Why did sugar become the dominant crop in the caribbean in the late seventeenth c...

In order to ascertain why sugar became the dominant crop in the Caribbean in the late seventeenth century, it will be necessary to consider the situation in the early 1600s. What were the crops which were cultivated by early settlers and why did they make the change? Economic factors must be examined, alongside the effects of conflict and political instability, and the growing conditions on the islands, which would favour some crops over others. The differing requirements of manpower, according to what commodity was produced, would also affect the choice of crop.

Many of the things which might grow well in the Caribbean would have a very limited export potential. Whilst much can be gleaned from contemporary records and statements written at the height of the sugar ‘ boom’, it should be borne in mind that there was much propaganda involved, and many of the statistics cannot be relied on. To give an example, some traders who were exporting to Britain, described white sugar as muscovado, because the duty on white sugar was so much higher. 1 Many scholars have held the view that sugar was the crop of choice in the Caribbean, because other products had proved unprofitable.

However, as Robert Carlyle Batie shows in his article ‘ Why Sugar’2 there is evidence that planters had done very well from tobacco in the years preceding the sugar boom. Thousands of Europeans had migrated to the Caribbean islands from the early 1620s. The British and the French had settlements in St. Christopher (1624), Barbados (1627), Nevis (1628), Antigua and Montserrat (1632) and Guadeloupe and Martinique (1635).

Barbadian tobacco was not universally appreciated. The founder of Massachusetts, John Winthrop told his son Henry that the tobacco he sent home was ‘ verye ill conditioned, fowle, full of stalkes and evil coloured. ‘ 5 The supply of tobacco from America continued to increase, as more English and French settlers were attracted by the apparently substantial profits which could be made, with the result that prices started to drop, and plummeted from 6d a pound in 1634 to 2. 5d per pound in 1635.

The bumper Virginian crop in 1639 brought them to an all time low of . 75d per pound. 6 It was no longer possible for planters to make their fortune in the Caribbean by growing tobacco. Sugar was not the first alternative crop to be tried. When tobacco prices had first fallen in 1630, some growers had turned to cotton. Sir Henry Colt wrote in 1631 ‘ now ye trade of cotton fills them all with hope’. 7 However, the markets for cotton were unstable and so many settlers had started to produce it, that it soon became as unprofitable as tobacco.

Some colonists began to grow ginger, but the market for this crop was very static and could not support much expansion. Many other products, such as pomegranates, figs and peppers were tried, but few showed a decent profit. By 1640, the islands which had seemed so full of promise were suffering from acute economic depression. The first island to turn to sugar as a main crop was Barbados. The only two islands with populations large enough to repel foreign invaders, and therefore more able to concentrate on economic development, were Barbados and St Christopher.

However, St Christopher was so de-stabilised by conflict between the English and French inhabitants, that it was only able to flourish once England had gained permanent control of the French sector in 1713. 8 In Barbados, Governor Henry Hawley had ruled as a government official from 1630 until he was recalled in 1639. Instead of obeying the order, he convened the Barbados Assembly in an attempt to maintain his position. He lacked local support, possibly because of the autocratic nature of his rule, and was forced to surrender to the Crown, but the result was that Barbados had an established system of legislation.

This gave protection from those who would take power arbitrarily, and meant that the risks for investors were reduced just as planters were considering the possibilities of growing sugar. First efforts were not very successful as Richard Ligon reported in his Island of Barbadoes ‘ But, the secrets of the work being not well understood, the Sugars they made were very inconsiderable, and little worth, for two or three years’9 He goes on to say that they soon leaned from their mistakes and were advised and assisted by sugar growers from Brazil.

The Dutch were very willing to assist the English sugar planters, possibly because they wanted to encourage the growth of a rival sugar industry, once they lost control of Pernambuco. Richard Dunn feels there were other reasons. ‘ Throughout the 1630s they had carried much of the English colonists’ tobacco and cotton to Amsterdam. Now they stood to profit much more handsomely by offering a full range of lucrative middleman services to the tyro English planters… For the Barbadians this Dutch partnership was

especially advantageous in the 1640s when English overseas trade was distracted by the civil war at home.

Once the plantation owners had mastered the techniques of growing and refining sugar cane, the results were spectacular. By 1643 Dalby Thomas reported that Barbados ‘ is growne the most flourishing Island in all those American parts, and I verily believe in all the world for the producing of sugar… ’11 In 1635, French settlers in Guadeloupe were instructed to concentrate on cotton and sugar production, by the Company of the Isles of America. The Company also granted a monopoly on all sugar produced, to a Dutchman, Daniel Trezel, if he would establish a plantation on Martinique.

Although Trezel did not prosper, sugar was becoming the crop of choice throughout the Caribbean. Sugar production needed a relatively large workforce and this was provided by the Dutch. As a result of the Brazilian revolt, in 1645, the Dutch found themselves with large numbers of slaves, bound for Brazil, where they could no longer be used. They shipped them to the Antilles and sold them at a rate which would prove highly profitable to the plantation owners.

The fact that this profit was possible even though the Dutch were charging between 60-100% more for their slaves than the Royal African Company had charged previously, indicates the high returns which were achievable once sugar production had begun. 14 During the latter part of the seventeenth century, the sugar trade in Brazil was beginning to flag, as the land lost fertility and many who had been involved in sugar production transferred their interest to newly opened gold mines. 15 This could only favour the

sugar growers in the Caribbean, who were more than willing to make up the shortfall.

As sugar became more available, rather than producing a glut on the market, it seemed that demand increased. It was as if, having once experienced the taste of sugar, the customer would require more and more of it. Sidney Mintz explains that sugar had changed ‘ from being a specialized – medicinal, condimental, ritual or display – commodity into an evermore common food’16 Even the poorer classes found that sugar gave the brief breaks in their working day a new relish when added to their drinks, as recorded by R. J Davis ‘… by 1750 the poorest English farm labourer’s wife took sugar in her tea’17 Finally, the production of rum, which was the staple drink of the Caribbean, as well as a valuable export, added to the demand for sugar. All the factors necessary to bring about a sugar boom in the Caribbean were in place. In conclusion, it would be fair to say that the answer to the question of why sugar became the dominant crop in the Caribbean in the late seventeenth century, comprises several factors.

The falling price of tobacco and the high quality of the Virginian competition for this crop was probably the first cause. This was followed by the failure to make a real success of the many other crops which were tried, such as cotton, ginger and even indigo, although this continued to be cultivated in Jamaica, on the south coast. Settlers would often start off by producing ginger or indigo, but as soon as they had built up a workforce of about twenty slaves, they would convert to sugar.

The availability of slaves, bought cheaply from the Dutch, provided the large numbers of unskilled labourers needed for sugar production, and though the death rate amongst the slaves was high, they were easily replaced and withstood the harsh conditions much better than indentured European workers. In addition to these factors, the expansion of the sugar market seemed inexhaustible. When all of these circumstances coincided, a situation arose, which made sugar the inevitable choice for those looking to make their fortunes on the Caribbean islands.