

Introduction



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Introduction In the seventeenth century both in the English and to a lesser extent, the French islands, a change occurred in the basic cash crop. This change was so quick and widespread that it could only be described as a revolution. The sugar revolution changed the Lesser Antilles completely. It was not just that sugar replaced tobacco as the chief crop: the population changed from white to black, the size of landholdings changed, and eventually the West Indies became 'the cockpit of Europe'. The list of changes the sugar revolution brought is almost inexhaustible. The sugar revolution is most clearly demonstrated in the history of Barbados where it occurred in roughly ten years, 1640 to 1650. It was not quite so rapid in the other islands. Jamaica changed to sugar slowly and less completely at a much later date. However, in each island 'revolution' can be used to describe the startling economic, social and political changes that occurred. The causes which brought about the change from tobacco to sugar all came together about 1640. Tobacco, the crop on which Jamaica's economy was founded, started to decline as a result of competition from Virginia tobacco (North America). In 1613 John Rolfe had introduced tobacco to Virginia. A variety imported from Trinidad proved to show good quality and growth potential. It is ironic that a tobacco plant species from the West Indies should be the source of the decline of the West Indian tobacco crop. By 1627 Virginia was able to ship nearly 500 000 lbs (226 800 kg) of tobacco to England in one year. It was the quality and quantity of Virginian tobacco which acted as a push factor for Jamaica's change to sugar for the demand for Jamaican tobacco plummeted while the world demand for sugar increased. 4