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# FALMOUTH IN PERIL: 'AN ALMOST UNSPOILT TOWN'

Douglas Blain

Falmouth, on Jamaica's north coast, was laid out after 1770 on a green field site as a port for the export of sugar from the island's rich coastal plain (Fig. 1). Somehow it survived the decline of the sugar industry following emancipation. Fires (in 1807 and 1926) and tempests (particularly the hurricanes of 1903 and 1944) inflicted serious damage, yet in 1949 the Georgian Group's first Secretary, Angus Ackworth, in his charming book *Treasure in the Caribbean*, was still able to characterise it as 'an almost unspoilt town of the late eighteenth century'.

That comment holds good even today, in the sense that Falmouth's unique 'Jamaica Georgian' character has by no means been lost. But, alas, many of the buildings themselves are in a ruinous state following the passage of Hurricane Gilbert along Jamaica's north coast in the autumn of 1988. In this brief history and description it is hoped to establish the case for an international effort to enable the poorer freeholders to re-roof their buildings in appropriate fashion and to make good the worst of the damage, particularly to windows, balconies and other characteristic features.

## Early History

The prosperity of the West Indies sugar trade at the end of the eighteenth century can only be compared with that of the Middle Eastern oil industry in the 1970s. In 1798 Pitt told the House of Commons that four-fifths of all the revenues flowing into England from overseas, including Ireland, came from the Caribbean colonies, of which Jamaica was of course by far the most important. From the time of Columbus's introduction of sugar-cane to the island during his second voyage in 1493, Jamaica's output had grown so fast that, 300 years later, she



Fig. 1. Bird's-eye view of a tropical 'planted town' – Falmouth, circa 1840, from Duperly's *Daguerrian Excursions in Jamaica*. By then the town was larger than Montego Bay, its trade second only to that of Kingston.

was the world's largest producer. At that time her annual output was of the order of 100,000 tons from approximately 800 estates, of which number about a tenth were in the newly created parish of Trelawny.

The proprietors in this easterly or 'windward' part of the formerly much larger parish of St James had, since before its separation in 1774, been exporting their sugar and other produce by way of Martha Brae Point, a safe haven (though notoriously difficult of access) at the mouth of the river of the same name, rather than send it all the way by road to the old administrative centre of Montego Bay. But their efforts to set up a new chief town had been less than successful, the settlement of Martha Brae itself having failed to progress beyond the status of a village, with a court house (but no church) and, according to Long's account of the island in 1774, only about 30 dwellings.

Meanwhile the Barrett family, who in the 1660s had been granted an enormous tract of land comprising almost the entire coastline of what was to become the parish of Trelawny, had been manoeuvring to have a new parish 'capital' on their own ground at Palmetto Point Pen, a 170-acre tract of flat, rather marshy land bounded to the north by the sea and the old-established Fort Balcarres, to the east by the harbour at Martha Brae river, and elsewhere by mangrove swamp. Even before the Jamaican Assembly had passed the legislation establishing Trelawny as a separate administrative entity, Edward Barrett of Cinnamon Hill (1734–1798), great-grandfather of the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, had apparently donated land for the building of a church to serve his intended new town. This may have been as early as 1771. Some time afterwards his brother Samuel was appointed chairman of a committee set up to look into the practicalities of moving the parish capital from Martha Brae. Certain members advocated settlement at Rock, on the other side of the harbour, but as soon as Barrett indicated the family's willingness to dispose of Palmetto Point on favourable terms there was a rush among the estate proprietors to buy plots for town houses and sugar wharves in what was shortly to become Falmouth.

In 1774 there was only one house on the site, apart from the fort and barracks. By 1781 between seven and ten houses had been completed. In 1790, when Captain John Leard, RN, of HMS Centurion, was commissioned to carry out a survey of the harbour, he was able to show Rock as simply a collection of warehouses linked by a bridge (built in that year to replace the former ferry) to the by-now substantial town of Falmouth, whose fort and barracks, a dozen or more streets on a regular grid pattern, and the wharves of the leading families are all clearly delineated. Also shown, and described in the accompanying navigational notes on Leard and Seymour's published chart of 1793, is a building known as the High House — a dwelling of three storeys which still stood in 1954 when Daniel Ogilvie wrote his history of the parish, from which much of the historical information in this paper has been drawn.

At the time of Leard's survey the new town could already boast between 100 and 200 houses (estimates vary according to source). In the following year a meeting held at Martha Brae resolved that a church for 300 should be built on the plot donated by Barrett twenty years earlier, at a cost of £9,000. Within five years it was complete, a fact confirmed by the date 1796 on the fine clock by Francis Perigal of Bond Street, London, which is still in the tower. Meanwhile, in January 1794, Mr Angus Campbell had been paid £20 for his trouble in ascertaining the number of houses in the new settlement, as well as at Martha Brae and Rock, with the names of the occupiers, and for going round with a petition, all with the aim of securing a transfer of the parish administration to Falmouth. This was achieved shortly afterwards.

### **Georgian Buildings**

The eighteenth and early nineteenth century houses of Falmouth are of two distinct types. One variety is modelled closely on contemporary English practice. Timber-framed, or



Fig. 2. The residential upper parts of many Falmouth buildings are entered by separate staircases from the rear.



Fig. 3. Market Street in the 1840s, showing the characteristic oversailing first floor 'piazzas' and ground-floor warehouse accommodation.

sometimes built in a yellowish brick which is often said, somewhat improbably, to have been imported as ballast from the United Kingdom, it is of two storeys, regularly fenestrated, with a central doorway of simple classical form, with fanlight. Apart from the absence of chimneys, the only features distinguishing it from its British counterpart are the use of North American broadleaf cedar shingles for the roof covering and the substitution, common but by no means universal, of louvred shutters or jalousies for glazed sash windows. In fact Falmouth was singled out for comment in 1802 as having 'several' houses with glazed windows.

The other type of house is much more distinctive, having close links with buildings of the same era in other West Indian towns (particularly St John's, Antigua) and, ultimately, in the eastern states of the USA. This is a dual purpose structure built of brick or 'cut stone' (ashlar) as far as first floor level, the upper storey or (in only one surviving instance, No. 37 Market Street) two storeys being of timber frame, weather boarded outside, flush-boarded or plastered inside, and often with the studs roughly infilled with brick in a fashion known, perhaps significantly, as 'Spanish wall'.

In plan, the houses of this second type are most interesting, the lower portion being usually designed as a single large space, entered directly from the street and clearly meant to serve as a warehouse. The upper part is entered by a relatively stylish, often open flight of steps from the back yard (Fig. 2), sometimes with a porch or simple timber portico through which the domestic quarters are reached. The protruding portion is supported on graceful columns (Fig. 3), its walls liberally pierced by jalousied openings to catch the afternoon sea breezes and cool the full-width room within. This seems to have had the same function as the eighteenth century 'piazza' of the great house in the countryside — an informal tropical



Fig. 4. The Barrett House, 1799, stands windswept and forlorn at the seaward end of Market Street. Already dilapidated, it was further damaged by the 1988 hurricane.

drawing room, entered by way of a handsomely detailed central passage and arched doorway, giving access in turn to the principal bedrooms, the partition walls being very often louvered for through-ventilation. The kitchen and other offices, with the slaves' quarters, were arranged around the yard at the back.

The finest surviving example in Falmouth of this type of dwelling is the Barretts' own house (Fig. 4), opposite their former wharf buildings at the north end of Market Street. Dated 1799, it is an elegantly proportioned structure of cut stone and sawn softwood, the latter no doubt imported from Nova Scotia; simple, well built, and with some attractive late-Georgian detail that would not disgrace a contemporary London town house of the third or fourth rate. Three pairs of double doors give access from the street to the warehouse, paved with what is said to be York stone, which stretches the full width of the building. Four splendid hardwood Tuscan columns in the centre of this lofty space help to support the bedrooms directly above, and the partition which separates it from the staircase and a number of smaller rooms behind is pierced by a decorative grille at high level.

The first floor elevation has a central tripartite window, flanked by two pairs of full-length sashes, each formerly graced by a semi-circular balcony of wrought iron in a simple lozenge pattern. These give onto two very spacious rooms, now subdivided and with a later staircase to the street. The doors opening into the central passage and bedchambers have finely detailed doorcases with Adamesque entablatures in gesso on pine (Fig. 5). At least one of the surviving doors has six double-sided fielded panels and is of solid native mahogany. A second has single-sided fielded panels, while a third is of softwood grained to look like mahogany. The walls are lined with wide, horizontal boards of cedar, delicately beaded. The



Fig. 5. Fine detail work in pine, cedar, mahogany and gesso distinguishes the Barrett House interior.

principal rooms have dados with traces of gesso decoration, and there is an elaborate cornice. The Barrett House, already decrepit, was further damaged by the 1988 hurricane. The upper part is unoccupied and open to intruders.

Other fine houses include No. 35 Market Street, the three-storeyed survivor mentioned above, which, whilst being entirely English Georgian in its elements, nonetheless has a New World air about it which supports Phillippo's assertion, in his account of 1843, that 'the character of the town is American'. Also in Market Street is Whiteside House, hideously mutilated outside but with an unaltered first floor interior of perhaps the 1780s, and with its ancillary buildings surviving in dilapidated condition in the back yard. Equally early but somewhat more complete are the house and wharf of John Tharp (1736–1804), arguably the most successful sugar planter of the eighteenth century. Tharp's town house with its first-floor porch facing the sea was until recently the Falmouth customs house.

The most notable public buildings are the church, the court house, the gaol and the Baptist chapel. The church (Fig. 6), of brick and stone, is one of the largest in Jamaica. Its structure of 1795 is largely intact despite later (1843) extension and an internal re-orientation of much the same date. There are some mural monuments, table tombs and gravestones of the 1790s, many of the latter in a ruinous state. The court house (Fig. 7) was built in 1815 but apparently designed some ten years earlier by one John Robey. It was seriously damaged by fire in 1926. The rebuilding resulted in some unfortunate changes to the detail of the fine portico and in the replacement of the original sashes by ugly but no doubt practical metal



Fig. 6. The church, built in 1795, is one of the largest in the island. Its tower was raised in the mid-nineteenth century to make the clock run longer.



Fig. 7. The Court House, still the seat of parish government, dates from 1815 but was much altered following a fire in 1926.

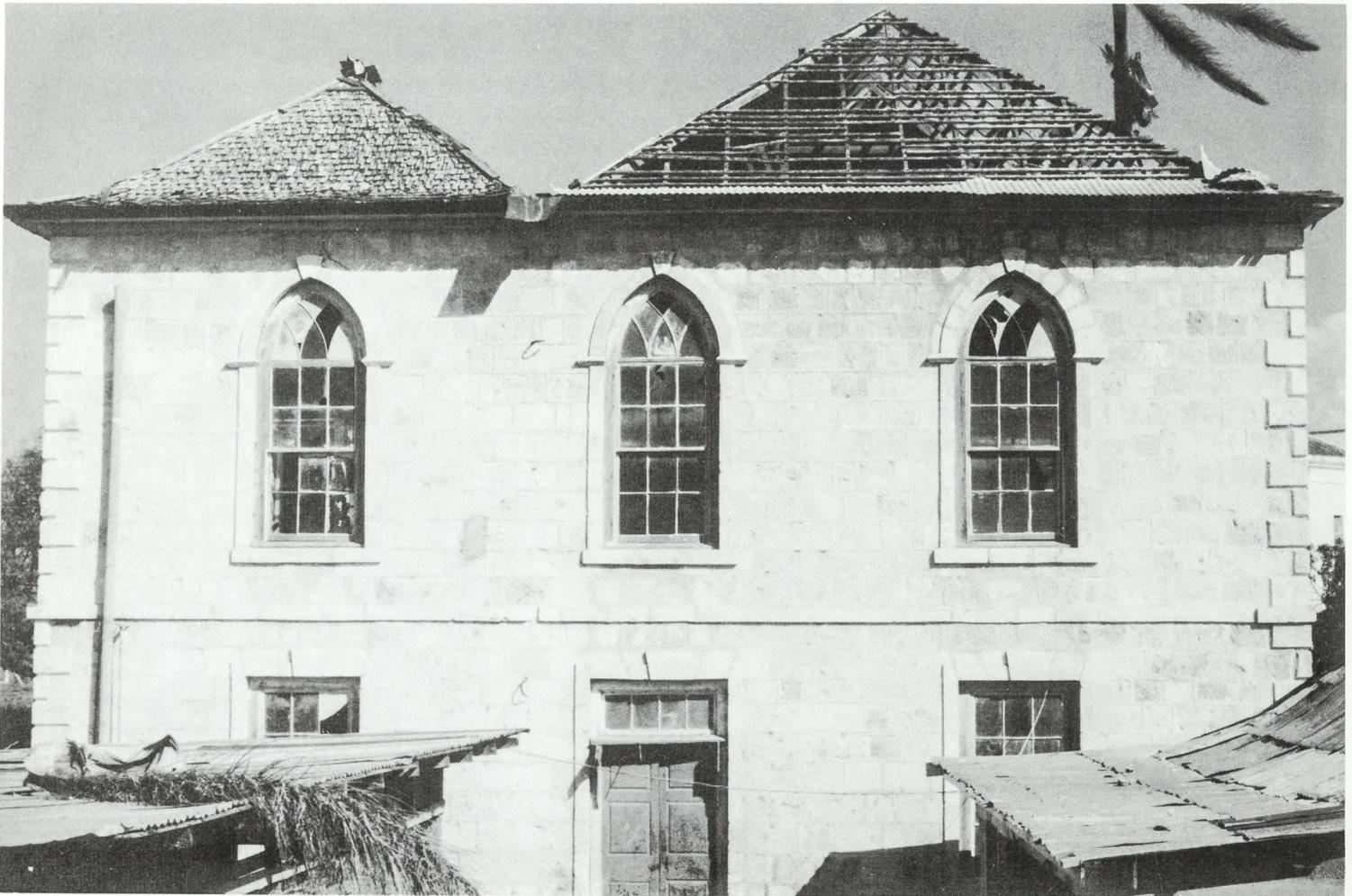


Fig. 8. The Baptist chapel, damaged by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, was built for the town's free-masons in 1798 but soon sold to liquidate debts.

louvres. The roof structure was altered to run from front to back instead of from side to side, as originally.

The gaol is an early cut stone building which looks at first glance like a greathouse of the 1770s, and may indeed be so; Ogilvie records that in 1798 one James Dunn was paid £400 for his house at the Grass Piece for use as a gaol. Its first floor is approached by a fine flight of steps, and the domestic impression is enhanced by the miraculous survival, in the forecourt, of an admittedly rudimentary English formal garden. The charming little cut stone Gothick chapel (Fig. 8) of 1798 was built as a masonic lodge but later sold in order to liquidate debts incurred in its construction. The Baptists were the purchasers. Their minister, William Knibb, achieved fame shortly afterwards as an anti-slavery campaigner and is said regularly to have attracted congregations of 2,000. Many of them must have had to congregate outside.

### **Falmouth Today**

With its harbour long since silted up and no industry to support it, Falmouth has been in decline for many years. There have been numerous proposals for its development as a tourist attraction, but to date the necessary funds have not been forthcoming. Whilst most of the domestic buildings are occupied, there is little spare cash for maintenance. A calamity such as a hurricane, however predictable in this tropical environment, can never be budgeted for.

Hurricane Gilbert not only removed the usual quota of roofs and verandahs but actually flattened one fine Georgian house and badly damaged fourteen others, leaving them in danger of collapse. Even minor damage such as the blowing-in of a window or the removal of the corrugated sheets which have, for the most part, replaced the original shingles leaves a fragile early building, its interiors desiccated by centuries of equatorial heat, dangerously exposed to subsequent damage by relentless seasonal rains.

In 1987 the Jamaica National Heritage Trust Act gave to that body powers of protection of any building it might choose to list as being of historic interest, including the power to enforce maintenance and to prevent demolition. The same law provides that any certified expenditure by the owner on a listed building can be offset against tax — a particularly enlightened measure. Without a system of state-funded grants for repair, however, the use of such powers against the impoverished freeholders of Falmouth would be counter-productive. Whilst there has been no lack of official reports and proposals for feasibility studies, the fact remains that somebody has got to pay for urgent repairs.

Estimates prepared for the Georgian Society of Jamaica suggest that some \$6 million Jamaican (roughly £550,000) is still needed to repair hurricane damage alone, with a similar sum being required for other necessary repairs. Emergency roofing works, using Canadian shingles imported in bulk, would cost about £65,000 sterling. This admirable local pressure group is taking steps towards setting up a registered charity to be known as the Falmouth Foundation, to which our own Georgian Group has already contributed, as have the Leche Trust and at least one private benefactor with local connections. But much more needs to be done, and quickly too, to save this devastated little Georgian gem, or there will be nothing left worth looking at.

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