

ART. XVI. — *A Cumbrian Lawyer Visits the West Indies in 1826.* By TIMOTHY COCKERILL.

*Read at Kendal, April 2nd, 1977.*

**E**ARLY in 1826 Richard Armitstead (1797-1859), a Whitehaven lawyer, set sail for the West Indies to complete the sale of a client's plantation. His Journal, found recently among my grandfather's<sup>1</sup> papers, gives a fascinating sketch of the island of Dominica in the last decade before the abolition of slavery.

The writer of the Journal was the eldest of the twelve children of the Reverend Richard Armitstead of Whitehaven by his wife Agnes, daughter of William Lewthwaite of Broadgate, Millom.<sup>2</sup> He entered St. Bees School in 1811 and was admitted a solicitor in 1820, practising in Whitehaven until his death. In addition to his law practice he held a number of local appointments and was Clerk to the Magistrates, Secretary of the Infirmary, Clerk to the Governors of St. Bees School, and a director and Secretary of the Whitehaven Joint Stock Bank. For some years he lived near his practice in Queen Street, Whitehaven, but later moved to Moresby. In 1829, he married Caroline Morland of Moresby Hall, but they had no children.<sup>3</sup> Armitstead died in London on 19th May 1859 and was buried in Brompton Cemetery.

During the long voyage Armitstead may have studied the recent history of Dominica and have discovered that it had been a French colony until ceded to Great Britain in 1763. It remained a British possession, although briefly retaken by the French in 1778 and again in 1805. In 1826, according to Armitstead's Journal, Dominica had a population (excluding the military) of 18,873, of whom only 874 were whites, 3,096 free coloureds and 14,903 slaves.

Armitstead's clients<sup>4</sup> owned a plantation called Check Hall, which they had bought in the 18th century, but in the uneasy years between the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself they had decided to sell the plantation and cut their losses. Trouble was probably expected over the sale and Armitstead felt the only way to conclude the matter was to be there himself. When he landed at Roseau, the capital, on 21 April 1826 he lost no time in presenting his letters of introduction to several influential people including the Governor and the Attorney General. The island's richest planter, Charles Court, insisted on being his host and Armitstead's only cause for complaint was the cheekiness of the slaves to their masters. On the following day, Armitstead received a warm welcome from Dominica's Governor, General Nicolay, a veteran of the Peninsular War. His wife knew Cumberland and so they had much to discuss. Two days afterwards the young lawyer attended a ball at Government House.

Armitstead's visit was primarily a business one and he soon made the better acquaintance of the Attorney General and other lawyers, who promised to secure his admission to the Dominican Bar should difficulties arise. Armitstead was perhaps fortunate that this proved unnecessary for he found the laws wretchedly administered in the colony. He comments that the whites never associated with a coloured man (although



RICHARD ARMITSTEAD  
of Whitehaven, Solicitor.  
(1797 - 1859).

not averse to taking a coloured mistress) and found that the majority of the planters were of French extraction, speaking a form of anglicised French. Many planters were non-resident, employing local agents to manage their affairs. The vast majority of the population were slaves, but Armitstead was surprised to note that they worked only a five day week, had the same meal breaks as English labourers and were in his opinion “decidedly happier than most free people”.

By mid July 1826 the sale of Check Hall was in its final stages, with the Attorney General acting for the purchaser. Armitstead’s opinion of this official remained a low one, and he found him both an incompetent lawyer and an extremely ill-tempered adversary. It took nine hours of legal wrangling to conclude the sale to Armitstead’s satisfaction. At one stage he ordered his bags to be put on the ship as he felt that he would never achieve his object. At last, however, the purchase price was paid over to him and the Attorney General added a grudging compliment on the “gentlemanly and professional way” in which Armitstead had conducted his client’s business. The young lawyer set sail for England on 14 July 1826 and arrived at Gravesend on 7 August well pleased with his adventure. He congratulates himself on “the happy and satisfactory conclusion of the business” and vows to lose no time in “posting off to my coffee house to equip myself for the pavé of the gay Metropolis”.

### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Rev. George Lewthwaite, B.A. (1868-1941).

<sup>2</sup> CW2 lxv 374.

<sup>3</sup> She was the daughter of John Morland of Capplethwaite, Killington and Natland (d. 1819) by his wife Mary, daughter of John Upton of Ingmire Hall. Her mother died at Moresby Hall in 1830.

<sup>4</sup> His mother’s family the Lewthwaites of Broadgate.

