

Erlene Downie pictured with her dog in 2000. A descendent of the indentured servants who were shipped to Barbados from the British Isles in the 17th century, Erlene still lives in abject poverty on the Caribbean island. Both her father and her husband died from leukaemia.

The Redlegs of Barbados

Well before black slaves were transported from Africa, work on the sugar plantations of Barbados was carried out by indentured servants brought from Ireland, Scotland and England. They became known as Redlegs, and their descendants can still be found, living in deplorable conditions, on the island's east coast.

Sheena Jolley reports

PHOTOGRAPHS by SHEENA JOLLEY

'Yella hair, speckled face and day feet brick red is fo' dat we does call dem de Redlegs'

(Folk song, 1974)

During the winter of 1636, a ship bearing a consignment of 61 men and women slipped quietly out of Kinsale in County Cork on Ireland's rugged south coast. Destined to be indentured servants on the plantations of Barbados, they were the forebears of a forgotten people who still live on the island.

By the time Captain Joseph West's ship arrived in the Caribbean in January 1637, eight of the 61 had died. The remainder were sold, including ten to the governor of Barbados for 450 pounds of sugar apiece.

Captain West was instructed to return to London to sell the sugar and then proceed to Kinsale to procure another cargo of indentured servants, and that first small trickle soon became a human flood. It was a lucrative business. An Irish white slave cost about

£5 and could be sold in Barbados for between £10 and £35. It was an age of intolerance and bigotry against the Irish, and the white Irish slaves were regarded as savages and their religion as unchristian.

In all, more than 50,000 'white slaves' had been transported from Ireland to Barbados by the time the trade ended in 1657, many of them prisoners captured by Oliver Cromwell during the wars in Ireland and Scotland and following the Monmouth Rebellion. The white slaves became known as Redlegs, almost certainly a reference to the sunburn they picked up in the hot tropical sun. It's thought that it was first applied to the kilt-wearing Scots, but the term, along with a number of similar variants, was used at the time for Irish soldiers of the sort transported to Barbados.

By 1680, most were free. Indentured servants were on their way out, their places taken by Africans. However, minute books from the island show that no more than a fifth of the indentured servants who were freed became farmers, owners or artisans. There's no record of what happened to the other 80 per cent, but it's likely that the majority emigrated.

Those who remained formed a wretched, poor and isolated community that was accepted by neither the rich plantation owners nor subsequently by the other black slaves. In 1689, the governor of Barbados, Colonel James Kendall, described the Redlegs as being 'dominated over and used like dogs'. He suggested to the

local assembly that the freed servants be given two acres (0.8 hectares) of land, as was their due, but the assembly contemptuously turned down the request.

POOR DESCENDANTS

It seems incongruous that behind the facade of a lush, green, idyllic rural setting on the east coast of Barbados lives a small, very poor, white population, the descendants of these same indentured servants and slaves. Today, the few hundred remaining Redlegs stand out as anomalies in a predominantly black population, struggling for survival in a society that has no niche for them, looked down upon by both the blacks and better-off whites.

Despite having lived in Barbados for a number of years, I had never met any of the Redlegs, but had glimpsed these conspicuously poor, bare-footed individuals hauling coconuts up the hill in the New Castle district of Saint John parish. None of my well-off Bajan friends had ever visited them, although a few had occasionally employed those who ventured into Bridgetown or worked on sugar plantations.

In order to get to know and understand the Redlegs, I spent time with them in 2000 and again in 2008. They were initially suspicious of me, but the fact that I had worked in the area helped to break the ice. As one Redleg exclaimed: 'Ah, that makes you Bajan.'



When I first visited Erlene Downie in 2000, she had been living alone for 33 years, following the death of her husband from leukaemia. Her home had neither electricity nor running water, which she had to carry from a stand-pipe. Once a week, she boiled some water on a fire outside so that she could wash. To earn money, she collected coconuts, splitting them with a pickaxe and supplying the husks to a local nursery for orchid cultivation.

In 2008, I found Erlene, now 78 years old, still smiling, but living in even worse conditions. She had moved onto a plot beside her daughter's house, where she lived in a wooden hovel, again without running water, proper

sanitation or electricity. To make matters worse, she was sharing the tiny space with a nephew and her youngest son, who is a haemophiliac.

In 2000, I visited 78-year-old bachelor Chris Watson, who spent his whole life as a fisherman. The tropical sun had taken its toll on his fair skin, and his face was half destroyed by skin cancer, left untreated for too long. Although he was living in appalling conditions, lying on a dirty mattress in a room bare of any other furniture, his wooden house was perched high on a hill with a breathtaking view of the wild Atlantic coast.

That year, I also spent time with Wilson and Louise Yearwood. They were living comfortably in a small government-

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Eustace Norris moved to England aged 31 to work in a factory, but found it too cold and returned to Barbados three decades later; Erlene Downie in 2008 outside the ruins of her old house. She keeps fit by walking the hills every day to visit friends and collect empty bottles and coconuts; fisherman Chris Watson hides his face, which has been damaged by skin cancer, and complains that there are 'dead spirits bothering him'; first cousins Wilson Yearwood and Wilson Norris, who is off to collect coconuts with his sack and hoe; **THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Monica Bailey, niece of Erlene Downie, looks after pigs, rabbits and ducks in the family yard; Wilson and Louise Yearwood in their government-supplied house; two of Erlene Downie's sisters in conversation. Erlene is the eldest of 12 siblings and left school to look after them when their father died of leukaemia; Wilson Norris collects coconuts both for his home and to sell



Erlene Downie in front of the Stove where she heats water to wash once a week

Erlene outside her old house now an overgrown ruin

supplied wooden house. However, Wilson was unable to work as a result of operations for an ulcerated stomach and a hernia, and there was obviously little money for basic necessities.

I was glad to see them both again in 2008, but it was a great shock to discover that a house built for two was now housing their daughter, her boyfriend and three small children. The young family shared the front room with a section partitioned for an adult bed. Wilson and Louise now use the kitchen as their main room with a section partitioned off for their bed. The toilet and very basic shower facility were in corrugated sheds in the back yard. An outside sink was used for washing clothes.

POVERTY TRAP

Ill health, inadequate housing, little ownership of land to produce their own food, and a lack of job opportunities have locked these remaining poor whites into a poverty trap that has hardly improved in the last century. Poor diet and a lack of dental care have left most of the older generation with either bad teeth or no teeth at all, yet the young people don't realise that this

is preventable. Illnesses and premature deaths caused by haemophilia (probably as a result of inbreeding) and diabetes have left men blind and without limbs, children without fathers and mothers without husbands.

But there is a strong sense of community among the Redlegs. 'If I need to eat, I go next door, and if they need to eat, they come to me,' I was told by 86-year-old Eustace Norris, who spent 30 years working in a factory in England before returning to Barbados. They have retained a racial pride and a degree of aloofness from their black neighbours, mostly marrying within their own community. Recently, however, there has been much more integration with the black population and there are many more mixed-race children.

It's sobering to realise that more than 350 years after the first Redlegs were brought to Barbados, they are still enslaved by their circumstances. Perhaps now, as attitudes towards matters of colour, race and class begin to change, the remaining poor whites, who don't join the white middle class via better educational and job opportunities will, via mixed marriages, become absorbed into the black majority. **G**

ABOVE: Erlene Downie's daughter Hazel, photographed in 2000 with her niece Naygia in the window their wooden home, known locally as a chattel house. Hazel has three sons by a black father – evidence that the poor whites are increasingly integrating with the rest of the Barbadian population

