

forgiven, but be assured their interest and love for St Helena and its people, is not just "a flash in the pan", the history of their efforts speaks for itself, and very often undertaken at personal cost. It can be said about the ex-pats that once they get to know both St Helena and the Saints, especially if they have visited the Island, enjoy what it has to offer and witness at first hand most of its aspects, they appear to become addicted to its cause.

Perhaps at this point it would be right to mention, apart from Government orientated and commercial personnel, the organisers are all volunteers, and again this is not detrimental to the former, nor does it make them any less supportive to the cause. The bottom line here is, all supporters have a common interest - St Helena - and particularly in our case, it is imperative that we must continue "to work with our people for our people" and maintain two of our important "values" - Teamwork and Discipline. Then and only then can we hope to support St Helena charities, and long may the other establishments continue with their efforts and sustain their interest in St Helena and the Saints.

---

## THE HUGUENOTS OF ST HELENA

by Trevor W. Hearl

The recruitment of French Huguenot wine-growers by the Dutch East India Company in the 1680s is well known as the basis of South Africa's wine industry today. Virtually unknown is the English East India Company's similar initiative at its South Atlantic island outpost of St Helena. Indeed the prospects there seemed greater than at the Cape where growers suffered from roving bands of Hottentots and still produced inferior wine after 25 years. St Helena, on the other hand, offered settlers an uninhabited island with a healthy climate and fertile soil. Given the example of Madeira, which had monopolised the supply of English ships and colonies since 1663, all that St Helena needed were vines and expertise.

No historian of the East India Company suggests that the Directors had a policy of employing Huguenot refugees, either from humanitarian or pragmatic motives. Yet in the case of St Helena, that is exactly what they did. "After divers attempts to make some profitable productions upon the Island," they advised Governor Blackmore in April 1689, "we have at length fixed upon the planting of vines and the making of Wine and Brandy." For this purpose a party of French wine-growers had been engaged, led by Mons. Poirier, "a Protestant ..... driven from all he had in France" - a

reference, as every schoolboy knows (or used to know) to the persecution of Huguenots following Louis XIV's Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. As Poirier had "lived formerly in great plenty upon his own land in France where he made 200 or 300 hogsheads of Wine and Brandy per annum" the Directors ordered that he be appointed to the Island Council with the title of Captain, "though under the pay of a Sergeant", adding some worldly advice:

"All the Vineroons that goe with him are likewise French protestants, but we must tell you the French are excellent servants if you keep them under and hold them sharply to their duty, but are apt to grow insolent and negligent if they be not held to their work as they are in France - and if you give them ear, they will not leave craving and asking, against which troublesome humour you must arm yourselves irresistibly if you expect to have any quietness with them".

The party boarded the *Benjamin* Indiaman at Gravesend on 11th April 1689 and, as "refugees from the Tyranny and Persecutions of France", gained the sympathy of the ship's chaplain, John Ovington. They told him of "Massacres and Butcheries acted upon their Fellow Christians" and of the "Hardships and Difficulties they struggled with in making their Escapes" which they could not recount "without Melancholy Resentments and hearty Sorrow". The voyage to St Helena - during which the Company expected the Frenchmen to learn English - was a tedious one in the days of sail, but especially in the 17th century, as instead of taking an East Indiamen's normal South Atlantic sailing route via the Brazil coast, ships for St Helena hugged the African seaboard to reach the Island's latitude before veering westward into the Atlantic. Crossing wind and current, it was almost another month, Ovington noted, before "we with much Difficulty weather'd the Island of St Helena". They had been nine months at sea when the entry was made at James Fort on 6th January 1690; "Captain Stephen Poirier, three sons and five daughters, Samuel Defountain and nine other French Vineroons landed from the ship *Benjamin*."

Ovington saw them settled "in the richest part of the Island" where the site for the "Vines and ..... rendering the Product of them serviceable" was agreed. He found the soil "qualified for their Expectation" and left them "highly sensible of the comfortable abode they enjoy'd in this distant Region ..... the Misfortunes of their Lives sweetened by the Kindness they receiv'd from their new Masters".

A year later, in June 1691, vineyard development was reportedly well under way when Captain Dampier touched at St Helena during his voyage round the world. "They do already begin to plant Vines, ..... there being a few French Men there to manage that Affair ..... (and) are in hopes to produce Wine and Brandy in a short time." Unfortunately, though keen to see for himself, "it rained so hard ..... that I had not the opportunity of seeing their Plantations." Seaman Barlow, who knew the Island well, made no reference to vines in his *Journal*, either in 1694 - too fascinated perhaps by



the story of Governor Johnston's murder - or during a two month's stay in 1703. St Helena's first historian, T.H. Brooke, identified the site selected by Poirier as Horse Pasture but Governor Janisch considered it "quite unfit for such purposes", unless he meant Little Horse Pasture between Thompson's Hill and Myrtle Grove. But Brooke concluded that the experiment had failed, making Ovington's doubts significant, whether the Frenchmen's morale could withstand the Island's poverty, "destructive Vermin", or the shiftlessness of its inhabitants.

Whatever dissatisfaction was felt at any failure, Captain Poirier was duly appointed to the Island Council. It was a privilege destined to have unforeseen consequences. When in 1693 Governor Johnston was murdered, Poirier became, by seniority, Acting Governor; and with the death of Johnston's successor, Richard Keeling, on 30th November 1697, he found himself the Governor of St Helena. Such responsibilities during a period of constant turmoil would have given Poirier little time to manage vineyards and lacking his attention they were hardly likely to flourish. His problems were indeed manifold. "To recount the numerous and gross insults offered to the Governor would be as unpleasant as uninteresting to the reader", declared Brooke, sampling his "futile efforts .... to maintain a tottering authority". Poirier's difficulties are easily understood. Unrest was endemic, fomented by arrack, lingering animosities between Royalists and Cromwellians, and real or imagined grievances aggravated by isolation and improvidence. The old settlers, mainly city-bred refugees from the Great Fire of London and time-expired soldiers were, in Ovington's opinion, uncultivated and depraved, as their treatment of slaves all too plainly demonstrated. They resented the Huguenot's privileges and even more, obeying a Frenchman.

Poirier countered by attempting to strike at the root of Island problems - "profligacy" and "drunkenness". Relying first on Biblical rather than secular authority, he prophesied that "vices will bring again on this poor Island the judgement of God Almighty" which, like Jamaica with its devastating earthquake in 1692, would suffer the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. His warnings ignored, he sought means to cut production of arrack - the downfall of many a Governor - and ordered a ten o'clock curfew, "whether it be shipping time or not", to keep inhabitants at home and reduce "debauchery". In London, the Directors rejoiced at his "care for discountenancing vice and promoting virtue", expecting St Helena to prosper accordingly under "ye Divine protection and blessing" - as long as their ships were not hindered in "fetching water or other refreshments on ye Lord's day". On the island, there was no such joy. The chaplain, Dr. Kerr, even boasted that he came "to ruin the French rogue ..... a church presbyterian", declaiming: "You Hogonist go! Go to your own Hogonist country to command your Hogonist Ministers". (*Records* 31st January 1704)

Poirier's governorship (1697-1707) became entangled in wider issues, however. Until the 'United Company' was formed in 1711, the old East India Company's monopoly was constantly challenged by 'interlopers' wanting to use the Island's facilities,



creating gubernatorial disputes both with Islanders and Directors. More serious was the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, for however much the Huguenot's of St Helena hated Louis XIV, to the "uncultivated" Islanders a Frenchman was an enemy. Unhappily for Poirier, when war came to St Helena on 1st June 1706 as French warships captured the *Queen* and *Dower* Indiamen in the Roads, he seemed unprepared. Guns had been poorly serviced and sited, and ships allowed to anchor out of range, "You are infinitely to blame in your management", thundered the Directors. But Poirier was more hurt by the accusation that he had once entertained the French commander and his officers "much better than any of our own Commanders", allowing them to survey the defences on the pretext of a shooting party. Poirier denied it, "extraordinary troubled that your Honours is so very angry ..... while in his conscience he has done his duty". Dejected and ailing, he retired to "the Country" where, "taken speechless", he died on 8th September 1707 "of a dropsical distemper". In his will Poirier, recalling how he had once been "stript of all but Freedom of his Thoughts and the Serenity of his Mind", thanked God for "the miraculous means" which had brought him "out from under the slavery of Babylon".

"I gave Him also my most humble thanks for having provided me an Azile(?) protection and entertainment under good and auspicious masters the Right Honble English East India Company, although loaded perpetually of trouble and vexation by traitors and unjust Enemies only because I never sought but the good and advantage of my illustrious masters."

Of Poirier's wife, three sons and five daughters there is no word. Perhaps the Island's parish records hold the key to their fate. Samuel Defountain, on the other hand, did establish a clan which, a century later, seemed to be divided into farmers, named Desfountains, and Company officials, De Fountain. The latter provide two shameful footnotes to St Helena history with John De Fountain's dismissal "for serious defalcations" (c.1818) and Charles De Fountain's conviction for gross cruelty to a slave-girl which, under pressure from Governor Hudson Lowe, instigated the Island Council's abolition of slavery in 1818. The name seems to have faded from St Helena Records by mid-century.

What then of the "nine other French Vineroons landed from the ship *Benjamin*" in 1690? Until their names are found in Jamestown's Castle Archives, it is unwise even to hazard a guess. The situation is complicated by the presence of others of French origin, such as Matthew Bazett, "a nasty French fellow" (in Chaplain Humphrey's words) who had arrived six years earlier in January 1684. He refused to work for Poirier claiming he was "a soldier and not slave", became Acting Governor in 1714, and left a name which survived some generations. If Governors Benjamin Boucher (1711-14) and Daniel Corneille (1782-87), or the soi-disant military engineer Paul Gasherie, a French exile sent out in 1734, or the later families of Bizarre and Le Breton, were of Huguenot origin, it is not apparent from published Island Records.

The Huguenots' failure to produce wine did not discourage others as Island conditions seemed to favour it. Thus Poirier's successor, Governor Roberts (1708-11), included a vineyard in his plan for irrigating and cultivating 200 acres of a new ground "within view of our own Plantation House".

"As for Vineyards we may have as much as you please on the sides of the hills clear of foggs so that we may be sure of a Vintage ....." (9th January 1711).

Perhaps he employed the hapless French wine-dressers and vintners, for Brooke claimed that "in a very short time, the Governor ..... was enabled to exhibit samples of sugar, rum, wine and brandy", adding however, "It is remarkable that scarcely any further notice is taken of this plantation in any subsequent record; and it is difficult to say why it was suffered to go to ruin". Indeed evidence of wine production on St Helena is so scanty that J.C. Melliss, in his comprehensive survey of the Island's natural history in 1875, could find no record, either of grapes before 1718, or "of any attempt having been made to cultivate the plant for the purpose of making wine in the Island."

"This is remarkable, inasmuch as the climate and soil of St Helena are very similar to those at Madeira. It is possible that the energy of the islanders may not have been directed in that way, because of the facilities which exist for obtaining wine from the Cape of Good Hope."

There is probably some truth in this, but neither was there a firm tradition of careful husbandry on St Helena to support wine production. When in 1813 Dr. Roxburgh reported *Vitis vinifera* growing on the Island, significantly Governor Beatson did not add wine to his many agricultural initiatives. In 1870 Melliss noted four kinds of grape "rather common", grown "for the sake of the fruit."

"It thrives best in the hot valleys, such as James' Valley and that below Longwood. I have seen splendid grapes grown at St Helena, but lately they appear to have been somewhat blighted. In some places where gardens formerly existed, the Vine now grows in an almost uncultivated state".

Benjamin Grant, author of a local Guidebook in 1883, confirmed this while bemoaning the loss of St Helena's "best fruit-producing garden" at Chubb's Spring after a flash flood in 1878:

"The Author, when a youth, oft times promenaded under the grape vines in this garden ..... went to snatch at the numerous tempting bunches of fine, luscious grapes (both white and black) as he passed under them ..... No-one dreamt that it would some day be swept away ..... destroyed in the space of half an hour".

A recent writer on St Helena place-names quotes Grape Vine Gut as an example of "the persistence of names for features which no longer exist", and certainly vines are less common today than a century ago. "The vine is rarely found," reported



Agriculture Officer R.O. Williams in 1977. It has "never gone wild and (is) rarely cultivated ..... Climatically there should be no problem growing the grape but fruit tend to be rather acid and lacking in flavour ..... probably a soil factor". Yet he named recent introductions - "Barlinka, Queen of the Vineyard, Sultana and Catawba from South Africa". Longwood's former French Hon. Consul, M. Gilbert Martineau (1957-91), perhaps unaware of his compatriot's initiative, was naturally dismissive of the local product: "St Helena could never grow a grape to satisfy the taste of Napoleon or make any wine at all".

With such conflicting views and uncertain records it is understandable if the Huguenot contribution to St Helena history has been overlooked. Thus while Captain Poirier's troubles in government are well examined by St Helena's leading historian, Dr. Philip Gosse, the role of the Huguenots in Island society and the fate of their project are ignored. Yet as one of the Company's major enterprises during the colony's infant years it raises some important issues for Huguenot, no less than St Helena, history. Can St Helena be unique in not having benefited from Huguenot immigration? Over 400,000 French Protestants emigrated to Holland, Germany, England and America, their skills and strict moral code bringing significant social and economic benefits to their hosts - to say nothing of the work ethic with which they inspired the Protestant world. Those from the Netherlands at the Cape in 1688-9, some 180 in all, certainly made their mark, though, yearning to keep their cultural identity they had to be forced by Governor van der Stel (1679-99) to integrate with Dutch settlers. Not so on St Helena, where the Huguenots numbered almost twenty souls among a European male population of under 100. They were no insignificant group, but a distant cultural and religious entity with a well-defined task amid a motley, poorly motivated society with ineffective clergy. Their leader moreover, was given absolute power as ruler of that society with the blessing of its masters. Yet, with advantages undreamed of elsewhere, they showed no such spirit, but apparently bequeathed only failure to their host community.

Can this really be the whole story of the Huguenots of St Helena?

#### SOURCES

NOTE: The basic source for all historical studies of the Island is Philip Gosse *St Helena 1502-1938*. (2nd edition Anthony Nelson, Oswestry, 1990)

THEAL, G.M: *History of South Africa under the Administration of the Dutch East India Co. 1652-1795* (2 volumes 1897) Vol.I, p.332

E.g. from Sir William Foster: *John Company* (1926) to John Keay: *The Honourable Company, A History of the English East India Company* (1991).

JANISCH, H. R: *Extracts from the St Helena Records* (1908). (4th edition TEALE, P.L. (ed.) Jamestown, W. A. Thorpe, 1981) p.44 and passim.

OVINGTON, John: *A Voyage to Surat in ..... 1689*. (1929) pp. 57-64, passim.



- DAMPIER, William: *A new Voyage Round the World*. (New York 1968) p.365
- LUBBOCK, B (ed): *Barlow's Journal ..... 1657 to 1703* (2 vols. 1934) I 199, 231-2
- BROOKE, T.H: *History of the Island of St Helena, from its Discovery by the Portuguese to the Year 1823*. (2nd edn. 1824) pp. 130-1
- JANISCH, H.R: *Scraps from the Records* (Jamestown, n.d. (c.1880) p.xi.
- FARRINGTON, A.J: 'Colonel' Paul Gascherie an Adventurer on St Helena (in) *Journal ..... for Army Historical Research* (?) pp. 235-242.
- MELLISS, J.C: *St Helena: A Physical, Historical & Topographical Description of the Island*. (1875) p.255
- GRANT, G: *A Few Notes on St Helena and Descriptive Guide* (1883). p.68
- DICKSON, V: St Helena Place-Names (in) *Names* 21/4 (1973). p.205
- WILLIAMS, R.O: *Plants on St Helena* (St Helena 1977); 2nd edn 1989). p.130
- 

## Random Recollections

by H.F. Driver

### THE FALL OF A GIANT

Yet another of my memories of war-time St Helena, and it concerns "repository". Whilst to civilians the word is synonymous with depository, and means a place of storage and safe keeping, to the military, especially the Royal Artillery it is quite different. It is the art of moving heavy armaments and their installations, as at Ladder Hill in both world wars. Now, I'm afraid the art will die, as coastal defence has been phased out. Aerial warfare has made the fixed battery a sitting target. after the lesson of Singapore where the Japs came overland and the guns covering only a limited arc seaward had to be "spiked" and abandoned, all has changed. But, - I digress - I only wished to introduce the subject of the admiration I had for all those officers and warrant officers entitled to the initials I.G. and A.I.G. included in their rank. These personnel (Instructors of Gunnery) were the experts who taught and practised "repository". It required an expertise in the use of timbers and rollers, (skidding), sheer legs, blocks and tackles, ropes and levers. It meant "knowing the ropes", the stresses that timbers could take, and the strain that ropes could withstand and a thousand other tricks of the trade. Safety was paramount, a mistake in moving, say a ten ton gun barrel could be a danger to life and limb.

The Army plays many roles, and it was therefore no surprise when it was considered that Plantation House was in danger from the largest tree on the Island, that the