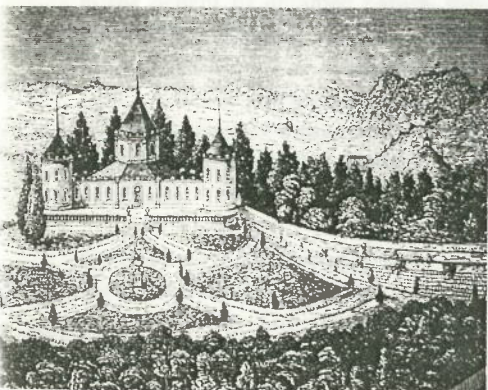


THE STORY OF MONSERRATE



William Beckford in 1781 at the age of 21, painted by George Romney. (Bearsted Collection, Upton House) He made his first visit to Portugal five years later. The picture shows him in a neo Classical pose, with no hint of his subsequent conversion to the Romantic Movement.



Sintra has a romantic charm which has delighted foreign visitors ever since the Moors used it as a summer palace more than ten centuries ago. The Portuguese Royal Family built two palaces and loved to spend the summer months there, enjoying the relative freshness of the air and the magnificent views of the serra. One visitor, Daniel Gildemeester from Holland, built the palace of Seteais, which is now a luxury hotel, but the most interesting of all the Quintas of Sintra is that of Monserrate.

The history of the estate, which was to become known as Monserrate, goes back to the time of the Moors. A Christian mozarabe lived on the mound where the present house now stands. He and the alcaide (governor) of Sintra fell out and a duel was fought. The mozarabe was slain and was buried on the mound where his house was built. After the restoration of Christian rule to Portugal by her first king, D. Afonso Henriques (1139-1185), a chapel was erected over the tomb and dedicated to the Mother of God.

Changing fortunes

Centuries passed, the chapel fell into ruins and the estate came into the ownership of the All Saints Hospital, Lisbon. In 1540, the Superior of the hospital, Gaspar Preto, went on a pil-

Sintra lies 20 kilometres to the north-west of Lisbon. It has a remarkable history, and has been declared a World Heritage Centre. One of the special attractions is the Quinta of Monserrate.

grimage to the famous shrine of the Black Madonna of Monserrat which stands in the mountains of Cataluña near Barcelona. On his return, he built a new chapel over the mozarabe's tomb which he dedicated to N^a S^a de Monserrate. It contained an alabaster statue of the Black Madonna, now sadly lost.

In 1601 the Hospital rented Monserrate to the Melo e Castro family. In 1718 one of family, Caetano, the 36th Viceroy of India, bought the estate and on his death entailed it to his descendants. The property then passed down the family for four generations.

The arrival of the English

During the latter half of the eighteenth century two very wealthy Englishmen rented the property and started a series of works which were to make it one of the most beautiful of the quintas in Sintra. The first, Gerard De Visme, was a descendant of Huguenot nobility and was a noted Lisbon philanthropist. He had made his fortune in the Brazilian teak trade, importing pau de Brasil, and secured his position by cultivating the friendship of the dictator of Portugal, the Marquês de Pombal. De Visme built a splendid palace in the Quinta de S. Domingos at Bemfica and lived there in magnificent style.



The Palace of Monserrate in 1808, less than a decade after the departure of Beckford. (Reproduced from 'Castles, Caliphs and Christians: a Landscape with Figures', by Ida Kinsbury - a manuscript published in 1994 by the British Historical Society of Portugal jointly with the Friends of Monserrate).



Sir Francis Cook and Lady Cook, the owners of Monserrate

Reproduced from *História da Quinta e Palácio de Monserrate* by Francisco Costa (1985)

In 1790 he negotiated with the owner of Monserrate, Francisco de Melo e Castro, a nine year lease. In it, he undertook 'to improve the property, enlarge the orchards according to his taste and restore as he wishes the existing buildings much damaged by the earthquake and now uninhabitable.' De Visme built a neo Gothic palace on the ruins of the chapel and erected another chapel elsewhere on the estate.

In 1794 another Englishman, William Beckford, came on the scene. He was a brilliant, eccentric, dilettante figure who came to Portugal after disgrace in England. He soon fell in love with Sintra when he stayed at the Quinta de Ramalhão in the summer and autumn of 1787, though he found the climate not to his taste. On his second visit, in 1793, he rented the Quinta of S. José de Ribamar in Dafundo and, in July 1794, sub-let Monserrate from De Visme.

Beckford was a strong follower of the Romantic Movement and Monserrate was perfect for him to practise his belief in the delight of untamed nature, solitude and wilderness. He channelled streams and rivulets into artificial paths, built a Cascade and erected an artificial cromlech (stone monument). These remain the most visible reminders of his time there.

Beckford stayed in Portugal, busy with both Monserrate and his house in Dafundo from late 1793 until the autumn of 1795 when he left the country. He returned once, in the autumn of 1798, and left for good in the summer

of 1799, perhaps because he discovered he could not buy the entailed estate of Monserrate, perhaps because he wished to build a palace in England. Monserrate again declined, rather rapidly, into a romantic ruin.

Cintra's glorious Eden

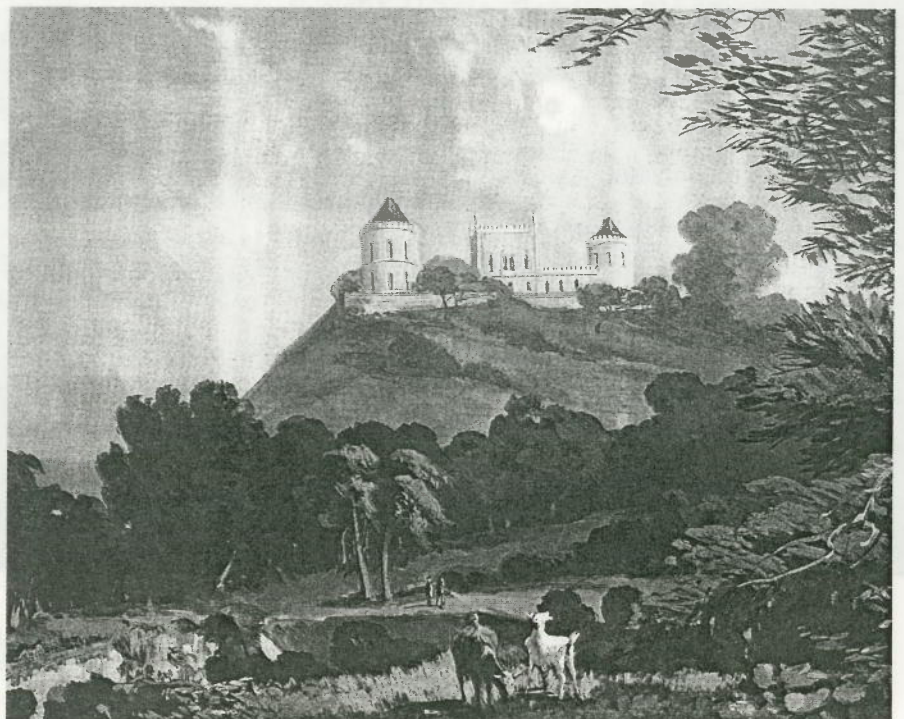
Byron visited Sintra in 1809. It was he who made the Serra and, above all, Monserrate famous for his generation. In 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage' having spoken of 'Cintra's glorious Eden' he continues:

'On sloping mounds or in the vale beneath,
'Are domes where whilom kings did make repair;
'But now the wild flowers round them only breathe;
'Yet ruin'd splendour still is lingering there.
'And yonder towers the Prince's palace fair;

The Cook family move in

Francis Cook, a textile merchant by trade, fell in love twice when he arrived in Portugal in 1841. First with Emily Lucas, daughter of a Lisbon business man and secondly with Sintra. He married Emily and set out to acquire Monserrate, converting it, as only a Victorian millionaire could, into the palace and garden of his dreams. He first leased it in 1856 and, seven years later, when the law of entail was revoked, he bought the whole estate for 40,000 milreis.

He started by rebuilding the palace, adapting it from the old plan, but it was in the gardens that Cook's genius was best seen. These remain a masterpiece of Victorian naturalistic landscaping. Sir Francis went on to buy a further fifteen



View of Monserrate in 1833, 8 years prior to the arrival of Francis Cook, painted by Celestine Brelaz (private collection - Gerald Luckhurst)

quintas surrounding Monserrate. He was stopped only when attempting to purchase an adjoining estate belonging to the exiled and impoverished Dukes of Cadaval. It is said that Francis made a generous offer to the stricken grandees, from whom the haughty reply came back: "The Dukes of Cadaval, Mr. Cook, sometimes buy, but they never sell!"

Emily died in 1884 and a year later Francis, now 68 years old, married again, this time to Tennessee Claflin from New York. 'Roguish and charming' Tennie revelled in her new found status and persuaded Francis to open up the gardens for charity.

Sir Francis Cook died in 1901 and his son, Sir Frederick Cook (1844-1920), continued the grand traditions established by his father. But after that, the shadows again began to fall over Monserrate. The third baronet, Sir Herbert (1869-1939) found the post war taxes and business slump a drain on the family fortunes and began to sell the quintas originally bought by his

grandfather. In 1929 he offered the Monserrate estate itself for sale with 353 acres (143 hectares). However, as a result of the depression, there were no buyers for the palace and its lovely gardens.

An offer too good to refuse

In 1946 Sir Francis, the fourth baronet, followed his father's example and put up the whole Monserrate estate - palace, contents, gardens, forests and all - for sale. He realised what a jewel his family had created and first offered to sell the quinta to the Portuguese government which, tragically, refused to buy it. He eventually sold the entire quinta and contents of the palace to Mr. Saul Saragga, for a paltry Esc. 9,350,000 (£85,000) in September 1946.

The new owner auctioned the contents of the palace and also sold the roof. He was preparing to divide up the estate into lots for development, when the ensuing outcry forced the Portuguese Government to intervene. They eventu-

ally purchased Monserrate for Esc. 11,850,000 but invested nothing in maintaining the land or buildings. Though the gardens remained open the whole estate slipped slowly back into disrepair.

In the late 1980's a group of horticulturists, sponsored by the Government of Ontario in Canada, mounted a huge clearing operation together with horticulturists from Portugal. Weeds were removed, paths cleared and the irrigation system cleaned out. However, the effect was short-lived and the gardens once again fell into ruin.

Hope for the future

In 1994 The Friends of Monserrate was founded with the aim of increasing public awareness of the actual state of Monserrate and of co-operating with the entities in charge of the Quinta. It is hoped that, with the sustained efforts of all the parties concerned, Monserrate, with its unique garden and its extraordinary palace, will be restored to its former glory.

Andrew Bull

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