

Headquarters House on Duke Street ... So Much History

On Duke Street in Kingston, just below Gordon House, the seat of Parliament, stands Headquarters House - an unusually beautiful, well constructed building, steeped in history, which was built for the love of a woman.

This is also the building in which national hero George William Gordon was arrested, prior to being hanged for his role in the Morant Bay Rebellion. In 1734, Thomas Hibbert a young English man, 26 years old, arrived in Jamaica. He came from a wealthy Lancashire family, involved in commerce and manufacture. In 1755 he competed with three other wealthy merchants, to see who could build the most beautiful house in Kingston. The story goes that the winner would also succeed in winning the affections of a certain young lady. The three rival properties, Constantine House (Highholborn Street), Bull House (North Street) and Harmony Hall (Hanover Street) no longer exist. It is not known who won the legendary wager, nevertheless Hibbert House has survived social, political and structural change as well as inclement climatic conditions to become Headquarters House. Hibbert House was based on the Georgian design which had become highly fashionable in eighteenth century England. It had reached Jamaica through merchants such as Hibbert who had settled in the island and saw no reason why they should not live in buildings of equal quality and splendour as those in England. The walls are of red brick, with contrasting pale limestone quoins to pronounce the exterior outline of the projecting façade and likewise to emphasize the sash windows and the large mahogany entrance doorway. The house is set back from the street and the two storeys are elevated with a fashionable high masonry basement, which gives an aura of domination and power. Surrounding the house would have been a garden within which it is said that Thomas Hibbert was supposed to have built a vault intended for his tomb. The garden has since disappeared and is now replaced by a car park and government buildings, but the courtyard behind the house has survived and contains remnants of the original structures. The building situated opposite the back of the house completed the square of the courtyard and would have contained the stables, the kitchen, the washhouse and the servant's quarters. The cooking was always done in a separate area, away from the main house, so as not to create uncomfortable heat and to decrease the risk of fire. After Hibbert's death the house entered a new stage of development involving modifications made to improve the comforts and practicalities of living in a West Indian climate. For example a double gallery stretching across the front and the back of the house was added to the existing core. The roof was extended to form a cover for the gallery and was supported by a large colonnade of white wooden Doric columns. The double gallery provided a cool, shaded area, increasing the living quarters and ensured that the interior rooms remained as cool as possible.

Military Headquarters During the last years of the 18th century and the early years of the 19th century, there was largely an undocumented period of private ownership. It was not until 1814 that the records revealed that the War Office purchased Hibbert House from the widow of Dr. Solomon de Leon for a sum of £5000. With the acquisition by the War Office the building served as the headquarters and residence of the generals of the army garrisoned in the island, hence the name Headquarters House which has survived. Among the more renowned commanders resident at Headquarters House were Sir Willoughby Cotton, who was lauded by the planters and the administration for his personal action during the 1831/32 Emancipation War in the west of the island, which was led by Samuel Sharpe; Major General Luke O'Connor who issued orders from the house sending the first troops to the East in 1865; and Sir William Gomm who founded the Newcastle Military Camp in 1841. In 1865, Governor Edward John Eyre having accused George William Gordon of having incited the Morant Bay Rebellion, had him arrested here for high treason. He was then transported in a wars stationed at Port Royal to Morant Bay, where he was condemned, sentenced, and executed by hanging in front of the Morant Bay Courthouse. Legislative Council In 1872, the capital of Jamaica was removed from Spanish Town to Kingston. As a result the seat of the Legislative Council was removed to the old entrance hall of Headquarters House, signifying the end of one illustrious epoch of the house and the beginning of another. To fulfil the new role, further modifications to the House were necessary. The most important change was enlarging the main Legislative Council room, which had to contain a large body of people, such as the Press, members of the general public, an Assembly and the Speaker all in one sitting. The façade was extended sideways by simply adding on wings either side in an identical Georgian style. Throughout the house, the rooms performed entirely new functions, and to create new office space, adjustments were made to the upper floor. In 1960, Headquarters House was vacated for Gordon House as the seat of Parliament. The old building was described as uncomfortable and overcrowded. Headquarters House is the home of the Jamaica National Heritage Trust. Source www.jnht.com