

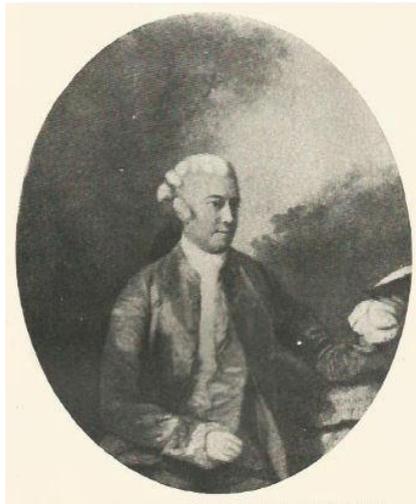
Gerard de Visme, Founder of the British Hospital (1793) and Member of the British Factory in Lisbon

Reprinted from the 7th Annual Report of the British Historical Association,
1943

Kindly transcribed from the original Report by the Society's Librarian, Dani
Monteiro, maintaining the original grammar of the article.

By A. R. Walford

In our Report & Review for 1940, page 239, we published a paper contributed by Miss Meta Williams giving the family history of Gerard de Visme, of Huguenot descent, one of the members of the old British Factory in Lisbon and the wealthy benefactor who contributed the funds for the rebuilding and enlargement of the British hospital adjoining the cemetery. The Factory records of that time state that the new building was erected partly on the ground where the former hospital stood, and partly on an extra strip ceded from the Dutch portion of the cemetery.



Portrait of Gerard de Visme, 1783.

Our former contributor recently gave us a photograph of an old oil painting of Gerard de Visme, painted during the occupation of his palatial residence at Benfica (northern suburb of Lisbon), which we reproduce.

Gerard was the fifth son of Philip, Count de Vismes and Marianne daughter of Piquet, Marquis of Magaens, French Huguenots who took refuge in England where members of that family had previously resided. He came to Lisbon in 1746 at the age of twenty and remained here til 1792. His firm was known as De Visme & Purry, subsequently becoming that of De Visme & Co. as shown in the “Almanach” published in Lisbon, 1794. (Factory books say “Devisme” throughout).

Of his business operations, his civil and social activities, or his personal preferences or tastes there is, so far, little or nothing to be found. It can, be assumed that he was a man of some refinement and culture as indicated from the following account of the spacious mansion he built for himself at Benfica:

“The *Quinta* that was eventually purchased by D. Isabel Maria, and where this Princess passed the last days of her life, was built by Gerard de Visme, an English merchant, in the XVIII century. The building as well as the disposition of the grounds, was planned, by the architect Ignacio de Oliveira Bernardes who also directed its construction. De Visme, (who purchased this *Quinta* in 1767) embellished the grounds with a number of statues and rare plants; decorated the mansion with objets d’art, principally oil-paintings, of which he was especially fond; organised a museum containing antiquities, curios, and works of good craftsmanship. Some years later having suffered some grievous “desgostos” he gave up the *Quinta*, selling it to the 3rd Marquis of Abrantes, D. Pedro de Lencastro. It was later sold by the 5th Marquis of Abrantes to Princess Isabel Maria in 1834”¹

¹ Dicionário de Portugal, Vol. 2. p. 283

There is no recorded date as to when he abandoned this fine property and the only other details which have so far come to light regarding a second residence indicate that he is supposed to have made for himself another *Quinta and Palacio* at Sintra known as the famous “*Monserrate*”. Evidence as to his actual residence in this property is conflicting, seeing both the *Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa* and the *Dicionário Portugal* give the date of his lease of the *Quinta da Serra de Cintra* (now Monserrate) as of 1790, the *Dicionário* further adding that Gerard de Visme “left Portugal hurriedly before the completion of the work”, 1792 being the recorded year of his departure by most sources. Local tradition implies that William Beckford rented the Monserrate property for a time, but there is no confirmation of this.

It is however on record (see Hickey's Memoirs in 1782) that Gerard Devisme “gave several pleasant parties at a beautiful seat some miles from Lisbon” and that he was present as a witness and guest at the marriage of Commodore George Johnstone, R. N., M. P., to Charlotte Dee, a daughter of James and Eleanor Dee, the marriage ceremony being performed at the British Envoy's Chapel in Lisbon, the Hon. Robert Walpole himself both acting as a witness and giving the wedding dinner “at which all the principal members of the Factory were present”. Soon afterwards “Charlotte fell ill and was attended by Dr. Hare, physician to the Factory. De Visme lent them a country house about eighteen miles from Lisbon (Monserrate) for her convalescence”. As the marriage above referred to took place in May 1782, this seems to provide definite evidence that Devisme was still occupying his property at Bemfica “some miles from Lisbon” and that he was also installed at *Monserrate*, though William Beckford, the owner of “Fonthill” and author of “*Vathek*” makes no mention at all of Devisme or Monserrate in his description of the various properties and men of note he came across during his residence in Sintra at Ramalhão 1787, which perhaps is not surprising, seeing that Beckford apparently had no special fondness for the members of the Factory, and appears to have devoted himself exclusively to the social life of the Portuguese nobility and members of the royal family circle, with whom he had personal contact.

Gerard Devisme, of high social distinction himself, seems to have been a friend and frequent guest of the then British Envoy and Minister to Lisbon, the Hon. Robert Walpole, and figures as a witness to Walpole's marriage to Dianna Grossett on May 8th 1780, and again to Walpole's second marriage to Sophia Stert on May 10th 1785 (a marriage which Debrett omits to record). Gerard Devisme was also present, again acting as a guest and witness to another fashionable wedding: that of Capt. Charles Henry Lane, R. N., to Elizabeth Parminter, on February 8th 1790. The (British) Protestant marriage registers do not record Devisme's presence at any subsequent weddings.

The name of Gerard Devisme's wife does not appear in any of our records. His daughter Emily, baptised in Lisbon on July 12th 1787, married in (England?) 1810 the Hon. Henry Murray, later General Sir Henry Murray, K. C. B. Devisme's donation to the new hospital was made formally by letter, and gratefully acknowledged by the Factory, as seen from the accompanying extracts from the Factory's JOURNAL, subsequently transcribed into that of the Hospital Committee:

“Extracts from the FACTORY JOURNAL:

LISBON, the 15th July 1786

At a General Meeting of the Factory held at the House of Mr. William Burn, Treasurer:

A letter from Mr. Gerard Devisme being read,

Resolved unanimously, that the said letter be copied into the Journal, and that the Treasurer be requested to convey to him their grateful sentiments for his extraordinary act of generosity, and in conformity to his inclinations, that Mr. William Burn, Mr. James MacGibbon, Mr. John Theodore Koster, Mr. John Bell, and Mr. Richard Amies, be a Committee to put his charitable purposes into execution, with a particular recommendation to consult him on every occasion, and execute the whole in a manner most agreeable to him”.

“William Burn, Esqr.

LISBON, The 14th July 1876

I have resided, my dear Sir, forty happy years in this our British factory, and am solicitous to give a proof to it of my sincere regard: in the enjoyment of so many blessings myself of health and affluence, I mean to alleviate the miseries of sickness and poverty towards those who are destitute. My intention is to build a commodious hospital in an airy and pleasant situation near Boa Morte, and I apply the sum of twenty thousand cruzadoes for the said charitable purpose.

Your zeal and sentiments will assist me in the execution. I request that you will impart my resolve to the meeting tomorrow of the Factory: Yourself, Mr. MacGibbon, Messrs. Koster, Mr. Bell, and Mr. Amies appear to me a very well chosen committee to buy the ground, which may be somewhat extensive and spacious, and to procure plans and materials, so as to execute all well, with solidity and economy, making the report to the subsequent factory meetings of the progress...

The hospital may be built to contain twenty airy apartments for so many sick mariners and other objects of charity; also a space on each side of the building in front for wings; very possibly other benevolent members of our factory may be disposed to add a decent abode for the chaplain, and one for the surgeon. I have too many avocations myself to attend to, as I could wish, the building, though am ready to assist as one of the community with advice.

I am with sincere regards

Sir: Your most humble Servant»

(signed) *Gerard Devisme*”

No lover of good English can fail to appreciate the resonance and dignity of language used by the British merchants and factors throughout these old Factory records. There is a not-unpleasing touch, in spite assuredly of the intention of the generous donor, of semi-arrogant aloofness in this graciously worded letter... the possibly close proximity of lorgnette... and snuff-box... where such inevitable things as sickness, poverty “and other objects of charity” sordid though they might be, came yet within the approach of a benevolent *beau seigneur*.

In due course the British Hospital was built though not without considerable delay. There were difficulties in acquiring the necessary ground, unforeseen impediments and legal proceedings, and when the hospital was already in course of construction it was found that the money donated would be insufficient. The total cost finally worked out at some fifteen Contos, the Hospital Committee becoming enthusiastic as the work progressed and added somewhat to the original conception; so that the Factory eventually contributed almost as much as Devisme, although the latter, kept constantly advised as to “progress”, kept adding to his original donation. By this time he was already in England: “GROSVENOR SQUARE, 19 March 1793.

...As I retired from Lisbon in the month of May 1791, and till now have had no advice from you on the subject (extra cost) I conjectured difficulty in the execution of my plan, and I will now request that the sum of money mentioned in my first donation may be paid to you by Mr. Du Bois, as the building advances.

I confide that you will apply also the sum of money, which I paid in to the Factory from my late partner Mr. Mellis’s legacy, to the purpose of the hospital in the manner I recommended, and I flatter myself that our example will be followed by other benefactors.

I am with great regard,

Gentlemen: Your most obliged and obedient Servant

(signed) *Gerard Devisme*”