

# THE FACTS BEHIND THE FLAX

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena's smart response to a UK appeal for a supply of New Zealand flax has been a heart-warming experience for all those who know that, given the chance, she usually turns up trumps. The story is briefly this. On Friday, 17 March 1995, the Island's Agricultural Officer, Chris Lomas, received an urgent request from Jamestown businessman Nick Thorpe to meet an order he had just received by fax for 200 kgs. of select flax leaves for the Natural Fibres Organisation Research Institute, Silsoe, Bedfordshire. The *RMS St Helena* was already loading for sailing next day. Could it be done? The Agricultural Research Station at 'Scotland' went full-steam ahead; Mrs Wendy Clingham had eight 56-lb bundles of leaf cut, cleaned, packed and transported to the wharf; there it was loaded by Solomons and, such was the spirit of euphoria, shipped freight free by Curnow. Joyfully reporting the operation, *St Helena News* hoped it might be "a start to export further orders of this plentiful commodity" [24 March, p 9].

That is by no means the whole story, however, and for readers who like to savour the intricacies apparently inherent in all St Helena affairs I will attempt to unravel 'the facts behind the flax'.

The chain of events started with an apparently esoteric article in *The Times* [28/1/95] headed "Hemp and Flax Lead the Fibre Revolution". It described experiments by Harry Gilbertson of the Silsoe Research Institute and Professor David Johnson of Leeds University's Department of Textile Industries, to produce new textiles from various neglected plant fibres, even including stinging nettles. Then why not *Phormium tenax* (New Zealand flax), wondered Bristol-based Australian scientist Harold B. Carter? As an authority on the life and work of Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) who had introduced it to the western world over two centuries ago, he felt strongly that the potential of this valuable plant had never been properly exploited. Contacting the Institute he reminded them that although Britain had formerly used *Phormium tenax* only for rope and twine, it was a most versatile fibre, from which Māori's spun the finest threads for their ceremonial cloaks. This quality, with its strength, had so impressed Banks that, on returning home with Captain Cook in 1771, he had his portrait painted wearing a Māori cloak, demonstrating the new wonder thread. Silsoe's researchers had not forgotten New Zealand flax, plots having been planted near Exeter, but the crop was far from maturity, and for trials with their newly developed decorticator, leaves were needed immediately. But where was raw material of the right quality to be found?

There the search might have ended but for one of those coincidences which St Helena research seems to generate. Among Harold Carter's correspondents, sharing his interest in Sir Joseph Banks, was Ian Mathieson, co-author of *Exploring St Helena*, who, with his wife Alison, supplies South Atlantic books. In their catalogue, 'Miles Apart', he noticed a book to be published about St Helena's flax industry

1874-1966. Perhaps the Island still had good quality leaf to offer? He must ask the author, Ken Denholm. All enquiries drew a blank. Denholm, a victim of St Helena's new immigration laws, had been asked to leave the Island and was last known to be making for "somewhere" in his native Australia. Snookered again! Why not try Trevor Hearl at The St Helena Link, Cheltenham? suggested Mrs Mathieson.

Doggedly persevering, Mr Carter rang Cheltenham to explain 'the fibre revolution', and the need to include *Phormium tenax* in current research. Could St Helena help? Hearl promised to see. He confirmed details with Tom Cromak at ADAS Startross experimental station, Exeter, and Harry Gilbertson at Silsoe, but warned that the *RMS St Helena* was already loading at Jamestown, and while the difficult can be done at once, the impossible takes a little longer. Even if flax leaves were available, delivery could be \_delayed for two months. Optimistically he sent an explanatory fax to Nick Thorpe who ironically had been working on Ken Denholm's book, hoping to publish it had the author been left to complete the final draft! Keen to help, it was a stroke of luck that Silsoe's research was known on the Island as *The Times* article on "the fibre revolution" had been reprinted in *St Helena News* [17/2/95]. Indeed, one reader, Mr Lionel G. Williams of Half Tree Hollow, wrote to tell Mr Gilbertson that St Helena had "an abundance of flax", asking "if there's a market and the possibility of an export from here". In the event, his letter did not reach Silsoe until 9 May, but his initiative was much appreciated at the Institute.

The flax duly arrived at Cardiff on 3 April. One of the research staff declared they were "over the moon" to be supplied so promptly. But will it open up a market for the Island's flax? The answer must surely be 'No'. The present research is designed, not to import raw material, but to find ways of utilising UK farmers' surplus crops, like linseed straw. It seeks to promote the use of "home-grown fibre plants and all the downstream products they can generate, from textiles to horse-bedding, from Bibles to particle board". St Helena should, in fact, benefit far more from this. Machinery capable of transforming *Phormium tenax* into a marketable modern textile would, if wisely managed on the Island, offer exciting possibilities for the profitable use of its hitherto unwanted legacy. It would certainly be more productive than shipping bundles of leaves overseas - or even bales of fibre to make string for the British Post Office! We shall watch developments at Silsoe and Leeds with interest

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