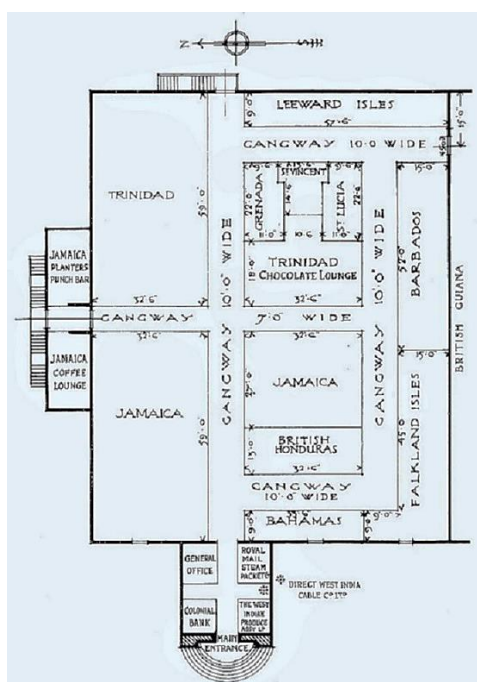


The West Indies at Wembley (British Empire Exhibition, 1924).

When the idea for the British Empire Exhibition was put forward after the First World War, it was mainly the large “Dominions” of Australia, Canada, India and South Africa who were involved in supporting it. The only West Indian colony to express an interest in taking part at first was Jamaica. However, in 1922, the then British Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill, set up a committee to organise representation from the West Indian and Atlantic territories at the exhibition. Its hard work, including a visit by an envoy to all of the islands, managed to persuade them all to take part, and to share the cost of a building which would display the products of the region together for the first time.

Members of the West Indian and Atlantic Committee visiting the site of the pavilion in 1923 (with the Metropolitan Railway's Neasden works and power station in the background).

[Source: Brent Archives – BEE brochure for the West Indies and Atlantic Pavilion, from the Wembley History Soc. Collection ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]

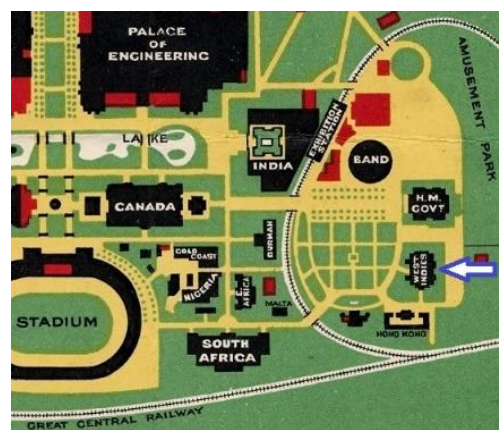


It cost £16,843 to build the pavilion, with around £7,500 contributed by British Guiana (now Guyana) which would be using the southern end of the building. Each of the colonies paid an amount based on the floor area in the pavilion which its own display would occupy, and with other expenses (such as maintenance, transport and insurance) the total cost of the exhibition for the West Indies was about £30,000. Jamaica paid the highest share, £6,000, while St Vincent's contribution of £300 was the lowest amount.

< Floor plan of the West Indian and Atlantic Pavilion.

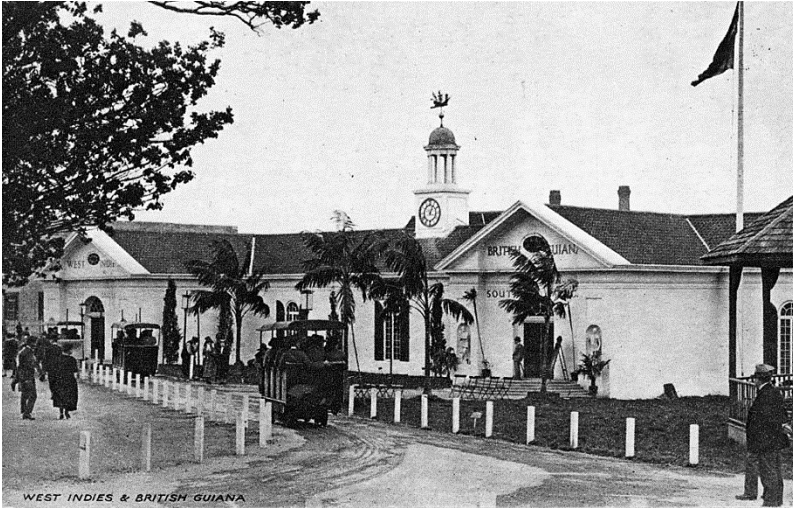
[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]

The West Indies and British Guiana Pavilion in 1924 was located near the south-east corner of the exhibition's Wembley Park site, between the British Government and the Hong Kong Pavilions.



Part of the Huntley and Palmer's map of the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, with an arrow added to show the site of the West Indies and British Guiana Pavilion >

[Source: Brent Archives]



A postcard of the West Indies and British Guiana Pavilion (with electric "Railodok" cars passing by).

[Source: Brent Archives - online image 893]

Because of the late start in organising the participation of the West Indies, poor weather during the winter and a short strike by the exhibition's building workers, the

pavilion was only just finished in time for the opening of the British Empire Exhibition on 23 April 1924. One of its features was a Tropical Garden, plants for which had been sent over early so that they could adjust to the British climate. A gardener from the Royal Botanic Gardens in Trinidad did his best to grow bananas, coffee and cacao, with varied success, to show visitors to the exhibition the main crops which the Caribbean could supply to the world.



The West Indies Tropical Garden, 1924.

[Source: Brent Archives – Photos by Fred L Wilson in the Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/3]



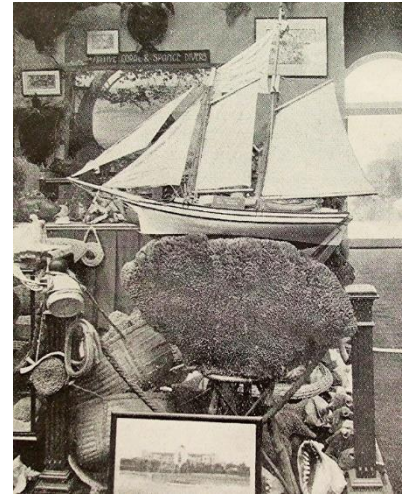
Visitors entering the West Indies Pavilion would see a large map of the Caribbean on the wall behind the Colonial Bank's exhibition branch office. In describing what these visitors would have seen inside the pavilion in 1924, this article will follow the map, and travel through the islands from north-west to south-east.

The Colonial Bank branch in the main entrance lobby to the West Indies Pavilion, with its map of the Caribbean.

[Source: Brent Archives – Photos by Fred L Wilson in the Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/16]

The British Empire Exhibition's 1924 official guide book described the West Indies Pavilion as 'a queer combination of a museum and a spice market.' The small exhibit from the **Bahamas** featured the work of the islands' sponge divers, and had products such as jars of preserved guavas on sale.

Part of the Bahamas display at the BEE, 1924.
[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]



The main exports from **Jamaica** in the 1920's were bananas, sugar and rum, which all featured in its display at the exhibition. Cigars, cocoa, ginger, honey and pimento (all spice) were among the other produce on sale. Craft products made by Jamaican people were also featured, including basketwork and walking

sticks made from some of the native woods of the island, and there were ladies at work demonstrating how "Jippa Jappa" hats (the island's version on the Panama hat) were made.



Part of the Jamaican display, with baskets, hats and rum on sale.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/23]

The organisers of the Jamaican section of the pavilion also took the opportunity to sell refreshments from the island. In an annexe to the display there was the Jamaica Planters' Punch Bar, serving rum and cocktails, while the Jamaica Coffee Room allowed visitors to sample Blue Mountain coffee (said to be the finest in the world), along with 'cakes and dainties' that were island specialities. While sitting to enjoy their coffee, visitors could also take in the pavilion's simple yet atmospheric decoration, its ceiling draped with light-weight cotton material above a frieze painted with colourful images of trees from the Caribbean.

The Jamaica Coffee room.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/25]





A number of the Leeward Islands had their own displays in the pavilion. **Montserrat** ("The Emerald Isle of the Antilles") combined with the **Virgin Islands** to promote their cigars, as well as other local produce. Next door, **Dominica** was the world's largest producer of limes at that time (with estates owned by the famous company, L. Rose & Co.).

The displays of several Leeward Islands.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the
Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/30]

Antigua and **St. Kitts** both featured their main products, sugar and molasses, as well as cotton and its by-products, cotton seed and cotton oil. St. Kitts also had coconuts and salt on display on its stand, while Antigua displayed large photographs of the island, and local crafts such as hats and shell necklaces.

The Antigua display in the West Indies Pavilion.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the
Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/29]



Across the aisle were the three stands from the Windward Islands of **St. Lucia**, **St. Vincent** and **Grenada**. The St. Vincent display promoted its Sea Island cotton ('the world's finest'), and arrowroot, for which this small island was the world's largest producer. Grenada proudly displayed its spices.



The St. Vincent display.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the
Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/31]



The Grenada display.

[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]

Barbados (which the official guide book described as ‘the healthiest island of the West Indies’) had its display designed by Lady Carter-Gilbert, the wife of a former Governor of the island. As



well as advertising its advantages as a tourist destination for the wealthy (‘the best bathing, in the best climate’), and its main products of sugar and cotton, it also promoted goods made by its Women’s Self-Help Association. These included basketwork, jars of preserves and pickles, lace bark and fern-work doilies and shell brooches.

A view of the Barbados stand.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the
Wembley History Society Collection, Acc.1904/17]

Trinidad and Tobago, at the south-west end of the Caribbean island chain, matched the size of Jamaica with their display. It set out to be more educational, with beautifully made models of its famous pitch lake, important buildings and its war memorial to the men from their country who had given their lives in the Great War. It also showed how its main products of cacao and sugar were produced, and one wall was decorated with paintings of tropical plants found in its Royal Botanic Gardens.



Part of the Trinidad and Tobago display.

[Source: Brent Archives –
Photos by Fred L Wilson in the Wembley
History Society Collection, Acc.1904/36]

Like Jamaica, Trinidad also included a refreshments room, but theirs served hot chocolate and fruit squashes. One speciality product which a section of the display promoted was Angostura Bitters, a by-product of the sugar industry which was popular in making cocktails. Visitors were told that this had once been made only in Venezuela, but that production had been moved to Trinidad because of political instability in that country.



The Trinidad and Tobago refreshment room.

[Source: Brent Archives – Photos by
Fred L Wilson in the Wembley History
Society Collection, Acc.1904/33]

Among the many visitors to the West Indies Pavilion in 1924 were King George V and Queen Mary. They spent some time there on 14 May, when touring parts of the exhibition with the King and Queen of Italy.

King George V and his party in the crowded West Indies Pavilion, May 1924.

[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]



The people from the West Indies, who came to give the British Empire Exhibition's 17 million visitors a taste of the produce and culture of their islands, were a mix of races, although the main organisation was in the hands of British colonials. They were photographed on the steps of the Pavilion (along with a number of locally recruited English staff) for the brochure which would commemorate the event.



The people who ran the West Indies Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition in 1924.

[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]

A number of bands, from Britain and around the Empire, were brought to Wembley to entertain the exhibition's visitors with daily concerts. One of these was the band of the army's West India Regiment, who also entertained the guests at the West Indies garden party, held in the Tropical Garden in July 1924. This party, attended by the Prince of Wales, and the participation of the West Indies in the British Empire Exhibition as a whole, were widely considered to be a success.

The West Indies Regiment Band, outside the British Government Pavilion, 1924.

[Source: Brent Archives - brochure ref. WHS/0/1/5/37]



**Philip Grant,
Wembley History Society,
February 2019.**