

## The Phelps family saga: From Dursley to Madeira

The Phelps first arrived in Madeira in 1784. The family would go on to have a major influence on the island's development. This article reviews some of the contributions of the first three generations of the family resident in Madeira, as wine exporters, traders, landowners, benefactors, educators, and developers of Madeira Embroidery.

*By Cláudia Faria*

### William and Elizabeth Phelps arrive in Madeira

William Phelps (1749-1831) and Elizabeth Peyton Phelps (1757-1829), originally from Dursley, Gloucestershire, left England for Madeira in January 1784. They had been married in St. Giles Church, London the year before. They settled down in a building in Funchal, on *Rua do Carmo*, and while William dedicated himself to business, Elizabeth took care of their seven children.<sup>1</sup>



**William Phelps**



**Elizabeth Peyton Phelps**

PHOTOGRAPH OF OIL PAINTING COURTESY OF JAMES PHELPS

According to Noel Cossart<sup>2</sup>, who studied the British firms established in Funchal, the family business was already registered in 1786. Over the years it changed its name on several occasions, being best known as *Phelps Page & Co*, with “Page” being Robert Page<sup>3</sup> (1775-1829) who married Elizabeth Phelps<sup>4</sup>, the couple's eldest daughter. Both Grabham Blandy<sup>5</sup> and Elizabeth Craig<sup>6</sup> confirmed the company was still active in 1840.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth born on 24 October, 1784; Mary born on 1 September 1785; William born two years later; and Abel Peyton born in 1789. They were followed by Ann on 4 June 1790; Joseph on 24 September 1791; and Charles on 29 August 1796.

<sup>2</sup> Noel Cossart, *Madeira: The Island Vineyard*, Christie's Wine Publications, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Son of the Reverend Charles Page from Northleach, Gloucestershire. He became a partner two years after his marriage to Elizabeth.

<sup>4</sup> They married on 22 March 1803, at St. Pancras, and sailed to Madeira on 10 October 1803.

<sup>5</sup> Grabham Blandy, *The Old Factory in Madeira, Funchal*, (undated)

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Craig, *Madeira Wine, Cakes and Sauces*, London, Andre L. Simon, 1933.

## Joseph and Elizabeth expand the business

Following tradition, the sons were sent to London to study and it was during his stay in the capital that Joseph met Elizabeth Dickinson<sup>7</sup> (1796-1876), to whom he got engaged. They married in the summer of 1819 and sailed to Funchal so that Joseph could join his father's business. The couple had a large family of eleven children, all born in Funchal. Most of the family became well-known figures in Madeiran society, especially Joseph and his wife, who also lived in a house in *Rua do Carmo*, where Joseph reserved a few rooms for his office.



**The Phelps' house in Funchal<sup>8</sup>**

*Phelps Page & Co* exported wine to various parts of the world, including New York, Boston, Guernsey, Cadiz, Gibraltar and Amsterdam. In addition, the company had a store located at the heart of the city where groceries, furniture, cloth, and a series of items related to the wine business were sold. Several local researchers have confirmed that the firm, run by Joseph Phelps, was very successful and dominated the market worldwide for Madeiran wine. The company's size is easily confirmed by the fact that it had 11 warehouses, mostly located in the Carmo area, as well as by the number of wine casks that were daily undergoing the "estufagem"<sup>9</sup> process in the wine greenhouse, amounting to 140 barrels.

All in all, the firm owned a series of buildings and houses scattered around the city and even the British Consul in Funchal, Henry Veitch, admitted "...that the British residents in Madeira had become such landed proprietors that one firm – that of *Phelps Page & Co* – was the third largest landowner in Funchal"<sup>10</sup>. In addition, the firm was granted permission to have its own coins and, consequently, many people used to do their shopping exclusively at the *Phelps Page & Co* shop, thus guaranteeing a prosperous and dynamic business. Joseph Phelps was a member of the Trade Board of Funchal, established in 1835, having been appointed treasurer. He was also involved with the Agriculture Board and the *Sociedade Funchalense dos Amigos das Ciências e das Artes*. He was a member of the *Asilo de Mendicidade do Funchal* and was the local agent for the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.

<sup>7</sup> Daughter of Captain R. N. Thomas Dickinson and Francis de Brissac.

<sup>8</sup> Perestrellos Photographer. *Museu de Fotografia da Madeira*– Atelier Vicentes Collection

<sup>9</sup> A process of heating the wine to duplicate the effect of a long sea voyage through tropical climates.

<sup>10</sup> Desmond Gregory, *The Beneficent Usurpers*, London, Associated University Press, 1988, p.46.

## Quinta do Prazer

In addition to a house located in Carmo in Funchal, the firm owned a countryside estate called *Quinta do Prazer* (Pleasure), to where the family often escaped to spend a few days and get away from the bustling city. It was acquired on 13 May 1805 at a cost of “15 contos de réis”<sup>11</sup>, a fortune for that time. It soon became a fashionable place, being a “must” visit to many of those who passed by the island or came to sojourn and benefit from the mild climate and pleasant atmosphere.



Quinta do Prazer<sup>12</sup>

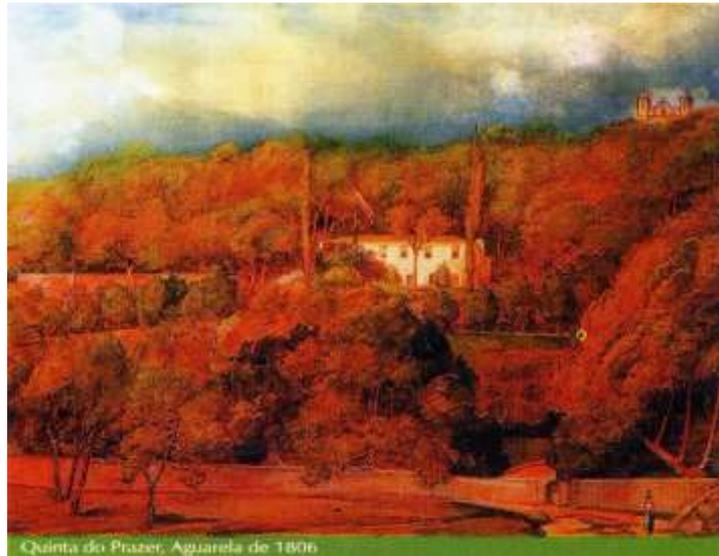
The family’s letters and private papers are filled with descriptions of dinner and tea parties, and of reading and dancing soirées, as well as of the famous picnics, when every visitor, by request of the lady of the house, would plant a tree or a bush, hence expanding the green area of the property. According to Mary’s<sup>13</sup> diary, it was her favourite place on the island and she frequently spent time there, playing the piano, reading or walking along the gardens and paths. It was also a desirable place to recover from any illness and, whenever the parents were away, visiting their family and friends in London, the children used to go up there and benefit from the tranquillity and security of the area.

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<sup>11</sup> A.R.M., R.N., Livro 3, n° 2284, fls. 37v°.-42v°., Tab. Cândido Leal e Lacerda.

<sup>12</sup> Engraving included in *A Shoebox of Letters* by Penelope Forrest published in 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Second daughter of Elizabeth and Joseph.



**Quinta do Prazer, 1806<sup>14</sup>**

### **The Phelps as benefactors**

Due to their prominent position in Funchal society, Joseph and Elizabeth Phelps were frequently asked for advice and help and they opened their door to everyone in need. As major benefactors they often gave money to the restoration or embellishment of churches, chapels and other buildings, and to the construction of new buildings that would offer services previously unavailable. Frequently they offered food and clothes to the poor, both in Madeira and elsewhere. In 1846, during a cholera outbreak in Funchal, the whole family got involved in providing assistance and Charles Phelps, Joseph's youngest son, became the treasurer, collecting funds inside and outside Madeira.



**Elizabeth Phelps and Joseph Phelps<sup>15</sup>**

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<sup>14</sup> Watercolour included in *A Shoebox of Letters* by Penelope Forrest, 2016. The original belongs to the Frederico de Freitas Museum in Funchal.

<sup>15</sup> Lambeth Archives, London. It seems likely that the "Elizabeth" in the photograph is the daughter of Joseph, not his wife.

The couple's most distinguished contribution to develop and modernize the island was by improving education. Joseph established a school for boys, which followed the Monitorial System.<sup>16,17</sup> Elizabeth, until she left Madeira in 1860, dedicated herself to the Lancasterian School for girls<sup>18</sup>, which she managed with outstanding success, teaching girls how to read and write and also how to become good housewives, by providing sewing and embroidery lessons.

Both schools relied on the supervision of associated members, who not only administered and collected funds from friends and visitors but also visited the premises and checked the students' health and hygienic condition every week. There was also direct connection with the British and Foreign School Society<sup>19</sup> in London, which received regular reports and also contributed with money and by sending books and other school material. The 1840 report to the Society, for instance, mentioned that there were 130 girls attending school, praising the level and proficiency of the teachers. As a curiosity, we can add that the Bible that circulated in the Phelps' school, which was sent by the Bible Society, was printed at John Dickinson's paper factory, that is, Elizabeth Phelps's eldest brother. There was also a library with varied books offered by the Duke of Leuchtenberg,<sup>20</sup> and there were other benefactors such as Queen Adelaide<sup>21</sup> and the German, Ida Saxe-Weimar.

Other members of the family were as prominent as Elizabeth and Joseph. The role of their eldest daughter, Elizabeth, known as Bella, in developing and promoting embroidery in Madeira is remarkable. It is said that after observing the skills of the women and girls, Bella decided to establish an embroidery school where she improved the patterns and modernised the methods, while importing materials, such as linen and threads, from England. She then had the embroidery sets sent to London and, with the help of her sister, Kitty,<sup>22</sup> and of Lady Marion Alford<sup>23</sup>, who had contact with the Royal School of Needlework, the works were admired and soon the requests increased, leading, in the long run, to a very industrious and profitable activity – the Madeira Embroidery.



**Pattern by Elizabeth Phelps**<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monitorial\\_System](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monitorial_System)

<sup>17</sup> The school was known as the *Associação Funchalense para o Ensino Mútuo* and opened in 1819.

<sup>18</sup> It was named *Senhoras do Funchal Associadas* and its regulations were approved on 21 December 1821.

<sup>19</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_and\\_Foreign\\_School\\_Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_and_Foreign_School_Society)

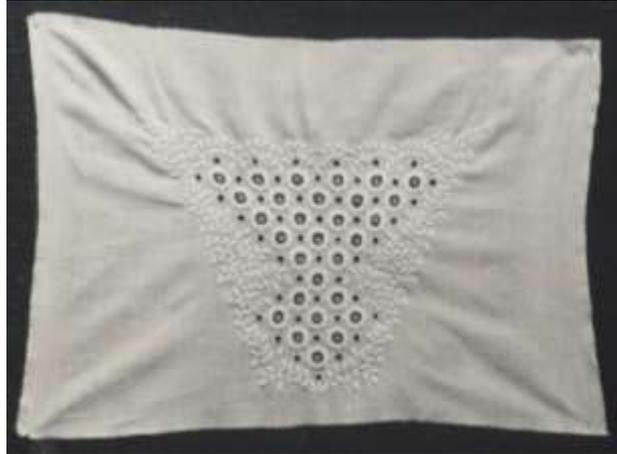
<sup>20</sup> Eugène Rose de Beauharnais, born in Paris on 3 September 1781, to the noble Beauharnais family, the son of Viscount Alexandre de Beauharnais and Josephine Tascher de la Pagerie.

<sup>21</sup> Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (Adelaide Amelia Louise Theresa Caroline; 13 August 1792 – 2 December 1849) was Queen of the United Kingdom and Hanover from 26 June 1830 to 20 June 1837 as the wife of King William IV.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth and Joseph's daughter Anne was married to Robert Bayman and known in the family by the nickname Kitty.

<sup>23</sup> She was the author of the book "*Needlework as Art*" published in 1886 and she was the vice-president of the Royal School of Needlework, established by the Princess Christian of Schleswig- Holstein, former Princess Helena, daughter of Queen Victoria.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Phelps, private collection. Simon Phelps lives at *Quinta Choupana* in the outskirts of Funchal and his mother was Greta Monica Phelps Figueira.



**Madeira Embroidery<sup>25</sup>**

### **Conclusion**

The role of the Phelps family in promoting the island and, above all, their commitment to improving the living conditions of the population cannot be denied. The family are still remembered, not only by their good deeds, but also because one of the streets in Funchal bears their name, hence confirming their wealthy position, acknowledging their love and care for Madeira, and emphasising the impact they had in Funchal's society during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**Largo do Phelps in Funchal<sup>26</sup>**

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Cláudia Faria was born and brought up in Madeira, having obtained a degree in modern languages and literature from the University of Madeira (UMA). She has researched and written extensively on the Phelps family, receiving a Master's degree from UMA in Anglo-American Culture and Literature, with a thesis titled *Phelps, Paths of a British family in Madeira in the 1800s*. She is currently working for the Culture Department in Madeira, being the chief editor of *Islenha*, a culture studies magazine. She is an active member of the Centre for English, Translation, and Anglo-Portuguese Studies (CETAPS), with which the BHSP collaborates regularly.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MadeiraQuaseEsquecida/>