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Dear Reader,

Letter from Jamaica No. 15

Falmouth – a Georgian window to our past, present & future

Seeking to discover something of the past, present and potential future, I found much in the environs of Falmouth, a sleepy old town on the north coast of Jamaica. A world of magnificent buildings, rebellion, rebuilding, immense and varied natural beauty and almost unbelievable success gained by quite a number of individuals. A journey with a few shocks, too. And there's a brief jaunt to Montego Bay along the way.

Falmouth hosts one of the largest collections of Georgian buildings in the Caribbean. Once one of the richest ports of the region, this sleepy seaside town is gradually awakening, with its new cruise-liner terminal and dual-carriageway. Plus lots of new housing. An area that was a close witness to some of the struggles against slavery and is now witnessing some of the world's top achievers. World-class achievers, driven by their personal responsibility and desire to achieve.



Falmouth Courthouse

Breakfast of mango, pineapple and papaya followed by ackee and saltfish with yam and fried dumpling has fortified me for the morning. Leaving the car behind at the hotel overlooking Glistening Waters, I walk the mile to town, armed only with my maroon floppy cricket hat and expensive camera. Barely eight o'clock, the sun is bright and the temperature perhaps 27 degrees, so warm but not yet hot. A cooling breeze. The old road is narrow, crossing the long lagoon only just above water level. I feel invigorated already by the crispness of the day and the fresh sea breeze. Approaching town, I have the sea as companion; a wave crashing against rocks says "hullo" and makes sure I am fully awake!

The magnificent new cruise terminal is to my right. Few if any locals may enter, but I somehow manage to gain a pass. An insight to a big driver of the town's future. Large dockside buildings look both new and Georgian, if that is possible. Apart from the odd cafe and restaurant, they contain lots of up-market shops. Some thirty-odd large glossy boards offer a potted history of many local events.



Cruiseship at Falmouth Port



Market entrance, Falmouth

From the terminal's car park, I spot the Trelawny parish capital's courthouse, a grand specimen of Georgian-style architecture, dating from 1813 (see the first photograph, above). Across Water Square, the Albert-George Market building is similarly fabulous, with its elegant clock tower and characteristic Georgian "quoins" (prominent corner building blocks).

Nearby in Tharp Street is a kiln-shaped building, the Phoenix Foundry, otherwise "The Dome". Built in 1810, it is one of the oldest remaining industrial buildings on the island. Products included glassware and ceramics, mainly for ship and sugar machinery repairs.



Phoenix Foundry, Tharp Street

Created from a greenfield site in 1767, Falmouth exported sugar from Trelawny's 200 estates. The same ships transported slaves from Africa to toil on the plantations, as part of the gruesome "triangular slave trade". Some persons in the town became so rich that Water Square came to house a reservoir that ensured that Falmouth had fresh running water before New York City.

Another of the sites of Falmouth that I want to see is the former Baptist Manse, close to



Water Square. In the last year or so, this fine building has become home to the Western Branch of the University of Technology (UTECH), providing a new source of computer training along with more traditional skills. By the 1830s, however, it was home to William Knibb, a Baptist missionary from England.

Former Baptist Manse, now UTECH

A strong abolitionist, Knibb worked with many persons to try to bring an end to slavery through peaceful means. Following the Christmas uprising of 1831, he and Thomas Burchell returned to England to press the abolitionist case even harder. By their return to Jamaica in late 1834, the necessary Act of Parliament had become law, ending slavery under British rule from 1838. British trading of slaves had been outlawed in 1807.

Other great buildings can be snapped in this delightful, carefully planned town of precisely-organised streets, that makes for wonderful walks. The place never feels like there's a threat to personal security round the next corner. Locals are friendly, but may object to photography. As anywhere across the island, some will occasionally beg a little help with the next meal. Police officers always seem to be there or thereabouts. Not least the special "tourist police", found also in Montego Bay, Negril, Ocho Rios and New Kingston.

But I am suddenly startled by a tap on the shoulder. A beggar with unusual strength? Or perhaps someone with a more menacing intent? No, just a young lady wanting to pose for the camera! Resisting the temptation to carry on snapping more and more of the sights, I must progress the rest of the day's mission.

Returning to the hotel, I am soon driving south, towards the hills of the Cockpit Country. After a few miles, the road deteriorates, with massive potholes and big gullies seemingly jumping out of nowhere. The deep scratches (okay, gouges) are testament to the power of the "invisible" drainage gullies!

After a few miles, I reach Sherwood Content, a village of less than 1,000 persons. I am at the central T-junction as I want the local Post Office. Not because Falmouth doesn't have one - indeed, its PO is housed in another magnificent Georgian building. The Sherwood

Content P.O. is small and not at all Georgian. And yet...a local artist has painted a large image on its main wall. An image of a national hero. Not yet formally a National Hero, in the sense of Marcus Garvey and the six others. Not Bob Marley, either. But a modern-day inspiration to many. To many across the world. I take a few snaps, just in case someone decides to cut the image out of the concrete wall, Banksy-like.



Forest in Cockpit Country, from Piedmont

This modern-day hero attended the not-too-far-away William Knibb Memorial High School, for long a school of some very good standing. Nearer, however, is Waldensia Primary. I am greeted by the headteacher in a slightly startling fashion. "Oh, you're not another person from the BBC, are you?" Despite not being so – or more likely because I am not so - the head tells me all about the school's most famous star pupil.

First, however, we recall the other great athletes that have developed their excellence in the hilly parish of Trelawny. The likes of Merlene Ottey, Veronica Campbell-Brown, Michael Frater, Inez Turner and Warren Weir. Plus disgraced sprinter for Canada, Ben Johnson. All were driven by a strong personal sense of striving to succeed. From an early stage they saw that commitment, training, hard work and endeavour could make a big difference to their lives. They focused on a goal. They focused on a personal responsibility to their futures. They had a personal desire to succeed. A dream of greatness.

As we all know, the sleepy, contracting village of Sherwood Content turns out to be the origin of the very fastest person on the planet. For it is The Honourable Usain St Leo Bolt OJ, CD who holds the 9.58 and 19.19 second records at 100m and 200m along with six Olympic golds. And numerous other achievements. And it is he who has tried to build Waldensia's computer facilities and has helped to renew the village's health centre.



Painting by local artist, Sherwood Content P.O.

Despite Falmouth's very, very early access to running water over 200 years ago, much of the village and nearby places like Piedmont still do not have running water, at least not every day. Bolt is again on the case, with daily running water now getting ever closer.

Around half-way back to Falmouth you will find the starting point for rafting on the Martha Brae river. While you relax on a 30-foot bamboo raft, the vessel's captain will pass on a variety of tales, some historic, some modern-day, all fascinating. If you are adventurous, he may even show you where to grab a rope on which to swing high above the river. You

might then be tempted to let go, to test your flying and swimming skills. I can personally testify to the safe nature of this practise, at least from my one attempt!

Soon I am back in Falmouth for lunch at Naz Restaurant in the centre of town. Parking can be free on the outskirts, but most streets require a permit, to be purchased from a local shop - though from which one is not always very clear! Naz offers some good local dishes, like fried or steamed snapper, with rice and peas. You will pay about J\$1400 (£8), so a little more than at the fast food places - though you may well get served more quickly!

Back to the car and I head west towards Montego Bay. Some great views of the sea. Soon after Greenwood village, I pass the Rose Hall Great House, home to the White Witch ghost, oft visited by the tourist in search of old stories of unexplained deaths and ghostly happenings. Between Greenwood and Donald Sangster International Airport, I count at least twelve sets of traffic lights. My mind jumps back a quarter of a century. Nelson Mandela a free man for only a month. And in all my travels around Jamaica at that time, I only saw one set of traffic lights - and that in the middle of Kingston. Times certainly have changed, bringing thousands of hotel rooms and apartments that all these traffic lights now serve.

You probably know that Donald Sangster's time as Prime Minister barely lasted two months, ending Spring 1967. The airport that bears his name has the longest runway on the island. Passing it, I keep coast-side and soon enter The Hip Strip. Here there are quite a few bars, restaurants, nightclubs, hotels and tourist shops. "Hip" remains an open question, at least for me. You may occasionally spot a little beachfront; but unless you are a guest, the beach is almost entirely off-limits!



*Samuel Sharpe Mausoleum,
National Heroes Park, Kingston*

Heading into town, Sam Sharpe Square is close to the market. It is dedicated to The Right Excellent Samuel Sharpe, National Hero of Jamaica, leading organiser of the Christmas Uprising of 1831. By handing himself over to the authorities and taking responsibility for the events, he secured release of William Knibb and Thomas Burchell. Like Mandela, Gandhi and Luther King, he believed only in "passive resistance", or peaceful protest. Yet a few persons had become rather less than

peaceful. And so Sharpe and 500 other persons lost their lives. Sharpe was hanged in this square in May 1832. (Pictured is Sharpe's mausoleum in National Heroes Park, Kingston.)

Mission accomplished, I follow the Bay a little farther west. Through several more sets of traffic lights, this time controlling some very wide roads. I am headed for Montego Bay Freeport, a form of Enterprise Zone that is just celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. The zone bestraddles much quayside and has attracted many ICT and call-centre facilities, often

servicing North American markets. "Business Process Outsourcing" (BPO) is a growth area for Jamaica. So, good to see UTECH in Falmouth.

I am, however, hunting dinner. Aboard the exquisite HouseBoat Restaurant. Parking up, walking through a tree- and bush- laden track and boarding a small rowing boat with rope instead of oars adds to the anticipation.



The Houseboat Grill, Montego Bay Freeport

Once aboard the large former bar and nightclub, I may as well be in an expensive restaurant in London, Paris, Manhattan or Kingston. Except that on the upper deck I can see the stars. On the main deck, I can dine inside or by the edge of the boat, close to the water. The latter is best, in my view. I can hear the constant chatter of crickets from the shore. I hear the occasional fish "popping" at the surface. The cool breeze complements the still-warm evening air. The staff are top-notch. The range of quality wine is fabulous. And, most importantly, all three courses are wonderfully delicious, not least the fish soup. The surf and turf is superbly cooked, tender and expertly seasoned. (Photograph from restaurant's website.)

Back at the Fisherman's Inn, I end the day as it began, sipping liquid and gazing across the Glistening Waters, feeling the gently lapping water outside Falmouth. The crickets are everywhere. Yet seem to be nowhere. Such a quiet and peaceful spot. Yet so close to so much. Both old and new. Well worth a visit very soon.

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PS. Since this piece was published in email form some three weeks ago, we have had news that modernisation of Falmouth market is expected by December 2015. And there is news of possible plans to enable larger cruise ships to use Falmouth Port. Hopefully new jobs will arise therefrom.

PPS. If you enjoyed this Letter from Jamaica, please forward to friends - and encourage them to register by emailing me. Thanks, Stuart

Please also send me your comments.