



## Reflections

# Honour the Memory of Our Ancestors<sup>1</sup>

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Recently, a group of visitors from West Africa and Jamaica had the opportunity to visit Seville Heritage Park, the site of Emancipation Jubilee 2024. Managed by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, its mission is “to inspire a sense of national pride . . .” However, the visit both inflated and deflated my Jamaican pride.

The tour guide at Seville Heritage Park, undoubtedly well-qualified and passionate about the history of New Seville, delivered a presentation that was not just informative, but also emotionally engaging. His narrative of Jamaica’s history, from the Tainos to the Spanish Conquerors, to the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, and Emancipation, was informative and emotional, not just a recitation of facts. The exhibits housed in the Great House were well-maintained and visually appealing, and the graves of the enslaved Africans were respectfully maintained, provoking an emotional response.

However, my disappointment was about the stark contrast between the maintenance of the Great House and the housing for the Tainos and the enslaved Africans. The latter areas were poorly maintained and marred by litter and debris, a sight that made me both angry and saddened. To compound my disappointment, certain historical relics, such as the water wheel used to operate the old sugar mill, the overseer’s house, and a barbecue, were not adequately

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: This was first published in the *The Gleaner* as “Letter of the Day,” by Father Donald Chambers, Thursday 15 August 2024 <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/letters/20240815/letter-day-honour-memory-our-ancestors>; reprinted here with permission. We likewise reprint *The Gleaner*’s response to Fr Don following his letter. *The Gleaner* is a newspaper published in Kingston, Jamaica.

<sup>2</sup> Father Donald Chambers, S.T.D. (Doctor of Sacred Theology), a Catholic priest and theological educator, was a participant in the TWP. Father Don is a Diocesan Priest from the Archdiocese of Kingston, Jamaica and currently is the General Secretary for the Antilles Episcopal Conference.

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highlighted and lacked informative labelling.

Reflecting on this experience, I couldn't help but draw parallels to other former plantation sites, where the history of the enslaved is often commercialized, as in Devon House, Kingston, or even sanitized, erasing the harsh realities of the past. I couldn't help but wonder if this site is emblematic of the theory of Plantation Economy, which is a throwback to stratified governance of the sugar plantation, with a preference for glorifying the achievements of the privileged while neglecting the stories and concerns of the marginalized.

Is the management of the Seville Heritage Park a reflection of broader governance and societal issues? Does it symbolize the persistent underdevelopment that plagues Jamaica, where the narrative is controlled by the modern inheritors of wealth and power, neglecting the painful history of those who were oppressed?

JNHT National [Jamaica National Heritage Trust] must ensure that all aspects of our history are preserved and presented with equal respect and attention. This honours the memory of those who journeyed before us and fosters a more complete and honest understanding of Jamaica's rich and complex past. A correction of the above is sure to give meaning to Emancipation Jubilee.<sup>3</sup>

## **Restoring Seville Heritage Park: *A Response to Donald Chambers from the Jamaica National Heritage Trust*<sup>4</sup>**

The Jamaica National Heritage Trust (JNHT) would like to offer a response to letter of the editor, "Honour the memory of our ancestors," published in *Jamaica Gleaner* on 15 August 2024.

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<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: In reflecting upon the diverse writing outputs from this project, we are encouraged that Fr Don has continued to write pieces like this for wide public engagement. In recent conversation, he shared the following with a project leader: "Thanks to you who have journeyed with me and continue to encourage me. Certainly, the experience of the Transatlantic Writing Project was a watershed moment. I remember one of the presenters encouraging us to keep writing and to find our niche that varies according to different persons, especially those who are not in full academia." One goal of the TWP was, and remains, to support clergy-scholars in making their theological insights more widely available to diverse audiences.

<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: This was first published in Jamaica's *The Gleaner* as "Restoring Seville Heritage Park" on 7 October 2024, <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/art-leisure/20241007/restoring-seville-heritage-park>; text and pictures are reprinted here with permission.

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This insightful letter regarding Seville Heritage Park and presents the experience of a recent tour group. The JNHT appreciates the feedback of the author and wants to address the concerns raised.

Seville Heritage Park is indeed a cherished site, deeply connected to Jamaica's rich and complex history. We are grateful for the recognition of our guide's passionate and informative presentation, as well as the commendation of the great house and the respectful maintenance of the graves of the enslaved Africans. Such feedback highlights the heart of what we strive to achieve, fostering a profound connection to our history.



**Seville Great House**



**A rear view of the planter's house-cum-interpretive-museum  
at Seville Heritage Park in St Ann**

However, we understand the disappointment regarding the maintenance and presentation of other areas of the park. The contrast observed between the great house and the housing for the Taino and enslaved Africans is a concern we take seriously. We recognize the importance of presenting all aspects of our history with equal respect and care, and the comments have illuminated areas where we need to improve.

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**The remains of a waterwheel on the grounds of Seville Heritage Park.**

### **Recent Challenges**

We acknowledge that recent challenges, including the impact of Hurricane Beryl, have affected the overall condition of the park. The storm's aftermath has understandably posed significant challenges for our maintenance efforts. Nonetheless, we are committed to addressing these issues as swiftly and effectively as possible. To this end the CHASE Fund has donated \$2.8m to address the damages caused by Hurricane Beryl. The JNHT's enterprise committee is actively proposing improvements, and we are engaging in discussions about restoring and enhancing the park's various sections. Our goal is to ensure that every aspect of Seville Heritage Park reflects the dignity and respect our history deserves.

The hurricane struck just days before Emancipation Jubilee which is the principal event on the organisation's calendar. This prompted a swift response to ensure major areas were cleared and ready in time. Prior to the hurricane, the JNHT had already begun the important work of replacing two termite-infested Taino houses and installing life size representations of a male and female Taino, which would enhance the educational experience for our visitors. Our commitment to this project remains strong and we are dedicated to restoring and enriching the cultural landscape for everyone.

### **Interpretative Signage**

In addition to physical restoration, we are also focusing on enhancing our interpretive signage and exhibits. Ensuring that historical relics, such as the water wheel and overseer's house, are adequately highlighted and labelled is a

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priority. We are dedicated to providing a narrative that is both accurate and respectful, honouring the full spectrum of Jamaica's history.

The feedback of the public we serve is invaluable, and we appreciate suggestions for constructive improvements. We are committed to making Seville Heritage Park a place where every visitor can deeply connect with and honour our shared heritage. We invite all to continue sharing observations, as they are crucial to our ongoing efforts to celebrate and preserve our history with the respect and integrity it merits.

We thank your readers for their continued understanding and support.

— Jamaica National Heritage Trust