

A short history of the de Pury family and their links with Lisbon

Exerpts from a paper presented by Chris Langridge, the great grandson of Hermann Edward de Pury, 1877-1931, who was posted to London to set up the London branch of the de Pury family bank.

By Chris Langridge

Introduction

As early as the 15th century, the de Pury family was known to own houses in Neuchâtel in Switzerland, and we know the occupations and functions of many of them:

- there were traders (shopkeepers) and craftsmen of all kinds, as well as hoteliers, winegrowers and agronomists, engineers, and a painter of great renown, Edmond 1845-1911;
- a parish priest in the 15th century, and a number of pastors and pastors' wives from 1620;
- numerous officers, most of them in foreign service;
- lawyers, who had studied in Basel and Geneva;
- bankers;
- the de Pury family took part in political life, serving as mayor, councillor, state councillor, clerk, bailiff, etc.;
- some were diplomats, entrusted with important missions, such as Samuel 1675-1752, known as "le grand conseiller", who in 1715 served as the King of Prussia's special envoy to the French court, or later Arthur 1876-1947, a Swiss minister in the Netherlands, and finally David 1943-2000, who was particularly active in the GATT negotiations.¹

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_de_Pury_\(diplomat\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_de_Pury_(diplomat))

Jean-Pierre de Pury (1675-1736)

The greatest adventurer of all the Pury family was undoubtedly Jean-Pierre, 1675-1736, who had to leave the mayoralty of Lignières after running into a few problems. He joined a ship bound for the Cape, where he hoped to launch a wine-growing project, devised theories on the ideal human habitat – which he visualised for each of the hemispheres on the 33rd degree of latitude – and then arrived in Batavia, in what is now Indonesia.

There, from 1714 to 1717, he submitted to the Compagnie des Indes and the Dutch authorities the first known plan for the systematic exploration and colonisation of New Holland, i.e., Australia, although the Dutch were interested in trading posts, but not in colonisation projects. Back in Amsterdam, Jean-Pierre acknowledged his failure and now turned to Great Britain, since under the reign of George II, Protestant settlers were being sought to secure (against Hispanic claims) the Savannah River frontier in America, and Jean-Pierre proposed the establishment of a town (which he would not hesitate to call Purysbourg), a proposal that would eventually come to fruition in 1731. More than 400 Swiss emigrants went there. Located in a malaria-infested region, the settlement barely survived until the American Civil War (in the 1860s), when it disappeared.

David de Pury (1709-1786)

Neither Jean-Pierre (1675-1736) nor his son Charles (1696-1754) returned from Purysbourg in America. On the other hand, Jean-Pierre's other son, David, 1709-1786, whom his father had left in Neuchâtel, decided, with the help of an uncle, to leave Switzerland, and headed for Marseille, where he stayed for some time to train in maritime trade, before going to London in 1730, hired by the South Sea Company, one of the major companies with access to world markets. It was during this stay in London that he obtained British citizenship.

David de Pury moves to Lisbon

By 1735, David was in Lisbon, where he and two partners set up a bank and at least three other businesses, with plans to mine diamonds and export rare woods from Brazil via Lisbon to Holland.

One such company was Pury & Mellish – founded 1740 – which later became Pury, Mellish and de Visme on offering Gerard de Visme² a partnership.

David had worked for John Gore, a director of the South Sea Company. Joseph Mellish 1717-1790 was Gore's son-in-law and nephew. The Lisbon partnership was in essence a trading house and commercial bank, which in 1757 obtained an exclusive royal contract to trade in Brazilian diamonds, which lasted for four years during which the partnership imported over 100,000 carats of rough diamonds. From 1766 the company was granted a monopoly by the Portuguese crown of the trade in Brazil-wood.

The partners lived in the Solar dos Carvalhos on Rua de Seculo, formerly Rua Formosa, which is better known as the Palacio Pombal. Famously an inflated rent of our thousand cruzados a year was paid in order to curry favour with the Marques de Pombal. Since 1760, this house received water overflowing from the public fountain across the road, which enabled the garden to be filled with fountains, orchards and pineapples.

We also know that David's portfolio included company shares linked to slavery, which is naturally the subject of controversy today. David, who had no direct heirs, bequeathed most of his immense fortune to the town of Neuchâtel.

He was created Baron by King Frederic of Prussia on 1 January 1785. He died in 1786 and is buried in the British Cemetery in Lisbon.

² https://www.bhsportugal.org/uploads/fotos_artigos/files/18_GerarddeVisme_Luckhurst.pdf



David de Pury's tomb at the British Cemetery in Lisbon

Subsequent generations

Several de Pury families emigrated in the 19th century. Two great-grandsons of Colonel Abram de Pury (1724-1804)³, Frédéric-Guillaume and Samuel, emigrated to Australia after the French Revolution of 1848.

The two brothers became agronomists and winegrowers in Australia and founded the Yeringberg estate. While Samuel returned to Switzerland to get married, Frédéric-Guillaume stayed on, married an Australian, and became the Swiss Consul General in Melbourne. He was the founder of the Australian branch of the de Pury family.⁴

³ A friend of Rousseau, who came under the protection of the King of Prussia when driven out of France and Switzerland <https://www.montmollin.ch/pub/Abram-Pury.htm>

⁴ <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/de-pury-frederic-guillaume-3397>.

Also in the 19th and 20th centuries, members of the younger branch established themselves in England, as bankers, interpreters, and accountants in the railway sector, and their descendants remained in the United Kingdom, from where some later emigrated to the U.S.A, to Japan, and to Africa.

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Chris Langridge was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1954, educated at Charterhouse School, and then became a chartered accountant at a comparatively young age. Chris has always enjoyed studying history and was intrigued to find out that his mother's family was a direct line from one of the oldest Swiss families which has just celebrated its 650th year.

He was intrigued to find that one of his ancestors was buried in the British Cemetery in Lisbon and embarked on a mission to discover more about his antecedents. This ancestor was David, Baron de Pury, who created a vast fortune and lived in Lisbon for many years having become an English citizen. David gave most of his fortune to the town of Neuchatel, which was used to build the municipal buildings and the university. What remained was used to set up a 'Caisse de Famile' – which would these days be known as a 'Family Office' – which has a managing committee and found that there are now as many de Pury's living in England as there are in Switzerland, as well as an equal number of Britons on the Managing Committee as Swiss.

Chris determined that he was born to the granddaughter of Herman de Pury, who had been sent over to London to set up a branch of the de Pury family bank. Herman married a descendant of the infamous "Hanging Judge Jeffreys", 1st Baron Jeffreys, and eventually became a naturalised British citizen, dying in Dorset in 1931.