

# Hamilton's Sugar Mill, Nevis, Leeward Islands, Eastern Caribbean

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**Summary:** *The sugar industry has dominated and shaped the economic and social history of the Caribbean for the past three centuries, but the development of large central mills and competition from other regions of the world has led to the disappearance of the original estate sugar mills. Hamilton's mill is one of the few in the Caribbean which still retains much of its machinery and functional architecture, combining seventeenth century layout and practice with some elements of nineteenth century steam power. These important remains were surveyed in 1988 by the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society and this report combines those results with historical research in Nevis and the United Kingdom.*

## Historical Introduction

For many years sugar was one of the most popular foodstuffs of mankind, satisfying the palate with its sweetness and possessing traditional healing properties for many ailments in the Caribbean. The change of sugar from a luxury to a widely available common food, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was achieved by European imperial powers who transformed the culture and environment of many Caribbean islands by transporting millions of black Africans from their homelands and forcing them to work in slavery on the sugar plantations. In the nineteenth century the slaves were emancipated but sugar estates established in other countries deprived the Caribbean islands of their pre-eminence in this commodity market and estate owners pulled out of the West Indian plantations, leaving the workers to get by as best they could. Many workers had to find employment on other islands or in north or south America, and since the end of the Second World War many have migrated to the United Kingdom. Although the estates were symbols of exploitation, they dominated the economy of many West Indian islands and some working mills survived into

the twentieth century, latterly run by local people.

Sugar mills cannot be studied without a consideration of the part that imperialism has played in the exploitation of a great number of people and this, and the reputation of the slave trade, may be reasons why historians and industrial archaeologists have neglected the engineering aspects of sugar milling. Hugh Torrens highlighted this at the 1987 AIA Conference in relation to Bristol, and coincidentally *The Guardian* referred to the neglect of the slave trade in the Maritime Museum in Liverpool.<sup>1</sup> The association with imperialism may also explain the previous reluctance of local governments to promote old mill sites as places of historical interest and tourist attractions. The authors hope that this article will go some way to open up interest in the technology of this industry, and show conclusively that Hamilton's estate on Nevis, in the Leeward Islands, has very valuable remains that are fascinating to explore.

This study has come out of three recent visits to Nevis by the authors. On their first visit in 1986 the wealth of remains of sugar mills took them by surprise. Hamilton's Mill was hastily photographed (Plate 1) which was fortuitous as the site has deteriorated since then due to hurricanes and bad storms. On the second visit it was possible to arrange a survey, by members of the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, and much of the material contained in this article has come from that work. The third visit showed the site had been badly damaged by Hurricane Hugo on 17 September 1989 — most of the roof had come down — but the machinery remained intact. It was possible to explore some of the underground heating ducts and tunnels and to obtain several interviews with local people who had worked at the mill before it closed.

The late Douglas Hague, a much respected