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## THE BRITISH CEMETERY IN RIO DE JANEIRO

by Carol Rankin

At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were few British subjects resident in Rio de Janeiro. Most of them unlucky enough to die there had to be buried at sea, along the beaches or even in unmarked slave cemeteries. Brazil was of course, a Portuguese colony and largely a Roman Catholic country. Adherents to the faith living in Rio and wealthy enough to afford a funeral and proper burial were interred in one of the city's numerous churches where many of their tombstones or numbered flagstones can still be seen.

At the start of the Peninsular War with Junot and his French forces just two days march from Lisbon, the Portuguese Royal family and its entourage left the country. They sailed in Portuguese ships of the line escorted by the British navy arriving in Salvador on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1808 and in Rio's Guanabara Bay some weeks later on March 7<sup>th</sup>. At this stage in time if Britain or any other nation wanted to trade with Brazil it had to do so through Portugal. This all changed with the signing of the Royal Decree shortly after arrival in Salvador, opening Brazilian ports to ships of friendly nations. The Convention, signed in London the previous October foresaw this action, in exchange for providing an escort all the way to Brazil. Further, in the 1810 Treaty of Commerce negotiated by Lord Strangford, Britain was granted a number of exclusive trading rights with Brazil. British subjects were not slow to realise that there were business and trading opportunities to be had and they arrived in Rio in increasing numbers. They not only needed a place to worship but somewhere to bury their dead, and were helped by the fact that Article 12 of the Treaty stated "British citizens in Brazilian territories shall not be perturbed in the practice of their Protestant faith".

Dom Joao VI naturally felt well disposed towards the British, on December 24<sup>th</sup> 1808 he signed the purchase of a piece of land, and on January 8<sup>th</sup> 1809 signed Decree No 3 effectively creating the cemetery which was then ceded to the British in 1810. This was Rio's first open air cemetery and the plaque on its wall today reads:

**Cemiterio dos Ingleses. Construido em 1811 foi o pimeiro cemiterio protestante e ao ar livre na cidade**  
*(English cemetery. Constructed in 1811 it was the first protestant cemetery and the first open air one in the city) \**

The site of approximately four acres was in a lovely position. A piece of farmland, it went right down to the shore of the bay at *Forno de Cal (lime kiln)* very near a spot where slaves from Angola were landed. The area was (and still is) known as Gamboa which means a cove or small inlet, in this instance one where sea shells were brought in by the tide which the fishermen then gathered up to burn and make lime. When the cemetery wall was originally built the sea came right up to it as can be seen in an early 19<sup>th</sup> century painting of the site by J. Ziegler. Another contemporary artist, Maria Graham, produced many paintings and engravings of the cemetery and described it as "one of the loveliest spots ever seen, commanding beautiful views in every direction".

The first burial took place on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1811 when a Mr. Bentley was interred. Interestingly, the grounds of the cemetery were only dedicated nearly 60 years later in 1869. A walk through the grounds today reveals many 19<sup>th</sup> century gravestones, though some are now very worn and illegible. Nonetheless, the stones attest to the fact that many burials took place there. Legible ones tell of a sailor who fell overboard from his ship and perished aged 16, another of a similar age, one who drowned in the bay, both of them so far away from home. The infant mortality rate in Europe was bad enough but in Rio there were diseases such as yellow fever and malaria to contend with and throughout the century many British families lost several children in their infancy, their names are engraved for posterity. At some stage in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a small chapel was constructed in the middle of the cemetery and it is

near this that most of the earliest graves are to be found. Amongst the interesting 20<sup>th</sup> century graves, just as you enter the cemetery there are 13 Commonwealth War Graves in a corner tended by The Royal British Legion whose Rio branch was founded in 1921.

The Gamboa area really started to change with the need for the development of a port with docks, warehouses and other infrastructure in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Land in front of the cemetery was reclaimed from the bay; it became Rio's dockland complete with roads and a railway. Any remaining view to the bay has now been completely obscured by Samba City, a three-storied building recently constructed as a headquarters for samba schools. In 1897 soldiers returning from a military campaign were given permission to temporarily settle by pitching their tents on the hill behind the cemetery. These tents gave way to shacks, 100 of them by 1904 and gradually increasing in number throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was Rio's oldest *favela* or shanty town and today its shacks and houses come right up to the cemetery walls on three sides.

The surrounding area may have obviously changed for the worse over the years but nonetheless the cemetery has always remained a little corner of Britain in Rio. It is a peaceful spot with trees and plants that provide greenery and shade as you wander round its well-kept paths. Its historical importance is such that in 1988 it was officially declared a National Heritage Site; this of course brings some benefits but also means that it must be well maintained and preserved. Members of The British Burial Fund are active in ensuring that everything is kept as it should be and are continually making improvements. One of their recent major projects was the restoration of the small chapel which was completed in time for its rededication on November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004. Nowadays many people prefer cremation as opposed to burial so a memorial garden has been created within the cemetery; here ashes are placed and plaques can be erected on a wall in memory of the deceased.

Looking to the future, Rio's City Hall has started to implement plans to develop the now mostly derelict dockland area so that it becomes a major tourist attraction. They are also in the process of improving conditions in the *favela*. All this means that the Gamboa area will become safer and more attractive which will benefit the *Cimiterio dos Ingleses* and undoubtedly attract more visitors to its historic site.

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\*It was in fact the first open air cemetery in the whole of Brazil.

It took Dom Pedro II twenty years to persuade the Catholic Church to use open air cemeteries in the country.

Sources:

The British Cemetery, Rio de Janeiro

The British & Commonwealth Society of Rio de Janeiro – articles in yearly handbooks – mostly written by Chris Hieatt.

[www.umbrellaonline.com.br](http://www.umbrellaonline.com.br) - various articles relating to the cemetery

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The Late Michael Hunter to whom this article is dedicated

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**Carol Rankin was born and brought up in Portugal. Having gained her BA (Hons) as a mature student, for the last decade she has lectured extensively on Portuguese History and History of Art to specialist cultural groups, has written sections for inclusion in two guide books on Portugal and contributed articles in both the 25<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> issues of the Annual Report of the Society.**