University of Winchester Archaeological and Historical Research in Barbados September 12th -24th 2017

Excavation at the Church Street site, Speightstown, 2017

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In September 2017 the University of Winchester continued research on a number of historical sites in Barbados. This work builds upon annual work that has taken place there since 2010, and focuses mainly, but not exclusively on the historical townscape of Speightstown in the northwest of the island. Over the last eight years we have forged a number of strong links with local community leaders, educational establishments (such as the University of the West Indies as well as a number of local schools) and other NGOs, including the Barbados Tourism Authority, the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, the Barbados National Trust and several religious organisations, Christian and Jewish. This year Dr Christina Welch joined the team and her skillsets and interests allowed us to develop the core project in new and exciting directions, especially in terms of analysis of historical burial material culture (see below).

For the most part our work has concentrated on excavation of historical sites and providing training for local people and for students at the University of the West Indies in archaeological excavation techniques and finds analysis. We have historically conducted training and research programmes in maritime ethnography, cemetery survey, historic buildings recording, geophysics, underwater archaeology and have undertaken a range of outreach events, working with the University and Schools, as well as the Barbados Museum and the National Trust. We have been asked to contribute towards environmental impact assessments and development plans, as well as having input into national heritage policy, and our expertise and commitment has been valued. There is no other British University, or indeed European University, that has the same level of engagement, influence and reach within the Anglophone Caribbean (let alone Barbados) than the University of Winchester. This is apparent in our developing links with NGOs and Governmental heritage sectors in the Cayman Islands, St Vincent and Grenadines, St Lucia and Tobago. These are all other links that will bear fruit in the coming years.

Our 2017 work built upon the work we have undertaken in previous years, although the original project design has evolved over this time. This year we continued our excavations at the historic church street site in Speightstown, which we believe is yielding evidence for a wealthy mercantile community dating from the late seventeenth century. We believe that this could be potentially one of the richest urban archaeological deposits within the entire Caribbean and as such will need our input in its management, conservation and interpretation over the next few years. Finds included a possible Venetian glass goblet, and a range of high status material culture. It may be that this site is linked to the presence of early Jewish merchants in the town, and thus opens up another potential research horizon, but this remains to be seen.
Our work in 2016, which was funded by an RKE grant, had laid the groundwork for a future collaboration in early years heritage learning linked with the Barbados-based ‘Fresh Milk’ initiative led by the artist Annalee Davis and led by former CHARM student (and who is applying for a PhD with us in 2018, Lucy Willans). We continued to build on this start in 2017. In addition our 2016 work laid the groundwork for the ‘My Digital Heritage Barbados 2016’ initiative, which continued its consultation process in 2017. We are hoping to be able to roll out a programme of community-based and participatory digital heritage platforms by 2020. This process is being managed by current CHARM student and Historic England database manager (and worker in the Black History Archives) Laura Hampden, and will form the core of her future PhD application to this University. This work, along with another chapter on the Speightstown project, is currently in the process of being published for 2018 (see bibliography).

The British historian and author Rachel Lichtenstein, who collaborates with NF and CW in another community heritage/religious identity project in the East End of London, has also been heavily involved this year. We have undertaken meetings together with Sir Paul Altman, a leader of Barbados’ Jewish community, and a former director of the Barbados National Trust. Sir Paul has requested that our team assists in helping analyse artefacts yielded by excavation of the area round the Nidhe Israel synagogue, which is one of the earliest synagogues in the Anglophone Americas. We are also planning to undertake a wider project studying the heritage of Jewish settlement in the wider Caribbean as a collaborative project, and it is anticipated that this will draw very heavily upon digital heritage methodologies and platforms that we are in the process of developing within community heritage settings in Barbados.
Historic Sephardic Jewish Cemetery, Nidhe Israel Synagogue, Bridgetown. Many of these graves date from the late 17th century and have not been recorded to a great level of detail.

NF and CW also took the opportunity to undertake a scoping study for the analysis of historic cemetery sites on Barbados as a whole, with a goal to extending this into a wider project entitled ‘Island Afterlives’ which will study historic cemetery settings and commemorative material culture in the wider Anglophone Caribbean. These would include historic Anglican sites, as well as (possibly) non-conformist, recent historical and Jewish burials. We are in the process of consultation with archaeologists from the Church of England who are developing methodologies for digital recording of cemeteries in the UK, and it is hoped that the Caribbean project will be the focus of a future AHRC bid involving the Church of England as a collaborative partner. This work very clearly builds on the current West Hill cemetery project being undertaken by CW. In this connection, NF and CW have prepared a proposal for Routledge Publishers for a co-authored monograph on the materiality of Caribbean religions as a whole, and are completing an academic paper (see below) on the biography of a single historic burial vault and its wider social history.
Example of late 17th-century burial culture in Barbados. Many historic graves still exist albeit in a poor state of repair. Our planned ‘Island Afterlives’ project aims to undertake detailed recording of these historic cemetery settings on Barbados initially, and then elsewhere in the Anglophone Caribbean as part of an ambitious and multi-disciplinary study.

Our students are fully involved in this process. This year our team included four MA CHARM students, a former Winchester PhD student as site supervisor, a former Winchester undergraduate archaeology student and an archaeology undergraduate from the University of Oxford. Historically we have always involved a large number of our students, and feedback from their previous involvement indicates that this experience has had a very positive impact upon their employability. Many go on to do their undergraduate, postgraduate and increasingly postgraduate research work on topics we have identified during their time in the Caribbean.

Reflecting upon a very busy and successful two-week period of work, our road map for the years ahead include roll out of our digital heritage platforms for Barbados, continuation of our heritage education project with the Fresh Milk initiative, further research excavations in Speightstown (and potentially a renewal of our underwater archaeology work, perhaps as some form of credited fieldschool targeted at the US market), work on the Jewish heritage sites and perhaps most ambitiously an island-wide survey of burial culture as part of a collaborative AHRC bid with the Church of England (and perhaps others).
NF (right) discussing the Church Street site with (from r to l) Dr Kevin farmer, deputy director of Barbados Museum, Alissandra Cummins GCM, (director of Barbados Museum, UNESCO regional representative), collaborator Rachel Lichtenstein and Nathalie McGuire (social history curator, Barbados Museum).

Bibliography

Outputs arising from the 2016 and 2017 work in Barbados:


(in prep) N Finneran and C Welch Barbadian Gothic: moving coffins, power relations and social disorder in an early nineteenth century Caribbean island setting