Reynolds (1785).*

or “body servants” who were regarded and treated as exotic playthings or status symbols by their aristocratic or rich owners. Sometimes these children were outrageously spoilt as infants and then, as awkward adolescents, were liable to instant dismissal or even cruel “repatriation” to the West Indies where most of them had never been. Owners tiring of their novelty would often advertise these children for sale in local papers and, if a local sale appeared unprofitable, they were sure to make at least some money by selling them to slave captains who would ship them to the West Indies.

The painting of the two girls, perhaps fifteen or older, shows them walking arm in arm, as Hutchinson reported Dido and Elizabeth had done, ostensibly in the grounds of Kenwood. Behind them is a grove of trees on a hill, behind that on the left is the sham bridge and beyond that is the rather prominent distant dome of St Paul’s Cathedral which could

once be seen from the house. It has the feeling of a stage setting rather than an observed landscape. An indication of a typical eighteenth century upper-class attitude to black slave children is found in the exotic silver satin attire of Dido with its charming but incorrect Indian turban trimmed with an ostrich feather. It is an early example of the taste for what we would call ethnic fashion. It also represents the stereotype of what a young slave “should” wear rather than what she actually did wear; her headgear in 1779 at least was described by Hutchinson as “a very tall cap”. One imagines that he would certainly have waxed vindictive had “the Black” appeared in the drawing room wearing satin, pearls, a turban and ostrich feathers! So Dido probably rarely wore such clothes, and if she did it would be only on a grand occasion. Lady Elizabeth wears the normal hooped day dress, with the pink open-fronted gown with a white gauze apron of a young woman of the period 1750–60, rather

earlier than the supposed date of the late 1770s when the girls were about fifteen. It also seems earlier than the style of that worn by Dido. Lady Elizabeth wears a wreath of rosebuds in her hair which perhaps, like Dido’s turban, may indicate some festive occasion.

As we have seen, Dido was not only held in very real affection in the family but there is also evidence of her material well-being in an Account Book dated 1st January 1785 to 2nd April 1793 which is still at Kenwood. It was kept by Lady Anne Murray, one of the two older nieces of Lord Mansfield, who came to live at Kenwood some years before, perhaps when it became apparent that Lady Mansfield’s health was failing (Lady Mansfield died in 1784). The account book recorded domestic and farm expenditure during the last eight years of Lord Mansfield’s life. It lists a great variety of expenditure large and small, from servants’ wages to the costs of “letters and turnpike”, from numerous charitable gifts to the food, drink and fuel needed to run a large household.

In the Account Book there are regular entries about Dido. We learn that from about 1785, when Dido was about eighteen or twenty, she received a quarterly allowance of £5, and from 1789 this was augmented by birthday (June 29th) and Christmas presents of five guineas, making a total yearly allowance of £30 10s. By way of comparison, the First Coachman received £15 9s. per annum and a kitchen maid £8 per annum. All three of course also received full board. In contrast there is an entry recording “Miss Elizabeth’s ½ yearly allowance” of £50 on October 16th 1785, indicating that, though of the same age and brought up as a close companion of Dido, she was of superior status and received £100 per annum as well as, perhaps, birthday and other gifts though there is no record of these.

Lady Elizabeth Murray left Kenwood in 1785 to marry her cousin George Finch Hatton, later an MP. An entry in the account book records Lady Anne’s customary but not exactly extravagant tip to the servants of £1 is.; enough one imagines to buy a generous quantity of beer or ale with which to toast the happy couple, but not so much as to interfere with the duties of the house. Both girls were on the threshold of their early twenties when this event took place. One can imagine how much Dido must have missed her young companion — perhaps her only young companion — and the next ten years at Kenwood may not have been as carefree as the previous ten. Lady

Elizabeth's marriage was happy, she had five children and there are a number of comments about her in letters (three at Kenwood) indicating that she was a charming and well-liked girl.

### Twenty and after

Lady Elizabeth's departure in 1785 signalled the end of the first twenty years of Dido's life at Kenwood, which included what seems to have been a happy childhood. Shortly before that in 1784 Lady Mansfield had died at an advanced age, leaving Lord Mansfield at about 79 shocked and bereft; indeed some said he never fully recovered. In 1788 he reluctantly resigned his position as Lord Chief Justice and retired permanently to Kenwood. During these sad years some stability for Dido must have come from the presence of the two older ladies, Lady Anne and Lady Margery Murray. From Anne's account book we learn that in 1792 Dido's bed was washed and glazed for 12 shillings. This entry must indicate that Dido's bed was hung with glazed chintz. To have this cleaned one had to employ a "calender" who would scour and wash the bedding and curtains, starch the material with a special solution and finally replace the glaze on it by treatment on a machine with heated metal rollers (a calender). This sounds an unwieldy procedure to us as it would obviously necessitate the complete unpicking and subsequent restitching of the curtains and drapes, but labour being cheap this is apparently what did actually happen. There is evidence that Dido's health was cared for in 1789 when she had two teeth extracted at 5s. each, and in 1791 when she was given asses milk, a recognised tonic at the time, which cost the large sum of £3 4s. 2d. and indicates real concern on the part of those who gave it to her. In addition to her bed with glazed chintz hangings, she had a table that was purchased for £1 4s. 2d. in April 1791, and there is also an earlier reference to "making a mahogany table for Dido" in Edward Lonsdale's bill of 1770.

Dido's father, Sir John Lindsay, died in 1788. We do not know what kind of relationship they had apart from the fact that he privately acknowledged her existence. He made the following bequest in his will:

I further give and bequeath unto my dearest wife Mary Lindsay, One Thousand Pounds in trust to be disposed by her for the benefit of John and Elizabeth my reputed son and daughter in such a manner as she thinks proper . . .

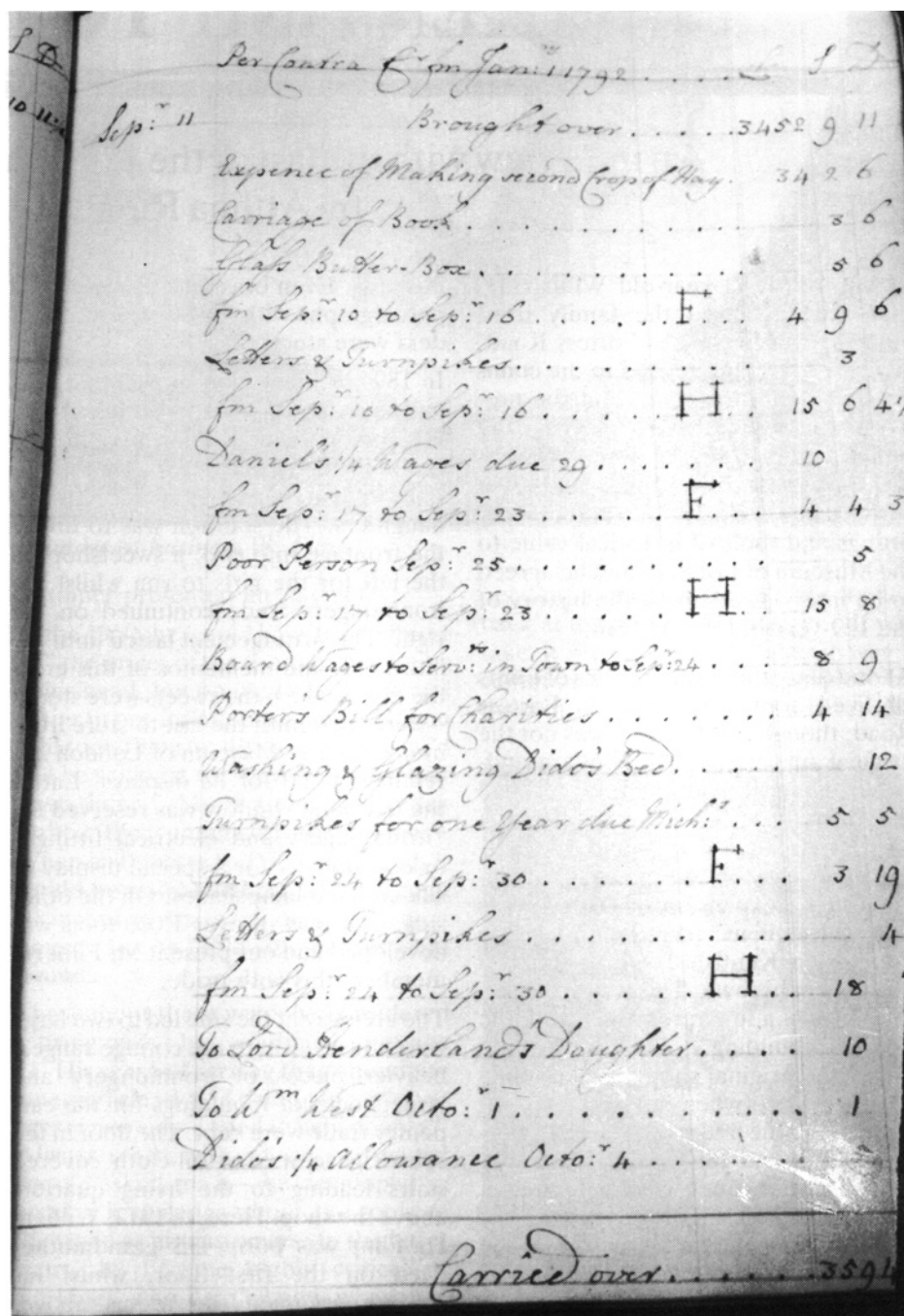
This is the only information that we have on John; we do not know whether he was Dido's brother or half-brother. In one of the obituaries for Sir John Lindsay, Dido is described as "of amiable disposition

and her accomplishments have gained her the highest respect from all his Lordship's relations and visitants". This is a long way from Hutchinson's "pert", "not handsome nor genteel", but by 1788 Dido was about twenty-five, grown up and mature. She had suffered two losses in her family as well as the departure of her companion and friend Lady Elizabeth, and she must also have been aware that she was soon to lose her greatest protector, Lord Mansfield himself.

On 20th March 1793 the old Judge died peacefully at home in Kenwood. Lady Anne Murray permitted herself a tiny show of emotion in her ledger; she records that the maids who had looked after "dear" Lord Mansfield in his last

illness were given a special payment of £10. All the servants were provided with mourning costing £150 19s., and the bell was tolled at Highgate, which cost five shillings. Lord Mansfield was buried in Westminster Abbey on 28th March.

In 1793 Lady Anne Murray ended her Account Book. Subsequent housekeeping books at Kenwood are not so detailed nor so diverse. All mention of Dido and her special presents "by Ld M's order" vanish. But from Lady Margery Murray's will of 1793 and its codicil in 1796, and from Stormont's bank account between 1793 and 1795, it appears that in 1794 she changed her name from Belle to Davinier; the receipt for her annuity on 21 March 1797 is signed Dido Elizabeth Davinier



A page from Lady Anne Murray's Account Book.

so presumably she married a man of that name in 1794 and left Kenwood for a home of her own.

We do not know what happened to her thereafter. She inherited substantial sums from her great-uncle Lord Mansfield (£500 plus £100 per annum for life), from her father (£1,000 shared with John), and from Lady Margery Murray (£100). In Lord Mansfield's will written in 1783 he had confirmed Dido's freedom, making doubly certain that once his personal protection was ended she should not be at the mercy of strangers or unscrupulous people. The fact that her freedom was "confirmed" indicates that he had already bestowed it upon her sometime earlier in

life. We can only hope that her married life was not coloured by the tragedy that beset her classical African namesake, Dido, Queen of Carthage.

Main sources

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