

Notes from a very small island

Governors and Potatoes

As the potato shortage enters its third month a new Governor arrives. Maybe it is an omen that the deprivations of the past few weeks may be coming to an end.

First, potatoes. St Helenians are particularly fond of their European type vegetables. For an island that supports banana, mango, guava and other tropical fruits they give a lot of land over to broccoli, string beans, cabbage, squash, carrots and potatoes. The fruit, on the other hand, is mainly imported from South Africa on the monthly ship when it could grow perfectly well here.

Things do run out on St Helena. I have recently lived through the horror of the island running out of beer (someone forgot to arrange for the bonded warehouse in Cape Town to be opened in time for the boat to leave). In the end one enterprising shop airfreighted the stuff in and set about selling it for £2.50 a small can.

The same is happening with potatoes. Shops begin to import them, word gets around that they have them in stock and a mini riot takes place to get your hands on them. Rumours abound that the shop workers have kept some back for themselves but like the beer they go for ridiculous prices. Potatoes are now exchanged as gifts which indicates that you are high in the estimation of the giver.

A farmer friend has just sown his spuds and says the first crop is 12 weeks off, with the main crop 20 weeks away. The end is in sight but is still a way off unless the boat due in on Monday is laden with the things, and then conversations can turn to something else.

Maybe that conversation will be about the arrival of the new Governor. Dr Philip Rushbrook arrived on Saturday 11th May 2019. There have been 68 previous Governors but he is the first one to arrive by air and so holds his place in history already. A stage was set up in front of the court house, prisoners were out and about polishing the metalwork on the monuments and government buildings were all given a lick of paint.

Those of us sitting on the stage during the inauguration ceremony were advised we could wear our hats and medals if we wanted to. It was especially hot as we sat in our suits, cassocks or uniforms (minus medals and hat in my case). I'm told that previously some lawyers turned up in wig and gown but having experienced the St Helena heat with horsehair on your head I know that is a bad idea.

Guides, scouts, school kids, police officers, customs officers, prison officers and nurses all marched by while the band played on. The band deserve special mention, they had only one practice session beforehand and even on their own admission it showed. As the Governor inspected the ranks of guides etc. they struck up confidently with Bread of Heaven. When that finished it was clear they hadn't thought about how long the inspection would go on for, so after conferring amongst themselves they played it again. There then were many other lengthy conversations followed by renditions of tunes that they clearly hadn't prepared for, I'm sure I heard 'head, shoulders, knees and toes' at one stage and then a version of the Hovis advert played at a speed more suited to a sombre funeral. To be fair the band were without their conductor, who wasn't available having just started a 6-year prison sentence.

Bemused French tourists took pictures and all chatted throughout events while around them people fainted. You could always tell when that happened because the nurses broke ranks to go and tend to fallen. Local radio broadcast the event live to the world, partly to my chagrin as it took place during my usual weekly radio show (those interested can stream it every Saturday 3pm to 5pm GMT on Saint FM)

I usually approach these types of events with a degree of unease but in this case it was absolutely captivating. My natural inclination to debunk pomp and ceremony very quickly gave way to admiration for the whole process. Here was someone who had given up his life in London to come to an island in the middle of the South Atlantic, miles from anywhere, and with the sole intention to do what is right by the populace. He had clearly identified the priorities of his tenure well before he arrived and outlined these in his address (no mention of potatoes though). The people were giving him a very warm welcome in the tradition of an island which has a strong allegiance to the Queen, the Governor is after all the Sovereign's representative here. The Royal Proclamation of Appointment was read and prayers were said by the recently appointed Bishop, God save the Queen was sung and oddly none of it seemed incongruous at all.

Although the position of Governor may date back to colonial times what went on was purely modern St Helena. The marchers were barely in step, the band played with gusto despite its problems, the Saturday drinking went on unabated (it starts early here), a car in need of a new exhaust drove by and everyone was happy, relaxed and obviously so. The natural state of any St Helenian is positivity combined with cheeriness and an overwhelming desire to be welcoming. That is what was on display at 4pm one Saturday afternoon in mid-May as a Governor took his oath of office to begin his three-year appointment.

- Duncan Cooke



"Potatoes are now exchanged as gifts which indicates that you are high in the estimation of the giver."