

Residences of Portuguese Ambassadors in London

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Since my arrival in London, I tried to identify the possible locations of former Portuguese Embassies in this capital. It has not been an easy task.

Governments always wish their representations, in foreign capitals, to be near the centres of decision of the accrediting country. London has, in this respect, been a very dynamic example and, due to different reasons, the centre of power has shifted from the Tower of London, in medieval times, westwards along the Thames. Therefore the parts of London where it was fashionable or prestigious to live, moved along, generally, in accordance with the place chosen for the Royal Residence.

Curiously enough, the reference to the earliest Residence of a Portuguese Ambassador I ever came across, refers to a certain building in the outskirts of London, more precisely in Hammersmith. In 1679 Queen Catherine of Braganza bought a house in that village situated near «Cupola House», a Portuguese Embassy building, to which she retired when life at Court became too exhausting or just using it as a Summer Palace from 1686 to 1692. Probably «Cupola House» was also a Summer dwelling of the then Portuguese Ambassador.

In London, I found no specific references to the Portuguese Embassy before the times of D. Luís da Cunha, the Portuguese Envoy between 1696 and 1713 and Ambassador in 1715.

We have to bear in mind that the length of Ambassadorial service was extremely variable and that great freedom and independence was the given to an Ambassador where and how to settle his Residence, how to run it and even how to pay for it. Normally, the latter was done out of their own private income, in most cases, acquired by Royal favour.

Nevertheless, in the later part of the XVII century the Royal Palace was at Whitehall and the main private residences stood along the Strand. The widowed Portuguese Queen, Catherine of Braganza, chose a house in that area for her Residence, the imposing Somerset House with gardens that lead directly on to the Thames.

There she lived surrounded by her small court and excellent musicians, having introduced into England the taste for Italian opera.

It is not difficult though to understand why D. Luís da Cunha chose the Strand area to establish his Residence. From 1700 it was located on the south side of Lincoln's Inn Fields then known as Portugal's Row, in a mansion, represented by numbers 53 and 54 on that street known today as Portugal Street. Presently the London School of Economics stands there and it is always a motive of pride to the numerous Portuguese students who attend that prestigious school to see their country's name given to the street. Perhaps, little do they know the reason why the street is so called.

We then have information that the Embassy in 1719 had moved to Great Queen Street, in the vicinity of Portugal Street where it most probably stayed until 1730 when once again the Embassy moved westwards to Golden Square in Soho, the former Portuguese Residence being taken by the Sardinian Legation.

The most famous of the occupants of the Residence in Golden Square was the Marquis de Pombal, then Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, Portuguese Envoy to the Court of St. James's from 1739 to 1749.

Some years ago the City of Westminster had one of its well known blue plaques affixed on the façade of the House, to remind us that it was there that the Marquis lived. As a matter of fact, this Residence consisted of two houses, numbers 23 and 24 which were connected at the back to the then Portuguese Chapel which extended halfway down to Warwick Street. The history of this Chapel as well as the others designated as either Portuguese Chapel or Portuguese Embassy's Chapel should be studied separately, but I will just add that this one was destroyed during the Gordon riots in 1780, but by then the

Royal Chapel had been taken over by the Bavarian Legation. Anyhow, it had proved to be too small to host the Portuguese congregation and between 1736 and 1740 the Embassy and the Chapel were removed once more westwards to South Street.

Apparently for a century Residence and Chapel remained in South Street until the events occurring in Portugal from 1826 lead to the closing of both in 1828. According to XVIII century plans of London, they occupied the site of the present Egyptian Embassy at the corner of South Street with South Audley Street. It is said that the Duke of Palmela, Portuguese Envoy in two different periods and who had to give up his appointment for a while during the political turmoil in Portugal due to the civil wars, never left the house in South Audley Street where he liked so much to live and where he was surrounded by many valuable works of art.

The next Residence we know of is located in number 12 Gloucester Place, Portland Square, a very fashionable place to live in since the late XVIII century. It is a pity the house is so small and, today, looks very insignificant. It was the Count of Lavradio who bought the house when he first arrived in London as Portuguese Ambassador in 1851.

The Count of Lavradio, Minister from 1851 to 1869 made the most of the house since he was such a distinguished and intelligent Ambassador and extremely well connected in this country. He considered it to be, and rightly so, a feather in his cap, to realize the marriage between the Portuguese King D. Pedro V and the German Princess Stéphanie from the Catholic branch of the Hohenzollerns. It was a match suggested to him by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, that matchmaker with a keen eye for connections between her family and German Royal families. After all, D. Pedro was one of her favourite cousins. Princess Stéphanie after her marriage by proxy came to London for inspection by the Queen who was delighted with her and a lovely portrait of the young and attractive bride, by Karl Sohn, still hangs at Osborne. Anyhow, reviving an old tradition and since there was no longer a Portuguese Chapel, the Count of Lavradio transformed the largest drawing room of the Embassy into one and had Mass celebrated there for his new Queen. The scene was recorded in watercolour by a celebrated Portuguese miniaturist, Eduardo Lobo de Moura, who was then working for Queen Victoria. A descendant of the Marquis of Ficalho, who accompanied the Queen, still has that painting.

The Count of Lavradio was then followed by the Duke of Saldanha who went on living in the same house.

According to a letter of a relative of mine who stayed with the Duke and Duchess, they were extremely happy to live in London and in a daring decision, at the time, they made up their minds to take the vaccine against smallpox and she comments «they look like two happy babies».

The daring and fashionable Marquis de Soveral who was the Portuguese Ambassador from 1891 to 1895 and then from 1897 to 1910 was apparently unhappy with the house. It did not correspond at all in size and grandour with the town residences of those of his friends and who were in the circle of the Prince of Wales. I have been told that the Prince at a certain moment told the Marquis that he ought to throw a lavish dinner party to thank all the invitations he had received. «But how can I do that Sir, in that wretched place where I live? Inside it is so drab and weird!». «I think we can manage that» answered the Prince in a mysterious way. When the time came, lovely but not too well known pictures and furniture arrived from Buckingham Palace to Gloucester Place. After dinner the Prince who of course was guest of honour, turned to the Marquis and said «Now Soveral, won't you show me and your guests the famous collections your Embassy reportedly has?». And, as he went round the house he was the most attentive and surprised listener to the explanations by Soveral. «Se non é vero, é ben trovato!». After all, I am sure that Soveral in spite of everything, was very sorry to leave that house after 1910.

Shortly afterwards a next Ambassador representing the Republican régime was appointed, Manuel Teixeira Gomes, a very cultivated and intelligent writer. He settled in the house and lived there for 12 years until 1923.

The Portuguese Government kept the property of number 12 Gloucester Place and it became useful when in 1933 it was decided to buy the lease of number 11 Belgrave Square for Residence. It was then sold and the profit helped to pay the lease of the new house. The Ambassador, was then Ruy Ulrich and, his wife, the celebrated writer and fashion leader Genoveva de Lima Mayer, turned this new house into a shrine of the «Art Déco» style. It was stunning and they entertained lavishly. They had their own staff, one of which was the nephew of the famous «Régulo Gungunhana» of Mozambique, actively supported by Queen Victoria, but finally defeated by Mouzinho de Albuquerque. One evening as the Ulrichs were holding a dinner party in

honour of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VIII, Mrs. Ulrich who was being led by the Prince in to the drawing room passed by the profiled black footman and could not resist telling the Prince who he was. «Really?» exclaimed the Royal guest. «Then we are cousins!» and he shook him by the hand.

It was not until 1949 that the present Residence, number 12 Belgrave Square, was bought by the Duke of Palmela, then Portuguese Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. He was nearing his term of office and never lived in the house. Anyhow, the house was badly needing repairs having been severely damaged during the war. Number 12 Belgrave Square was first built in 1830 and its architect was Sir Robert Smyrke. The house is elegant, grand and well proportioned. It had been the town Residence of the Duke of Buccleugh and the Earl Bathurst among others. In 1951 a Portuguese architect, Luís Benavente, started the alterations that were followed up by the architect Alberto Cruz. Workmen sent from Portugal moved in and Portuguese decorative elements were put in the house: painted ceilings, XVIII century tiles, marble floors and stairs.

The next Ambassador Pedro Theotónio Pereira, started the works and followed them with great care and was responsible for most of the decoration. In this he was helped by Lady Blanche Elles, who was half Portuguese and had a highly successful business of interior decoration in Lisbon called «Renaissance». He bought most of the pictures and furniture that combined both Portuguese and English pieces. The most remarkable are a pair of gilt settees in the Regency style presumably from the Brighton Pavillion. The paintings in the dining-room are remarkable. The five landscapes adorned the house of Mrs. Wakefield-Saunders, 2 Hyde Park Gardens, and, when the house was pulled down Theotónio Pereira bought them. They were then attributed to the School of Gainsborough. Recently they were definitely attributed by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art to the Dutch School of the XVIII century, more precisely to the painter Joseph Maurer.

Two Portuguese Presidents, General Craveiro Lopes and General Ramalho Eanes and their wives, during their State visits to the United Kingdom, hosted dinners at the Residence in honour of the Queen and members of the Royal Family.

In 1986 during the official visit of President Mário Soares for the celebrations of the 600th Anniversary of the Treaty of Windsor, the Queen attended a large party at the Residence where she had the opportunity to meet numerous Portuguese and English guests.