

JAMESTOWN - AS HOME-PORT AND HAVEN

by Trevor W. Hearl

It may be the inaccessibility of its records that denies Jamestown its rightful role in history as an international seaport. Thus any recognition of this is welcome, but these two studies are doubly welcome, for being researched and written on the Island, and produced, one in Jamestown and the other by a St Helenian-owned company in UK.

The First 'St Helena' traces the stormy career of the East India Company's prototype packet schooner from her launch on the Thames in 1814 to her capture by pirates of Sierra Leone in 1830, with a postscript noting her final demise in Plettenberg Bay in 1851. As the first Island-based ship, her local importance is obvious, but as David MacGregor has explained [*Fast Sailing Ships 1775-1875* (1973) & *The Schooner in Four Centuries* (1982)] this early schooner-brigantine also has a place in the history of ship design. Barbara Montgomerie's comprehensive chronicle should therefore attract interest beyond a St Helena-centred readership. With its generous provision of quotations and Appendices (e.g. listing the ship's 64 voyages), its value will mature as a sourcebook, even perhaps for those topical allusions to today's 'St Helena' which may otherwise have endeared the book more to casual than to serious readers. Operating an Island packet service during and after the Napoleonic era was a hazardous task in a 136-ton vessel carrying livestock among mixed cargoes from the Cape, Angola and Brazil, so that, with the author's intensely personal presentation of her discoveries, readers are steeped in the calamities as well as the correspondence of the day.

Fresh insights can be gleaned on other topics too - the transportation of St Helenian convicts to New South Wales, the dietary problems of local lascars, the use of 'Fiscal birds' to tackle insect pests, the impact of slave emancipation on household goods, and so on - often complementing Marcus Arkin's scholarly trilogy on *John Company and the Cape - St Helena Trade 1794 - 1836*. Barbara Montgomerie has shown how a rich seam of St Helena's heritage can be mined from the Castle dungeons in an enterprise ably supported by her publishers, Print setters, whose attractive, well-printed production encourages one to hope for more St Helena titles from their press.

South Atlantic Haven, in contrast, takes a panoramic sweep of St Helena's maritime history from 1502 to March 1994, when the Q.E. 2 anchored in James Bay. Jamestown's international importance at the hub of the old South Atlantic sailing routes is the most important theme in St Helena's 500-year-old history; certainly the only functional justification for the Island's settlement and maintenance - except as a "safe haven" of a different sort! Mr. Denholm, whether based in England or Australia, has long been a zealous student of 'our Island story'. Readers may recall his illustrated article on St Helena's coastal defences in FORTRESS (August

1990), although a publisher has yet to be found for his larger study of its fortifications, *South Atlantic Fortress*. Some months ago he returned to St Helena on one of his occasional research forays to complete two further studies to be published in Jamestown, *The Flax Industry 1874-1966*, and *From Signal Gun to Satellite*, on Island communications, written partly, I believe, at Longwood House while its French custodians were on leave.

South Atlantic Haven has meanwhile been published by the Education Department in a limited edition of 100 copies “as part of support given to authors”, explains the Chief Education officer, “in providing subjects of local interest as reference material for schools”. This welcome recognition of the need for inexpensive, Island-produced books on local topics has economic, as well as social and cultural merit. Select tourism, no less than the school curriculum, is crying out for such initiatives. The Island’s 500th anniversary is only 7 years away! Ironically St Helena has proved anything but a ‘*South Atlantic Haven*’ for Mr. Denholm who, under current inflexible Immigration Ordinances, found himself reluctantly boarding the *RMS St Helena* on 29th December 1994, leaving his typescripts and faithful old typewriter with friends “should I ever return”. So if his text is marred by signs of haste in composition and production, is it surprising? At least it brings to readers’ notice a score of maritime enterprises in which St Helena played a vital role, as well as disasters in which the Island proved a haven indeed. Each would make a study of its own; some, like the sinking of the *City of Cairo*, have already done so. I hoped to read of that dramatic episode in 1805 when, for fear of the French, Governor Patton held 80 East Indiamen in the Roads, devouring Island stocks and almost bankrupting the Company, but sadly it is one of many omissions (even Jamestown becoming a free port in 1826) and errors (such as the long-disproved Dutch occupation of 1665) that makes one view the work warily.

Authors need the help of Readers and Editors before going into print. St Helena does not lack the expertise, but if home-grown publications are to flourish as everyone hopes they will, its authors must be given - and submit to - such essential discipline.

- Barbara B. Montgomerie: *The First ‘St Helena’*, xii, 196pp.illus. p/b. UK price £12.50 inc.
- Ken Denholme: *South Atlantic Haven - A Maritime History For the island of St Helena*. Education Dept., Jamestown. x,70pp.illus. A4. UK £6.

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