

BHS P 10-1983

ROBERT HUNTER REYNOLDS: A 19th-Century Cork Merchant

It was in the mid-1820s that the Reynolds family first came to Portugal. Thomas Reynolds and his wife Marion Hunter settled in Oporto with their three sons, Thomas William (b.1811), Robert Hunter (b.1820) and William Hunter (b.1822).

From the choice of Oporto as his base it is clear that Thomas Reynolds's main interest was initially in wine. At that period, however, the distinction between the wine-trade and other commercial activities was not so clear-cut as it later became. Some of the well-known port wine houses did a considerable trade in Newfoundland cod. Just what the Reynolds business took in during these first years remains obscure, but cork certainly soon became part of it.

In 1828 the very unsettled state of Portugal led Thomas Reynolds to return to Britain, more specifically to Edinburgh, with his wife, his two younger sons and his daughter Elizabeth, born in Oporto. A nephew and his eldest son Thomas William, then aged 17, were left behind in Oporto to look after the business. (1)

At the end of the 'War of the Two Brothers' in 1834 the Reynolds family returned to Portugal. Robert and his brother William 'attended a school kept by a cultured Englishman who unfortunately died'. From this it may perhaps be assumed that Robert entered the family business, like his elder brother, at a fairly early age.

The Oporto business seems to have flourished, and as the boys grew to manhood they were encouraged to go far and wide in search of suitable cork for the wine business of Thomas Reynolds and Son Ltd. Some years later this led to their devoting virtually all their time and energies to the cork business itself which was then in primitive obscurity.

(1). See *8th Annual Report* pp. 26 - 36 and *9th Annual Report* pp. 54 - 63 for details.

The great majority of the cork forests lay deep in the Alentejo province of Portugal and in Southern Spain, areas then devoid of railways or of anything deserving the name of roads. Travelling had to be done on horseback involving many long hours in the saddle with a lack of comforts of every sort. Since inns were few and almost invariably dirty, it is likely that Robert on his cork purchasing expeditions accepted on occasion the willing hospitality of the forest owner.

It must have been on one of these expeditions that Robert met and stayed with Rafael Pérez Montalvo, an influential landowner of Oliva de Jerez in the Province of Badajoz, and a member of the family of the Marqués de Montalvo, a grandee of Spain. The two men had much in common and became close friends, so much so that Robert in 1852 married Rafael's attractive and cultured daughter Maria de Gracia.

The alliance posed religious problems — Robert being an Independent or Presbyterian by persuasion and the girl a strict Roman Catholic. However, Robert formally became a member of his wife's Church and all his children were brought up as Catholics. What his intimate beliefs were it is impossible to say; but the marriage seems to have been thoroughly successful. Robert surrounded himself with his wife's family whom he obviously liked and trusted, to the extent of appointing his brother-in-law Ildfonso one of his executors; and at his death he made provision for his sister-in-law Maria Tomasia.

Robert Hunter Reynolds was undoubtedly a good businessman. Originally, it would seem, that he and his brothers were in partnership; Thomas working with him in Portugal and Spain and William in England. The brothers at various times had cork factories in Portalegre, Estremoz, Azaruja and Évora in Portugal as well as in Albuquerque, Oliva de Jerez, Jerez de los Caballeros and Seville in Spain. Not all of these can have been operative at one and the same time, and a number were probably only 'field factories'.

The Portalegre factory was in due course sold to George Robinson who developed it and made it his principal factory. The Reynolds brothers' more important factories were situated at Azaruja and Estremoz. In the latter place there were two factories or depots, first in the Quinta do Carmo or Quinta de D. Maria about a mile from the town, and later in the extensive grounds behind the long low house on the east side of the big central Rocio square in Estremoz itself. It was in this house, known to this day as the Casa Inglesa, that Robert lived for many years and it was there that he and his wife both died.

The cork business like many others has its ups and downs which may have been one of the reasons that led Robert's brother Thomas William to emigrate to New Zealand. The youngest boy, William, during his years in London had become involved in a migrant scheme to the South Island and persuaded his parents, who had returned to Eng-

land in 1842, to join him. The migration of the larger part of the Reynolds clan to Otago between 1850 and 1857 has already been described. (2)

The question of Robert Hunter Reynolds following the rest of the family to the Antipodes seems not to have arisen. In part this may have been due to his health which had not been robust for a number of years before his death at the age of fifty-two. Equally he may have considered that the success of his operations in the Peninsula justified his remaining in Europe; and, though the family's migration turned out well, the prospect of starting a new life in a distant and undeveloped land must in any case have been daunting. Whatever the reasons, Robert and his family remained in Portugal.

In the mid-19th century the system of a convoy of carts was the habitual way of bringing cork from the Alentejo to Lisbon or to factories around Aldegallega (the present Montijo) and Barreiro. There were no roads as such but only ill-defined tracks, hot and dusty in the summer, the usual season for transporting cork.

Between Estremoz and Azaruja and Montemôr-o-Novo the way would lie among forests of cork and ilex trees and grey-green olive groves, up hill and down dale, passing the occasional crop or pasture land and, at wide intervals, long low white-washed cottages and farmsteads. After leaving Montemôr and its olive groves, the soil becomes lighter, sandier, and the vegetation undergoes a change. The rolling hills flatten and give way to moors covered with scrub. These stretch for miles with not a house in sight. A scene of glorious peace but almost desolation were it not for the beauty of the landscape; the home of many foxes, badgers, civet cats, mongoose and lynx; rabbits by the hundreds in the clearings among the shallow valleys, and birds of many kinds.

This is how Aubrey Bell, in his book *In Portugal* and writing in 1912, describes the scene:

... The roads cut through deliciously scented wilderness of cistus, without a tree, but with many birds and flowers: vetch, thick-tufted lavender, bugloss, hibiscus, the white round flower of the cistus with its dark red spots on each petal, other similar but unspotted cistus flowers (the size of wild roses) of white and yellow and glowing pink, pinks, harebells, campion flowers, foxgloves, tall branched asphodel and a hundred more . . . and the wind blows the strong heavy scent of the cistus over the road. . .

(2). See 9th Annual Report pp. 59 - 62.

One of Robert Reynolds's grandsons recalls being driven as a youth through this area in the early days of motor cars:

... in an open car of course . . . It made a deep and lasting impression on me; herds of goats speckle-spread among the scrub, the fragrant scent of the gum cistus, myrtle, wild lavender, the distant columns of smoke where periodically fires were lit to keep the scrub under control; and the hot swirling dust enveloping the car and its perspiring occupants barely shielded from the scorching sun by a flimsy hood. Alas, all that has long disappeared and the area has been brought under cultivation. Man and his civilisation have destroyed the habitat of many beautiful and interesting wild creatures. . .

In Robert's time the whole of this area was infested by robbers and highwaymen. A solitary two or three carts making their way together stood no chance; the muleteers' money, watches and overcoats were small prey. Mules could be taken out of carts and sold at a distant fair or traded with a gypsy, and the muleteers left to fend as best they could. For this reason convoys of at times as many as 100 carts or more were organised, each carrying two armed men — the muleteer and a companion — so that the robbers were discouraged from attacking them.

This had another advantage. Only a few muleteers knew the way which could be very confusing, particularly where tracks converged or crossed each other. The knowledgeable drivers took the lead, the rest merely followed. The long trail of carts must have been an impressive sight weaving its dusty way like a huge snake along the valleys and among the hills covered in forests of cork, ilex and pines; thrusting its winding course through moors of thick, scented scrub, to the accompaniment of mule bells and the singing and chatter of the men.

Cork is a light but voluminous cargo, so each cart would be piled high, the cork overflowing and bulging over the sides. At night the men slept alongside their carts, after unyoking the mules and providing them with hay or other food. Water they had to take at the many *fontes*, or water troughs, along the way. People having a spring or well not too far from the road made it a point of Christian charity to channel the water to a trough for the refreshment of man and beast.

Robert Reynolds's very successful cork business was largely based on a system he devised of what became known as 'leases', whereby he bought a few years ahead the right to strip the cork trees on a given property paying cash down or, more frequently, in annual instalments some years in advance. From the owner of the forest's point of view the arrangement had the advantage of fixing a price irrespective of market fluctuations. From Robert's angle it ensured a supply of cork

at a fixed price, though it also meant that he took the risk of loss due to market variations. His credit was obviously good for he was able to obtain what money he needed from the Bank of Portugal of which António José d'Andrade was a director. The latter was a thrifty and astute man of business and apparently a large absentee landlord in the Alentejo.

It is said that on one occasion a lively difference arose between Robert, who claimed the right to strip the cork on the Cabida property, and António José who claimed that he had bought the property, cork and all. Eventually Robert lost patience, organised an army of cork-strippers and carts and – so it is said – stripped the whole Cabida forest in one night, by torchlight.

This dramatic touch must be a colourful exaggeration; for to strip a tree in daylight is difficult enough; at night it would be well nigh impossible and very dangerous from the risk of fire.

Whatever the truth, the two men were big-minded enough to recognise each other's qualities and they remained good friends – a friendship that extended to their families and which ended in marriages between the Reynolds and the Andrade descendants, with the result that the Cabida estate eventually became the property of both.

In the process of acquiring leases Robert came to own a number of small properties around Evoramonte. Some of these had the most quaint names: *Matamouros* (Kill Moors), *Baldios* (Waste Land), *Quinta do Gordo* (Fat Man's Property) and even *Pouca Farinha* (Little or Scant Flour) all more or less carry their own meaning. But what of *Coitada dos Pixeis* (Protected Area of Wine Measures), *Peia Galinhas* (Tether Hens) or *Alferes da Meia Noite* (Midnight Subaltern)? Most of these numerous properties, often of not more than two or three hectares, paid a yearly *foro* or tithe to the Estremoz or Evoramonte Misericórdia (Poor House) consisting perhaps of a lamb or a couple of chickens at Christmas and a few measures of wheat, olive oil or honey and even a nominal sum in cash. The Misericórdia had perhaps at one time owned some of these properties and by retaining these rights when the land was sold – and together the properties covered a wide area – the Misericórdia assured itself a useful addition to its larder and income.

One of the innovations introduced by Robert Hunter Reynolds in the preparation of cork for manufacture was to boil it. In the past the method of preparation consisted of firing or burning the outside of the sheets whereby the rough gritty bark was burnt off and the texture of the cork allegedly improved. The new method of boiling soon did away with this old and inefficient system. Unless it is boiled, cork, with the passage of time, becomes hard as wood, due to the crystallisation of salts and chemical substances contained in the minute cells

that form the texture of the cork itself. Boiling dissolves these substances and renders the cork soft and pliable, another advantage being that the gritty bark can be scraped off easily when it is wet.

At first this new method carried its own handicap, for boiling left the cork black and discoloured. However, brother Thomas, who had obviously been discussing the problem with Robert, came up with the solution. Writing from Lisbon he said:

I am convinced that the black colour of the boiled cork is due to the iron boiler. Try to arrange for a copper boiler to be made.

He was absolutely right. The copper boiler left the cork unmarked and the boilers themselves remained bright and clean.

But Robert's activities were not limited to cork. Apart from his trade in this to the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States, he sold wool to Britain, sheep to New Zealand, olive oil, honey, crockery from the Fábrica de Loíça de Sacavém, cotton and linen cloth from 26-28 Rua dos Fanqueiros in Lisbon, and even wooden boards and beams supplied by an Elvas firm, Balthazar H. do C. Forn. Nothing seemed too much trouble if it left him a profit; nothing too insignificant if he could oblige a friend.

So Diedrich Matthias Feuerheerd of Oporto (3) is found writing to Robert in 1860, from the Hotel Durand in Lisbon, asking for:

two Marino (sic) rams and four young pigs of the kind you generally see here two of them male and two females, have the goodness to send the whole lot by Steam or Railroad to Oporto to my son there and recommend the Railroad officer to take care of them during transit. For the moment please to value on Porto or say to whom it shall be paid here.

Thanking you for the trouble this affair has cost you, I remain with a tender of my services on similar occasions, My dear Sir, yours very truly, D.M. Feuerheerd.

Business demands and the time taken by travelling on horseback or by carriage from forest to forest and from forest to factory could not have left Robert much time for hobbies. He was certainly a countryman – how indeed could he be otherwise living all his adult life in the Alentejo and Southern Spain? He successfully bred horses, mules, pigs, sheep and cattle, and established a brand for marking his animals – a practice generalised as a protection against cattle rustling – and the Reynolds brand became recognised as a hall-mark of quality.

(3). A native of Hamburg, Feuerheerd came to Portugal to avoid serving under Napoleon. He dealt in wine, mining and cattle. His children were all to become British subjects.

Robert was also responsible for the introduction of the eucalyptus into Portugal. Thanks to his brother William, who had married an Australian and traded with Australia, Robert received seeds of the Blue Gum (*globulus*) variety. This family tradition was later to be confirmed by Daniel Bergqvist, a Swedish engineer and chemist and a director of the Caima Pulp Company. He was responsible for converting the Caima pulp mill from pinewood to eucalyptus and had made a study of the tree and its history. According to him there was no doubt about its introduction to Portugal by Reynolds. Around the same time a Mr. Gassiot of the port wine firm of Martinez Gassiot introduced the eucalyptus to the north of Portugal but possibly from seeds or young trees grown in the Alentejo.

Robert's own contribution to the bird life of New Zealand was probably less useful than William Reynolds's to the economy of Portugal. It is said that he heard that the family in Dunedin missed the cheerful chirping company of the common house sparrow of which there were none in New Zealand. Robert therefore had a number of cages filled with sparrows and sent them out to his family. Apparently *passer domesticus* is now something of a pest in New Zealand.

In 1857 William Hunter Reynolds came to England with his young Australian wife on emigrant business, arriving in London soon after his eldest brother Thomas William and family had left for New Zealand. A long letter from William to Robert urges him to bring his wife and family to England for a meeting, alternatively suggesting that he might make a brief visit to Lisbon on his own, albeit at some inconvenience. Whether the two brothers did in fact meet is not known. Unlike his father and brothers, Robert does not seem to have been a traveller. His health may already have been precarious. A few years later his friends and close business associates in England, W.D. Howard and John Fisher, both refer in their letters to Robert's indispositions. In 1860 Howard cautions 'against eating and smoking too much, as these are both productive of indigestion and colic.' Six months later he writes: 'We sincerely regret your inability from indisposition for you to come to England this year. I foresaw this from the first knowing your repugnance to travel.' In 1863 we read, 'We are all very much concerned at the repeated attacks of colic from which you suffer . . .'; and Howard's partner, Fisher, writes:

I am very sorry to learn by your letter that you have been and are still so unwell. I sincerely hope that the bathing at Lisbon will set you quite straight.

'Bathing at Lisbon' consisted of being rowed out to one of the *barcas*, or bathing lighters, anchored far out in the main stream to

avoid the filth and pollution of the shore. These lighters 'had stairs or a ladder leading down into cages which stood under water and the bather swam or sat in these cages.' Robert reputedly 'always went very early in order to choose his cage which was always the end one up-stream according to the direction of the current so as to have fresh water not having passed through cages of others.'

From this it is clear that Robert suffered over the years from some sort of chronic stomach trouble. However, he lived long enough to meet his brother Thomas William when the latter returned from New Zealand in 1867 in connection with his Portuguese business interests.

Maria de Gracia Reynolds died early in 1870. She left Robert with a family of seven young children to care for, the eldest of whom, Eliza, was 16 and the youngest, Raphael, only 18 months old.

The death of his wife and the added responsibilities resulting from it must have taxed Robert's already fragile health, and on 22 October 1872 he himself died at the early age of 52. His son Raphael believed his father to have died of a burst appendix — a very possible explanation at a time when appendectomies were still unknown to the medical profession.

Robert died a very wealthy man. He left a carefully planned will, which, nevertheless, in years to come was to cause much family dissension, principally because the daughters' husbands had been excluded from any direct management or benefit in his estate. 'The best laid schemes of mice and men' He would however have been very happy to know that despite the many problems caused by her husband's involvement in the dispute and his lack of business sense, his eldest daughter, Eliza, did not hesitate to take it upon herself to act the little mother to all his children.

(This third part of the story of the Reynolds family is once more based on Dr. A.H. Reynolds's chronicles. The Council's thanks to him for allowing its publication here.)