REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

IN THE COURT OF APPEAL

Civil Appeal No. T 243 of 2012 Claim No. CV No 2011 - 04300

BETWEEN

ESTHER MILLS

APPELLANT

AND

LLOYD ROBERTS

RESPONDENT

PANEL: P. JAMADAR, J.A.

N. BEREAUX, J.A.

P. MOOSAI, J.A.

APPEARANCES:

Mr. R. L. Maharaj S.C., Ms. V. Maharaj and Ms. N. Badal for the Appellant.

Mr. E. O'Connor for the Respondent.

DATE OF DELIVERY: 16th December, 2016.

JUDGMENT

Introduction

- 1. This matter concerns a property and buildings in Scarborough, Tobago, comprising approximately 28,000 square feet of land owned by the respondent's mother (Hannah), now deceased. The respondent's mother and the appellant's mother (Marie, also deceased) were sisters and they operated a guest house on the property. The appellant claims an interest, arising by virtue of estoppel through an arrangement between the sisters, in the property; while the respondent is the only child of Hannah and claims to be the sole beneficiary of her estate. The respondent contends that the appellant and her mother were employed by Hannah and were paid a salary, and that his mother (Hannah) was always in control of the guest house. Hannah and the respondent migrated to the United States of America in or around the 1960s. The property comprised a main house, a servant's quarters and an office. The appellant alleges that between 1978 and 1979, after she had given birth to a daughter, Hannah encouraged her to build a dwelling house on the spot where the office was situated. It is not in dispute that the appellant built and lives in this dwelling house.
- 2. The main issue the trial judge had to determine was, what was the nature of the arrangement between the appellant and her mother (Marie) on the one hand, and as between the appellant and her mother (Marie) and the respondent's mother (Hannah) on the other hand?
- 3. The trial judge made the following orders (on the 28th September, 2012) that are relevant to this appeal:
 - a. The Claimant (appellant) is entitled to remain in possession of the parcel of land comprising approximately 28,000 square feet of land situated in Scarborough, Tobago bounded on the North by Young Street, on the South by the lands of the Seventh Day Adventist Church on the East by Mc Kay Hill Street and on the West by Cuyler Street to Convent together with the buildings thereon, the subject of this action ("the subject lands") and to continue to operate the guest house known as

¹ On the 14th October, 2015, at the hearing of this appeal, pursuant to Part 21(7), CPR, 1998, Gloria Roberts of 287 Gordon Street, Staten Island, New York, USA was substituted as the respondent in place and stead of Lloyd Roberts (who died on the 20th April, 2015) for the purposes of continuing this appeal.

Mills Guest House from the subject lands, for the duration of her life, or for as long as she continues to operate a guest house thereon, whichever is sooner, subject to the disposition of the rents of the long term tenants as set out in paragraph 1 (d) below.

- b. The Defendant (respondent) is entitled to the use of the front room of the said guest house comprising a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen located along the western side of the upper floor of the building located on the northern eastern portion of the subject lands ("the said front room"), for use by himself and/or his servants and/or agents at his discretion, upon the Defendant giving the Claimant 48 hours notice of his intention to occupy the said front room.
- c. The Claimant (appellant) is entitled to remain in possession and occupy for the remainder of her life, the dwelling house situated on the south western portion of the subject lands where she now resides.
- d. The successor in title to the late Hannah Elizabeth James who receives a grant of letters of administration is entitled to the rents from the long term tenants of the building on the south eastern portion of the subject land and the Claimant (appellant) is to account for and pay such rents to such successor in title from the 27th February, 2010 being the date of Hannah's death.
- 4. The appellant is only appealing the declaration at (c) above. The respondent by a cross-appeal, is appealing the entire judgment.

Respondent's Cross-Appeal

5. For practical purposes it is sensible to deal with the respondent's cross-appeal first, as it challenges the trial judge's entire judgment. Essentially it is an appeal against findings of fact by the trial judge.

The Approach of the Court of Appeal

- 6. It is well settled that the Court of Appeal ought not to overturn a trial judge's findings of fact unless there are very good reasons for doing so.² In summary, the approach is that unless a trial judge is shown to be plainly wrong in the assessment of the evidence, an appellate court ought not to interfere with the trial judge's findings of fact.
- 7. To be plainly wrong, it must generally be demonstrated that the trial judge made findings without any evidential basis for so doing, or as a result of a sufficiently material mistake or misunderstanding of the evidence or without properly considering or analyzing the totality of the relevant evidence, or came to conclusions that no reasonable judge properly informed could have arrived at. This approach is really a directive to appellate courts to consider whether the trial judge's findings of fact were reasonable and permissible in light of all of the evidence considered in its totality (even if appellate judges faced with the circumstances may have come to different findings). This is what the standard of 'plainly wrong' imports into the appellate review process on findings of fact at first instance.

The Trial Judge's Findings of Fact

- 8. In our opinion, it has not been demonstrated that the trial judge was plainly wrong in his core findings of fact. It is accepted that in his written judgment there are some areas where the trial judge seemed to have confused the facts somewhat.³
- 9. However, these instances though advanced as mistakes and misunderstandings of the evidence, are not sufficiently material when viewed in the context of the entire judgment and all of the facts, to result in a conclusion that the trial judge was plainly wrong on his core findings.
- 10. Indeed, the trial judge undertook a careful and detailed analysis of all of the evidence, and did so under all of the relevant categories in relation to the issues raised, which he properly

² The right approach has most recently been set out by the Privy Council in **Beacon Insurance Co. Ltd. v Maharaj Bookstore Ltd.** [2014] UKPC 21, at pages 4 to 7, paragraphs 12 to 17.

³ For example, paragraph 39, where he seemed to have confused the sums allegedly expended on the repairs and renovations of the guest house (\$250,000.00) – see paragraph 30 of the judgment, with the alleged costs to build the dwelling house (\$65,000.00) – see paragraphs 35 and 38 of the judgment.

identified. In fact, the trial judge, properly advised himself of the approach that he should take to issues of fact as guided by the Privy Council decision in **Horace Reid v Charles and Bain**.⁴

- 11. Following this, the trial judge meticulously considered the evidence of each witness and then tested it against the available documentary evidence, and evaluated it all against the probabilities of the rival contentions in the context of common ground or unchallenged evidence. In particular, the trial judge carefully analyzed the respondent's case (at paragraphs 84 to 117 of his written judgment), and rationally demonstrated, point by point, why he did not accept, on a balance of probabilities, the respondent's evidence or contentions.
- 12. We are of the opinion that the trial judge's analysis was thorough and commendable and in fact accords with our own evaluation of the evidence (albeit without having had the advantage and benefit of seeing and hearing the testimony of the witnesses).
- 13. In our opinion, the judge was plainly right in his findings of fact on the core issues in dispute between the parties. The cross appeal is therefore dismissed.

The Appellant's Appeal

14. The appellant's appeal is limited to the judge's order that the appellant is only entitled to a life interest in the dwelling house situated on the south western corner of the subject lands. The appellant contends that the trial judge erred in law, in not having declared that the fee simple in the house and lands on which it stands be transferred to the appellant in satisfaction of her equity, having found that this house was constructed by the appellant⁵ and her mother (Marie)

⁴ Privy Council Appeal No. 36 of 1987; per Lord Ackner: "...where the wrong impression can be gained by the most experienced of judges if he relies solely on the demeanor of witnesses, it is important for him to check that impression against contemporaneous documents, where they exist, against the pleaded case and against the inherent probability or improbability of the rival contentions, in the light in particular of facts and matters which are common ground or unchallenged, or disputed only as an afterthought or otherwise in a very unsatisfactory manner. Unless this approach is adopted, there is a real risk that the evidence will not be properly evaluated and the trial judge will in the result have failed to take proper advantage of having seen and heard the witnesses."

⁵ See paragraphs 35 – 39 of the judgment.

with the knowledge and encouragement of the respondent's mother (Hannah), and that they did so in reliance on the encouragement of Hannah and to their detriment.⁶

15. In his treatment and analysis of the evidence on this issue the trial judge stated as follows:

"40. While I accept that Hannah was aware of and acquiesced in the claimant's occupation of **the dwelling house** that the Claimant built, I find that Hannah's alleged assurances that **the lands and buildings would** belong to the Claimant less credible. On the Claimant's case there is no reason why at that point Hannah could not have given effect to her alleged intention to divest herself completely of the said property and transfer it to the claimant and her mother, if in fact she did not intend to retain any interest in the said property, or the guest house, or the profits thereof. In fact I find, on the Claimant's own evidence that Hannah did intend to retain an interest, as set out hereunder.

66. It is clear that the Claimant relied on the assurances of Hannah and acted to her detriment in constructing her dwelling house on the subject lands. I find that Hannah's conduct encouraged the Claimant to rely on same and to act to her detriment in this regard.

67. I find that the Claimant would not have invested money and built her dwelling house on the subject lands if such promises and assurances were not given to her. Hannah visited Tobago and saw that dwelling house of the Claimant.

122. I find that the Claimant was granted the right to construct/renovate, and occupy her dwelling house rent free and no time limit was specified. Her expenditures thereon were permitted by the deceased and not objected to. I find that Hannah encouraged the Claimant to believe that she will obtain an interest in

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⁶ Paragraphs 122 and 128 of the judgment.

the dwelling house that she constructed on the said property, by her conduct and by encouraging the Claimant's belief passively by remaining silent.

- 128. I find that the Claimant did sustain detriment, with respect to construction of her living quarters on the subject lands.
- 131. However Hannah at no time evinced in tangible or documentary form any intention that the fee simple in the entire property should pass to the claimant, to the exclusion of the defendant, her only son, and his children. I find therefore that it would also be inequitable to deprive the defendant of his share of the profits that, on the undisputed evidence of the Claimant and the Defendant, Hannah enjoyed.
- 132. I also find that there is no reason to quantify any equitable interest in the said property as exceeding a life interest. As far as the dwelling is concerned the claimant has enjoyed rent free accommodation there, and on the premises, since the 1970s."
- 16. These findings resulted in the following conclusions by the trial judge (under the heading 'The Extent of the Equity'):

"The Extent of the Equity

51. Hannah's actions were not consistent with any intention that **all** her interest in the said property be divested from her estate, bypassing her son and grandchildren. I find on a balance of probabilities that the alleged representation to that effect is not credible, and that if Hannah had really wished to do that she had sufficient acumen and experience that she could have accessed lawyers to give effect thereto.

52. That equity can best be satisfied by a life interest in the property for the continued operation of the guest house by the Claimant, and occupation of the dwelling house.

53. In accordance with the common evidence of the arrangement that applied with respect to Hannah, the rents from long term tenants would go to her successor in title, the Defendant, should he apply for and receive a grant of letters of administration in respect of Hannah's estate."

Did the Trial Judge Err?

17. We do not find that the trial judge misstated the law on promissory estoppel.⁷ Did he misapply it?

18. In our opinion the trial judge correctly applied the law of promissory estoppel, having found that there was 'no evidence' of any "promise or assurance ... in respect of the entire property including the lands".⁸

19. In respect of the law of proprietary estoppel we are more troubled about the correctness of the application of the law. Whereas in promissory estoppel there must be a clear and unequivocal promise or assurance intended to effect legal relations or reasonably capable of being understood to have that effect,⁹ in the law of proprietary estoppel there is no absolute requirement for any findings of a promise or of any intentionality.

20. The seventh edition (2008) of The Law of Real Property adequately summarises¹⁰ "the essential elements of proprietary estoppel", as follows:

- (i) An equity arises where:
 - (a) the owner of land (O) induces, encourages or allows the claimant (C) to believe that he has or will enjoy some right or benefit over O's property;

⁷ See paragraphs 119, 121, 125 and 127 of the judgment.

⁸ Paragraph 120 of the judgment.

⁹ See Snell's Principles of Equity, 31st Edition, 2005, paragraph 10-08.

¹⁰ At pages 698 - 699.

- (b) in reliance upon this belief, C acts to his detriment to the knowledge of O; and
- (c) O then seeks to take unconscionable advantage of C by denying him the right or benefit which he expected to receive.
- (ii) This equity gives C the right to go to court to seek relief. C's claim is an equitable one and subject to the normal principles governing equitable remedies.
- (iii) The court has a wide discretion as to the manner in which it will satisfy the equity in order to avoid an unconscionable result, having regard to all the circumstances of the case and in particular to both the expectations and conduct of the parties.
- 21. The eighth edition of A Manual of The Law of Real Property explains the 'modern approach' as follows:

"Since 1976, the majority of the judges have rejected the traditional approach and have regarded these three situations as being governed by a single principle. They have adopted a very much broader approach which is directed rather at ascertaining whether, in particular individual circumstances, it would be unconscionable for a party to be permitted to deny that which, knowingly or unknowingly, he has allowed or encouraged another to assume to his detriment than to inquiring whether the circumstances can be fitted within the confines of some preconceived formula serving as a universal yardstick for every form of unconscionable behaviour. This broader approach has been developed into the principle that a proprietary estoppel requires:

- (i) an assurance or a representation by O;
- (ii) reliance on that assurance or representation by C; and
- (iii) some unconscionable disadvantage or detriment suffered by C."

- 22. In proprietary estoppel therefore, the focus shifts somewhat from the search for a clear and unequivocal promise and for intentionality, to whether the party claiming the benefit of the estoppel had a reasonable expectation induced, created or encouraged by another, and in those circumstances acted detrimentally to the knowledge of the other. For proprietary estoppel to operate the inducement, encouragement and detriment must be both real and substantial and ultimately the court must act to avoid objectively unconscionable outcomes.
- 23. It is clear that the trial judge having found encouragement, agreement, knowledge and detriment in relation to the dwelling house, set about to satisfy the appropriate equitable interest of the appellant and did so by granting her a life interest in the house¹²:
 - "132. I also find that there is no reason to quantify any equitable interest in the said property as exceeding a life interest. As far as the dwelling is concerned the claimant has enjoyed rent free accommodation there, and on the premises, since the 1970s."
- 24. It is self-evident that to satisfy the equity created by a proprietary estoppel (as in this case), a court must act equitably. In determining how best to satisfy the equity regard must be had to all the circumstances of the case with an eye on avoiding unconscionable results. However, it would appear that the real and practical directive is for courts to discover and satisfy "the minimum equity to do justice to" the party claiming the benefit of the estoppel.¹³ In this task a wide discretion is conferred on the courts to discover and apply the fair and just remedy.¹⁴
- 25. The Privy Council in **Theresa Henry and Anor. v Calixtus Henry** has carefully explained that in cases of proprietary estoppel, when it comes to determining **how** the equity is to be satisfied, the following are relevant guidelines:¹⁵
 - (i) The court should adopt a cautious approach.

¹¹ See Snell's Principles of Equity, 31st Edition, 2005, paragraphs 10-16 to 10-17.

¹² Paragraph 132 of the judgment.

¹³ See Snell's Principles of Equity, 32nd Edition, paragraph 12-025.

¹⁴ **Theresa Henry and Anor. v Calixtus Henry**, Privy Council Appeal No. 24 of 2009, at paragraphs 54 to 61.

¹⁵ See paragraphs 51 - 55, per Sir Jonathan Parker.

- (ii) The court must consider all of the circumstances in order to discover the minimum equity to do justice to the claimant.
- (iii) The court however enjoys a wide discretion in satisfying an equity arising from proprietary estoppel.
- (iv) Critical to the discovery of the minimum equity to do justice, is the carrying out of a weighing process; weighing any disadvantages suffered by the claimant by reason of reliance on the defendant's inducements or encouragements against any countervailing advantages enjoyed by the claimant as a consequence of that reliance.
- (v) In determining the balance in the relationship between reliance and detriment: just as the inquiry as to reliance falls to be made in the context of the nature and quality of the particular assurances, inducements and encouragements which are said to form the basis of the estoppel, so also the inquiry as to detriment falls to be made in the context of the nature and quality of the particular conduct or course of conduct adopted by the claimant in reliance on the assurances, inducements and encouragements.
- (vi) Though in the abstract reliance and detriment may be regarded as different concepts, in applying the principles of proprietary estoppel they are often intertwined.
- 26. Sir Jonathan Parker in **Theresa Henry's case** also drew extensively from Lord Walker's discussion of proprietary estoppel in **Gillett v Holt**, ¹⁶ **Jennings v Rice** ¹⁷ and **Cobbe v Yeoman's Row Management Ltd**, ¹⁸ adopting approvingly the following observations: ¹⁹

¹⁶ [2001] Ch 201.

¹⁷ [2003] P. & C. R. 8.

¹⁸ [2008] 1 WLR 1752.

¹⁹ See paragraphs 37 - 42.

- (i) Reliance and detriment are often intertwined. However, the fundamental principle that equity is concerned to prevent unconscionable conduct, permeates all of the elements of the doctrine.
- (ii) Detriment is not a narrow or technical concept; it need not consist of the expenditure of money or other quantifiable detriment, so long as it is substantial.
- (iii) Whether the detriment is sufficiently substantial is to be tested by whether it would be unjust or inequitable to allow the assurance to be disregarded; in this regard, the essential test is unconscionability.
- (iv) The aim of the court in satisfying an equity arising from a proprietary estoppel is to decide in what way the equity can be satisfied in the context of a broad inquiry as to unconscionability.
- 27. Because the relief fashioned must be fair, proportionate and operate to satisfy the minimum equity required to do justice, and because there is a wide discretion to be exercised, it is clear that individual judges can disagree in what is an appropriate order to satisfy the equity.
- 28. As in all similar cases, the Court of Appeal ought to pay regard to the margin of appreciation afforded trial judges in fashioning the appropriate remedy.
- 29. Therefore, in this case, the question becomes: in all the circumstances, bearing in mind the considerations identified above, can it be said that the order of the trial judge did not appropriately satisfy the minimum equity to do justice to the appellant.
- 30. The trial judge found that there was no reason to quantify any equitable interest in the said property as exceeding a life interest. As far as the dwelling house was concerned, the judge considered that the claimant has enjoyed rent free accommodation there, and on the premises,

since the 1970's.²⁰ From the guidelines enunciated in **Theresa Henry and Anor. v Calixtus Henry.**²¹ it is clear to us that this assessment of the minimum equity to do justice to the appellant is flawed. In arriving at his conclusion the trial judge did not properly conduct the process of weighing both the disadvantages suffered by the appellant by reason of her reliance on the promises (encouragement), against the countervailing advantages which she enjoyed as a consequence of that reliance. The trial judge also did not consider whether the relief that he granted was proportionate to the detriment suffered by the appellant.²² Further, the trial judge did not consider the detriment regarding the dwelling house separately, but rather lumped both the guest house and the dwelling house together in his deliberations on these matters. The trial judge also did not consider all of the relevant circumstances in this case in order to achieve the minimum equity to do justice to the appellant. Accordingly, it falls to this court to address the issue of how is the equity that the appellant has acquired to be satisfied in the circumstances of this case.

31. The trial judge accepted the evidence of the appellant, that she demolished an existing structure and constructed the dwelling house at a cost of approximately \$65,000.00,²³ that she had Hannah's consent for the building of the house, that there was no evidence that Hannah ever objected to the appellant living in the house, or making it her home, or expending monies to make it suitable for her living quarters.²⁴ The trial judge summarized this finding when he stated: "it is clear that the claimant relied on the assurance of Hannah and acted to her detriment in constructing her dwelling house on the subject lands". 25 The evidence shows that the appellant believed that the dwelling house would belong to her and that she would have an interest in the land, not just an interest for life, but the fee simple in the property.

In the case of **Dillwyn v Llewelyn**, ²⁶ the Lord Chancellor when considering the question 32 of what estate the plaintiff had acquired in the property given to him and which was made the

²⁰ Paragraph 132 of the trial judge's judgment.

²¹ Privy Council Appeal No. 24 of 2009.

See Snell's Equity, 32nd Ed., paragraph 12-025.
 See paragraph 35 of the trial judge's judgment.

²⁴ See paragraph 38 of the trial judge's judgment.

²⁵ See paragraph 66 of the trial judge's judgment.

²⁶ [1862] EWHC Ch J67.

site of his dwelling house, stated in relation to England: "No one builds a house for his own life only". That insight is no less true in Trinidad and Tobago. In this case the appellant has built and lived in that house for approximately 30 years without interruption. She has maintained it and improved it over the years. Further, the appellant's daughter and granddaughter also live with her in that house. This evidence supports and corroborates the belief of the appellant that she would at least acquire the fee simple in the lands upon which the dwelling house had been built.

- 33. Having found that the appellant constructed the dwelling house and lived in it continuously for over 30 years, the trial judge fell into error when he found that the appellant lived 'rent free' in the dwelling house. The appellant cannot be said to have lived rent free in a house that she constructed with her own monies. To hold that she lived rent free in the circumstances of this case is not only erroneous, but it led the judge into making an order that was unconscionable, unfair and inequitable. This error led the judge to ascribe to the appellant a benefit which did not arise in the circumstances of this case.
- 34. In granting the appellant a life interest in the dwelling house, the trial judge also failed to take into consideration that the appellant would not be able to obtain a mortgage by using the property as security, or charge the property to obtain a loan for any purpose. In **Pascoe v Turner,**²⁷ the court considered that if a licence is granted, such a licence cannot be registered as a land charge, so that the defendant may find herself ousted by a purchaser for value without notice. Also, that if the defendant had in the future to do further and more extensive repairs, she may only have been able to finance them by a loan, but noted that as a licensee she would not have been able to use the house as security. Similarly in this case, the vesting of a life interest in the appellant would severely inhibit her capacity to use the premises as security for the purposes of raising a loan.
- 35. In this case, the appellant invested her monies in the building of the dwelling house on the subject lands on the promises and assurances given to her by the respondent's mother

²⁷ [1979] 1 WLR 431 at 439

Hannah. She expected that she would obtain an interest in the fee simple (rather than a mere life interest). The appellant could have invested her monies and/or constructed her home elsewhere, instead of building the dwelling house on the subject lands. Additionally, the appellant focused her energy on upkeeping the property and running the guest house, which not only benefitted her and her mother, but also benefitted the respondent's mother Hannah. Building her dwelling house on the subject lands and living there, facilitated both herself and Hannah. The appellant can therefore be said to have suffered substantial detriment by acting on the inducements and encouragements of Hannah.

- 36. In considering all of the circumstances in this matter, consideration must also be given to the family relationship between the appellant, her mother (Marie) and Hannah. This relationship and the arrangements between the parties existed for approximately 50 years, a half of a century. Indeed, even after the appellant's mother passed away, the appellant continued to operate the guest house with dedication and devotion so as to make the guest house a successful business, for the benefit of both herself and Hannah. This was in fact also actively encouraged.
- 37. Having regard to the trial judge's findings of fact, referred to above in the course of discussion, this court is hard pressed to identify any sufficiently countervailing advantages to the appellant which could have been balanced against the substantial detriment she suffered in building her dwelling house on the premises, so as to justify her minimum equitable interest in the property as being a mere life interest. To do so would in our opinion be unfair and disproportionate, and also unconscionable.
- 38. In our opinion, in all the circumstances of the case, we are of the view that the appropriate relief in order to achieve the minimum equity required to do justice to the appellant, is to grant to her the fee simple in the land on which the dwelling house is situated.

Conclusion

39. In the circumstances, the respondent's cross appeal is dismissed. The appellant's appeal is upheld. The order of the trial judge itemized at (c) that is, the claimant is entitled to remain in

possession and occupy for the remainder of her life, the dwelling house situated on the south

western portion of the subject lands where she now resides, is set aside. The appellant is

declared to be the owner of the dwelling house where she now resides, situated along Cuyler

Street on the south western portion of the subject lands. The appellant is also granted the fee

simple in the lands on which the dwelling house is situated, which is to include a curtilage of

four (4) feet around it as well as access to the driveway as shown on the plan attached to this

judgment as Appendix A. The fee simple in the remainder of the subject lands is to vest in the

beneficiaries of the estate of Hannah.

40. The counterclaim having been dismissed and the appeal allowed, the following order is

made as to costs: the respondent is to pay the appellant's costs of the appeal and cross appeal.

Peter Jamadar

Justice of Appeal

I have read the judgment of Jamadar, J.A. and I agree.

Nolan Bereaux

Justice of Appeal

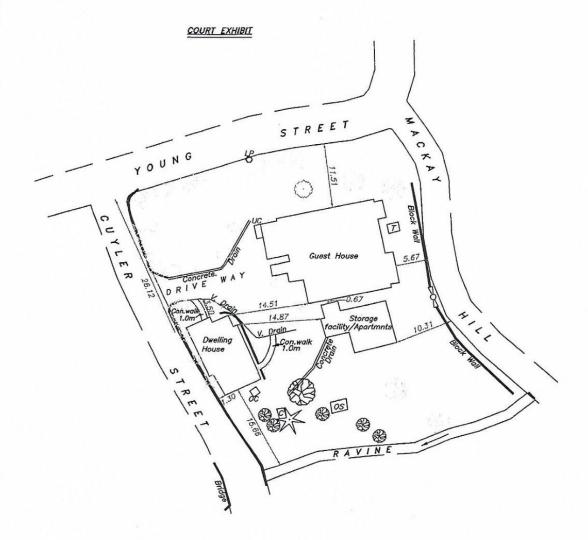
I have also read the judgment of Jamadar, J.A. and I too agree.

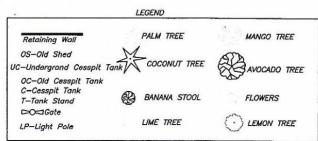
Prakash Moosai

Justice of Appeal

APPENDIX A







SURVEYED BY: ALFRED SURVEYS LTD 18 A FRENCH FORT SCARBOROUGH, TOBAGO TELEPHONE:1-868 778 1222.

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CLIENT:

CRISTAL JONES

Location: Scarborough,Tobago Date of survey: 20th October 2015 Distances are in metres

SITE PLAN Scale 1:500