

ST GEORGE'S ANGLICAN CHURCH, TUNIS A BRIEF HISTORY

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Abstract: This article describes some of the history of St George's Anglican Church in Tunis. I have so liberally used the few existent reports and histories¹ that they should be fully acknowledged from the very beginning of article. Given the interesting history of Tunis and its environment, any further, more serious, study of the role of the Anglicans and their mission in Tunis should be encouraged.

Key Words: Anglican Communion, Tunis, Episcopal Diocese of Egypt, London Jews Society, LJS, CMJ, ECJME.

1 Protestant Graveyard

St George's Anglican Church in Tunis is build on the location of the Protestant graveyard that was established on a plot of land that was supposedly donated to the British Consul Thomas Campeon around the year 1645 by Tunis' ruler, Hammouda Bey (1631-1666). Hammouda was



¹ 'Tunisia Report 2004: An Open Window at St. George's Church', www.crosbieandwilma.com/tunisiareport.htm (20 December 2011); Denys Pringle, 'The Protestant Graveyard in Tunis: A Catalogue of the Inscriptions, 1648-1885', www.stgeorgetunis.com/images/stories/Church/History/Graveyard-Pringle.pdf (20 December 2011); Rt Rev Bill Musk, 'St George's Anglican Church, Tunis: A brief history' (unpublished paper, received 15 July 2011); *Church of England Newspaper* for March 30, 1961; *CMJ Quarterly* for April to June 1971; *North of the Sahara* CMJ Publication, n.d.; Denys Pringle, *An Expatriate Community in Tunis 1648-1885*, BAR International Series 1811, 2008.

given the title *pasha* in 1657 by the Ottoman Sultan, underlining Ottoman Suzerainty over Tunis at that time.

Ivor J Rawlinson, British Ambassador in Tunisia from 1999-2002, called the land grant 'legend' in his 'Historical Reflections on the Centenary of St George, Tunis, 1901-2001'. There are no historical records of the land grant extant. The dimness of our historical knowledge of the origins of the graveyard is underlined by the fact that the supposed time of the land grant predates the appointment of Campion as Consul in Tunis in 1655 by more than a decade.

The oldest tombstone dates from 1648. The first stone commemorates a Samuel [W]ebbe (or Cobbe?); the unfortunate man died when he was 21 years old. On the stone he is described in Latin as a *mercator anglicus*, an English merchant. Thirteen years later

Consul Campion was buried in the same graveyard.

The graveyard was, in accordance with Muslim custom, outside the walls of the medina, at the Carthage Gate. That was fairly close to where the foreign merchants lived. The majority of those buried in the cemetery were under 45 years old when they died. Even the



richest in Tunis were relatively short-lived. The largest contingent of Protestants buried before 1800 were from the United Kingdom, but the gravestones also list deceased from Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and France.

Those expatriates who lived in 17th century Ottoman Tunisia were used to seeing hundreds of Christian slaves in the city. They were usually brought in from others parts of the Ottoman Empire and converted to Islam. In the city were also the prisoners of the corsairs, sold into slavery in Tunis.

The Mediterranean in the 17th century was largely in the hands of pirates. Robbing European ships provided the Bey of Tunis with

good income. The corsairs ransomed anyone they could take captive. Their Christian prisoners, unless repatriated by Consuls or merchants, were kept in specially constructed prisons. There were several of those in Tunis. What is interesting is that the cemetery was used and accepted by locals as a refuge for escaped English Christian slaves on the run in Tunis. Hence its name in Arabic: “Bled Cheram” (place of refuge). Curiously, illegal immigrants still seek refuge there. The tradition persists.

One of the tombstones’ in St George’s cemetery has a skull and crossbones under the epitaph. These symbols on the grave of Marie Ronling, the Swedish Consul’s wife who died in 1766, do not refer to piracy but to freemasonry. A century later Henry Howard Haylock’s tombstone was erected, so the epitaph says, by his Masonic brethren.

There are 25 tombs from the 18th century when Tunis was slightly calmer and prosperous. A notable tomb from the period is of Richard Lawrence, British Consul General, born in 1668 in Cornwall and who died in 1750 aged 82 having served for no less than 38 years under three British sovereigns. Three other 18th Century British Consuls have their resting-place in the cemetery. One of them had the bright idea to fund the maintenance of the cemetery by demanding a cemetery upkeep tax of five piasters on all English ships arriving in the harbor.



The earliest reference to the cemetery's dedication to St George occurs in 1804 when the consuls of Britain, the United States, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands divided between them the cost of repairing its boundary wall.

Sir Thomas Reade, Consul General from 1824 to 1849, deserves special mention. In the spirit of the abolitionist movement which was sweeping through Europe, he persuaded Ahmed Bey in 1842 as his epitaph says, “to abolish slavery throughout his dominion” and give freedom to every slave. His remains were removed to England in the 1950s but a commemorative plaque in the church porch reproduces his full epitaph. Incidentally, Reade’s son, also called Thomas, took over as Consul from his father.

The most famous American of all commemorated at St George’s is John Howard Payne (died 1852), actor, playwright, poet and twice consul. He is the author of the song “Home, Sweet Home” and he is honoured by a cenotaph over two metres tall. He was given a public funeral, at Ahmed Bey’s insistence, and his coffin was escorted from Manouba to Tunis by a guard of honour. His remains were exhumed and transferred to Washington in 1883 for reburial there.

Nineteenth century Tunis had the largest European colony in the Maghreb in the early 1800s. St George’s cemetery reflects this. Twenty-seven of the 108 tombs are from the period 1800-1850. The last burial, according to the tombstones, dates from 1885, when the French were already in charge of Tunisia. During its last period, the cemetery had been managed by a committee of the British community in Tunis with some financial assistance from the British government.

2 St Augustine: First protestant church in Tunis

According to the Rev Michael Russell, writing in the “History and Present Condition of the Barbary States” in 1835, the relatively few Protestants at that time in Tunis received the sacrament in a Greek church and made use of the services of Greek priests for marriages, baptisms and burials. A few years later, when the missionaries came to convert the Jews in Tunis, divine service was held in the missionaries’ house.

The English chaplaincy in Tunis started in 1860 by the Rev William Fenner, a missionary working with the Church Mission to the Jews (CMJ), also called the London Jews Society (LJS), who were responsible for the construction of Christ Church inside the Jaffa Gate, in Jerusalem. Anglican worship took place in private houses.

CMJ had begun its work in Tunis in 1833 at the hands of Dr Ferdinand Christian Ewald, a Hebrew Christian, who began a regular Sunday service. Ewald returned, ill, to England in 1841. Rev E. A. Page worked in Tunis 1853 to 1856 when he died of cholera. Rev William Fenner arrived in Tunis in 1860, re-opening a Boys School in 1861 and starting a Girls School 1862. He died of diphtheria in 1874. Rev E.B. Frankel superintended the work in Tunis until his retirement in 1881. Rev H.C. Riechardt followed Rev Frankel until 1888 when he was followed by Rev C. Frederick W. Flad.

By the 1870's the British community had grown considerably and in 1877, despite his Catholic persuasion, Sir Richard Wood obtained a site from the Bey or the municipality where a church structure was built, called St. Augustine. Among the British Embassy papers there is still a translation in English of a letter in Arabic in 1877 to Sir Richard Wood from Mohamed el Arabi Zarrouk, President of the Municipality of Tunis, agreeing to supply one meter of Zagouan water "to the Protestant church situated near the fish market". This was just outside the walls of the medina but some way away from the cemetery. It was on the west side of the Rue d'Espagne according to the map of 1878. Little is known about St Augustine's beyond that it was built with some sort of iron-frame by the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews—the official name of the LJS. Within 20 years it was demolished and the land was sold.

In the 1880's the municipality instructed Protestants (and Catholics) to use the new municipal cemetery for Europeans outside Bab al-Khadra - so no further burials were made in St George's cemetery from that time.

In March 1891, responsibility for the St George's cemetery and the church of St Augustine was passed to a new committee of St Augustine's church. The new committee consisted of a delegate from the bishop of Gibraltar, the chaplain and a member of the British community. Before taking on responsibility for the management of the cemetery, the committee requested that it first be put into a secure state. The British government made a financial contribution lasting four years. Then, on 4 December 1894, the British consul general, with the authorisation of the British foreign secretary, ap-

pointed three trustees to manage St Augustine's church and St George's cemetery:

Whereas certain persons hereinafter called the subscribers contributed divers sums of money for the building of an English Church at Tunis, named by them on its completion St Augustine's Church; and whereas the subscribers aforesaid expressly stipulated at a meeting held on the 21st May 1877 that the said church so erected by them be maintained and preserved as an English Episcopal Church for the celebration of the Established Church of England and for no other use, object or employment whatsoever [...] *The trustees are given responsibility for St Augustine's Church and for St George's Cemetery and express permission [...] even to sell this said land [the land on which stands St Augustine's Church], on condition, however, that in case of such sale the proceeds would be employed for the erection of a stone church in the grounds of St George's Cemetery or elsewhere.*

In accordance with the terms of the trust, the trustees subsequently sold St Augustine's church and its site and used the proceeds plus other donations to build a new church on the site of the cemetery.

The Embassy papers contain an even more intriguing letter of 14 January 1887 from the Bishop of Gibraltar, writing from Algiers, to the Rev Reichardt which hints at serious problems about the status of St Augustine's and to whom it belonged. The Bishop regrets that there had been friction and ill-feeling between the Consulate and the Rev Reichardt about this. He recognised the value of the vicar's long and gratuitous services, but wrote, "I cannot for a moment admit that you have any personal or exclusive right in the guardianship of the Church or its title deeds. Both of these should be in my possession", or that of the Consul whom the Bishop had appointed as his representative. The Bishop formally requested the vicar deliver over the key and the title deeds to the Consul. He regretted that the vicar had discontinued to hold services in St Augustine's, and said a committee of three trustees should be appointed to regulate the affairs of the church: the Consul, the Chaplain and a member of the congregation. Finally, the Bishop dismissed the vicar's request that the congregation should pay the full wages of his servant.

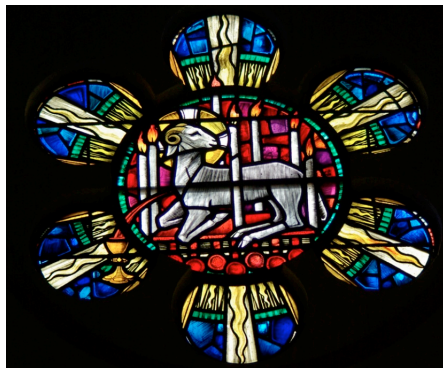
It is not entirely surprising to discover such goings on in the community at this time. The powerful, dominant Sir Richard Wood was a master of intrigue. When he was unceremoniously retired by the Foreign Office in 1879 at the age of 73, his place was taken by Thomas Reade who was described as “weak and negligent, asleep most afternoons outside the cafes” in what is now Avenue de France. Reade evidently had let church affairs slide.

3 St George's Church

A manuscript in the British Embassy shows that a stone church in the grounds of St George's cemetery was being considered even in 1894. The building of St George's took place between 1899 and 1901, on the site of part of the old cemetery. The Protestant section of the new European Cemetery at Bab-el-Khadra was already in use. Those tombs at St George's cemetery that had to be disturbed had their headstones affixed to the walls of the cemetery.

Money for construction of the church was raised by the Rev Cameron Flad, the vicar. Born in Abyssinia of German-Scots missionary parents, he lived in Tunis from 1888-1914, employed by the Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews. He raised not only enough money from the sale of the site of St Augustine's and from elsewhere to build the church but also to build two schools nearby, one for boys and one for girls, together with a residence for the missionary-teachers and a residence for himself. He lost both his wife and child in an epidemic before the First World War.

Because of his half-German ancestry, he was forced to leave his church and the area when the First World War broke out. The local authorities were suspicious then about all the work being done by the missionary-teachers and were threatening to requisition the whole Mission. A British successor was quickly found to continue





the Rev Flad's work and the new vicar's first task was to deal with local attempts to sequester the church and the church house.

The new church, of cut stone, was modeled on the English church at Patras, in the Greek Peloponnese. The architect/engineer was a certain J E Baldaull, though the signature on the plan is indistinct. The church, which seats 100, is built of cut stone in Gothic style and consists of chancel, nave, porch and vestry. On raised land well above street level, it is built to last. The foundations are of concrete to a depth of 2-1/2 metres. The height from the ground to the top of the cross on the belfry is 15.8 metres. It possesses a fine belfry but has never had a bell.

The first sermon in the church was the Memorial Service to Queen Victoria who died in 1901. The pulpit, made of local Chemtou marble, was erected in 1902 in memory of three former missionary clergy of LJS (now known as the CMJ).

The five stained-glass windows in the church are of different periods. The two oldest, depicting saints, are in the nave on the side by which one enters the church. No documentation has been seen concerning these windows. Beside them is a window donated by a mother in memory of her only son, Donald Anderson, who died at Medjez El Bab in 1943. This beautiful window is most unusual for its military detail -- mine detector, uniform, etc. It was installed in 1950.

The three splendid windows (triforium) behind the altar were in-



stalled in 1961 and today are perhaps the great feature of St George's. They depict or name leading figures of the first Christian era in nearby Carthage: St Cyprian and St Augustine as well as the two female Christian martyrs, St Felicitas and St Perpetua who refused to renounce their faith and were thrown to the wild beasts in the Roman amphitheatre.

4 The Mission to the Jews and its schools

The beginnings of St George's were closely linked to the already mentioned London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews, aka LJS, aka CMJ. St George's is located right beside the old Jewish quarter (El Hafsia) where a succession of Protestant clergy went about their missionary work from 1833 onwards.

There were an estimated 15,000 Jews in the Hafsia at that time. The two schools were started in 1861 and 1862 in rented buildings before moving into purpose-built premises in Place des Potiers in 1910. The building is still a school and there is still a residual link with St George's. The schools were founded by the Rev William Fenner. He did not have an easy time of it. His tombstone at St George's records "his peculiarly trying missionary labours amongst the House of Israel". Teachers today would find the conditions imposed on their predecessors at the Missionary schools unbelievably harsh. A 1931 contract form in the St George's archives shows that if the teachers did not learn Arabic or French "within a reasonable time" they were dismissed. They could not change their accommodation without the agreement of the Head of the Mission. Permission to marry had to be sought from the Mission and anyone who married without permission would be considered as having resigned. After four years a teacher would qualify for a return to Britain for the summer holidays, second class! An average of 200 children at a time were taught in their own special Judeo-Arabic language and French and Hebrew until the Six-Day War of 1967 when most Jews left Tunisia.

There was a Bible Depot adjoining St George's from which bibles and brochures were freely distributed until it was burned by a mob in 1967. The vicar had to lead his wife and children to safety through the same mob. First, however, he buried a quantity of bi-

bles in the churchyard where no doubt they still are. This was the time when the British Embassy not far away in Place de la Victoire, was attacked and set alight by angry crowds forcing the staff to flee across the rooftops. The Church Mission to the Jews finally withdrew from Tunisia in 1970.

5 Second World War

The church records show that St George's had to close from November 1942 to May 1943 during the German occupation of Tunis. The English and Jewish connections made St George's, the Mission, and those who worked there too easy a target. The vicar at the time, the Rev Isaac Dunbar, went into hiding. However, after the liberation of Tunis the church was much used by the British Armed Forces, to the extent that it acquired the title "The Westminster Abbey of North Africa". Rev Dunbar acted as chaplain to the British Forces and did great work for which he was awarded the MBE in 1944. Some 300 men were confirmed there during those years. Many memorials line the walls of the church placed there by British regiments that saw action and lost men in what was to be the last part of the North African campaign and the turning point of the war.

The RAF and the First Army have their own plaques. The roll call of army regiments is sonorous and still very meaningful to many veterans -the Hampshires, the First Parachute Brigade, the Coldstream Guards, the Scots Guards, the Royal Artillery, the Royal Tank Regiment, 4th Indian Division, the Household Division, the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, the Grenadier Guards, the Welsh Guards, the Yorkshire Light Infantry, the Royal Armoured Corps, the Irish Guards, Sixth Armoured Division. Veterans of the Second World War still come in pilgrimage to the battlefields and the eight war cemeteries in Tunisia where 9,702 Commonwealth war dead are commemorated.

Remembrance services, usually officiated by the vicar of St George's, are held at one of the Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries in the open air. For the past years the Remembrance Services have been attended by over 500 people each time. There is no way that that number of people would fit into St George's. Services have

been held at St George's commemorating the lives of Kings (George I and George VI), Queens (Victoria), Presidents (Eisenhower and Kennedy) and a Prime Minister (Sir Winston Churchill) as well as the Princess of Wales.

6 Finance and status

St George's depends almost entirely on congregational offerings for its upkeep, preservation and the maintenance of the vicar or pastor. There is no endowment or accumulated fund. The land was gifted to the British Crown and both it and the Church building are technically the property of the British Government who, however, accepts no financial responsibility for either. The Church House is a separate property owned by a company registered in Tunisia. The British Government has vested its responsibilities, including possession of the property and its proper use, in trustees, one of whom is the British Ambassador or his nominee. There are, or can be, up to five other trustees including, of course, the vicar or pastor and the Chairman of the Parish Council. In practice today it is the Parish Council that takes day-to-day operating decisions. The trustees meet if needed for decisions within their responsibility. Two small shops and an apartment in Rue Mongi Slim also belong to St George's and produce a very small rental income.

7 St George's today

Since the last World War, there have been one or two periods when St George's has been without a vicar and when the congregation has dwindled. This is not surprising. Most of the congregation today lives ten miles or more from the Church and finds it difficult to get to. Indeed, for a time services were held in the American School outside the city. Presently, the congregation of about 250 adults consists mostly of African worshippers.

St George's is Anglican and comes within the diocese of Egypt with North Africa, Ethiopia and Somalia, but the church congregation comprises a kaleidoscope of believers. Many have young children for whom there is a Sunday School in Church House on Sunday mornings. And there are, of course, other regular and ad hoc activities throughout the year.

The Right Reverend Mouneer Hanna Anis is the bishop of the diocese, and as such he represents the diocese and all the Episcopal or Anglican churches under his jurisdiction before the governments of the countries of this region, including St George's in Tunis. Property and church buildings belonging to the Episcopal or Anglican Diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa are administered by the diocese which is legally responsible for such properties before the legal authorities in each country. Serving under Bp Anis as assistant bishops are the Rt Rev Bill Musk, who is also the pastor of St George's, and the Rt Rev Grant Le Marquand, who was ordained bishop on April 25th of 2012 in Cairo. Le Marquand will have responsibility over the diocesan churches and institutions in the Horn of Africa.

This diocese itself is one of four dioceses that form the Anglican province called The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East. The other three dioceses are the Diocese of Jerusalem, the Diocese of Iran, and the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf States. In 1974 The Sudan became its own province within the world-wide Anglican Communion.

8 Chaplains/Ministers of St George's Anglican Church

1901-1914 Rev Cameron Frederick W. Flad
1914-1933 Rev H.C. Burrough; 1933-1936 Rev L.F. Rice
1938-1956 Ven Isaac Dunbar
1960-1967 Rev Ron W. Oswald
1968-1969 Ven Isaac Dunbar
1970-1971 Rev Basil Pitt
1972-1978 Rev Derek Eaton
1978-1982 Rev Russell Avery
1982-1986 Rev Dan Sealy
1987-1992 Rev Patrick Blair
1992-1993 Rev Don Church (interim)
1993-1995 Rev Paul-Gordon Chandler
1997?-1998 Rev Howard Morton
1999-2000 Rev Geoff Holt
2000-2007 Rev Gerald Brulotte
2008- Rt Rev Dr Bill Musk