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Capital and Kin: English Women's Intimate Networks and Property in Barbados

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Abstract

This article explores how women in England, using a range of economic and legal tools and methods, managed wealth and property in Barbados during the seventeenth century. Being distant from the colony had implications for how English women managed their property in Barbados, as direct oversight was impossible. Instead, women were forced to broker arrangements with overseers and agents who could act on their behalf. We can make sense of how they established these connections through the lens of women's intimate networks, as they appointed trusted friends, family, and associates to manage their affairs. Women's intimate networks are a lens through which we can explain not just how women acquired property, but also their continued investment in plantation economies and slavery during the first decades of English colonisation in Barbados.

Keywords: women; Barbados; colonisation; seventeenth century; property

In 1650, Mary Browne of Barbados made John Ryland, her kinsman, an overseer of her estate after her death. He would receive two thousand pounds of sugar per year as recompense, “so long as he shall be employed in my affairs.” But Browne also demanded that Ryland be “both mindful and careful of my business and estate.”¹ Women like Mary Browne, whose wealth and property was tied up in plantations in Barbados were themselves incredibly mindful of their affairs throughout the seventeenth century. Their letters and deeds, made from the 1640s onwards, show that women were independent participants in the early expansion of plantation economies and slavery in Barbados. Through producing goods like sugar and cotton and selling and transferring property, including equipment, land, and enslaved Africans, they were individually invested in the developments sweeping through the Caribbean. They regularly appointed trusted individuals, who were friends, lovers, or members of their extended kinship networks, to manage their diverse economic portfolios, not just in the event of their death, but during their lifetime too. Women who sold, transferred, bought, and inherited property in Barbados were frequently located not within the Caribbean, but in England's port towns and cities, including Bristol and London.² This article provides a first insight into how these women in England, using a range of economic and legal tools and methods, managed wealth and property in Barbados during the seventeenth century.

¹ Barbados National Archives, Black Rock [hereafter BNA], Recopied Deed Books, 13 May 1650, 724.

² BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 1640–1644, RB3/1; BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 1645–1667, RB3/3.

Being distant from the colony had implications for how women managed their business, as direct oversight was impossible. Instead, they were forced to broker arrangements with agents and overseers who could act on their behalf. We can make sense of how they established these connections through the lens of women's intimate networks, meaning those relationships whose quality was shaped by sexual and romantic attachment, family ties, and friendship. Examining women's economic activity through the lens of their intimate networks, using sources such as notarial records, deeds, and wills, has provided a fresh perspective on the development of colonies in the early modern Atlantic world. In the Dutch colony of New Netherland, for instance, empire-building—through the establishment of households and extension of credit—was undergirded by women's intimate networks in both the metropole and the colony.³ Examining women's intimate networks, and the effect they had on inheritance practices, has also extended our understanding of women's role in the development of plantation slavery in the British Empire. In Jamaica, for example, women saw enslaved Africans as a “vital form of property” and thus “deepened the empire's commitment” to slavery.⁴ Whilst our appreciation of how women shaped these developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has continued to expand, the rate of change has not been as quick for earlier periods.⁵ Scholars of seventeenth-century England have been slow to explore English women's participation in plantation and slavery, but more recent studies point towards the importance of understanding and recognising how metropolitan women's connections with empire were manifest in significant ways.⁶ Women sought to shape colonial policy by petitioning the crown and providing intelligence to government bodies in London; women's interpersonal connections helped to foster interest and participation in the imperial project; and through women's inheritance a new class of heiresses, whose wealth derived from empire, emerged.⁷ Nonetheless, how seventeenth-century English women were involved in empire in the Atlantic world, and the Caribbean in particular, continues to be much less understood.

Overlooking the efforts women made to initiate and sustain plantation economies and slavery has shaped scholarship on seventeenth-century Barbados for decades. In the pioneering work of Richard S. Dunn, for example, even some of the methods deployed (including tracing the surnames of prominent Barbados families across the seventeenth century) exclude and fail to account for the economic participation of women.⁸ Yet, as Cecily Jones has noted, including English women—those in the metropole alongside those on the island—within our frame of analysis is essential if we are to fully understand

³ Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁴ Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 167–8, 210.

⁵ See Hannah Young, “Negotiating Female Property- and Slave-Ownership in the Aristocratic World,” *The Historical Journal* 63:3 (2020): 581–602.

⁶ Until recently, Amussen's *Caribbean Exchanges* remained an exception for considering these issues in relation to elite English women, culture, and taste. Susan Dwyer Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640–1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁷ Misha Ewen, “At the Edge of Empire? Women's Ceramic Collections in Seventeenth-Century Newfoundland,” *Cultural and Social History* 18:1 (2021): 23–44; Lauren Working, *The Making of an Imperial Polity: Civility and America in the Jacobean Metropolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Linda Levy Peck, *Women of Fortune: Money, Marriage, and Murder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸ Because, unlike their fathers, sons, and brothers, when women married they changed their surnames; see Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Williamsburg, VA: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 58–9. The overall absenting of women has continued in more recent work on the English “planter class.” See Larry Gragg, “*Englishmen Transplanted*”: *The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627–1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

how social and economic changes were produced in seventeenth-century Barbados.⁹ Attending to the role of English women has broader implications for studies of early modern British society, colonisation, and empire. Firstly, studying how women deployed the knowledge that enabled them to navigate absentee property and slave ownership in seventeenth-century Barbados will allow for fruitful comparisons with what came later, in Jamaica and elsewhere in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world. Secondly, understanding how women “at home” participated in plantation and slavery in Barbados can, and should, inform how we view developments in England, including enslavement within elite households and investment in the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁰ Women were, throughout the seventeenth century and across the British Empire, involved in initiating and maintaining such practices.

Women in England were under pressure to manage their property in Barbados from a distance, to ensure that it was safeguarded for their heirs and to guarantee their own continued prosperity. To do so, they adopted various legal and economic tools, including power of attorney, making wills, and deeds of gift. In seeking to successfully manage their property in Barbados whilst resident in England, women demonstrated independence as well as legal competencies, not least by adapting their pre-existing skills to the new transatlantic colonial context.¹¹ In the seventeenth century, power of attorney, which meant the authority to act on the behalf of someone else in business and legal affairs, was a relatively new legal tool. It was more commonly used by prosperous families whose economic interests were dispersed across the Atlantic world, with wives, sisters, and daughters often viewed as the most appropriate people to oversee the family enterprise when their male relations were overseas.¹² In English maritime communities, women were regularly granted the customary right, or power, to act on the behalf of sailors who were sometimes, but not always, their family.¹³ Women who were absentee property owners in Barbados found themselves at the other end of this tool, instead delegating power of attorney to someone else.¹⁴ But this does not imply that women who appointed attorneys lacked sufficient economic or legal competence themselves. When women could not directly oversee their affairs, they could just as well demonstrate their authority and knowledge of plantation management in the Caribbean by giving

⁹ Cecily Jones, *Engendering Whiteness: White Women and Colonialism in Barbados and North Carolina, 1627–1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Current research projects and recent publications are attending more thoroughly to this issue of women’s involvement in slavery within England and investment in the Royal African Company. See Simon Newman, *Freedom Seekers: Escaping from Slavery in Restoration London* (London: University of London Press, 2022); and *The Legacies of the British Slave Trade: The Structures and Significance of British Investment in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, c. 1550–1807* (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, University of Lancaster, reference AH/V004417/1).

¹¹ Amy Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); Aske Laursen Brock and Misha Ewen, “Women’s Public Lives: Navigating the East India Company, Parliament and Courts in Early Modern England,” *Gender & History* 3:1 (2020): 3–23.

¹² Linda L. Sturtz, “‘As Though I My Self Was Pre[e]sent’: Virginia Women with Power of Attorney,” in Christopher L. Tomlins and Bruce H. Mann, *The Many Legalities of Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 250–71.

¹³ In the eighteenth century, attorneys tended to be trained lawyers, but this was not the case in the seventeenth century. Margaret Hunt “The Sailor’s Wife, War Finance, and Coverture in Late Seventeenth-Century London,” in Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring, eds., *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), 144.

¹⁴ These findings complement those of Sara Damiano, who has explored how women worked alongside legal professionals in eighteenth-century New England. See Sara T. Damiano, “Agents at Home: Wives, Lawyers, and Financial Competence in Eighteenth-Century New England Port Cities,” *Early American Studies Interdisciplinary Journal* 13:4 (2015): 808–35.

careful instructions to their agents.¹⁵ Seventeenth-century women who were absentee property and slave owners in Barbados activated their intimate networks to similarly deploy agents and attorneys, with the purpose of maintaining control of property, including plantations and enslaved Africans.

The remote management of property required other precise legal arrangements, including deeds, which were instruments in writing between two living people. Deeds bring to light how women managed their assets to increase their wealth, including liquidating goods, collecting debts, and overseeing plantations on the island. Deeds in the Barbados National Archives show women acting both as independent parties and in unison with others. Unlike wills, the deeds usually provide no information about the reasoning behind the transfer or sale of property. But by naming the different parties involved, their relationships to one another, and the property concerned—which included enslaved Africans—it is possible to reconstruct a fuller picture of women’s intimate networks and their individual investment in plantation and slavery.

Many women appointed an attorney, who might be a trusted family member, friend, or associate, following the death of their husbands (which was a common occurrence) in order to swiftly and effectively liquidate their property in Barbados.¹⁶ Elizabeth Hussey, a widow in Bristol, who was the executrix of Captain Steven Hussey, appointed an attorney in 1643. She engaged George Roche to recover her goods, including cotton and tobacco, and also dispose of any land that belonged to her in the Caribbean.¹⁷ The wording of Hussey’s deed suggests that her husband’s business interests may have stretched across several Caribbean islands. It is not clear from the deed whether she had a previous relationship with Roche, but other women were clear that they chose to appoint attorneys from among those they were closely connected with, including individuals in their kinship network. In 1645, Elizabeth Ham, a spinster who lived in Bristol, appointed her brother John Ham, also of Bristol, as her attorney in Barbados, “to receive for me and in my name and to my use” debts that were due to her.¹⁸ As Elizabeth Ham had never been married, we can assume that her brother was recovering debts owed to her through her own business enterprise or debts that she had inherited. In 1645, Mary Ballard, a widow who inherited property in Barbados from her uncle, David Salisbury (who died on the island), also appointed her brother, David Salisbury, to be her attorney. The family hailed from Denbighshire, Wales, and were likely a lesser branch of the prominent Salusbury (rather than Salisbury) family. In the deed, Mary Ballard described herself as a trustee of John Salisbury, but her relationship to him is unclear. He was possibly another brother, and they both might have inherited from their uncle. Mary Ballard’s deed illuminates another dimension of women’s intimate connections in the Atlantic world, as both her uncle and brother were illegitimate, being her “father’s *natural* brother” and her “*natural* brother.”¹⁹ Despite their illegitimacy, Mary and her father before her had clearly established close ties with these family members.

As this suggests, deeds reveal more than just what women chose to do with their property. They are also sources that provide an insight into the intimacy that women established with others, both men and women. In 1648, Ann Ellison, a widow who lived in Southwark, London, acted as the executrix of her late husband’s will, but she also appointed a trusted person, her “loving friend” Nathaniel Starkey, a City of London

¹⁵ See Young, “Negotiating Female Property- and Slave-Ownership.”

¹⁶ On mortality amongst the white population, see Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 325 ff.

¹⁷ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 20 February 1642/3, RB3/1, f. 260.

¹⁸ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 19 March 1645, RB3/3, f. 599.

¹⁹ Note the variant spelling Salisburi and Salusbury. BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 24 February 1644/5, RB3/1, f. 673.

merchant, as her “true and lawful attorney” to recover debts owed to her in Barbados.²⁰ Ellison may have formed an intimate relationship with Starkey during her widowhood, but chosen not to remarry. Women formed close bonds with men with whom they were not married, nonetheless making them significant beneficiaries of their property and wealth. Remaining unmarried meant retaining the status of feme sole and also protecting property and wealth from a potentially profligate husband. Establishing connections that were not sanctified by marriage was one option, and not an unusual one, for women who found themselves in this position.²¹

From the vantage point of England, managing affairs in Barbados could seem incredibly risky. In order to ensure the smooth transmission of property, women appointed close family members who were resident in Barbados, sometimes over a prolonged period of time. Elizabeth Rawdon was the widow of Colonel Marmaduke Rawdon, a merchant, plantation owner, and Royalist war hero who died in 1646. They had married in 1611 and Elizabeth, the daughter of Thomas Thorowgood, a London Freeman of the Drapers’ Company, reportedly brought a fortune of £11,000 to their marriage. In 1628, Marmaduke Rawdon and his partners, a syndicate of London merchants, were granted ten thousand acres of land in Barbados. According to his nephew’s account, Rawdon himself invested £10,000 in the venture. One of Rawdon’s partners was his future son-in-law, Edmond Forster. Following the defeat of the Royalist army in the British Civil Wars (1642–1651), Rawdon’s property is said to have been sequestered by the Commonwealth state, but it was recovered, at least in part, by 1653. That year, Elizabeth and her daughter Elizabeth Forster, Edmond’s widow, appointed Thomas Rawdon (their son and brother) to oversee their affairs in Barbados.²² Since the Royalist defeat, Thomas had lived in Barbados, a haven for supporters of the crown during the Civil Wars. In Barbados, Thomas married Magdalen Crew, with whom he had six children.²³ Another Rawdon son, Bevill, resided in Surinam.²⁴ The Rawdon family tree show connections that stretched from Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire (the family property that Elizabeth Rawdon had inherited from her father), across the English Atlantic world.

It was an obvious choice for Elizabeth Rawdon and Elizabeth Forster to appoint Thomas to act on their interests in Barbados. The Rawdons were a large but very tight-knit family and Thomas had already provided financial assistance to Bevill to establish a plantation in Surinam. The mother, daughter, and son agreed to let a plantation in St. Michael, Barbados, to William Mott for a period of twenty-one years for eight hundred pounds of “good dry and well cured muscovado sugar” yearly rent. Mott already inhabited the plantation, and it was further agreed that the sugar should be “delivered to a convenient

²⁰ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 19 March 1648, RB3/3, f. 602.

²¹ See Walker, *Jamaica Ladies*, 216, 231–2.

²² In the Barbados deed book and in her own will, Elizabeth spelt her name as Rawdon, but it was sometimes spelt as Roydon. The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], Will of Dame Elizabeth Rawdon, Widow of Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, 5 March 1669, PROB 11/329/312. See also, John C. Appleby, “Roydon [Rawdon], Sir Marmaduke (1583–1646), Merchant and Shipowner,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/refodnb/24237>; Arthur Collins, *Peerage of England*, 9 vols. (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, Otridge and Son, 1812), 6: 674; Michael Bennett, “Merchant Capital and the Origins of the Barbados Sugar Boom, 1627–1672” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2020), 39; and BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 2 September 1653, RB3/3, f. 881. Elizabeth Forster (née Rawdon) was baptised 9 April 1618; see London Metropolitan Archives, Parish registers, All Hallows, Barking by the Tower, P69/ALH1/A/01/001; TNA, Will of Elizabeth Forster, 8 September 1691, proved 31 May 1693, PROB 11/414/446; TNA, Will of Edmond Forster, 20 September 1649, PROB 11/209/294.

²³ Collins, *Peerage of England*, 6: 676–7. TNA, Will of Thomas Rawdon, 1 April 1664, proved 25 September 1666, PROB 11/321/512.

²⁴ Bevill Rawdon married a widow, Anbitt Leverton, in Surinam and bequeathed half of his plantation to his step-daughter Jane Leverton. See Rev. Nicholas Leverton 1610–1662: *Life and Death of a Non-Conformist*, <http://www.nickleverton.com/life-and-death-story.html>.

storehouse at Indian Bridge.”²⁵ It is not clear from the deed, but it seems likely that the three of them had inherited this property from Marmaduke Rawdon, Elizabeth’s husband and the father of Thomas and Elizabeth. With Thomas in Barbados, his mother and sister could rely upon him to ensure the sugar was delivered, duly sold, and converted into cash that they would use as additional income during their widowhoods.

In 1660, the crowning of Charles II turned the political tide and the Rawdon family’s fortunes in turn. Thomas Rawdon, who had effectively been in exile in Barbados, returned to England in 1662 with his family, whilst still maintaining property on the island. Elizabeth Rawdon also maintained connections to Barbados until the end of her life, leaving “all in right debts and interest” on the island to her son Bevill in her will.²⁶ Remarkably, the Rawdons had succeeded in safeguarding their property and inheritance in Barbados throughout the turbulence of the Civil Wars. Marmaduke Rawdon had died in the midst of the conflict, whilst his heirs lived to see the Restoration of the crown in 1660 (his son Thomas died in 1666 and his wife Elizabeth in 1669). Women’s intimate connections had ensured that their property in Barbados was not entirely lost during the seismic social and political shifts that occurred in the mid-century English Atlantic world.

Elizabeth Rawdon and Elizabeth Forster might not have been willing to relocate to Barbados alongside Thomas, but by indirectly overseeing plantation management in Barbados and by using the legal instrument of deeds they ensured an income for themselves. As well as managing property to procure an income, women used deeds to simultaneously safeguard property for their heirs. Elizabeth Crotis, a widow who lived in Cornwall, used a deed of gift to assign twenty acres of land in St. Lucy and twelve acres in St. Thomas to her grandson, Edward Gufer, in 1666. Edward was the son of her son, also Edward, and the land would be passed down from Edward to his heirs in perpetuity. Crotis underlined her care and sentiment towards her grandson, adding that her gift was for the “natural love and affection” she bore him. But her gift to Edward came with the condition that during her lifetime she would receive £10 per year towards her maintenance.²⁷ By assigning her plantations to Edward during her own lifetime, Elizabeth freed herself of direct responsibility for their management, but expected to reap the rewards of Edward’s careful oversight.

Deeds offer a static picture, a snapshot in time only, of women’s intended outcomes for their property in Barbados. In the absence of further evidence, such as women’s correspondence, it is impossible to know whether their instructions were followed through in the manner they desired. Barbary (sometimes Barbara) Newton’s correspondence with her kinsman and plantation manager, Benjamin Cryer, during her widowhood suggests how women’s plans could be frustrated and also how partnerships between women and those they charged with overseeing their property could break down.²⁸ Newton’s husband, Colonel Samuel Newton, died in 1684, and as one of his executors she was tasked with collecting debts that were owed to him, distributing his bequests, and overseeing the continued prosperity of their plantation and property. Until their eldest son, John, reached the age of twenty-four, Barbary Newton was to have oversight of all of their property in England and Barbados, which included goods, land, plantations, and enslaved Africans. When John came of age, she would have “one moiety,” or one-third, of all her

²⁵ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 2 September 1653, RB3/3, f. 881. In his will, Thomas Rawdon stated that he had helped his brother Bevill set up his plantation in Surinam. TNA, Will of Thomas Rawdon, 1 April 1664, proved 25 September 1666, PROB 11/321/512.

²⁶ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 2 September 1653, RB3/3, f. 881; TNA, Will of Thomas Rawdon, 1 April 1664, proved 25 September 1666, PROB 11/321/512; TNA, Will of Elizabeth Rawdon, 27 February 1666, PROB 11/329.

²⁷ BNA, Recopied Deed Books, 17 October 1666, RB3/3, f. 185.

²⁸ She signed her name variously as Barbary and Barbara, including in her will, where she went by Barbary. TNA, Will of Barbary Newton, 5 February 1694, PROB 11/418/305. See also Amussen, *Caribbean Exchanges*, 103.

husband's property in Barbados and England, "to possess and enjoy during her widowhood and [. . .] dispose of [as] she shall please." There was, however, a significant caveat attached to Samuel Newton's bequest to his wife: Barbary would inherit her third, "provided always that she [. . .] shall continue a widow to the time of her death." Samuel Newton's intention was that John and Barbary would manage his estates jointly, without dividing his property, thereby ensuring its inheritance by his heirs.²⁹

At the time Samuel Newton penned his will on 12 February 1684, Barbary was already residing in England. But she had, it appears, spent some time on the island of Barbados. Her residence there dated to at least 1670, when her son Edmund was baptised in Christ Church.³⁰ But it was from her home in England, at King's Bromley, Staffordshire, that she corresponded with Benjamin Cryer between 1683 and 1689. The Newtons certainly showed affection towards their Cryer kinfolk. It was Isabella Cryer (née Robinson), Benjamin's wife, who was Colonel Newton's kinswoman, receiving a bequest of £50 when he died. Samuel Cryer, Benjamin and Isabella's child, was also Colonel Newton's godson and received £20. Benjamin Cryer was clearly trusted by Samuel Newton; whilst he was not appointed as an executor or trustee of his will, he was named as an individual who could be relied upon, in an unofficial capacity, to help repair any disagreements that might arise between his wife and eldest son.³¹ During a period of time that Barbary Newton had hosted her "cousin" Isabella Cryer, Benjamin Cryer noted that Newton's treatment of his wife was generous, demonstrating the "kindness not of a kinswoman but of a mother."³²

It was upon this foundation of mutual affection and trust that Newton tasked Cryer with overseeing her affairs in Barbados. He promised her, "I shall observe your orders and take as much care of your affairs as I possibly can."³³ This involved many months of frustrated attempts to collect her debts, often to little avail. Cryer wrote, "I have had very solemn promises of payment from some of your debtors, to which I gave some credit but have been failed." Going forward, Cryer intended to be less forgiving, pleading "I hope you will pardon my past credulity, and for the future I shall let no time lapse of suing for debts that are due and not paid, and shall remit you the moneys as fast as I can meet with opportunities."³⁴ For Newton, Cryer's swift recovery of money that was owed her was of the upmost importance, so that she could dispense her husband's bequests and also maintain her own independent living in England.

It might have been precisely because he was part of her kinship network that Newton freely expressed her frustration with Cryer, and why he, in turn, may have taken advantage of his position (at least this was what she believed). In October 1686, Newton decided to appoint Thomas Horner, her "very good friend," as her attorney, who, she wrote to Cryer, "doth well understand the nature of my business."³⁵ She requested Cryer to allow Horner to "have all my books, bonds, bills, and all the whole of papers, that

²⁹ Walker argues that Jamaica planters used wills to keep property intact for their heirs. Walker, *Jamaica Ladies*, 168. Newton's plantation in Barbados stayed in the family until 1723. University College London, Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*, "Woodland, St George, Barbados," <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/estate/view/62>.

³⁰ Samuel Newton was buried in Christ Church, Barbados. BNA, St. Philip, Burials, 9 June 1684, RL1/25, f. 15. Barbary and Samuel Newton baptised one of their children, Edmund, in Barbados in the parish of Christ Church. BNA, Christ Church, Baptisms, 18 June 1670, RL1/17, f. 91. Their daughter Sarah married Richard Bate in 1677. BNA, St. Philip, Marriages, 18 December 1677, RL1/24, f. 2.

³¹ TNA, Will of Samuel Newton, 13 January 1686, PROB 11/382/43. Isabella Robinson and Benjamin Cryer married in the same church as their Newton kin in 1678. BNA, St. Philip, Marriages, 27 August 1678, RL1/24, f. 2.

³² Senate House Library, London [hereafter SHL], Benjamin Cryer to Barbary Newton, 1 October 1686, MS523/1069.

³³ SHL, Benjamin Cryer to Barbary Newton, 25/6 March 1686, MS1255/1.

³⁴ SHL, Benjamin Cryer to Barbary Newton, 16 June 1686, MS523/1068.

³⁵ SHL, Barbary Newton to Benjamin Cryer, undated, MS523/1094.

concerns me.”³⁶ Newton also demanded that Cryer allow Horner to visit her plantation and inspect her property, including the enslaved Africans. Newton’s mistrust of Cryer was not, according to Horner, without foundation. Later, she learned from Horner that Cryer and Beale had recklessly mismanaged her property.³⁷

Conclusion

Throughout the seventeenth century, English women directed agents and attorneys to manage their affairs in Barbados. In the period before the role of the attorney was legally formalised, they appointed individuals in their extended networks who were knowledgeable about their business to collect debts, manage, and dispose of their goods and property. Women’s correspondence suggests they had a close bond with those they chose to oversee their plantations, and, at the outset at least, their intimate friends and family appear to have been the preferred choice. Women sometimes drafted affective language of close friendship, love, and intimacy into letters and deeds themselves, demonstrating the entanglement of their affection and affinity towards those they appointed with their sense that they were trusted and competent enough to see to their affairs. Trust underlined these relationships and interactions, as women in England had to believe that their agents and attorneys in Barbados would work in their best interests, even whilst they were not under their clients’ watchful eyes. In spite of kinship, if this trust was broken, women might sever ties, as the conflict between Barbary Newton and Benjamin Cryer demonstrates.

Although slavery and colonialism are generally absent from discussions of women, property, inheritance, and wealth in seventeenth-century England, recent scholarship by Hannah Young makes a forceful argument for seeing property in the Caribbean—including those who were enslaved and treated as such—as fully integrated with women’s property in the domestic sphere. The “histories of Britain and those of the Caribbean cannot,” Young has argued “be conceived separately or in isolation.”³⁸ Further research will bring to light how women’s management of Barbados property and wealth in the seventeenth century intersected with and was dependent upon enslavement; and similarly how English women’s slave ownership, enjoyment of slave-produced goods, and investment in the slave trade was connected to, and even predicated upon, their absentee property and slave ownership in the Caribbean.

Intimate networks operate as a framework for understanding how some women became property owners in Barbados, through inheritance for instance. But this is not the full picture. Intimate networks are also the lens through which we can understand women’s continued involvement in the economies of plantation and slavery, as they leveraged the assistance of individuals in their networks to enable them to manage wealth and property in the colony. Seeing women’s intimate networks in operation *only* at the point at which they became property owners would be to miss the significance of their ongoing participation in systems of colonialism and enslavement, and how they achieved this whilst looking on—an ocean away—in England.

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³⁶ SHL, Barbary Newton to Benjamin Cryer, 18 October 1686, MS523/1087.

³⁷ SHL, Thomas Horner to Barbara Newton, 18 October 1687, MS523/1077.

³⁸ Young is discussing the eighteenth century, but her findings are also applicable for the previous century. Young, “Female Property- and Slave-Ownership,” 602.

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