

## Beeston, Sir William

(1636–1702)

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**Beeston, Sir William** (1636–1702), merchant and colonial governor, was born on 19 November 1636 at Posbrook, Titchfield, Hampshire, the second son of William Beeston of Posbrook and Elizabeth, daughter of Arthur Bromfield. His elder brother, Henry, was master of Winchester School and warden of New College, Oxford.

### Early career

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Nothing is known of Beeston's life until, in common with many younger sons of gentry families, he decided to try his luck overseas. He set sail for Jamaica, where he arrived in April 1660, a month before the final defeat of the Spaniards, from whom the English had seized the island in 1655. At the Restoration, Charles II was widely expected to return Cromwell's prize but, in fact, the king retained Jamaica, disbanded the army, and in 1662 appointed Thomas, seventh Baron Windsor, as governor with orders to frame civil government. Beeston lived in Jamaica for almost thirty of his remaining forty years of life and played a major role in shaping the political and economic development of the island.

In 1662 Beeston was elected member for Port Royal in Jamaica's first assembly, which embarked with enthusiasm on legislating to regulate life in the infant colony. Beeston reported the good fellowship of the new house until the arrival of Thomas Modyford, a successful Barbados planter, as governor in 1664. His pursuit of profit soon caused clashes with the pioneer settlers and fomented a lasting factionalism in the island. Beeston played a leading part in the assembly's efforts to curb the governor's ambitions and suffered brief imprisonment. Squabbles culminated in the murder of one member and, apart from a three-day session in 1665, Modyford did not call another assembly during his seven years in government. The governor further tightened his personal grip on island affairs by turning out office-holders and substituting his friends. Many disgruntled islanders (including Beeston's friend Thomas Lynch, who lost his place as provost marshal) returned home, but Beeston remained, and prospered as the island economy was put on a sound footing.

At Beeston's arrival in Jamaica the economy was based largely on trade in prize goods brought in by privateers exploiting the island's location in the heart of the Spanish Indies. Plunder continued to be important after 1660 and the decade was renowned for the exploits of Henry Morgan and others, but, as the future became more certain, privateering was supplemented, and ultimately surpassed, by a smuggling trade with the Spanish colonies and the planting of cash crops. Beeston, based in Port Royal, seized all opportunities. He purchased shares in prize vessels, traded in prize goods and island

commodities (both on commission and on his own account), and from 1662 onwards began to patent land in the interior. By 1670 he had 878 acres in St Andrews and had accumulated sufficient resources to begin the expensive work of setting up a sugar plantation.

In 1670 England and Spain signed the treaty of Madrid promising mutual peace and friendship in America, and Modyford's pro-privateering policy became an embarrassment. Thomas Lynch was sent back to Jamaica to take over the reins of government, and, with help from old friends, made an immediate effort to use the peace to extend trade with the Spanish colonies. Beeston was sent to Cartagena with the Madrid treaty, and in December Lynch placed Beeston in command of HMS *Assistance* with orders to cruise around Cuba and Hispaniola in pursuit of pirates. These activities provided openings for underhand commerce, and there is evidence that trade was put on a regular footing. The governor and his associates, including Beeston, were able to secure an advantage, which was broadly maintained for decades, but the engrossing of the trade (especially the slave trade) into few hands caused resentment among others grouped around Morgan.

After the outbreak of war with the Dutch in 1672 Beeston was ordered to convoy a fleet of merchantmen back to England, where he stayed a year, marrying Anne Hopegood, a merchant's daughter, on 11 December. The couple returned to Jamaica in 1673, and Beeston resumed business in Port Royal using surplus funds to improve his plantations in the country. He also picked up his active role in island politics. He served as member for Port Royal in the assembly of 1673, and each succeeding house, until he left the island in 1680. In 1675 he was appointed a commissioner of the Admiralty court. In 1677 Charles Howard, first earl of Carlisle, arrived as governor with orders to pass a permanent revenue bill, on the model of an Irish act, which, by depriving the assembly of its revenue raising role, would have undermined its power. Beeston, who became speaker in that year, and Samuel Long led the house's opposition on the grounds that it was contrary to the government of England 'of which country we [are]' and therefore 'desired to live under those laws' (BL, Add. MS 12430, fol. 71). Beeston and his friends further resented Carlisle as he allied with Henry Morgan's faction to the detriment of their business, and in 1680 Beeston returned to England with his wife and young daughters (a son had died at the age of fourteen months in 1677), taking a fund of about £300 subscribed by supporters to help him and Long present the assembly's case to the lords of trade and plantations and to lobby for the return of Lynch as governor. Lynch was reappointed governor in 1682.

Meanwhile, Beeston, having accumulated capital and contacts during his years in the Caribbean, resolved to resettle in England. In 1686 he was among London's sixty leading West Indies traders with imports from Jamaica valued at £2762. His enemies, Morgan and Bindloss, tried to cause trouble by informing the lords of trade and plantations of his involvement in the *Hawk*, a slaver trading contrary to the Africa Company's monopoly. But he retained his good name, reflecting the widespread animosity to monopolies, and was regularly called before the lords of trade to provide information and advice about Jamaica. However, he and his associates did suffer severe damage to their interests in 1688, when, after the death of Lynch and his successor, Hender Molesworth, Christopher Monck, second duke of Albemarle, was appointed governor of Jamaica and, on arrival in the island, allied himself with Morgan. Matters improved little after Albemarle's death, and Beeston's circle did all they could to

discredit the regime and return the government to one of their own number. Beeston was appointed lieutenant-governor in September 1692, knighted by William III on 30 October, and set sail for Jamaica in December, arriving on 9 March and presiding over his first council meeting the next day.

### Lieutenant-governor of Jamaica

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Beeston reported that he found Jamaica in a 'mean condition' (Beeston to lords of trade, 23 March 1693, *CSP col.*, 14, no. 209). After three decades of growth the outbreak of war in 1689 seriously disrupted trade. Shipping was in short supply, although Beeston claimed that it was impossible to enforce the *Navigation Acts* during the war and it is plain he allowed the Dutch to step into the breach. Wartime dislocation was exacerbated by a devastating earthquake in 1692. Beeston reckoned that the damage to his own property had cost him £300 a year. Half of the densely built town of Port Royal, perched at the end of a sand spit, was plunged into the sea, and the king's house was under water and past recovery. Beeston moved into the government residence at Spanish Town, which he complained was cramped and inconvenient, and he made various improvements during his government.

In the aftermath of earthquake severe sickness swept away hundreds of lives. Newcomers proved especially vulnerable, and Beeston's own eighteen-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, and a number of his servants died during his first summer back in Jamaica. Hardship drove many more to desert the island, as did the threat of impressment by naval captains stationed at the island: a repeated source of complaints from Beeston. By 1696 he estimated that the island had as few as 1300 white men (over 1000 fewer than a year earlier) and it was intensely vulnerable, not only to French depredations, but to an internal uprising among the 40,000 or so slaves.

Privateers based in Hispaniola plundered Jamaica's coastal settlements throughout the war to the detriment of planting interests, and in June 1695 du Casse, the governor of San Domingo, led a major assault on the island. Beeston had some weeks' warning and took steps to improve fortifications and prepare a defence strategy. He ordered the island's small numbers to concentrate in St Andrews, allowing critics to point to self-interest as his own most valuable property was in that parish. The strategy left other parts of the island undefended, and when the French landed in the eastern quarters they laid the land waste. After a month there was a fierce battle in which the English, led by Colonel Lloyd rather than the governor, held their own, and the French finally withdrew at the end of July. Beeston reported that 'they have done themselves no great good but they have done this people and country a spoil that cannot soon be estimated' (Narrative by Sir William Beeston on the descent on Jamaica by the French, BL, Add. MS 12430, fol. 3). The French had killed over 100 people, burned 200 or so houses, destroyed fifty sugar plantations, and carried away over 1200 slaves. Beeston estimated that the destruction had cost the island £30,000.

Beeston's report of the invasion did not reach England until August, after the French had withdrawn, underlining the difficulties of defending distant empires in the seventeenth century and the heavy reliance on the courage and competence of those on the spot. The king declared himself very sensible of the 'infinite importance of the safety of Jamaica to England and her allies the Spaniards' (Blathwayt to Trenchard, 2 Sept 1695, *CSP col.*, 14.1277). The fleet departed the following spring and reached Jamaica in summer 1696 after an ineffectual campaign in Hispaniola. With some justification Beeston

complained loudly about their conduct. The expedition displayed the same weaknesses as others in the West Indies: poor and divided leadership; ill-defined strategy; and extremely heavy mortality through sickness. Fortunately for the English their French enemy proved as ineffectual, and stalemate prevailed.

### Problems of the governorship and lieutenant-governorship

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Beeston reported financial hardship throughout his period of office. Having been appointed as lieutenant-governor he was allowed £1000 a year (half the governor's salary). He claimed that this did not cover his expenses, especially as the cost of living was high in Jamaica. Furthermore, his salary was always in arrears. He had great difficulty persuading the assembly to vote any taxes, even when under threat of invasion, and the treasury was always in debt. However, in 1698 the assembly voted him a gift of £1500 towards his wartime expenses, and in 1700 his friend Gilbert Heathcote persuaded the Board of Trade to have him made governor, with a salary of £2000 per year.

Despite complaining of hardship, Beeston found abundant opportunities for profit. He participated in the Spanish slave trade and drew criticism for his use of naval vessels to convoy the traders. However, supply difficulties damaged this trade in 1696, and it recovered less well than expected after the peace in 1697 owing to Spanish hostility, which he blamed on the Scottish attempt to settle at Darien in 1698. Although the English government disowned the scheme, and Beeston issued a proclamation forbidding any correspondence with the settlers, the Spaniards were not convinced of English innocence. In 1699 Beeston reported the collapse of the Darien project with some relief. He had compensated for wartime difficulties by engaging in the profitable business of provisioning troops (a much more secure business than competitive peacetime trade). Gilbert Heathcote organized the trade in London using his brother Josiah and Beeston as agents and bankers in Jamaica. After war ended in late 1697 the island's trade and shipping boomed and Beeston shared in the general prosperity.

Despite his own claims to the contrary, Beeston does not appear to have been popular with his peers in Jamaica in these years, perhaps because he could use his position to gain a competitive edge in the ferocious pursuit of profit which characterized life in the high-mortality and high-risk environment of the Caribbean. He was at loggerheads with every naval commander stationed at the island as each was jealous of his own interests. By 1697 the council of Jamaica was half empty with six members only. Beeston admitted that there were sufficient rich men to fill the places, but claimed that they wanted other qualifications, suggesting his trouble lay in finding men he could count on for support. In 1700 he appointed Sir Thomas Modyford, the young grandson of the former governor, who had married his only remaining child, Jane, the previous year, although his wife later claimed he opposed the marriage. Ironically, the governor tried throughout his term of office to persuade the assembly to pass a permanent revenue bill on the model he had resisted in the 1670s but failed, as the island élite remained stubborn in its refusal to surrender power to the crown (which would, in practice, have been vested in the governor), rehearsing similar arguments to those used by Beeston himself in the 1670s. The Admiralty and a number of islanders (including Richard Lloyd, who had led the defence against the French in 1695) complained to the home authorities about the governor's conduct, specially at the time of the French invasion. Beeston dismissed all as 'malicious' and 'unfounded', and on every occasion his

business associate Gilbert Heathcote, the agent for the island, defended him with some success before the Board of Trade. Distance made it hard to distinguish between contradictory testimonies, and time makes it more difficult still, especially as much surviving evidence was written by Beeston himself.

Beeston became increasingly sickly and repeatedly asked to be recalled. In 1702 his request was granted and he made his final departure from the island where he had spent most of his adult life and built a substantial fortune. He died soon after his return, on 3 November, and was buried in St Peter's, Titchfield, where he had been baptized. Beeston's will left all his property in England and an estate in Jamaica (which his widow claimed was worth £30,000) to his widow, Anne (and after her death his nephews), apart from a bequest of £3000 to his daughter, Jane, Lady Modyford (who had already received a dowry of £10,000). Lady Beeston, who married Sir Charles Orby in 1707, claimed that Lady Modyford was disinherited after marrying without her parents' consent. Lady Modyford (herself widowed in 1702 and remarried, to Charles Long, in 1703) denied the story and, in the absence of her mother, took possession of her father's Jamaican estate. Despite a long court case, and a judgment in Lady Beeston's favour, the decision proved impossible to enforce in Jamaica.

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## Wealth at Death

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approximately £30,000 in Jamaica; also property in England: widow's evidence in court case against daughter, TNA: PRO, C 10/306/50

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### External resources

National Archives <<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F61575>>