

What Happened to the Coffee?

“Saint FM and the Independent are currently working on investigating the health of the local coffee industry. Parts of this work include to find out how much coffee is actually exported from the Island. The figures are held at the Finance Department but after enquiries from Saint FM and the Independent it was said that “With reference to your request for statistics relating to the export of coffee, legal advice is this information could be commercially sensitive and therefore shouldn’t be released.” After SHG has pumped in 100,000’s of pounds into the coffee production on the Island, the outcome of the spending of public money is confidential.”

Coffee has been seen as a major contributor to the local economy for many years. Already when Napoleon was exiled on the Island, local coffee was recognised as a unique product and the Green Tipped Bourbon Arabica, which is the type grown on the Island received some fame. Coffee was cultivated on St Helena as early as in the 1730’s when seeds were taken from Yemen in Arabia and some ended up in St Helena. Sandy Bay is one of the few places in the World where coffee actually grows in the wild. St Helena has the opportunity to cash in on a product that nobody can compete with. St Helena coffee can only grow in St Helena.



Green Tipped Bourbon Arabica

Unfortunately, the huge coffee success outlined in the 1990’s never came off the ground. Money spent, first by A&NRD and later by SHDA appears to have gone down the drain. As late as eight years ago, it was estimated that we had 18 acres of coffee under cultivation, containing 20,000 trees and with a potential to produce up to 12 tonnes of green bean per year. Now we have less than two acres of productive coffee culti

vation. Vast areas of former plantations are going to waste, with invasive species of weeds taking over, strangling the coffee trees. In the middle of the 1990’s we were exporting about three tonnes of green bean per year, which was seen as a good foundation to be able to build up a growing coffee industry. The local market has always been viable but to have an outlet for a growing production, an export market is a necessity. In the 1990’s we had Taylor’s, who bought coffee in the days when A&NRD grew the coffee. Colin & Marlene Yon took care of the local sales. A scheme started when coffee trees carried a subsidy and almost everybody with a piece of land planted coffee paid by Government. The hopes were high but soon scattered. Towards the late



Derelict Coffee Plantation at Bamboo Hedge

1990’s the export figures dropped, which at the time, was blamed on that the trees were not mature and did not produce much. Still, over ten years later, most of the subsidised trees do not yield much coffee, if any. Some of them are dug up others have to fight with weed for their existence. The potential for a viable coffee business is there but the longer it takes, the more expensive it will be to restore the coffee grounds to be productive.

The largest productive coffee plantation today was never in the Government scheme in the first place. It is Rosemary Gate Estate, with 1,200-1,500 trees. It is owned by Bill and Jill Bolton, who started the business in their home garden in the mid 1990’s. They are the providers to the local market through the Coffee Shop in the Leisure Park and also have limited exports to Ascension Island and what tourists bring with them to their home country. We also have a few smaller growers on the Island. Overseas, importers would give their right arm to buy some St Helenian Green Tipped Bourbon Arabica, but in vain. There is no coffee in St Helena. A price of £30 per kilo bean is on offer but nobody appears to be bothered. Next step for the Island is to build up a fantastic tourism industry, where millions will be poured in with the same tale of certain success as the coffee industry. It will only take a few years before we see derelict chalets, restaurants and holiday compartments, all overgrown and deserted after the state subsidy is taken away.



Part of Rosemary Gate Estate, the Island’s largest active coffee producers.

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It makes me wonder what will come next. There are not many stubborn people like the Bolton's, willing to develop a business in St Helena. It is a long-term task which takes more resilience than most people possess. Many schemes look good on paper but who is willing to actually do it?

I can see the St Helena Independent in ten years time: "Saint FM and the Independent are currently working on investigating the health of the tourism industry on the Island. Parts of this work in-

clude to find out how many tourists actually visited the Island. The figures are held by the Tourist Office but after enquiries from Saint FM and the Independent it was said that "With reference to your request for statistics relating to tourism, legal advice is this information could be commercially sensitive and therefore shouldn't be released." After SHG has pumped in millions of pounds into the tourism industry on the Island, the outcome of the spending of public money is confidential."



There is a huge market for St Helena Coffee