

Queen Elizabeth's (1985) and Prince Charles'/King Charles III's (1987) Memorable Visits to Sintra, Portugal

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Introduction

With the revelation of these unpublished elements about Queen Elizabeth II's and King Charles III's visits to Sintra, I can both pay homage to those sovereigns and make my contribution to complete the information known to date.

During my varied and interesting professional career as a museologist, after having been appointed director of the Machado de Castro National Museum in Coimbra (1980-1984), the second most important state owned museum, I applied to be placed closer to Lisbon, due to my impending second marriage, which made me find a home in the capital. Therefore, from 1984 to 1990, I was the director of the Sintra National Palace, Portugal's most fascinating palace, called 'the Stone Lusiad', with a more than a thousand years of history and an incomparable variety and value of art. I think this is also one of the oldest European royal palaces which has accompanied history and art, which is different with its unique combination of features.

For centuries the Sintra Royal Palace/Sintra National Palace (commonly known as '*O Paço*'/The Town's Palace, to be better identify it from '*O Paço*'/The Pena Palace, which was built on the Sintra Mountain in the 19th century) had been chosen for receptions offered to important people. In the 20th century it became usual for Prime Ministers to offer their most important state luncheons or dinners at the Sintra National Palace.

As the director of the Sintra National Palace. I attended and conducted guided tours for dozens of presidents, kings and queens, the Emperors of Japan, princes, ambassadors, and other high dignitaries.

Now, on the occasion of the death of Queen Elizabeth II, I am going to reveal some interesting details about her visit in 1985, as well as her first born son's visit in 1987 (now King Charles III and then Charles, the Prince of Wales).

Queen Elizabeth II and the importance she gave to a red rose, a reminder of our Queen Philippa of Lancaster

I have always admired Queen Elizabeth II, and when she visited Portugal for the first time in 1957 with Prince Philip, I went to see her in Lisbon twice, with my school colleagues from the Maria Amália Vaz de Carvalho high school, and with my own family. In 1985, among the preparation of Queen Elizabeth II's and Prince Philip's visit to the Sintra National Palace, due to the admiration I nurtured for this sovereign who seemed to me particularly captivating, for the first time I felt a desire to present her with something, a kind thing, addressed to an illustrious guest.

After much reflection, I decided to give her a simple red rose, the symbol of the House of Lancaster, to which Philippa, the English Queen of Portugal (1360-1415) belonged, the wife of our King D. João I (1359-1433). He was called 'The one of good memory', and married Philippa of Lancaster in February 1387 and bore with her the 'Illustrious Generation': the future king, D. Duarte Edward, D. Pedro, who became known as the 'One of the seven parts of the world', due to his travelling, O Infante D. Henrique (Prince Henry the Navigator), A Infanta Isabel, who would become the remarkable Duchess of Burgundy, D. João, and D. Fernando, known as the Holy Prince.

In his work 'Mensagem' (The Message), the poet Fernando Pessoa calls Queen Philippa of Lancaster the 'Godmother of Portugal'. Philippa was a key character of the History of Portugal, and so was she

in the history of the Sintra Royal Palace, a monument belonging to the Queens' royal household since the 12th century, where she liked to stay, and where she made some great improvements. On the other hand, the Sintra Royal Palace has been a unique symbol of universality since 1289, when King D. Diniz and Queen Santa Isabel started to hold the Feasts of the Holy Ghost there, which are still celebrated in many countries. The Palace was chosen by King D. João I to plan the beginning of the 'Expansion' of 1415, which paved the way for the 'Discoveries'. One could say that Philippa of Lancaster was the Mother of the Discoveries.

On 27th March 1985, when Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip arrived at the Sintra National Palace they were entertained by the Prime Minister, Dr. Mario Soares, and his wife Mrs Maria Barroso in the front courtyard, according to state protocol, and some steps behind stood myself, placing at my side my eleven-year-old daughter from my first marriage, Inês. In fact, I wanted to promote my daughter by making her responsible for holding the Red Rose of Lancaster, which made her proud of having been in contact with this so-extraordinary sovereign.

I added a note to the Red Rose written on my calling card, which read:

“To Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II, the Red Rose of Lancaster, as a memory of our beloved Queen Filipa (Philippa of Lancaster), so much present in this Royal Palace of Sintra.
Matilde Sousa Franco.”

As soon as she received the Red Rose and heard my explanation, Queen Elizabeth II said with emotion, “I like this touch very much”, and noted that nobody in Portugal had told her about Philippa of Lancaster before. Immediately she decided to show her appreciation for the Red Rose by holding it during the guided tour, placing it by her plate during the banquet (held in the Swan Room, as is custom). After lunch she told me again how much she had appreciated my gift, and she held it until she got into the car. This was even more uncommon, as we know that the presents given to important guests are usually quickly delivered to

people-in-waiting, as was the case of my book which I also presented to her. – a book that I had published when I was the director of the Machado de Castro National Museum in Coimbra, with a first overview of the life of the British 18th century architect William Elsdon, who directed the works of the Marquis of Pombal’s reform of the University of Coimbra.

During the one-hour guided tour of the palace which I conducted, which took about one hour, Queen Elizabeth II asked many questions and showed a great interest and knowledge, not only of the History of Portugal, but also of the monument, which made me both amazed and happy. The whole conversation evidenced her sympathy, empathy, and her sense of humour. Dated 27th March, that same day and written on Royal Yacht Britannia headed paper, Queen Elizabeth II had a long letter delivered to me, where an MBE had been added to my name:

“The Queen commanded me to write and thank you for a most enjoyable visit the Palace of Sintra the Palace for which you care so devotedly. Her Majesty was most grateful to you for showing her round on that all-too-short guided tour.”

The letter went on to thank me for the book about the works at the University of Coimbra, ending by saying:

“It comes with the best wishes of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness to you and all your staff, who must have worked so hard to ensure the success of today’s programme.”

For me the confirmation of the unique character of this sovereign came a few days later, when another letter arrived in the post, this time from London, dated 30th March, on Buckingham Palace headed paper, just to say thank you for the Red Rose of Lancaster:

“I am commanded by the Queen to write and thank you for the Red Rose of Lancaster. Her Majesty was very touched by your kind thought. The Queen was so pleased with the wonderful reception she has been given in Sintra and elsewhere in Portugal. I am to thank you once more for your kindness.”

With this most grateful and unforgettable memory I already understood the entrenched love of the British and Commonwealth member states for Queen Elizabeth II and for the Monarchy. That understanding of mine was even better grounded two years later, in 1987, with the Princes of Wales Charles and Diana's visit to the Sintra National Palace.

King Charles III, his Culture, Esthetical Sense, and Sense of Humour

On the same day of that so-special visit of Prince Charles, on 13th February 1987, I published an article on this subject in the Sintra Newspaper, which reads:

“The Sintra National Palace, a nearly thousand-year-old jewel of the Portuguese heritage has been very much forgotten in its historical and artistic immense dimension. On the occasion of the 6th Centenary of the marriage of D. João I and Philippa of Lancaster (which was solemnised in the Cathedral of Oporto on 14th February, 1387), the celebrations of the rich history of this monument began. For this celebration I purposely managed to obtain the presence of Their Royal Highnesses the Princes of Wales at the Sintra National Palace. Since I was appointed the director of this palace in 1984, I have started to research and study it better, which I have done globally; and as far as official visits are concerned, I have tried to relate the exceptionally rich history of this monument and the countries of origin of the dignitaries who visit it.”

Actually, to prove how forgotten the history of the palace was, even by the very educated people who had organised the programme, the fact stands out that this visit only came about as a simple occasional encounter between me and my childhood friend, the late Dr. Paulo Lowndes Marques, the then the chairman of the British Historical Society of Portugal, who revealed to me this planned visit of the Princes of Wales to Portugal, in which he was involved. The Sintra National Palace was not included in the programme, and I suggested a visit,

moved by my passion for this monument and for Sintra. The was thus ‘squeezed’ into the programme, but it could not include a banquet and had to take a little more than one hour, and had to take place a few hours before the departure of the princes to Oporto, on that Friday afternoon. This visit to Sintra was programmed with six aspects:

1. The research, preparation, and publication of a text of mine, in Portuguese and English called: ‘Sintra National Palace, the cherished residence of John I and Philippa of Lancaster’, a joint publication of the Sintra National Palace, The British Historical Society of Portugal, and Lloyds Bank plc, in Sintra, 1987. It was most appreciated that Prince Charles’ genealogical tree was presented in the book, being a descendent of D. Afonso Henriques the first king of Portugal, and it included Princes William and Harry. If I mention that I had played the role of a book designer, it is because Prince Charles praised me for my work: I had chosen the House of Lancaster’s red for the front cover, with the representation of the Sintra Royal Palace from a drawing by Duarte d’Armas from 1507, and with a portrait of Queen Philippa taken from an illumination representing the Genealogical Tree of the Kings of Portugal, by Simon Bening (c. 1483-1561); and I used gold for those drawings;
2. The signature of the Palace’s Visitors’ Book of Honour, a custom which had been started there for all state visits;
3. The unveiling of a bronze plaque, representing Philippa of Lancaster, by the Master Sculptor Professor António Duarte;
4. The exhibition of a collection of Vista Alegre porcelain with the theme of the Anglo-Portugal relations, including a leaflet for which I was asked to prepare a special text;
5. The offer to the Princes of Wales of a pair of octagonal boxes representing two different swans, copied from the paintings on the Sintra National Palace Swan Room ceiling;
6. The offer of a picture depicting the Sintra National Palace by John O’Connor.

During the guided tour, I noticed that Prince Charles, just like his mother, had a deep knowledge of the history of Portugal and of the history of the palace, which was rare among the dozens of guided official tours that I had conducted. Endowed with a profound historical and esthetical sense, the Prince of Wales constantly asked me questions and made comments. Regarding the collection of porcelain, he immediately said that Queen Elizabeth II owned some Vista Alegre pieces which she was very fond of, and he was delighted with the two above-mentioned beautiful swan boxes (please note that these two boxes were unique pieces produced by Vista Alegre which were inspired by the Swan Room, although my project for the palace, for which I helped select every detail, consisted of the production of a dinner set for banquets at the palace, as well as innumerable sundry pieces for sale in museum shops, which to this day I feel are valued and profitable. With the single purpose of valuing the country's heritage, I recently got in touch with Vista Alegre to remind them of this project, and I have received excellent feedback regarding it coming to fruition).

Just to tell you how impressed I became, especially with King Charles III's extraordinary sense of humour, I must now focus on the bronze plaque representing the bust of Philippa of Lancaster¹, whose unveiling was the last part of the visit. An incident occurred which naturally worried me terribly, and only the King's amused reaction was able to put me at ease!

It is an enormous bronze plaque designed to be fastened to a palace garden wall. But for this unveiling it had to be placed by the palace's entrance, outdoors, under the arches, on a stand solid enough to hold the several tons. Due to the financial situation of the Sintra National Palace at that time, this was a complex problem, as it involved having a solid wooden structure made with extremely limited funds, and the purchase of yards and yards of velvet material to both cover the structure and also make a curtain for the Prince to unveil the plaque.

¹ Partly financed by a donation from the British Historical Society of Portugal.



The bronze plaque representing the bust of Philippa of Lancaster and the plaque which mentions the British Historical Society of Portugal

I must reveal the scarcity of human and material means those days: the palace had had no director for thirteen years, I never had a curator, or a senior manager, neither any other manager, even though the Sintra National Palace was the second most-visited palace, monument, or museum; and under my direction revenue increased ten-fold, all the proceeds being remitted to the Ministry of Culture. I counted on the fantastic support of the few guards, gardeners, clerks, and cleaners; and also on the support of the ‘Friends of the National Palace of Sintra’, which I had recently created.

Therefore, the building of the wooden structure for the heavy bronze plaque with the portrait of Philippa of Lancaster absorbed all the available resources of the palace, and nothing was left for the purchase of the necessary velvet material. I was accordingly advised to rent some velvet from a gentleman from Cacém!

A few days before the visit, I was even busier than usual. An unexpected and rare storm with heavy rain and strong winds which had brought down hundred-year-old trees from the palace park on top of houses, had forced me to help with these emergencies and to protect the whole structure where the plaque was to be unveiled with plastic. Meanwhile, I had the supplementary work of closely supervising the archeologic excavations that I had requested to better study the palace's age, cataloguing the valuable assets from at least the 12th century, which I even did even on the day of the visit.

Against all expectations, the velvet fabric only arrived on the eve of the visit. I was scared by the poor quality of the velvet, but it was too late to buy other material, even if I paid for it myself as a gift to Culture, as I had already done discretely, just for the pleasure of obtaining the best possible quality work, which was difficult for me, as I am not rich, which led my husband to rightly say that this was unsustainable.

On the eve of the visit, in the eye of the storm, I had to invent something to do to disguise the imperfections of the velvet material, resorting to some stitches and pleats, held by pins, only being assisted by the head guard, involving long hours up a ladder! (I have always liked my job but as a director, but I suffered a lot).

During the course of the guided tour, I became more and more impressed with Prince Charles, whom I feel does not correspond at all to the image of a cold, distant personality, without emotions, as conveyed by some social media. The Prince repeatedly called the visit “fascinating”, an expression quoted by the press on that occasion, as highlighted by the newspaper ‘A Capital’ (14/2/19887). At the end of the visit, we returned to the palace entrance, where the Prince was expected to unveil the bronze plaque with the portrait of Queen Philippa of Lancaster, by pulling a fabric tassel to release the velvet.

Well, imagine my surprise when the piece of cloth did not fall down, which was a terrible gaffe! Logically, as a director, such a situation was fundamentally tragic... moreover so when I had already been traumatised by the quality of that velvet. However, I soon recognised that the situation was a tragicomic one... and it became even more comic when the first thing to fall was the tassel!!!

I laughed inwardly with pleasure when Prince Charles, in an impulse of fantastic humour, asked me permission to keep the tassel as a souvenir of the marvellous visit and put it in his pocket!!! With this hard experience suddenly made more ludicrous and even amusing, thanks to Prince Charles, I became even more convinced that he had been very often treated unfairly.

On the 'Royal Party on Tour' headed paper, dated 14th February 1987, a nice letter addressed to me was received, thanking me for conducting the visit, but it must be added that the note mentioned:

“...the nasty weather, with rain and heavy fog..... Their Royal Highnesses had heard so much about this Palace and the wonderful views from it and were only sad that they were not able to appreciate these”.

More than four years later, having already been transferred to Lisbon one year before, I found even funnier than on the occasion of the visit when I received a letter on paper headed London St James's Palace, dated 8th April 1991, from the Private Secretary to the Princes of Wales Major General Sir Christopher Airy, saying that he had just come across and most appreciated my book about the Sintra Palace, which he called “excellent”. I quote the final part:

“More importantly, I have shown your booklet to The Prince of Wales and he was delighted to be reminded of that happy moment when Their Royal Highnesses visited Sintra on 13th February 1987 and he unveiled the plaque commemorating the marriage of Philippa of Lancaster to King John I of Portugal, surely a significant moment in the histories of our countries, and in the linkage with our oldest ally”.

Epilogue

I quote some articles published in the media regarding the visit to Sintra, except from the one cited that I wrote for ‘Jornal de Sintra’ (13/2/1987):

- ‘Before going to Oporto Charles and Diana at Sintra’ (‘Diário Popular’, 13/2/1987); ‘Humour in a foggy morning’ (‘A Capital’, 14/2/1987);
- ‘One hour in Sintra. Evocation of the marriage of Philippa of Lancaster’ (‘O Dia’, 14/2/1987);
- ‘Princes at Sintra say good-bye to the south’ (‘Diário de Notícias’, 14/2/1987);
- ‘Reportagem’ (‘Semanário’, 14/2/1987); ‘Princes in Oporto’ (‘O Século’, 14/2/1987);
- ‘Burst out laughing in the Sintra Palace’ (‘Correio da Manhã’, 14/2/1987);
- ‘Matilde Sousa Franco has just strived...everything went beautifully’ (‘Olá Semanário’, 21/2/1987);
- ‘From Sintra to Oporto Charles and Diana. In Byron’s paradise’ (revista ‘Gente’, 25/2/1987);
- António Valdemar ‘Philippa of Lancaster got back to Sintra’ (‘Diário de Notícias’, 1/3/1987);
- ‘What a competence! Matilde Sousa Franco’s leading the Sintra National Palace’ (‘Olá – Semanário’, 14/3/1987).

With these unpublished elements about the visits of Queen Elizabeth II and Charles III, I pay homage to these sovereigns, and I give my contribution to complete the news known so far. In addition, I offer my contribution to the Sintra National Palace being the national and international tourist attraction it deserves to be, as it has not yet been granted the recognition it deserves, unfairly forsaken in favour of several other palaces in Sintra, despite Sintra’s award of World Heritage status, granted in 1995, which commenced with an application that I made on 20th August 1984, a few weeks after my appointment as director of that fascinating national monument.



Dr. Matilde Sousa Franco was the director of the Museu Nacional de Machado de Castro, in Coimbra (1980 - 1984) and the Palácio nacional de Sintra (1984 - 1990). For many years she was a professor at the Faculdade de Letras of Universidade de Lisboa and of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa. She is a member of the Portuguese Academy of History, a member of the Academia Nacional de Belas Artes, a member of the Scientific Society of the Universidade Católica Portuguesa, and a member of the Association of Art Historians of Great Britain (AAH).