Twitter Thread by Friendless Churches

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@friendschurches

In 1746 in West Africa, a child is playing on the banks of a stream. He's trying to catch a moorhen. It sounds picturesque, but within seconds this little boy will be abducted. He will be shipped across the globe to North Wales. This is the story of John Ystumllyn.

#thread



He is taken far from his home, far from everything and everyone he knows. Eventually, he arrives in Ynyscynhaiarn, Gwynedd to work for the Wynne family. We don’t know what name his parents had given him, but the Wynnes named him ‘John Ystumllyn’ after their estate.

2/8



If you’ve been watching #AHouseThroughTime you'll have seen the story of Thomas, a black boy who was a 'servant' of a family in Bristol until he ran away in 1759. Boys like Thomas often appeared in portraits and still-life paintings in this period.

3/8

The paintings were displayed as status symbols to highlight a family’s wealth and connections to overseas trade. In 1754, John had his portrait painted. Presumably it hung in the Wynne’s home. A novelty in North Wales, he became known as Jack Du, or in English, Jack Black.

4/8



When John arrived at Ynyscynhaiarn, he was possibly as young as 8, and ‘had no language other than sounds similar to the howling of a dog’. We can only begin to imagine how lonely and terrifying it must have been in a completely unfamiliar place with no way to communicate.

5/8

The circumstances that brought John to Wales were a crime against his humanity and must never be forgotten. However, his story is also one of resilience, respect and love. John soon learned to speak English and Welsh and to read and write. He became an accomplished gardener.
6/8

Over time, Margaret Gruffydd, the maid who brought him his bread, cheese and ale every day, fell in love with him, and married in 1768. The Wynne family gave them a cottage with a field in recognition of John’s service. John and Margaret had seven children…

7/8



... And thus, John's African heritage was woven into the rich tapestry of Welsh ancestry and culture. John Ystumllyn was buried with dignity in the churchyard in Ynyscynhaiarn.

Discover more about John’s life here: https://t.co/e3VMblbjob

8/8