PLANTATION PRODUCTION AND WHITE

“PROTO-SLAVERY”:

WHITE INDENTURED SERVANTS AND THE COLONISATION OF THE ENGLISH

WEST INDIES, 1624-1645

I

Two dominant features of agricultural history in the English West Indies\(^1\) are the formation of the plantation system and the importation of large numbers of servile labourers from diverse parts of the world—Africa, Europe and Asia.\(^2\) In Barbados and the Leeward Islands, the backbone of early English colonisation of the New World, large plantations developed within the first decade of settlement. The effective colonisation of these islands, St. Christopher (St. Kitts) in 1624, Barbados

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\(^1\) Professor Nef’s identification of what is now referred to as “proto-industrialization”, in late medieval England, (which was revolutionised during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) has become a distinct category of historical investigation. In the West Indies, the dismantling of the slave system in the 1830’s led to the rapid development of a black peasantry. Historians have since been trying to discover the historical roots of this class within slave society and have identified what is now termed a “proto-peasantry”. Some slaves, they argued, functioned in the system in a manner similar to the peasants of the post slavery period. They achieved certain “semi-freedoms”, produced foodstuffs for both subsistence and local marketing, engaged in household crafts for local markets, used primitive technology, employed household labour, and achieved low levels of capital accumulation. Of historical importance, also is the need to identify the colonial roots of black chattel slavery. The transition from white indentured servitude to Black Slavery in the mid seventeenth century was more than a qualitative adjustment of the labour market. It was a move along the continuum of labour enslavement. It was upon the system of white servitude that black slavery was imposed—hence, the identification of a “proto-slavery” system in the formative colonial period.


\(^2\) Between 1640 and 1690, labour was imported to work on West Indian sugar plantations from the British Isles, Africa, China, Madeira and Portugal. For a general survey, see E. Williams, \textit{From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969} (London, 1970, Andre Deutch).
1627, Nevis 1628, Montserrat and Antigua 1632, was possible because of the early emergence of large plantations which were clearly designed for large scale production, and the distribution of commodities upon the world market; they were instrumental in forging an effective and profitable agrarian culture out of the unstable frontier environment of the seventeenth century Caribbean. These plantations, therefore, preceded the emergence of the sugar industry and the general use of African slave labour; they developed during the formative years when the production of tobacco, cotton and indigo dominated land use, and utilised predominantly European indentured labour. The structure of land distribution and the nature of land tenure systems in the pre-sugar era illustrate this. Most planters who accelerated the pace of economic growth in the late 1640’s and early 1650’s by the production of sugar and black slave labour, already owned substantial plantations stocked with large numbers of indentured servants.

Philip Curtin estimated that some 4,040,000 Africans were imported into the English Caribbean as slaves. See The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (London, 1969, University of Wisconsin Press) p. 91.


H. Beckles estimated that between 1624 and 1750, at least 34,000 indentured servants were imported into the English West Indies; See, ‘‘White Labour in Black Slave Plantation Society and Economy: A case study of indentured labour in seventeenth century Barbados’’ University of Hull, Department of Economic History, unpublished Ph.D Thesis, 1980. See also, A. E. Smith, Colonists in Bondage: White servitude and convict labor in America, 1607-1776 (Chapel Hill, 1947, University of North Carolina Press).


4 Land was unevenly distributed in Barbados from the beginning of colonization. Ligon’s map on early Barbados shows that 10,000 acres of the most fertile land, located in the St. George Valley, belonged to a London merchant syndicate. Also, in the early 1630’s, Capt. Futter, William Hilliard, Edward Oistin, Henry Hawley, and James Drax, some of the prominent early colonists, owned plantations of over 300 acres, which were large by Barbadian standards. Futter owned 1,000 acres, and Hilliard over 700. The average size of plantations in seventeenth century Barbados was 80-100 acres. See Deeds of Barbados, early inventories, RB 3/2 ff 109-309, R.B. 3/1, ff 1-18. Barbados Department of Archives. For an opposite view, not based upon extensive research of the early land deeds and inventories—which stress that land was generally parcelled out in very small units to thousands of freeholders see, R. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves, pp. 46-59 and C. Bridenbaugh, No Peace Beyond the Line: The English in the Caribbean, 1624-1690 (New York, 1972, Oxford University Press).

5 Recent work on the pre-sugar era points to the early growth of large plantations, a wealthy planter elite and modest economic growth. Much of the early confusion has arisen over the issue of land tenure. Some large plantations were subdivided and leased on the long term to tenants, who were recorded by
This essay looks at the ways in which the demands of plantation agriculture transformed the traditional form of indentured servitude, with its moral-paternalistic ideology of pre-industrial England, into a form of ‘proto-slavery’ in the West Indies. It was this system that provided the English planters with the necessary experience for the enslavement of black labour. Slavery had long disappeared from English social culture, and, unlike the Iberians, the English therefore were not directly familiar with slave-like relations in the production of agricultural commodities. White indentured servitude was the training ground, whereby the planters obtained the necessary skills and attitudes that allowed for a rapid and unproblematic transition to large scale black slavery in the late 1640’s. At the point of transition, many features of slavery were already established, particularly, a highly developed market view of labour. Servants were seen primarily as capital, as unit investments with property values. The sensitivity of the early planters to market forces was the basis of these developments. They allowed market forces to determine the type of labour they used as well as the nature of its use. The shift from a white to a black labour regime was primarily a response to market forces, but some of the important structures and relations necessary for slavery were already established; they were further developed as the intensification of resource exploitation became necessary during the early years of sugar production because of massive capital outlay and high recurrent cost in that industry.6

Barbados is more central to the analysis than the Leewards not only because it set the pattern of agriculture development in the English West Indies, but simply because virtually no good collections of manuscript data have survived for the Leewards in this early period. However, it is now established that the Leewards followed a similar agrarian path to Barbados,

though a time lag of some 10-15 years can be identified. In this sense it is possible to make more than just tentative generalisation about the Leewards from the Barbados experience.

During the 1640's, Barbados became the boom colony of the English New World Empire, overshadowing Virginia, St. Christopher, Nevis, Antigua and Montserrat. From the beginning of settlement, the planters went about the task of producing tobacco, the most profitable American agricultural staple on the European market. They wished to compete with, and if possible replace, Spanish New World tobacco on the Western European market. In 1623, Virginian tobacco reaching England was worth £1½ shillings per pound, and in 1625 three shillings per pound. These prices were high enough to incite "tobacco fever" in the West Indies planters who, between 1624 and 1629, transformed Barbados and St. Christopher into tobacco economies. In 1628 these two economies exported some 100,000 pounds of tobacco to London where it was sold at a price of nine pence per pound. At this stage these English islands were described as "... wholly built on smoke ..., tobacco being the only means they hath produced ...".

In January 1631, the London tobacco market became glutted as West Indians expanded production, and prices fell sharply. The following year, the Imperial Government ordered the restriction of tobacco production in the lesser Antilles. The order stated that the "... great abuse of tobacco ... is so notorious that the king has directed the planting of it to be limited in St. Christopher and Barbados ... until such time as more staple commodities may be raised there ...". The Barbadians ignored this order, and by the end of the decade their volume of tobacco exports was still rising while those of Virginia and St. Christopher were falling.

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9 Robert Alsopp to the Lord Proprietor, 12 December, 1628, C.S.P.C., 1574-1660, f.411 Also, King to Governor and Council of Virginia, November, 1628, ibid., f.86.
London Tobacco Imports, 1628-1639 (lbs).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Barbados</th>
<th>St. Christopher</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1628</td>
<td>-----100,000-----</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1637</td>
<td>124,395</td>
<td>263,599</td>
<td>1,067,262</td>
<td>60,597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1638</td>
<td>204,956</td>
<td>470,732</td>
<td>2,361,999</td>
<td>79,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1639</td>
<td>208,100</td>
<td>107,312</td>
<td>1,091,773</td>
<td>111,268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was popular knowledge, however, that Barbadian tobacco was "... the worst that grows in the world ...", or close to being so. The first shipment which Henry Winthrop, an early planter, sent to London in 1628 was described as "... very ill-conditioned, foul, full of stalks and evil coloured...". The Barbadians, who were themselves great tobacco smokers, even refused to smoke their own tobacco and imported Virginian and Spanish brands. Like good entrepreneurs however, they responded to market forces and shifted productive resources from tobacco into cotton production, a commodity which was much demanded in England and fetched higher prices on the London market.

The transition to cotton production allowed the planters to maintain a moderate level of capital formation in the colonies. When Sir Henry Colt visited the West Indies in 1631-2 he noted that the "... trade in cotton fills them all with hope ...". By 1635, the more organised planters were monopolising its production, shipping and marketing at the expense of the smaller planters. The following year, Peter Hay, the proprietary agent for Barbados, was instructed by the Proprietor not to allow the leading planters to dominate cotton production, but to "... encourage every planter to plant cotton, for Barbados cotton of all is esteemed best ... and it is a staple commodity that will ever worth money...". In 1638, one planter reported that the level of profits in Barbados, occasioned by cotton production

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11 Additional Manuscript 35865, f.247, British Library.
12 Letters of Henry Winthrop (Barbados, 1628-31) to his father and brother are reproduced in N. D. Davis, Cavaliers and Roundheads of Barbados, 1650-52 (Georgetown, 1887), See p. 53.
13 Ibid.
14 In 1631, Sir Henry Colt on his way to St. Christopher to settle stopped at Barbados for a short period. He observed the transition from tobacco to cotton production, and made many useful references to the enterprising nature of the planters, the great abuse of servants, and the general desire of the latter to escape their bondage. See the papers of Sir Colt, in V. T. Harlow (ed.), Colonising expeditions to the West Indies and Guiana, 1623-67 (London, 1924), p. 69.
was so impressive that to re-invest the capital it was proposed to set "... up a cotton manufacture..."\textsuperscript{16} in the colony.

The boom in cotton prices attracted other English planters in the Eastern Caribbean into cotton production, and by 1639 the London market was glutted, and prices fell rapidly. The collapse was sudden and unexpected, and many marginal planters were ruined. The Dutch merchants, who shipped most of the English West Indian produce, lowered their freight charges to assist the planters, but prices continued to fall to unprofitable levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1635</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1637</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1638</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>1641</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1640, Peter Hay informed the Proprietor, "... this yeare hath been so baise a cotton yeare that the inhabitants hath not maide so much on cotton as will buye necessaries ..."\textsuperscript{18} This was to the advantage of the European consumer who found the prices of cotton textiles becoming constantly cheaper; for the West Indian planter it meant the search, once again, for another staple in order to maintain capital formation in the colony. It was at this stage that innovative planters began to experiment with indigo on a large scale as an alternative commodity.

Indigo was used to make certain dyes that were needed by the large and rapidly expanding European textile industry. The capital needed to set up an indigo plantation was greater than that needed for either cotton or tobacco. During the early 1640's, there was a widespread shift into indigo production; large and small planters invested scarce capital in the industry.

\textsuperscript{16} The Company of Providence Island to Captain Woodcock, 7 June, 1639, \textit{C.S.P.C.}, 1574-1660, p. 297.

\textsuperscript{17} See for commodity prices, N. Posthumous, \textit{Inquiry into the History of Prices}, p. 119 See also for commodity prices, R. C. Batie, "Why sugar?", \textit{op. cit.} p. 30.

\textsuperscript{18} The proprietary agent generally kept the Lord Proprietor informed upon the level of economic activity in the colony. Peter Hay's correspondence to the Lord Proprietor, the Earl of Carlisle, are very detailed and precise. See, J. H. Bennett, "The English Caribbean in the Period of Civil War, 1642-46", \textit{William and Mary Quarterly}, 3rd Series, vol. 24, 1976, p. 360.
Ligon, an early planter and historian of Barbados, noted that in the early 1640’s it was ‘‘. . . well ordered and sold at very profitable rates . . .’’ both in London and in English mainland colonies—especially New England. London rates fluctuated between £40 and £44 per chest, but industrialists in New England, who were developing a large textile industry, paid better. In 1641, for example, Capt. Jackson arrived at Boston with a large cargo of Barbadian indigo which he sold quickly at a price of £48/chest making a handsome return of £1,400. By 1643, there was overproduction and the price of the commodity fell to levels which the planters found to be unprofitable. Peter Hay informed the Proprietor in 1643, ‘‘. . . unless some New Invention be found out to make a commodity . . .’’ the colonists will be reduced to subsistence, and the mercantile interests ruined. Sugar was the commodity which saved the colonists and the merchants.

Sugar cane was introduced into Barbados in the early 1630’s, but was not used for the manufacturer of sugar. It was widely used for feeding cattle and for making manure and fuel. Considering that sugar was a highly profitable commodity in Europe, where the demand seemed insatiable, it might appear paradoxical that it was not produced during the 1630’s instead of tobacco and cotton. But it was almost certainly the relatively greater profitability of cotton in the mid-1630’s, and indigo in the early 1640’s plus their low unit cost of production which made these commodities temporarily more attractive than sugar. About 1642-3, sugar gained a price advantage over indigo on the European market (see diagram below). It was at this stage that planters, responding to market forces, made the critical transition to sugar production. By 1645, when the price of indigo had collapsed, sugar was fetching a higher price than any other American staple on the European market, and once again the Barabadians were the pioneers: the Leeward planters following this pattern in the early 1650’s.

19 Richard Ligon arrived in Barbados in 1645, and worked on a sugar plantation with Colonel Modyford for a few years. His observations are therefore firsthand. See R. Ligon, A True History and Exact History of the Island of Barbados, (London, 1657), p. 24.
21 Peter Hay to the Lord Proprietor, Barbados, 1643, in J. H. Bennett, “Peter Hay”, p. 416.
22 The green tops of the sugar cane plant make an excellent cattle feed, while the dried leaves can be used easily as a fuel. For a short history of the sugar cane plantation in early Barbados, see J. Handler and F. Lange, Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation (Cambridge, Mass. 1978, Harvard University Press), pp. 15-17.
23 For an analysis of the general movements of commodity prices, see N. Posthumous, Inquiry into the History of Prices, pp. 119-125, 133-37, 414-47. Between 1627 and 1645, the Brazilian sugar planters had a virtual monopoly of the European market, and West Indian producers could not profitably
In the first half of the century, the European sugar market was rapidly expanding, and the planters felt that they had found, at last, a truly profitable staple—one which was free from extreme price fluctuations. The economic prosperity brought about by this commodity was immediate. The first observer to record this economic success was a Harvard trained Puritan, George Downing, in 1645. He observed that if "... you go to Barbados, you shall see a flourishing Island..." fully recovered from the crises in cotton and indigo production.\(^{24}\) By the early 1650's, Barbados was described as the richest spot in the New World. One observer pointed out that the island's value, in terms of trade and capital formation, was greater than all the English colonies put together.\(^ {25}\)

Ligon captured quite remarkably this important economic explosion by making analyses of plantations and planter class expectations. He wrote about Colonel Thomas Modyford, son of the Mayor of Exeter, who arrived compete with them. It was only during the civil war in Brazil (1640's) between the Dutch and the Portuguese, which crippled the sugar industry, that West Indian planters saw the possibility of breaking into the market. Certainly, they could have produced sugar earlier, but the quality would have been poor and would not have infiltrated the market. See M. Edel, "Brazilian Sugar Cycle of the Seventeenth Century and the Rise of West Indian Competition", Caribbean Studies, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1969, pp. 24-44; also, R. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves, pp. 188-223.


at Barbados in 1645. Modyford bought a plantation of 500 acres and provided it with a labour force of twenty eight indentured servants from England. According to Ligon, he took "... a resolution to himself not to set face in England, till he had made his voyage and employment there worth him a hundred thousand pounds sterling; and all by this sugar plant." Modyford's optimism was, indeed, justified. By 1647 he had made a fortune and was one of the wealthiest planters on the island. In 1651, he became a councillor, and was made Governor in 1660. In the late 1660's, he decided to expand his interests into the new English colony of Jamaica. He became the Governor of that island in 1664 and, at his death in 1679, owned one of the largest plantations in the West Indies (with over 600 slaves and servants).

The case of James Drax is also informative. He arrived at Barbados during the tobacco boom of the late 1620's with a capital stock of £300. He commented to Ligon that he too "... would not look towards England with a purpose to remain there the rest of his life, till he were able to purchase an estate of ten thousand pounds ... which he hoped in a few years to accomplish ..." By 1654, Drax was the richest planter in Barbados (if not the West Indies) with an estate of 700 acres and 200 slaves. Both Drax and Modyford represented the optimism and success of the large planters of Barbados.

Between 1628 and 1640, land values in Barbados were relatively low and with a small capital stock a planter could obtain a substantial plantation. In the 1630's, £200 could purchase a 100 acre plantation equipped with a labour force of indentured servants. After 1643, when sugar was proven to be lucrative, land prices doubled annually until the mid 1650's when they stabilised. By 1670, most of the arable land was under sugar cultivation; in that year Governor Atkins noted, "... as for the lands in Barbados I am confident there is not one foot that is not employed down to the very seaside." Such developments were said to have made the popular colony of New England look like "... a very poore country ..." indeed. Thus Bar-

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26 R. Ligon, A True and Exact History of Barbados, p. 96.
30 Governor Atkins to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, 26th June 1676, C.O. 1/37, no. 51, P.R.O. Egerton Mss. 2543, f. 123. British Library.
bados made the critical transition from a crude struggling frontier com-

munity to a wealthy and complex economy within half a century.

II

The system of commodity production was built upon the labour of thou-

sands of indentured servants imported from England, Ireland, Wales and

Scotland. Unlike the Spanish settlements in the Greater Antilles, Barbados

and the Leewards were not densely populated with Indians who could be

reduced to chattel slavery. The islands were part of the wider environmental

and political network of the Caribs who inhabited the Lesser Antilles.32 The

Caribs (like the European invaders) were a militant and imperial people

who were in the process of establishing their hegemony in the Eastern

Caribbean. Their cultural matrix made any form of labour subjection by the

Europeans very difficult. Du Tertre, the French missionary who was fa-

miliar with the Caribs, noted that they possessed an innate contempt for

manual labour which drove them to launch a full scale ‘guerrilla’ war against

the Europeans.33 They won some battles and killed a large number of

whites, but eventually over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they

were defeated and eliminated by Anglo-French and Dutch military pres-

suers.

To clear the very forested land and initiate production, the English in the

West Indies had, therefore, to look outwards for a labour supply.34 Like

the French in the New World they looked firstly to their homeland for this

labour supply. The slave trade from Africa was not fully established in the

early seventeenth century, and was a virtual monopoly of the Iberians and

the Dutch. The price of slave labour from Africa was prohibitively expen-
sive and the English were not familiar with black slavery as an institution

which made the dependence on British labour more complete. It was

common practice in seventeenth century Britain for farmers to hire labour

by the year for agricultural and artisan work. The most logical step was

therefore to demand labour from England under temporary indenture, not

for a year, but for anything between three and ten years. The planters would

pay the passage, feed, clothe and shelter the servant in return for their

labour. At the end of the indenture the servant would be given a ‘freedom

32 G. T. Barton, The Pre history of Barbados (Barbados, 1953, Advocate Co.) Chapter 3.
34 D. Watts, Man's Influence on the Vegetation of Barbados, 1627-1800 (Hull, 1976, Hull University
Papers), Chap., 3.
due' of £10 or a piece of land. It was legitimate and acceptable within the labour tradition of English society.

In 1638, Peter Hay noted that ‘‘... a plantation in this place (Barbados) is worth nothing unless their be a good store of hands upon it. . . .’’35 These hands were shipped out from Britain, and white workers under indenture became the ‘‘... mainstay of the colony. . . .’’36 In 1645, George Downing wrote to John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts

A man that will settle there (West Indies) must looke to procure servants, which if you could gett out of England for 6, or 8 or 9 yeares time, only paying their passages, or at the most but some smale above it, it would do very well, for so . . . (you) shall be able to doe something upon a plantation. . . .37

Biographical data can be used to illustrate the critical importance of indentured labour to agricultural development during this period. The careers of Henry Winthrop (the young son of the famous John Winthrop of Groton in Suffolk and Puritan Governor of Massachusetts) and Thomas Verney illustrate the important forces operating within early Barbados plantation economy. Winthrop arrived in Barbados during the tobacco boom of 1628, and wrote to his uncle, Thomas Fones, in October stating that he ‘‘... doe intend God willing, to staye here on this island caled Barbathos, in the West Indyes, and here I and my servantes to joine in plantinge of tobaccoe.’’38 He soon realised that in order to continue in tobacco production his plantation needed ‘‘... every yere some twenty three servants. . . .’’39 He was satisfied that the importation of a servant from England at a cost of £5-6 for the passage and £10 annually for food, clothes and shelter was, indeed, money well spent. After his first crop reached London, he wrote to his father demanding more indentured servants in order to expand his plantation.

Thomas Verney arrived in Barbados in the 1630’s and began his ‘‘headlong rush’’ to make a quick fortune. His father, with the philosophical

35 Cited in R. Dunn, Sugar and Slaves, p. 52.
37 Cited in E. Donnan (ed.) Documents, Vol. I, pp. 125-6. The first Blacks in Barbados were a small party captured from a Spanish vessel by Capt. Henry Powell, the first Governor of Barbados, in 1627. Henry Winthrop, an early planter noted that in 1628, they were only '50 slaves of Indynes and Blacks in the island, out of a population of 1,800. In 1636, Governor Hawley legislated that in future all Blacks and Indians, plus their offspring, were to be received in the island as slaves, unless some contract exist to the contrary. See, Henry Winthrop to John Winthrop, Jan. 1628; in A. Forbes et. al. (eds.) Winthrop papers 1498-1649 (Boston, 1929-47) Vol. I, p. 357.
40 Ibid. pp. 33-4.
complacency and sense of inner goodness of the early Puritans, was not impressed with his son’s capitalist spirit, and informed him ‘‘... he who hasteth to be rich shall surely come to poverty.’’ But Verney was a shrewd and determined entrepreneur. He sent an invoice to his father which listed the commodities needed in order to make use of his plantation. The invoice was headed with a request for ‘‘... twenty able men servants whereon two to be carpenters, two of them to be joiners and two masons, all of them to have their tooles belonging to their several occupations ...’’ The others were to be unskilled labourers strong enough for working in the fields. Such a labour force was certain to produce high maintenance costs in clothing, and Thomas asked for two extra servants: ‘‘... a weaver that can weave diapers and the other a taylor.’’

In 1640, Thomas asked his father for a loan of £200 which would assist him to raise his ‘‘... fortune in a few years.’’ On receiving this request his father began to make enquiries in London concerning plantations in the West Indies. He then compared the information received with the pattern and nature of his son’s demands, and decided that Thomas had no sound knowledge of plantation management. Furthermore, Thomas’ crop of cotton turned out to be of little value, and a loss was made on his tobacco.

But Sir Verney’s insights were matched by his son’s trickery. On the receipt of his father’s refusal to provide credit, Thomas obtained a testimonial from Capt. Futter, a large planter of 1000 acres and a councillor, which he sent to his father. The testimonial stated that Thomas was an ‘‘extraordinary husbandman’’ and careful, but no credit was forthcoming from his father. Thomas also ran into trouble with his servants: some had fallen sick from overwork, and some he had to auction on the open market because he could not afford to employ or maintain them as the returns from his crops were poor. Thomas, however, was persistent. In June 1640, he wrote to his father asking if he could, with the help of the warden of the Bridewell prison, obtain 100 servants for his estate. Thomas was either trying his hand at servant trading, or was repaying his debts on the island with servants, as was customary. His father refused him both labour and capital. In September, Thomas wrote to his brother, ‘‘... the next yeare

43 Ibid. no. 33.
44 Ibid.
I shall not have soe much credit, unless my father is pleased to send me over a good supply of servants that I may pay that which I am indebted in the country, which I do not pay I must lye and starve in prison..."46

In December, he was imprisoned for non-payment of debt by Governor Hunchs. Such were the experiences of two young planters coming to terms with the dynamics of plantation development in Barbados during the pre-sugar era.

The mercantile interests had been prominent in the Councils of the Imperial State from the 1620's, and well established merchants, such as Thomas Povey, Martin Noell, Andrew Riccard and Maurice Thompson, all had West Indian investments and were therefore prepared to assist the colonists with a large supply of indentured servants.47 The analysis of the 836 servants going to Barbados in eight voyages in 1634 shows that the planters were getting the kind of labour they wanted.

**Servants shipped to Barbados in 1634**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voyage details</th>
<th>sex</th>
<th>age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male</td>
<td>female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan., Capt. J. Ramsey</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb., <em>The Hopewell</em></td>
<td>146</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April, <em>Bonaventure</em></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April, <em>The Falcon</em></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May, <em>Alexander</em></td>
<td>143</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov., <em>Expedition</em></td>
<td>202</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec., <em>Falcon</em></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTALS</strong></td>
<td>709</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data indicate that 87.5% of the servants were within the prime age group for colonial labour, between the ages of ten and twenty, and were also predominantly male. Furthermore, the importance of indentured servants to the pre-sugar West Indian planters can be illustrated by a sample

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46 Thomas Verney to James Verney, 12 Sept., 1640, Davis Mss., Box I, no. 27, letter 5.
48 J. C. Hotten, (ed.) *The Original List of Persons... who went from Great Britain to the American Plantations, 1600-1700* (Lon., 1874).
which shows the labour structures of fifteen Barbados plantations between 1639 and 1643. The sample is taken from the few remaining inventories of this period, and covers most of the arable regions of the colony.

**Labour structure of 15 pre-sugar plantations in Barbados**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Servants</th>
<th>Slaves</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1639</td>
<td>Thomas Hethersall</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Samuel Andrews</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Henry Hawley</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Lancelot Pace</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>William Woodhouse</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1640</td>
<td>Capt. Skeete</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1641</td>
<td>Col. Drax</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1641</td>
<td>Lancelot Pace</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642</td>
<td>Gerald Hawtaine</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642</td>
<td>Thomas Rous</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>Alexander Lindsay</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>Christopher Moulropp</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>James Holdip</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>Capt. Perkins</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1643</td>
<td>John Friesenborch</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>2,681</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The spread of sugar production throughout the West Indies demanded not only large sums of capital and technology, but also a considerable flow of labour with varying degrees of skill, from common field labourers to highly specialised artisans. By seventeenth century standards, the plantation was a sophisticated production unit, demanding a labour force more complex than, say, an English estate. The grinding, boiling, curing, refining and distilling processes of sugar manufacture demanded industrial machinery which had to be assembled, maintained, and at times modified. This meant that a labour force with basic literacy and a familiarity with advanced industrial technology was necessary. In the early phase of sugar production, planters claimed that these qualities were rare in most Africans, and when they were present, thought it politically necessary to suppress or

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49 Deeds and Inventories of Barbados, RB. 3/1, ff. 15, 55-77, 229, 237, 290, 316, 418, 729, 730, 946.

Also, R. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, p. 68.
eradicate them. As a result, they became heavily dependent on white indentured servants to make the critical transition to sugar production.

In this period, servants brought skills to the colonies which were adapted to meet the planters’ demands. Their emergence from a rapidly developing technological society made them suitable. The importation of servants was conceived of not only in terms of labour inputs, but also as injections of technology. A sample of 1,808 servants who registered for servitude in Barbados at Bristol can be used as an indication of the qualitative nature of the labour force being attracted by Barbadian sugar planters. When compared with Virginia, a tobacco colony, Barbados attracted more skilled workers in the period.

### Servants Shipped to Barbados and Virginia from Bristol 1654-60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Barbados (1)</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>no. skilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1654</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1655</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1656</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1657</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>225</td>
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<tr>
<td>1658</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1659</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1660</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>1808</td>
<td>919</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of planters found indentured servants qualitatively adequate for sugar production. The result was a very large increase in the demand for servants during the sugar boom of the late 1640’s and early 1650’s. The Civil War in England was critical in releasing large numbers of labourers, and between 1645 and 1650 at least 8,000 servants joined the labour force.

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in the West Indies. By 1652, some 12,000 servants were employed in Barbados sugar production.\(^51\) Governor Atkins noted that, during the period of early sugar production, indentured servants "... did most of the work on the plantation."\(^52\) These "... poor tradesmen and artificers ..."\(^53\) from the British Isles, Atkins noted, were critical to the development of the sugar industry in the colony.

During the period 1628-1655, indentured servants experienced a degrading form of servitude. They worked as field-hands in gangs on the plantations.\(^54\) Sugar production in both the Old and New Worlds had long been associated with slave labour, and servants found their working relationships in the West Indies more oppressive than anything they had experienced in Britain. They worked in gangs with their African counterparts under severe overseers. The evidence of servants working with slaves in the sugar fields is interesting because it became common in the eighteenth century to designate field work as "nigger work". Ligon noted how servants worked as field-hands on the sugar estates between 1647 and 1650, and concluded that they got a harder share of the work than the slaves who were worked lightly during their first two years of "seasoning".

The hours of field work were indeed long. West Indian planters operated on the "sun-up till sun-down" rule, using all daylight hours to advance the plantation. Generally, the work was hard, the diet poor, and the overseers brutal in their discipline. In 1648, Ligon worked on Col. Modyford's plantation which employed twenty eight servants, and was able therefore to provide a first hand account of their working lives. He noted that when the servant ships arrived, the planters hurried abroad to inspect the "white" cargo. After the allotted time, which was given to rural planters to travel into town, the sale began. It was a time of great activity in Bridgetown as the auctions temporarily dominated the town's business.

After making his purchases, the planter would send his new servants to the plantation with an overseer. On their arrival at the plantation the servants had to build their huts in which they were to live over the period of their indentures, which ranged from 3-10 years. The next day work began with the ringing of a bell at six a.m. According to Ligon, "... if they resist,

\(^{51}\) Egerton Mss. 2395; also An Invoice of Commodities to be sent to Barbados, 23 July 1656 C.S.P.C., 1574-1660, p. 446.
\(^{52}\) Governor Atkins to the Lords of Trade and Plantations, 26 October 1680, C.S.P.C., 1677-80, no. 1558.
their times are doubled . . ." and "... if they complain they are beaten by the overseers. . . ."55

In 1655, one observer noted that in spite of the large number of African slaves on the island, the

custom of all merchants trading thither is to bring as many men and women as they can. No sooner doth a ship come to anchor than the Islanders go abroad enquiring what servants they can buy . . . these servants planteth, weedeth and manureth their ground all by hand in which lieth their estates.56

During the 1630's and 1640's planters kept gangs of female servants "... that weed and do common work . . ."57 about the plantations, but after the 1670's female servants were not allowed in the fields; they were kept primarily for domestic and sexual functions. Field servants were divided into three basic groups. Firstly, there was a group of "subordinate overseers" who formed part of each gang and were responsible for making sure that each daily task was completed. Secondly, there were the gangs of "common servants" who did most of the field work with the slaves. Thirdly, there were the gangs of "common women" who performed work about the plantations.58

In 1645, George Downing explained in a letter to John Winthrop the very important relationship between indentured servitude, Black slavery, and plantation profitability in Barbados. According to Downing, a man in Barbados was severely limited on his estate until he was able to obtain a large stock of servants. Servant labour was to be used for the arduous preliminary stages of development, and then the planter could "... procure negroes out of the increase . . ."59 of the plantation. The idea of the early sugar planters, therefore, was to exploit as severely as possible their indentured servants and use the capital accumulated for the purchase of Negroes.

III

The seventeenth century Englishman was familiar with the institution of indentured servitude, and conceived it to be essential to the organisation of

55 R. Ligon, A True and Exact History, p. 44.
57 R. Ligon, op. cit. p. 112.
58 Ibid.
59 George Downing to Winthrop 26 Aug. 1655, in Forbes, A. et. al. (eds.) Winthrop Papers, Vol. 5. p. 43.
agricultural labour. It was, therefore, a popular and legitimate institution within the socio-economic organisation of society. The institution grew out of the feudal system of apprenticeship, and was characterised by the establishment of a contractual agreement with mutual obligations, not moral but legal, between master and servant. In the formative period of West Indian colonisation, however, the system evolved quite differently in its functions and forms of legitimation. Contemporary observers described it as "white slavery" and referred to indentured servants as "white niggers." Certainly the institution, as it developed in the early English West Indies, resembled chattel slavery more so than traditional English servitude, and the forces which enhanced this development were said to be specific to the nature of early plantation economy.

Pioneer Barbadian planters quite freely bought, sold, gambled away, mortgaged, taxed as property and alienated in wills their indentured servants. These practices were governed not by English labour customs and traditions, but by a loosely defined concept—"the custom of the Country"—which was the law and deciding force in the colonies before a comprehensive master and servant code was established in 1661. Through the manipulation of this concept, early Barbadian planters developed a system of white servitude which was peculiarly new world, and in many ways came remarkably close to the "ideal type" of chattel slavery which later became associated with the African experience.

Historians have generally agreed, however, that the central feature which distinguished white indentured servitude from black slavery was that, unlike the slave, it was the servant's indentured time (contracted labour power) which was marketed and not the servant's self. It should be pointed out, nonetheless that it was this very issue of the "servant's time" which distinguished English from West Indian servitude. Unlike the English master, the West Indian planter on purchasing a servant, obtained by the "custom

Also, in an early account of Barbados, 1667, the authors noted that the field servants, particularly the Irish "... were derided by the Negroes, and branded with the Epithite of white slaves....". See, some observations on the island Barbados, 1667, CO 1/31, No. 170. Public Records Office, London.
See also, R. Schomburgh, The History of Barbados... (London, 1848) p. 84.
of the country’’ total control over the servant, that is, not only his labouring hours, but also his non-labouring hours. He was accountable to his master for the total time embraced under his indenture. The result being that servants could not legally leave their plantations without a pass signed by the master, which in effect meant that the total control element so characteristically demonstrated in black slavery was directly applicable to white servants. Also, planters were keen to demonstrate that the servant was not a free person under contractual obligations, but primarily a capital investment with property characteristics—factors which were contradictory to the concept of partial freedom.

Though the servant’s market value was usually determined primarily by the length of un-expired servitude, planters developed other methods of property valuation, whereby the resale values of some servants were quite independent of the time factor. Common in Barbados was a method which evaluated bodies rather than time. Equiano, an ex-slave, wrote in his autobiography in relation to slaves ‘‘I have often seen slaves . . . in different islands, put into scales and weighed and then sold, from 3 pence to 6 pence a pound’’ .63 This practice was also used to value some white servants. Richard Ligon’s descriptive account of such a transaction in Barbados during the 1640’s is very informative. On this occasion, a young female was being bartered for a pig. The parties to the transaction obtained the scales and weighed both the pig and the servant for their relative value. According to Ligon, ‘‘. . . the price was set at a groat a pound for the hogs flesh, and six pence for the woman’s flesh . . . .’’64 Furthermore, Ligon admitted in dismay, ‘‘. . . tis an ordinary thing here, to sell . . . servants to one another . . . and in exchange receive any commodities that are in the island.’’65 The planters acting under the ‘‘custom of the country’’ merely continued what the merchant had started—dealing with their servants as a species of property.

The development of West Indian servitude was the outgrowth of a complex mixture of economic and social forces operating within the construction of the agricultural systems. The early Barbadians, like other English colonists dependent on tobacco and cotton production, found that depression in the markets for those products not only threatened capital accumulation, but the very future of English Caribbean colonization. There were two

63 R. Ligon, A True History of Barbados, p. 59.
64 Ibid.
65 See, N. Foster, A Briefe Relation of the Late Horrid Rebellion Acted in the island of Barbados. (London, 1650), pp. 293-295.
fundamental responses by the planters to this sense of economic stagnation and unsatisfactory utilisation of indentured labour. A significant number emigrated from the West Indies, taking their servants, to the mainland colonies, particularly Virginia and Maryland. Those who stayed behind began to reappraise the relationship between capital accumulation and labour organisation. These planters developed a more market-oriented conception of labour and its functions as capital. Engerman made an interesting correlation between production, productivity levels and the establishment of property relations in labour. He stated, “It is clear, that the allocation of property rights in man could affect the measured level of output in the economy. The slave owner is able to obtain higher output from his labour force than might be obtained where labour is free, because of the ability to manipulate the supply of labor available.” The Barbados planters, by establishing property rights in servants under indenture, were able to push outwards the supply curve for labour and maximise output with the available technology and land. By this process, these planters were able to accumulate capital in order to survive the crises in the tobacco and cotton markets between 1628 and 1640, and finally to make the leap into high-cost sugar production with black slave labour.

On pre-sugar plantations, capital investment in indentured labour was the largest single outlay, next to investment in land. The most effective method by which a wide range of economic functions could be attached to indentured servants was to establish by the “custom of the island” their use as a form of alienable property. Since servants represented in this period the most liquid form of capital on the plantation, planters wanting to raise small units of money on a short term basis could achieve this by selling servant stock on the open market, thereby increasing significantly the cash flow level on the commodity markets. The use of labour as property with all the market functions of such is the common feature of chattel slavery wherever it has been found. The early Barbadian planters, by using white servants as property on the market therefore laid down the basis prerequisite for slavery to develop. Smith, in his comprehensive survey of English colonial servitude, noted, however, that the servant, “or rather his services” could easily be bought on the open market, while Harlow in his

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67 On Rendevous Plantation (360 acres) in Barbados, 1640, Capital was appraised as follows: 360 acres—36,000 lbs. of cotton; Housing, edifice—4,700 lbs. of cotton; 17 servants—5,000 lbs. of cotton. Inventory of Rendevous Plantation, 1640, RB. 3/1, ff. 13-4 Barbados Archives.
history of Barbados, was more intrigued by the wording and implications of some deeds by which indentured servants were sold.\textsuperscript{68} One Barbados deed read as follows

I, William Marshall of the Island aforesaid (Barbados) Merchant, do by these present, assign, sett and order, all my right, title, and interest of one maide servant, by the name Alice Skinner, for the full term of four years from ye day of her arrival in this island, unto Mr. Richard Davis, or his assigns . . . \textsuperscript{69}

Harlow was particularly interested in the nature of these "rights" and "titles", which were being transferred. He concluded, however, that these related not to the servant's self as property, as with black slaves, but to their labour services. The deeds of Barbados, however, contain much direct evidence to show that the sales of servants were not simply transference of their labour services. For example in 1640, Richard Atkinson signed a deed of sale with John Batt which provided that in case of his financial default

. . . It shall bee for the said John Batt, or his assigns, to take the body of me Richard Atkinson, servant for the terme of six yeares without further trouble or suite of lawe. . . \textsuperscript{70}

Property inventories, wills and deeds of Barbados contain much information on the transfer of ownership of servants. These data show that in plantation accounts, sales and Government investigations into property values, indentured servants were categorized as property, like cattle, slaves, and fixed assets. For example, when the Governor's estate agents appraised "... all such good cattle and chattel as are now upon the Plantation ..." of George Bulkley, on June 12, 1640 the report was itemised as follows: Livestock (42,000 lbs of cotton), Kitchen utensils, Household stuffs (1,125 lbs of cotton) and 9 servants (3,120 lbs of cotton).\textsuperscript{71} Servants were not only tied to the plantation as an integral component of its capital assets, but were also disposed of with the estate as it changed ownership, either by sale or by will. During negotiations for the sale of plantations the seller would present an appraisal of its capital value. These appraisals gave detailed itemizations of every asset to be sold with the land, with their current value. Servants were generally listed as alienable property in these inventories. For example, when Three Houses Plantation in Barbados was sold by Capt. Henry Hawley to Capt. Francis Skette on 19th June, 1640, the "...goods and chattel" attached to the land in sale were:\textsuperscript{72} 40 sowes (12,000 lbs of cotton),

\textsuperscript{68} For a discussion of this theme, see A. E. Smith, \textit{Colonists in Bondage}, p. 233.
\textsuperscript{69} Deed of William Marshall, RB. 3/2, f. 47. Barbados Archives.
\textsuperscript{70} Deed of John Batt, 14 Dec., 1640, Davis Mss. Box 2, Royal Commonwealth Society (London).
\textsuperscript{71} Inventory of George Buckley's Plantation, 12 June, 1640, RB. 3/1, f 14. Barbados Archives.
\textsuperscript{72} Inventory of Henry Hawley's Plantation, 19 June, 1640. RB. 3/1, f. 15. Barbados Archives.
160 piggs (5,150 lbs of cotton), 2 hoggs (3,000 lbs of cotton), 1 horse (700 lbs of cotton), 6 donkeys (3,600 lbs of cotton) and 28 servants (26 males, 2 females) (7,350 lbs. of cotton).

The inclusion of servants as chattels to be alienated in property transactions illustrates how Barbadian planters imposed market functions on indentured servants as they did with their African slaves. The government of the colony also recognised the market functions of indentured servants as alienable property. Magistrates and tax officials frequently confiscated indentured servants in order to recover tax arrears, or to pay the debts of the deceased.73 For example, on the 7th April, 1647, the Provost Marshall of Barbados gave a local constable an order to

. . . seize and attach any of ye cotton, tobacco, servants, plantacon, or other goods or estate, whs'over belonging to the children of Capt. William Rayley deceased . . . to be resold to meet the debt owed by the deceased to Mr. Alexander Lindsay.74

Like the tax officers, individuals preferred to reclaim debts by obtaining indentured servants; they could either be quickly sold for cash or a commodity, or easily put to work. There was, therefore, a wide-spread preference for indentured servants as a short-term capital investment, more than for African slaves, who were seen as problematic, in that they had to be trained into productive roles.

Servants were also used as integral parts of the commercial and financial structure. Planters commonly used them as property security in mortgage agreements. In March 1647, John Wiseman, Barbados planter, was in debt to the value of 500 lbs. of cotton unto William Russell. In order to satisfy Russell, Wiseman had to mortgage his "... plantation and servants ..."75 until the agreed repayment date was fixed.76 The placing of indentured servants on two to five year mortgages was common; individuals preferring to use servants as property guarantees in such agreements. The logical market extension of such a system was the use of indentured servants as a form of currency which was accepted by all and legitimized by local law and custom. Some individuals insisted that payment in transactions be made, not in sterling, but in servants, while others made it the basis of the legality of contracts. In 1644, Thomas Applewahaite, a Barbados planter, bought a 200 acre plantation in the parish of St. Thomas and St. George;

74 Order to the Provost Marshall, 7 April 1647, RB. 3/2, f. 70. Barbados Archives.
76 Ibid.
the contract being valid only if part of the payment was made with 25 indentured servants valued at £15 each.77

All these functions were part of a wider system of property and processory relations in human beings developed in the colonies and which corresponded to the plantation system of production and legitimised by its “legal-custom” superstructure. Max Weber in his analysis of property, used the concept of “appropriation” as being central to the meaning of property in a given set of social relations. The total appropriation of a person’s social and productive capacity by another in any set of social relations implied the formation of ownership and rights systems in that person. Furthermore, the ultimate proof of the existence of property rights in persons lies in whether those rights and titles can be alienated. Torrance argued that “appropriated rights which are enjoyed by individuals through inheritance . . . will be called the property of the individual . . . as they are alienable free property.”78 In Barbados, indentured servants, like slaves, were bequeathed and inherited by wills, and no one questioned the legality of this method of property alienation. For example, the will of John Daulton, 15th April, 1656 stated, “I give and bequeath unto my daughters Emillie Daulton and Joan Daulton . . . my estate whatsoever, and goods and chattels, commodities merchandizes, servants . . . upon it.”79

No system of slavery could function effectively unless property rights were not only defended but also alienable, especially within the family through the inheritance mechanism. Smith argued, however, that whether property or not, “. . . indentured servants were Christian and they were white, hence they were protected . . . by their right to complain to magistrates.”80 He made a great deal of this right of servants to complain to local magistrates over excessive mal-treatment, and implied that this undermined the conception of them as property. There were, however, some constraints which prohibited masters from using their servants fully as chattel slaves. Engerman noted, however, that even “. . . in societies in which slavery existed and was held morally defensible, both law and custom recognised that man was a rather peculiar form of property. Slave codes to regulate treatment by masters were widespread and there were more legal constraints on the behaviour of slaves than on other forms of property.”81

77 Deed of Applewhaite, 1644, RB. 3/1, f. 536. Barbados Archives.
79 Will of John Daulton entered 15 April 1656, RB. 6/13, f. 134. Barbados Archives.
80 See, A. E. Smith, *Colonists in Bondage*, p. 234.
81 S. Engerman, “‘Some consideration relating to Property’”, p. 44.
Barbados did not develop slave and servant codes until 1661, by which time the numerical and economic significance of servants in the society was rapidly diminishing.

Constraints of race and culture also played an important part. Both the planter class and the imperial government would have had great difficulty in legitimising the reduction of indentured servants to chattel slaves. Indeed, the history of the English people was popularly conceived to be featured primarily by the gradual freeing of lower orders—and this was identified in the seventeenth century as an important area of progress. Furthermore, most servants came to the West Indies voluntarily, and would have objected to such a development. Their use as property had already created a political crisis in the white community, as evidenced by the aborted servant insurrections of 1634 and 1647.  

Nonetheless, it was clear that prior to the 1661 Masters and Servants Act, and especially in the period before 1647, both servants and slaves were used as property, though slaves were seen, unlike servants, as permanent and self-reproductive, thus of higher value. The controversy initiated by Oscar and Mary Handlin’s well known essay on the origins of slavery in English America is directly relevant to this period of West Indian history, since it was at Barbados that the English developed their first expansive slave system in the New World. It is now difficult to accept their argument that the English in the early West Indies were not innately prejudiced against blacks, who were a small minority in the pre-sugar era. The evidence, however, does support their other argument that the masters, in terms of the market use of labour, did not significantly distinguish in this formative period between servants under indenture and blacks. While the blacks served indefinitely and the servants for periods of 3-10 years, what was common to both was their property status. Though this status was in itself insufficient to allow for a definition of the servant as slave, added with other features, blacks clearly became slaves. For example, the blacks’ status


White servants organised two aborted plots on the island, 1634 and 1647. They ran away, confronted overseers, refused to work, and in 1692, were involved in the aborted slave insurrection.

was involuntary and self-reproductive: in addition non-pecuniary returns, such as socio-sexual benefits (including rape and other forms of physical assault) could be obtained from slaves without legal penalties, whereas by ‘the custom of the country’, servants could not be used in these ways.  

Servants did in fact have a right, and this was the right to complain to local magistrates over excessive maltreatment at the hands of their masters. This right was rarely effectively exercised, and the Council, Assembly and Judiciary, the politico-legal apparatus of the planters’ hegemony, greatly suppressed it so that it did not adversely effect normal property right in the servants. For example, in 1640, when two Barbados servants lodged complaints against their master, Capt. Thomas Stanhope, for maltreatment, after examination the local magistrate found them to be malicious and had them publicly flogged, thus destroying any legal threat to the planters’ right to treat their property as they wished within the wide limits of the “custom of the country”. Planters expected such decisions from the judiciary and held the view that since they paid a property tax on their servants, their disposal and use of them was no concern of the wider community. In 1636, therefore, when the Barbadians established in law, aboriginal and African slavery they had already developed in the “custom of the country” white proto-slavery.

**Summary**

The rise of the plantation system, like the development of white ‘proto-slavery’ preceded the emergence of ‘sugar and black slavery’. The demands of commodity production had the effect of creating a new form of servitude out of the old institution, one which was more suitable to the market requirements of the early planters. This subject has gone largely unresearched because of the greater involvement of African slave labour and Asian indentured labour in plantation development in the West Indies. Much work has been done on the servant trade and the displacement of servant labour by black slaves particular on the mainland colonies, but the economic nature of early West Indian servitude on the plantations is still in need of researchers. However, it is important to realise that the development of plantation economy in the early decades of West Indian colonisation was based upon white labour, and it was upon this basis that expansive black slavery emerged between 1645 and 1650.

**UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

*Mona, Jamaica*

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84 For a discussion of this theme as it relates to the English West Indies in the early seventeenth century see, R. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, pp. 226-230.