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THE CHAPEL OF OUR LADY OF THE WOODS: A SUMMER MYSTERY

by Patricia Lamb

The Society's 1997/1998 season of visits to places of historical interest culminated in a light-hearted day out with a serious purpose. On the first Saturday in July 1998 a group of forty members packed picnic baskets and set out for the little town of Mouriscas, some 14 kms. east of Abrantes, in the wooded, hilly area where the Ribatejo joins the Beira Baixa.

Just 2 kms. beyond Mouriscas a well-signposted forest track bears off to the right of the road and leads up hill and down dale, through scrubland alive with wild flowers. When the Society last visited this area, in 1990, it was heavily wooded but forest fires have taken their toll and though the undergrowth has quickly revived there are now only a few scattered pines.

The purpose of the Society's visit was to investigate the origin of the pilgrimage chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Matos, which stands on a small hillock and is surrounded by a paved area bounded by a low stone wall. The chapel is very simple: a small, whitewashed building with a sacristy to one side. It is recorded that there were pilgrim lodgings here at one time but all trace of these has disappeared. The interior of the church is very plain, with a single nave leading to a slightly raised sanctuary area, backed by a typical country-style reredos with an unpretentious figure of the Blessed Virgin.

The whole interest, and mystery, of the chapel resides in the front panel of the altar table and the coat of arms painted on the ceiling.



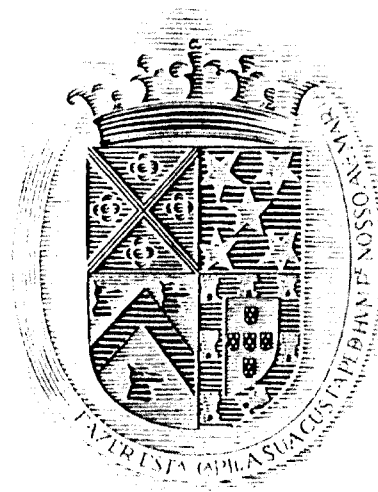
The altar front in the Chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Matos, Mouriscas

The altar front is entirely covered by a panel of azulejos in blue, white and yellow, showing the Virgin Mary in the centre, flanked by two pairs of "speaking" angels. Each of the angels has a "ribbon" issuing from its mouth and stretching towards the Virgin and on these ribbons are written the words DIVA INTERCEDE PRO ANGLIA UT CONVERTARTUR (LADY INTERCEED FOR ENGLAND THAT SHE MAY BE CONVERTED). As can be seen from the photograph, the inscriptions on the two "ribbons" on the right are written mirror-like from right to left, which was a common practice in the 17th century. This panel does not seem to have been designed as an altar front. As the illustration shows, it appears to "disappear into the floor" at the bottom, suggesting that it was originally square in shape.

In the centre of the ceiling above the sanctuary there once existed a painted coat of arms, now so heavily covered in whitewash as to be almost indecipherable but research has produced a drawing of this escutcheon made some years ago and this is reproduced here.

The Society's two visits to this site were inspired by an article written by Miss Virginia Rau for the 1943 Annual Report of the Lisbon Branch of The Historical Association, forerunner of The British Historical Society of Portugal.

Since the Society's most recent visit some information concerning the connection with England has emerged, thanks to the discovery of a series of articles written by Dr. José Pequito Rebello in 1943 and 1944 for the magazine "Novidades" and subsequently published in book form under the title "O Aspecto Espiritual da Aliança Inglesa".



The coat of arms on the ceiling of the Chapel of Nossa Senhora dos Matos, Mouriscas

Dr. Rebello begins by quoting Eng. João dos Santos Simões, a distinguished investigator, who wrote the following appraisal of the Mouriscas altar front some fifty years ago:

"The panel of polychrome tiles dates from the second half of the 17th century and was probably not intended for an altar front but more probably was a panel to be placed on a wall. Not only is this

type of panel never found in altar fronts but it is also perfectly obvious that the lower part is missing. Its strange use as an altar front gives it a certain rarity value and also makes it more visible

"The intention of the votive panel is obvious, however, since the meaning of the words DIVA INTERCEDE PRO ANGLIA UT CONVERTARTUR is sufficiently clear. The conversion of Protestant England was solicited at a time of great religious persecution, either during the Cromwellian commonwealth 1649-1660 or later, at the time of religious agitation around 1670, during the reign of Charles II."

Dr. Rebello goes on to quote Gustavo de Matos Sequeira, writing in Bulletin N° 6 of the *Sociedade de Belas Artes*:

"The artist who composed the 17th century altar front located in the hermitage of Our Lady of the Woods shows us the Virgin between four "talking" angels who beg her intercession for the "heretics" . This is a reference to a local legend concerning the conversion of the English. The blue and yellow give an ingenuous effect and I do not know of another ceramic composition of this type which shows so much simple faith."

The parish priest of Mouriscas in the 1940's, Father Francisco José Pires, told Dr. Pequito Rebello that there was no explanation of the dedication of the chapel in the parish archives and this is confirmed by the present incumbent, Father Manuel Rodrigues, who accompanied the Society's recent visit. Father Pires did mention that it was thought locally that the chapel had been constructed by "Irish Fathers" who settled in the area at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The feast of the patroness was held on 1st October. In times gone by this was very well attended and indeed the local villagers still hold pilgrimages to the chapel today.

The distinguished archaeologist Dr. João Calado Rodrigues reported earlier this century having heard from old people in the neighbourhood a local tradition that an Englishman who had suffered greatly had promised to build a chapel in honour of the Blessed

Virgin and asked her to inspire him as to its location. An image of Our Lady was found in the woods and, as so often happens in ancient folk tales, although it was removed several times to the local church it always returned to the place where it had first been found and that was where the Englishman eventually built the promised chapel. Above the sanctuary arch was the date 1664.

Calling attention to the fact that only the area surrounding the high altar forms part of the original building, Dr. Pequito Rebello mentions that the body of the present church is smaller than the original building, which measured some 11 x 7 metres. The walls flanking the high altar are still covered in what Dr. Rebello described as 15th or 16th century azulejos somewhat similar to those in the parish church in the nearby town of Mação. Dr. Rebello's research showed that the original nave had a barrel vault roof and its walls were covered in fine tiles. The ceiling above the altar was also arched. Nowadays the body of the chapel is smaller (8m x 5m) and there is a pitched tiled roof.

Continuing his description of his first visit to the chapel, Dr. José Pequito Rebello transmits feelings of excitement and curiosity which stayed with him over ensuing weeks and seem to have been transmitted to many of his acquaintances. He writes: "When I thought there was nothing more to be seen I noticed some words surrounding the coat of arms on the ceiling. I used tables and chairs to build a scaffold and managed to climb up and read: MANDOU FAZER ESTA CAPELA À SUA CUSTA PEDE HUM PADRE NOSSO AVÉ MARIA (... HAD THIS CHAPEL BUILT AT HIS EXPENSE AND REQUESTS AN OUR FATHER HAIL MARY). It was disappointing not to be able to read the name of the builder of the chapel which must surely have been written in the most heavily whitewashed area. In my urgent haste to identify¹ the provenance of the arms, I immediately consulted the eminent heraldic expert Dr. Frederico Perry Vidal but he was not able to give much help".

It can well be believed that Dr. Rebello was fast falling into despair when he received what he described as "a truly enlightened piece of information" from "that illustrious genealogist, the Conde de

São Payo" (sic) who wrote:

"Eureka! Or almost eureka, with proper respect for the language of the divine Plato. As President of the Heraldic Section of the Portuguese Association of Archaeologists, at yesterday's session I brought up the heraldic problem you put to me on the train, some two weeks ago. Do you remember? The coat of arms in the chapel at Mouriscas. Two of our members, Antonio Machado de Faria and Gastão de Melo e Matos immediately expressed opinions about our problem and from the discussion which ensued I gleaned the following information.

"D. Fernando Coutinho, Marshal of the Kingdom, born in 1565 or 1566, was the father of a bastard son, D. Alvaro Coutinho, who in his turn had an illegitimate daughter (by Maria Sanches) known as D. Maria Coutinho.

This Maria Coutinho married D. Francisco Naper, an English nobleman, born in Scotland, who came to this kingdom and was governor of Abrantes. This Francis Naper was the son of one Christopher Naper, who served D. João IV in the wars against Castille. Now it seems that "Naper" is the same name as "Napier" and the arms of this family are a St. Andrew's cross accompanied by four roses, which would seem to be the same as the first quarter of the arms you showed me. The second quarter, five stars, apparently represents the arms of the Coutinhos, whose emblem is in fact five red stars on a field of gold. The fourth quarter would be the arms of the Lencastre family, which came down to the Naper Coutinhos through their forbear D. Branca de Lencastre, wife of Marshal Alvaro Coutinho, i.e. the royal arms, since this D. Branca was a niece of D. Jaime, Duke of Bragança. The remaining [bottom left-hand] quarter has still to be deciphered but given its English aspect it is to be supposed that it represents another attribute of the Napers or Napiers.

"As you can see, we have here the conjugation of such a large number of factors that I do not think there can be any doubt that

the chapel in question was founded by a member of the Naper Coutinho family, resident in Abrantes in the 17th century, who recalled their English past and prayed for the extinction of "heresies" in the British Isles. It may have been D. Francisco Naper de Lencastre, son of the couple mentioned above, or his brother D. Alvaro Coutinho de Lencastre."

And so it seems that the mystery is largely solved. The building of the chapel may date back a little further but the tile panel and its appeal to the Virgin Mary would seem to date from the time of Charles II of England and his Portuguese queen, Catherine of Bragança, a period when life was not easy for English Catholics and a nobly-born Napier may well have found refuge in the ancient Portuguese city of Abrantes.

But why the folk memory of "Irish Fathers"? It was not unusual, in the past, for Portuguese people to confuse Irish and Scottish origins. If these fathers existed, could it be that Naper or Napier was an Irish name, or could it be that the fathers in question were in fact Scottish? And can it be that these fathers, Irish or Scottish, built a chapel in a remote area which was later taken under the protection of our British friend and embellished by him with a plea for the conversion of England? If any of our members can find further information on this point it will help us to complete and enrich our records on this mysterious British connection with a remote Portuguese woodland.

See: ¹Christovão Aires and Braancamp Freire: *Armaria Portuguesa*.

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