

# A NOVEL WAY OF RELIEVING THE POOR SEND THEM TO JAMAICA

by Eileen M. Bowlt

**This paper looks at an apparently isolated instance of Ruislip paupers sailing to Jamaica as indentured servants in 1835. Historical research has focused upon indentured servants going to the West Indies and the American colonies from England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and from India and China in the mid and later nineteenth century. The brief facts recounted here occurred at a transitional moment in Jamaican history, slavery having been abolished in Britain and her colonies in 1834. How widespread was the practice?**

Members of this Society who have read the 2007 *Journal* will have realised from the articles on the Game Laws (Cartwright) and the deaths caused by starvation (Bowl) that the 1830s and 1840s were times of great hardship. Agriculture was at a low ebb and there was no alternative work for labourers in Ruislip, unlike those in Hayes and West Drayton where there were large brickfields, or Harefield with its copper mills. Poor Relief had become harder to obtain with the harsher conditions set down by the new poor law after 1834. Farmers, who paid the agricultural labourers and contributed to the Poor Rate, were feeling the pinch because of the general economic conditions, exacerbated by the effect of the protected game birds upon crops, and were less sympathetic than formerly to the needs of the poor.

## The Jamaica Scheme

The Revd John Addison, Rector of Ickenham and chairman of the Ickenham Vestry, attended a Ruislip Vestry meeting on 26 December 1834, to propose that the parishes of Ickenham and Ruislip should unite under the Poor Law Commissioners<sup>1</sup>. (The new Poor Law Union boundaries had not yet been decided.) He was not present at a special meeting on 16 January 1835 called to consider whether such a union was expedient, but he

had placed a letter in the hands of the Vestry Clerk, containing another proposition, suggesting a way of removing some indigent residents far away from these shores.

The letter<sup>2</sup>, written two days earlier, came from one Peter Wells, agent for W.R. & S. Mitchell, West India Merchants of 46 Lime Street in the City of London. Mr Wells was planning to send 300 labourers and their families to Jamaica and needed 50 to make up the numbers. 'Will you oblige me by stating what number may be promised from your neighbourhood if you think I could get the 50 to sail on the 31<sup>st</sup> inst.'

He propounded the terms on which he had sent 103 people to a friend in Jamaica the previous month. Each able-bodied person received £5 per year; a cottage; medical attention; proper clothing for the climate; a sufficient quantity of land to cultivate to provide food. There were other advantages such as the possibility of raising poultry and pigs. Persons were engaged for three to five years.

Such terms – a sea voyage to a place with a warm climate and a cottage and land – could have a certain attraction for uneducated people living on the edge of starvation in Ruislip or Ickenham. The 'advert', for so we must construe it, says nothing of the size of the house or the quantity and quality of the land. Even more tellingly it plays down the three to five year engagement. Persons taken to Jamaica went in fact as indentured servants and one wonders how much time they would have left after working for their masters to produce enough food for themselves, let alone have a surplus to sell so that they could buy animals.

Only five people attended the meeting, the chairman, Ralph Deane of Eastcote House, Nathaniel Soames of Northwood House (The Grange), Mr James Webb of Field End, Ruislip, (now the Barn Hotel), Mr Edward

Long of Cheyney Street Farm and Mr William Durbridge of Field End Farm, Eastcote, who were Overseers of the Poor and John Ashley of St Catherine's Farm, Howletts Lane. He was the Assistant Overseer. They considered the two propositions before them. They decided that Ruislip would 'not unite with Ickenham in the present circumstances'<sup>3</sup>.

The question of emigration to Jamaica was sufficiently important to warrant another meeting on 23 January 1835. Both Mr Addison and Mr Wells came and presented the terms of agreement made with five labourers who had been sent out 'to their estate' called the 'New Ground Estate' the previous month.<sup>4</sup>

The labourers 'of their own free will' bound themselves servants to Rowland Mitchell, Samuel Mitchell and Henry Roden, trading under the firm of W.R. & S. Mitchell & Co, in the capacity of agricultural labourers for the sum of £5 sterling per annum for seven years (not three to five as said in the letter) to be paid quarterly. The labourers promised 'readily and cheerfully' to obey and execute the lawful and reasonable demands of Rowland Mitchell etc or their attorney in Jamaica. They were not to absent themselves from service and were to be diligent, sober and temperate.

The Company was to provide comfortable lodging, clothing and medical attention, food and pay for the voyage out to the island of Jamaica from England. Youths and children were to be paid for their labours in proportion to the able labourers according to their capacity<sup>5</sup>.

Those present understood that any local paupers who chose to take advantage of the offer would have to be given clothes for the voyage at the expense of the parish, but would then cease to be a burden upon the local rates.

How information about the plan was circulated among the poor is not stated in the Vestry Minutes, but at a meeting on 30 January 1835, it was reported that Hannah Bowden and Caroline Parker had applied to go out to Jamaica as female servants<sup>6</sup>.

They were both referred to the Revd John Addison who was acting as intermediary.

### **Hannah Bowden and Caroline Parker**

Why did these two women agree to leave home and family? Did anyone explain to them what they were binding themselves to do? We do not know the answers to these questions, but it is likely that they went blindly into the unknown, because life in Ruislip had so little to offer them.

Hannah Bowden is probably the girl of that name baptised at St Martin's in July 1814, daughter of William and Elizabeth Bowden<sup>7</sup>. They lived in a cottage in Frog Lane (Fore Street). She was already known to the Overseers and had been in Ruislip Workhouse on two or three occasions in the previous couple of years. John Ashley, the Assistant Overseer had ordered Martin Webber, Master of Ruislip Workhouse, to receive Hannah Bowden in January 1834, but he had refused to take her on the grounds that she had failed to deliver a letter that he had entrusted to her the last time she had been an inmate. In October 1834 Hannah was ill and sought relief again<sup>8</sup>. On this occasion she was taken into the house and a doctor was sent for. This is the last reference to Hannah before she applies to go to a new life in Jamaica.

Her family seems generally to have been in poor circumstances and various members received assistance from time to time during the 1830s and 40s. By the time of the 1851 census, Hannah's mother, Elizabeth, was a widow and living in the Church House (now known as the Almshouses) by the churchyard. In later censuses, Joseph, probably Hannah's brother, and his family were in the Church House and some of them remained there into the twentieth century.

Caroline Parker is something of a mystery. She does not appear in the Ruislip parish registers, but there is one mysterious reference in 1834 to 'Parker's children' at Bushey and reports of their ill usage - said to be false<sup>9</sup>.

Presumably these two young women - Hannah was nearly 21, but Caroline's age is

unknown – set out for Jamaica in hope of a better life. If only one knew what happened to them.

## **Jamaica**

Christopher Columbus seized Jamaica for Spain in 1494 and the native American Taino population was decimated by European diseases introduced by Spanish settlers and by overwork on the new ranches. They were replaced by black slaves, first brought in via Spain, and from 1518 direct from Africa.

Admiral William Penn and General Robert Venables seized Jamaica for England in 1655. A House of Assembly under the Governor of Jamaica who was the representative of the English Government, made its own laws for the colony.

During the eighteenth century sugar, coffee and pimento were produced, with most of the work being done by slaves, 10000 of whom were imported annually from Africa, outnumbering those born in Jamaica. Despite this trade, (abolished by Britain in 1807), there was always a labour shortage, that was supplied by transporting prisoners from England and by enticing young people from the streets of London and other sea ports like Liverpool and Bristol to bind themselves as indentured servants. They went not only to Jamaica, but to other English colonies in the West Indies and America.

There are very few surviving records of those who went, although a system of formal registration of those indentured was introduced in the late seventeenth century. The first major shipments from London occurred about 1620, when three groups of about 100 children went to Virginia under an agreement between the Virginia Company and the City Corporation. The high-minded City fathers recorded that the scheme was 'for redeeming so many poor souls from misery and ruin, and putting them in a condition of use and service to the state'<sup>10</sup>.

Some young men and women were deliberately lured onto ships in the pool of London, with promise of free clothing, bed and food, sometimes weeks before sailing, by which time they had become indebted to the

captain. Others were 'spirited' aboard, deceived by the wonderful tales spun by gangs who were paid by the ship's captains for their booty. Some were kidnapped by force. The rest went freely regarding the indentures as similar to entering into a normal apprenticeship at home. Usually they entered into indentures with the ship's captain and he upon arrival in the colony sold their indentures to a plantation owner or other master. The indentured servants were treated as marketable commodities. Plantation owners were inclined to treat white servants worse than the slaves, as they were cheap, only costing their wages, and therefore more expendable than the slaves who cost £40 or £50 to replace. Indentured servants, however, always had rights under English Common Law in English colonies, provided that they could gain access to it<sup>11</sup>.

## **Conditions in the 1830s**

William Rowland Mitchell of W.R. & S. Mitchell & Co., was a director of the West India Dock Company in 1831 and Deputy Chairman by 1834<sup>12</sup>. The terms set out by Peter Wells, the agent, suggest that servants were indentured to the Company, not to the ship's captain and that they would be working on the Company's own estate, the New Ground estate, rather being than passed to other masters.

Labour conditions were changing in the Caribbean at the time when Hannah and Caroline went there, because Britain abolished slavery in 1834, although emancipation was introduced in stages. The Act of abolition was effective from 1 August 1834. All slave children under the age of six or born after that date became free. The other slaves became apprentices. Field workers were tied to their former master for six years and non-field workers for four years. They were to receive food, clothing and shelter, but no wages for a 40½ hour week. Wages would be paid for extra hours. The apprenticeship aroused much resistance and was abandoned in 1838. The Government paid £6 million compensation to the slave owners.

Plantation owners began to import indentured servants from India and China from the mid-1840s until indentured servitude came to an end in 1917. Were West India Merchants like Mr Mitchell canvassing for paupers to fill the gap in the labour market and boost their trade? Much more research needs to be done.

### Some final questions

Did the girls arrive safely? If so did they remain on the island or could they afford to buy a passage home at the end of their seven years servitude? A trawl through the Ancestry Website produced a Hannah Bowden living in the Union Workhouse at Hillingdon at the time of the 1861 census. She was unmarried. She had given her place of birth as Ruislip, her age as 45 and her occupation as field worker. Ten years later she was still there, giving her age as 54 and her place of birth as Eastcote. In 1878 her death was registered in Uxbridge, her age said to be 'about 60'. Were the years in Jamaica the most exciting part of a rather sad life?

Caroline Parker remains a mystery.

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<sup>1</sup> London Metropolitan Archives: DRO 19/C1/3, p45b (Vestry Minutes)

<sup>2</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3, pp48-9.

<sup>3</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3 p48

<sup>4</sup> LMA DRO 19/c1/3, p 48b

<sup>5</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3, p49

<sup>6</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3, p50

<sup>7</sup> Manor Farm Library: Transcript St Martin's Parish Registers.

<sup>8</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3, p17

<sup>9</sup> LMA: DRO 19/C1/3, p21b

<sup>10</sup> Guildhall Library: Wareing, John: *The Regulation and Organisation of the trade in indentured servants for the American Colonies in London*. PhD thesis, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Guildhall Library: Robson's London Directory, 1831 & 1834.