

examination format – “compare and contrast”. Both Alexander Schulenberg and Trevor Hearl are historians but approach their subjects in very different styles and it is a pleasure to have both of them contributing to the same issue. I have lost count of the number of would-be writers, visitors to St Helena and just “curious about the South Atlantic islands” who have been inspired by coming to know Trevor. As your Editor I am most indebted to him and acknowledge the warm encouragement he has given me with “Wirebird”.

As always, my thanks to all those who have enabled us to produce the nineteenth number of your magazine: for me the penultimate issue but still an enjoyable challenge. The next number already shows much promise and will appear in December.

Tony Cross

MYTHS OF SETTLEMENT:

St Helena and the Great Fire of London

by **ALEXANDER HUGO SCHULENBURG**

St Helena, like other colonial territories, has its myth of settlement. In his *A History of the Island of St Helena*, published in 1909, Thomas Brooke was ostensibly the first to claim that “after the year 1666, the island received a considerable increase of inhabitants by the dreadful fire in London, which ruined so many families, and, like other public calamities, induced numbers to seek relief in distant climes”. Ironically, Brooke’s statement on the Great Fire refugees is followed by his debunking the claim that St Helena had been assigned to Charles II as part of his queen’s dower. That, Brooke, says, “is not justified by any authentic information”. If only he had been as cautious regarding some of the other claims in his *History*.

Even Philip Gosse, one of the first writers to make extensive use of the Company’s records in London, wrote in 1938 that it “is true that the *Constantinople* brought out twenty-six men in 1663, and the *Charles* another thirty or perhaps more, victims of the Great Fire of London, four years later”. This ‘Great-Fire-Myth’, as I choose to call it, has since become a standard feature in even the briefest of historical overviews of St Helena. (see Philip Gosse, *St Helena 1502-1938*, London, 1938).

Ross Clark, writing in *The Spectator* in September 1994, offers the following version: “Another group who inadvertently ended up on St Helena were Londoners made homeless in the Great Fire of 1666. Quite what they had done to deserve being transported 5,000 miles from their former homes is difficult to guess, but whatever the reason, the East India Company felt it was doing them a favour”. (see Ross Clark, ‘We have always been British’, *The Spectator*, September 1994).

Tony Cross, writing in 1980, appears to have had even more detail at hand, for he claimed that “[a]fter the Great Fire of London in 1666 the company made grants to settle some homeless families in the island, and although some returned to England later a nucleus remained”. (see Tony Cross, *St Helena: Including Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha*, London: David & Charles, 1980).

The Great-Fire Myth has even found its way into a whole range of arguments, from politics to genetics. To provide an example of the former, one of St Helena’s legislative councillors, Harry Legg, referred to the Great Fire in a speech objecting to the British Nationality Act 1981. “Have our people to become refugees to enter Britain as our ancestors became from the Great Fire of London to come to St Helena?” (see *St Helena: Proceedings of the Legislative Council*, 20.6.1985).

Ian Shine, on the other hand, drew on the genealogical side of the ‘Great-Fire-Myth’ in his otherwise admirable medical study of the island, *Serendipity in St Helena*, published in 1970:

“The term ‘founder principle’ refers to the changes in gene frequency that may occur whenever a colony is founded by a small number of individuals carrying genes that are rare or unrepresentative of the parent population. Consider a Londoner in the year 1666 who was made homeless in the Great Fire and emigrated to St Helena, as some did. Whatever rare gene he happened to carry (perhaps he was the only Londoner with Christmas disease), as soon as he became one of St Helena’s 100 settlers, his rarity value changed from 1:500,000 to 1:100.” (see Ian Shine, *Serendipity in St Helena: A Genetical and Medical Study of an Isolated Community*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1970).

Most significantly, however, the Great-Fire-Myth received official approval in 1967, when the 300th anniversary of the settlers’ arrival was celebrated with a commemorative issue of four stamps. The first of these shows a cityscape of burning timber-framed houses, with a number of people running from the flames. The second shows an East Indiaman under full sail. The third shows two crowded longboats approaching a shallow beach through the surf and being met by people on the shore. Finally, the fourth shows a group of people felling trees and building a log cabin of sorts, and clearing and hoeing the ground. All four stamps are bordered by the caption “Tercentenary of the arrival of settlers after the Great Fire of London, St Helena 1667-1967”. In addition, the stamp issue’s first day cover featured a chart illustrating the route taken by the settlers on their voyage to the island.

Trevor Hearl, in a leaflet written in 1994, clearly accepted the Great-Fire-Myth at face value, for he requested that “[n]ow we have found St Helena’s ‘Mayflower’ (ie. the ship *Charles*) and those who sent it, will someone please find the Saints’ ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ (ie. a list of names of those who sailed upon her)!”

This, alas has turned out to be a futile quest, as St Helena's supposed 'pilgrim fathers' did NOT travel on the *Charles*.

During the year of the Great Fire, the East India Company did in fact experience serious difficulties to engage settlers for its island of St Helena. On the 26th January 1665 (ie. 1666), the East India Company's Court of Directors had requested "the committee for plantations to consider & provide Men Blacks Ammunition & what else they think needful for St Hellena", and one month later, a Mr Kendall was desired to agree for Freight, passengers & Blacks to be carried to St Hellena, upon the best termes he can. [H]is discretion shall direct him". On the 30th March, however, "Mr Kendall acquainted the Court that he had according to their order endeavoured by all waies he could to supply St Hellena with men & mony, but he could now effect it now [...]". No particular reasons are recorded, although they would presumably have been given at the time. In consequence, the court deferred any further moves until after the Company's next meeting of shareholders, which took place the following month. At the end of April, the court renewed its request to Mr Kendal "to take care to furnish that Island with such men, Ammunition & provisions as may be thought fit or needful for the better security reinforcing that place, & perticularly to supply them with an able planter to instruct the people there".

As the issue of St Helena is not mentioned again for several months, Mr Kendall presumably made some progress in the matter. On 28th November, the Court again requests the committee for shipping to arrange for the supply of the island and ordered a Mr Maurice Thomson "to appoint such goods to be laden on the *Charles* as are proper for that place".

Eventually, in December 1666 the East India Company addressed a petition to the King, stating "That though your Petitioners doe not adventure to carry on their trade as in tyme of peace, Yett in Order to yo^r Ma^{ties} service & preserving the Kingdomes interest in those parts, & for keeping things in the best order there that may be possible in this time of eminent danger Have prepared onely 3 ships namely the *London* John Privitt Commander burthen 400 tonns with 80 men, the *Bantam* William Barker Commander 120 tonns with 25 men, the *Charles* Samuel Smith Commander 130 tonns with 30 Seaman (& also 30 Landmen for supply of the Island of St Helena) designed for some ports in India where they hope (by the blessing of God) they may Arrive & from thence returne with safety".

In his reply, the King only granted permission for the *London*, but as the *Charles* is known to have sailed, permission must have been granted at a later stage, although no record survives.

On 14th December, the Court's minutes record that a "draught of severall heades of agreement with Henry Gargen to goe for St Helena with his family was now read & approved by the court, and the Comittee for plantations were disered to perfect them in the form of articles". But Gargen was no ordinary settler, not least because the Company's agreement with him stipulated that he be "second to y^e Governor, & one of the Counsell". In its final form, the agreement with Gargen provided that "himselve with his wife, & her sister whoe hath skill in Dary, together, wth a man & Maid Servant

(if hee can procure them) & one childe of a yeare & halfe old, may be transported for y^e Island of St Hellena, at y^e charge of the East India Company. [...] That he be employed [...] y^t he shall chiefly attend y^e affaires of y^e Comp^a in y^e prudent manadgm^t of their plantacon & their cattle, & that his wife and her sister improve y^e Comp^{as} Dary, in y^e making of Butter, Cheese &^c”.

The *Charles* actually missed the island at first and had to land at Spiritu Sanctu in Brazil on its way to St Helena. However, upon her arrival at the island, there appear to have been no other passengers on board than Henry Gargen and his family. These, however, do not qualify as victims of the Great Fire of London. Not only do Gargen's and his sister-in-law's expertise in farming make it unlikely that either of them came from the City of London itself, but, more importantly, Gargen had previously been resident on St Helena, from 1661 to 1665. As for their man and maid servant, it is not even known whether any were ever engaged by him. Although it is correct to speak of Gargen, his family and servants as settlers who travelled to St Helena on the *Charles*, there is no reason to suppose any of them to have been victims of the Great Fire. And even if they had been, their small number hardly justifies their being accorded the status of 'Pilgrim Fathers'. In any case, as is well known, the island was originally settled in 1659, eight years earlier.

The South African traveller Lawrence Green claimed in 1956 that “St Helena has its old families with remarkable histories, but there are very few survivors of the seventeenth century settlers”. This, however, is not the case. Rather than cling to mythical ancestors, St Helenians are in fact in a position to research their ancestry through the island's extensive and well-kept registers of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths. As they are sure to discover, a few of the island's late seventeenth century settlers are bound to be amongst them.

ARCHIVAL REFERENCES

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- India Office Records: H/42, 'Petition to His Majesty', p. 134; 'Royal Order', p. 135.
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