

MALDIVIA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

by Trevor W. Hearl

International interest has recently been re-kindled in one of St Helena's former tourist attractions, Maldivia. A century ago its splendid garden was among the sights to see, and the house was one of the "fine residences where sojourners generally put up", as Grant's Guide, reported in 1883 noting its "very healthy situation at the head of the Town" and abundance of home-grown fruit and vegetables. The interest today is prompted by other considerations, however, with enquiries from the Maldives Islands, and from descendants of Capt. James Bennett whose family lived there in its heyday.

The property, originally called 'Concord', was named after seven shipwrecked Maldivians who were housed there after being rescued by the Drake Indiaman in 1735 adrift in the Indian Ocean. Labouring to earn their keep, they created a garden destined to become the pride and profit of its owners. But while this may be general knowledge in St Helena it was unknown on the Maldives Islands, as Dr Alasdair Edwards, author of *Fish and Fisheries of St Helena Island*, discovered last year when he met Maldivian historian Hassan Ahmed Maniku. Surprised to learn of his countrymen's contribution to St Helena history 260 years ago, Mr Maniku will now weave their story into Maldives Island history. More details have been sent him from UK and with the discovery of this common interest in Maldivia he hopes that links can be forged between the Maldives Institute for Historical Research and the St Helena Heritage Society.

Meanwhile descendants of Captain James Bennett have been digging into family history to help BBC television film an adaptation of Trevor Hearl's *Mahogany Table Mystery*. This will feature Colin Fox's search for evidence that Napoleon's outer coffin in 1821 was made from his St Helenian ancestors' dining-room table! Capt. Bennett later bought Maldivia from Col. Hodson, the house and garden providing the family with much-needed income after his death. By a remarkable coincidence, among an Oxford audience at one of Dorothy Evans' St Helena talks recently was 96-year-old Miss Viola Bennett, whose family letters and photographs have since shed new light on old Maldivia. They show, for example, that it was already noted for providing high-class accommodation in 1835 when among the paying guests, at £20 a month 'without Table', was Mrs Oliphant, wife of the Attorney-General at the Cape, whose later life in America with her eccentric son Laurence is summarised in the Dictionary of National Biography. Probably the longest resident was Lady Ross (nee Eliza Bennett) widow of Governor Sir Patrick Ross (1846-50), shown on several photographs at a reunion there of the three elderly Bennett sisters in 1888. But this historic house has significance for other reasons, too, most obviously for being, when owned by Col. 'Hercules' Hodson, one of the first houses on the Island at which Napoleon was entertained.

Enquiries resulting from this revival of interest in Maldivia, unfortunately, suggest that all is not well with the old house today. Indeed, concern about it has recently been aired by the St Helena Heritage Society. Sadly almost the last act of the late John Bailey as its chairman was to inform the Public Works Committee of this concern. "There are few outbuildings as charming and as visible as those behind Maldivia", he wrote, stressing the Society's view that "demolishing historic buildings as an alternative to repairing them is a short-sighted policy". But in a brief reply, the Chief Engineer, Mr Jones, held out little hope of assuaging the Society's fears "due to lack of funds".

"The main house requires a considerable amount of repair work (including under-pinning and buttresses) If you wish to see the outbuildings restored then may I suggest that the Society organises and funds the work." One response might be for the Society to publish an illustrated booklet telling 'the Maldivia story'.

This would not only be a fitting tribute to the memory of their late Chairman but, with Maldivia already in the spotlight, would help keep it there.

Maldivia passed into the hands of Mrs E.M. Lloyd, through her father, Rev. George Bennett, former Vicar of Jamestown. At her death in 1948 she left Maldivia (and the cottage near Francis Plain where she was born) "to the inhabitants of St Helena". As the people's watchdog in these matters, the St Helena Heritage Society has a right and duty to express its concern.

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