

St. Helena Through the Eyes of Two of Its Surveyors: Surveyor-General George Whalley & Son Surveyor John Charles Melliss!

By John F. Brock

Keywords: St. Helena Surveyors George Whalley and son John Charles Melliss, St. Helena History, two books on St. Helena, George's book of photographs (1857); iconic 1875 work on Physical, Historical and Topographical Description of the island by John, Napoleon's exile and death with an Australian link.

Abstract

It is not too often that the literary work of a land surveyor is commemorated as a major work on the postage stamps of any country. However, the comprehensive publication by its own Surveyor John Charles Melliss titled: "St. Helena: A Physical, Historical and Topographical Description of the Island" was so highly treasured by the inhabitants that it issued a commemorative set of stamps in 1975 for the centenary of this work. What makes this isolated island even more special to surveyors like me is that John's father, George Whalley Melliss was also Surveyor-General, publishing a work in 1857 called: "Views of St. Helena: Illustrative of its Scenery and Historical Associations", containing lithographs made from his own photos of various sites around St. Helena exhibited together with some information about the scenes.

My paper will give readers a resume of the rich history of this strategically located but remote dot in the Atlantic Ocean as well as introducing you to two of its most renowned residents through their own publications chronicling and portraying the history of the island. Along the way you will also get associated with some of the notable characters who have called St. Helena home whether by force or choice as well as those who just paid a visit while passing through. The many colourful characters who have paid visits (or longer?) to St. Helena are James Cook, Edmond Halley (of Halley's Comet fame), William Bligh accompanied by Matthew Flinders, and Bligh's nemesis Fletcher Christian, Arthur Phillip - First Governor of NSW, and Napoleon Bonaparte, who died there in 1821 after being exiled to the island in 1815. In more recent times renowned Australian author Thomas Kenneally went to the island as reconnaissance for a book he was writing on Australian woman Betsy Balcombe, who became an associate of Napoleon while she was his neighbour there.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to destinations which crave my curiosity, isolated islands fill up most of the top spots on my "go-to" list. I have so far been most fortunate to be able to make many visits to Norfolk Island, just off the Australian east coast, as well as Easter Island, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Tahiti, Kangaroo Island and Melville Island. One far away island which has held my fascination since studying its history is St. Helena, and most surprisingly it has direct connections with Norfolk Island (my most favourite place on Earth!) through iconic travellers who have forged identities with both locations.

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However, during my research of this intriguing spot in the Atlantic Ocean between South America and Africa I discovered two icons of the island who documented the history, physical description and unique features of this remote place, and both of them were surveyors there! The first one was George Whalley Melliss, Surveyor-General of St. Helena for the East India Company, and the other was his son John Charles Melliss.



Figure 1: St. Helena From the Anchorage from the 1875 book by John Charles Melliss.

EARLY YEARS OF ST. HELENA

The popular first European sighting and naming of St. Helena has a long tradition of being credited to the Portuguese mariner Joao da Nova in 1502 on the feast day of the saint which bears her name? With some later reanalysis casting doubt upon this legend, the first records and charts of the island arise from the early 1500's with the accompanying very stylistic version of the island dating from 1506 by German cartographer Valentim Fernandes, but obviously bearing only a vague and generalized depiction of

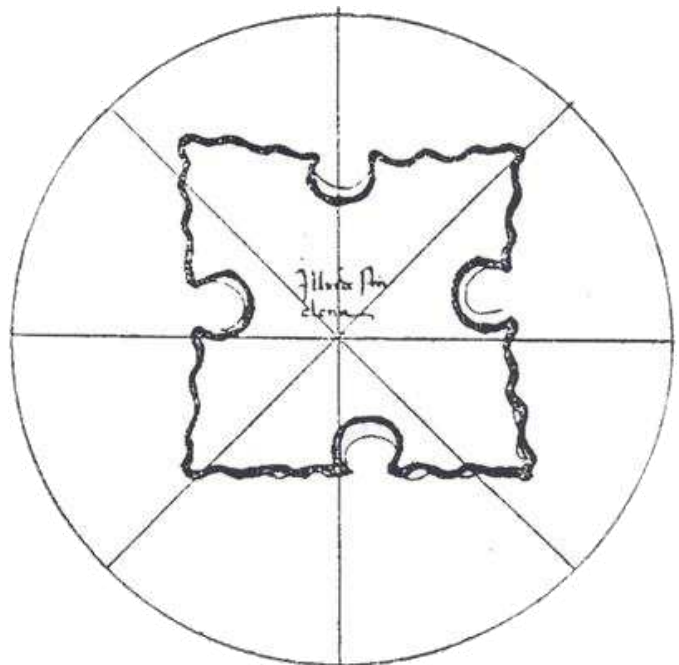


Figure 2: The earliest representation of St. Helena on a map from 1506 by Valentim Fernandes.

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the real shape of the island. More accurate delineations of the island's shape were not far off being made by various other mapmakers.

MOST NOTABLE VISITORS TO THE REMOTE ISLE

From its earliest recorded encounters there has been a veritable who's who of historical figures who have stopped off at this island in the middle of the World, mainly due to its strategic location en route between the Great Southern Land and, closer to home, from South Africa for re-provisioning before docking at Plymouth in England.

Listing renowned visitors in chronological order St. Helena has been visited by Sir Thomas Cavendish (1588) who is said to be the first Englishman to land on the island; legendary comet man Edmond Halley (1676/77) during which he observed 341 southern hemisphere stars and a Transit of Mercury, published in "Catalogus Stellarum Australium", making another stop in 1700; privateer William Dampier (1691) in the *Roebuck*; Greenwich Astronomer Royal Nevil



Figure 3: Famous visitors to St. Helena clockwise from top left - Fletcher Christian, William Bligh, Joseph Banks, James Cook, Matthew Flinders, Sir Thomas Cavendish, Edmond Halley, Phillip Parker King, Nelson, Duke of Brontone, Bonaparte.

Left: Lachlan Macquarie, Named: "Father of Australia" (after 1822)

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Maskylene
(1761) on
Prince Henry
where he
observed the
Transit of
Venus on June
6; Charles
Mason and
Jeremiah



Dixon (of Mason-Dixon Line fame - October 1761) on *Mercury* after viewing the Transit of Venus in Cape Town; legendary navigator James Cook with Joseph Banks (1771) on the *Endeavour* and again in 1775 on the *Resolution*; Horatio Nelson, as a young midshipman (1776) on *HMS Dolphin* commanded by Captain James Piggott; Fletcher Christian (of Mutiny on the *Bounty* fame – 1784) on the *HMS Eurydice*; and his nemesis of the famous conflict, William Bligh (1792) on the *Providence*, with Matthew Flinders; Lachlan Macquarie (to become Governor of New South Wales in 1810 and later named “The Father of Australia”- 24-27 March 1803) aboard the *Sir Edward Hughes*, an East Indiaman; 1st Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley (1805) on *HMS Howe* staying in Briars Pavilion, the same building where Napoleon Bonaparte initially stayed upon arrival in 1815, on *HMS Bellerophon*, before moving to Longwood House where he died in 1821; Phillip Parker King (between January and April 1823 before arriving in England) on the *Bathurst*; Charles Darwin (1836) on the *HMS Beagle*; King George VI with his daughters Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret (1947) on *HMS Vanguard*; and in more recent times Australian prize winning author Thomas Keneally who wrote a book about St. Helena titled: “Napoleon’s Last Island”, about the former French Emperor’s interaction with his neighbour while there, Australian woman Betsy Balcombe whose family came from Melbourne, Victoria.

FIRST APPEARANCES OF THE MELLISS FAMILY ON ST. HELENA

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It is most likely that the John Melliss (born in Edinburgh, Scotland on 6 April, 1764 and married to Ann Sparks) who was surgeon on the ship *Gorgon*, was George's father and his plaque shows him dying on St. Helena on 25 July, 1820. George was born 4 August, 1802 at St. Pancras, London, England, marrying Julia Weston (born on St. Helena 3 April, 1806) at St. Helena on 13 May, 1827. George is listed as "Lieutenant" variously described as an engineer, surveyor of lands and Surveyor-General for the East India Company on St. Helena then subsequently with the British Government. George died 28 October, 1874, aged 72, at Kensington, London, England. The couple had six sons and five daughters with John Charles being born on St. Helena on 23 January, 1835. John followed in his father's footsteps and became the Chief Surveyor of St. Helena, although not being referred to as "Surveyor-General" at any time. He married Alice Elizabeth Louisa Stace (born in Barbados 1846) in Chipperfield, Hertfordshire, England on 20th July, 1869, the pair bearing two sons, John William Vincent and Hugh John, and a daughter named Lillian Frances Alice. John Charles Melliss died on 23 August, 1910, aged 75, at Hampstead, Middlesex, England. J.C. founded J.C. Melliss and Co. in 1878, and his son Hugh continued in the company until 1955, having formed a partnership with H.R. Smart, with the name changing to Melliss and partners in 1961 when the two practices merged. The company is still in operation as Melliss LLP Consulting Engineers based at Guildford in Surrey, United Kingdom, and I was sent some photos of John Charles and his son Hugh John by the current Senior Partner of the business, Alan Harding, coming up for 48 years with the firm on 26th July next, since his graduation from university in 1976, for which I am most appreciative.



Figure 4: John Charles Melliss.

FIRST MELLISS BOOK

In 1857 George appeared to be one of the first doyens of modern photography and set to work to compile a set of depictions of the notable sites on St. Helena in a book titled: "Views of St. Helena – Illustrative of its Scenery and Historical Associations" consisting of 13 tinted lithographic plates by W. Gauci, after photographs by GWM printed by Vincent Brooks in original purple roan-backed blue cloth gilt.



Figure 7: Slide III of the GWM book: “View of James Town.”

MELLISS BOOK WITH ST. HELENA ILLUSTRATIONS.

George had been responsible for supervising the installation of The Ladder Hill Railway (designed by engineer J.W. Hoar) to Ladder Fort in 1829 to provide access up the steep side slope of the James Town topography via one of the World’s first funicular railways, the structure featuring in Slide I (see fig. 6) of GWM’s illustrated book Upon the cessation of this steep

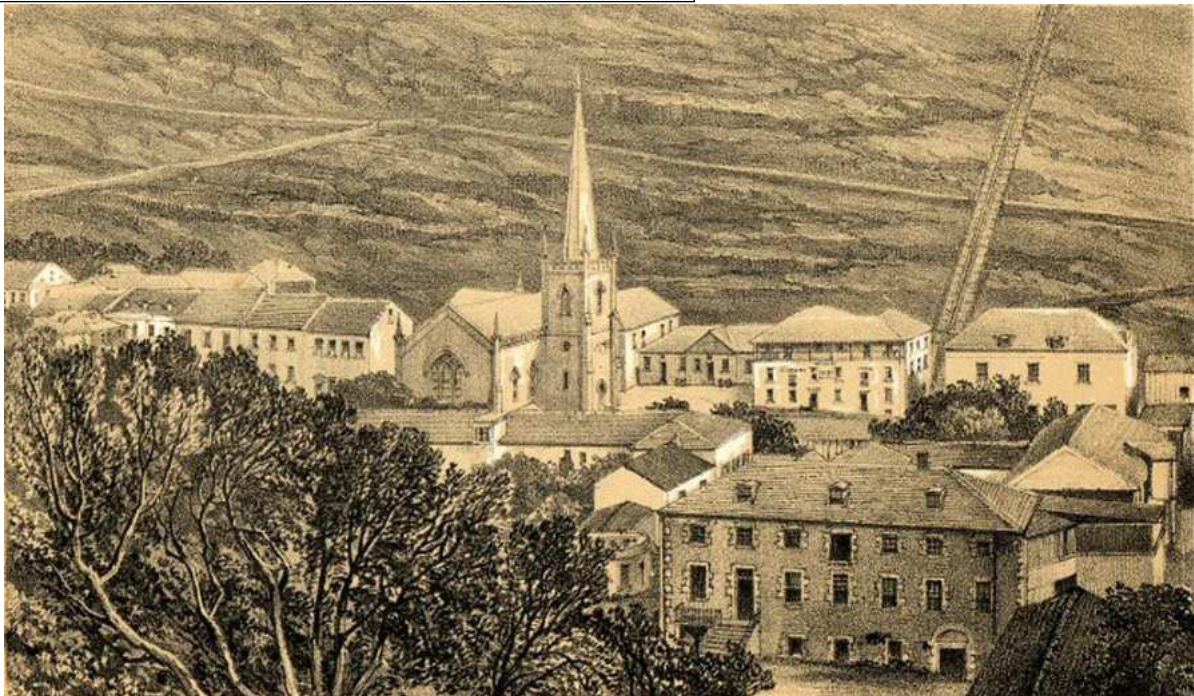


Fig. 6: Slide I of 1857 GWM book “View of the Lower Part of James Town” clearly featuring the funicular railway designed and built by GWM, later Jacob’s Ladder.

railway in 1871 it was replaced by a staircase with 699 steps called Jacob’s Ladder which has become an iconic tourist attraction rewarded with a Certificate at the museum for making it to the top and back. Slide III (see figure 7) of the images shows a panorama of James Town along with a description of its locality as “in a valley, between two lofty, rugged and precipitous hills. It extends for about a mile in length, and contains 3,000 people. The buildings are all of stone and of superior order.” The remaining 11 slides depict images titled “Upper Part of Main Street, James Town”, “The Briars”, “Tomb of Napoleon”, “Front View of Longwood Old House”, “Longwood New House”, “Marshal Bertand’s Cottage”, “Plantation House”, “St.

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Paul’s Church”, “Oak Bank” and “Willow Cottage”, all with a brief description of the location and some history about the illustrations.

GWM and his family lived in Oak Bank Estate between 1846-1851, John being also engaged in building and architectural projects for the British administration which included restoring Longwood House, last residence of Napoleon during his exile on the island.

SECOND MELLISS BOOK

With great admiration for his father’s contribution to St. Helena’s significance and acknowledged in the front of the book as “greatly encouraging it”, John had set about studying and analysing the whole island with respect to its topographical, botanical, climatic, entomological and zoological qualities. The book published in 1875 was: “St. Helena: A



Figure 8: Endangered plant named after J.C. Melliss – *Mellissia begoniifolia*

Physical, Historical and Topographical Description of the Island: including its Geology, Fauna, Flora and Meteorology.” It has ever since held the greatest esteem as the authoritative journal on this intriguing island. As testimony to his thorough and detailed exposition of the island’s ecosystems a very rare and extremely endangered plant was named *Mellissia begoniifolia*, (known as St. Helena boxwood) in his honour, identified by the discovery of a single plant in 1998, even

now believed to be only 20 specimens surviving in their native environment. The Silver Eel (*Ariosoma mellissii*) was also named after him by Albert Gunther.

To make the unique ecosystems of St. Helena more incredible, a Wildlife Survey was carried out by the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) as a first-ever stocktake of the wildlife of the UK’s Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. The comparatively diminutive area of 47 square miles (122 sq. kms) comprising St. Helena was found to contain 30% of all British endemic (not found anywhere else) species! With 500 from a total of 1547 species, St. Helena is well ahead of the next highest land abroad which is Bermuda at 320. To provide an even more stark comparison of its astonishing diversity, St. Helena has about 7 times more endemic terrestrial invertebrates than the Galapagos Islands on a land area basis. With such an astounding pedigree in natural attributes it is not surprising that a resident with a surveyor’s eye like John Charles Melliss took upon the onerous task of surveying his landscape while at the same time collecting, cataloguing and identifying the flora and fauna occupying

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Fig. 10: Title page of J.C. Melliss book 1875.

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the diverse habitats of the small island haven. His comprehensive compendium of everything nature bestowed upon his home was made even more spectacular with colourful and accurate

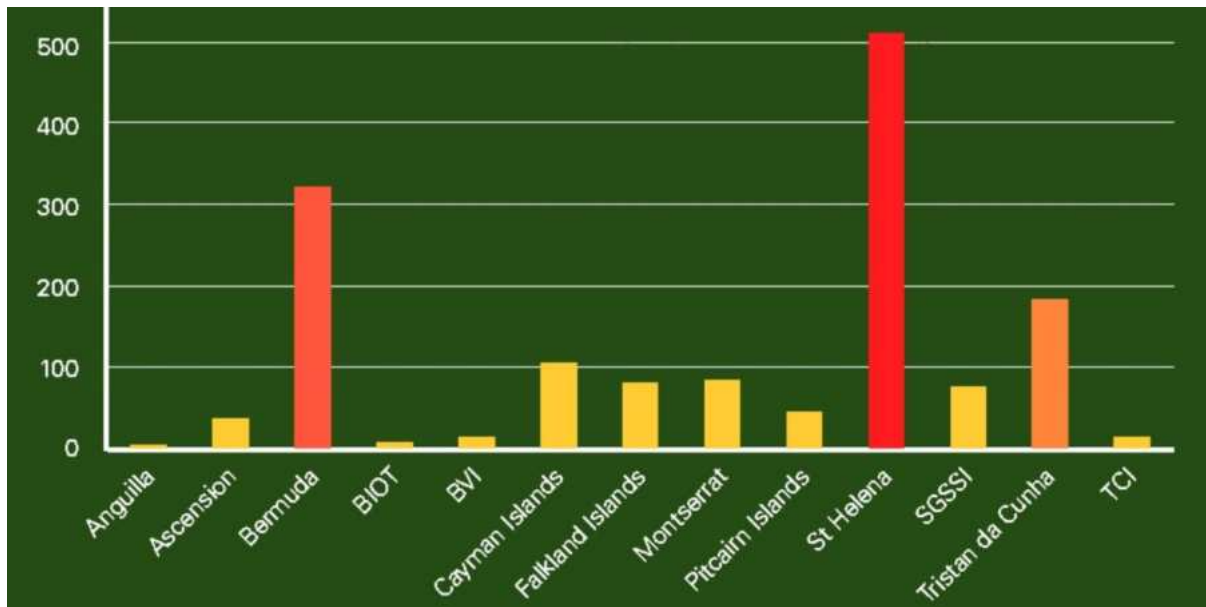
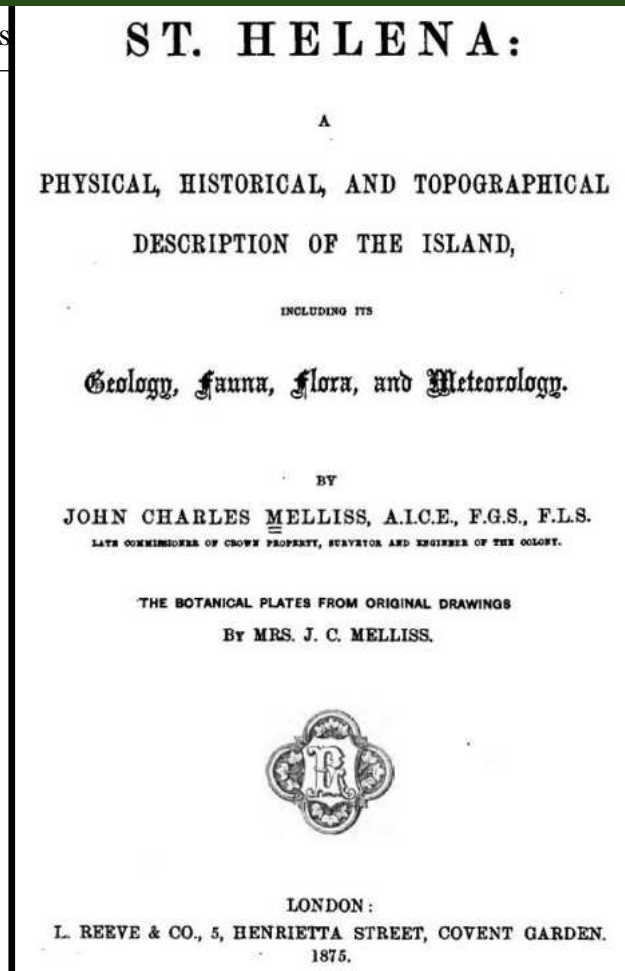


Figure 9: Column graph of endemic species

illustrations made by his wife, Alice, of the many specimens so included in the most handsome volume. This publication is rightfully regarded as the original and authoritative description of this fascinating and idyllic locality on Earth, but JCM does preface his book by declaring it is merely the foundation upon which others can add further discoveries, which have been occurring for nearly 150 years since this mighty work came onto the scene. As a brief introduction to the achievement, I will list its contents. The first chapter is Part I Historical (pp. 1-45), followed by Part II Geology and Mineralogy (pp. 46-78), Part III Zoology (pp. 79-220), which is further subdivided into Vertebrata Class I Mammalia, Class II Aves, Class III Reptilia, Class IV Amphibia (nil), Class V Pisces, as well as Spiders and Insects. Then comes Part IV Botany (pp. 221-383) which describes 1058 plant species; and V Climate – Meteorology – Tides – Rollers (pp. 384-398). The final pages have Appendices, an



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Index and Bibliography. Amongst the leaves are found full colour drawings of the many plants, creatures, sites and buildings contained within the text. Since the first issue of this scientific volume there have been more studies and explorations made over the territory which have yielded more samples previously thought extinct. JCM also prepared a topographic map of the island in 1875 for the book.

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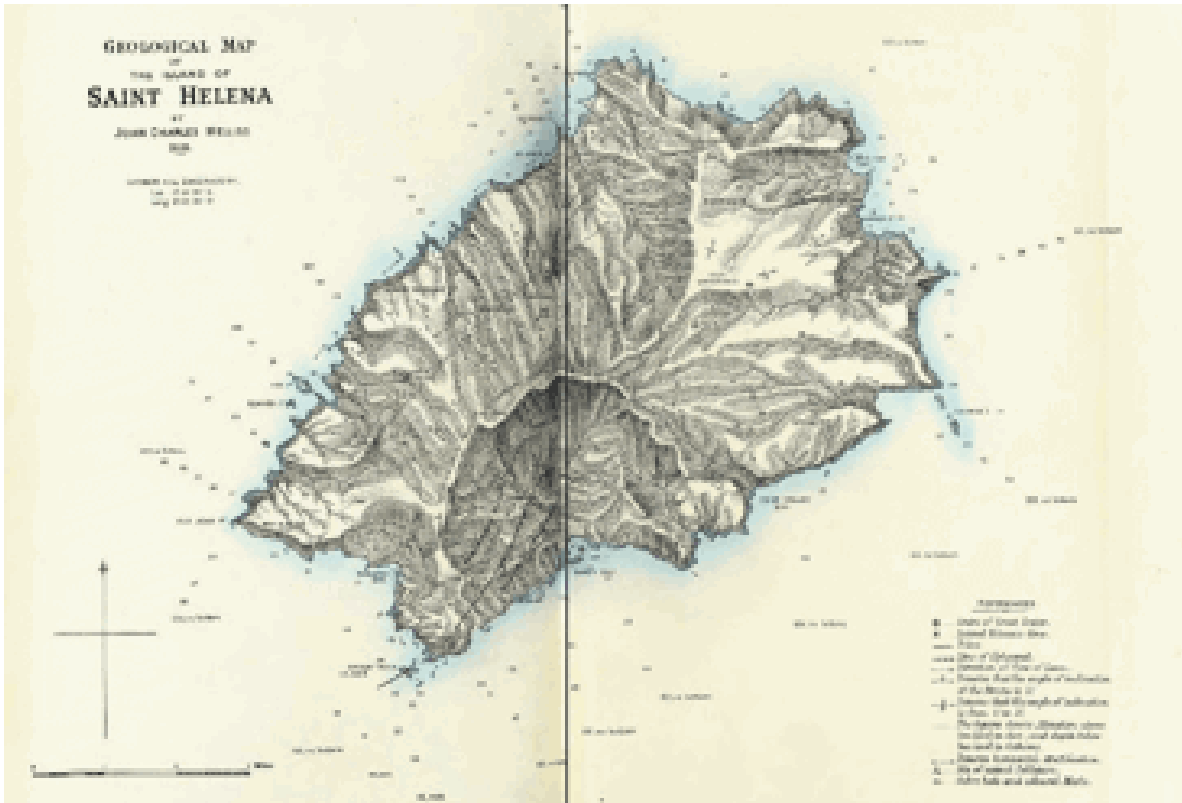


Fig. 11: Topographic map of St. Helena in the J.C. Melliss book of 1875.



Fig. 12: St. Helena stamps issued for the 100th anniversary of the 1875 JCM 1875 book release.

As a tribute to the pride of the people of St. Helena in this groundbreaking text the St. Helena Post Office issued a set of stamps to commemorate the 100th anniversary of its first release, featuring a selection of the images created by Alice Melliss. In the left hand slide are samples of a fish, a beetle, the national bird of St. Helena, the wire bird, and the plant named in JCM's honour, the Mellissia begoniifolia. Some more examples of the brilliant colour plates found within this comprehensive historical and natural examination of St. Helena can be found in Appendix B at the rear of this paper, following Appendix A which includes the remaining eleven (11) slides contained within the 1857 book by GWM. There was also a stamp

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minted by the Post Office to celebrate the 150 year birthday of the completion of the funicular railway by George in 1979 along with some other scenes of James Town and its iconic structures.

FINAL YEARS OF THE MELLISS'S

In 1871 John had been made redundant by the British Administration due to a downturn in work, and it would seem that he and his family, along with his father and mother moved back to England. Although records are somewhat contradictory, it would appear most likely that George and his wife returned to England with his son John and his family, as George is recorded as having died on 28 October, 1874, aged 72 years, at Kensington, London, England, with his wife Julia listed as having passed away at the same location in 1884, aged 77 years. Alice Melliss died at Hampstead, Middlesex, England on 8 December, 1909, aged 63 years, while her husband John passed away the following year on 23 August, 1910 (some sources say 1911?), aged 75 years, at the same place. This demonstrates that John's commitment to publish his amazing treatise on his beloved island home carried on well after his departure, most unfortunately finalizing its first edition the year after his father George was gone.

CONCLUSION

The contributions of surveyors can be found in every facet of World history and there is no doubt that our work in a vast kaleidoscope of fields is an essential element to any successful assessments and solutions to environmental problems which present themselves. There can be no doubt that the practical and insightful considerations by all surveyors provide the vital framework to contend with the survival of the world. With this in mind it is not difficult to expect that the close association surveyors develop with their natural environments offer them the tools and observational ability to be the catalysts for more thoughtful and realistic treatment of those areas of sustainability confronting humanity. Major works of exploration and the collation of what natural specimens and features currently survive at any particular epoch allow future actions to be formulated for the preservation and propagation of endangered species of animals and plants together with making provision for the growing populations to carry on occupation of a planet with an ever-burdened supply of resources.



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BIOGRAPHY

Private land surveyor since 1973, **Bachelor of Surveying** (UNSW 1978), **MA** (Egyptology) from Macquarie Uni., Sydney (2000), **Registered Surveyor NSW** 1981. Now Director of Brock Surveys at Parramatta (near Sydney). Papers presented on six continents including Brunei, Nigeria, Morocco, Papua New Guinea, Hawaii, Bulgaria, Finland, Colombia and all states/territories of Australia as well as Norfolk Island. Stalwart of FIG International Institution for the History of Surveying & Measurement awarded **FIG Article of the Month March 2005**,

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January 2012, June 2014, April 2017 and April 2023. Institution of Surveyors NSW Awards – **Halloran Award 1996** for Contributions to Surveying History, **Fellow ISNSW 1999 & 2002 Professional Surveyor of the Year.** First international **Life Member** of the Surveyors Historical Society (USA), Rundle Foundation for Egyptian Archaeology, Parramatta & District Historical Society, Friends of Linnwood (House), **Foundation Member** Australian National Maritime Museum & Friends of National Museum of Australia. **Member** of Bradman Crest, International Map Collectors Society, Royal Australian Historical Society, National Trust of Australia, Hills District Historical Society, **Friends** of May's Hill Cemetery, St. John's Cemetery, St. Patrick's Cemetery and Parramatta Female Factory.

CONTACTS

John Francis Brock
P.O. Box 9159,
HARRIS PARK NSW 2150, AUSTRALIA
Tel: +61(0)414 910 898
Email: brocksurveys@bigpond.com

APPENDIX A

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Slides from the George Whalley Melliss book: “Views of St. Helena.”



Figure 13: Slide II – “A View of the Upper Part of Main Street, James Town.”



Figure 14: Slide IV – “The Briars.”

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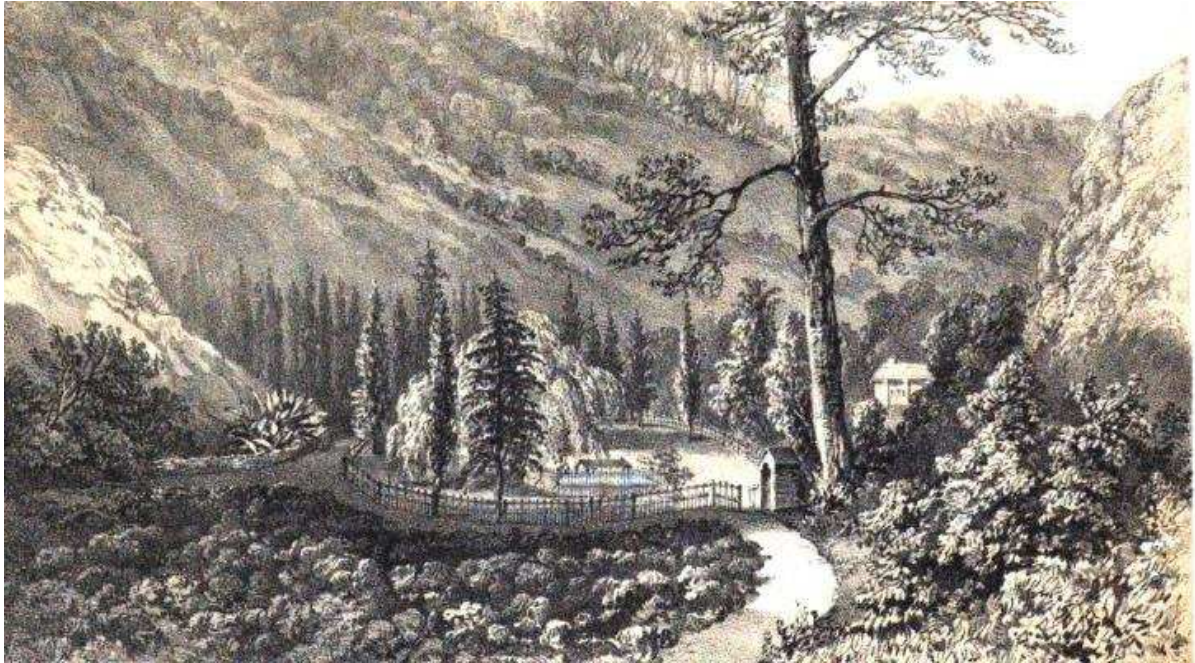


Figure 15: Slide V – “The Tomb of Napoleon.”



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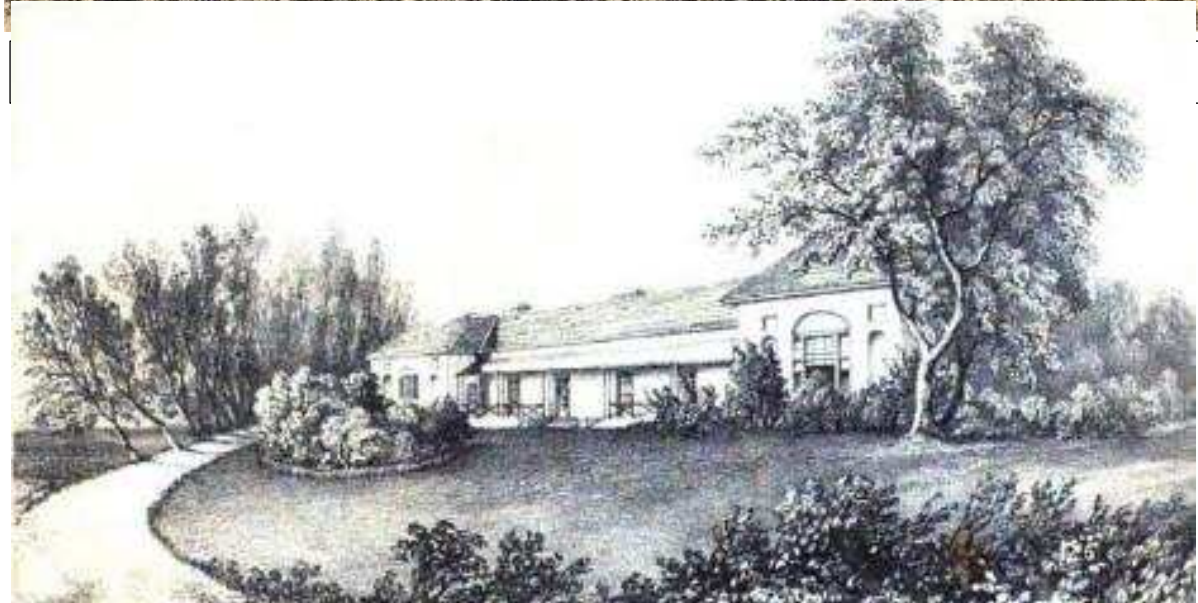
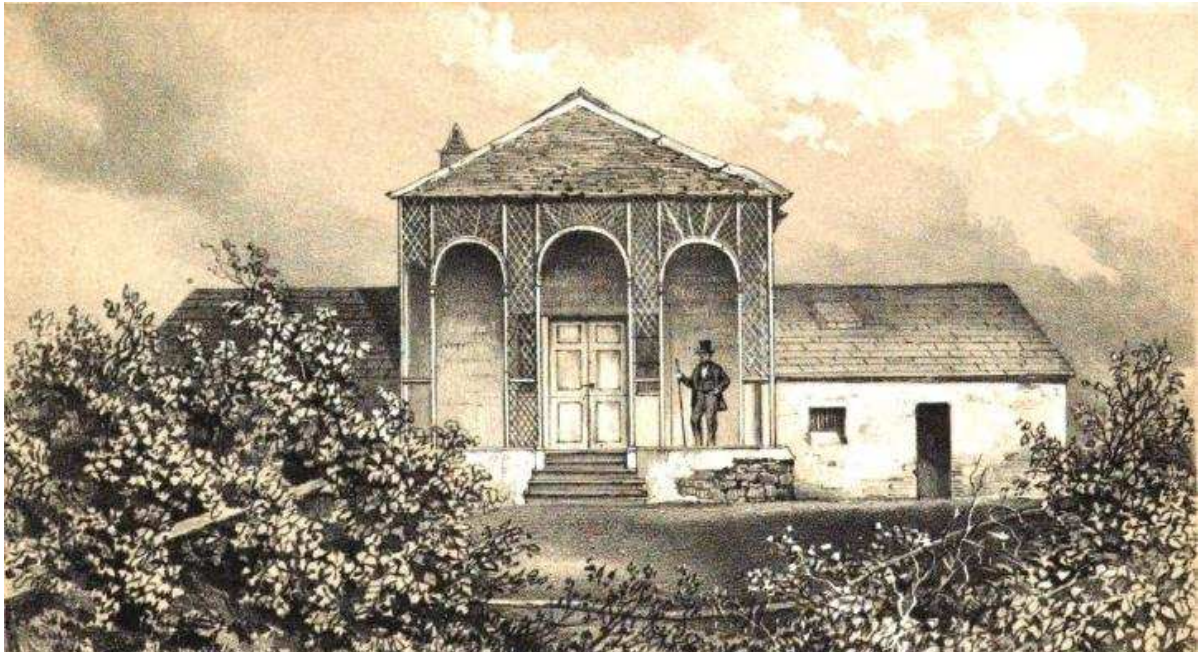


Figure 18: Slide VIII – “Longwood New House.”

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FIGURE 19: THE HOUSE OF THE SURVEYOR-GENERAL



Figure 20: Slide X – “Plantation House.”

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Figure 23: Slide XIII – “Willow Cottage.”

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APPENDIX B

Plates from the book on St. Helena by John Charles Melliss.

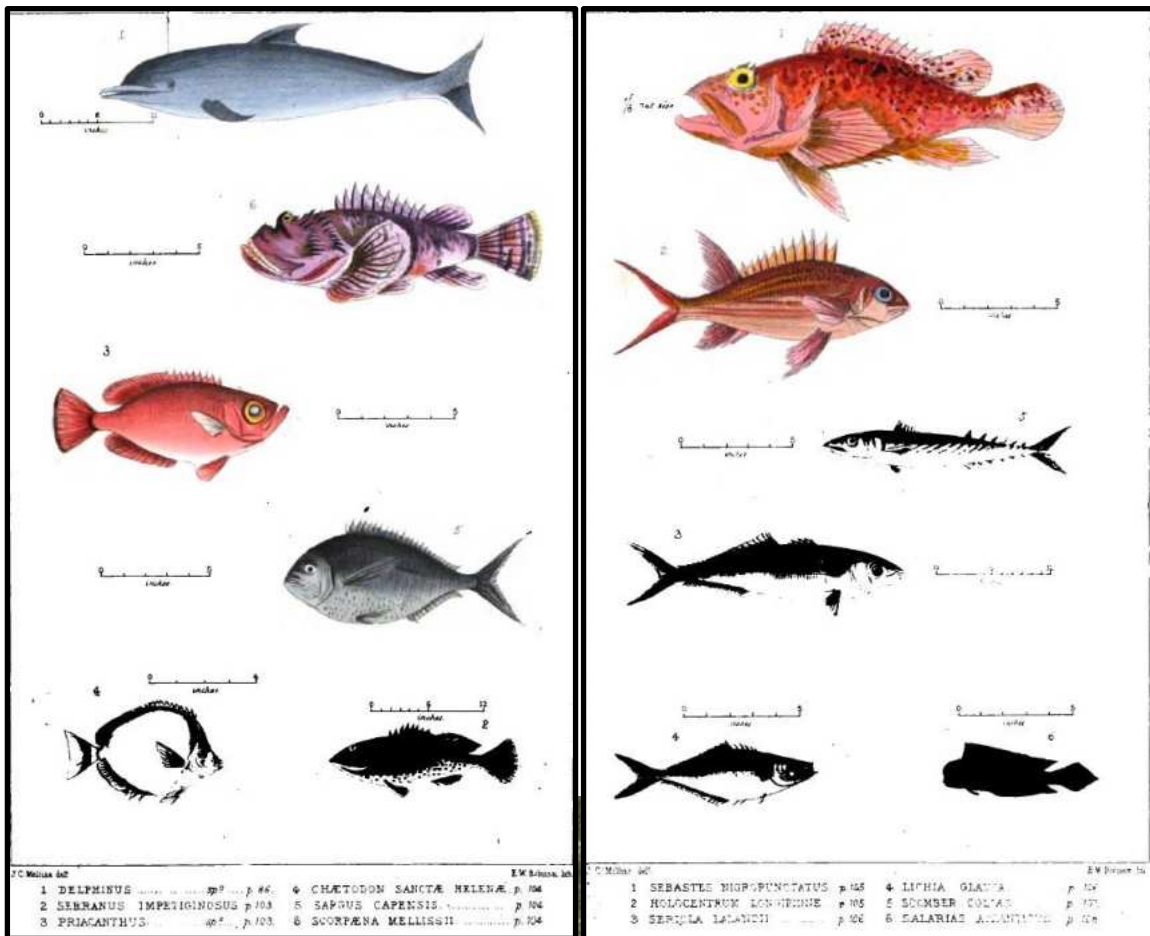


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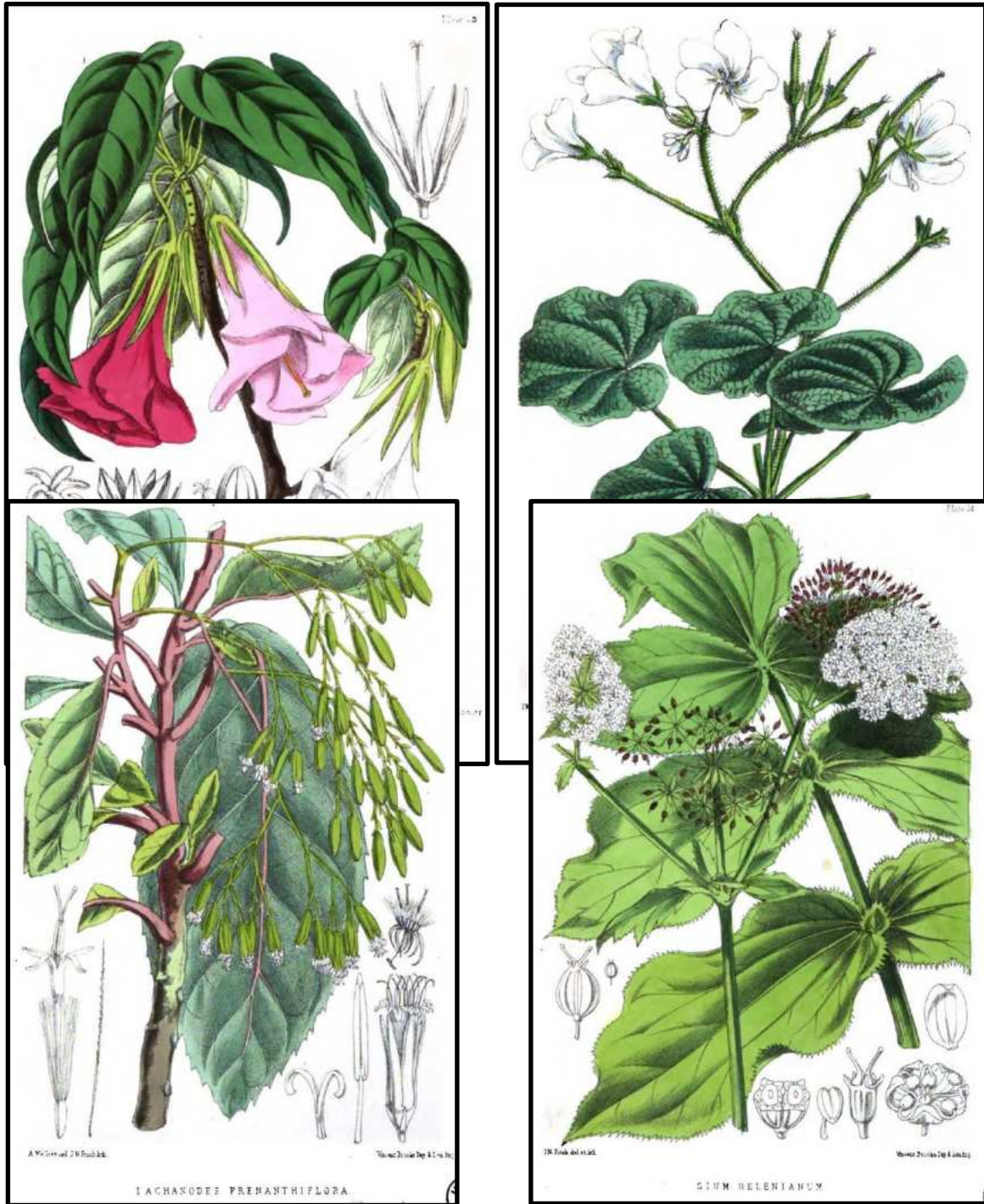
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