

West Indies and West Indians

In the eighteenth century the majority of the products shipped to London from the West Indies were produced by slave labour, by Africans who had been brought to the West Indies through the Middle Passage. However, the labour force of the seventeenth century predominantly had been comprised of Irish, Welsh and Scottish prisoners from Oliver Cromwell's military initiatives in Britain, coupled with convicts sent to the colonies from courts throughout the British Isles. Slave labour fuelled the triangle of trade between Europe, Africa and the New World. The slaves in the Caribbean worked in harsh, brutal conditions and life expectancies were short, particularly on plantations that grew sugarcane. For almost four centuries a constant stream of newly-enslaved Africans were brought to replace dead workers.



A boiling house, where sugar was produced from sugarcane

The West Indian sugar industry began in Barbados and Guadeloupe in the 1640s and this crop dominated the Caribbean economy for centuries. Barbados was the first British sugar producing colony and remained the largest producer until overtaken by Jamaica around 1720. Approximately 70% of the total output of plantations in the British West Indies was sugar and molasses. Different islands produced different qualities of sugar; Nevis and Jamaica produced brown sugar, which was at the lower end of the scale, with Barbados producing very fine clayed sugar. Sugar production had peaked in

the early 1700s and was in decline for the rest of the century, yet it still comprised a huge proportion of the West Indian economy. In the 1770s almost 90% of the value of Jamaica's exports to Great Britain and Ireland came from sugar.

With sugar's decline, other products were produced in greater numbers. Rum, made from molasses, a by-product of sugar, was the second most important produce. Coffee was the next most important export after rum. Although cotton had been grown in the West Indies for many years, it was not until the 1770s that it became a major product. There were several factors behind this shift toward cotton production, including the boom in the British textiles industry. Many smaller plantation owners and farmers did not possess the quality of soil required for sugar production. However, cotton could be successfully grown on inferior quality land, enhancing the yield from the islands. Additional crops were cultivated, such as yams, Guinea corn and pigeon peas, which were not only sold but also used to feed the slave population. The sugar plantations were owned and run by the elite of white West Indian society, whilst other staple crops were produced by those lower down the social ladder.

Sugar prices fluctuated over the course of the century, but prices were high after 1795 and remained so, until a financial crisis in Europe in the middle of 1799. Despite the West Indies producing the vast majority of Britain's sugar, the law forbade them from refining it. As a result, London had a thriving sugar-refining industry. Some of this refined sugar would then be exported back to the West Indies. However, no such law applied to rum, which was distilled on many plantations.

It is believed that the annual income for the West Indies in the late eighteenth century was £17,000,000. The largest proportion of this income lay in the hands of West Indian plantation owners that had come to live in Britain. These planters were assigned a unique identity within British society - the West Indian of European heritage. Often drawn from well-established families in the

Indian originated it was the Anglo West-Indian who claimed the honour of the description". Many planters, particularly those from Jamaica and the Leeward Islands, brought their families to live in London to be part of British high society, leaving their plantations to be managed by others on their behalf. West Indians also settled around Britain in such places as Liverpool, Bristol and Glasgow, where similar bodies representing West Indian interests were also established. Having made their fortunes in the West Indies, they desired to travel to Britain, to escape the high mortality rate of the tropics as well as the frequent wars waged in the region between the various colonial powers. The metropole provided the perfect stage for rich West Indians to flaunt their wealth and many purchased houses in Marylebone, then a fashionable village on the outskirts of the city. Meanwhile, their offspring received a good education, and were afforded the opportunity to make a name for themselves outside the colonies. Several mixed-race children made this journey with their planter fathers, joining the upper ranks of British society. This marked the beginning of a steady increase in West Indian intellectuals in London. Men, whose family had become rich in West Indian trade, now prospered in other arenas, including the arts, as poets, writers, journalists and musicians.



Lord Mayor William Beckford

When they arrived in Britain, however, their attempts to integrate themselves into high society met with a certain amount of scorn; they were viewed as the ‘nouveau riche’ of their day. Even those who felt British were classed as distinctly West Indian by the native-born Britons. Due to their extreme wealth, they often presented themselves ostentatiously and were viewed as being socially inept. During the eighteenth century, William Beckford was one such West Indian. A notorious Jamaican Planter who twice held office as Lord Mayor of London, Beckford was characterised by his show of wealth, lack of charm and broad Jamaican accent. He is believed to be the first British commoner to die a millionaire. As the abolitionist movement gained support, many came to view the white West Indians negatively, questioning the means by which they gained their colossal wealth. As a result, Beckford was given derogatory nicknames by abolitionists.

Many absentee planters became Members of Parliament. There were approximately fifty to sixty of these politicians, forming a significant voting block within the House of Commons, which held the balance of power in many situations, allowing them to exert a significant influence on the government of the day and promote what they felt was beneficial to the West Indies. There were also representatives in the House of Lords by virtues of strategic marriages, direct blood ties and appointments.

It was against this backdrop that the West India Committee, then the West Indian Merchants and Planters Committee, was born. West Indian men, based in London with trade interests in the islands, came together to defend their common cause. Some committee members were drawn from the richest and most powerful families of the West Indies, such as George Hibbert and Beeston Long, whose families had been long-established in Jamaica. Hibbert acted as agent for Jamaica in London and was later chairman of the West India Committee. Long’s family firm, Long and Company, was the oldest firm involved in the Jamaica trade and he, himself, served as Deputy Governor, and later Governor, of the Bank of England. Other members included John Wedderburn, whose father Sir John Wedderburn had been executed for siding with the Jacobites at the Battle of Culloden, and William Manning, whose family had long been established in St. Kitts.

These men campaigned on behalf of West Indian trade but had immense difficulty in combating the many thefts of slave-produced goods on the river.