

## PART I

### Contexts

#### The island of Nevis

*Nevis: this romantic little spot is nothing more than a single mountain,  
rising like a cone in an easy ascent from the sea ...*

Anonymous visitor, 1810<sup>1</sup>



Image from <http://www.stkittsnevis.org.flag.html>

The modern national flag of Nevis and its coat of arms sum up the island's history: in the flag the green stands for the fertile lands, yellow for sunshine, black for its African heritage and red for the struggle from slavery through colonialism to independence. The white stars on a black diagonal bar symbolise hope and liberty.



Image from <http://nevis1.com/nevis-government.html>

In the island's coat of arms the history is captured in more detail: the head of the Carib is a reminder of the earliest inhabitants while the hands that hold up a flaming torch belong to the people who came later: Africans, Europeans and people of mixed descent. United in purpose, they lift the torch together. The torch symbolises the struggle and the quest for freedom against the colonial powers, France and England. Their influences are acknowledged by the inclusion of the *fleur de lis* and the rose. While the two poinciana flowers and the pelicans embody the abundant native flora and fauna, the sugar cane plant and the coconut palm represent the cultivated export crops – first sugar, then copra. These shaped the island's landscape and economy. The sail of a lighter, the traditional means of sea transport, stands as a symbol for the mobility and outward-looking character of the island's inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Anon *Authentic History of the English West Indies* p60

<sup>2</sup> *The National Symbols of St Kitts and Nevis* Information leaflet



Image from <http://www.caribbeancrews.com/islands.html>

## Geography, geology, climate

Nevis lies in Central America in the Eastern Caribbean. Geologically it belongs to the Lesser Antilles, a chain of partially submerged mountains that arches northwards from Venezuela on the South American mainland to Puerto Rico - the easternmost of the Greater Antilles. Geographically, and in the past at times politically, it is part of a group of islands known as the Leeward Islands.<sup>3</sup> The Leeward Islands stretch between latitude 18° and 16° north and longitude 61° and 65° west<sup>4</sup> and cover an area of 2,000 square miles (5,000 square km).

At its northern end a two-mile straight separates Nevis from its nearest neighbour, the island of St Christopher, or St Kitts. Nevis, with its 36 square miles (93.6 square km)<sup>5</sup> is smaller than St Kitts, which measures 68 square miles (176 square km), and about the same size as its neighbour to the southeast, Montserrat (39 square miles or 102 square km). Compared to Jamaica, the largest of the former British West Indian sugar islands, Nevis is a mere dot: Jamaica is over a hundred times bigger. Its small size was a determining factor in its development.

<sup>3</sup> The Lesser Antilles are made up of the Leeward Islands and the Windward Islands. This division is based on the manner in which sailing ships from Europe approached the islands. Trinidad and Tobago and the Netherlands Antilles, which lie off the coast of South America, are considered part of the Lesser Antilles.

The Leeward Islands comprise the Virgin Islands (36 islands form the British Virgin Islands; St Croix, St Thomas, St John and over fifty islets form the Virgin Islands of the United States), Anguilla, St Martin, St Barthélemy (also called St Bartholomew and St Barts), Saba, St Eustatius (also called Statia or Stacia), St Christopher (St Kitts) and Nevis, Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, and Guadeloupe.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Samuel M 'The Prehistoric Settlement Pattern of Nevis, West Indies' in *Journal of Field Archaeology* Vol 16 No 4 (Winter 1989) p427, quoting Helmut Blume *The Caribbean Islands* Longman, London 1974

<sup>5</sup> *South America, Central America and the Caribbean*

According to David Watts, the island is 130 square km (*The West Indies: Patterns of Development* p4).



Nevis from the sea, with the ruins of Mountravers 'Great House' and stable block visible in the centre of the image  
(D Small and C Eickelmann, 1998)

Charmed by the view as he approached the island by sea, in the 1820s a visitor wrote that

The appearance of Nevis is perhaps the most captivating of any island in the West Indies. From the south and west it seems to be nothing but a single cone rising with the most graceful curve out of the sea, and piercing a fleecy mass of clouds which sleeps for ever round its summit.

Below the summit, 'round the neck of the high land where cultivation ceases', could be found a 'complete forest of evergreen trees' that grew like a collar and encircled the peak.<sup>6</sup> Today, rainforest still stands in the highest reaches; it merges with acacia trees and other mostly non-productive vegetation that covers the western side of the island in uniform green. The profile of the island is, indeed, that of an almost perfectly shaped, slightly capped cone but the symmetry of Nevis Peak is deceptive; on the eastern side a summit of 1,901 feet (579 metres) stands out, and on the southern and northern sides the peaks of Saddle Hill (1,250 feet; 381 metres) and Round Hill (1,014 feet; 309 metres) break up the evenness of the cone. The highest elevation is the summit of Nevis Peak which rises to 3,232 feet (985 metres) above sea level.<sup>7</sup> The upper reaches are steep and decrease at angles of more than forty per cent, while most of the island falls off at gradients of between ten to forty per cent. Except for some steeply sloping land south of Saddle Hill, the coastal areas decline gently.<sup>8</sup> Pounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the eastern shoreline is rugged, has cliffs and rocky outcrops, while most of the western coast is dominated by Pinneys Beach, a palm-fringed beach that stretches for over three miles (five km) along the Caribbean Sea. Nearly circular in shape, Nevis is surrounded by a coral reef. Much of it has broken up, accelerating coastal erosion.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Coleridge, HN *Six Months in the West Indies* p179

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, Sir Harold *Caribbean Patterns* p297

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, Ivor *Drought Hazard Assessment* p12

<sup>9</sup> Wilson, SM 'The Prehistoric Settlement Pattern' in *Journal of Field Archaeology* Vol 16 No 4 (Winter 1989) p428

Nevis Peak is an extinct volcano, encircled by a marine terrace, which was formed as the seas receded during the various ice ages, and although the island is primarily volcanic, the oldest rocks are of limestone origin. About two thirds of the land from the sea up to the middle of the mountain is covered in 'shoal' soil, or Charlestown loam, which is said to be 'loamey and clayey' and difficult to cultivate. The higher, forested slopes are strongly acidic.<sup>10</sup> Generally the land is bouldery, 'prodigiously rocky and stony'.<sup>11</sup>

Carved into the mountainsides are ravines of varying lengths and depths called ghuts (also ghauts, guts and gutts).<sup>12</sup> During periods of low rainfall they dry out but in the wet season fill with water that can flow so fiercely that it carries with it huge boulders and fallen trees. Several dams and freshwater springs are located in various parts of the island. One of the springs was renowned for its hot waters; Bath Spring was said to possess 'all the medicinal properties of the hot well at Bristol'. The poet Grainger mused that Nevis was 'justly for its hot baths fam'd'.<sup>13</sup>

Rainfall determines the seasons. With an average rainfall of about 13 inches (almost 34 cm), the first half of the year can be defined as the dry season and the second half, with an average of over 23 inches (58 cm), as the wet season. Some months do not conform to this pattern: in May rainfall is consistently above average, and in December rainfall in some parts of the island is equal to that of other parts in January.<sup>14</sup> The lowest precipitation is in the eastern area (35 inches; 89 cm), the highest at the highest point, Nevis Peak (90 inches; 229 cm). The average annual rainfall in the island measures close to 46 inches (117 cm). The average humidity varies from 70 per cent in March to about 78 per cent in September through to November,<sup>15</sup> but can be as low as 50 per cent in the dry season and as high as 90 in the wet season. The average relative humidity is about 76 per cent.<sup>16</sup> In the cooler months the average minimum and maximum temperatures range from 22 to 29 degrees Celsius (72 to 84 degrees Fahrenheit), in the warmer months, June to October, from 25 to 32 degrees Celsius (77 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit). Since the temperature is said to drop by one degree Celsius (34 degrees Fahrenheit) for every 100 metres (328 feet) of altitude, the higher parts of the island become increasingly cooler.<sup>17</sup> The prevailing winds, the north-east trades which blow in from across the Atlantic, also cool the land and temper the subtropical climate. The eastern part of the island, the windward side, is more exposed to the wind while the western, or leeward side, generally enjoys calmer conditions. A nineteenth century visitor who rode around the entire island found Nevis 'with the exception of a mile or two on the windward side ... uniformly rich, verdant, and beautiful'.<sup>18</sup>

A distinct time of the year is the hurricane season. The hurricane months were said to have started at the 'latter end of June' and to have lasted until the end of September.<sup>19</sup> Hurricanes have also occurred in the

<sup>10</sup> Jackson, Ivor *Drought Hazard Assessment* p10

<sup>11</sup> CSP 1734-1735 No 314

For a study of the geology of Nevis see CO Hutton's report *The Petrology of Nevis* in the NHCS Archive.

<sup>12</sup> The etymology of the term ghut or gutt, as used in the Leeward Islands, has not been established with certainty but most likely the word derives from a Lincolnshire term, gowt: the outlet of a drain or watercourse (Display board by The Lincolnshire Waterways Partnership). The 1913 Webster Dictionary suggests that the word actually means 'go-out' and defines this go-out, written also gowt, as 'a sluice in embankments against the sea, for letting out the land waters, when the tide is out.' The suggestion that the word has its origin in the Indian term 'ghat' and that it is used in islands with East Indian immigrant populations cannot be correct; the term 'gutt' was already used in Nevis in the early 1730s prior to the arrival of East Indian labourers (UKNA, CO 186/2).

<sup>13</sup> Grainger, James *The Sugar Cane* p15

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, Ivor *Drought Hazard Assessment* p7

The weather patterns appear to have changed. One man, reminiscing about his childhood and youth in Nevis, stated that the rainy season was in March and April and marveled that it had shifted to September (Hanley, Lornette 'I remember when ... Interview with Robert Griffin of Butlers Village' in *NHCS Newsletter* No 39 (November 1995) p11).

<sup>15</sup> Jackson, Ivor *Drought Hazard Assessment* p7 and p9

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, David and Jennifer Lowery *The Natural History of the Island of Nevis* pv

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, Ivor *Drought Hazard Assessment* p8

<sup>18</sup> Coleridge, HN *Six Months in the West Indies* p183

<sup>19</sup> Hancock, David (ed) *The Letters of William Freeman* p73 William Freeman to Robert Helme, 18 July 1682; also Reverend William Smith *A Natural History of Nevis* p3



West Indies at other times of the year,<sup>20</sup> but generally the folk wisdom still holds good: 'June too soon; July stand by; August a must; September remember; October all over'.

### **A brief outline of the early colonial history of Nevis, to 1685**

The earliest inhabitants of Nevis were active in the island before 600BC. They left no ceramics; what is known about them archaeologists have determined from their shell midden sites. A considerable number of their settlement areas have been located along the coast, mostly on the eastern, or windward, side.<sup>21</sup>

It is probable that these people had contact with seafarers from the Old World long before Christopher Columbus sailed in the region in 1493, then on his second voyage to the Americas. The last Amerindian group to inhabit Nevis called the island 'Oualie', the Land of Beautiful Water,<sup>22</sup> but Columbus is credited with giving both Nevis and St Christopher the names that are still in use today. Apparently the cloud that generally covers the peak reminded Columbus of snow; the word Nevis (pronounced Nee-vis) is derived from the Spanish Nuestra Senora de las Nieves, meaning Our Lady of the Snows.

After Columbus's voyages, Spain claimed ownership of all the Caribbean islands but settled few. Spain's colonial ambitions were driven by the quest for precious metals rather than land, and while in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Spain spearheaded and then dominated the economic exploitation of the West Indies, by the beginning of the seventeenth century the major European powers – the Dutch, English, French and Portuguese – were competing for land, resources and, most importantly, trade. English and European seafarers descended on the islands in search of anything that might be of value. In Nevis they found *lignum vitae*, an extraordinarily dense wood that had the strength and durability of metal. As early as 1603 the crew from an English ship is known to have removed twenty tons of this precious timber. Four years later, those colonists who were to establish their first settlement at Jamestown in Virginia, called in at Nevis to take on fresh supplies of wood and water.<sup>23</sup>

The English sought to gain a foothold in various parts of the Caribbean but were unsuccessful until they managed to establish their first permanent colony at St Kitts. In 1624 Thomas Warner led a small vanguard, most likely men from his native East Anglia,<sup>24</sup> with whom he settled the island. Relations with the original inhabitants, the Caribs, were friendly at first but quickly deteriorated. The French had also established a presence in the island and in 1627 English and French settlers joined forces, slaughtered a

The St Kitts planter Clement Caines wrote that 'in common speech' the hurricane months were 'September and October, as well as August' but claimed in 1800 that during his 22 years of residence in the West Indies he only ever experienced hurricanes in August (Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* p70).

<sup>20</sup> Measured over three centuries, until 1933 hurricanes have occurred in Nevis in the following months: Five in January; seven in February; eleven in March; six in April; five in May; ten in June; 42 in July; 96 in August; 80 in September; 69 in October; 17 in November and seven in December (Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p757, quoting *West Indies Pilot* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed 1933 Vol 3 p19).

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, Samuel M 'The Prehistoric Settlement Pattern' p435

Archaeologists are still trying to piece together the movement and subsequent settlement of peoples from the South American continent. The most important pre-Columbian site in Nevis is at Coconut Walk. For further details see P Bellamy, J Cathie, M Nokkert *Coconut Walk, St James Windward, Nevis: Archaeological Investigations by Time Team October 1998* Terrain Archaeology, 2004; EL Morris, A Crosby, R Leech, T Machling, et al *The Nevis Heritage Project Interim Reports* 2000, 2001 and 2002 and Quetta Kaye, Scott M Fitzpatrick, Michiel Kappers and Victor Thompson 'Beyond Time Team: Archaeological Investigations at Coconut Walk, Nevis, West Indies, 1<sup>st</sup> July-4<sup>th</sup> August 2010' in *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* Vol 20 (2010).

<sup>22</sup> Robinson, David and Jennifer Lowery *The Natural History of the Island of Nevis* p6

<sup>23</sup> Robinson, David and Jennifer Lowery *The Natural History of the Island of Nevis* p vii

<sup>24</sup> Among the early settlers, for instance, was John Jeaffreson from Pettistree in Suffolk, which is near Parham where Thomas Warner grew up (John Cordy Jeaffreson (ed) *A Young Squire*).

large number of Caribs and divided up the island between them.<sup>25</sup> A year later a 150-strong settlement party set off for Nevis and embarked on the slow and arduous process of taming the land and of producing crops. Led by Anthony Hilton, the men began by chopping down wood that for the most part reached to the water's edge. With some difficulty they managed to establish farms. In addition to subsistence crops, they grew tobacco, some cotton and indigo (a plant that produces a textile dye), as well as ginger and aloe vera. They lived in simple huts, made from a number of forked stakes driven into the ground, covered in reeds and thatched with palm fronds or plantain leaves.<sup>26</sup> If destroyed, the shelters could be rebuilt quickly and at little expense. Life at this new frontier was rough; one of Anthony Hilton's servants sought to kill him in his sleep, and Hilton tried to burn the house of the deputy governor of St Kitts.<sup>27</sup> Hilton was disappointed that Nevis did not prove as financially rewarding as he had hoped and, with a group of thirty men, left for Tortuga, a small island off the northern coast of Hispaniola (originally Española, later corrupted to Hispaniola, it comprises today's Haiti and the Dominican Republic).<sup>28</sup> But steadily the men continued to clear the forest inland, along the gently sloping west coast, and they established two settlements, Jamestown on the western and Newcastle on the northern shore.

In addition to using what native labour there was, the Englishmen worked their farms with white indentured servants. These were mostly poor people who contracted themselves as agricultural workers for periods of four, seven, or more years. In return for selling their labour they received free passage to Nevis, board and lodging and some clothing. If they survived their period of servitude, and fewer than half did, they could work for themselves and perhaps, one day, even own some land.

When the colonisers arrived in Nevis, only a few of the original inhabitants were left in the island. One of these was a man who worked for the merchant Roger Glover. His real name is lost; Glover called him his 'servant Roger the Indian'. In his will Glover rewarded this man with the considerable sum of £10, suggesting that they enjoyed an amicable relationship.<sup>29</sup> The money could, possibly, have been Glover's way of rewarding Roger for assisting him during the Spanish attack of Nevis in 1629. First the invaders had taken St Kitts and then three dozen of their vessels had appeared off Nevis. Having fired their single great gun, the planters tried to ready the militia that was largely made up of indentured servants. They were supposed to see off the enemy but, instead, seized the opportunity to rebel against their masters. To cries of "Liberty, joyful Liberty", they refused to fight, while others swam to the Spanish ships to side with the enemy.<sup>30</sup> Left to their own devices and faced with such overwhelming force, the planters fled to the mountain where they remained hidden. The 'Indians' sustained them,<sup>31</sup> but while single individuals like Roger may have been rewarded, in general neither their presence nor their assistance was appreciated. Instead, those indigenous inhabitants who survived the colonisation of their island were put to work on the plantations. Few survived into the next century.<sup>32</sup>

During the early years of settlement tobacco proved a profitable commodity. It was a native plant that could be grown on small farms which required little investment<sup>33</sup> and a relatively small workforce. Processing the crop was straightforward: the crowns of the tobacco plants were topped before flowering,

<sup>25</sup> Merrill, Gordon Clark *The Historical Geography of St Kitts and Nevis* p51

<sup>26</sup> Watts, David *The West Indies* p153 and RS Dunn *Sugar and Slaves* p120, quoting Davies *History of Caribby-Islands* pp163-8, p177 and Harlow *Colonising* pp1-4 and pp18-20

For a fuller history of seventeenth century Nevis and the social and political developments, see chapter 4 'The Leeward Islands' in Richard Dunn's *Sugar and Slaves*.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, Richard S *Sugar and Slaves* p120

<sup>28</sup> In the seventeenth century Tortuga (Île de la Tortue) was a well-known buccaneering base (David Watts *The West Indies* pp169-70).

<sup>29</sup> Oliver, VL *Caribbeana* Vol 4 p106

<sup>30</sup> Dunn, Richard S *Sugar and Slaves* p120, quoting Harlow *Colonising* pp4-17

<sup>31</sup> CSP 1629-1630 p102 and p103

<sup>32</sup> Hubbard, Vincent K 'Slave Resistance in Nevis' in *NHCS Newsletter* No 39 (November 1995) p4

<sup>33</sup> Watts, David *The West Indies* p156

the leaves handpicked in stages as they matured on the plant stem, then hung in sheds or barns where they were cured by air or fire. Once dried, graded and twisted into ropes, the tobacco could be shipped off. The product found a ready market. Ever since tobacco had been introduced at the Elizabethan court in the late 1500s, people had enthusiastically taken up pipe-smoking, and the use of tobacco had spread to Europe and further east. Settlers who had established the English colony of Virginia had realised that money could be made from growing tobacco and had launched its large-scale cultivation, working the land with white indentured labourers and enslaved Africans. Soon Virginia overtook the West Indian suppliers, and the inhabitants of Nevis had to find another means of livelihood. In the 1640s they followed the example of St Kitts and began to switch to sugar.<sup>34</sup> The first documented evidence to sugar being grown in Nevis comes from a will dated August 1648 when a planter called John Scott left to members of his family his land with 'all cattle, goats, hogs, turkeys, tobaccos, sugars'.<sup>35</sup>

Sugar cane (officially known as *Saccharum officinarum*) is a tall-growing member of the grass family. When mature, its jointed stem contains a large amount of sweet juice that can be extracted, boiled and made into crystals. The origin of the sugar plants in Nevis has not been established with certainty. According to Revd Smith, it was said to have grown wild in St Kitts and was found there in 1630 but one historian has raised the possibility that Smith referred to American grass which is similar to cane.<sup>36</sup> Another stated that the Spaniards introduced and planted sugar cane very early on,<sup>37</sup> while the British West Indies Sugar Association attributes the arrival of the cane to the Caribs. The Association cites the year 1639 as its first reference.<sup>38</sup> The English in St Kitts made sugar before the settlers in Nevis who had acquired their first canes from their neighbours.<sup>39</sup> The technical know-how came from the Dutch who were keen to expand their West Indian trade.<sup>40</sup>

Sugar was a crop with a future. On the European market demand for the product was on the increase. International trade had begun to flourish in the sixteenth century and apart from tobacco, other exotic luxury products had reached Europe and had quickly become equally popular: coffee, tea and cocoa, which was made into a rich brew of hot chocolate. These fashionable new beverages were much enhanced by sweeteners such as honey or sugar, and some sugar was imported from Brazil, the Spanish Canary Islands and from Sicily. When trade and the supply and consumption of luxury drinks increased, the supply of sweeteners could no longer meet the demand. Consumers were prepared to pay a lot of money for their sugar, and as settlers in the West Indies had both the climate and well-suited soil, they readily began to plant sugar cane as their new cash crop. In Nevis sugar caught on quickly and before long, Nevis-produced sugar 'won the reputation of being the best made in any of the English islands'.<sup>41</sup> The soil was richer and more fertile than in other Leeward Islands; it was said that a gallon (4.5 litres) of juice from Nevis produced 24 ounces (680 grams) of sugar, compared to 16 from St Kitts.<sup>42</sup> By the mid-1650s Nevis was at the forefront of Leeward Islands producers.

<sup>34</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p175

According to Watts, tobacco was grown until the mid-1650s when Nevis converted to sugar (*The West Indies* p224). Although by 1655 sugar had become the major export crop (Dunn, RS *Sugar and Slaves* pp122-23), tobacco continued to be grown but planters were struggling and could not compete any more with the bigger, better financed sugar plantations. During the 1660s many gave up farming tobacco because restrictions on trade meant that they could not sell their crops at satisfactory prices (Olwig, Karen Fog *Global Culture* p20).

<sup>35</sup> Oliver, VL *Caribbeana* Vol 4 p106

<sup>36</sup> Watts, David *The West Indie* p76, p116 and p152, quoting Reverend William Smith *A Natural History of Nevis*

<sup>37</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p19

<sup>38</sup> *Sugar in the West Indies and British Guiana* p26

<sup>39</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p81, quoting Pere Labat

<sup>40</sup> Parno, Travis G 'Jesus Christ is Good but Trade is Better' p9, quoting BW Higman 'The Sugar Revolution' in *Economic History Review* Vol 53 No 2 p216

<sup>41</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p81, quoting Pere Labat

<sup>42</sup> This observation was made in 1727 by an anonymous observer (Eickelmann, Christine and David Small *The History of Clarke's Estate*). According to other sources, a gallon of juice boiled down to about a pound of sugar (Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p195 fn16; see also display in the Museum of Antigua and Barbuda, St John's, Antigua).

Establishing a sugar plantation required capital investment, technical know-how, as well as specialised buildings and equipment. According to one estimate, the cost of transforming a tobacco or cotton farm to sugar equalled at least five years' profit,<sup>43</sup> and then, for the first two or three years, the returns were small because the cane juice yielded no sugar. The juice could be distilled into rum,<sup>44</sup> but this was less lucrative and also required a still in which the rum could be processed. The buildings and equipment alone represented a substantial capital outlay that went beyond what an average smallholder could afford, and for the whole operation to be efficient, the plantation had to be large enough. It has been estimated that in the Eastern Caribbean the minimum size for a profitable estate was at least one hundred acres (40 hectares).<sup>45</sup>

The cultivation and processing of sugar also required a larger workforce than was necessary on tobacco or indigo farms, and as the settlement of other Caribbean islands progressed, they and the North American colonies competed for white indentured servants. To meet the demand, crimps scoured the harbours and the poor areas in the big cities, seeking to enlist volunteers. If no one volunteered, they signed up anybody they could, by fair means or foul. Some enterprising agents even tried their luck abroad and went in Germany, where the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) had cast adrift a large section of the population.<sup>46</sup> In England, in an effort to support the colonies (while at the same time clearing the country of undesirables), the judicial system quickly adapted itself, and the Courts readily used transportation as a means of punishment. The sentence was used indiscriminately on serious offenders, on political prisoners and on those found guilty of minor transgressions: small-time poachers, petty pickpockets and needy sheep stealers.<sup>47</sup> They sailed to the Americas alongside the destitute, the religious outcasts and the adventurers. No exact figures are known but Hilary Beckles has estimated that since the early days of colonising the West Indies until 1750 at least 34,000 bonded people left England to labour in the plantations.<sup>48</sup> Another writer states that in the period from 1654 to 1679 10,000 men and women emigrated from Bristol under indenture to the American colonies. Of these, Nevis received 1,247 people - convicts as well as volunteers. The numbers leaving from other ports would have been similar.<sup>49</sup>

Recruiting white labourers became ever harder and, when they died in great numbers, planters everywhere increasingly sought to fill their labour requirements with imported Africans. The first documented reference to the presence of enslaved Africans in Nevis comes from a will made exactly a year after sugar was first mentioned: in August 1649 the owner of Bath Plantation, James Hewett,

<sup>43</sup> Craton, Michael *Searching for the Invisible Man* p12

<sup>44</sup> Davy, John *The West Indies* pp478-79, quoting Reverend William Smith *A Natural History of Nevis* 1745

<sup>45</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p9

<sup>46</sup> Buckley, Roger Norman *The British Army in the West Indies* p42

<sup>47</sup> British Courts used transportation as a punishment for minor offences well into the nineteenth century. As the records from the Old Bailey show, this also applied to children. On one day in February 1814 a girl and a boy were each sentenced to be transported for seven years: Matilda Seymour, aged ten, for stealing a shawl and a petticoat and Thomas Bell, aged eleven, for stealing two silk handkerchiefs (Venetia Murray *High Society* p275).

<sup>48</sup> Beckles, Hilary McD 'Plantation Production and White 'Proto-Slavery': White Indentured Servants and the Colonisation of the English West Indies, 1624-1645' in *The Americas* Vol 41 No 3 (January 1985) p22

James Walvin has estimated that between 1630 and 1680 75,000 Britons immigrated to Virginia (*Black Ivory* p8).

<sup>49</sup> Souden, David 'Rogues, Whores and Vagabonds?' Indentured Servant Emigrants to North America, and the Case of mid-seventeenth century Bristol' in *Social History* Vol 3 No 1 (January 1978) p24 and David Watts *The West Indies* p361, quoting Smith (1947).

One shipment of 38 prisoners from London jails which Christopher Jeaffreson negotiated for St Kitts was described as being marched to the ship manacled together and guarded by an almost equal number of men to stop them from escaping. On their way to the ship the convicts 'committed several thefts, snatching away hats, perrewigs, etc. from several persons whose curiosity led them into the crowd'. Some of these men whom Jeaffreson sent for sale in the West Indies were sailors – a fact he omitted to tell prospective buyers, 'for nobody, I suppose, will be desirous to buy a servant that has that convenience of freeing himself, by the first boat he can steal' (Richard S Dunn *Sugar and Slaves* pp132-33, quoting JC Jeaffreson (ed) *A Young Squire* pp123-28 and pp191-200).



bequeathed three indentured servants and four 'Nigros'. One of these, Hewett noted, was 'out in rebellion'.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of establishing plantations in Africa was muted but dismissed. It was deemed not workable because of the many diseases which killed off whites astonishingly quickly. Shipping Africans across the Atlantic must therefore have seemed like an ingenious solution: they lived in the tropics and consequently would be better suited to withstand the rigours of Caribbean plantation work than whites. Commercial links with Africa already existed – Africa was exporting gold and ivory - and a trade in enslaved people already existed in Africa itself. These links only needed to be built on and extended so that a potentially limitless supply of workers could be packed off to the plantations. Acquiring Africans required a substantial initial capital outlay but planters reckoned that their investment would pay off in the long term.

As the demand for Africans increased, the Transatlantic Slave Trade gathered momentum and the English put in place measures to control the industry. In 1660 a charter was granted to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa to supply enslaved Africans to the West Indian colonies. Headed by the King's brother, the Duke of York (who later became King James II), its trade was, however, hampered by the Second Anglo-Dutch War which was fought between 1665 and 1667, and in 1672 the Company of Royal Adventurers surrendered its charter. Another establishment, the Royal African Company (RAC), formed in the same year, replaced it and took over its monopoly and its West African infrastructure: the forts, trading posts and holding depots.<sup>51</sup> In Nevis the RAC was represented by, among others, two men who jointly owned one of the parts that later made up Mountravers plantation: William Freeman and Robert Helme. While Freeman left for England, Helme was an RAC agent at a time when Nevis became the depot for the trade in enslaved Africans for all the Leeward Islands.

By the early 1660s Nevis had developed into 'a considerable English colony'.<sup>52</sup> Its landscape had changed. The fields were bigger, the tall sugar grass had mostly replaced the shorter tobacco and cotton plants, and chimneys from the boiling houses stood high among the canes. With its development away from tobacco and cotton to sugar had come a demographic shift because many of the poorer inhabitants wholly employed in the manufacture of tobacco were 'forced daily to desert the island'.<sup>53</sup> Wealthy landowners and venture capitalists from England replaced the small tenant farmers, and Africans replaced white agricultural workers.

While in the 1660s many other islands suffered from invasions by the French, Nevis escaped the enemy's attention and consequently did comparatively better than the other Leeward Islands. In 1678 Governor Stapleton valued estates in Nevis at about £384,000, while all the estates in St Kitts, Montserrat and Antigua were worth just over half that amount. Governor Stapleton also found it worth remarking that only in Nevis was there a sufficient number of planters able to fill the positions in both the Council and the Assembly. A planter himself, he chose Nevis as his residence.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hubbard, Vincent K 'Slave Resistance in Nevis' in *NHCS Newsletter* (November 1995 and February 1996) and VL Oliver *Caribbeana* Vol 4 pp106-07

From the early beginnings of plantation slavery, people refused to accept their enslavement. One of the earliest references to enslaved Africans on St Kitts dates from ten years earlier and this, too, referred to their resistance: sixty people had rebelled, escaped and gone into hiding. These rebels were among those brought in 1636 by Dutch traders to the French sector of St Kitts (Gaspar, David Barry *Bondsmen and Rebels* p173 and David Watts *The West Indies* p148).

<sup>51</sup> Planters protested at the Royal African Company's monopoly: prices were excessive and deliveries of Africans irregular and insufficient. With the accession of King William III and Queen Mary in 1689, the RAC's privileges were curtailed and the trade opened up (Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p267).

<sup>52</sup> CSP 1661-1668 No 1368

<sup>53</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p269, quoting CSP 1661-1668 No 731

<sup>54</sup> Dunn, Richard *Sugar and Slaves* p128, quoting CO 153/2/139-190

By March 1677/8 the enslaved population in Nevis had reached a total of 3,849. The Africans outnumbered white people by about 250. The ratio of enslaved men to enslaved women was near enough equal: there were 1,422 men (37 per cent) to 1,321 women (34 per cent). It can be assumed that most of the 1,106 children (29 per cent) were imported Africans but by then a proportion of youngsters would already have been island-born. In all, about one in three householders owned enslaved people which, compared to Barbados, was a relatively low proportion. There enslaved individuals were found in about four of every five households.<sup>55</sup> Among the whites, Nevis was a man's world - a tough, male working environment, in which men outnumbered women almost two to one: 1,541 white men (43 per cent) compared to 838 white women (23 per cent) lived in the island. Of the 1,216 white children in their households a number would not have been their own offspring but young indentured servants.

Among the white inhabitants the English made up the largest group (2,670), followed by the Irish (800), while 74 whites of other nationalities outnumbered the 51 Scots. Among the white inhabitants were eight Jews, five adults and three children, who belonged to a rapidly growing community that settled in Charlestown and as merchants and shopkeepers contributed to the island's commercial sector. One of the Jewish merchants, Solomon Israel came to figure on the margins of the early history of Mountravers plantation.<sup>56</sup>

Solomon Israel and the other Jews were among those who had migrated to Nevis to escape economic depression, political defeat, or religious persecution. In the 1640s Nevis had received eight hundred people from St Kitts (who had left after tobacco cultivation had been banned),<sup>57</sup> and from England came a number of defeated followers of the king.<sup>58</sup> In the 1660s English Quakers made their home in Nevis. Persecuted for their beliefs, they had been expelled to the West Indies.<sup>59</sup> The biggest influx, however, came during the Second Anglo-Dutch War when 5,000 refugees from other islands sought asylum from the 'cruel French and the bloody Indian cannibals'. The French, who had entered the war in 1666, captured Antigua in November that year and Montserrat three months later,<sup>60</sup> but although Nevis was blockaded, it escaped capture.

During the blockade no English ships could supply the island and the flood of refugees put such pressure on resources that provisions ran out. People ended up eating nothing but 'the herbs of the fields boiled with salt only'. Faced with mass starvation the French came to their rescue by allowing 'one of their ships and two Hamburgers to supply the island with provisions for payment'.<sup>61</sup> The mass arrival of people coincided with hurricanes striking the Leeward Islands in three successive years, causing devastation in St Kitts<sup>62</sup> and possibly also in Nevis. Later more migrants arrived in Nevis from Barbados, having escaped the dreadful winter of 1670/1.<sup>63</sup> Towards the end of the decade some more people from Barbados joined them.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> In 1680 82 per cent of householders in Barbados owned enslaved people. This was considerably higher than in the Leeward Islands: in 1678 in Antigua the figure was 47 per cent, in Nevis 31 per cent and in Montserrat 26 per cent (Dunn, Richard S *Sugar and Slaves* p129 Table 13. Social Structure in Nevis and Barbados, 1678-1680).

<sup>56</sup> Oliver, VL *Caribbeana* Vol 3 pp72-80, and M Terrell *The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis* pp45-8

<sup>57</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p24

<sup>58</sup> Iles, AJB *An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis*

<sup>59</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p285, quoting Acts, Privy Council, Vol 1 No 651

<sup>60</sup> Damer Powell, JW 'Sir James Russell: Defender of Nevis' in *United Empire* XXII (1931) p558

<sup>61</sup> CSP 1661-1668 No 1880: Petition to King, 27 November 1668

<sup>62</sup> In 1666 a hurricane hit the Leeward Islands. Francis, Lord Willoughby, was lost as he was hurrying to the relief of St Kitts (Deerr, Noel *The History of Sugar* Vol 1 p30). In the following year St Kitts was devastated by a hurricane (Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p758) and in 1668 a hurricane destroyed everything that was left of William Freeman's St Kitts estates (Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p180).

<sup>63</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p192

<sup>64</sup> Watts, David *The West Indies* p376

The population of Nevis, as elsewhere in the Caribbean, was in constant flux. While new people arrived, others left the island. One large group in search of a better life went to Jamaica where they, with other migrants from Montserrat and St Kitts, settled in the eastern part of the island. This particular group consisted mainly of poor people – former indentured servants and small farmers - who took with them their enslaved people,<sup>65</sup> and it can be assumed that in the migratory flows that occurred during these decades many of the Africans who had recently been transported to the Caribbean were, once more, uprooted and relocated elsewhere.

The islanders endured diseases and natural disasters. In 1642 a hurricane flattened their flimsy shelters<sup>66</sup> and wrecked two dozen ships at St Kitts. Another very heavy loss occurred in 1647 when two violent hurricanes raged through the Leeward Islands, destroying fifty vessels.<sup>67</sup> When ships were wrecked not only lives were lost but also plantation produce awaiting shipment across the Atlantic, or valuable imported supplies. In a matter of hours a whole season's income might vanish, or the food that was to sustain people for months. Even more disastrous was an outbreak of the plague which for about eighteen months spread throughout the Caribbean. It claimed as many as 15,000 lives. In Nevis blacks and whites perished. Many of the victims were freeholders whose small tracts of land were bought up by other planters,<sup>68</sup> enabling them to expand their sugar plantations. An earthquake which shook St Kitts in 1675 seemed to have caused little or no damage,<sup>69</sup> but in April 1690 Nevis was supposed to have lost part of its capital, Jamestown, to a tsunami that followed a seaquake.<sup>70</sup> In 1681 three hurricanes struck St Kitts - on one plantation it 'blew most of the negro huts clean away' - <sup>71</sup> and in 1682 everyone in Nevis suffered more hurricanes and great droughts.<sup>72</sup> Always living on the edge of existence is said to have made people live for the day. They acquired a hearty lust for life's pleasures and, faced with sudden death from disease or disaster, developed a fatalistic outlook.

England, meanwhile, had suffered its own upheavals, religious and social, and, very much occupied with its internal affairs, had largely left the colonies to their own devices. A period of resentment towards an increasingly autocratic monarchy had started when King Charles I began his reign in 1625 and culminated in the fighting between the pro-Catholic king and his supporters on the one side and Protestant Parliamentarians on the other. Their four-year-long civil war was followed by another, shorter period of internal warfare and the trial and execution of Charles I. After the king's death in 1649, England was declared a republic, and for eleven years the country was governed by a succession of parliaments. When news of the dissolution of the first republican parliament reached Nevis in November 1653, a mutiny broke out but soon peace was restored again.<sup>73</sup> Led by Oliver Cromwell until his death in 1658 and then by his son Richard until his resignation after only nine months in office, one short-lived government succeeded another until the republicans lost popular support and power. In 1660 the

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<sup>65</sup> Bridenbaugh and Bridenbaugh wrote that between 1,600 and 1,800 white people and 'negro slaves' from Nevis, St Kitts and Montserrat embarked for Jamaica with Governor Stokes and his family and settled in January 1657 at Morant Point. In 1660 fewer than 80 of them were still alive (*No Peace Beyond the Line* pp202-03). For slightly different versions, see also David Watts *The West Indies* p226 and Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p259.

<sup>66</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p116

<sup>67</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p758

<sup>68</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* pp127-28

<sup>69</sup> Deerr, Noel *The History of Sugar* Vol 1 p29

<sup>70</sup> Iles, AJB *An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis*

See Tessa Machling Chapter 2: Colonial Fortifications 'Jamestown, Morton's Bay and James Fort: Myth, Port and Fort' in E Morris, R Leech, A Crosby, T Machling and B Williams *Nevis Heritage Project Interim Report 2002* (Southampton, Nevis Heritage Project, University of Southampton, 2003) pp31-38

<sup>71</sup> Jeaffreson, John Cordy (ed) *A Young Squire* p120 and p279

<sup>72</sup> Hancock, David (ed) *The Letters of William Freeman* p274 William Freeman to Robert Helme, 18 July 1682; also for drought on St Kitts in 1683 see John Cordy Jeaffreson (ed) *A Young Squire* Vol 2 p53

<sup>73</sup> CSP 1653-1656 p411: Governor D Searle, Barbados, to the Council of State, 15 November 1653

monarchy, and – temporarily - England's stability, was restored when King Charles II assumed the throne.<sup>74</sup>

In the very early days of settlement the colonies had enjoyed unfettered trade - Dutch merchants, for instance, brought the first African captives to Nevis - <sup>75</sup> but as the colonies prospered and political life in England bedded down, England began to take measures to protect its commercial and political interests. Parliament introduced legislation which required that all colonial trade could only be conducted in English-built ships which were crewed mostly by English sailors, and that goods were exported only to England (as the colonies were considered English, this included ships and crews from, and exported to, the colonies). This legislation - called the Navigation Act - protected and promoted English trade but at the same time hindered the free flow of trade in the colonies and was deeply resented by early settlers.<sup>76</sup> An unpopular law, it was followed by a new tax, introduced under Charles II, which tied the colonies to the mother country and brought them more firmly under English political control:<sup>77</sup> Barbados and the northern Leeward Islands were required to pay four and a half per cent duty on all sugars shipped. Intended to finance improvements in the colonies as well as a system of colonial administration, in practice the income from this tax was used to plug gaps in the royal Exchequer.<sup>78</sup> Over the following century until its abolition in the late eighteenth century, Nevis and the other colonies repeatedly tried to have this tax reduced or withdrawn. When they applied for their share of the Exchequer's income, they mostly asked that a continuous military presence be financed and defences be improved. Nevis petitioned first for support within a year of the tax being introduced and asked for money to maintain the forts and employ standing guards.<sup>79</sup>

Originally Nevis and the other Leeward Islands were governed together with Barbados but Barbados was the Leeward Islands' main competitor, and in 1665 planters and merchants petitioned King Charles II for separation from Barbados, alleging unfair competition from the 'Barbathians'.<sup>80</sup> The request was granted and in 1671 the Leeward Islands were separated from Barbados, with Sir Charles Wheler acting as the first Governor-in-Chief of the Leeward Islands (St Kitts, Nevis, Montserrat, Antigua, Barbuda, and

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<sup>74</sup> King Charles II was the eldest surviving son of Charles I. He held nominal military command during the Civil War but fled to The Hague when the King's army lost to the Parliamentarians. After his father's execution he accepted the title of King of Scotland, sections of Ireland and of England which was then ruled by Oliver Cromwell. Having accepted the Scottish crown, in 1651 he invaded England with a Scottish army. Proclaimed King of England at Carlisle, shortly afterwards he lost the Battle of Worcester and with the help of Catholic sympathizers fled to France. He remained in exile until, after Oliver Cromwell's death and his son Richard's resignation as Lord Protector, the new Parliament asked him to return. After his death in 1685 he was succeeded by his brother James II.

<sup>75</sup> Hubbard, Vincent K *NHCS Newsletter* (November 1995) p4

<sup>76</sup> The first Navigation Act of 1651 was later followed by other protectionist legislation until it was finally abolished in 1849. Trade with foreign vessels was still possible but the Navigation Act introduced a layer of bureaucracy that had previously not existed. For instance, licences had to be applied for and if they were deemed flawed, ships could be confiscated. This happened in 1655 when two Danish vessels were impounded at Plymouth. Their masters' claim that they had a licence to trade from the Governors of St Kitts and Nevis was rejected. The captains petitioned for the release of their ships. In another instance, a Swedish master, Carsten Carstensen, captain of the *Stockholm*, had his goods seized at Antigua, at Montserrat and at Nevis. He petitioned the Lord Protector for free passage and the return of his goods (CSP 1653-1656 p422 and p420). When Nevis's life-threatening shortage of provisions was relieved by foreign ships supplying the island, even in wartime this necessitated a subsequent petition to the King. To the independently minded islanders this grovelling must have been galling (CSP 1661-1668 No 1880: Petition to King, 27 November 1668).

In 1661, ten years after the introduction of the English Navigation Act, Scotland retaliated with its own Act 'for encouraging of Shipping and Navigation'. The Scottish Act had little effect because the country was poor and could not enforce the legislation (Burns, *A History of the British West Indies* p402). After the Act of Union of 1707 united England and Wales with Scotland, the English trading rights were extended to Scotland, and the two countries were on an equal footing.

<sup>77</sup> Parno, Travis G "*Jesus Christ is good but Trade is better*" p15

<sup>78</sup> Watts, David *The West Indies* p264

<sup>79</sup> CSP 1661-1668 No 732: Petition by the Assembly to the King, 29 April 1664

<sup>80</sup> Penson, Lillian M *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p195, quoting BM Egerton MSS 2395, ff455-56



Anguilla). His short-lived governorship ended in accusations of embezzlement.<sup>81</sup> The former Lieutenant-Governor of Montserrat, the very capable Sir William Stapleton, succeeded him.<sup>82</sup>

As a representative of the King, the role of the Governor-in-Chief, or Commander-in-Chief, was to direct colonial government so as to maintain English interests and, after 1707, when Scotland became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, British interests. The Governor derived his authority from ordinances called the Royal Commission and Instructions. Intended for use in emergencies rather than continual application, they limited his influence and authority, while his lack of legal training and his ignorance of local affairs could render him vulnerable to drift into 'the waiting web of colonial customs and interests'.<sup>83</sup> Successive Governors, among them Sir William Stapleton, acquired plantations from which they supplemented their incomes, and while this gave them a first-hand insight into the sugar industry, Governors could easily lose their political independence and be swayed to side with planters. Patronage was then an accepted part of the political system and those governors who, like William Mathew Burt, had family in the islands, were subject to the powerful push and pull of kith and kin. Every Governor was inundated with requests for favours and official appointments.

Under the overall command of the Governor, each of the Leeward Islands had its own political structure and administration, its separate judiciary and its separate defence force, the militia. Down to the annually-elected Vestry Boards that managed the parishes, the institutions were fashioned after English models. Governance of the islands lay in the hands of the Legislatures that consisted of a House of Assembly and a Board of Council. Like the House of Commons, Assembly members were elected bodies but voting was reserved for landowners who had a minimum annual income of £40 or 40 acres of freehold land.<sup>84</sup> Council members, like members of the British upper chamber, the House of Lords, were appointed by the King at the recommendation of the Governor. Of course, the Governor would choose the most loyal subjects of the Crown<sup>85</sup> and those he deemed most worthy of reward. In practice, this meant appointing the richest and most prominent planters, who, because of the inherent weaknesses in the Governor's position, were largely able to govern themselves. Often members of the Council were in conflict with their less affluent colleagues in the Assembly, but when it came to opposing outside interference, they usually united in common cause.

The Legislature had the power to raise taxes, adopt budgets and pass legislation. To become effective, the laws had to receive royal approval, and in 1672, when Stapleton became Governor, he received instructions to transmit to England any acts that had been passed for confirmation.<sup>86</sup> Royal assent was not automatic and legislation could be, and was, returned to the colony for revision.

The judicial system in Nevis was in the hands of the same people who held the political power. The Commander-in-Chief, as the King's representative, nominated certain members of the judiciary in the islands where a court was held,<sup>87</sup> but the judges and the juries were the same men who had passed the laws. Planters not only made the laws, they also enforced them. They presided over a two-tier system of control: the formal island's legislation and the informal rules they imposed on their own plantations. They had the power to decide to what extent they complied with, or diverged from, the island's laws because

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<sup>81</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p340, quoting CSP 1669-1674 No 393

<sup>82</sup> Deerr, Noel *The History of Sugar* Vol 1 p150

<sup>83</sup> Buckley, Roger Norman *The British Army* pp68-9

<sup>84</sup> Simmonds, Keith C 'Political and Economic Factors Influencing St Kitts-Nevis Policy: An Historical Perspective' in *The Journal of Negro History* Vol 48 No 4 (1987) pp277-86

<sup>85</sup> Occasionally, when several vacancies arose because of deaths of Council members, the Governor's appointees would take their seats immediately rather than wait for ratification.

<sup>86</sup> Penson, Lillian M *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p292

<sup>87</sup> For the legal system in the islands, see Goveia, E *Slave Society* pp60-2

plantations were largely self-contained units. There was little danger of being held accountable in a court of law, and if planters did face prosecution - as well-documented cases in the nineteenth century were to demonstrate – the brotherhood of whites closed ranks. They blatantly disregarded evidence and applied the law selectively. The legal system in Nevis functioned imperfectly from its early days of colonisation right through to the abolition of slavery. Inconsistency existed not only within Nevis but also within the Leeward Islands. The islands refused to cooperate and establish a single legal framework. One of the Governors was astonished to find that in the courts in Nevis ‘some matters they will determine by English laws, in others, without any rational disparity, they reject English law; and in another island, the reverse of those decisions will be the judgment given’.<sup>88</sup> This fluid approach to the law enabled those whites who were in power to maintain their interests.

While the settlers established their political and legal institutions, they also began to address their religious obligations and in 1643 built their first church, St Thomas’s, on a hill in the western part of the island. By the 1670s there were ‘some ministers and schoolmasters’, and children in Nevis received schooling of a kind. In providing some education, Nevis was alone among the Leeward Islands.<sup>89</sup> By the 1680s, congregations in three more parishes had their own churches,<sup>90</sup> and the Jewish community worshipped in their own synagogue and buried their dead in their own burial ground in Charlestown.<sup>91</sup>

Nevis is divided into five parishes whose boundaries meet near the top of the central mountain: St Paul (in which the capital, Charlestown, lies), St John Figtree, St George Gingerland, St James Windward and St Thomas Lowland. The parishes had their own Minister who was accountable to the Bishop of London.<sup>92</sup> In addition to the Minister, each parish also employed a parish clerk. Their salaries, paid in the form of sugar, were raised from the parishioners.<sup>93</sup> If parishioners objected to their Minister’s sermons or his religious activities they could withhold his livelihood, and few clergymen would have risked incurring their flock’s displeasure. Indeed, some of the clergymen in Nevis were planters themselves, and until slavery was abolished, they all owned enslaved people. In reality, then, the clergymen’s interests were closely bound to the planters’.

In addition to their pastoral responsibilities Ministers also had a political role because they automatically became members of the Vestry Board. They joined the elected members, the vestrymen. The vestrymen had influence on the political landscape in that they managed the local government at parish level: they elected churchwardens who collected and managed local taxes, paid out poor relief and oversaw the maintenance of parish roads and bridges.<sup>94</sup> Members of the Vestry Boards were elected by freeholders in each parish. Poor whites, therefore, had no direct influence on the institutions that governed the island, nor were they represented.

Among the early settlers were people who had to leave England because of their religious views, such as members of the Society of Friends, commonly called the Quakers. As followers of George Fox, who had begun preaching an egalitarian, anti-war and anti-slavery doctrine in the late 1640s, they believed in the

<sup>88</sup> Bridenbaugh, C and R Bridenbaugh *No Peace Beyond the Line* p405

<sup>89</sup> CSP 1675-1676 No 784

<sup>90</sup> According to Governor Stapleton, by 1678 Nevis could boast four of the ten churches in Leeward Islands (Dunn, Richard S *Sugar and Slaves* p128). The church in St James Windward contains one of three black crucifixes in the Caribbean.

<sup>91</sup> Terrell, Michelle M *The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis* p46 and p48

<sup>92</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p286, quoting CSP 1677-1680 No 1488

According to Burns, the Bishop of London had assumed ecclesiastical control over the colonies. No authority has been found that would have given the Bishop of London this right but his ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the colonies was generally accepted until 1824 when the first Bishops were appointed for Barbados and Jamaica.

<sup>93</sup> ‘By an Act of Nevis, dated 10 February 1671 and confirmed 8 February 1681, each parish was to pay 16,000 pounds of sugar yearly as a stipend for the Minister, also 2,000 pounds for each Clerk who is to keep a Register of all Christnings (sic) and Burials in each Parish’. Marriages, it was commented, were not mentioned (Oliver, VL *Caribbeana* Vol 1 p286).

<sup>94</sup> Goveia, E *Slave Society* p69

existence of God in every person and refused to bear arms or pay tithe to the established church. Although they and other dissenting groups had been promised religious freedom, under King Charles II they were persecuted and in the 1660s many Quakers were expelled from England. The refugees were transported to Jamaica, Barbados and Nevis, and those unable to pay their passage were indentured for seven years.<sup>95</sup> In the West Indies, they continued to follow Fox's teachings and provided religious instruction to their enslaved people. This brought them into conflict with the planters, and laws forbidding Quakers to take these people to their services (called meetings) were passed in Barbados in 1676 and in Nevis two years later. When Quakers consistently disobeyed this law they were subjected to further measures: Quakers were prohibited from coming ashore at Nevis, and any enslaved person caught attending their meetings was put in irons.<sup>96</sup> Quakers and some other groups of dissenters gained religious freedom in England through an act passed in 1689;<sup>97</sup> Catholics, however, had to wait another hundred years until they were free to worship in Britain<sup>98</sup> and then a further thirty until all civil and religious restrictions were removed. While Nevis took measures to suppress the spread of Quakerism, from time to time anti-Catholic sentiments also surfaced. In the mid-1700s, for instance, some rioting occurred over efforts to increase the rights of Catholics. On a wider scale, the religious divide between Protestants and Catholics prevented any real cooperation between English and Spanish colonies - despite the common danger both faced from pirates and the French.<sup>99</sup>

Each Caribbean colony had its own political and judicial structures. Coupled with their religious divisions and the geographic distances between the islands, this led to an individualistic outlook in which common interests were set aside. The wish for sovereignty extended to each island employing an agent who represented their particular concerns in London. Part ambassador, part lobbyist, an island's agent liaised between the island administration and the metropolitan Parliament and, in turn, supplied the island with political and commercial information. It was recognised that an agent was open to manipulation by one section of the community or the other, and to underline that he was to represent everyone in the island equally, he owed his appointment to the Legislature.<sup>100</sup> Governor Stapleton, in an effort to unite the disparate Leeward Islands, advocated that the islands shared an agent, with each Legislature contributing to his salary but in Nevis Stapleton's proposal was rejected immediately.<sup>101</sup> Nevis was determined to go it alone.

While colonial agents represented the islands' interests in London, the Governor also employed his own representative, a personal agent. He performed the duties of an attorney, such as sending out goods for personal or plantation use, and he defended the Governor's own interest before the British government.<sup>102</sup> One of Sir William Stapleton's personal agents in London was none other than the former RAC agent in Nevis, William Freeman, who with Robert Helme owned one of the parts that later became Mountravers plantation.<sup>103</sup> Stapleton and Freeman were not only related - William Stapleton was

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<sup>95</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p285, quoting Acts, Privy Council Vol 1 No 651

<sup>96</sup> Cadbury, Henry 'Negro Membership in the Society of Friends' in *The Journal of Negro History* Vol 21 No 2 (April 1936) p151

<sup>97</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p285

<sup>98</sup> Reed, Michael *The Georgian Triumph 1700-1830* p197

<sup>99</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p284

<sup>100</sup> Penson, Lillian M *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p79

<sup>101</sup> Penson, Lillian M *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p67, quoting CO 1/50: 15 November 1682

The earliest reference to an 'Agent for the Island of Nevis' dates from 1659 when Captain Roger Morton held the post (Lillian M Penson *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p17, quoting CO 1/13 No 67). In 1690 Nevis did agree to a Leeward Island agent because by then the attitude towards the French had changed (CO 154/4: 8 November 1690) but reverted to employing its own representative. One of these, Samuel Martin, was so slack in corresponding that the Legislature wanted to get rid of him but legally this was not possible. Eventually Martin resigned. A subsequent Act enshrined the right of dismissal by the Legislature (UKNA, CO 324/60:1 April 1751).

<sup>102</sup> Penson, Lillian M *The Colonial Agents of the British West Indies* p61

<sup>103</sup> William Freeman was Sir William Stapleton's personal agent from 1675 to 1682. From 1681 to 1685 it was a man called Patrick Trant, who stood accused of embezzling a large sum of money belonging to Stapleton. Trant was taken to court but the lawsuit

Freeman's sister's brother-in-law – but also similar in character. Both were fiery and quick-tempered.<sup>104</sup> Sir William Stapleton held the post of Governor-in-Chief until 1685.<sup>105</sup>

At the beginning of 1685, King Charles II died and his brother James II was crowned King. At this point his nephew, the Duke of Monmouth, decided to leave his exile in Holland and to claim the crown as his. In June 1685 Monmouth landed at Lyme Regis, marched northwards while quickly gathering a band of 10,000 followers. The rebel army met the king's forces in the Somerset Levels and, suffering huge losses, Monmouth and his men lost the battle. Those taken prisoner were tried and over three hundred men were executed. The presiding judge was under order from the king to provide transportable convicts to several of his friends and political allies who could sell the condemned men to speculators, and among those waiting to receive prisoners were the London agents who represented the various West Indian islands. The agents undertook to pay the prisoners' passage in return for the transportees serving a fixed period in the colonies. Such was the demand that the islands' agents competed for the convicts and tried to snap them up as soon as the Court had dealt with them.<sup>106</sup>

These political prisoners were superior to the common criminals. Otherwise law-abiding, these able-bodied men had fought for their principles and beliefs rather than need or greed. Many of the Monmouth rebels were skilled men employed in the cloth trade - men like Richard Jackson, a comber from Uffculme in Devon; John Coleman of Ruishton near Taunton in Somerset; William Coles, a weaver from Taunton St Mary and John Browne, a worsted comber from the same parish. They were among the seventy or so Monmouth rebels indentured to Sir William Stapleton. On 20 October 1685 they left Bristol, bound for St Kitts and Nevis.<sup>107</sup> In another ship another follower of the Duke of Monmouth, a man called Azariah Pinney, also sailed for Nevis. He was to become the central character in the early development of Mountravers plantation.<sup>108</sup>

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extended well beyond Sir William Stapleton's death in 1686. It was ultimately won by Stapleton's widow (Handlist of the Papers of the Stapleton Family, University of Manchester 1988).

<sup>104</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* pp341-42

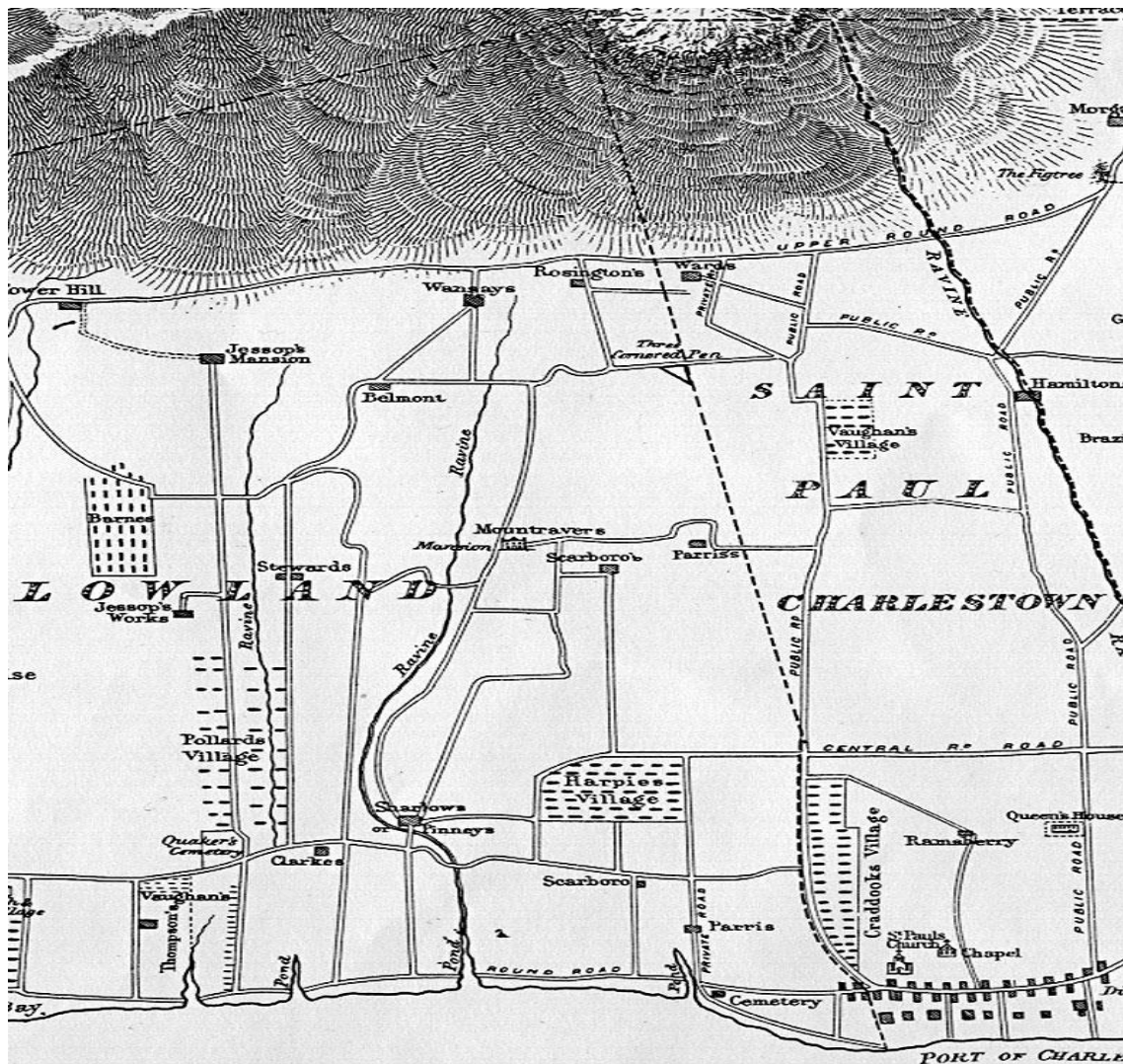
<sup>105</sup> Burns, Sir Alan *History of the British West Indies* p341

<sup>106</sup> Jeaffreson, John Cordy (ed) *A Young Squire* Vol 2 p218, Vol 1 pp144-47 and Vol 2 p224 Christopher Jeaffreson to Colonel Hill, 5 August 1685

<sup>107</sup> Wigfield, W Macdonald (comp) *The Monmouth Rebels 1685*

<sup>108</sup> The name Mountravers was not used until the 1820s. In the early 1760s it was described as the 'Lowland Estate', or the 'Estate of John Frederick Pinney dec'd'. It is sometimes mis-spelt Montravers.





Detail from 'Map of the Island of Nevis' J A B Iles, 1871,  
showing Mountravers and the surrounding estates (viewed from the west, the Caribbean Sea)

## Mountravers: an overview

Mountravers is situated on the west side of the island in the parish of St Thomas Lowland, about two kilometres northeast of the capital Charlestown. Like many other Caribbean sugar estates, it evolved over time. It grew with purchases of additional land, foreclosed mortgages and a crucial marriage that combined its main constituents, two properties called Proctor's and Charlot's (later Sharloes). To this, successive owners added small tracts of land and surrounding estates.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Although the term Mountravers was not recorded until the latter part of the eighteenth century, it is used here for ease of reference.

The early history of the ownership of Proctor's and the other Helme/Pinney plantation, Mountain in St John's Figtree parish, is complex and it is apparent from Richard Pares's Notes that he, too, struggled trying to disentangle the identities of the main characters and their various transactions. In themselves, the documents in the Pinney Papers do not tell the whole story but with the help of the Freeman Papers Professor David Hancock has unravelled it to its earliest beginnings. However, there appear to be some gaps and some discrepancies, such as the identities of Robert Helme, Mary Helme and Elizabeth Baxter.

In the seventeenth century, the men concerned with Proctor's and Charlot's were strong-minded characters: William Freeman, the Helme brothers Robert and William, and Azariah Pinney, a political exile. All the men were merchants as well as planters. Given the people involved and the political climate at the time, perhaps unsurprisingly, not every transaction stands up to close scrutiny: skulduggery, the proceeds from smuggling, strategic manoeuvring and possibly even downright fraud all contributed to the early development of what became known as Mountravers plantation.

The arrival in Nevis in the 1710s of Azariah Pinney's lawyer son John with wife and children heralded a more genteel age, but the early death of John Pinney meant that his widow Mary had to maintain the plantation and keep it functioning as a business. In this she succeeded, just as her mother, the twice widowed Mary Helme/Travers, had done before her.

On Mary Pinney's death, the plantation descended to her only surviving child, John Frederick. Born in Nevis but schooled in England, he chose to remain in England, and for three decades Mountravers was managed on his behalf by James Browne and then, briefly, by one of Browne's sons. On John Frederick Pinney's death in 1762 the plantation passed as an entailed property to a young relative, John Pretor, who took the name Pinney and throughout this study will be referred to as JPP (John Pretor Pinney). His period of ownership is well documented and forms the core of this study. JPP spent close to two decades in Nevis and, before returning to live in England, he acquired the uppermost part of the estate, Woodleys or Woodland. After JPP's son and heir, also called John Frederick, came of age, the entailed estate descended to him. In the early nineteenth century Mountravers was sold out of the Pinney family to the Huggins family of Nevis. They added three neighbouring estates: Clarke's, Scarborough's and Parris's.

Mountravers was worked as a sugar plantation from at least the last quarter of the seventeenth century but earlier, as elsewhere in the island, tobacco, cotton, or indigo may have been its main crops. It is known that at least from the 1670s, if not earlier, its main labour force consisted of enslaved Africans while white men mostly held positions as supervisors and managers.

The larger of the two properties which formed Mountravers, Proctor's, lay about halfway up the central mountain at a height of 325 feet (99 metres).<sup>110</sup> It was surrounded by several other estates,<sup>111</sup> and, bordering and overlooking Charlot's, it had no access to the sea. In the late 1670s, when there were three hundred estates in Nevis, Proctor's belonged to the 37 'middling' properties that were worked with between twenty and 49 people. It is not known how many men, women and children were then on Charlot's but at the close of the seventeenth century Charlot's had 19 people and, by the same measure, was among the 'small' properties which accounted for the overwhelming majority in the island.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Map 'Nevis with Part of Saint Christopher (Saint Kitts)' Series E803 DOS 343

<sup>111</sup> In 1680 the land was bounded by one owner each to the east and to the west but by several to the north and to the south, which suggests that Proctor's ran in a strip up the central mountain (PP, Box O, Bundle 5, notes courtesy of David Hancock; also WI Boxes A and B).

<sup>112</sup> In his analysis of the 1677/8 Nevis census, in addition to 37 middling estates David Watts has found thirteen 'big' owners who had fifty or more enslaved people and 251 'small' owners with fewer than 19 people (David Watts *The West Indies* p334, quoting Catalogue of Colonial Papers 1669-1674 Numbers 429-431). Richard Dunn has used a different measure to determine social structure in Nevis. According to him, big planters had sixty plus people – of which there were eight – while middling had between 20 and 59. By this measure Proctor's belonged to 45 middling estates. The majority, about a thousand, were small farms worked with up to 19 people (Richard S Dunn *Sugar and Slaves* p129 Table 13. Social Structure in Nevis and Barbados, 1678-1680).

According to David Hancock, in the 1670s the two properties together comprised only 0.1 % of the island's cultivable and settled land and 12 % of all patented land (CSP (Colonial) 1675-1676 p499/ No 1152: 'Nevis contains by computation 320,000 acres, about 7 miles in breath and 15 miles in length, 2,000 acres patented, the whole Island settled, except the top of the mountain.'). Although the number of enslaved people on the two estates made up more than one and a half per cent of the total slave population (VL Oliver *Caribbean* Vol 3 pp27-35), this is deceptive because at the time of the census the two plantations were not yet worked as one unit.

In terms of acreage, Proctor's was also the bigger of the two properties: in 1680 it consisted of 189 acres (76.5 hectares) while sixteen years later Charlot's had less than half, 87 acres. However, the ratio of enslaved people per acre was lower on Proctor's than on Charlot's: on Proctor's, on average, 4.1 people worked an acre of land, on Charlot's the ratio was 4.6 people per acre. In theory, at least, this would have meant that people were worked harder on Proctor's but by 1680 not all the land on Proctor's had yet been cleared for growing cane while on Charlot's the lowland forest would already have given way to sugar cultivation.<sup>113</sup> In its early days, Charlot's, therefore, could have been the more demanding working environment. In addition, it lay on the lower ground, close to the sea and the swampy foreshore. Anyone working on Charlot's would have had to cope with the additional health hazards associated with its location: warmer, damper air and a higher concentration of pests such as chiggers and mosquitoes.

Once the uppermost part, Woodland, was added, Mountravers stretched from sea level to the southwest peak, which at its highest point reaches 3,193 feet (973 metres).<sup>114</sup> The estate was in a favourable location for cultivating sugar cane. It had suitable soil, the land was at an angle that facilitated drainage while retaining moisture and, lying in the path of the prevailing winds and the rain shadow of Nevis Peak, Mountravers enjoyed relatively high rainfall. Its western-facing slopes did, however, also experience a higher degree of transpiration (the evaporation of moisture from leaf surfaces) as a result of exposure to the afternoon sun.<sup>115</sup> For the cane to ripen well it needs sun and adequate rainfall, followed by a spell of dry weather in which the crop can be taken off<sup>116</sup> and, as long as the dry periods came at the right time, the harvests were safe.

In addition to providing good drainage, the sloping land also meant that canes could be relatively easily transported from the fields to the mills and the boiling houses, and the barrels full of sugar and rum could be rolled to the seashore. Having the beach at the bottom of the land also meant that small vessels could bring supplies from Charlestown. With the main island road running through Mountravers, the estate was well-served with transport links.

Two ghuts cut deep into the land and supplied the estate with water. In some places stone bridges spanned the ghuts and dams were built to contain the flow. At its lower reaches, breastworks contained one of the ghuts but there is no direct evidence that irrigation played any part in the cultivation. The request to one of the managers to 'pay particular attention to keep all the water sluices open to preserve the lands in the heavy rains' probably referred to controlling the flow of water in the dams rather than using it for irrigation.<sup>117</sup> Domestic drinking water for the Great House was produced with the help of a drip stone while in the slave village a so-called slab (in effect a pool) collected and retained rainwater.

Mountravers had at least three sets of sugar works: at low-lying Charlot's, at the middle plantation – the old Proctor/Travers estate – and at Woodland. Cane would have been crushed in mills driven by animals until an additional windmill was built in the 1790s. The industrial age arrived in the early 1820s with the installation of a steam engine.

By then the estate was in possession of Peter Thomas Huggins. His father Edward had bought the property in 1808 by way of a mortgage from the Pinneys. Eight years later Huggins senior had paid off the mortgage and he handed the estate over to his son Peter Thomas. When Edward Huggins acquired

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<sup>113</sup> According to David Watts, almost all the lowland forest in Nevis had gone by 1672 (*The West Indies* p394, citing Catalogue of Colonial Papers 1669-1674 No 392).

<sup>114</sup> Map 'Nevis with Part of Saint Christopher (Saint Kitts)' Series E803 DOS 343

<sup>115</sup> Ivor Jackson *Drought Hazard Assessment* p9

<sup>116</sup> Higman, BW *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica* p20

<sup>117</sup> PP, LB 9: JPP to TP Weekes, 24 October 1791



Mountravers, it contained close to 400 acres but in the 1820s Peter Thomas added the neighbouring plantations (Clarke's, Scarborough's and Parris's), as well as other small tracts of land so that the old 'Pinney's Estate' grew to around 730 acres. On his death, Peter Thomas Huggins left the northern part of his estate (Clarke's and its surrounding lands) to one son, Charles Pinney Huggins, and Mountravers and other southern lands to another son, Edward John Huggins.

Along with many other West Indian sugar plantations, the Huggins properties were deeply in debt. Put into the hands of receivers, in 1874 and 1879 the two parts - Clarke's and Mountravers, together with the surrounding lands - were auctioned and bought by a Scottish company, James Ewing and Co. Under the terms of sale, two of Peter Thomas Huggins's unmarried daughters were allowed to live in the Great House until they died.

In the following decades sugar became less important. Part of the estate was given over to the growing of coconuts and the production of copra, as well as stock keeping. By the time the Scottish company sold the old 'Pinney's Estate' in 1941, sugar production had ceased altogether. After changing hands again, in 1946 the property was purchased by a local entrepreneur, Walter Wade. He and his family worked the land until 1974 when it was sold to a development corporation. In the mid-1990s the Great House and a small tract of land around it was purchased by a descendent of the American branch of the Pinney family while the rest remained owned by the corporation. It went into receivership and the land was then acquired by the Nevis Island Administration.

In the early 1990s the northern part of the estate, Clarke's, was transformed into a luxury hotel with its own 18-hole golf course. In building these facilities valuable archaeological evidence was destroyed.<sup>118</sup> Plans to build another hotel on the land surrounding the Mountravers Great House site – complete with a replica windmill – were first muted by a North American developer but these did not materialise, nor the plans by another developer to build a new, upmarket hotel and residential scheme. Several of the historic sites on the land have been returned to public ownership and it remains to be seen what the old Pinney estate will eventually become.

## How sugar was made

To appreciate the work people did on Mountravers one has to understand the process of sugar-making. While this changed over time and planters tried out different methods - in the 1780s, for instance, one manager on Mountravers experimented with improving the quality of sugar by using over a thousand eggs but quickly abandoned the trial - <sup>119</sup> the basic principles remained the same.

Everything depended on good timing so as to coincide with the annual weather cycle. Newly planted cane had to establish itself before the weather turned drier towards the end of the year,<sup>120</sup> and the finished product had to be ready before the onset of the hurricane season so that the fully-laden ships could safely leave the West Indies. Plantation workers could subvert each of the steps involved in the production process. Once cut, sugar cane rotted easily; once squeezed, the cane juice fermented quickly, and once

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<sup>118</sup> The slave village on the old Clarke's Estate lay on the ridge between two deep ghuts. Measurements suggest that the eastern end of the village lay partly at the tee end of the 15th hole of the Four Seasons golf course and partly in the bush to the south of the tee. Interestingly, the west (or bottom) end of the village by measurement lay roughly where, in 2002, the bush ended and an edge of the hole began. A search by the authors in the bush south of the tee produced some evidence of a wall and concrete accretion. East beyond, close by, there was possible terracing or an animal mill platform; east beyond this there was compelling evidence of rubble banks marking the public road which is shown on the Incumbered Estate plan drawn up in the 1870s.

<sup>119</sup> PP, AB 30 Plantation a/c

<sup>120</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p16



boiled, the sugar syrup spoilt if it was not processed properly. Owners' profits could quickly dip or diminish.

The first task, preparing the soil, was best done during the early months of the rainy season. It not only allowed the cane to grow sufficiently but if holing commenced during dry weather, the soil would not yield and, if done later, it would be too wet and heavy. To prepare the soil for planting the workers had to loosen it manually with a hoe; ploughs were only introduced on Mountravers in the 1820s.

The area to be planted was marked out, either with rope, chain or sticks, and at regular intervals people dug out holes or trenches. Depending on the nature of the soil, the holes were between 4 and 7 inches deep and between 4 and 5 feet wide (between 10 and 18 cm deep and 1.22 m and 1.52 m wide).<sup>121</sup> Holing, as it was called, was back-breaking work and usually reserved for the strongest, and at least one manager was known to have used digging cane holes as punishment.<sup>122</sup>

The task required not just strength but also the skill to heap the banks in such a way that the soil would not be washed away during heavy rains and, depending on the steepness of the land, planters employed different techniques. The general advice was that 'The art of holing consists of keeping every row of cane holes on an exact level, in such a manner, that no hole, from one end of the line to the other, shall be higher or lower than the next'.<sup>123</sup>

Sugar was cultivated by stem cuttings. From these shoots or eyes sprout at both ends. Pieces of cane about a foot long were placed horizontally into the holes and, to collect the rainwater, an indentation was made around the plant. On flat land as many as five cuttings were planted in one rectangular hole perhaps 5 feet wide and 7 long; on steep slopes where holes were narrow, only three.<sup>124</sup> Normally young shoots developed in four to five weeks<sup>125</sup> but it took about 14 to 18 months for the grass to reach a height of about eight feet (2.5 m). Fields were planted in rotation.

During the cane growing period fields had to be manured. Animal dung tended to be used but planters were always on the look-out for other sources of fertiliser: ash from the boiling house, rotted-down banana stalks or decayed vegetation from the mountainside, mould from the ghuts and off the boundary walls, or plants that grew on the foreshore. Mules transported the dung in horsehair bags<sup>126</sup> but to reach the steeper-lying grounds people had to carry it head-load by head-load. For this they used specially-made dung baskets. Some planters, however, preferred to manure their steep mountainside fields by a more direct method: they staked their animals and made shelves out of heaped cane trash for them to stand and lie on. The bedding was brought down from the higher-lying ground.<sup>127</sup>

It was said that applying fertiliser increased the yield by about a third,<sup>128</sup> and as the soil wore out it became ever more important to nourish it. In the early days of sugar-growing it was 'good agricultural practice to spread 30 baskets of dung on an acre of land'.<sup>129</sup> Baskets, however, varied in capacity from about 25 pounds<sup>130</sup> to as much as 80 pounds (11.3 to 36.3 kg),<sup>131</sup> it is therefore difficult to calculate

<sup>121</sup> Lambert, S (ed) *House of Commons Sessional Papers Vol 69 Evidence by the Legislature of Nevis*

<sup>122</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p28

<sup>123</sup> Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* pp43-4 and p46

<sup>124</sup> Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* p70

<sup>125</sup> Grainger, James *The Sugar Cane – a Poem in Four Books* p22

<sup>126</sup> Lambert, S (ed) *House of Commons Sessional Papers Vol 69 Evidence by the Legislature of Nevis and Vol 71 James Tobin's evidence*

<sup>127</sup> Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* pp25-6

<sup>128</sup> Lambert, S (ed) *House of Commons Sessional Papers Vol 69 Evidence by the Legislature of Nevis*

<sup>129</sup> Watts, D *The West Indies* p400

<sup>130</sup> Lambert, S (ed) *House of Commons Sessional Papers Vol 72 Alexander Douglas's evidence*

exactly how much manure was needed to cover an acre, and to assess how much was required in the later years of sugar-making, once the soil got exhausted.

Apart from applying fertiliser it was important to keep the fields free of weeds. This was the job of the weeding gang which consisted largely of women and young children. Ideally, after holing and before planting they would have taken out every weed – ‘however small and insignificant it may appear’ – but their hoes would never catch everything.<sup>132</sup> Once the cane started to shoot, they had to clean several times in between the plants until the advancing growth surpassed the weeds and made the job unnecessary.

When the cane was ripe for harvesting, first the leaves were trimmed off and then the stalks were slashed down with a billhook. Some planters claimed that females were best suited for cutting cane because they chopped low to the ground but this could have been said to justify employing women to do this tough job. To slash through stems one or two inches thick (2.5 to 5 cm), day after day, required great strength and stamina and workers had to take care not to injure themselves. Less arduous was the task of gathering the canes and binding them into bundles with cane leaves, but this job, too, carried some risks: the sharp edges of the grass cut people’s skin, and certainly some of the sores from which field workers suffered would have resulted from injuries sustained when handling the cane leaves. The ‘weak female blacks’ did the bundling. One woman followed several cutters. Although a planter claimed that the strong moved quickly, could then rest while the ‘slow and lazy’ followed behind,<sup>133</sup> it was the driver’s task to ensure that the line of cutters moved along in unison.

It has been estimated that an acre or two of cane produced between 60 to 80 tons of vegetable matter.<sup>134</sup> If the cut cane was left standing and allowed to re-grow (this was called ratooning), tops and leaves were not removed but remained in the field, thereby fertilising the growing plant and protecting its roots against the sun.<sup>135</sup> Ratooning resulted in lower yields and planters had to decide whether and how often they would leave the plants before repeating the process of holing the land and of replanting it afresh.

If the cane plants were grubbed up, then the leaves had to be taken away. They were useful and fulfilled several functions: as litter for the animal pens (so that, in time, the leaves would return to the fields as manure), as thatch for the ‘negro houses’, or as fuel in the sugar-making process. Dried in the sun and turned several times, this fuel was variously called bagasse or megass. If vermin was present in the field, the leaves were burnt to destroy the pests.<sup>136</sup>

The bundled cane stalks were carried or carted to the mill for processing. Different types of mills operated in Nevis: they were powered either by animals or wind, later by steam. Other islands also had watermills. Mules or cattle drove the animal mills. The numbers employed varied; Davy in the 1840s noted that he had seen an old cattle mill consisting of ‘three perpendicular rollers of small size, worked by six mules, three abreast, driven by two boys’.<sup>137</sup> In addition to animal mills, some estates erected a windmill. The tower and the cap housed the mechanism that drove the cane crushers,<sup>138</sup> and it was hot, hard work for those who kept the crushers going. They had to work faster than people who operated the animal mills. If

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<sup>131</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p15, citing J Stephen *The Slavery of the British West India Colonies Delineated* 2 Vols 1824, 1830

<sup>132</sup> Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* pp52-5

<sup>133</sup> Barclay, Alexander *A Practical View of the Present State of Slavery* p310

<sup>134</sup> Green, William A *British Slave Emancipation* p49 fn37, citing Jelly *A Brief Encounter* p49

<sup>135</sup> Tyson, George F and Arnold R Highfield (eds) *The Kamina Folk* p129

<sup>136</sup> Luffman, John *A Brief Account* Letter XXI 1 August 1787 in VL Oliver *The History of the Island of Antigua* Vol 1

<sup>137</sup> Davy, John *The West Indies* fn455

<sup>138</sup> Gjessing, FC *The Tower Windmill for Grinding Sugar Cane* p1

the wind was good, it was claimed that windmills were up to eight times more efficient than those driven by animals.<sup>139</sup> This put more pressure on people and, although planters valued windmills for their effectiveness, they had two disadvantages: they required a steady wind (if it gusted too strongly, their arms had to be tied down) and, as fewer animals were needed, plantations had to find alternative sources of fertiliser. Steam-driven mills were more efficient still. At any one time they did the work of twelve mules, or 48 mules in 24 hours.<sup>140</sup> But they were costly and required regular supplies of imported coal and clean water, as well as expensive equipment and specialist maintenance.

The various modes of power drove a mechanism in the mill which rotated the cane crushers - heavy, grooved sets of metal rollers, which were either of a horizontal or a vertical type. These large cylinders moved in opposite directions, and each stalk had to be fed into the revolving parts by hand. According to one contemporary observer four people were employed in stuffing the canes while others continually supplied them with great bundles.<sup>141</sup> The rollers mangled the cane. The juice dripped out and left was the stringy pith. In the eighteenth century, the best equipment could extract only about half the juice<sup>142</sup> so that the bruised and flattened cane had to be passed through the rollers a second time. Once the juice was extracted the remaining trash, too, became a fuel or animal feed.

The mill was usually placed above the sugar works so that gravity carried the juice along a pipe or a gutter into the nearby boiling house. These contained a receiver which was followed by a succession of iron cauldrons (called coppers) of decreasing size. One planter recommended that the receiver and the first copper should each hold 270 gallons, the second copper 190, the third 110 and the last, the tache, 65 to 70 gallons.<sup>143</sup> The coppers were set firmly into a 'boiling wall' or 'boiling bench'. Underneath the coppers a fire was kept going constantly.<sup>144</sup> Working below the coppers in incredibly hot and cramped conditions, stokers fed the fires with trash or wood. It has been estimated that making one ton of sugar (1,000 kg) required five tons of firewood.<sup>145</sup> In Nevis mill trash provided the main source of heat.

While the stokers were engaged in their 'most unpleasant job',<sup>146</sup> the boilers worked on the juice which had been placed into the largest of the coppers, the receiver. The boilers' task was to evaporate as much of the water content as possible while cleaning out any impurities. Mud settled at the bottom and vegetable matter rose to the surface. To assist the clarification process, boilers tempered the mixture with lime. This had to be added at the right time (opinions differed whether temper was added in one go or divided between different coppers) and at the right quantity: too little and the sugar would become too soft, too much and it would turn 'rocky'.<sup>147</sup> While adding the correct amount of lime required good judgment, skimming off the dirt and the frothy scum and transferring the boiling juice to the next copper required strength and dexterity - boilers had to safely handle heavy equipment such as large copper ladles that held two gallons.<sup>148</sup> Although demanding in some ways, at the same time the job of skimming

<sup>139</sup> Tyson, George F and Arnold R Highfield (eds) *The Kamina Folk* p130

<sup>140</sup> PP, LB 50: Copy of a letter from Richard Trevithick, 5 November 1812

<sup>141</sup> Cundall, Frank (ed) *Lady Nugent's Journal* p85

<sup>142</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p16 and FC Gjessing *The Tower Windmill* p5

<sup>143</sup> Pares, R A *West India Fortune* p353 fn15, quoting Thomas Roughley *The Jamaica Planter's Guide* London 1823 p194

<sup>144</sup> The construction of the boiling benches as well as the number of cauldrons varied. Marco Meniketti found that over time planters in Nevis adapted their so-called Spanish trains in which a fire burns underneath each copper to the so-called Jamaica trains. These have a fire at one end and a chimney at the other so that the draft of the chimney pulls the heat across the length of the boiling bench. He stated that in the early days in Nevis boiling benches originally consisted of four coppers, then five and later six or more (<http://historycooperative.org/journals/sia/32.1/meniketti.html>). Neil and Ann Wright, however, stated that in the seventeenth century the number of coppers were standardised at five (Wright, Neil and Ann 'Hamilton's Sugar Mill, Nevis, Leeward Islands, Eastern Caribbean' in *Industrial Archaeology Review* Vol 13 No 2 (Spring 1991) p134).

<sup>145</sup> Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p16

<sup>146</sup> Tyson, George F and Arnold R Highfield (eds) *The Kamina Folk* p130

<sup>147</sup> Pares, R A *West India Fortune* p117

<sup>148</sup> PP, LB 3: Invoice of Goods ordered

(also called scumming) was dull. Making 'circle after circle' proved 'incessant and monotonous labour' but planters adhered to the maxim that 'Liquor cannot be scummed too much ...'<sup>149</sup>

A man stood at each copper, stirring constantly so that the juice did not burn, and the man at the last cauldron 'called continuously to those below, attending the fire, to throw on more trash, &, for if the heat relaxes in the least, all the sugar in the cauldron is spoiled'. By the time the liquor reached the last copper it was about a quarter of its original volume (as Pares pointed out, the sizes of the coppers illustrate the rate at which the juice reduced).<sup>150</sup> When the sugar reached the last copper it was up to the head boiler to determine the exact point at which the concoction was ready to 'strike' - the stage at which it would transform from syrup to granules. One way of measuring this was to pull apart a drop of hot syrup between thumb and forefinger and, if it formed a continuous thread, it was time to dampen the fire for a moment and transfer the mass into the coolers – usually flat, wooden trays. The cooling mixture then had to be raked to keep the granules apart while they crystallised. If the mass set too firmly, it was broken up with a heavy iron paddle.<sup>151</sup>

At this point the sugar boiler would have known whether or not a good batch had been made, whether gutters and coppers had been kept clean so that the juice did not spoil, and whether the mass was of the right texture and a pleasing colour. It was said that using wet fuel and boiling the juice too slowly ruined the colour.<sup>152</sup>

When the viscous mass was ready for 'curing', it was ladled into containers. In the early days these were conical clay pots about three feet high with small holes at the tapered end,<sup>153</sup> but later the mass was shovelled directly into large barrels. In the curing house these barrels - called hogsheads - were propped up on stanchions to allow the molasses to drain out. Molasses is the part of the sugar which does not crystallise. It was collected as a useful by-product. Some of it was exported but most was made into rum (along with the skimmings), given to plantation workers to supplement their diet, or fed to livestock. It could also be re-heated and made into low-grade sugar.

The other part of the sugar, the coarse brown crystals of the moist muscovado sugar, settled in the hogsheads. Handmade by the coopers on the plantation, the hogsheads held different amounts, as demonstrated by one particular shipment of 46 hogsheads: the majority contained 16 or 17 hundredweights (cwt) gross (812.8 or 863.6 kg) but seven hogsheads held 18 cwt each (914.4 kg) and one even 19 cwt (965.2 kg).<sup>154</sup> The weight was determined by the length of time the sugar had been left

<sup>149</sup> Caines, Clement *Letters on the Cultivation of the Otaheite Cane* p102

<sup>150</sup> Pares, R A *West India Fortune* p353 fn15, quoting Thomas Roughley *The Jamaica Planter's Guide* p194

<sup>151</sup> PP, LB 3: JPP, London, to Peter Eaton, 10 December 1774

<sup>152</sup> Pares, R A *West India Fortune* p117

<sup>153</sup> Pers. comm. Vincent Hubbard, 28 October 2009. For further details, see Elaine L Morris 'Sugar-Refining Ceramics' in *The Nevis Heritage Project Interim Report, 2001* pp87-9

<sup>154</sup> A similarly confusing picture emerges from a shipment of sugar to Philadelphia. One hogshead contained 1,591 pounds and six 'barrels', on average, 349 pounds. The biggest barrel held 445 pounds of sugar, the smallest 293 pounds (PP, LB 3: JPP to Joshua Fisher, 25 March 1775).

The issue as to how much a hogshead contained cannot be settled with certainty. Ward had found that there was a difference over time and, for the purpose of his calculations, assumed that in 1750 a hogshead had a capacity of 1,600 pounds (725.7 kg) and in 1830 of 2,000 pounds (907.2 kg) (Ward, JR *British West Indian Slavery* p190 fn1). However, a contemporary observer stated that in the early nineteenth century a hogshead in Nevis contained 1,600 pounds (Anon *Authentic History of the British West Indies, with the Manners & Customs of the Free Inhabitants*), while at the end of the century HW Estridge, regarding the family's Hill Estate in St Kitts, mentioned hogsheads that contained 1,900 cwt (BROR, D/EM Z17). Pares stated that St Croix hogsheads were generally smaller than those made in Nevis (Pares, R A *West India Fortune* p304 Table 10) while the Jamaican hogsheads were larger still: according to Higman, the minimum weight hogsheads contained was 1,344 pounds, the maximum 2,308 and the median 2,000 pounds (Higman, BW *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica* p235 Appendix I). In 1734, Governor Mathews observed that 'the tierces of sugar at St Christophers rather exceed in weight the Antiguan hogsheads' but he did not state the capacity of either (CSP 1734-1735 No 314).



to cure and how successfully the hogshead had been 'rammed' – that is topped up with fresh sugar. One method called for removing the hogsheads from the stanchion ten or twelve days before shipment, rolling them to the weighing pole and then returning them to their original position on the stanchion to drain some more. A day or two before they left the plantation the tops of the hogsheads were opened up and more sugar was rammed in. Then they were ready for the final weighing. Another school of thought had it that ramming injured the sugar. Instead, after weighing the hogsheads would be set back on the stanchion and turned so that they drained further. Only just before they were due to be carted off, were the hogsheads opened at the top, filled up with more sugar and shaken so that they became 'quite full'.<sup>155</sup>

The final weight of each hogshead was recorded in the ledger and endorsed on the bills of lading. Branded with their owners' initials, the hogsheads could be carted down to the bay below the plantation. From the beach they were rolled onto small, sideways-lying boats which were tipped up and launched into the water, or, with the aid of planks, they were manoeuvred onto a drougher (droger). These coastal sailing vessels took the barrels out to the trans-Atlantic ships which anchored nearly a mile from the shore in the deep waters of the Nevis Road.

Once in England, the sugar was treated in refineries to remove any molasses and impurities.

To read other chapters, please copy this link and paste it into your search engine:  
<https://seis.bristol.ac.uk/~emceee/mountraversplantationcommunity.html>

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<sup>155</sup> PP, LB 17: JPP to James Williams, 19 April 1802 and 8 February 1803