TROPICAL BAROQUE

Douglas Blain finds echoes of a distant land in Jamaica's exuberant plantation houses.

Despite having been fascinated by Jamaican Georgian plantation houses and their histories since the early 1980s, I had not really appreciated how important the earliest surviving domestic buildings were to the history of British Colonial architecture until one day in April 1987 when Marcus Binney and I found our way down to what is now called Colbeck Castle, located not far inland from Old Harbour, once the principal southern seaport for the export of sugar. As we drove into the compound of this enormous ruin Marcus, genuinely taken aback, exclaimed: 'Good God! It's Vanbrugh in the wilderness!'

One can easily see why he made that half-jocular comparison. But despite obvious parallels with Vanbrugh's work, for example at Grimsthorpe, Lincolnshire, whose builder wanted four towers but could afford only two, there is no evidence that he or any other prominent English Baroque architect had any direct involvement with this extraordinary complex – or, indeed, with any other of the five closely related Jamaican buildings we know of either from remains or from illustrated early evidence.

Colbeck's early history has so far defied convincing documentation. It is often said to have been built by a Cromwellian colonel of that name who was one of the early settlers in Jamaica after its conquest from the Spanish in 1655. But Colbeck died too early, really, for even a rich planter to have established himself to that extent in a new colony still very much finding its feet.

Colbeck Castle, south elevation

The palatial scale of the house suggests a level of prosperity and security more readily associated with the early eighteenth century, by which time slavery was well established and the sugar trade booming. Set in the centre of a not-quite-square enclosure bounded by a shallow moat, it stands on a slight hillock with paths radiating to four masonry pavilions. Each of these was supplied with fresh water via underground vaulted drains from the roof of the house itself, and each had a definite function. As well as a large kitchen (these were almost always detached

in Jamaica, as occasionally at home, owing to the risk of fire) there were flushing latrines and even a bath house, with steps leading down to a lime-rendered bath the size of a small swimming pool.

Inside the house, there is evidence of an internal stair leading to the *piano nobile*, as opposed to the external flight usual in the better Jamaican great-houses of the period. This led to a large hall or drawing room, half-panelled in what one can assume was locally sourced mahogany, with a fireplace and chimney. This room and its neighbouring parlour or eating room shared access to four spacious covered verandahs, with what were probably bedrooms in the towers at the corners of the building and further accommodation above.

By contrast with contemporary or slightly earlier plantation houses in, say, Barbados or the southern United States, Colbeck shows clear signs of having been designed with the prevailing climate very much in mind. Hans Sloane, writing at about that time following a long stay in Jamaica, pointed out how ill-adapted the conventional English style of construction, as opposed to the Spanish, was to life in the tropics. It is possible, therefore, that one should look to the South American sugar colonies for prototypes rather than simply assume a straight line of succession from 16th century Italy.

Colbeck has a scale, a presence, a sense of drama, a degree of brash self-confidence about it that sets it apart from the rest of this distinctive group, but at least one of the others (now gone, alas) was just as big and just as full of bluster, if considerably later in

Left: speculative reconstuction of Colbeck as it would have been in *c.*1680. © Peter Dunn

The north face of Colbeck

date and style. The others, though smaller and simpler, by no means lack presence. They share an obvious desire on the part of their builders to address the challenges offered by Jamaica's tropical climate, with its relentless sun, sudden rainstorms, frequent hurricanes and occasional earthquakes. This is what makes them so important in the evolution of what we now recognise as the Colonial Georgian style.

Two of this Jamaican Baroque group, Stokes Hall in the south-east of the island and Green Park in the central north, are quite heavily defended by gun

Below: the north-west corner building at Colbeck, showing the position of the kitchen, pool and latrine

Right: Colbeck Castle. east elevation showing downspout fixing points

loops strategically placed in their masonry. Why? Well, bands of escaped slaves and early convicts, together called Maroons, were a hazard all over the island until a peace was negotiated with their leader, Cudjoe, in 1739. So were the slaves themselves, who vastly outnumbered their white masters and were apt, understandably, to demonstrate their discontent from time to time. But nearer the coast there were additional threats from French invasion and from raiding parties, particularly from Cuba, of privateers in search of slaves to abduct and sell.

Stokes Hall is a fine solid structure built in limestone ashlar with relatively small segmentally arched windows, suggesting a date no later than the 1720s. As shown by early estate maps, it stood in a walled enclosure with a long outbuilding across the seaward side. This no doubt housed similar facilities to those in the detached corner pavilions at Colbeck – kitchen, latrines and, possibly, accommodation for the house slaves – while a smaller stone structure opposite contained a water cistern.

The layout of the central block was similar to Colbeck's but on a smaller scale. Flanked by those four stout towers, fortified upstairs as well as down, its central structure, including the galleries, was largely of timber. This portion was badly damaged in a major fire around the time of World War Two, but one can still discern traces of similar internal features to those at Colbeck, including a fireplace (always an early indicator), offset staircase and abundant dado-height panelling. The principal rooms were, as usual in this climate, on the first floor, cooled by any available breeze and shaded by wide timber verandahs on all four sides.

Unlike Stokes Hall, which had stone towers of coursed limestone but a timber-framed upper storey to the central block, or Colbeck, which is all of care-

fully detailed masonry, Green Park's entire upper storey, towers and all, is of timber. It is partly weatherboarded now but originally, no doubt, was infilled with what is always (with good reason) called Spanish Wall in Jamaica – a kind of coarse lime concrete rather like our West Country cob, which would set as hard as sandstone. At 78ft long by 45ft wide, Green Park is considerably smaller than Stokes Hall (84' x 66'), and much smaller than Colbeck (105' x 96') but still has a total gross floor area, covered and uncovered, of roughly 20,000 sq ft – an enormous domestic building by any standard. Fortified in a similar way to Stokes Hall, it has gun loops aimed across the external doorways at ground level on the long sides as well as outward on all four elevations. The end walls appear always to have been flush at ground level, with no recess for piazzas, but, as at Colbeck and Stokes Hall, there were four spacious galleries upstairs. Bolection moulded linings to the doors inside suggest a comparatively early date.

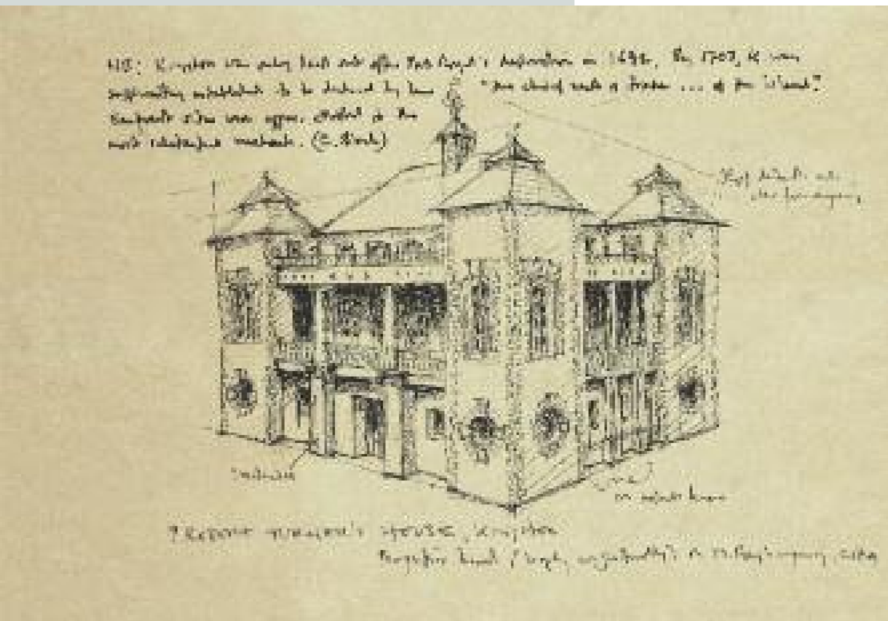
What of the other two houses of similar type? Nothing survives, in fact, of either apart from a single contemporary illustration in each case. The later of them, Richmond, in the parish of St Anne on the North Coast, is the only one of the group described or even mentioned by Edward Long, Jamaica's early planter-historian. Writing in 1764, he says: 'This estate is graced by a very elegant mansion, consisting of two storeys. It is surrounded with a spacious piazza, supported by columns of the Ionic order. At the four corners are pavilions, with Venetian windows corresponding to each other. The only fault belonging to this house is in point of situation, for it stands upon a dead flat. But, being considerably raised from the foundation, it is dry and healthy.'

I tried for some time to locate the site of this house, but, confused by the existence of two similarly situated settlements of that name in the same vicinity, was on the point of giving up when Professor Louis P Nelson, speaking two years ago in London to the Friends of the Georgian Society of Jamaica, showed a slide of a watercolour I had never seen before. One of several painted in the 1760s by the Swiss traveller du Simitiere to illustrate a diary of his two year stay in the island, it shows clearly the location – the more easterly of the two I had found – at the foot of the Coolshade Banks. It shows the corner towers familiar to us now from the earlier houses of similar type and, in particular, the Venetian windows and Ionic columns described by Long at about the same time. Clearly, this was Richmond – no doubt the last and one of the two most stylish of this remarkable group.

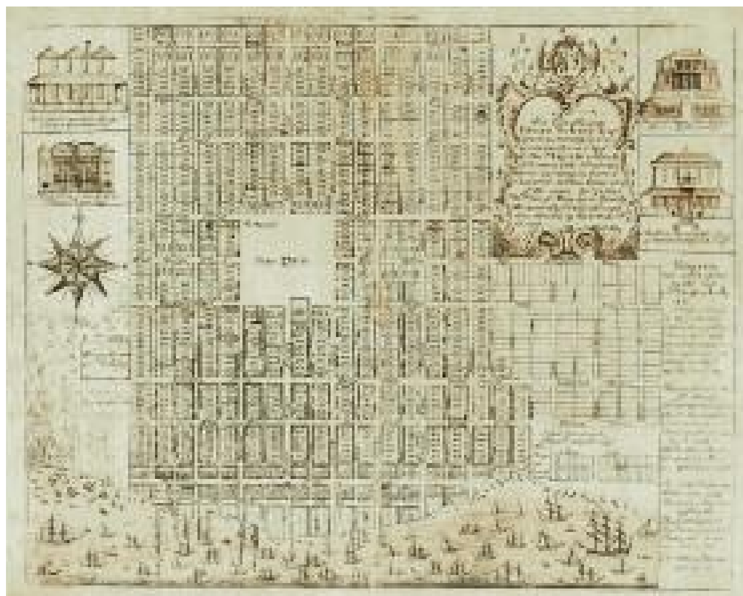
Colbeck, south-east corner building

Long tells us Richmond was the house of 'Mr P--------k'. This is probably his tactful way of naming Philip Pinnock, who was under financial stress at that time. Pinnock's town house at Halfway Tree, just outside Kingston, was said to have cost him £18,000 – about £3m today. It was described as being 'the chief ornament of St Andrew parish'. The Pinnocks were an old Jamaican family connected by marriage to the Dakinses, or Dawkinses, and clearly deeply interested in architecture. At least one of the clan is known to have made the Grand Tour and visited Naples, where he is bound to have admired the Villa Reale – surely the inspiration for this whole group of buildings. Indeed it was James Dawkins who, out of the profits of his sugar plantations near Spanish Town, financed the publication of *The Ruins of Palmyra and of Baalbeck*. I wonder if there is a missing link somewhere here with the mystery of Colbeck Castle?

Richmond, clearly, was huge – nearly as big as Colbeck, I would guess. The eight bay front elevation, facing the sea, was flanked by towers with, at ground level, wide arches just as in Palladio's design for the Villa Valmorana, with pedimented recesses above. This facade broke forward into a vast pedimented portico with two tall tiers of what Long



Robert Turner's house in Kingston



Plan of Kingston, *c*1745, with Robert Turner's house drawn on the left, above the compass.

confirms were Ionic columns. The Venetian windows he speaks of were on the longer east and west sides of the towers, separated by five bays of sashes. Built all of coursed masonry, presumably the fine white limestone in which Jamaica abounds, this splendid Classical palace must have been a dazzling sight.

Of my final example no trace remains apart from an engraving in one corner of Hay's map of Kingston, Jamaica, dated 1740. Stylistically, Robert Turner's house was very similar to Colbeck, albeit much smaller, with the same *oeil-de-boeuf* windows at ground level in the towers, topped by similarly tall, elegant, segmentally arched apertures suggesting a *piano nobile*. These look very much like sashes, whereas evidence found on site suggests their equivalents at Colbeck were either glazed casements or louvred shutters, or jalousies.

This group was a surprisingly coherent one. All five of the buildings were constructed on the same plan. Castles with corner towers, or flankers, were of course common in mediaeval and early-modern Europe including England, Scotland and Ireland, perpetuated in areas of conflict for many years afterwards. Later, when defence was no longer an issue, they remained popular for reasons of vanity – a building on that plan suggests ancient noble lineage for the occupants but is smaller in area, and hence cost, than it appears.

But what brought about this late revival in faraway Jamaica, at the earliest perhaps in the 1690s, gathering pace in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and continuing till forty or fifty years later, of a style that had by then long been superseded at home by the now-familiar Georgian country house? In an unhealthy environment where most planters, however rich, were out to make a quick buck and consequently tended to build on a much more modest scale, it is not just surprising but exciting to stumble upon such a sudden and, as it happens, short-lived thunderclap of high style several thousand miles and a century or two from home.

This article is adapted from a talk delivered initially in London to the Friends of the Georgian Society of Jamaica, a charity with which The Georgian Group has had links since the Friends' foundation twenty-one years ago.