

FOOTNOTE TO A ST HELENA DISCOVERY FIRST DAY COVER

by Trevor W. Hearl

Collectors of St Helena's Official First Day Covers will be disappointed, and disciples of the Napoleonic legend dismayed, to find a cardinal error in the notes accompanying the FDC of the fourth (19th century) set of "500th Anniversary of Discovery" stamps, dated May 23, 2000. It appears, surprisingly, in comments on the 30p stamp commemorating "Napoleon - Arrival 1815/ Departure 1840."



Collectors are told that Napoleon stayed "at the house of Mr Henry Porteous in Jamestown [...] until he could occupy Longwood". But as every St Helena-watcher knows, he stayed there for only one night (November 16/17, 1815) before moving to The Briars until December 10. What makes this no trivial omission is the importance of The Briars Pavilion on today's tourist trail, the fairly recent establishment of a Napoleonic Museum there, and the fame of the exile's antics with the teenage daughter of the owner, William Balcombe. After all, the Betsy Balcombe story has spawned a small shelf of books all on its own, including, as recently as 1997, a children's picture book, *My Napoleon*, by Catherine Brighton, praised by reviewers as the best in its class that year.

The FDC's notes are right to report the melancholy demolition of Porteous' historic house in 1937. Dr Philip Gosse, author of *St Helena 1502-1938*, actually witnessed it in March of that year, to make a motor garage on the site, "an inglorious ending to a famous building, and one of the finest still standing in the street in spite of it having been gutted by a fire lighted as an incendiary in 1865." But Bob Broadway, who lived almost next door, while regretting the eyesore the site had become thirty-odd years later, told me that at the time they were more pragmatic

about it, adding, with a touch of irony, that in 1937 Jamestown needed a good garage more than a derelict ruin! Whether that was the most appropriate use for the prime site in Main Street, next to the Castle Gardens, was not then considered.

For much of its life, Porteous' House (as it was always known) served as a boarding-house. Built toward the end of the 18th century, it was home to the Company's Head Surgeon, John Charles Dunn, until 1811 when it was bought by William Balcombe, and quickly sold again to Henry Porteous, the Company's botanical gardener. On his death in 1819, it remained in the Porteous' estate under its trustee, Thomas Baker, who let it to Andrew Eyre as a boarding-house until it fell, almost inevitable, into the hands of Saul Solomon as his "hotel." After his death (at Portishead, near Bristol), shares were offered in it, but not successfully it seems as the Colonial Treasurer, John Gabriel Doveton, bought it and sold it on to Robert Pooley, the commercial agent who later became U.S. vice-consul, partner in the firm of Solomon, Gideon & Moss. In his history, Gosse provides a photograph of George and Isaac Moss (1796-1864), taken on February 10, 1863, sitting in the garden behind the house with Baron de Rougemont, who had landed from the French war-steamer Cassini. The front of the house is shown in *Views of St Helena*, published that year by J. E. Fowler, taken from a photograph by Barrack master John Isaac Lilley, showing Chief Justice William Wilde standing on the mansion steps. Two years later, on Sunday, April 2, 1865, "the finest house in Main Street" was reduced to a fire-ravaged shell by an unknown arsonist

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