

Oporto, Old and New.

Personal Reminiscences

by

Charles Sellers

In 1899, Charles Sellers, a member of a wine exporting family based in Oporto, published a book entitled: *Oporto, Old and New. Being a Historical Record of The Port Wine Trade and a Tribute to British Commercial Enterprize in the North of Portugal.*

This contains some fascinating information about Oporto, the River Douro region and Portugal in the late 19th century, as well as detailed descriptions of the major wine exporters.

The first chapter is titled *Personal Reminiscences* and we reproduce it in the following pages. The chapter describes the improvements to the city that the author had noted in the previous 40 years; its history, its geography and the problems caused by the steepness of the hills; the development of shipping services to England; the bridges built across the river to replace the pontoon bridge; the English in Oporto and their cricket; the building of a new Customs House; and the construction of the new port at Leixões.

Following a brief tourist guide to Oporto, Sellers discusses his memories of staying at the beach at Foz do Douro or Leça da Palmeira. The English had small houses at the beach and furniture was annually loaded onto bullock carts. Sellers amusingly describes the events at the beach and the differences between Portuguese and English bathing practices.

This is just a “teaser” for the book, which Sellers dedicated to King D. Carlos I. The full book can be downloaded online,¹ however we may well reproduce further chapters in future editions of the Newsletter.

¹ <https://archive.org/details/cu31924085185100/mode/2up>

OPORTO, OLD AND NEW.

CHAPTER I.

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES.



It is one of the most select British communities abroad which, for generations, has taken up its residence in Oporto. The only reason I can assign for the exceptionally favourable prominence into which the British residents in Oporto have brought themselves is the acknowledged excellence of Port Wine, of which, be it said to their honour, they are the originators and disseminators. Viticulture, or the growing of the grape vine, is one thing; viniculture, or the combined art and science of preparing the Wine, is another. The latter industry in Portugal is essentially British. But whence came they, these Englishmen with all their insular prejudices, their indomitable energy and extraordinary resources? Well, of course, they came from England, such as were English, or their forbears did, and the Scotch came from their own land. One of the oldest English firms is Devonian, still connected with Dartmouth by many family ties, and tracing its Wine history back almost to a date coeval with that of the cod-fisheries on the hanks of Newfoundland. Many came from that largest of English counties, Yorkshire, so famed for its stalwart men and buxom women. Others, but not so many, derived their origin from the modern Babylon, London. I must here observe that such as dealt in dry goods enjoyed the name of "rag merehants," as

distinct from "wine merchants," and only one firm has, to any extent, combined rags with wine. Of course, so far as Great Britain is concerned, the rag business is of more importance than the Wine business; but in Oporto the proper thing, and very naturally so, is to ship Wine. The following are grand names in the vinous history of Oporto:—Newman, Bearsley, Dow, Hunt, Offley, Sandeman, Teage, Croft, Kingston, Warre, Dixon, Roope, Coekburn, Forrester, and others almost forgotten, but whose names are still to be found in the archived ledgers of centuries ago. Then we have such good old names as the Dutch and German families, now Portuguese, of Van Zeller, Köpke and Burmester; and among those who have contributed in a wider sense to England's fame abroad are: William H. G. Kingston, the novelist; Joseph James Forrester (Baron de Forrester), the essayist and eminent cartographer; Albert G. Sandeman, late Governor of the Bank of England; Henry Rumsey, the lexicographer; John P. Gassiot, F.R.S.; General Sir William Kidston Elles, K.C.B.; Admiral Dunlop, etc.

Oporto has very much improved during the last forty years. The Rua dos Inglezes (street of the English) was one of the very few streets paved right through. There were others that were only paved on one side, and these had been done at the expense of the father of the present Senhor Antonio Bernardo Ferrreira, the first gentleman to own a carriage in Oporto, drawn

by horses. Even the Rua dos Inglezes is changed, for many of the old buildings have disappeared altogether and a public garden has replaced them. In this street the British merchants have always met to transact business and see each other.

Before steamers commenced running to Oporto, the trade between that city and the principal English ports was carried on by means of small schooners, such as the "Mary Sweet," "John Ormerod," "Red Port," "Alarm," &c., the skippers of which used to appear on 'Change in dress coats and white gloves. For giving themselves the trouble to go to the offices to sign the bills of lading, they received "hat money" at the rate of 1s. per tun; this gratuity was in later times paid as primage.

I recollect seeing an advertisement about the sailing of one of these schooners from Liverpool. She was described as "the fine Clipper Paeket —, 99 tons reg." I believe she was the "Red Port," and on this occasion she took six weeks on her voyage out to Oporto. There are still some of my readers who will recollect merry Captain Triplett, and how he could step the hornpipe.

Freights ruled considerably higher than

they do now, for it was no unusual thing to pay as much as 100s. per tun of two pipes, in time of war, to London. The captains were frequently entertained at dinner by the merchants, and were on special occasions admitted as guests to the British Club, called the Factory House, situate in English Street.

It was in a house in this street, in 1394, Philippa, of Lancaster, gave birth to Prince Dom Henrique, the great navigator. The house is now distinguished by a slab bearing an appropriate inscription.

Oporto is supposed to be built on seven hills; in this it is not singular, as I know many other cities that lay claim to the same number of elevations. I am inclined to think, however, that Oporto is far too modest in its pretensions, for it would not at all surprise me



Exterior of the Factory House in Oporto.

to hear that the number is nearer fifty than seven. The streets are, with few exceptions, so steep that, for drawing heavy weights, oxen are used instead of horses, and when the load is too great for oxen, then the Gallegos are brought into requisition. These stalwart, but most unsavoury, sons of Galicia place ropes under the load, and then run a stout wooden bar through the double rope, and, at an unearthly



An Old View of Oporto, Showing Bridge of Boats.

grunt given by the Capataz, or ganger, they all place their shoulders under the bar, raise themselves, and thus proceed with their burden. Be it said to their honour, they are always esteemed as servants by all the English families for their proverbial honesty.

But again, reverting to Oporto, I may just mention that it is one of the most ancient cities in the Peninsula, and held very high rank during the Moorish invasion; as this, however, is not a history of the country, but rather of the British community resident there, I know I shall be pardoned if I simply refer my readers to the many well-known works on Portugal and its history should they desire to be informed as to the sailing of the Armada from Lisbon, or the implanting of the Monarchy in that country. Naturally I have now and again to refer to some historical data in order to fix the times in, and the circumstances under, which vine-growing was introduced into the Kingdom, as well as when producing copies of charters granted to Englishmen for liberty to trade and establish themselves there. But, as for history pure and simple, the arts and sciences, and other matters connected with the Portuguese themselves, are they not to be found in the chronicles prepared by many eminent writers? Oporto still presents itself to the tourist as a city of unfinished buildings, of noble aspirations, but above all, and pre-eminently above all other cities, as the city that has given the name to the best Wine the world has ever produced. In this it has left its aspirations and its history far behind; when Portugal's great navigators are forgotten in the busy turmoil of everyday life, their fame shall be remembered as future generations drink from crystal goblets the generous Wine of many a Douro vintage.

Previous to 1842 the Douro, from Oporto to Villa Nova de Gaya, was spanned by a bridge of boats, of which I

give a picture reproduced from a coloured engraving in the possession of Messrs. Dent, Urwick & Yeatman.

For the next thirty-eight years a handsome suspension bridge, a little higher up the river, took the place of the bridge of boats, and now a splendid double bridge, made of iron and containing only one arch, places the upper part of Oporto in communication with that of Gaya, while the bottom platform or span forming the base to the arch serves for passengers to and from the lower parts of the city. It is on the south bank of the river, in Gaya, that the Wine merchants have their lodges, and as to these, the improvements made in the construction of casks, &c., I will have occasion to refer to them later on. I am now more concerned in speaking of Oporto as I have known it and as it used to be long before I was born, but as it has often been graphically described to me by relatives and friends. So far as I can make out, the game of cricket has been played in Oporto almost as far back as the oldest English resident could remember when I was a child. The field was on the spot now occupied by the Infantry Barracks, close to the Carraneas Palace. There was then, as now, a cricket club, and the merchants generally assembled on the field on Saturday afternoons. They wore high silk hats or beavers, and bowled, so I have been informed, from the front of the wicket. As a schoolboy I have often played on the Torre da Marea, where the Crystal Palace now stands, and not far from the former field. As I have mentioned the Carrancas Palace, I will observe that when Sout was so unceremoniously disturbed at dinner by the approach of Sir Arthur Wellesley, the palace belonged to the Barons of Nevo-gilde, who were allowed certain privileges on condition that they should entertain the Sovereign whenever he, or she, came to Oporto. The building, with the gardens

at the back, was bought by Dom Pedro V. about 1860, from his private purse, and was subsequently transferred to the Crown.

And, now that I am speaking about one of the Royal residences, I may be allowed to refer to the Coat of Arms of the City of Oporto, of which I give a representation. The Shield is surmounted by a Ducal Coronet and quartered with the Royal Arms of Portugal and of our Lady of Vendôme, between two turrets Argent on a field Azure. In the centre there is a Heart Or on Escutcheon of pretence purple. Surrounding the Shield is the Collar of the Order of the Tower and Sword. Supporter, Dragon Vert. The Collar was presented by the Duke of Bragança as a reward for the heroic resistance during the siege, and he further granted to the city the title of "Very Noble, Always Loyal, and Unconquered." The Dragon is the supporter of the Arms of the Royal House of Bragança. The heart was added later on in memory of

Dom Pedro IV., who presented his own to the city, whose inhabitants have worthily preserved it in the Church of the Lapa.

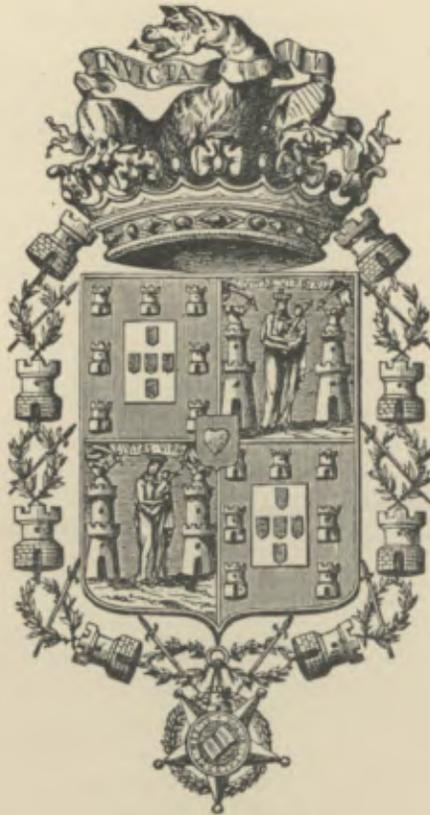
One of the greatest changes, if not the greatest, that has taken place in Oporto was the building of the new Custom-house on the sandy beach of Miragaya. Where the old alfandega still stands is, in my opinion, the most appropriate place for

such a building, because it is close to the Rua dos Ingleses (now called the Rua do Infante Dom Henrique), where all business is transacted, and also because there is very good anchorage opposite, and vessels can discharge alongside.

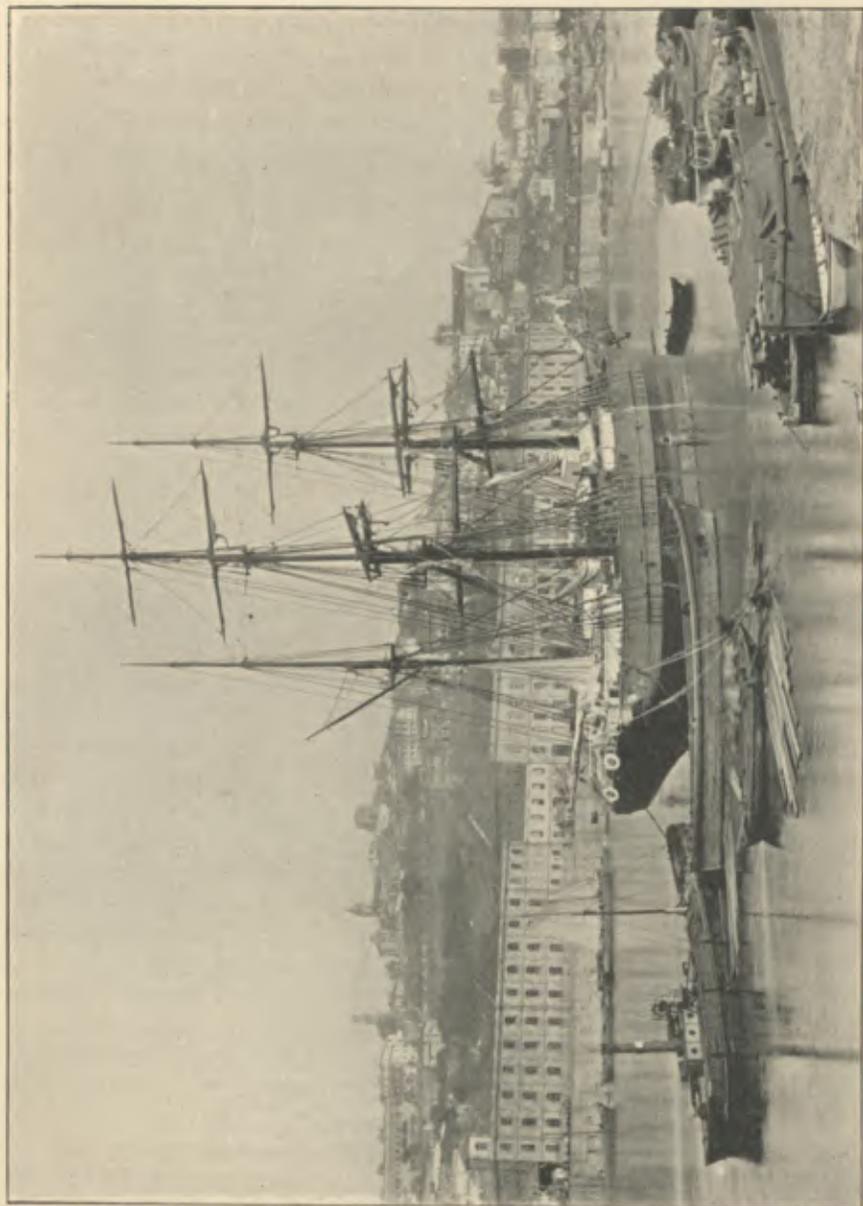
Another very marked improvement, in that which concerns trade between Oporto and foreign countries, is the construction of the harbour at Leixões, in close proximity to Leça da Palmeira, distant about six miles from Oporto. This "artificial port," as it is called by the Portuguese, was much required owing to the difficult, and often dangerous, navigation of the bar. The river Douro is liable to periodical freshets which render it impossible for vessels to leave or enter the port. For many years the project for the construction of this port was assiduously nursed by a few Englishmen, who devoted all their spare time and energy in trying to impress the Government with the importance that a harbour would have on the trade of the

north of Portugal; they now have the satisfaction of knowing that their names will always be linked with the construction of the port of Leixões, where some of the largest steam packets call in regularly for passengers and cargo.

If you want to have a bird's-eye view of Oporto you must ascend the steeple of the Clerigos Church, close to the Mercado do



The City Arms of Oporto.



View of the Custom House in Oporto. (From a Photograph by Robert Fitz Maurice Dixon, Esqre.)

Anjo. Right below you is presented a beautiful panorama; the city proper, with all its numerous churches and squares surrounds you; to the south, but separated by the lovely Douro, is Villa Nova de Gaya with its long rows of wine stores, the convent of the Serra do Pilar and the two bridges spanning the river; to the north are the heights of Bom Fim and the hills of Vallongo, while to the east the snow-capped mountains appear in the distance. To the west the scene is still more lovely, as the broad Atlantic lies before you, into which the Douro pours its limpid waters at Foz. From this high tower the city seems to be almost level, but as you watch the tramcars drawn by six mules it soon becomes evident that the streets are very steep. The Mercado do Anjo is the oldest market place in Oporto and is decidedly



The Clerigos Tower in Oporto.

worthy a visit. Under the wide spreading shade of mulberry trees, are located the stalls where women, in native attire, sell fruit of all qualities, fresh vegetables and poultry. As you enter by the western gate you have on your left hand a long row of fruit stalls gorgeous in the display of lovely apples, pears, oranges, grapes, &c., while on the right-hand side are located the poulterers and butchers. This western

entrance forms the apex, so to speak, of the triangular shape of the market, and all the space disposable at the base is covered by dealers in vegetables. In the early morning, when the country women arrive with their loads for disposal to the storekeepers, the colouring is very bright as the native costume partakes, though in a modified form, of that brilliancy which is so much in evidence in Spain. Here do congregate the students from the neighbouring College of Surgeons; not only are they in quest of fruit, but also of some responsive smile from the dark-eyed peasant girls. Some twenty years ago the neighbourhood of this market was not pleasant at night owing to the number of hungry dogs which infested the place and fought furiously with each other over some piece of offal. I have had it asserted

that in still some remoter days a few wolves had been seen mingling with these curs of every degree, and I recollect a wolf having been trapped just outside the city. At the eastern end of the market-place a handsome flight of steps leads to the open-air shoe and boot market, which is anything but picturesque, and on the opposite side of the road is the thieves' market, called the *ferros velhos* (old pieces of iron), where

every conceivable and inconceivable article of native hardware is procurable.

I must not omit to mention the native jewellery which is to be found on sale in the Rua das Flores, in Oporto. It is principally filigree work, and compares very favourably with the Maltese work. Portuguese women are much addicted to gold ornaments, and at the Church festivals some may be seen with gold chains worth a few hundred pounds. The artistic part of the jewellery worn by the peasantry owes its origin to the Moorish invasion, and if not of a very high order of merit has at least the charm of novelty to most English tourists; and, moreover, the gold is absolutely pure; in fact, the Portuguese look upon English gold jewellery as so much base metal. In the reign of Dom Manoel "the

Fortunate," a school of native art in gold work was instituted, and resulted in the production of some very beautifully executed articles; but in these days, when originality too often gives way to imitation, the Manoelian school has been superseded by French art. It is still possible to obtain some examples of fifteenth century work, but you must be prepared to pay a high price for them. These are

more frequently found in the interior, at the houses of well-to-do farmers, and even in the homes of river pilots, some of whom have amassed considerable fortunes by conveying cargoes of wine from the wine country to Villa Nova. In former days the *fidalgos*, or aristocrats, had all their dishes, plates, basins and jugs made of the precious metals, and I have known them retain these marketable chattels when poverty was pinching, for with them it was a case of *noblesse oblige*.

The accompanying picture is from a photograph of a twelfth century house in the Rua da Reboleira, which was built for a nobleman. This house has been pulled down to make room for improvements. Oporto is full of alterations, but not necessarily of improvements. A system of tram-lines covers the city, and I be-



Twelfth Century House in the Reboleira, now pulled down.

lieve the Company pays very handsome dividends. Cabs ply for hire in all the principal streets, each being drawn by all that remains of two horses. Horse breeding, which was at one time held in much esteem in Portugal, has now fallen into decadence, but even so the horses are not to be despised. Horse racing and fox hunting have been tried, but the people understand not these pleasures. Whyte

Melville might never have existed as far as the Portuguese are concerned. The turf is, therefore, as dead a letter to them as hunting. There is, or was, a sporting club in Oporto, but, as in the vicinity of the city there are more guns than birds, the members have not had much to do beyond agitating. The British community retain their national instincts; they have, as I said before, their cricket and football clubs, their boating and golf clubs, their seaside club, their Factory house, their places of worship, and, in fact, they make life as pleasant as possible under most favourable circumstances.

As in our childhood's days the brightest are, as a rule, those we spend at the seaside during our midsummer holidays, so my memory carries me back to the time when we used to close up our town house and take up our abode in some small house at Foz, or Leça. The heavy furniture was forwarded in bullock carts, and the lighter goods on the heads of women, who charged 2d. a journey for performing a run of six miles to Foz and back. Some of the English families retained their Foz summer houses for many years, and among these were the Nobles, the Kingstons and the Sandemans. Mr. John Alexander Fladgate, (Baron da Roeda), acquired a beautiful property on the Monte, and lived at Foz all the year round. I mention this favourite seaside resort as it enables me to give a description of English life on the rocks at the Cancero, and the better to bring this subject before my readers I will state that on the left hand side is the old castle, situated close to the mouth of the river, and on the right, the lighthouse. On the rocks, watching the bathers, do congregate some of the native dandies. To this day the Cancero is the spot most favoured by the *élite* of Portuguese society, but the English only frequented the rocks as spectators; they had their own *praia*, about a hundred yards beyond, which was,

and is still, known as the *praia dos Ingleses*, or the "beach of the English." On the high rock separating the Portuguese from the English bathing place William Kingston, the novelist, very often used to take his perch, but the English ladies, with their brown straw sun-bonnets and blue veils, would sit among the crowd and, while knitting, enjoy the merry sight offered by the over-dressed native bathers. I think that at English watering-places the bathers have too little regard for modesty, while in Portugal this virtue is completely hidden by a superfluity of clothing. According to the police regulations all bathers at public places in Portugal must be as completely clad as if they were going for a walk. There are no hideous bathing machines to be seen disfiguring the beach, no nigger minstrels to be heard with their discordant banjos. The beach presents a town of white canvas, flat-topped tents, with lanes dividing one row from another. The bathing women attend on the male bathers, and the bathing men on the lady bathers. From early morn up to about mid-day, this animated scene continues without interruption. Some guitar players stroll about the rocks and through these alleys formed by tents, picking up the few coppers from those who still delight to hear the harmonious and plaintive native airs.

When I was a boy, before *calceches* had commenced running between Oporto and Foz, the narrow esplanade at the back of the bathing-station was the standing ground for numberless badly equipped and sorry looking donkeys, which were waiting the return of their riders from their morning ablutions. Many families would engage a huge carriage, something like our country omnibuses, but drawn by oxen, and for these, while the family bathed, there was a space reserved in the neighbouring streets. Our young people of to-day may not feel inclined to credit that in this fashion their ancestors had to travel to

Foz for their sea-dip; the ladies used to ride on an *audilha*, a sort of cushioned chair on donkey back. And as we English had a separate bathing place from the Portuguese, so we had our own donkeymen and women who provided us with our mokes.

The 24th of August, St. Bartholomew's Day, is, in Portugal, dedicated to sea-bathing and the eating of melons. The Portuguese Clergy have very wisely introduced some salutary innovations into their religion. Knowing that the lower order of the population, like that of almost every other country, is averse to almost every form of ablution, they, from time immemorial, have done everything in their power to promote cleanliness, not always, I must own, with complete success. Tradition, or superstition, in the north of Portugal hath it that St. Bartholomew made a treaty with Satan that all people who had not taken thirty-three baths in the sea every year by the 24th August should be handed over to the modern Pluto. From all parts of the interior, therefore, the peasants assemble in vast numbers at all the seaside resorts, and many may be seen taking all the prescribed baths on one day. But education, which by some has been called the mother of civilisation, has

unfortunately weakened the faith of many Portuguese peasants in the necessity for this wholesale form of cleanliness, so that now the custom is fast going out of fashion.

This was the grand day, *par excellence*, of the English; this the day on which they had an opportunity of admiring the cunning work of the native goldsmiths on the necks and cars of the handsome and stalwart daughters of the north of Portugal. On the eve of St. Bartholomew a display of fireworks took place in front of every parish church; a village band discoursed national airs, and the crowd consumed wine at 1d. per pint. The Church in Portugal is always foremost in keeping up these amusements for the people, and although we profess to have our more correct ideas on the subject, I feel confident that I am not singular in the opinion that innocent amusement, such as the Portuguese people enjoy on a Sunday, is preferable to a choice between going to a public-house or to church. I also know that the English in Portugal do not keep aloof from these innocent entertainments, and that when we come back to England we feel there is a void in life which we stoically describe as a "true English Sunday."

