

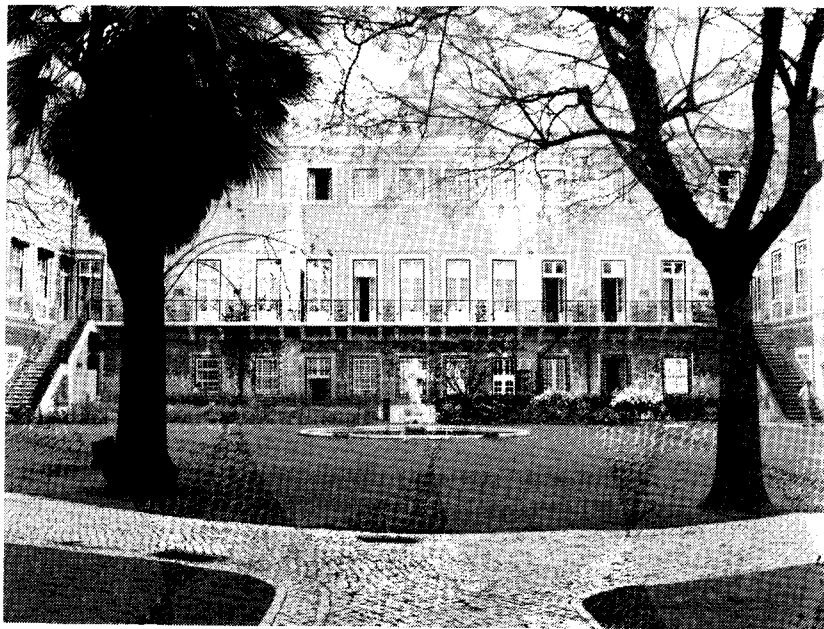
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Front (above) and back views of the Porto Covo Palace



THE PORTO COVO PALACE IN LISBON

by Simon C. H. Wilson

The British Embassy will be moving from its present building, the Porto Covo Palace, to new premises in Rua de São Bernardo (behind the Estrela Park) in October 1995.

Readers may appreciate details of the history of this splendid 18th century building which the Embassy has occupied since the Second World War.

I would like to express my thanks to Maria Calado, Ana Sofia Pereira and Manuela Romano de Castro for their help in preparing this history.

The Lapa district

Situated in Rua São Domingos, the Porto Covo Palace is part of an area of Lisbon with aristocratic traditions, where one finds examples of typical Lisbon architecture. These range from large convent type buildings, to small rented houses, and from small palaces to manor houses facing the streets with hidden gardens.

Rua São Domingos forms a central axis following an ancient path which divides the two areas that make up the Lapa quarter. On one side you have the oldest part, with a more popular expression and showing a more orderly arrangement, and on the other side a group of more aristocratic residences from the 19th century. Rua São Domingos à Lapa is also the natural link between the Southern part (Santos river side area), and the Northern part (Estrela area).

From the first settlement up to the 18th century

Although the dispersed settlement on the hill dates from ancient times, as the designation itself seems to indicate (lapa = cave), buildings only started to appear with the convergence of two factors: the progressive importance of Santos riverside area dating from the 15th century and the establishment of convents in the western part of the city from the 16th century. The setting up of

fishermens' residences at Madragoa represented the first stage of development, and an urban structure began to appear by the 16th century. Subsequently the convents attracted other population groups as we entered the 17th century. The vast hill was occupied by farms and unoccupied land belonging to Casa do Cadaval in the South and to Casa do Infantado in the North.

Rural paths appeared, separating the convents and the properties of noblemen, usually following the existing features of the land. The 16th century earthquakes, particularly that in 1531, attracted new residents and the main economic activities in the area were associated with the sea, farming and ceramics.

The Pombaline period

Following the 1755 earthquake, a large number of citizens moved towards the western part of the city, significantly increasing the resident population. This already included a significant number of foreigners. In 1770 the parish of Lapa was established largely resulting from the breaking up of the Santos parish, and with its parish based at Nossa Senhora da Lapa chapel.

The building plans for Lisbon, in the context of the Pombal plan, were responsible for the systematic urban planning of Lapa area, arranged in large quarters and octagonal streets.

Rua São Domingos à Lapa, at the edge of the plan, was then systematically developed through levelling of the pavement and successive construction of houses. The Porto Covo Palace is the most important of these buildings. Rua São Domingos became more and more important as a result of its increasing role as link between the Estrela quarter and the riverside area.

19th and 20th centuries

Following the disbandment of the religious orders and the expropriation of the convent properties in 1834, some of the properties were used for different purposes. In some cases they were divided into lots, for example the area of the Trinas and Nossa Senhora do Rosário properties. From the end of 19th century, the whole part of the hill to the West of São Domingos was occupied by small palaces and manor houses, belonging to the Lisbon aristocracy.

The architectural façades contain eclectic and revivalist symbols, and in some cases even "art-nouveau". Inside there are gardens and parks with a romantic lay-out and atmosphere.

The establishment of diplomatic residences dates from the 19th century but became more evident at the beginning of this century.

Construction of the Porto Covo Palace

The construction of the 18th century building, comprising the Palace, the Chapel and the garden, was ordered by Jacinto Fernandes Bandeira, a middle class trader from the Pombal period. He was born in Viana do Castelo in 1745. He established himself in Lisbon where he made a fortune by trading in tobacco with Brazil. The financial support he gave to Pombal's economic reforms earned him noble titles. In 1774 he became a Knight of the Order of Christ and later he was given the title of "Escrivão do Desembargo do Paço" and Deputy and Inspector of the Royal Board of Trade. In 1794, during the reign of D. Maria I he became a Peer and in 1803 the Baron Porto Covo. He had founded the village of Porto Covo on the Alentejo coast, and the name of the village was used in his title. His descendants, who were later given the titles of Viscount and Count, developed their economic activities by increasing trade with Brazil, concentrating on the wool and paper industries and in construction projects; they also opened a bank.

(An interesting British connection occurred at the time of the Palace's construction. The first Baron also acted as the representative of Francisca Melo e Castro, wife of the Portuguese Viceroy of India and owner of Monserrate. In 1790 he arranged for Monserrate to be rented to an Englishman of Huguenot descent, Gerald de Visme).

With his new found status, the first owner ordered the construction of the palace, and it was completed in 1790. It was the most significant building of its kind and remains a remarkable example of Portuguese palace architecture in the second half of the 18th century.

The garden and the back façade

Like the city palaces of the 18th century, the whole building occupied a long block and contained a garden inside. The back façade framed one of the areas of the garden and the tile decoration established a theme with the other areas. The garden had a pond with a stone sculpture of a two-tailed mermaid and a small romantic waterfall. A tile panel with tree motifs, around the outside walls of the ground floor, gave the illusion of a larger garden. Although in this period it was quite common to use tiles on the outside walls and gardens this is a remarkable and exceptional case because of the size of the panels. Other tile themes depicted the life of the owners of the building, for example scenes showing their involvement in trade with Brasil. One of the family was even born in Rio Grande do Sul, Colónia. The garden parties became famous in the Lisbon society of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Internal decoration

Having the same objective as the tiles, the frescos inside the palace gave life to the rather austere architecture. The walls and ceilings of several rooms have a very important number of frescos with neo-classic and romantic themes. The most important is the decoration above the grand staircase, where the architectural details are combined with the frescos in the ceiling in order to create a scene rich in space and colour.

19th and 20th centuries alterations

The decoration of the interior of the building and repairs to the small towers and the façade over the garden were finished in the first half of the 19th century. The Counts of Porto Covo bought remarkable pieces of art in order to give increased value to their palace. The Counts supported liberalism and were well known figures in the economy, politics and society of the time. The first Count died in 1806 and was buried in the Palace chapel. His nephew, also called J. F. Bandeira, succeeded to the title.

With the death of the second Count in 1895, the prosperity of the family stagnated and only cosmetic repairs were subsequently carried out on the Palace.

Sale of the Porto Covo Palace to the British Embassy

After the death of Alberto Júlio da Bandeira, the third Count, in 1937, all the family assets were sold by public auction. This included the palace and buildings in Rua de São Domingos and Sacramento à Lapa, the Porto Covo Bank and the trade company. Also dispersed were the remarkable furniture and works of art of the palace. The main building and the garden were bought by the British Embassy and the works of art were bought by private and public museums. The chapel reverted to the Patriarchate.

The building had already been connected with service to the British Crown during the Napoleonic campaigns when the Baron Porto Covo gave permission for the building to be used as the Headquarters for Wellington's troops. The Embassy moved into the Palace during the Second World War, in 1941, following extensive repairs and alterations.

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