

St. George's Anglican Church, Ponta Delgada, São Miguel re-visited, with some notes on the British presence on the island.

The Society's Annual Report and Review for 1990 includes an article written by our late chairman, Paulo Lowndes Marques, entitled *St. George's Anglican Church, S. Miguel – Azores*. I visited the island of São Miguel in late August this year and found time to visit the church and cemetery in Ponta Delgada. I was thus inspired to write this article, drawing partly on the history of the church from Paulo's article, and also on my own impressions. I would recommend the reader to read Paulo's article for additional information on the church.¹

By Edward Godfrey

St George's was built in 1828 and was active as an Anglican church until 1948, when the last chaplain left. Later, the church found a new use, serving a Portuguese Presbyterian congregation. The church was sold to this congregation and the communion plate was sent to St. George's Church, Lisbon for safekeeping, where it still resides in the safe.

On my final day in Ponta Delgada, I contacted the pastor, Carlos Rosa, via the telephone number given in the website of the *Igreja Evangelica Presbiteriana*. He was only too pleased to meet me and show me round. The church, whitewashed both inside and out, is elegant and sober, as befits a church that was probably built to serve a "low church" Anglican congregation. Behind a simple altar is a wooden panel, on which is written the Lord's Prayer, The Ten Commandments, and the Apostles' Creed. In a nearby corner is a long-disused harmonium and a contemporary keyboard. At the west end of the church is a gallery and the whole building is well lit by eight large windows.



St George's Church, Ponta Delgada



The altar

The adjoining cemetery, where occasional burials still take place, is well maintained by the local parish council, *Junta de Freguesia*. There are three graves designated as Commonwealth War Graves. Here we find Donald Black, a "Boy", who died on 17 July 1942 aged 17. Donald was a member of the crew of the merchantman *Avila Star*, which was *en route* from Buenos Aires to Liverpool when torpedoed by a German submarine 90 miles east of Ponta Delgada on 6 July 1942. Three other members of *Avila Star*'s crew are buried in the British Cemetery in Lisbon.

¹ Paulo Lowndes Marques. *St. George's Anglican Church, S. Miguel – Azores*. British Historical Society Annual Report, No. 17. 1990. <https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/st-georges-anglican-church-s-miguel-azores>



The pulpit



The gallery

Also buried in the cemetery are two members of the crew of *HMS Cossack*, Henry Springall and Reginald Wallace, who died on 27 October and 3 November 1941, respectively, in hospital in Ponta Delgada. In February 1940, *HMS Cossack*, a Tribal class destroyer, became famous for the boarding of the German supply ship *Altmark* in Norwegian waters, and the rescue of 299 sailors originally captured by the German pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee*. *HMS Cossack* was torpedoed west of Gibraltar on 23 October 1941 and eventually sank on 27 October. These two sailors were picked up, severely wounded, by HMS Legion which took them to the nearest hospital at Ponta Delgada.



Grave of Donald Black



Henry Springall and Reginald Wallace graves

During the 19th century, Ponta Delgada became the third largest town in Portugal, in economic riches and the number of residents. The poet, Bulhão Pato, writing of Ponta Delgada, was surprised by the extraordinary riches of the plantation owners, the “gentlemen farmers” that lived within the urbanized core: exporters of oranges and corn, bankers, investors, industrialists and shippers, all contributing to a privileged class of economic and social thinkers and philanthropists. Many Jewish merchants arrived, notably the Bensaude family. The Bensaude Group of companies is still involved in many economic activities today.

Its website recalls that the first members of the family to arrive travelled from Morocco with British passports in 1820. They soon became involved in various aspects of business such as importing textiles from Great Britain and exporting oranges.

Ponta Delgada's British inhabitants in Victorian times, perhaps numbering somewhere between one hundred and two hundred souls, would have been involved in a number of activities. As Paulo Lowndes Marques says, Ponta Delgada was a staging post in the submarine cable network across the Atlantic so, just as in Carcavelos, a considerable British community was attached to the Cable and Wireless company.

Others, such as the Dart family, which had strong links with Liverpool, were involved in the growing of oranges and their exports to the British Isles and Continental Europe. Many landowners and merchants grew wealthy in this trade in which speed was of the essence. As soon as incoming topsail schooners were spotted from the hilltop look-outs, oranges were picked, packed, and sent down to the port. Often there would be a race back to England by these fast vessels and the first ship back would get the highest price. However, this trade rapidly declined in the 1880s due to the arrival of the fungal disease, gummosis, which wiped out many of the orange groves, and greater competition from Spain, from where faster steamers transported oranges to Europe. Other crops were then introduced into São Miguel, such as tea, bananas, and pineapples. Incidentally the orange is not a native European fruit. The sweet orange, as we know it, was brought to Europe from the Far East by Portuguese and Italian merchants and by 1646 was well established as a luxury good.

Lowndes Marques' article includes transcripts of the registers of christenings, marriages and deaths, as compiled by Antonio Augusto Riley da Mota. The register of christenings covers the years 1830 to 1901 and records 130 such events. It reveals interesting information of the fathers' professions. As well as several merchants, there are doctors, a baker, consuls, landowners, gardeners, a "botanic", a language professor, mechanics and hoteliers. The register of marriages covering the years 1827 to 1945 records 22 marriages. Ponta Delgada is given as the address of most of the "nubentes" although this might just be the address at the time of marriage.

The register of deaths from 1830 to 1949 records 101 such events. I presume that "death" in this case actually means "burial", this being the usual terminology in Church of England registers. However, there are fewer monuments than I expected to find in the cemetery, which has quite a large area of open lawn. Were some families reluctant to remember the lives of the departed with a memorial? And maybe anonymous sailors, victims of drowning, are buried in unmarked graves?

Among the memorials in the cemetery is that of Thomas Hickling, 1743-1834, an energetic businessman from Boston, Massachusetts, who arrived in 1770. In 1795 he was appointed U.S Consul in São Miguel by President George Washington. He also started the botanical garden surrounding his simple wooden summer house known as Yankee Hall at the spa town of Furnas. This house was purchased by the Visconde de Praia in 1848 who subsequently enlarged it. The surrounding park and gardens are now the popular Terra Nostra Park.

The largest botanical park was owned by José do Canto, who employed an English gardener, George Brown. As Augusto de Athayde pointed out in a 1991 article for the BHSP, São Miguel did not treat Brown too well. Three of his children died within two months of each other, in 1861, and were buried in the cemetery. Brown, himself, lived until 1880. After retiring from José do Canto's gardens, he set up the Hotel Brown, which was continued by a surviving daughter, Sophia Brown, and became the best hotel on the island.²

² Augusto de Athayde. *Some Notes About the History of the Azores and its British Connections*. British Historical Society Annual Report, No. 18, 1991. <https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/some-notes-about-the-history-of-the-azores-and-its-british-connections>

Other memorials exist to members of the Ivens family. William Ivens, an Englishman, was shipwrecked off São Miguel and ended up marrying Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Hickling. As Lowndes Marques says, the Ivens family became firmly Portuguese, and William's grandson, Roberto Ivens, 1850-1898, became the great explorer who, together with Capelo, crossed Africa from Angola to Mozambique in 1877.^{3 4}

The church and cemetery can be found at Rua da Mãe de Deus, Ponta Delgada, approximately ten minutes uphill walk from the Marina Atlantico Hotel.

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³ See also: James Henry Hayes. *The Hickling Connection*. British Historical Society Annual Report, No. 20, 1993.

<https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/the-hickling-connection>

⁴ See also: Carlos Guilherme Ivens Ferraz de Mesquita. *The Hickling Connection (continued)*. British Historical Society Annual Report, No. 21, 1994. <https://www.bhsportugal.org/library/articles/the-hickling-connection-continued>