

## **Introduction to Seventeenth Century Records in the St Helena Archives**

St Helena is a small island in the South Atlantic ocean and one of fourteen remaining British overseas territories. Now known mainly as the final place of captivity of Napoleon, the island has a much longer and richer history. St Helena was first discovered by the Portuguese in 1502-5 during Vasco da Gama's journey to the East Indies. During the sixteenth century the island was visited by travellers as diverse as two teenage Japanese princes en route to visit the Pope and an unlucky follower of Alfonso Albuquerque, who was marooned there after defecting to an enemy. It was also the site of what can be described as the first ever 'science fiction' novel, Francis Godwin's 1638 'Man in the Moone'. After being abandoned by the Portuguese, the island passed between Dutch and English hands until 1659, at which point the East India Company established their 'government' there. Apart from one further short period of Dutch occupation in 1673, Company rule endured until the island was transferred to the Crown in 1834. Thereafter, almost every English ship, and many vessels under other flags returning from the East called at the island for refreshment, repairs, and rest, bringing goods, news, and people. The island's population was formed from a small band of initial recruits from England who were either Company servants, soldiers, or smallholders, referred to as 'free planters' and their families. They were joined by slaves from West Africa and Madagascar, European and Asian sailors, prisoners, and exiles, and other arrivals including Huguenot refugees from France and the occasional stranded pirate from the Americas. The accompanying map gives a stylised representation of the routes to the island in the seventeenth century. In other words, the lines shown are not a reflection of the actual logs of ships but simply depict the connections between the island and other parts of the world.

From an early stage, each East India Company settlement, or 'factory', was required to keep detailed accounts of the meetings of the Governor and Council in 'Consultation Books', as well as a series of 'Letter Books' which recorded all the correspondence sent and received. Two copies of each of these types of record were supposedly made, one to be retained by the factory and the other to be sent on a ship returning to England and kept in the headquarters of the Company. However, the journey back to England was long and hazardous and these documents were often lost or stolen en route, particularly during the early period. This means that the India Office records now held in the British Library are incomplete while those on the island supply a far better picture of its life in the seventeenth century. The digital copies and indexes discussed here were made in the archives on St Helena during March to June 2008. This work was supported by a Central University of London Research Grant.

**East India Company Consultations, Volumes 1-6 (1678-1700), Letters from England (1673-1683) and Goodwin's Abstracts (1677-1713)**Organisation and numbering of digital copies:

The DVDs containing the files are held in the British Library African and Asian Studies reading room.

A complete index is included here and each DVD has an index to the section of the volume included. The first five DVDs contain one volume each and the last contains the relevant folios of Volume 6, Goodwin's Abstracts and the First Letter Book (LB1). Each photograph is one page numbered to correspond to the folio numbers given at the top of each page. In several of the volumes the folio numbers do not run consistently. Therefore, folios that are not numbers are given the number in sequence. When folio numbers are missing or two different numbers are given this is indicated in the 'notes' column. When two or more folios have the same number this is indicated by (i), (ii) etc. in brackets. This is also used for pages which are not foliated but are interleaved after a page that does have a number.

Language and abbreviations

The text is readable without any background in paleography. Note that because of changes to the English calendar, the first three months of the year are often given as the previous year. For example, 1 January 1680 may be written 1 January 1679 or 1679/80. The actual year is given in the index. In some sections '7ber' is used for September, '8ber' for October; '9ber' for November and 'Xber' for December. Common abbreviations include 'y<sup>b</sup>' for that, 'w<sup>ch</sup>' for which and 'y<sup>e</sup>' for the, Hono<sup>ble</sup> 'honourable'. In some places 'v' is used instead of 'u', e.g. 'vpon' is 'upon'. The long 's' also occurs in some passages.

Scope and other collections:

The first five volumes of the records cover the period from 1679 until 1699. Although copies of the records were sent to London, there are significant gaps in the records housed in the India Office collection in the British Library: in particular, there are no records for the period between summer 1676 and spring 1682 or between early 1685 and mid 1694 and none between 1696 and 1699. All of these gaps can be supplied by the St Helena archives. The index to each volume shows which records are duplicated in London. Letters from England to St Helena are preserved in the general 'E' series which contains all letters from the Directors to 'their servants in the East', but separate volumes of correspondence with St Helena are not preserved in London until the nineteenth century. The surviving book of seventeenth century letters in the St Helena Archives covers the period 1673-1683, containing letters from England and from several

of the factories in Asia. Goodwin's abstracts, made in 1708 give extracts and notes covering the period from 1673 to 1713 as well as list of rules for slaves made by the inhabitants with the approval of the Governor and Council.

Published accounts of the records:

The main source is H. R. Janisch's *Extracts from the St. Helena Records* (St. Helena, 1885) which presents sections of the Consultations interspersed with letters from London and editorial comments. There is a column in each index showing whether or not the content of each folio was included by Janisch. As for the sections that Janisch does include, he is fairly reliable in most places, the main problem being that it is hard to tell when the records are being quoted directly and when he is summarising them. Many passages also miss out text mid-quote which in some cases changes the sense of the text. In other cases, Janisch notes part of a story but misses out other details, which can be misleading. For example, in some legal cases he notes the punishment but neither the presence of a jury nor the evidence given. These instances have been noted in the column for Janisch.

Another source which makes extensive use of the records is Philip Gosse's *St Helena 1502-1938* (London, 1937). However, this work does not give any references for the sections that have been consulted. A more recent work which directly draws on and references the records for this period is Stephen Royle's *The Company's Island* (London, 2007). Folio numbers given in this work should match those given here. Philip and Myrtle Ashmole's *St Helena and Ascension Islands* (Shropshire, 2000) also draws on the records in its account of efforts to control the destruction of timber and plant life by fencing and culling wild goats.

Overview and points of interest:

The records give a vivid picture of many aspects of early life on the island and can be drawn on by specialist and amateur historians for information about a number of subjects. Some examples are given below. This is not an exhaustive guide and the indexes should be referred to for more details and examples:

*Crime and punishments:* The early records note frequent complaints between the inhabitants for minor crimes such as theft, fighting, insults as well as the moral transgressions noted below. Vol. 1 f. 82 orders that these complaints should be brought to the Council monthly and the 'Court of Justice' was set up in Session House near Fort St James and the Governor and Council were to sit as a 'Court of Judicature' four times each year from 1688 (Vol. 3, f. 3-4). A jury was called for each of these sessions made up of twelve English men which judged all cases. Some more serious cases also occurred and the evidence, testimonies and judgments

are given in detail: as well as the trials for treason and rebellion discussed below inquests resulting in a verdict of manslaughter is described in Vol. 1 f. 85; Vol. 2, f. 222. A keeper for the prison is appointed in Vol. 2 f. 15. Punishments ran from fines to the duckings often used for women (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 18) to 'riding the wooden horse' (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 3) public whipping at Flagstaff on the naked body (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 297; Vol. 3, f. 95) to branding with the letter 'R' ('rogue') (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 55 and 269) and castration (Vol. 3, f. 403). In cases of execution, the methods were often extremely violent, including being hung, drawn and quartered or starved to death. Deterrents included forcing other inhabitants to watch and placing body parts in public places. Such punishments were disproportionately inflicted on slaves (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 268, 390; Vol. 5, f. 174) and the use of torture to exact confessions from slaves was noted in 1692 and 1697 (Vol.3, f. 402 and f. 417; Vol. 5, f. 64-65). Deportation to Barbados and Bombay was also used for planters and soldiers involved in the rebellion of 1684 (Vol. 2, f. 138 and 142 and Vol. 3, f. 149) and disgraced members of the Company were sent to Bencoulen (Bengkulu in Sumatra, renowned in this period as disease-ridden) (e.g. Vol.3, f. 1).

*Environment, agriculture and conservation:* Several conservation projects have aimed to reconstruct the record of indigenous and endemic species of St Helena, as well as when other species were introduced. A list of trees introduced is given in the LB1 f. 32r (see also f. 22 which notes that fruit trees have been sent). The records for this period record experiments with seeding rice from paddy sent from India (LB1 f. 35) the planting of tobacco (Vol. 5, f. 62), and of grape vines after the arrival of French vintners in 1690 (Vol. 3, f. 146 and 184). The staple crops of yams and the endemic cabbage trees are mentioned throughout (e.g. Vol. 3, f. 382; Vol. 5, f. 57), with shortages of yams after a drought reported in 1699 (Vol. 5, f. 190 and 200). A scarcity of lemons and fines for inhabitants who gather them is reported on Vol. 1 f. 39, restrictions on cutting timber are described in Vol. 1 f. 220 and f. 229 and Vol. 2, f. 190 and 198. Goodwin's Abstracts f. 39 records concern about the over-use of 'roots and fruits' in distilling arrack, which is warned may soon consume all the available timber. When the resettlement was made, the Company were required to take all wild cattle into their possession (LB1, f. 6), from which stock they were to supply each planter family with two cows. Changing policies on culling of wildlife can be traced from the prohibition of killing wild goats on Vol. 1 f. 21 and Vol. 5, f. 152 until this was finally allowed in 1698 on the grounds that they were damaging plantations (Vol. 5, f. 169). In 1674, a stock of *Carmenia* goats from Persia along with combs were sent from Surat in the hope of encouraging wool production. Swine are mentioned as a problem in the Great Wood and inhabitants are required to mark those that they own in Vol. 1 ff. 52 and 65; Vol. 2 f. 59; Vol. 3, f. 374. The taming of wild cattle was ordered in 1678 (Vol. 1, f. f. 14).

*Fortifications, defenses, buildings:* Defense was an important consideration in the resettlement of the island. In 1673, inhabitants were granted the right to build houses 'provided they build the said houses regularly in order to a Town of Defense (LB1, f. 7r). The records for the years after the re-taking of the island from the Dutch include the fortification of several parts of the island (e.g. Vol.1, f.3 records the establishment of watches at five points around the island; the construction of fortifications is recorded from Vol.1, f. 55 onwards and Sandy Bay was fortified in defense against a feared attack from France (Vol. 4, f. 235); inhabitants are delegated to various points of defense on Vol. 1. f. 8. Complaints about failures to attend these points of defense begin on Vol. 1, f. 35 and also occur in Vol. 1, f. 424. Depending on the level of the perceived threat from French and Dutch competitors, watches were reduced (as in LB1, f. 13 and 16r; Vol. 1, f. 43) or increased (Vol.1 f, 160, 396, 425; Vol. 3, f. 307-308 and f. 430-432; Vol. 4 and 56; Vol. 4, f. 211-212). In 1689 (Vol. 3, f. 123), slaves were also required to participate in the duties of watching. Vol. 1, f. 45 demonstrates the state of uncertainty that often reigned regarding whether England was currently at war with her European rivals and Vol. 3, f. 109-122 about the result of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688. The building of a market and store house are recorded in Vol. 2, f. 106, 119, 185, 225. Rebuilding of Fort House is noted in 1694 (Vol. 4, f. 122).

*Land and inheritance:* Planters were allotted land by the Company, which they were forbidden to sell or exchange until they had 'planted and improved' them for at least four years, a period which was later raised to seven years (LB1 f. 23r; Vol. 1 f. 238). However, Vol.2, f. 77 imposes restrictions on digging, planting and 'improving' land. LB1, f. 24; Vol. 1, f. 62 and f. 277 note the beginning of the surveying and mapping of the island after the inhabitants sought assurances of the security of their land from the Company and details of the history of particular plots of land can be traced through the allocations and exchanges (whether authorised or opposed by the Company) that are recorded throughout (e.g. Vol. 1, f. 113 on land in Plantation Valley). A jury for 'inquiring about land' was appointed in 1682 based on Company instructions of 1679 (Vol. 1, f. 281) and registration of land was required in 1684 (Vol. 2, f. 75). A list of landholders by 1681 is given in Vol. 1 f. 190. The care of orphans and their land and property is recorded throughout (e.g. Vol. 1, f. 49, 325, 330, 359; Vol. 2, f. 46; )

*Medicine:* As many early inhabitants or visitors to St Helena were there as a result of being left sick off one of the ships returning from the East Indies, disease and medicine was an important part of island life. As well as the official appointments and dismissals of the surgeons which are recorded (LB1, Vol. 8r and f. 46; Vol. 1, f. 402; Vol. 3, f. 365-6; Vol. 5, f. 4 and 235) and some complaints about the lack of a surgeon (Vol. 5, f. 183), there are several references to other

inhabitants performing cures (e.g. Vol. 1, f. 308 and 310; Vol. 2, f. 50; Vol. 3, f. 6 and f. 335). A general epidemics is reported in Vol. 2, f. 24. Medicine from India is mentioned in Vol. 3, f. 230 and a chest of medicine and 'chafing dishes' were received in 1694 (Vol. 4, f. 152). Goodwin's Abstracts also imply that slaves were practising medicine among themselves (f. 76).

*Pirates and 'interlopers'*: Ships not commissioned by the East India Company sometimes arrived at the island (LB1 85), and although at first they were officially banned from aiding them, the Governor and Council allowed them to take on supplies (Vol. 1, f. 186-188). A warning was issued banned them from allowing private ships from using the island to meet ships returning from India, thus evading customs duties (LB1 f. 85r). In 1685, a planter was fined for trading with another interloper (Vol. 2, f. 238). Detailed information about pirates was provided in 1696 by three men who had previously been part of the crew on ships from the West Indies that called at Madagascar, from where they attacked ships trading with Mocha in the Red Sea (Vol. 4, f. 32). A further account was given by a boy left off a pirate ship which called at both Madagascar and St Helena in 1698 (Vol. 5, f. 95-97 and 106).

*Rebellions and mutinies*: A charter preserved in the LB1 and dating from 1673 (ff. 1-4) grants the Governor and Council the power to administer justice including the suppression of 'rebellion, mutiny, or sedition, refusing to serve in a war or flying to the enemy'. The major rebellions on the island were that of 1684 (Vol. 2, f. 108-114), after which all inhabitants were required to take an oath of allegiance and had their land removed (f. 109). The trials are documented in Vol. 2, f. 129-34. Assemblies were banned in 1685 on pain of being dealt with as 'riotters and seditious'. A second rebellion occurred in 1693 in which Governor Johnson was killed by the soldier Henry Jackson (Vol. 4, f. 1-9). After plundering the fort and destroying the defenses by spiking the canons and taking several hostages the rebels escaped in the ship of Capt. Pitt (Vol. 4 ff. 22-35). A planned rebellion by slaves was discovered in 1695 (Vol.4 f.237-260) and eleven slaves were subjected to execution or to receive up to 100 lashes and branding. Planned rebellions or 'dangerous' or 'divisive' comments are reported on Vol. 1 f. 158; Vol. 2, f. 87 and f. 99; Vol. 3, f. 73-78). Foreigners like Nicholas Matthews (Vol. 1 f. 139) and the group of Dutch sailors who visited in 1695 (Vol. 5, f. 25) were often suspected of planning to betray the island to the Company's rivals. Inhabitants were also punished for complaints about the Governor and Council and for denying their authority (Vol. 3, f. 253-256, f. 337-8 and f. 444-446; Vol. 5, f. 126 and f. 175). The incident of Captain Holden's refusal to obey the orders of the Governor, who he called a 'rebel' (Vol. 2 f. 302-318, 330-363, 379-383) demonstrates conflicts over the nature of the Company's authority within the Council itself. In 1695, a further rebellion was feared after a conviction for drawing powder from the guns in front of Fort St James (Vol. 4, f. 222-232).

*Religion and morality:* Inhabitants were required to make payments towards the building and upkeep of the churches (Vol. 2, f. 180, 194, 219; Vol. 5, f. 75-6) and schools in churches are referred to Vol. 1 f. 13, 142 and 337. Two churchwardens were appointed by the Governors from a list of four suggested by the planters, with their duties being written down in 1697 after some apparent conflict over the office (Vol. 5, f. 63 and 78). The island often lacked ministers however, a consultation of 1694 noted that there had no been on the island for eleven years (Vol. 4, f. 210) and this situation resumed after 1696 when the minister who had been appointed left for the West Indies (Vol. 4, f. 280). The charter of 1678 and letters from the Directors in London constantly stress the importance of keeping the Sabbath (Goodwin, f. 3-5) and policing the morality of the inhabitants (LB1, f. 21), which is also emphasised in the proclamation of William and Mary received in 1694 (Vol. 4, f. 143). The early records contain example of trials conducted for breaking the Sabbath (Vol. 4, f. 256; Vol. 5, f. 191; ), swearing or blasphemy (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 117 and 151; Vol. 4, f. 213-214), for adultery (Vol. 1, f. 300; Vol. 1 f. 311) or lewdness (Vol. 5, f. 241; ) for giving birth to an illegitimate child (Vol. 1, f. 374; Vol. 5, f. 242); and treasonous comments (Vol. 3, f. 71). Gambling was also described as a crime to be punished with imprisonment (Vol. 1, f. 125, Vol. 3, f. 5 and 105). Accusations of witchcraft appear in Vol. 1, f. 278 and Vol. 4, f. 262-278(i) and a slave, Jamy, was burned to death for sorcery in 1693 (Vol. 5, f. 156). Suicide was punished by burial at a crossroads with a stake driven through the heart (Vol. 4, f. 273; Vol. 5, f. 40 and f. 74-5). In a speech of 1698 (Vol. 5, f. 113) Governor Poirier explicitly linked such moral transgressions to the earthquake in Jamaica in 1692, warning that a similar fate would befall St Helena if such sins were not prevented for the future.

*Slavery and race relations:* These records reveal the extent to which St Helena depended on the slave trade in its early years. Most came from West Africa or Madagascar, but some also arrived via settlements in the East Indies (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 332; Vol. 5, f. 47). The numbers of slaves owned by planters (i.e. excluding Company slaves) on the island can be reconstructed from the sections of the records in which the inhabitants are required to make payments towards the compensation of owners of slaves who had been executed (e.g. Vol. 2, f. 284; Vol. 3, f. 247, Vol. 5, f. 187) and the total number above the age of 15 is given as 200 in 1687 (Vol. 2, f. 395) and as 127 in 1699 (Vol. 5, f. 187). The Company expenses also occasionally give the numbers of slaves employed in carrying provisions or working on the plantations (e.g. Vol. 4, f. 80). Sales of slaves are also reported, with prices given (e.g. Vol. 3, f. 106-7). The laws relating to slaves which are summarised in Goodwin's abstracts (f. 71-77) can be traced through the records, often as reactions to threatened or rumoured rebellions by slaves against their masters, especially after reports of such uprisings in other colonies. Concerns about a possible rebellion

or take-over by slaves begin with the trial of Sattoe for murdering his owner John Boston in 1679 (Vol. 1, f. 67-70) which was followed by rumours about a plot by slaves to cut the throats of soldiers in Lemon Valley and take over the island (Vol. 1 f. 71). Trial by jury was ruled not to be necessary for slaves accused of offenses in 1686 (Vol. 2, f. 262). A case of poisoning in 1687 sparked further rumours of a rebellion (Vol. 2, f. 388- 389 and Vol. 3, f. 140-144). A plan to run away with the Company's boat was rumoured in 1691 (Vol.3, f. 331). A law against trading with slaves was introduced in 1684 after a robbery by slaves (Vol. 2, f. 21) and Vol. 2, f. 22 imposes restrictions on slaves going onboard ships and Vol. 2 f. 274 on going outside at night. A further proclamation warning planters against allowing slaves out at night was issued in 1693 after rumours about a planned rebellion in 1693 (Vol. 4, f. 64). In 1695 a plot among slaves to cut the throats of their owners, take Lemon Valley fort and leave on the next ship (as Jackson and his allies had done) was uncovered and those involved severely punished with the three identified as ringleaders killed (Vol. 4, f. 237-260).

These records also record the treatment of the few black people who were not slaves, referred to as 'free blacks'. The family of 'Black Oliver', who was freed after assisting in the re-taking of the island in 1673 (LB1, f. 9) remained free. His son, Jack Oliver was employed as an apprentice after his death in 1685 (Vol. 2, 244) but was harshly punished after unsubstantiated allegations made against him in 1690 (Vol. 3, f. 175-6). Martha and Marcy Oliver were both harshly punished for bearing an illegitimate children, one to a planter and the other to a slave (Vol. 5, f. 57, 86 and 242) and Martha was later deported to Bencoulen for unspecified offenses after giving evidence in an adultery trial (Vol. 5, 209 and 242). Instructions received from the Company in 1673 (LB1 f. 9r) ordered that slaves who publicly accepted Christianity were to become free planters after seven years, however, it is not clear from the records whether this order was ever followed and it is significantly absent from Godwin's Abstracts.

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