

Object Lesson

Jamaican Lace-Bark: Its History and Uncertain Future

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The lace-bark tree (Lagetta lagetto (Sw.) Nash) has a robust inner bark which was used in Jamaica to make utilitarian objects such as whips and baskets, or was teased out into a natural lace to be used in dress and curios. Evidence suggests at least 300 years of lace-bark use for dress and in other areas of daily life by Maroons, an African-Jamaican community living in Cockpit Country, and varied use of less certain scale by Jamaicans outside Cockpit Country. The development of a large-scale souvenir industry in the 1880s, as mass tourism began in Jamaica, probably led to the decline in lace-bark tree populations first reported at about this time. One hundred years later, changing tastes and difficulties in obtaining and marketing lace-bark, have led to the end of its use throughout the island.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a history of Jamaican lace-bark from the perspective of economic botany. Rather than putting forward social or historical analyses, it hopes to present a platform on which future studies engaging with Jamaica's past can build.

Lace-bark is a form of barkcloth made from the inner bark of the lace-bark tree (*Lagetta lagetto* (Sw.) Nash) which grows in Jamaica, Cuba and Hispaniola. However, it differs markedly from all other tropical barkcloths, in that it is not beaten but instead stretched and teased to form a natural lace.¹ Its use is documented in the earliest natural histories of Jamaica, beginning in the late seventeenth century. The stimulus for this paper came from Emily Brennan's undergraduate conservation project, carried out in 2009 on a lace-bark bonnet in the Economic Botany Collection (EBC), at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Fig. 1).² This is a sophisticated garment, dating to about 1860, which immediately raised questions. Who made it and who would have worn it? What were the qualities of the material and was it truly utilitarian? How was it harvested and processed? To what extent are lace-bark items in collections representative of its use? Initial research found a remarkably small body of literature since the turn of the twenty-first century; a note by botanists at Kew, a brief note in a global survey of barkcloth, and a discussion of its place in Jamaican dress during the era of slavery.³

It became clear that we could fill the gap between these recent accounts and the well-known descriptions by eighteenth-century authors such as Hans Sloane, Patrick Browne and Edwards Long,⁴ through use of digital resources. The most important of these is the



FIG. 1. Lace-bark bonnet, after conservation on a custom-made mount. The bonnet is made of an array of materials including metal, cotton, silk, seeds, moss and strips of raw plant fibre. The lace-bark is overlaid, ruched and decorated with stitching. Height (excluding ribbons): 27 cm.

Photograph: © Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (EBC 44939).

online archive of *The Gleaner*, today Jamaica's major newspaper, with 2,623 references to lace-bark since 1865.⁵ This, like books and reports authored by residents of Jamaica, offers some insight into local perceptions of lace-bark. Details of who made and who used lace-bark are hard to come by, but we have given special attention to such evidence as survives. Although we have not spoken to anyone involved in lace-bark's heyday, which ended in the 1960s, we were able to visit and interview several involved in the short-lived revival initiatives of the 1980s. We have also investigated the uses and perceptions of lace-bark outside Jamaica, particularly in Britain. Here we have evidence relating to the 'exhibitionary complex' of the Victorian period: catalogues of the great international exhibitions, the objects once displayed in museums, and reports by museum and botanic garden staff.

THE LACE-BARK TREE

The botanical name of the lace-bark tree is *Lagetta lagetto* (Sw.) Nash (Fig. 2).⁶ Although invariably called lace-bark in printed sources, it is today known as white bark in Cockpit Country.⁷ The genus *Lagetta* is in the Thymelaeaceae family.⁸ The inner barks of several other genera in this family are used as a fibre source: for example, paper is made from *Daphne* bark in the Himalayas and from *Edgeworthia chrysantha* in Japan. The lace-bark tree is narrow and pyramidal in shape, and relatively small at 4–9 metres high. The ecology of the lace-bark tree is a major determinant of its availability, which we have explored in detail elsewhere.⁹ It forms part of the sub-canopy of the wet limestone forest that grows along the karstic,¹⁰ mountainous, ridges of the island. The tree grows in soil-less crevices.

A significant part of the limestone forest in the western part of the island lies within Cockpit Country, 1,300 square kilometres occupied by the Leeward Maroons — one of

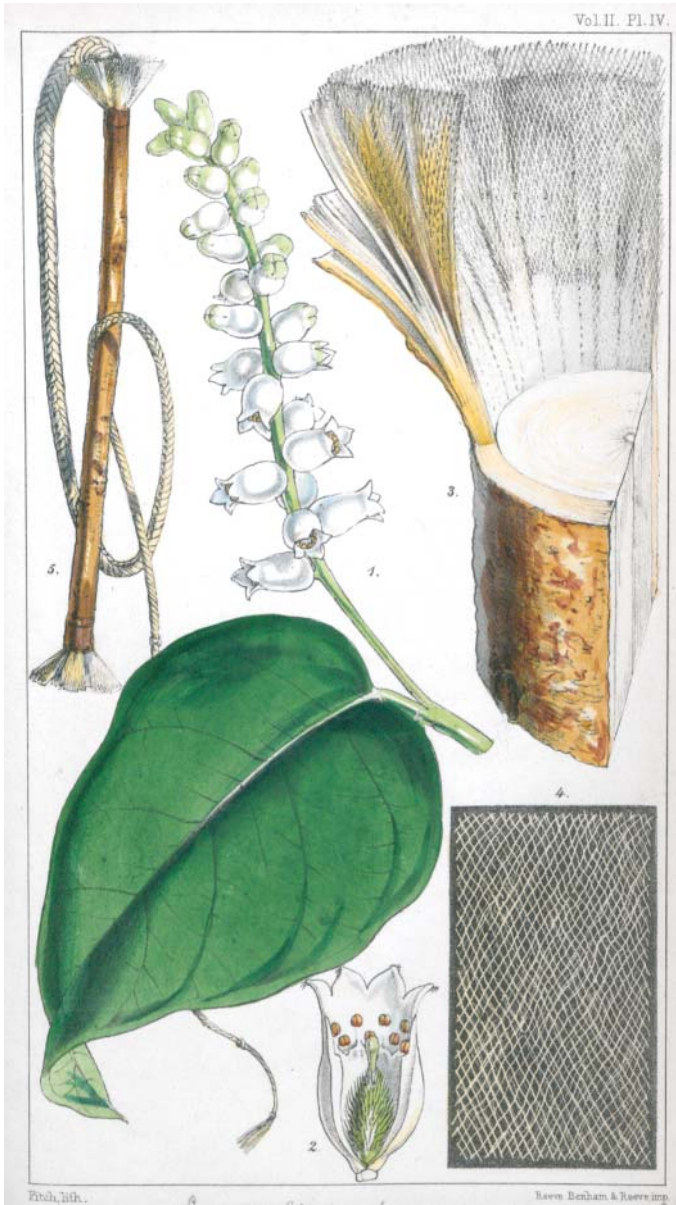


FIG. 2. Plate IV from Hooker's *Journal of Botany and Kew Garden Miscellany*, II (1850) showing lace-bark tree (*Lagetta lagetta*) specimens in Kew's Museum. A branch showing lace extraction is on the right. The whip shown on the left is still held at Kew (EBC 44946; see Fig. 3). © Copyright The Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

the free African-Jamaican communities that carried out a sustained campaign of armed resistance against plantation slavery. Their resistance remains extremely important historically and had significant effects on the political stability of the colony. Today's inhabitants of Cockpit Country, including the main town of Accompong, are the descendants of these freedom fighters and remain a dynamic community with unique traditions, who are to an extent autonomous from the rest of Jamaican society. Browne,

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author of the *Civil and Natural History of Jamaica* (1756), notes that ‘the tree is pretty common in the woods of Vere and St. Elizabeth’s . . . It has been, upon occasions, made into different forms of apparel, by the wild and runaway negroes’, while Edward Long writes in 1774 that ‘the wild Negroes have made apparel of it, of a very durable nature’.¹¹ It can be assumed that both of these early historical accounts refer to the Maroon community. The Windward Maroons who lived in the Blue Mountains to the east of the island did not have easy access to lace-bark; the tree does not grow on the metamorphic rocks of the Blue Mountains. However, the distribution of lace-bark trees extends well beyond Cockpit Country. An account in *The Technologist* of 1861 says: ‘in Jamaica it is common in the woods of the parishes of St. John, Vere, Clarendon, Manchester and St. Elizabeth’s, on the south side of the island and generally in the mountains of the interior and north side parishes’.¹²

The question of distribution is important in understanding supply. A major source of lace-bark trees clearly lay within the Maroon territory in the western part of the island. Here it appears that lace-bark was collected and used by Maroons. The area was largely inaccessible to outsiders, so it is likely that Maroon collectors of bark traded it to the rest of the island, as is documented in the 1980s.¹³ Lace-bark in the more easterly parishes would perhaps have been more accessible amongst the wider population but, because of its inland habitat, would still have needed to be traded to have reached coastal and urban settlements.

The tree appears to have been abundant in the past. Sloane, resident in Jamaica between 1687 and 1689, describes it as ‘in great plenty’, Browne as being ‘pretty common’ in 1756 and Long notes it as ‘common in the woods’ in 1774, the same phrase as used in 1861 in *The Technologist* account mentioned above.¹⁴ However, *Gall’s Weekly News Letter* of 8 November 1890 carries the following communication from the Botanical Department of Jamaica:

The Lace Bark Tree provides a very beautiful natural lace, the bark of the tree which is used in large quantities by ladies for ‘Fern work,’ a characteristic art product of Jamaica. It is feared that this tree will soon become extinct, as large numbers are cut down without any attempt at replanting. The Director of Public Gardens and Plantations will be thankful if anyone will send him seeds of this tree, in order that a small plantation may be formed for the purpose of providing seeds in future for those who may wish to grow this valuable and interesting tree.¹⁵

In 1884, the Women’s Self Help Society noted that:

The growing scarcity of lace has been arousing the serious attention of the committee, as this bark is extensively used in articles sold by the Society. Lace bark trees are being constantly cut down for fencing purposes as well as for the bark, and there is nothing to indicate that new trees are being planted.¹⁶

I. K. Sibley notes the diminishing sizes of lace-bark pieces in 1960, indicating the use of either younger trees or less aggressive harvesting techniques.¹⁷ The tree is described as ‘occasional’ in the most recent Flora.¹⁸ Herbarium collections and recent sight records from botanists at the Institute of Jamaica show that the tree is still widespread within the central mountainous ranges, but primarily in the form of small or immature trees.¹⁹

Two factors may have been responsible for lace-bark's decline between the eighteenth century and the current day. Firstly, deforestation in general; E. D. Hooper's report of 1886 documents the visible disappearance of forest in the late nineteenth century, which has only accelerated through the twentieth century.²⁰ Secondly, a likely increase in the volume of lace-bark used in the late nineteenth century; we discuss this below.

HARVESTING

In contrast to the abundant evidence, explored later, for how lace-bark souvenirs were sold and exhibited, little is recorded of how lace-bark was harvested, processed or made into objects. Harvesting would have taken place well off the beaten track. Those who harvested the material are those least likely to have had the opportunity to write about their work. Instead, we rely on scattered hints in literature, interviews, photography and from objects which remain in collections.

Lace-bark was used in two forms. Utilitarian items such as whips and cordage were made from strips of multiple layers of inner bark; in the case of whips, part of the woody portion and outer bark remained intact (Fig. 3). In contrast, when used as a textile, entire layers of inner bark were separated. If fresh from the tree, the inner bark could easily be separated into thin layers which are pulled apart across the fibre orientation to form a rhomboidal net-like structure, or lace (Fig. 4). This stretching expands the bark to at least five times the width of the unstretched bark.

Several farmers, some of whom were Maroons, living in Accompong and Quickstep, Cockpit Country, were interviewed by two of the authors (Emily Brennan and Lori-Ann Harris) in 2010. Referring to the 1960s–1980s, the farmers said that harvesting of the



FIG. 3. Lace-bark whips made from branches of the lace-bark tree. The inner woody portion and outer bark have been partially removed and the remaining inner bark twisted into the whip tails. Length of handle, reading from top to bottom: EBC 75996 36 cm; EBC 44946(1) 43 cm; EBC 44946(2) 49 cm; EBC 44956 60 cm.

Photographs: © Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

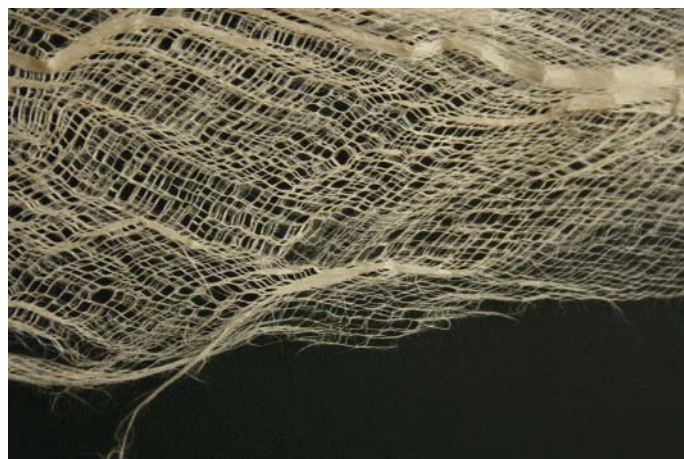


FIG. 4. Close-up of lace-bark sample collected during fieldwork in Cockpit Country, March 2010. The rhomboidal structure of the material is evident.

Photograph: © Emily Brennan.

bark was either by branch or as whole trees. They added that knowledge of the forest and of the location of the trees was necessary to harvest lace-bark efficiently, in combination with the ability to carry out heavy manual work, especially if the whole tree was to be harvested. Historical sources also suggest that whole trees were felled. As noted above, in 1884 the Women's Self Help Society noted the impact of cutting trees for lace as well as for fencing.²¹ In 1916, in response to a letter advocating the use of lace-bark fibre for rope, the *Journal of the Jamaican Agricultural Society* noted that, as lace-bark was 'not plentiful in every district and the tree took a score of years to mature so that it could not be renewed quickly', supply for twine manufacture could not be met.²²

The evidence provided by demonstration pieces showing lace-bark extraction, and widely sold as souvenirs, is inconclusive (Fig. 5). The pieces examined range between 5 and 8 cm in diameter and could either represent branches, or the trunks of young trees. Sometimes very narrow branches were used. For example, as mentioned above, whips were made by cutting branches about 2 cm in diameter, with the handle being formed from the intact branch and the whip from braided inner bark with the wood removed (Fig. 3).

We speculate that different uses of lace-bark may have required different harvesting techniques. For utilitarian objects made from relatively narrow strips of inner bark, such as bridles or cordage, the width of the original piece of inner bark (and therefore the diameter of the portion of tree to be used) would have been less important as it was to be cut up into longitudinal strips, requiring length rather than width. For small pieces of lace, again small branches would be satisfactory. However, for large pieces of lace, correspondingly large widths and lengths of bark would be required and the easiest way to obtain these might be to strip all of the bark from a trunk, thus requiring the felling of the whole tree, or barking the tree *in situ* and therefore killing it.

MANUFACTURE

In the 1980s, we were told that stretching of the bark could be done either by the harvesters (usually men) or the makers (usually women) (Figs 6a, 6b and 6c). Cecile Brown,



FIG. 5. Branch showing lace production technique; sold at Selfridge's department store, London, c. 1920–1930.
© *The Field Museum of Natural History.*



FIG. 6. Lace-bark harvesting in Cockpit Country with the Lennon family, March 2010. (a) Derrick Lennon harvesting lace-bark; (b) Iris Lennon (mother of Derrick) about to begin stretching the inner bark of the lace-bark tree; (c) the same piece of lace-bark after stretching. The multiple layers are revealed together with a dramatic expansion in width.
Photographs: © *Lori-Ann Harris.*

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FIG. 7. A pair of lace-bark slippers, c. 1827. The lace-bark is overlaid on silk and the soles of the slippers are made of coconut bark. They appear never to have been worn. Length: 28 cm.

Photograph: © Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (EBC 67770).

a craft user of lace-bark in Kingston, confirmed that in the 1980s she would either receive the material stretched or in its bark form.

Freshly harvested inner bark can be separated from the corky outer bark by hand, but, if the bark has been dried, then boiling or soaking is required to enable this. Once stretched, the material can be softened through soaking or washing with soap, and whitened through sun bleaching. Lace-bark has naturally occurring stiffeners which can be soaked or rinsed out to the desired degree.

It can then be used as any lace or net, being remarkably strong yet soft. If desired, it may then be dyed or stained, ruched, overlaid, and stitched for decoration as evidenced in the EBC artefacts (Figs 1, 7 and 8). The unmodified inner bark is clearly a durable material, as witnessed by its use in whips, and by the good condition of surviving nineteenth-century specimens. It is harder to judge the durability of the lace. In Victorian souvenirs, such as doilies and fans, the material is clearly ornamental and was not designed to be handled. However, there are frequent references to the use of lace-bark in dress (thus as lace rather than tougher bark) which specifically refer to its durability, and items such as the Kew bonnet (Fig. 1) and the Saffron Walden dress (Fig. 9) and cap seem to have been made for use. The apparent flimsiness of many lace-bark souvenirs should not be interpreted as meaning that the lace was not also a practical clothing material. This is reinforced by several references to its suitability for laundering.²³

USE DURING SLAVERY, 1655–1837

Jamaica was a lightly populated Spanish colony from 1509 to 1655. It was captured by British forces in 1655 and was under their full control by 1660. By the 1690s, large-scale slavery and sugar production had been established.²⁴ The first detailed description of lace-bark is by Sir Hans Sloane, based on his stay in the 1680s:

Lageto ... What is most strange in this Tree is, that the inward bark is made up of about twelve Coats, Layers, or Tunicles, appearing white and solid, which if cut off for some Length, clear'd of its outward Cuticula, or Bark, and extended by the Fingers, the Filaments or Threads thereof leaving some rhomboidal Interstices, greater or smaller

according to the Dimensions you extend it to, form a Web not unlike Gause, Lace, or thin Muslin, in Length and Breadth proportionable to the Length and Circumference of the Branch from which the Bark so extended was cut. This imitates Linens, Gause, or Lace, so much, that in Scarcity it has been made use of in lieu of them for Mourning Linen both for Men and Women, and unless one know them well and look attentively, he will not perceive the Difference. I was told likewise, that it would bear washing well as other Linen; and that King Charles the Second had a Cravat made of this presented to him by Sir Thomas Lynch Governor of Jamaica. I had it from Mr. Leming, who sent it me from Luidas, an Inland, mountainous, Plantation, where these Trees grew in great Plenty.²⁵

Sloane's collections of lace-bark were probably the first scientific specimens to reach Britain; a piece of lace is attached to the herbarium specimen in the Sloane Herbarium and Sloane gave a piece to Ralph Thoresby for his museum in Leeds.²⁶ Intriguingly, the famous portrait of Sir Hans Sloane by Stephen Slaughter shows him holding a drawing of the lace-bark plant.²⁷ By the end of the eighteenth century, lace-bark was commonly present in collections in the British Isles, including the British Museum: 'Here is a shirt or garment of it; being the entire inner bark of a tree'.²⁸ A sample of the material was also catalogued in Bullock's *London Museum and Pantherion* catalogue of 1813.²⁹ Lace-bark in the Duchess of Portland's famous collection in London found its way, after the sale of the collection in 1786, into Alexander Shaw's compilation of tapa cloth from Cook's voyages.³⁰ A dress and cap made of the material were put before the Arts Society in 1835, to 'ascertain their applicability and value to the arts of this country'.³¹

How widely used was lace-bark in pre-emancipation Jamaica? Browne and Long, writing in the eighteenth century, seem to refer to its use by Maroons, as does Lunan in 1814:

The inner bark is of a fine texture, very tough, and divisible into a number of thin filamentous lamina, which, being soaked in water, may be drawn out by the fingers into a reticulum, resembling fine lace so nearly as to be scarcely distinguished from it. The ladies of the island are extremely dexterous in making caps, ruffles, and complete suits of lace with it; in order to bleach it, after being drawn out as much as it will bear, they expose it stretched to the sunshine, and sprinkle it frequently with water. It bears washing extremely well, with common soap, or the curatoo soap, and acquires a degree of whiteness equal to the best artificial lace. There is no doubt but very fine clothes might be made with it, and perhaps paper. The wild negroes have made apparel with it of a very durable nature. The common use to which it is at present applied is rope-making. The Spaniards are said to work it into cables, and the Indians employ it in a variety of different fabrics.³²

As mentioned previously, the association of lace-bark use with Maroons is unsurprising in view of the co-location of Leeward Maroons and the lace-bark tree. However, this also raises the question of the origin of lace-bark use. There is increasing evidence in the seventeenth century of coexistence of Maroons and the pre-Columbian Taíno occupants of the island, and therefore the potential for the sharing of pre-Columbian plant uses with Maroons.³³ At the same time, the majority of slaves arriving after British occupation were from West Africa, a region with a history of barkcloth use, albeit of beaten

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barkcloth rather than lace-bark.³⁴ Either way, it seems likely that the use of the bark as a stretched lace substitute would have grown out of the amalgamation of influences in Jamaica during the colonial era.

Steeve Buckridge has argued that ‘One of the most interesting African dress customs that was maintained and nurtured in Jamaica by African slaves was the production of bark-cloth and lace-bark’.³⁵ However, with scanty evidence of such material culture, the role of lace-bark in the dress of the enslaved remains unclear. We found no evidence that British settlers adopted lace-bark as regular wear, but it was clearly appreciated, as evidenced by the gift of a lace-bark suit to Charles II³⁶ and the existence of other elaborate items of clothing that made their way to Britain, including the Saffron Walden dress and the Kew slippers. Lace-bark whips were a common artefact in Victorian souvenir shops, and remain in museum collections (Fig. 3). Their association with slavery, even after emancipation, must have been clear to purchasers and viewers, and is a grim aspect of the material’s history. In 1850 William Hooker wrote that ‘in the days of slavery the negro-whips were commonly made of the branches of this tree, thus: of a portion of the branch the wood was removed, and the bark twisted into the lash. The lower part of the branch formed the handle, and if it was desired to ornament the latter, it was done by unravelling the bark at the lower end, which thus formed a kind of tassel consisting of spreading layers of lace’.³⁷

EMANCIPATION TO INDEPENDENCE, 1838–1962

During the Victorian period there are many references to lace-bark in the context of everyday life in Jamaica. Uses include harnesses and curtains,³⁸ kitchen strainers,³⁹ robes,⁴⁰ party dresses⁴¹ and evening gowns⁴² made of lace-bark. In 1861 lace-bark is noted as being ‘used by the natives for aprons, collars, caps . . . Its fibres are also used for cloth’.⁴³ Buckridge recorded oral history, dating perhaps to the late nineteenth century, that Maroon women ‘made lace blouses and frills for dresses and skirts, and that some women wore outfits consisting of a lace-bark blouse and a banana-fibre or curatloe-fibre skirt’.⁴⁴

At the same time, a new use developed in the form of souvenirs. Many of the lace-bark objects held in the EBC are typical of these. Souvenirs were more likely to be preserved as they were less likely to be handled, and more likely to be shipped overseas. It is not surprising that the majority of lace-bark objects in collections or those appearing in antique shops in the early twenty-first century are of this type. The EBC includes doilies, either singular or grouped among leaves of decorated books often in combination with Jamaican flora (Fig. 8); whips; fans; branches with the inner bark partially separated; and sheets or puffs of the material. Other less common items in the collection include lampshades and decorated souvenir books. Doilies are the most common form in which lace-bark appears in online auction houses today.⁴⁵

Advertisements for shops selling lace-bark appear most frequently in *The Gleaner* between 1880 and 1925.⁴⁶ As the names of the shops imply (including The Curio Shop, The Jamaica Souvenir and Curio Store and Jamaica Curios), clientele were seeking curios and souvenirs, not items of everyday use. A children’s book of 1883 features a visit to such a shop:



FIG. 8. A doyley on a lace-bark ground with decorations of ferns surrounded by seed hairs of French cotton, *Calotropis procera* (Aiton) W. T. Aiton. Date unknown. Diameter 34 cm. Photograph: © Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (EBC 90405).

This seemed to be the nicest shop-visiting to do of any; it was so splendid to go down Harbour Street, and into De Cordova and Gall's, with full permission to look at all their 'native products' . . . and curiosities . . . 'And these lace-bark fans!' said Leonora. 'Do look! And this seed-work, and this shell work, and these flowers made of fish-scales, and these made of the dagger-plant, and these d'oy-d'oy-what is it?-made of ferns! I wonder which we are going to buy!'⁴⁷

Lace-bark curios were also sold at market stalls, as recorded in this 1906 account of the lively Kingston market, 'she produces dainty d'oyleys and table-centres and fine ornaments made from the lace bark tree, and fashioned with ferns and pressed blossoms. These things cost a great deal of money, but as a rule they are very decorative'.⁴⁸ While the way in which makers obtained lace-bark remains obscure, 'wanted' advertisements in *The Gleaner* sometimes requested it as a raw material in 'large quantities',⁴⁹ either processed or 'on the stick'.⁵⁰

In addition to individual makers, such as the market woman mentioned above, institutions played a major role in the marketing and manufacture of lace-bark curios. The Women's Self Help Society was founded in 1880 to improve the income of women by selling crafts for a small commission on sales.⁵¹ It also promoted the material in a Kingston salesroom and at major exhibitions both in Jamaica and abroad.⁵² Its closure in 1961 probably contributed to the decline in lace-bark use. Lace-bark items were also made in orphanages. For example, a book of Victorian doyleys on sale at an antique shop in 2012 bears a printed label stating:

The Doyleys are made of the bark of the LAGETTA-LINTEARIA Tree, growing in Jamaica. The borders are cut out of the Spatha, the sheath of the fruit of the MOUNTAIN-CABBAGE Palm. The FERNS are collected from different parts of Jamaica. The Doyleys are sold for the benefit of the Orphanage for Girls of Half-way Tree, Jamaica.⁵³

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The high quality and quantity of botanical information on the label is typical: we have seen a number of souvenir objects correctly labelled with the botanical names (note that *Lagetta lintearia* was the most widely used botanical name for lace-bark in the Victorian period). The accuracy of the names is not surprising as Jamaica had an active government botanical department through the second half of the nineteenth century. The emphasis on the botanical nature of the objects also fits well with a colonial view of the Caribbean, effectively summarised by Wayne Modest, which saw:

... the New World as a place of the curious and the exotic, where nature abounded and wild man roamed. Indeed, from the moment of European contact, the Caribbean has been framed as a natural space — sometimes as the Garden of Eden and at other times a torrid zone — within imperial imagination.⁵⁴

Modest documents how, from Sloane onwards, collectors in the Caribbean have emphasised and prioritised the natural, as abstract from culture and Caribbean people. Lace-bark, whilst collected for its connection to natural history, also embodies the Jamaican people who made these objects and, as such, is a rich and unusual resource. It is not surprising that it reached so many private and public collections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Paralleling the production of fanciful, decorative objects, the Victorian period also saw lace-bark take a similar position in literature. E. C. Stedman's poem *Fern-land* includes these lines:

Here on the lagetta tree
Laboring elves at starlight weave
Filmy bride-veils of its spray,
Shot with the cocuya's ray, —
For in fairy-land we be!⁵⁵

There was a persistent interest in the commercial development of fibre plants in Victorian Jamaica, part of a search for alternative crops driven by declining sugar prices. Lace-bark features sporadically, for example as one of many local and introduced fibre plants listed by the government botanist Nathaniel Wilson in 1855.⁵⁶ There are occasional calls for its development, as in the case of the 1916 interest in twine manufacture. However, lace-bark features very little in the annual reports and other publications of the government department concerned with botany and agriculture, and there is no evidence of industrial manufacture. The West-India Hemp and General Fibre Company was formed in 1854 with plans for two factories in Jamaica and Demerara to produce a wide range of fibres, including lace-bark.⁵⁷ The Company appears not to have become active. Trade in lace-bark goods was established with Messrs R. Manie and Son, Princess Street, Edinburgh, but reportedly failed as a result of the high costs: at 2s per doyley, a profit would not be made on sale.⁵⁸ Further evidence suggests that global trade was inhibited by cost. In 1894 the Honorary Commissioner of Jamaica, C. J. Ward, expressed the view that a considerable amount of lace-bark could be sold in America if the duty were to be lowered.⁵⁹ The collections at Kew include experimental paper made by Thomas Routledge, the British papermaker, who worked with a wide range of fibre

plants from around the world. Lace-bark was one of many species that failed to enter the repertoire of papermaking plants.

It is clear that lace-bark production had greatly increased by the end of the 1880s through the systematic and large-scale production of decorative items. External tourism may have been one driver. Few tourists came to Jamaica in most of the nineteenth century. The island had a reputation for poor health, poor transport connections, internally and externally, and few hotels.⁶⁰ However, regular passenger transport on banana boats between Boston and Jamaica, started in the 1870s and became large-scale with the advent of steamships on the route from the mid-1880s.

LACE-BARK ABROAD

In 1850 Sir William Hooker wrote that ‘every one has heard of the “Jamaica Lace-Bark,” and has inspected the curious and beautiful substance: few have seen specimens of the leaves and flowers, still fewer have seen the living plant, nor was it, we believe, permanently introduced in the latter state to Europe till the year 1844’.⁶¹ This familiarity fits with the significant flow of lace-bark specimens into collections before the second half of the nineteenth century discussed above. The living plant also became widely distributed in the Victorian period, with trees recorded at botanic gardens in New York, Sydney, Trinidad and Sri Lanka.

Beginning with the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, lace-bark products received even wider exposure as a result of their regular display at international exhibitions. They were shown at the International Exhibition of 1862, London; the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878; the Jamaica International Exhibition of 1891 in Kingston; the Chicago World Fair of 1893; the Coronation Exhibition of 1911 in London; and the British Empire Exhibition in Wembley in 1924.⁶² Exhibits were not only for show; some were for sale. A report on the Chicago Fair of 1893 records: ‘To spectators at the World’s Fair; there was nothing more in demand at the World’s Fair than our lace-bark puffs and whips. We have ready for shipment 250 dozen lace-bark whips and 400 dozen lace-bark puffs’.⁶³ At the St John’s Exhibit of 1902 in New Brunswick, Canada, the displays of the Women’s Self Help Society of Jamaica were extremely popular, with sales being withheld to prevent empty displays.⁶⁴

The lace-bark objects held in many museum collections are mainly of nineteenth-century origin.⁶⁵ Doilies are the most common textile item, with lace-bark whips being the most common overall. Many collections hold samples of the material in its stretched but unconstructed form. We have found only a few items of clothing: the child’s dress (Fig. 9) and cap at Saffron Walden Museum, Essex, detailed above, and the bonnet (Fig. 1) and a cap at the EBC. This is in contrast to abundant reports of the use of lace-bark as clothing in Victorian Jamaica, showing that, as suggested, museum collections are biased towards objects produced as souvenirs.

THE LAST DAYS OF LACE-BARK, 1960S–1980S

As late as 1958, the Tourist Board Office supplied lace-bark to be made into a dress for a show to be sponsored by Cunard.⁶⁶ This indicates that lace-bark was sufficiently familiar to have a role in touristic promotion. Articles in *The Gleaner* from the 1960s



FIG. 9. Lace-bark dress, donated in 1833 by Marchioness Cornwallis. Saffron Walden Museum, Essex (no. 1833.59). Photograph: © Saffron Walden Museum, Essex (Image No. 000491).

refer to the decline of lace-bark production, noting in 1960, ‘men have to go out into the forest and stay there for a few days at least’;⁶⁷ in 1968 ‘in these modern days men no longer want to strip the tree which produces the lace’⁶⁸ and also in 1968 ‘it might be termed a laborious job for men’.⁶⁹

This was part of a wider pattern in decline of what could be termed ‘traditional crafts’ in the 1960s. The Jamaican government responded in the 1970s and 1980s through the activities of Things Jamaican, which provided administration services, manuals such as *Marketing Hints for Jamaican Craft-Workers* (which listed over 500 craft-workers), as well as support networks and trade opportunities including exhibitions and directories.⁷⁰ This led to a revival of interest in lace-bark; for example, with decorative flowers made from lace-bark harvested in and bought from suppliers in Cockpit Country.

Maroon interviewees in Accompong told us that lace-bark had been used in the 1960s–1980s for utilitarian objects such as rope, baskets, mats and hammocks, but that it is not used today (2010). Bernard Lennon, a former trader and now a farmer from near Quickstep, also in Cockpit Country, was listed as a supplier of lace-bark in the 1983 *Manual*. In 2010 we visited his family near Quickstep. They recalled harvesting the bark in the 1980s and selling it to craft workers elsewhere in Jamaica. They remembered talk of plantations and a lace-bark factory, but nothing ever came of it. A former Accompong Maroon colonel recalled the raw material being sold at market in Black River and New Market by members of his community during the 1970s and 1980s. He also stated that, prior to this, notably in the 1960s, lace-bark production was sufficient to support some people’s livelihoods.

The reasons for the decline in lace-bark use are complex. Four factors regularly came up during conversations: the wider decline in interest in ‘traditional crafts’ in Jamaica that dates back to at least the 1960s and is perhaps linked to the arrival of plastics; difficulties in harvesting, due to the labour required, scarcity of trees, and the low prices fetched for the raw material; the importance of intermediaries in promoting lace-bark and ensuring regular supplies, and the impact of Hurricane Gilbert in September 1988, which left one-third of the population living in shelters and had a long-term impact on business.

CONCLUSIONS

Today lace-bark is a largely forgotten material. This forms a striking contrast with the prominence of lace-bark in the writings of travellers and natural historians from the seventeenth century onward, and, in particular, its apparent importance in Maroon dress and daily life until the twentieth century. The use of lace-bark garments as prestige gifts, whether to Charles II or Queen Victoria, suggests that British society had a high regard for the material.⁷¹ Scattered references show that lace-bark was used by other African-Jamaicans outside Cockpit Country, supporting Buckridge’s case for its use by enslaved and free Africans in Jamaica, on the grounds of its accessibility and affordability.

The late nineteenth century saw an important new market for lace-bark as curios and souvenirs. The coincidence in timing between the arrival of the first steamships bearing tourists in the 1880s, the appearance of many curio shops in Kingston at this time, and the first report of the tree’s decline in 1890, is striking. Despite all the uncertainties in quantifying lace-bark use, its use by Maroons and other communities in daily life appears to have been moderate and perfectly sustainable in the two previous centuries.

In view of the extensive deforestation that has taken place in Jamaica during the twentieth century, and the more recent threat to lace-bark habitats from bauxite mining, we think it would be difficult to re-establish lace-bark harvesting from the existing population of trees unless sustainable harvesting techniques are developed. A major factor in the decline of lace-bark may be the loss of popularity of materials made from plants, a worldwide phenomenon that began in the 1950s. Fibre products have been particularly apt to being replaced by plastics. In the last two decades this has changed; plant materials and fibres are recognised as being sustainable, and if harvested and manufactured locally and sustainably, beneficial to rural communities in economic terms.

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