

THE BRITISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PORTUGAL

TWENTY FIRST ANNUAL REPORT
AND REVIEW 1994

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THE BRITISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PORTUGAL: A LOOK BACK

by d'Arcy Orders, MBE

Address given to members at the Dinner held at The Hotel Palácio, Estoril, on the 21st October, 1994 to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Inauguration of The British Historical Society of Portugal and, together with members of The Royal Society of St. George, Lisbon Branch, to commemorate the Battle of Trafalgar.

“This Society was not the first of its kind in Portugal.

In 1936 a group of members of the British Community got together and formed the Lisbon Branch of the History Association which was and still is, based in London.

Membership never exceeded 40 and meetings were held at the British Institute; then activities were, more or less, the same as ours - meetings, lectures, outings and the publishing of an Annual Report. In addition, they collected a great deal of memorabilia relating to British institutions.

The War came in 1939, several members left Portugal and the activities of the Branch were greatly restricted. During the War some of the original members had resigned and by the end of the fifties the Branch was virtually dormant. Fortunately, the British Institute offered to house the Society's archives.

In 1968, the then director of the British Institute wrote to the British Community Council suggesting that the Branch be revived - no doubt, he wished to get shot of the archives! There appears to have been little interest. However, a small committee was formed with Richard Price - better known as Dick - as Honorary Secretary to catalogue the documents and files.

One of the moving spirits in the founding of the Society was Sir Alfred Norris, known as 'Bing'. A chartered accountant, his career had been in Brazil until he retired to Portugal in the mid 1960s. He had been very active in British community affairs in Brazil and had, in fact, been knighted for his services to the British community in São Paulo. He soon became involved in community activities here in Portugal and was elected Chairman of the Executive Council of the British Hospital. Whilst holding this office he wrote the definitive history of the Hospital - we have copies in the Society Library if anyone wishes to read about the Hospital. Whilst researching the book he met Dick Price. At about the same time the British Institute advised the committee that they could no longer store the archives. It occurred to Dick and Bing that there might now be support for some sort of historical society in Portugal and in December 1973 the Anglo-Portuguese News published a letter from Dick floating the idea. Amongst others, I replied and was invited to lunch by Dick and Bing. We had a most agreeable lunch at The Royal British Club and when, the next day telephoned Dick to thank him for his hospitality, I learned that, much to my surprise, I had agreed to become honorary secretary which just proves what too much Club port can do for a chap! A meeting of those interested was called for June 18th 1974 at which the Society, was formally constituted. Later a constitution was drawn up, lectures and outings planned and the Inaugural meeting held at the Estrela Hall, just twenty years ago next week.

HBM Ambassador, Nigel Trench was in the Chair and about 50 members present. The Officers and the Executive Council were elected, Dick Price becoming Chairman and the annual subscription fixed at the exorbitant sum of 200 escudos per annum!

By the end of 1971 there were 27 members. The first outing organised was a visit (on November 3rd) to Wellington's Lines at Torres Vedras.

It was a delightfully sunny day; we all took picnics and Bing shepherded the party round the Lines. Fortunately, this was before lunch as, by the time the picnics had been eaten and the odd bottle of wine disposed of, few were interested in clambering around ruined fortresses! The next outing was to the Stephens Brothers Glass Works at Marinha Grande. This time, mindful of the hazards of drinking and driving, a coach was hired. Nevertheless, en route, we found time to enjoy a leisurely, lunch.

Whether these outings were considered to be highly interesting historically or the rumour got around that they were jolly good parties I do not know but membership rapidly increased and by the end of 1975 totalled 75 members in Portugal and 10 overseas.

Of course, the Society was handicapped at this time because we had no base and couldn't refer to archives which were still being stored, slightly under protest, at the British Institute.

In down-town Lisbon there was, and still is the Inglezinhos, the English College. This was a Catholic seminary founded in 1622 when Catholics in England were subject to severe persecution. Its role was to bring over to Portugal students, aged about 12, to be trained as priests; then, when they had been ordained, to return them to England, usually, clandestinely, where, in the greatest secrecy, they ministered to Catholics and, I might say, as great personal risk. Some were arrested, imprisoned, tortured and it is known that at least two died in prison. By the 1970s, of course, Catholic priests long since could be trained in England and the seminary had closed down.

The Society was offered two rooms in this huge complex, one for the archives and the other for meetings. So all the files, papers and other records were moved from the Institute to the Inglezinhos and the process of cataloguing, sorting and indexing begun.

As the Society was the only occupant of the building, the caretaker and his wife were quite willing to provide lunch for the Council meetings and on other occasions. I well remember some leisurely lunches discussing Society matters and, sometimes, catching up with British community gossip and/or scandal!

Unfortunately, in less than two years, we learned that the premises had been sold and that we would have to leave. There followed a long search for accommodation, several places were considered; the Royal British Club, the top floor of the parsonage, back to the British Institute but none were, for various reasons suitable. Just as things were getting desperate, the Elders of St. Andrew's Scottish Church, in the Rua da Arriaga offered the Society a room below the Manse, rent free.

Shelving was installed and, once again, the archives were moved to our new home. Cataloguing and indexing was soon underway.

With a secure base, the Society was able to be somewhat more ambitious and, as well as the usual outings, talks, publication of the Annual Report and occasional papers, trips of several days were organised to the Alentejo, Algarve, Oporto, Madeira and the Peninsular War Battlefields in Spain.

Following the death of Dick Price in 1983, John Cobb took over as Chairman, sadly, for only a short period, until his untimely death in 1985 when the Society's present Chairman, Paul Marques was elected. Joan Croft de Moura had become Honorary Secretary in 1981 and the combination of these two with their wide-ranging Anglo-Portuguese connections made it possible for members to visit stately homes, palaces and other places of Anglo-

Portuguese interest which were not normally open to the public and, in some cases, never would be. The Society has also organised various specific projects, for example: There was nothing in the Parque Edward Sete in Lisbon to indicate why it is so called. In 1985 the Society commissioned a bust of Edward VIIth commemorating his State Visit to Portugal in 1903 and presented it to the Camara Municipal de Lisboa. It stands there today.

1987 was the 600th Anniversary of the marriage of Phillipa of Lancaster to King John of Portugal. The Society arranged for the production of a bronze plaque of a likeness of the Queen to be placed in the Palace at Sintra where Phillipa lived for some time. As the Prince and Princess of Wales were in Portugal for the Sexcentenary Celebrations, Her Royal Highness graciously unveiled the plaque.

In the case of the Duke of Wellington; it is not known where he resided when he was stationed in Lisbon during the Peninsular War so it is not possible to place a plaque on the wall of a building.

Instead, in 1992, the Society commissioned a bust of Wellington. It was a copy of the bust modelled by Bing Norris' son and which is still in the entrance to The Royal British Club.

The bust now stands in the praça in front of the British Hospital. The Lord Mayor of the City of London unveiled the bust and, a few weeks later, the Society invited the present Duke of Wellington to Lisbon for its inauguration.

A few months ago it was stolen but the police soon tracked it down and it is back in place.

These, and other projects, would not have been possible without sponsors. The Society has been most fortunate in having the support of several British companies, Lloyds Bank, Barclays Bank, British Petroleum and Rio Tinto Mines.

The Society's Library is steadily expanding and community institutions are urged to deposit their records with the Society. There is a large collection of books, reference books, prints and, of course, many files relating to community matters over several centuries. Members are urged to visit as there is still plenty of work to be done.

Yvonne Mollet, our Librarian, has been working for two years or more, practically single-handed and would appreciate help from members.

No particular skills are required as the work would be mainly indexing, cataloguing and transcribing records. She is there every Monday and anyone who could spare a few hours would be more than welcome.

One of the jewels of the Library is a complete bound collection of the Anglo-Portuguese News since its foundation in 1937. It is a fascinating experience to

browse through some of these old copies which give a remarkable insight into the life of the British community over a period of nearly sixty years and are, of course, a necessary source of information for those researching the history of British community institutions. The Society's financial position is healthy. Not only is there money in the bank, there is also cash on deposit.

Members' subscriptions just about cover the cost of printing and distributing the Annual Report; other income arises from donations, joining fees, bank deposit interest and sales of the Society's publications. One of the money-spinners has been the sale of 'The Water-colour Prints of Lisbon' by John Coates. Barclays Bank sponsored the printing of this beautiful collection of eight water-colours of buildings connected with the British community such as: The British Hospital, The Ambassador's Residence, Corpo Santo. They are really quite exquisite. I am not trying to sell them to you but there are just a few left!

It seems to me that the Society is fully justified in being proud of its achievements during the last twenty years. With nearly three hundred members and an enthusiastic Council I am sure it is well placed to go from strength to strength!

—ooOoo—

d'Arcy Orders, one of the founders of the Society in 1974, was the Society's first Honorary Secretary. Subsequently he was Honorary Treasurer and served on the council for many years. He has written several books on British community subjects, all of which are available from the Society.