



The Arthur Wharton Story

We have not included images in this text for easy and economical printing. Copies of our full-colour booklet can be obtained along with our physical exhibition package or seperately via: www.arthurwharton.info

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Arthur Wharton: 1865 to 1930

The World's First Black Professional Footballer

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Who was Arthur Wharton?

Arthur Wharton was a remarkable 19th century sportsman who lived in Victorian Britain. Not only does he hold the title of the first black professional footballer in the world, he was also a world record holding sprinter, a professional cricketer and an outstanding athlete.

Arthur played football for the most prestigious team of his day in the North of England, Preston North End. His other teams included: Sheffield United, Stockport County, Darlington and Rotherham Town.

After retiring from playing, Arthur, an immigrant from Africa's Gold Coast, spent 20 years working as a Yorkshire coal miner until his death in 1930 at the age of 65. Arthur was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in the village of Edlington, near Doncaster, South Yorkshire. A local paper at the time reported his funeral was 'well attended' by people from the sporting world but sadly Arthur's achievements were largely forgotten by the history books - that is, until the 1980s, when history lecturer, Ray Jenkins, started researching his story.

This was to be the beginning of an Arthur Wharton revival. In the last few decades, historians, sports organisations and passionate individuals have been working hard to ensure that Arthur's accomplishments continue to be recognised, and that his pioneering story is used to inspire future generations and provide a clearer picture of the sporting and multicultural heritage of Britain.

This booklet and other resources aimed at schools and community groups available through www.arthurwharton.info aim to support this work.



Arthur the Multicultural Pioneer

Arthur's life is both inspiring, in terms of his sporting achievements, and tragic, in its 'riches to rags' ending. What these events tell us, is how much our sporting world and Britain itself has changed because of pioneers such as Arthur. Sadly, they also show us the roots of what we still see the effects of in today's society - racism and prejudice in sport and class and status divides.

Sports and social class

Arthur experienced life in the North of England through a working class perspective as the Industrial Revolution intensified. Manning factories and mines meant a large majority of people were poor and worked long hours in bad conditions for little pay.

The wealthy minority, who reaped the most benefits from the mechanical and technological advancements that came as a result, were also those who were in a position to call the shots in the sporting world. The rise in leisure time and attendance of spectator sports in the last years of the 19th Century meant more of the working class were becoming sportsmen and needed to earn a wage at the same time. But unlike today, there was little money to be made and it was not as regulated as it is today.

Defying racist myths

Arthur was a pioneer. Not only was he an exceptional athlete, achieving so much as a sportsman within the difficult circumstances of Victorian working class life, he was doing this as a black man in a prejudiced society.

Victorians commonly believed in 'Scientific racism': the idea that the physical characteristics in Africans marked them as an inferior race in terms of their standing, intellect and capabilities.

Arthur did not fit this stereotype. In contrast, he was well educated, well-mannered, moral, religious, intelligent, strong-willed and proud- not the subordinate, savage many expected a black man to be.

Arthur was frequently described in newspapers during his career by the colour of his skin. He was most commonly known as 'Darkie Wharton', but other descriptions in the press included 'Othello', 'The dusky flyer', and 'A brunette of pronounced complexion'. Sometimes comments about Arthur's performance were accompanied by overtly racist slurs.



Achieving against the odds

It was through his achievements as a sportsman in the public eye that Arthur was a key figure in overturning the accepted Victorian idea that there was a hierarchy of different 'races' based upon our biological evolution. This combination of racism, and the lack of power that the working class had at that time to write their own 'histories', is perhaps why Arthur was forgotten for over 50 years.

Sadly the corrosive roots of these ideas about race still echo in British society today, and understanding Arthur's story can help to wipe out some of the myths that still prevail. For example, some Britons believe the myth that "Black immigrants came to Britain after World War II" and that "Immigrants take from Britain and don't give back". On the contrary, Arthur was not only a black immigrant living in Victorian Britain, he also made an outstanding contribution to both Britain's sporting heritage and its economy through his hard graft as a Yorkshire coal miner.

Furthermore, Arthur shows us that there was a black presence at the very beginnings of professional football in the world, (the oldest football club in the world being Sheffield FC). This longevity of black players' involvement in football is crucial in helping us understand the wider contribution people of colour have made to the building of modern Britain.

Why was Arthur forgotten?

Phil Vasili, who wrote Arthur's Biography, believes Arthur was not fully represented in sporting history because of several factors - his ethnicity and the fact he was a threat to exposing the falsehood of the racial stereotyping that marked Africans as an inferior race, and also because of the lack of power that the working classes (of which Arthur became when he came to Britain), had in 'writing their own histories'.

"Wharton's deeds have an overwhelming symbolic dimension to them. Here was an African, at the time of Africa's forced colonisation by the capitalist nations of Europe, beating these 'superior races' at their own sports on their home turf. That Wharton's accomplishments were quickly forgotten is sad testament to the degenerative effect of racism in relation to history. By concentrating on the colour, culture and ethnicity of an athlete, instead of their unmediated achievement, so much is missed".

(Vasili, May 2013)



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Early years

Arthur was born in 1865 in the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana in West Africa. He grew up in Accra, the capital and lived there until he left for England to study at the age of nine. Arthur's parents had ten children but only three survived to adulthood. His father, Henry, died in 1873 when Arthur was only seven.

Arthur went to school in London and stayed four years before returning to the Gold Coast. Three years later at the age of 17, Arthur came back to England with three cousins to study at Shoal Hill Methodist College in Cannock, Staffordshire. As he had lost his father, Arthur's uncle, F.C Grant, who owned the 'Gold Coast Times' newspaper, paid for he and his cousins to attend.

The expectation for Arthur was that he would become a teacher or missionary like his father. He studied religious theology for three years but also during this time, honed his skills in sprinting, cycling, football, cricket and rugby. It's likely Arthur first played some of these sports as a child in the Gold Coast, especially cricket, where it had been taken by the British colonists.

In 1885, Arthur moved to Cleveland College in County Durham and took up a range of athletics. He was known to dip in and out of rugby and cycling during his athletics career but it was sprinting, cricket and football where Arthur would make his mark.

Multiple heritage

Arthur was of multiple heritage and his family background says much about the relationships between Europe, Africa and the Caribbean at the time. The Gold Coast was part of the British Empire from 1874 to 1957; so many British people lived there, mostly in positions of power. Though the prevailing Victorian views of the time believed Africans were inferior to whites, the methodology of colonialism depended upon alliances with 'native' people to help administer colonial rule. In West Africa skin-colour was key to your status.

Arthur's father, Henry Wharton, was born in Grenada in the Caribbean. His own father was a Scottish merchant and sea captain and his mother was the daughter of a Grenadian slave woman. Henry went to the Gold Coast as a Methodist minister and missionary. Arthur's mother, Annie Florence Grant, was also of mixed race and her father, John C. Grant, was a Scottish trader. Annie's mother, Ama-Egyiriba, was part of the Fante Royal Family. The Fante people were the dominant ethnic group in the coastal part of the Gold Coast, so Arthur came from a wealthy, aristocratic family.



Arthur the Sprinter

In 1886, while still at Cleveland College, Arthur set the world record for the 100 yard sprint at the Amateur Athletic Association's Championship (AAA) at Stamford Bridge, London. He ran it in an incredible ten seconds flat - 'even time'.

The following year he defended his title and came first yet again. Many papers commented on Arthur's unusual running style. He was said to run bent forward on the flat of his foot.

"He has neither system nor style, but he runs like an express engine with full steam on from first to last with a result that makes both system and style unnecessary".

(Darlington & Stockton Times, 5/6/1886)

In 1888, he moved to Sheffield to become a 'pedestrian', that is, a professional runner. At the time, Sheffield was a renowned centre for pedestrianism (which also referred to race-walking). In those days, the best athletes had to run with a 'handicap', meaning their slower opponents were given a head start.

Gambling on races was common among spectators with huge amounts being wagered. Arthur's achievements included winning the Sheffield Handicap - one of the top national pedestrian events of the year - at the Queen's Ground, Hillsborough, in September 1888, in front of around 4,000 spectators. At the time, the Sheffield Daily Telegraph, described him as "travelling like a racehorse".

Arthur retired from professional running in 1890 to concentrate on his football career.

Athletics known dates

1885-86	Darlington C&FC
1886	Birchfield Harriers
1886-87	100 Yard World Record
1887	Cleveland College
1888	Professional - Sheffield



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Arthur the Footballer

Strangely perhaps for a world record holding sprinter, Arthur's best position in football was as a goalkeeper.

Arthur started playing football for local teams when he was still at college. In 1885 he went on to play regularly as an amateur for Darlington Football Club. For the next two years he was selected for several district and county representative teams in the North, while, at the same time, excelling as a sprinter.

Notably, in 1887 he signed for Preston North End as an amateur who could play in their FA Cup matches. Preston were then one of England's top teams, known as the 'Invincibles', and one of Wharton's finest footballing achievements was helping them reach the 1887 FA Cup semi-final. He continued to play for Darlington, helping them win the Cleveland Cup in 1887.

The Football League, which marked the beginning of professional football, began in 1888 with 12 teams. It was then that Arthur became the first black professional footballer when he joined Rotherham Town in 1889 in the Midland League.

During his time with Rotherham Town he helped them win the Midland League in 1892 and 1893, and then to win election to the second division of the Football League for the 1893-4 season.

In 1894, Arthur signed for Sheffield United. The following year he became the first black professional footballer to play in the First Division when he made his debut in their 2-0 defeat away to Sunderland. Arthur made three first team appearances for Sheffield United, but was unable to dislodge the giant William 'Fatty' Foulke from his position as goalkeeper.

Arthur returned to Rotherham Town in 1895 then joined Stalybridge Rovers in the Lancashire League in 1896 as a player and coach, making him the first black manager. He moved to nearby Ashton North End in 1898 and back to Stalybridge when Ashton went bankrupt in 1899. He returned to the Football League with Stockport County in 1901 at the age of 36 before retiring from professional football in 1902.



Arthur's on the pitch antics

Strangely Arthur was known for his camaraderie and unusual antics on the pitch and there are several references to them in the local and national newspapers of the time.

Opinions were mixed; some said he was unreliable, fickle and behaved like a showman. The Athletic News, for example, described him as “the coolest customer that has ever stood between the goal posts”, (13/9/1887), but not as a compliment, rather to point out that Arthur seemed too casual and arrogant in his approach.

As many Victorians believed in the notion of Scientific Racism, (that the physical makeup of Africans marked them as an inferior race in terms of their standing, intellect and capabilities), Arthur was also ‘put in his place’ in the newspapers of the time through racial slurs. The most famous one:

‘Is the darkie's pate too thick for it to dawn upon him that between the posts is no place for a skylark? By some it's called coolness – bosh!’

(Football News and Athletic Journal, 29 October 1887)

Indeed crowds and critics alike did think Arthur was ‘cool’ in a positive way and many reporters were impressed by Arthur’s skills and thought he should play for England. There were rave reviews of some of his goalkeeping displays:

“In a match between Rotherham and Sheffield Wednesday at Olive Grove, I saw Wharton jump, take hold of the crossbar, catch the ball between his legs and cause three onrushing forwards to fall into the net. I have never seen a similar save since and I have been watching football for over fifty years”

(Sheffield Telegraph & Independent, 12/1/1942)

At that time, goalkeepers could handle the ball anywhere in their own half of the pitch, and could be charged down even if they didn't have the ball, making it a dangerous position. Arthur was known for punching the ball a long way and for crouching in the corner of the goal – both habits may have been to protect himself from opponents, they certainly impressed some:



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Football c.1882-1902

1882 - 84	Cannock FC Cannock Whitecross FC
1885 - 86	Cleveland College Darlington Darlington Cricket & FC Newcastle & District Northumberland & Durham Durham Cleveland
1886 - 88	Preston North End
1888	Darlington
1889 - 94	Rotherham Town (professional)
1894 - 85	Sheffield United
1896 - 94	Rotherham Town/Stalybridge Rovers Rest of Lancashire League
1897	Ashton Northend
1898	Stalybridge Rovers
1900	Leaves Stalybridge Rovers
1901	Stockport County
1902	Last FL appearance v Newton Heath Retires from professional football



Arthur the Cricketer

The longest record of Arthur's sporting activity is in cricket which he played for at least 34 years.

In those days, it was not unusual for footballers to play cricket in the summer season, and some clubs ran both football and cricket teams - including Darlington Cricket and Football Club, which Arthur joined at the beginning of his sporting career in 1885.

Arthur first played cricket professionally for Greasbrough in 1889 at the age of 23 while with Rotherham Town Football Club. He played on and off for 6 years and also played for other local teams including Rawmarsh and Rotherham Borough Police. While playing football for Stalybridge, he played cricket professionally for them during the 1896 season.

After retiring from football in 1902, Arthur continued playing cricket for Rotherham Town in 1907 at the age of 40. Here, Arthur is recorded to have delivered one of his greatest games against Denaby, when he scored 86 not out. The Rotherham Advertiser, (10/8/1907), said:

"...the 'coloured gentleman'...played a wonderful innings of forceful cricket... he put on 16 runs in one over, and he hit two successive balls out of the ground, for six each...I never thought Arthur could hit so hard, and play such sound and merry cricket".

In 1914, he was offered a job as a cricket coach in County Durham, but he sadly declined it as it didn't pay a living wage and no other work was available. Even when he became a miner, he continued to play for his local mining teams, Denaby Main and Yorkshire Main Colliery until at least 1916.

Cricket c.1882-1916

1882 - 84	Cannock Town CC
1885	Darlington C&FC
1885 - 95	Greasbrough CC
1892	Rawmarsh CC
1893 - 94	Rotherham Borough Police CC
1895	Rawmarsh CC
1896	Stalybridge CC
1897	Ashton CC
1907	Rotherham Town CC
Various	Colliery teams



Perceptions of Arthur: What the papers said

Pioneers like Arthur allow perceptions to change and there is evidence of both prejudice and tolerance in the way people saw Arthur.

Generally, the more negative and racist descriptions of him were given by national or regional newspapers who had the more politicised agenda of upholding Victorian ideas about race that justified the British ruling classes' thief of Africa.

Locally, and by people who knew him personally, Arthur was acclaimed as a talented celebrity and man of character who bought a certain amount of recognition to the community. At a cricket club dinner in 1886, a toast to him was proposed, and a song, 'Wharton, of Darlington', composed by his trainer, Emmanuel Harbron, was sung and 'nearly raised the rafters'. (Darlington & Stockton Times, 25/12/1886). Arthur is also known to have sung at post-match concerts.

The Ashton Herald, 15/2/1896 described him as:

"... a modest and unassuming man, a genial companion, and a friend whom any person might feel proud to number amongst his acquaintances".

This is a far cry from the image of Arthur as a cocky, showman as some reporters made out. The most famous being:

"Is the darkie's pate too thick for it to dawn upon him that between the posts is no place for a skylark? By some it's called coolness - bosh!" (Football News and Athletic Journal, 29 October 1887).

An interview in the Athletic Journal, 'Men I have met', 26 June, 1888, also echoes a different reflection of Arthur on a personal level:

"Arthur is a most sociable fellow when you know him, but you have to get to know him first..."

The Athletic Journal reporter appears to be saying that when you judge Arthur as a man and individual, and not through the invented lens of the 'savage African', he is a man of standing and integrity. In the same article the reporter says:

"Arthur has a bit of temper when he's crossed, but taken all round, he is a straightforward, good-natured chap".



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The temper of which the reporter refers can also be interpreted as Arthur resisting unfair treatment both in sport and in relation to his ethnicity. He was known to be a proud man; unafraid to defend himself, and he was regularly documented to have publically shown his disagreement of injustice.

For example, in the same interview two incidents of Arthur's 'temper' are described. The first is a story Arthur told of a time he was resting between races, unseen, and overheard two rivals say, "Who's he that we should be frightened of him beating us? We can beat a blooming nigger any time". He recalled jumping up and startling them with, "Allow me to help you understand that I not only run, I do a little boxing when it is required", and that the rivals made a quick getaway!

The second confrontation talks of Arthur being challenged by another runner, Harry Gent, through a newspaper threat goading him into a running challenge when they were both making a name for themselves:

"As Wharton at the time had not the slightest intention of joining the pro ranks, he considered the issuing of a challenge insulting and wrote to the challengers that he was not afraid to meet them".

In an interview with Arthur (Athletic journal, 21/6/1887), he talks of several other incidents of unfairness: "At Middlesbrough, I was done out of the first prize in the 120 yards, which I won fairly by 3 yards, but the judges made a mistake and when I was presented with the salad bowl as second place, I smashed the prize in front on the committee and told them to make another of the bits".

He later talks of having "some curious adventures of men trying to 'square' me..." . He goes on to give an example: "I recollect a man once offering me £20 to lose a race. I asked him if he knew who he was speaking to, and he said, of course he did, but I told him I would run and if he ever made an offer like that again, I would report him to the Athletics Association".

£20 was a huge amount of money in those days and no doubt much needed by Arthur to supplement his poor wage. What these stories and newspaper descriptions tell us, is that, Arthur, being in the public eye, was a threat to the prevailing notions of race. He was strong-willed, bold, intelligent, fair and fearless in his manner. How dare he, as a black man, have so much audacity and act without inferiority?!

Quite simply, Arthur's character, education and ability infuriated white supremacists as they told a very different story to the racial propaganda of the time.



Arthur's life in working-class Britain

Life in early 1900s Britain was tough if you weren't one of the wealthy few. The Industrial Revolution, (the move to new and faster production processes), intensified in Britain during the late 1800s and many people were poor and worked long hours in factories and mines. Despite coming from a rich family in the Gold Coast, Arthur had no British friends in high places to give him a helping hand.

Arthur the Publican and Tobacconist

Often football clubs would arrange other jobs for a player due to poor wages and it's likely that these jobs were the more desirable 'sweetener' jobs that encouraged loyalty from players. Across his footballing career Arthur was offered a number of jobs to supplement his earnings and there are records that Arthur, (who was known to like a drink), managed several pubs in Sheffield and Rotherham.

His first was the Albert Tavern on Albert Street, Masbrough, Rotherham, in 1891. He also had a spell running the Plough Inn on Greasbrough Road, Thornhill, Rotherham. On joining Sheffield United in 1894, he took over the Sportsman Cottage on Button Lane in Sheffield city centre. The 1901 census, taken shortly before Arthur joined Stockport County, records him as being a tobacconist, running a shop in Old Street, Ashton-Under-Lyne, Lancashire.

Family life

In 1890 at the age of 24, Arthur married Emma Lister, the daughter of a plumber, in Masbrough, Rotherham. The 1911 census entry states that Arthur had one child who died. There is however, a convincing argument that Arthur also fathered one or possibly two children with his wife's sister Martha.

Shelia Leeson, Martha's granddaughter and Arthur's great-niece, believes Arthur had an affair with her grandmother which produced her mother Nora and her sister, Minnie. Sheila described Minnie as having a dark complexion and that on her birth certificate her middle name was Wharton. Nora refused to talk to her own children about who her father may have been, and there was no record of him on her birth certificate. In those days it was particularly shameful for affairs to happen and commonplace to 'keep face' and hide infidelities.



Retirement from sport

The lack of financial benefit to being a sportsman in late 19th Century Britain meant that once Arthur retired from his sporting career, like other working class athletes of his time, he needed to find work to survive. Unsurprisingly, he became a miner and went 'down the pit' like so many men during that time in the North of England.

Arthur the Home Guard

During the First World War (1914-1918), Arthur also became a soldier and served as a corporal in the Reserves (the Territorial Force), acting as a Home Guard, rather than serving aboard.

Arthur the Miner

When he retired from football, Arthur spent around 20 years working in the coal mines of South and West Yorkshire.

Despite his tiring job, he continued to play cricket. Many mines at the time employed hundreds or thousands of men and most had their own football and cricket teams. As Arthur is known to have played cricket for Denaby Main in 1905-6 and 1909: he may well have worked at Denaby Main Colliery at that time but no record has been found.

The 1911 census shows Arthur as living in Moorthorpe, South Elmsall, West Yorkshire, and his occupation is given as a 'collier (hewer)'. This would have been a very physical job cutting coal from the seam. It's likely that he worked at either South Kirkby Colliery or Frickley Colliery nearby.

Arthur spent the last 15 years of his life living in the village of Edlington near Doncaster, and working at Yorkshire Main Colliery. Here he worked as a haulage hand until his death in 1930 at 65. This was a dangerous and physically demanding job, involving hauling full coal trucks weighing 1.5 tons each.

It's likely, as Arthur was a member of the Yorkshire Miners' Association, that he will have taken part in the General Strike of 1926. Many miners were on strike for seven months in protest at plans to increase their hours and reduce their pay. Terrible hardship and poverty was experienced in mining communities as a result.



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Arthur's death

Arthur died in December 1930 aged 65 'after a long and painful illness', (Doncaster Chronicle, 19/12/1930). The main cause of death was said to be cancer of the upper lip. The last known photo of him as a miner clearly shows the growth on his nose. He died at Springwell House Public Assistance Institution, Balby, Doncaster and was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in Edlington. The Doncaster Gazette reported that at the funeral there was "a fairly large attendance which was representative of all the sports and organisations he had been connected with".

In an interview for BBC Two's Black Britain (1997), local Edlington resident, Alwyn Tatum, recalls seeing Arthur when he was a lad, physically fit in his sixties, running laps in the colliery sports ground. He recalled:

"There was no fat on him, it were all muscle. It were like looking at a greyhound. They always used to say he could catch pigeons"



Arthur's revival

Arthur was largely forgotten after his death until the 1980s when Ray Jenkins, a history lecturer from North Staffordshire Polytechnic, started researching his life. Sadly, Jenkins died before finishing his work but in 1996, FURD teamed up with historian, Phil Vasili, to continue researching Arthur's achievements. Key events:

- In 1996, Sheila Leeson, Arthur's great-niece, also believed to be his granddaughter, replied to a letter from Phil Vasili in the Rotherham Advertiser asking if anyone remembered Arthur. Having found some photos and newspaper cuttings about Arthur that had belonged to her mother, Sheila contacted Vasili with her findings. Shortly after, she discovered that Arthur was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in Edlington near Doncaster, South Yorkshire.
- Also in 1996, FURD launched an appeal to raise money to pay for a headstone for Arthur's grave and, in May 1997, they unveiled a headstone at a special ceremony attended by members of Arthur's family, local residents, and representatives of FURD and the wider football community.
- In 1998, Vasili's book, 'The First Black Footballer: An Absence of Memory' was published and shed detailed light on Arthur's story and achievements.
- In 2003 Arthur was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the National Football Museum.
- In 2007, a campaign was launched by shopowner Shaun Campbell to erect a statue of Arthur in Darlington, and in 2008 a model of the statue was created by sculptor Vivian Mallock. The campaign was then developed into a charity, the Arthur Wharton Foundation, which has since presented bronze mini-statues of Wharton to the FA, UEFA, FIFA, PFA and Ghana FA.
- In 2011, a ceremony was held at Wembley Stadium to honour Arthur before the first full international between England and Ghana, attended by representatives of FURD, the Arthur Wharton Foundation and Arthur's family.
- In 2011, FURD received funding from the Heritage Lottery to carry out school, community and wider awareness-raising work about Arthur's story and achievements. See www.arthurwharton.info for more details of the Arthur Wharton Heritage Project.



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- In September 2012, a blue plaque in honour of Arthur was unveiled at the Tameside Stadium, Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire.
- In October 2012, Arthur's British-born family members, Sheila Leeson and her daughter Dorothy, along with representatives from FURD and the Arthur Wharton Foundation, travelled to Accra in Ghana, where Arthur grew up. The trip came about as part of a documentary about Arthur being made by the BBC for its 'Inside Out' series. During the visit, Sheila and Dorothy met some of their Ghanaian relatives for the first time. They also made links with the Ghanaian government, the Ghana FA and Arthur's school to spread awareness of Arthur in his homeland.
- In October 2012 the film documentary produced by the Heritage Project, 'The Arthur Wharton Story' was premiered in Sheffield
- In December 2013 FURD launched the educational materials produced by the Heritage Project.