

The Providence Island Company

On 28th September 1629 letters of marque were issued for an expedition to be mounted to St Catalina, an island in the Caribbean (later to be renamed Providence Island). Subscriptions were invited from Lord Saye's circle of powerful political and business friends, who were opposed to the arbitrary rule of the king, for twenty shares at £200 per head.

In the summer of 1630 the first meeting of shareholders was held in Brooke House, Holborn, London (held there to avoid the plague in the country). On 4th December a patent was sealed granting the formal incorporation of the splendidly named company of 'The Governor and Company of Adventurers of the City of Westminster for the Plantation of the Islands of Providence, Henrietta and adjacent islands laying upon the coast of America'; known as 'The Providence Island Company'. The total cost of the Patent and fees was £60.

The name Providence had great significance at that time; the Adventurers (men who advanced venture capital) believed they were responding to divine will in founding the settlement. They were casting themselves on God's providence. The project could only succeed with God's approval.⁴

St Catalina, as the Spanish called the island, was situated in the south-west corner of the Caribbean, off the coast of Nicaragua; it is six miles long by four wide and was considered, in the seventeenth century, to be the choicest of the Caribbean islands. It had an equable climate, was fertile and salubrious; with plenty of water. It was easily fortified and there were no venomous creatures. Henrietta (the Spanish island of St Andreas) was sixty miles south-west of Providence; it is the larger of the two at sixteen miles by four. The company planned to grow and sell sugar and tobacco.

Of the original twenty Charter Members (subscribers) listed, the most active players were, throughout, the Earl of Warwick, Viscount Saye and Sele and Lord Brooke. The Company's first officers were: governor, the Earl of Holland; deputy governor, John Dyke; treasurer, John Pym; legal adviser, Oliver St John; secretary, William Jessop (not a share holder). Other members were Gabriel Barber, Gregory Carswell (Gawsell?), Sir Gilbert Gerrard, John Gurdon, Sir Edward Harwood, Richard Knightley, Sir Edmond Moundeford, Sir Nathaniel Rich, John Robartes, Sir Benjamin Rudyerd and Christopher Sherland. A late joiner, Sir Thomas Barrington, was admitted 31st January 1631; he made up the twenty subscribers.

⁴ Kupperman, K.O., *Providence Island 1630-1641*, C.U.P., 1993.