

FRANCIS BARBER AND DR JOHNSON'S HOUSE

17 Gough Square,
City of London



Dr Johnson's House was built at the end of the seventeenth century by a City wool merchant, Richard Gough. The timber-framed, brick townhouse, was part of a development in Gough Square, of which Dr Johnson's House at number 17 is the only one to survive.

The four-storey building has retained many of its period features, which include historic panelling, a fine open staircase, wooden floorboards, a charming cellarette cupboard, coal holes and even the original door handles. The eighteenth-century front door still has its original anti-burglary devices intact, including a heavy chain with corkscrew latch and spiked iron bar over the fanlight. Visitors can enter all the rooms in the House and sit down on the chairs and window seats to soak up the atmosphere.

Dr Johnson and those living here with him were only tenants at 17 Gough Square, and following their departure in 1759, the house went through a variety of different uses. It had other lodgers, was used as a small hotel and bed and breakfast and was even a printers' workshop and studio. By 1911 it had fallen into a sad state of disrepair, with water leaking through the roof. At this point it was saved and restored by Cecil Harmsworth, a Liberal MP.

Today the house operates as a museum dedicated to the life and legacy of Samuel Johnson and those living here with him, principally Francis Barber and Anna Williams. Through the lens of their lives, we explore the importance and power of words, and celebrate triumph in the face of adversity, be that discrimination based on race, gender and mental or physical health disabilities.

A plaque erected by the Arts Council nearly 150 years ago has long identified this as the home of Samuel Johnson. In 2016 we were awarded permission to erect a temporary plaque, in conjunction with the BBC series by David Olusoga *Black and British: A Forgotten History*. We now seek permission to erect a permanent plaque to commemorate Francis Barber's life and identify 17 Gough Square as his home – the only one of several that we know of still to stand, and the only building (to the best of our knowledge) still standing within the City of London where a person born into slavery lived and worked as a free person.



Of all the paintings and prints which line the walls of Dr Johnson's House, the most striking is a portrait in the parlour on the ground floor of a young black man. The caption to the portrait declares that it is 'Francis Barber, Dr Johnson's servant'. Why does this picture hang here and what is the story behind it?

The boy who was later to be named Francis Barber was born in Jamaica in about 1742. His parents were enslaved and so he was born into slavery. He was brought up on the Orange River sugar plantation, where he lived and worked alongside about 150 other enslaved men, women and children. In 1750 the owner of the estate, Colonel Bathurst, got into financial difficulties and was forced to sell it. He sailed for England, taking with him the young boy.

Some time after his arrival in England, the boy was baptised and given the name Francis Barber. He was at first sent to live in Yorkshire but then, in April of 1752, a life-changing event took place: he joined the household of Samuel Johnson in Gough Square, as a servant.

The arrangement had been made by Colonel Bathurst's son, Dr Richard Bathurst, who was a friend of Samuel Johnson and shared his antislavery views. Johnson was well-known for providing for those in need of support and shelter, and the Gough Square household was home to several such people.

Barber was to live in Gough Square for four years. During this time he carried out the usual duties of a servant, fetching and carrying, running errands, opening the door to Johnson's visitors and waiting at table. He probably slept in the basement. The House is the only surviving building in the City of London known to have been home to someone who had been enslaved and Barber's experience of slavery must have informed Johnson's antislavery writings.

Johnson was anxious that Barber should be properly educated and spent a lot of time educating the (clearly very intelligent) him, to ensure he was literate, not only in English but Latin, Greek and other European languages to a degree. A remarkable piece of evidence of Barber's presence in the House at that time is a surviving scrap of paper on which the young boy practised his handwriting, writing over and over, 'Francis Barber' and 'England'.

There was a sizeable Black community in eighteenth-century London, many of whose members worked in domestic service. A report survives of 57 black men and women attending a party at a Fleet Street inn and on one occasion a visitor to Johnson's home recorded seeing Barber hosting a gathering of his Black friends there.

In 1756 Barber left Gough Square and went to work for an apothecary in Cheapside. After two years he joined the Navy, serving during the Seven Years' War. But his naval career came to an end in 1760 when – at Johnson's instigation – he was discharged. It is thought that Johnson feared Barber would be captured and sold into slavery when his ship started trading in the West Indies. He returned to Johnson's household (now in Inner Temple Lane) and was to remain in Johnson's living with him in the various addresses Johnson had for the next 24 years.

Johnson sent Barber to the renowned Bishop's Stortford Grammar School, after which he returned to the household. In 1773 Barber married a white woman, Elizabeth Ball. The marriage provoked some hostility but also some support. Johnson welcomed the couple (and, later on, their children) into his household. The Barbers named both their sons (one of whom died in infancy) Samuel.

As Johnson grew old and ill, Francis and Elizabeth cared for him and Francis was at his bedside when he died in 1784. In his will Johnson left Barber an annuity (a guaranteed annual income) of £70 a year and also provided that, after a number of personal bequests, the remainder of the estate should be held on trust and used for Barber's benefit. The amount involved was about £1,500, a substantial sum. A copy of the will hangs in the House.

The Barbers moved to Lichfield, Johnson's birthplace, where at first they lived in some comfort. But the money ran out and Francis set up a school – he is the first black schoolmaster on record in Britain. The venture was not a success and the Barbers fell into poverty, selling mementoes of Johnson to raise a little money.



Francis Barber died in Staffordshire Infirmary on 13 January 1801. Elizabeth lived on until 1816. They were survived by a son and a daughter, who carried on the school, and to this day direct descendants of the Barbers still live in Staffordshire and have close ties to Dr Johnson's House museum.

The portrait which hangs in Dr Johnson's House is a copy of an original by Joshua Reynolds. In spite of its caption, the identity of the sitter is not known for certain: historians debate whether it is Francis Barber or Reynolds's black servant. Despite the lack of certainty, it is fitting that this extraordinary portrait hangs in Dr Johnson's House to provide a vivid reminder, not just of the black community in eighteenth-century London, but the remarkable life of one young boy who found his home in Gough Square with Samuel Johnson.

For more information please visit our website: <https://www.drjohnsonshouse.org/post/francis-barber-dr-johnson-s-house-and-black-history>

In 2026, we mark the 225th anniversary of Barber's death, and to be able to erect a permanent plaque to raise awareness of his life and legacy, and Black Georgians more broadly, would be of both regional and national significance. By coincidence, it is also the 150th anniversary of the installation of the Blue Plaque to Johnson erected in 1876 by (Royal) Society of Arts – so old it isn't even blue, but terracotta.

We have been conducting community consultations throughout 2025 and have engaged with several organisations with members from the African and Caribbean diaspora. A series of community workshops were undertaken with residents from within the City and the 12 surrounding boroughs. The purpose of these was to gain a better understanding of the communities awareness of and interest in Dr Johnson's House and the individuals that lived there, to understand the needs of our local communities and challenges they face to engaging with cultural and historic venues and to gain insight into how we can better share the stories of the individuals who lived at Dr Johnson's House who reflect underrepresented audiences, with a focus on the life and legacy of Francis Barber. These workshops resulted in gaining valuable knowledge to support the development of future community programming and interpretation plans whilst providing the participants with a more significant connection to the history of their local area and creating an interest to explore further. The results were both shocking and encouraging, in that only 1% of participants had previously heard of Barber, but 100% were interested in learning more about him and in visiting his surviving home.

We look forward to working with you to ensure we commemorate the life of the extraordinary man who once resided here in 17 Gough Square.

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