

WHEN ST HELENA TREMBLES

Some reflections on the earthquake history of the Island

by David Holt

'I remember when our whole Island was shaken with an earthquake some years ago there was an impudent mountebank who sold pills which (as he told the country people) were very good against an earthquake'

Joseph Addison (1672 - 1719) writing in 'The Tatler' (London)

Joseph Addison's account of the gullibility of the 18th Century English country people makes amusing reading and one hopes that no Saint, past or present, would be so easily tricked. Indeed many Saints may not even realise that their Island is ever affected by earthquakes. Yet readers of Wirebird will know from Lady Emma Bingham's interesting story quoted by Mrs Pamela McClintock on page 28 of the Autumn 1996 number of the Journal that earthquakes certainly do occur there, and that on the 21st September 1817 one reputedly even caused the Church bells in Jamestown 'to ring for some time'.

This raises the hypothetical question that even if anti-earthquake pills existed and anyone on St Helena should think of getting some, how often would they need to consider taking them? Obviously twice a day after meals would not be appropriate. So maybe once a month or even once a year or once in ten years would suffice. Perhaps even once in a hundred years would do if the person concerned managed to live that long.

A review of the earthquake history of the Island should help to provide an answer to such questions, but unfortunately information on such matters is scanty, being dependent as far as the distant past is concerned on chance observations such as that provided by Lady Bingham. From the beginning of this century we can however call on instrumental records from a global network of seismic stations, each one of which is capable of detecting and recording earth tremors over great distances. Putting together known evidence from these two sources, it is possible for the first time to get an overview of the subject which is summarised in the following table.

TABLE 1*A compilation of known St Helena seismic events (May 1997)*

No	Year	Date	Time	Description	Source
1	1756	7 June	07.00	Two small shocks	a
2	1763	21 May	05.00	A violent shock of an earthquake. The agitation was so strong in the south part of the Island as to shake the china off the shelves in the houses but thank God no damage ensued.	b
3	1780	— not known —		None given	c
4	1782	26 Jan	13.40	A shock of an earthquake was felt throughout the Island attended by a rumbling noise which lasted about four seconds.	
5	1817	21 Sep	21.45	Two slight shocks	a
				Whole house shaking. Rumbling noise like a waggon. Room and chairs violently agitated. The Church bell rang for some time.	d
6	1818	12 Aug	not known	The shock of an earthquake throughout the Island for about half a minute, we are happy that no injury attended the event.	
7	1864	15 Jul	04.10	Two pulsations within five seconds.	
8	1984	1 Dec	not given	Instrumental record, probably hardly felt on the Island.	e
9	1987	3 May	-do-	-do-	e

Sources as follows:-

- a) 'Records of the Island of St Helena' G.C. Kitching 1947
- b) Letters from the Hon East India Co local Directors to their Principals in London
- c) J.C. Melliss 'St Helena' 1875 (reprint R. Castell 1979)
- d) Lady Emma Bingham, letter home. Wirebird Autumn 1996
- e) Global Seismology Unit, British Geological Survey, Edinburgh

Conclusions to be drawn from the table are:-

- 1) Over a period of nearly 250 years only 9 earthquakes have been recorded, i.e. on an average about one every 27 years.
- 2) No one has ever been killed or even injured by an earthquake on St Helena.
- 3) No serious damage has ever been caused to property by earthquakes on St Helena.

In trying to answer the hypothetical question posed at the beginning of these notes, it may be seen from the Table that two earthquakes actually occurred within a year of each other (items 5 and 6) but on the other hand it appears that after 1864 no further earthquakes occurred for another 120 years, i.e. not within living memory. This therefore poses a problem for the hypothetical pill taker since he (or she!) could be ultra-cautious and take one every year and yet go their whole lives without there being an earthquake to counteract. Since there is evidently nothing to fear on St Helena from earthquakes it hardly matters however – even for the most gullible hypochondriac!

One further thought, it will be seen from Addison's writings that although many people may not realise it, earthquakes do occur in the U.K. In fact they probably occur about as frequently there as they do on St Helena, which may be regarded by some as yet further evidence that St Helena is a lost county of England!

João Da Nova

and

THE LOST CARRACK

by

Alexander Hugo Schulenburg

University of Sussex and

The St Helena Institute

Although João da Nova is widely considered to have been St Helena's discoverer, there are at least two intriguing questions surrounding the man and his discovery. One of these harks back to the early 1800s, the other to Philip Gosse's classic history, *St Helena 1502 - 1938*, published in London in 1938.

Gosse narrates how

three ships were sent (...) under the Admiral, João da Nova Castella, to reinforce Cabral, the Portuguese commander in India. In due time da Nova arrived at his destination, met, attacked and defeated a fleet belonging to Zamorin, and was appointed commodore of the returning ships to Europe. When at last he rounded the tempestuous