

METHODOLOGY REPORT

BACKGROUND

St Helena was first discovered in 1502 and English rule, under the auspices of the East India Company (EIC), was established in 1659. Although best known for its association with Napoleon, the island has a longer contribution to history in terms of colonialism, empire-building, and the slave trade and its suppression. It was a way-station between Europe, India and the East, and as such was pivotal in the creation of the British Empire. In the 18th century hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of merchant ships called there every year. From its earliest association with the EIC, St Helena employed coerced labour, but after 1807 became an important base for British slave trade suppression in the Atlantic. The island's remoteness has, from time to time, also led to its use as a place of imprisonment: in addition to Napoleon, it has housed Boer POWs, Zulu chiefs and Middle Eastern dissidents.

The island's Archives in Jamestown houses records from its first years as an English colony. The earliest documents date from 1673 and include EIC records through to 1834. These embody correspondence with England, internal memos, land grants and legal proceedings. There is also extensive documentation relating to Napoleon's exile, including his death certificate.

Overall, the documents preserve practically all of the primary historical record of St Helena from the late 17th century onwards. They contain an intricate, fine-grained record of the history, people and daily life of the colony, providing an essential historical context for its extensive built and archaeological heritage. The material has international significance and does not exist anywhere else.

DOCUMENT TYPES AND CONDITION

As a result of a pilot project in March 2013, a complete audit of archive material was carried out. The Archives is housed on the ground floor of an historic building. The records in the Repository and the cabinet in the Reading Room are mostly in moderate or good condition. It is estimated that about 80% of the records have survived well and are in good bindings. Many of the key series have been rebound. Although it was identified that there were no microfilm or digital copies of any materials, and therefore all research is carried out on the original documents.

Almost all documents within the Archive are paper and given the number of records, it was not practicable to undertake a detailed survey of condition. The condition of records is simply described as 'good', 'moderate' or 'poor', the following examples should indicate the reasoning behind a given condition grade.

Goodwin's Abstracts - Letters from England (1673-1707)

Re-bound in the 1930s. Undamaged cover, cloth on board. Hollow-back binding. The original documents are pasted into the text block, making them robust and easy to handle. There is no insect damage. The ink has not faded, and all information is easily legible.

Condition: Good

St Helena Records Volume 3 (1687-1693)

Rebound in the 1930s. Cover, cloth on board, faded. Hollow-back binding, cracked; the paper of the first few pages is brittle and the pages have broken away from the binding, but the rest are securely-held. The original documents are bound directly into the spine, without any backing. The page-edges are often slightly ragged, though rarely torn. They are fragile and require careful handling. The text on the main body of most pages is generally easily legible, but the ink nearer the page-edges is occasionally faded. The tight binding means that the writing on the inner margins is sometimes obscured. Many pages are ink-marked, stained or foxed.

Condition: Moderate

Letters from England (1824)

Bound volume. The board cover is fragile with the bottom corner missing. The sewn binding is damaged, with many pages breaking away. The bottom corners of many pages are torn, creased and, in cases, completely lost. Most pages are stained or foxed. The ink has not faded and, despite the damage, the content of all letters can be easily discerned.

Condition: Poor

SELECTION FOR THE DIGITISATION AND IDENTIFICATION

A priority list for digitisation was established, based on historical value, stability, fragility, amount of use, and level of duplication elsewhere.

The decided material was created between 1673 and 1834. It comprises sequential correspondence and records across this entire period, which includes all of the 17th-century East India Company records and most of those for the 18th century, notably St Helena Records and Letters from England.

DIGITISATION PROCESS

The digitisation process, did not take place in the actual Archives, primarily due to limited space capacity. Digitisation took place at the St Helena National Trust Building (a 3-minute walk from the Archives)

- Access to the documents by personnel employed to undertake the digitisation were possible from Monday – Friday.
- The Custodian of Records provided guidance and supervision of the handling and transportation of documents, which was done using air-tight containers.
- Documents for digitisation were collected from and returned to the Archives on a daily basis by those employed to carry out the digitisation.

A total of 325 Volumes have been digitised, resulting in 110,742 digital images.



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