

Fortifications in the West Indies



A map of Barbados demonstrating some of the defensive fortifications on its coast

In order to defend the West Indies, many fortifications were constructed across the islands, normally positioned around the coastline or overlooking harbours in order to defend against enemy raids or invasion. Particularly important sites, such as Barbados's Carlisle Bay, were given more prominence; six forts were established to protect it. The economic importance of some of the West Indian islands was so significant that some of the larger and richer islands developed quite extensive networks of defences, which led future American President George Washington on his visit to Barbados, in what was his only journey outside North America, to comment that the island was a single giant fortress. Often it was the case that the fortifications were constructed at the behest of the local governments.

The majority of the fortifications in the West Indies were initially built and maintained using slave labour, with hundreds of slaves used by the local Caribbean Governments to do so. However, maintenance on the fortifications was not always regular, and, in some conflicts, it was noted that fortifications had fallen into poor states of repair; during the American Revolution, many island governments refused to vote for additional funding to restore them. As the threat to the British Caribbean islands faded, many fortresses and camps fell out

of use and were no longer maintained. Over time, degradation in the Caribbean climate means that, of some, little evidence now remains. This process of deterioration occasionally has been aided by changes in Caribbean geography; for example, the site of the small fort that was at Saint George Cay off the Caicos Islands is now underwater, with its location marked by submerged, rusted cannons that once were part of its defences.

A number of fortifications that formed part of larger complexes and camps have survived the ravages of time, thanks to more consistent maintenance over the years. The Shirley Heights complex, named for Governor Sir Thomas Shirley, which is situated above English Harbour, Antigua, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, housed hundreds of soldiers and their families. Arguably, the most impressive fortress in the British Caribbean was at Brimstone Hill, St. Kitts, also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This complex was developed gradually over the course of the eighteenth century, and remains one of the earliest surviving examples of the 'polygonal system' of military architecture, featuring various barracks, storerooms, cisterns, bastions and the citadel of Fort George. Made of stone, largely quarried from the 220-metre-high twin-peaked hill on which it stands, the stronghold was believed, at its peak, to be impregnable, and indeed no enemy ever captured it by storming the defences. Brimstone Hill was undoubtedly an imposing edifice but men in remoter postings had to deal with ruder structures. Thomas St. Clair was stationed for a time at Fort Myers in British Guiana, which was a poorly constructed mud-work, and during his residence there as an officer, he remarked that it reminded him of a house of cards built on a table.



The view from Shirley Heights, Antigua



Part of the fortifications at Brimstone Hill, St. Kitts

Even some of the smallest and poorest islands had their own fortifications for the use of their local militias when necessary. For example, on Grand Cayman, two small forts were constructed; one was to defend the main land site at Hogstye Bay and the other to safeguard the road to the then capital of Bodden Town. The remains of the first of these can still be seen in downtown Georgetown today, despite almost being destroyed by a property developer. Like larger fortifications, such as Brimstone Hill, it is made of local materials, but the poverty of the Cayman Islands, at the time of its construction in the late eighteenth century, limited its scale and strength. The fort covered a small area of 57ft by 38ft and, despite having emplacements for ten guns originally, in the early nineteenth century it was noted that it only had three guns.



The remains of Fort George, Grand Cayman

When constructing military buildings in the region, the British Army's engineers also had to consider some architectural features used in Caribbean civilian architecture to help keep buildings cool, dry and well ventilated. These included a raised ground floor for protection against storm flooding and, to help air circulate, window jalousies to keep direct sun and rain out, whilst still allowing light and air in, as well as a veranda or gallery around the building. The problem with many structures in the Caribbean was that they were built in what proved to be unhealthy sites, such as Jamaica's Fort Augusta, which was constructed near swampy terrain and whose garrison therefore frequently fell ill.

The British Army's Royal Engineers also developed a system of prefabricated buildings in the 1820s. These involved a cast iron skeleton, made in Britain, and then shipped to the Caribbean. This skeleton featured the girders, joists, stairs and doors, whilst the walls were 'filled in' with locally-sourced stone. Barracks made in this fashion were 156ft long, three storeys high, including a basement, with a gallery running around the two upper storeys. These buildings would sleep over 200 soldiers, between rooms designed for 18 to 20 men each. Hospitals were also constructed in this fashion and such buildings proved to be sturdy, resisting hurricane-force winds, with some even surviving to the modern day.

The fortifications of the Caribbean were equipped with some of the most impressive array of cannons to be found anywhere in the world; Barbados had 364 serviceable guns by 1780s. Some of these cannons are massive in size, with one example in Jamaica originally requiring its own steam powered mechanism to move it. Many of these guns remain in the islands and can be seen at the fortifications and camps which are now a major tourist attraction in the region. A few camps are still used today by the local defence forces, including Up Park Camp, in Jamaica, the site of which was first purchased by the British Army in 1784. Others have been repurposed, such as Jamaica's Fort Augusta, which is now the site of the island's only women's prison.