

Plantation slavery

For over 300 years, enslaved Africans were forced to work for Europeans. In the Caribbean, many laboured on sugar, coffee and cocoa plantations owned by North East Scots.

Generations were born into this slavery. Millions died young because of poor diet, cruelty and relentless hard labour. The survivors lacked the most basic freedoms, such as the right to care for and protect family members.

Many sugar labourers were women. A girl began work around age four, collecting grass to feed the mules and oxen. By ten she was weeding the cane fields, and by 18 she was planting and harvesting the canes.

By 40 she was worn out, and was sent back to feeding the livestock. If she survived a few years more, she became a nurse to the babies on the plantation – a new generation of workers that probably included her own grandchildren.

This was the life lived by a slave with a relatively mild owner, such as Thomas Gordon of Buthlaw and Cairness. In 1796 he inherited Georgia Estate in Jamaica with over 200 slaves. He disliked slavery, but he was not prepared to free his workers. Instead he tried to be a kind, sympathetic master.

But Gordon's workers wanted freedom, not kindness. Many joined in the big Jamaican slave rebellion of 1831–2, including five men [3W2] who were punished by life in prison.

Quotations

3Q1

I have put a few new Negroes upon Georgia Estate out of an Eboe cargo I lately sold myself. They consist of 4 women at £63 each, 1 woman-girl at £61, and four little girls at £59 each.

Charles Gordon's agent buys nine Ibo women from Nigeria for his Jamaican estate, 1789

3Q2

In the Negro Hospital the complaints are principally pain in loins and head from burdens on the head – enough to kill the strongest animals up hills and down hills.

Jonathan Troup attends to slaves injured by overwork in Dominica, 1789

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3B1 A slave driver oversees the digging of a canefield in Antigua, 1823. (© The British Library Board)



3B2 Authority on a plantation – a European overseer and his driver, a trusted slave who enforced his master's orders with a fearsome whip.

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3B3 A romanticised view of life on a sugar plantation – Trinity Estate in Jamaica, 1825. (© The British Library Board)



3B4 A reluctant slave owner – Thomas Gordon of Cairness, 1836. (© The University of Aberdeen)

Caribbean plantations owned by North East Scots

Many North East families owned plantations in the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In some cases, the young men who went to the Caribbean had no land or money to their name when they left Scotland. If they did well in the Caribbean they bought one or more plantations there. When they had made enough money, they sold up their properties there and bought an estate in Scotland, where they retired to live as landed gentlemen.

A complete list of the Caribbean properties owned by North East Scots would be very long. The following includes some of the better known estates:

Dr William Bremner

Dominica – Dawn, Aberdeen

Dr James Clark (d. 1819) of Aberdeen

Dominica – Clark Hall, Mount Pleasant

Thomas Cumming of Inneshouse

Grenada – Kelty, Garden of Eden

Alexander Forbes (fl. 1740s) of Aberdeen

Jamaica – Aberdeen

Alexander Farquharson (d. c.1838) of Belnaglack

Jamaica – Job's Hill

James Gardiner (d. 1825) of Banff

Jamaica – Swanswick

Dr Alexander Gordon (d. 1801) of Elgin

Tobago – Belmont

Charles Gordon (1749–1796) of Buthlaw & Cairness

Jamaica – Georgia

Sir Alexander Grant (1705–1772) of Dalvey

Jamaica – Albion, Berwick, Charlemont, Crawle, Dalvey, Eden, Epsom, Rio Magno

Sir Archibald Grant (d. 1778) of Monymusk

Jamaica – Monymusk

Charles Irvine (c.1720–1794) of Aberdeen

Jamaica – Friendship

Dr James Laing (d. 1831) of Haddo & Auchleuchries

Dominica – Union, York Valley, Macoucherie

Dr Alexander Murchison of Elgin

Jamaica – Springfield

James Murray (died. c.1856) of Aberdeen
Jamaica – Lottery

John Shand (c.1758–1825) of The Burn, Fettercairn
Jamaica – Belmont, Kellitts, Mamee Gully, Clifton Pen

William Shand (1776–1845) of the Burn, Fettercairn
Jamaica – The Burn, Hopewell, St Toolie

Enslaved sugar workers and skills

A sugar plantation required many skilled workers, such as carpenters, coopers [**3W1**], sugar boilers, millwrights and blacksmiths. These skills were taught to enslaved men, not women. With such a skill, a male slave could often earn money for himself by working on his day off – usually a Sunday. Some even managed to earn enough to buy their freedom.

There were fewer opportunities for enslaved women to learn a skill. Some were employed as domestic servants and learned laundering and sewing, but these jobs were usually reserved for mixed-race girls – often the illegitimate daughters of European planters or overseers. Most African women worked as field labourers [**3W2**]. They could only earn money by selling vegetables that they cultivated on Sundays on plots of waste land.

Remarkably, some of these resourceful women saved the large sums of money needed to buy their freedom. But their owners rarely agreed to release them when they were still of child-bearing age. Few owners let go a woman capable of producing more slaves for them.

Violence against slaves

It was in the planters' financial interests to look after their slaves, but nonetheless many inflicted high levels of violence on their workers. Slaves were routinely beaten for minor faults, such as failing to dig enough cane holes or collect enough grass. Slaves who left the plantation without permission, even just to visit family members elsewhere, were confined in stocks, shackled or weighted down with iron. Those who repeatedly broke plantation rules or challenged the slave owner's authority were flogged mercilessly with a long cart whip that tore the skin from their back and buttocks. These punishments were inflicted on both men and women, including pregnant women. There are many accounts of enslaved women miscarrying after being beaten.

Generally slave owners did not wish to kill their slaves and the punishments were usually meant to stop short of inflicting death. Deaths did happen, however, as many slaves were too weak from overwork and poor nutrition to recover from severe beatings.

The most serious punishment was execution, usually by hanging. This was restricted to slaves who killed Europeans or who rose up in rebellion. After they were dead, it was a common practice to cut off their heads and display them publicly as a warning to other slaves to obey their masters.

Many visitors to the Caribbean were shocked at the violence. But the slave owners justified it by claiming that Africans did not feel pain like Europeans or that they only understood orders inflicted with a whip. In reality, the violence was driven by fear. Slave owners were far outnumbered by their slaves and they lived in daily fear of rebellions and uprisings. The violence was an attempt to terrify their workers into submission.

For anti-slavery campaigners the violence was one of the worst aspects of slavery. It was proof, they argued, that owning slaves turned men into monsters.

Thomas Gordon of Buthlaw and Cairness

Thomas Gordon (1788–1841) was the son of Charles Gordon, 7th of Buthlaw and 1st of Cairness, and his wife Christian Forbes. Charles Gordon had bought Georgia Estate in Jamaica in about 1778, but the family's connections with Jamaica predated this. George and James Barclay, the brothers of Charles' mother, had been doing business in Jamaica since the 1720s.

Charles Gordon visited Jamaica occasionally, but in his lifetime Georgia Estate was mostly managed by another North East Scot, Francis Grant of the Grants of Castle Grant. In the 1790s, income from Georgia enabled Charles Gordon to build one of the finest new houses in the North East, Cairness [3W4], near Lonmay [Map1].

When Thomas inherited the estate he was uneasy about slavery. He was an ardent supporter of Greek independence from Turkish rule, and this interest in freeing people from foreign control sat uncomfortably with his own ownership of more than 200 people. But he did not risk giving his slaves their freedom before anyone else and the people on Georgia were emancipated at the same time as all other slaves in the British empire, in 1834.

Jamaica's Baptist War

Jamaica's biggest slave revolt broke out immediately after Christmas 1831 and lasted for ten days. About 50,000 slaves took part. They attacked over 225 estates and caused damage totalling over £1 million.

Georgia Estate in Trelawny, owned by Thomas Gordon of Buthlaw and Cairness, was one of the estates caught up in the rebellion, and afterwards five of Gordon's slaves were sentenced to life imprisonment for joining the fight.

Samuel Sharpe was the most prominent leader of the rebels. A slave from Craydon Estate in St James Parish, he was also a charismatic leader in the local Baptist church. Many of the other fighters were also Baptists. They used Christian theology to argue that they could only have one master – Jesus Christ. All of the rebel leaders had military titles such as 'general' and 'colonel' and their followers were organised into military companies. In court, witnesses both for and against the rebels always described the rebellion as a war. In Jamaica today it is commonly referred to as the Baptist War.

The Jamaican government suppressed the rebellion savagely. Troops executed hundreds of suspected rebels, often without a proper trial, while planters and their employees burnt numerous churches where slaves had worshipped. But although defeated, the rebellion actually hastened the end of slavery. It convinced people in Britain that the system was unsustainable; to continue protecting the slave owners would only lead to more expense and more brutality.

Map1 (Map of North East Scotland with slavery-related) and **Map3** (Map of Caribbean with individual islands) available to download as a pdf.

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/slavery/pdf/map1-3.pdf>



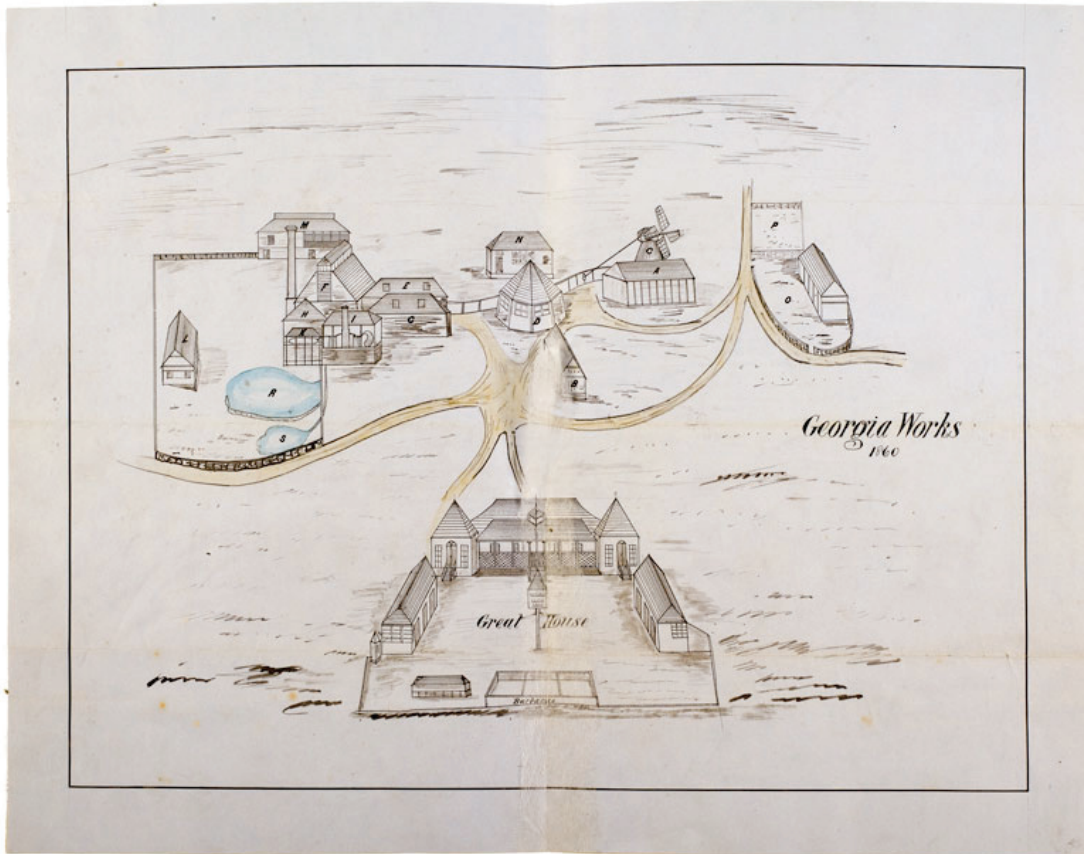
3W1 A cooper in the town of Roseau, Dominica, drawn by Jonathan Troup, 1789. (© The University of Aberdeen)

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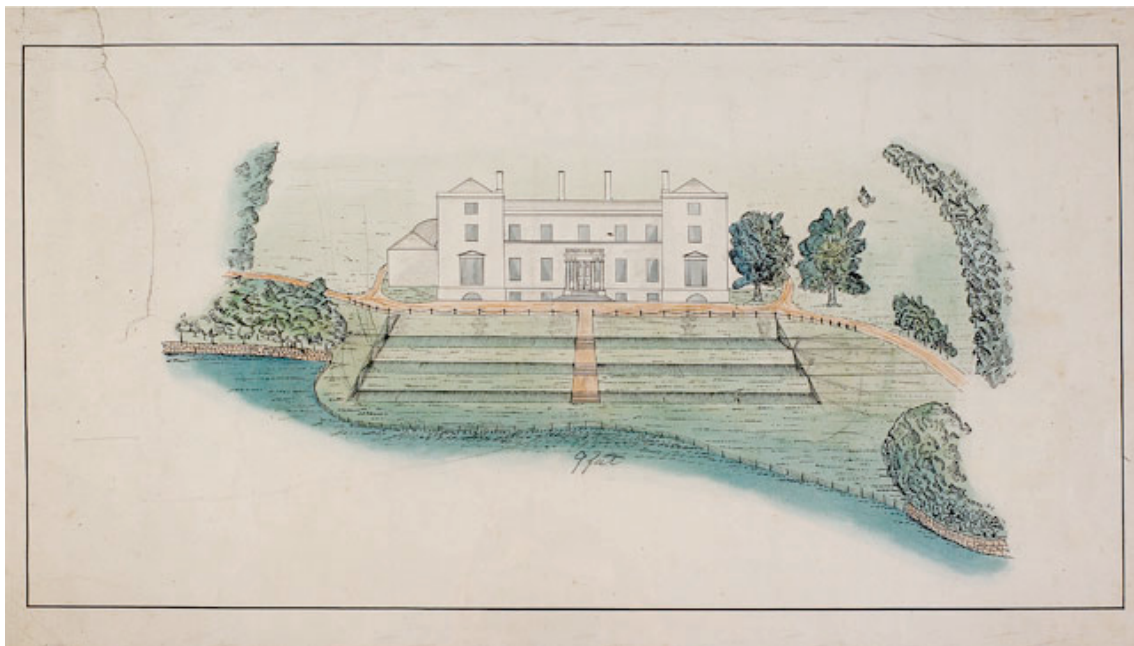


3W2 Field slaves and town slaves in Dominica, drawn by Jonathan Troup, 1789. (© The University of Aberdeen)

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3W3 A survey of Georgia Estate in Jamaica, dating from 1856, after the emancipation of the slaves. (© The University of Aberdeen)



3W4 A view of Cairness House, designed for Charles Gordon in the 1790s by the architect James Playfair. (© The University of Aberdeen)

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Increase and Decrease of Slaves upon Georgia Estates for the Year 1832

Date	Increase	1832					Date	Decrease	1832					
		Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Total			Age	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Total
July 1	To Number on Estate the date	88	80	21	29	268	July 10	By Act of Slavery, of Darby	49	1				1
July 2	Elizabeth Bond, delivered of Slaves				1	1	July 8	James Richards, of Ayr	69	1				1
July 3	Susan Brown of Darby				1	1	July 22	Edward Grant	45	1				1
July 4	Riza Grant of Darby				1	1		John Baillie	41	1				1
July 13	Julian Richard of Darby				1	1		John Kelly	58	1				1
March 29	John Gordon of Darby				1	1		Robert Lamont	50	1				1
April 5	John Ford of Darby				1	1		Thomas Reid	34	1				1
July 7	Thomas Ford of Michael				1	1		Samuel Reid, of Dysart	64	1				1
July 21	Samuel Kelly of Oliver				1	1	Jan 12	John, of Ayr	70	1				1
May 2	Robert Thomas of Montrose				1	1	28	Deceased & runaways for many years	65	1				1
July 17	Susan Gray of Bute				1	1		Deceased & supposed to be dead	75	1				1
July 18	William Ellis of Montrose				1	1	July 20	Deceased, of Darby	74	1				1
July 10	John Littlejohn of Darby				1	1	28	Valentine, of Ayr	70	1				1
Oct 12	Tom Williams of Darby				1	1	Sept 11	Conroy, of Ayr	74	1				1
							Jan 26	Corridor, of Ayr	65	1				1
							Dec 7	Oliver, of D.	65	1				1
							21	By Number on Estate at date	76	78	21	29	27	268
									88	80	21	29	27	268
July 1	To Number on Estate the date	76	78	21	29	268								

3W5 Document recording the 1832 Court Martial for Acts of Rebellion of five male slaves from Georgia Estate, Jamaica: Edward Grant, John Baillie, John Kelly, Robert Lamont and Tom Thomas Reid. (© The University of Aberdeen)

Enlarged version available at text link "five men" - www.abdn.ac.uk/slavery/banner3.htm