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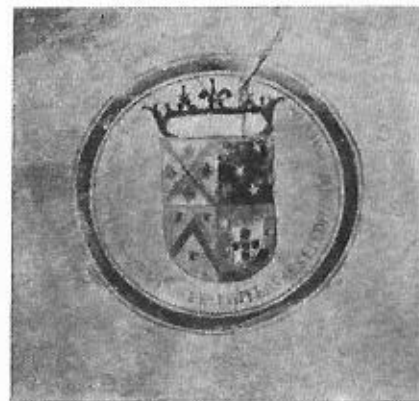
A BRITISH HERMITAGE AT MOURISCAS?

(Contributed by Miss Virginia Rau)

There are many documents in Portugal attesting the close relationships between this country and England during the past eight centuries, and whether hidden away in the solitude of dusty archives or illumined by Portugal's bright sun, it is not difficult, when moved by the spirit of curiosity towards «antiques», to come across many which constitute the golden threads of Portugal's national history.

The greater number of these documents are official and authoritative: treaties, diplomatic or military missions, reports of campaigns, political or religious machinations, all couched in the stiff-toned manner usual with government departments. All too scantily an ambassador inserts in his voluminous official despatches an occasional touch of wit or humour; others are monumental or frigid, yet at times evocating the picturesque and historic scenery of Busaco and the wild and rugged peaks of Torres Vedras; a few breathe the placidity of peaceful epitaphs and lie appropriate in the lone seclusion of seeming cemeteries.

There is one, however, which appeals by its odd charm of simplicity and freshness even though three hundred years have passed since it was written. It states that about three kilometres from the «Aldeia das Mouriscas» (hamlet of Moorish women) and about fourteen kilometres from the town of Abrantes, hidden away in a small cluster of hillocks and hemmed in by a girdle of forest tress. — there exists a small



Coat of Arms painted on the ceiling of the rural Chapel to «Nossa Senhora dos Matos» («Our Blessed Virgin of the Woods») at the rustic Hermitage at Mouriscas, near Abrantes, Portugal. (1664).

Details of the quarterings and script are given in the accompanying article by Miss Virginia Rau. If any of our readers can state to which family this Coat of Arms belongs, it will be very much appreciated if they will kindly communicate with the Hon. Secretary of the Historical Association - Lisbon Branch, Instituto Britânico, Rua Luis Fernandes, N.º 3, Lisbon, Portugal.

hermitage dedicated to «Nossa Senhora dos Matos» («Our Lady of the Woods»). Modest in structure, white-washed, nothing in its appearance gives rise to any inkling that it guards within nought but a single votive dedication in the form of a pious altar inscription.

As the name of the hermitage suggests, it is far from any habitation, lost in the wild thickets and moorland. In 1758 the curate in charge of the «Aldeia das Mouriscas», Snr. José de Figueiredo, reported in an investigation at that time that the hamlet was situated in a remote wilderness and with nothing but this hermitage for a neighbour (1). In the 19th century, Snr. Pinho Leal states:

«The chapel is eleven metres long and seven metres wide; has a vaulted roof; its interior walls covered with beautifully painted tiles. The chancel is also vaulted, and there is a good sacristy. Attached to the chapel there is accommodation wherein pilgrims may rest. The annual feast-day of its Patroness is kept on the 1st. October and formerly used to be very well attended. For a long time there used to be a hermit in charge to attend to the upkeep of the edifice as well as to receive the alms of the pilgrims, but for many years now the place has been unattended» (2).

Today nothing remains of the rest-rooms for pilgrims of which Snr. Pinho Leal speaks, but on the east side there is a small yet sufficiently ample vestry. The chapel is vaulted throughout its entire length; the chancel delimited by a raised stone floor, and spanned by a single arch resting upon two pillars. On the outside wall and just where the arch is keyed there is a small slab giving the date of the chapel's foundation: 1664.

The beautifying of this chapel has been concentrated entirely upon the painted tile-work covering the altar frontage in the chancel. Here the composition is generous and impressive,

(1) Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo: Dicionário Geog. XXV N.º 242.

(2) Pinho Leal: «Portugal antigo e moderno» V. 580.

the blue and yellow blending in a grateful harmony affording good contrast for the altar frontage panel where, upon a white back-ground, the figure of the Virgin stands out surrounded by four «speaking» angels whose prayer is one of supplication: (translated): «Holy Mother, intercede for England, that she be converted» (1).

This is certainly a unique example of 17th century Lisbon ceramics earning the praise of the art-critic Matos Sequeira who reported: «The blues and yellows make candid appeal, and I «know of no other example in ceramic compositions of this kind, «and so full of human faith» (2).

This pious appeal to «Our Lady of the Woods» seems to fall within a period when relations between Great Britain and Portugal were particularly friendly. The Treaty of Whitehall had been signed and Catherine of Bragança married to Charles II in 1662. British military contingents were in Portugal assisting in the struggle for national independence, and the British navy had promised to help Portuguese efforts whenever necessary.

In spite of my keen desire to discover the *reason* for this chapel I was quite unable to ascertain who its originator had been or to learn the motive of the prayer so ardently expressed for the conversion of protestant England. In the centre of the chancel ceiling a coat-of-arms is still in a fair state of preservation surrounded by an inscription of which it is only possible to decipher:

«...caused this chapel to be erected at his own cost,
«and requests a Pater Noster & an Ave Maria» (3).

Successive whitewashings of the vaulted ceiling have obliterated the name of the founder of the chapel, the most important part of this inscription. It was also impossible to identify the coat-of-arms; and yet the fact that in one of the

(1) «Domina, intercede pro Anglia ut convertatur».

(2) Boletim da Academia Nacional de Belas-Artes, VI, 32.

(3) «...mandou fazer esta capela a sua custa. Pedu hum Padre Nosso e uma Ave Maria».

quarters the Portuguese arms are clearly shown seems to indicate that a Portuguese escutcheon forms part of the whole. Application to an heraldic expert for assistance in deciphering this enigma was also unsuccessful. At present this coat-of-arms is no more than a mixture of brown, yellow, and silver. The Portuguese arms are on a field of yellow; the stars are of silver on a field of brown; and the birds' heads are of brown on a yellow field; the crown, and bands or batons in deep yellow and brown (1).

The local legend gives some vague idea as to the *dedication* of this chapel of «Our Lady of the Woods». «Once upon a time...» (for in this way all such popular legends commence) a party of Englishmen came to Mouriscas: according to some, «geologists looking for minerals», according to others: «to do no-one knows quite well what». What is certain, according to all, is that, moved by a sudden inspiration «they all became converted», giving up the sectarian faith they had followed in their far off fatherland.

What is left of these fading inscriptions does not permit of our completing or rectifying local traditions. Even to this day the people of Mouriscas still talk of these heretic Englishmen converted by the miraculous intercession of the Virgin.

(1) The colours may have changed with age, climate, and their contact with mortar containing lime. (Ed).