

## Connections with Jamaica

Dyrham Park has a long history associated with colonialism, including many direct connections to Jamaica. In November, I had an incredible opportunity to visit Jamaica and spend time with colleagues from the Jamaican National Heritage Trust. I spent four days with colleagues from the Jamaican National Heritage Trust (JNHT), exploring their sites, discussing different approaches to presenting and interpreting our shared histories, and thinking about potential for future collaboration.

This followed a visit from Evelyn Thompson, Conservator at the JNHT, who came to Dyrham Park in October 2022. Our growing partnership with the JNHT has been facilitated by [INTO \(the International National Trusts Organisation\)](#) and has grown out of the [RISE \(Re-Imagining Sites of Enslavement\)](#) knowledge sharing programme established by INTO in 2021. I was joined on the trip by Alexander Lamont Bishop from INTO and our travel costs were funded through INTO's programme.



Our first day was spent at Headquarter's House in Kingston, Jamaica. This is the best surviving eighteenth-century house in Kingston and it was built by Thomas Hibbert, a major merchant, plantation owner and trader in enslaved Africans in Jamaica.

Thomas Hibbert was the great uncle of George Hibbert Oates, another plantation owner in Jamaica. George Hibbert Oates and Margaret Cross, a free woman of colour, were the parents of Mary Sarah Oates who was brought up in Bath and later married into the Blathwayt family, becoming lady of the house at Dyrham Park in 1899. During our day at Headquarters House, we discussed this shared history alongside meeting the JNHT team and their colleagues in the Ministry of Culture, learning more about their organisation and their future priorities. We had a full tour of Headquarters House, including their archaeological stores in the basement and their conservation studio.



On our second day, we explored more of the island. We drove through Spanish Town, the old capital of Jamaica, and saw Parade Square, the memorial to Admiral Rodney and the eighteenth-century iron bridge. It was striking to see these examples of familiar European architecture in a Caribbean context, in areas where there is real poverty, deprivation and high levels of violent crime. It brought home the extent to which the modern history of our country is deeply interconnected with the history of Jamaica (and so many other places). The English took control of Jamaica by force in 1655 and it remained part of the empire until independence in 1962. During that time a huge amount of wealth was extracted to Britain through the sugar trade, underpinned by the violent exploitation of enslaved Africans, and the legacies of this history are visible in both countries.

We then visited Colbeck Castle, a ruined eighteenth-century plantation great house, built by John MacLeod a Scottish plantation owner. The ruins are very striking, but perhaps more interesting was the discussion about how to make this site appealing to the residents of a new and rapidly expanding housing estate that will soon surround the site. We discussed the importance of preservation of green space and beauty, particularly in the context of fast expanding urban populations, which felt very resonant with the campaigning of Octavia Hill and the origins of the National Trust.



We completed the day with a tour of Seville Heritage Park, on the north coast of Jamaica. Seville was the site where Christopher Columbus first landed in Jamaica in 1494. The site is about 300 acres and it includes archaeological remains of the first Spanish settlement in Jamaica, archaeological evidence of the Taino people who were the indigenous people of Jamaica before the Spanish arrived, an English plantation great house, industrial archaeology relating to sugar manufacture and the site of an African village, where enslaved Africans lived. The house is now home to a museum display, presenting the history of the site and outside there are recreations of a Taino hut and an African house. Our focus for this visit was to work with the JNHT to review their business plan for Seville, and we will be continuing these conversations online in 2023.



The final two days of the trip involved visits to more sites, meeting key stakeholders such as the National Museum Director and the British Council's Jamaica Director, and discussions with the JNHT about opportunities for future projects. A highlight on our final day was a visit to Trench Town Culture Yard, where we saw one of the rooms where Bob Marley lived, his

first guitar and his first vehicle. This was a reminder of the huge cultural impact of Jamaican artists and their global significance.

Other highlights of the trip were the opportunities to try traditional Jamaican cuisine. This included meals of 'rice and peas', breadfruit, plantain, cornmeal dumplings, as well as roadside offerings of sugar cane and coconuts and an ill-advised Devon Duppy rum cocktail at Devon House. We were also encouraged to try one of the local fruits direct from the tree, where you had to suck the slimy flesh and spit out the seeds. It's fair to say, this wasn't entirely successful!

We finished our trip feeling that we had built some really strong relationships with colleagues at the Jamaican National Heritage Trust and that there is much that both organisations could learn from one another. We are looking forward to continuing the conversations online and exploring opportunities for future collaboration.

[Read more about Dyrham Park.](#)