



Background information on the West India Committee minutes

Minutes, 1769-1779 (reel 1 microfilm)

This volume describes the activities of the Society of West India Merchants, which met in London coffee places, ale houses and other establishments. Occasionally joint meetings were held with the "West Indian Planters". There is also evidence of collaboration with such bodies as the Liverpool and Glasgow chambers of commerce. The committee gave money to the "Marine Society".

The committee's business also included:

- Lobbying the Admiralty (eg) to agree to supply convoys to guard ships en route to the Caribbean against attack by French or American raiders, provide ships to protect the islands, and allow merchant seamen to be armed;
- Protesting against alleged malpractice by colonial officials;
- Representations to the Commissioners of Customs (eg regarding sugar trade);
- Establishing freight rates and other charges (eg wharfage);
- Ensuring captains of merchant ships and escorts carried out their duties;
- Lobbying the Postmaster General about mail issues (collection, delivery and dispatch of overseas mail; extension of services), and about the security issues of Pacquets;
- North American privateers: investigating reports of their activities, and lobbying about their activities;
- North America: efforts to build up trade;
- Tariffs: (eg) lobbying for more favourable duties for rum compared with French brandy; removal of restrictions on relevant export duties (such as on equipment required for curing sugar);
- Lobbying Parliament: (eg) to ensure interest rates on loans to the Plantations did not rise;
- Collecting annual statistics of imports of sugar and rum from the British West Indies;
- Security issues at the London docks (ie theft);
- Seamen: (eg) freeing seamen on West Indian ships from "pressing"; recruitment; training of boy sailors.

Minutes, 1779-1783 (reel 1 microfilm)

Particular issues included;

- Protests against the import of cotton from the Levant (therefore putting cotton from the West Indies at a disadvantage)
- Petitioning the British government to legislate that produce from the British West Indies must be carried only by British ships manned by British crews;
- Lobbying the British government to encourage the Spanish to return escaped slaves from the British West Indian islands;
- Lobbying for tariff relief for the West Indian colonies because of the huge defence expenditure during the recent war (petition of 11th April 1783);



- Sugar monopoly to the British market: (ie) opposition to the Bill, supported by the refiners, which would revoke the monopoly of British colonies to import sugar into Britain;
- Agreement by the West India Merchants that British Plantation tariffs could now apply to sugar from “Demerary and Esequibo”;
- Agreement that Rodney should sail immediately after pleas from the West Indies for urgent, large-scale military and naval intervention.

Minutes, 1785-1792 (reel 3 microfilm)

Volume includes:

- Responses to the establishment (in 1789) of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade;
- Case against abolition set out in detail in May 1789, (eg) pages 90-97; parliamentary representations, 1792 (pages 207-209);
- Responses (including requests for military assistance) to rebellions of slaves in St Domingo and Dominica (eg) page 157;
- Attempts to preserve the monopoly on the supply of sugar and other produce to Great Britain (including detailed statements of the case), see (eg) pages numbered 176 onwards;
- Tariff issues: (eg) concern about goods imported into Ireland, lobbying for preferential tariffs from the colonies, danger of goods entering the British West Indies (BWI) illicitly and being re-exported as BWI produce;
- Rum duties (eg) opposition to increase;
- Opposition to the establishment of a Sierra Leone Company, which might compete with West Indian produce.

Minutes, 1793-1801 (reel 3 microfilm)

Includes:

- Racial issues (eg alleged danger of notions of equality (eg) page 121; advice on treatment of slaves; alleged superiority of whites; planters’ fears of black troops (eg) page 310);
- Response (page 317) to the decision by the British government to sending black troops to Jamaica;
- Attempts to get Anti-Slave Trade Bills blocked in Parliament (eg page 155);
- Opposition to Pitt’s suggestion that slave trade be suspended for a limited period (page 322);
- Opposition to the British Government’s attempts to improve conditions in slave ships (page 231);
- Details of expenses for campaigns (eg legal bills for opposing the abolition of the slave trade, 1792-1794, page 26);
- Maroon rebellion in Jamaica (page 128-130);
- Military interventions in the Caribbean: (eg) opposition to actions of British commanders in the Caribbean (pages 53-67); defence arrangements (eg in Jamaica);
- Sugar duties: attempts to modify government restrictions/regulations on the re-export of sugar (eg pages 295-306, 317-322); successful campaign for preferential tariffs (page 171);



- Import duties: consultation by the Chancellor of Exchequer (pages 229-230) before increase in duties;
- Protests by plantation owners against British government restrictions on trade: (eg) only British ships – not American or other ships - allowed to carry produce to the British West Indies from Britain, leading to shortages in the British West Indies (pages 40-46, pages 303-306);
- Development plans - including legislation - for the West India Docks (pages 180-, 192, 235, 261, 267-8, 271, 285-6);
- Aid to the West Indies: export of seeds and tropical plants (pages 24, 269);
- Development in the West Indies: (eg) innovations in distillation of rum, bread-making (pages 114-5) and sugar production (page 168); improvements to sugar mills (page 164);
- River police in the West Indies: proposal (page 238) and parliamentary Bill (page 275).

Minutes 1794-1802 (reel 2 microfilm)

Comprises minutes of the “West India Merchants”, a body recognised as able to settle disputes within the business community and empowered to negotiate with the Government. The committee was augmented by new members, elected by the existing committee. “West India Committee” became an alternative title during this time: (eg) letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 17th October 1799.

The committee’s activities included:

- Opposition to Admiralty attempts to force merchant ships to supply seafarers to the Navy;
- Compiling statistics on imports of West Indian goods;
- Resisting British Government plans for duties on sugar;
- Challenging decisions by customs officers (eg in Jamaica), such as the impounding of good held up by congestion on the river;
- Clarifying the distinction between shipper and importer in terms of landing charges;
- Lobbying successfully for legislation to punish seafarers who deserted in the West Indies;
- Pressing the Admiralty to court-martial the commander of a West Indies convoy for neglect of duty;
- Investigating the issue of potential tolls on West Indian shipping at Margate harbour;
- Sugar: report on the stagnation of the sugar industry (pages 261-267); bounties and drawbacks (including discussions with Treasury and Customs about the law, pages 283-288); campaigns to promote the use of sugar in breweries and distilleries (eg page 348);
- Bonding facilities (ie storing produce in “bonding” warehouses): negotiations about bonds of payment for import duties, storage of sugar in private warehouses;
- Rum: efforts to persuade the British Government to buy rum for the navy, and the military;
- Food for the West Indies: complaints about the restrictions about supplies; Pitt’s agreement to supply herrings for consumption by slaves (pages 302-4);



- River police in Britain: proposals in June 1798 (page 123); financial backing from planters (page 235); legal and Parliamentary steps (resulting in the Thames Police Act, 1800); reports on the working of the Office;
- Details of convictions for stealing cargo including monies paid to informers, legal costs for prosecutions;
- Convoy protection: details of requests to Admiralty; responses by the Admiralty (eg pages 78-79);
- Mail; complaints about including report on lost ships, 1793-1800 (page 301); arrangements for routing (page 9).

Minutes 1801- 1804 (reel 3 microfilm)

Comprises minutes of the West India Planters and Merchants, 10th December 1801 - 9th June 1804. Includes committee's activities regarding:

- Taxation and the war: (eg) extra 12.5% duty on sugar;
- Campaigns to reduce duties (on sugar, coffee, rum, pimento);
- Preferential tariffs for British colonies: this principle was rubber-stamped in this period, giving an advantage to West Indian sugar over sugar from East India;
- Import of coffee and pimento free of tariffs for export;
- Amendments to the "Intercourse Act", which allowed American ships to take West Indian produce to the United States, therefore encouraging trade;
- Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade (minutes of 17th May 1804); levy to campaign against this (minutes of 9th June 1804).

Minutes 1803-1804 (reel 1 microfilm)

Comprises West India Merchants minutes, 1803 April 29th – 1804 July 4th. Includes the committee's activities regarding:

- Procedures at the West India docks (especially regarding sugar);
- Preferential tariffs for West Indian sugar (compared with East Indian) confirmed by the Act of Parliament of 1803 (pages 3 to 9);
- Rum: warehousing issues; regulations about warehousing, duties etc (eg page 16);
- Slavery: includes petitions to Parliament regarding proposals to abolish the slave trade.