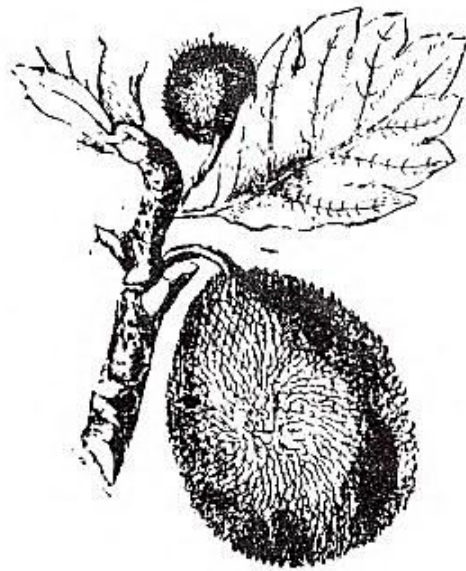


# BLIGH OF THE BOUNTY'S BREADFRUIT MYSTERY

by Trevor W. Hearl

Breadfruit may not merit a place in St Helena's "Sustainable Environment Development Strategy" but reading Kenneth Bain's chapter on the famous Captain Bligh's visit in 1792 reminds me that the fate of the breadfruit plants he so conscientiously delivered remains one of the mysteries of our island story. happy result of the labours to serve the Island with inestimable Fruits". In his Journal he was careful to note: "The principal plants were taken to a valley near (Col. Brooke's) residence called Plantation House, and the rest to James Valley. On the 23rd, I saw the whole landed and planted, one plant was given to Major Robson, Lt. Governor, and one to Mr. Wrangham, the first in Council". Governor Brooke reported hopefully to the Directors in London: "Most of these Plants are in high health and we trust will do well". The tale is told by Philip Gosse, quoting Bligh's own account of the event. He was master of HMS Resolution under Captain Cook when he saw the value of breadfruit (*Artocarpus communis*) to the South Seas islanders and thought it would improve the diet of slaves in the West Indies. The government took up the idea and put him in charge of an ambitious project to transplant trees from Tahiti to Jamaica. We all know the fate of his attempt in 1789 aboard HMAV *Bounty*. But after the mutiny and surviving a voyage of 4,000 miles in an open boat, he tried again. This time he succeeded and on 17 December 1792 his plant-laden ships, HMS *Providence* and *Assistance*, anchored in James Bay, St Helena en route to Jamaica. Viewed from the Castle Terrace, "the delightful scene" seemed little short of miraculous, as W.H. Doveton told Bligh on behalf of the Governor and Council: "(It) raised in them an inexpressible degree of wonder and delight to contemplate a floating garden fraught with what may prove of inestimable value to that part of Mankind [...] transported in luxuriance from one extremity of the World to the other".

"By His Majesty's goodness", 22 pots of breadfruit plants, and 36 specimens of other species, were off-loaded and planted under the care of Bligh's botanists.



*Old engraving of breadfruit plant showing young and mature fruit, leaves and stem.*

They also left “mountain rice seed” and cooked a sago pudding to show its use. In return they were given “such Plants and Trees from this Island as they wished for”, and after 10 days, with “all needful refreshment”, they sailed to a 13-gun salute from Ladder Hill and a parting shot from Captain Bligh: “May you live to see a happy result of the labours to serve the Island with inestimable Fruits”. In his Journal he was careful to note: “The principal plants were taken to a valley near (Col. Brooke’s) residence called Plantation House, and the rest to James Valley. On the 23rd, I saw the whole landed and planted, one plant was given to Major Robson, Lt. Governor, and one to Mr. Wrangham, the first in Council”. Governor Brooke reported hopefully to the Directors in London: “Most of these Plants are in high health and we trust will do well”.

St Helena was fulfilling a role for which the island was ideally suited by virtue of its latitude, climate, soil and isolation, that of halfway house for the transmission of plants from one hemisphere to another. For this purpose Henry Porteous had been appointed to superintend the botanical garden in James Valley. His fine house next to the Castle Gardens was to earn him a footnote in history on 16 October 1815 at Napoleon’s first lodging in exile, but his real contribution to island history has yet to be explored. Bligh duly reached the West Indies where signs of his enterprise are still to be seen. “In Kingstown, St Vincent”, reports Bain, “there is a notice on an ageing (sic) breadfruit tree which commemorates the first such planting there of Tahitian breadfruit by Captain Bligh”. But where is the evidence. If Bligh’s breadfruit flourished, no one noticed. When in 1808 Thomas Henry Brooke described his uncle’s “exertions to promote the natural resources of the island”, it was not Bligh’s breadfruit nor even his miraculous “floating garden” that he recalled, but mundane increases in livestock and potatoes. Six years later, Dr Roxburgh of Calcutta’s botanical garden listed island plants during a nine-month stay, but he saw no breadfruit. Neither did another expert observer, Surgeon Frederick D. Bennett of the whaler *Tuscan* in 1836, though his descriptions of it in the South Pacific - ironically including Pitcairn - occupied three pages of his Narrative. Melliss (1875) is similarly silent. Nevertheless, there is a St Helena breadfruit! I first noticed it listed by Agricultural Officer R.W. Williams in 1977. But from its botanical name, *Monstera deliciosa*, its appearance as a prolific climber, and the taste of the fruit, “a mixture of pineapple and banana”, it clearly owes nothing to “Breadfruit Bligh’s” visit two hundred years ago.

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### October 1995 Corrections:

I must apologize for two serious omissions in my article, “Bligh of the Bounty’s Breadfruit Mystery”, which was published in the April 1995 issue of the South At-

lantic Chronicle. The first is to note that the breadfruit plants left by Bligh in 1792 were badly hit by the three-year drought which followed, 1795-98, and which caused, reported *The Annual Register* for 1798 in London, “great mischief and want at St Helena”. (p. 495) “Several of the breadfruit plants which had been left by Captain Bligh on his return from the South Seas had fallen to decay”. The most serious omission, however, was my failure to report the commemorative stamp issue of 4 December 1992 to mark the 200th anniversary of Bligh’s visit. The stamp depicted an unnaturally green island coastline, with a ship without any visible “floating garden”, and a burgeoning bunch of breadfruit. So, whatever the fate of the original plants, some at least now have flourished philatelically!

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