The Speightstown Archaeological Research Project
Progress report 2010

Introduction

The Speightstown Archaeological Research Project seeks to understand the archaeological and historical development of Speightstown (St Peter Parish, north-west Barbados), which from the 17th century onwards was the home of Barbados’ most thriving port.

Barbados was rapidly becoming one of the wealthiest colonies in the world thanks to the cultivation and trade of sugar cane (a system which was built upon African slavery), and Speightstown was an important social and economic hub in the wider imperial system. In fact, Speightstown would become known as ‘Little Bristol’ owing to the importance of trade with this west-country city. Its mercantile class included a number of Sephardic Jews and its hinterland was dominated by a plantocracy (a ruling class formed of plantation owners) whose wealth, manifested in magnificent houses and enriched churches, was built entirely upon the export of sugar cane to new markets in the Americas and Europe. For this, however, they relied wholly on the exploitation of a massive African slave class. Speightstown also has other historical curiosities: the site of the only English Civil War battle to be fought outside Great Britain, and latterly one of the Caribbean’s few whaling centres.

Dr Niall Finneran using hand-held GPS to record the graveyard of St Peter’s Church, Speightstown
The first phase of work, in September 2010, was carried out by Project Director Dr Niall Finneran, with Winchester PhD students Joel Sperry (maritime archaeologist), Dan Heale (heritage specialist) and postgraduate student Michael Bowey, who is studying the archaeology of religious identity on the island from the 17th century, through graveyard survey and church archaeology. The project also offers extensive scope for archaeological training and Dr Finneran is collaborating with Dr Sabrina Rampersad of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill (Barbados) and Mr Kevin Farmer of the University of the West Indies, St Augustine (Trinidad) in order to provide archaeological training opportunities for Winchester and UWI students. This community archaeology project has close links with Barbados Museum and the Barbados National Trust.

PhD student Joel Sperry with 18th-century cannon found in the ruins of a fort at Speightstown

During the first season in 2010, a wide-ranging graveyard survey was carried out of St Peter's Church (the first exercise of this sort attempted in the Caribbean), as well as extensive surveys and assessments of the many and varied extant Georgian standing buildings of Speightstown, which comprise some of the oldest forms of their type in the Americas. In addition, extensive archaeological survey was conducted in the hinterland of the town, which located several sites worthy of future excavation. Examples are plantations and military forts dating from the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries as well as later sites, such as the now abandoned Cold War US Navy base at Harrison's Point (which will be the subject of a ground-breaking historical archaeology study). Many consultations and discussions were undertaken with a range of residents and the maritime survey indicated excellent potential for underwater archaeology. Training opportunities for students will comprise traditional field-walking survey, excavation, buildings recording, church archaeology, graveyard survey, oral history research and maritime archaeology.
Michael Bowey field-walking the site of an old sugar plantation to the south-east of Speightstown. The old plantation house and windmill and ancillary buildings survive.