

William A. Thorpe, 1842-1918*

By Ian Bruce & Nick Thorpe

On the morning of Sunday 12 January 1918, William Thorpe set off on a horse ride from his country residence, Mount Pleasant. The 75-year-old enjoyed riding his extensive lands. On this occasion, he was accompanied by Donald and Eric Bruce, his twin 14-year-old grandsons by his late daughter Ethel Mary. According to these witnesses, about half a mile along, whilst riding along the path above Stoney Point, Thorpe's horse stumbled and he fell off, hitting the ground and rolling down the slope. Had this happened today he would not have travelled far because the slope is covered with flax and scrub, but in those days, the ground was open and he rolled uncontrollably a long way down, smashing his head against a rock. Seeing their grandfather lying down the slope, the boys rushed back to the house for help. It took several hours before the unconscious body was retrieved and brought back to Mount Pleasant. Thorpe was still alive but died two days later on 14 January.¹



Path above Stoney Point, approximate location of Thorpe's fall

The cause of death quoted on Thorpe's death certificate was "fracture base of skull". There was no inquest - given he was *THE* coroner, it may have been difficult to arrange an inquest at short notice. Benjamin Grant of the St Helena Guardian wrote an obituary stating he had known Thorpe "*from his youth up and can testify that no youth can boast a career as he could! Very unassuming - never seen to keep company with anyone - abstemious in his habits - in short a youth of exceptional character.*" Grant also commented, "*no islander has died here who has left such a large amount of property and money to his children as William Alexander Thorpe.*"²

Given their general lack of opportunities, St Helenians have an unfair reputation for being apathetic and unambitious, but this certainly did not describe William Thorpe. Born into an ordinary family, he was educated at a regular island school. There was nothing in his background to suggest he would one day be recognised as the most outstanding island-born businessman.³

The other great entrepreneur at St Helena was of course Saul Solomon (1776-1852), but he belonged to an earlier generation, trading in the first half of the nineteenth century, which was largely a relatively benign economic period. Born some 66 years before Thorpe, Solomon arrived as a soldier serving in the island regiment, beginning his operations at the turn of the nineteenth century when St

* This is a modified version of an article published by Friends of St Helena - Ian Bruce and Nick Thorpe, 'William A Thorpe, 1842-1918', *Wirebird The Journal of the Friends of St Helena* 43 (2014): 4-20). Full details of the Society, its objectives, publications and considerable other information on St Helena can be seen on <http://www.sthelenauk.net>

Helena was still an essential port of call for homeward ships from India and the Far East. During his period, the number of ships calling at the island steadily rose from about 150 to over a thousand a year. He was criticised for charging outrageous prices, but his customers were sufficiently wealthy to afford them. He also benefited greatly from the increased population during the 1815-1821 period when Napoleon was imprisoned on the island. Certainly, the economic climate deteriorated in the late 1830s due to harsh cutbacks when governance of St Helena passed from the East India Company to the British Colonial Office. However, by then not only was Solomon in a dominant position to survive this lean period, but also to buy up houses, land and businesses on the cheap when many families previously employed by the EIC were forced to leave the island. Then from March 1840, trade picked up again when the Vice Admiralty Court was opened at St Helena, being part of the attempt to stop slave ships crossing the South Atlantic Ocean. Thorpe was just ten when Solomon died. By the time he grew to adulthood, the trading position at St Helena was completely different. Throughout almost his entire career, St Helena's economy was in decline and trading opportunities were few. To succeed, his business approach would need to be very different from Solomon.⁴

William Alexander Thorpe, the only child of Henry and Susan Thorpe, was born in Jamestown on 1 August 1842. "Harry Thop" and Susan "Easthopt" married on 3 June 1841 in a service conducted by Richard Kempthorne and witnessed by Martha "Easthopt" and Joseph Bacchus, these surnames presumably being spelt phonetically by the clergyman when filling in the ecclesiastical record. Little is known about Harry Thorpe's origins. He probably arrived on the island as a soldier and there is a family tradition he was a red-bearded Yorkshireman. He was probably also quite tall, William Thorpe himself towering over other born and bred St Helenians. The Thorpe surname is not especially common, averaging about 0.02% of the total UK population in the 1841-1861 censuses. Given St Helena's small population, this would roughly equate to only one Thorpe on the island. However, excluding Henry Thorpe's family, at least eight other Thorpes lived there during the nineteenth century, so there were probably some family relationships between them. The ancestry of Thorpe's mother is much easier to trace because she was born at St Helena, descended from slaves on both sides of her family. Susannah Easthope was born on 22 April 1820 (baptised precisely one year later), the daughter of Henry and Ann Easthope née Scott. Her parents married on 26 December 1816, Henry Easthope being a slave and Ann Scott the daughter of John Scott, a soldier, and Mary, slave to Mr Yates.⁵

William was probably educated at Jamestown's government under school. The location of this building is not known, but was condemned in 1842 by Governor Trelawney because it comprised an upper-floor area packed with over 120 children, conditions he deemed unsuitable for their health. His father ran a lemonade and ginger beer business but died from "a bilious attack" on 13 May 1854 when William was only eleven. The significant affect the premature death of a father can sometimes have in promoting the career of an adolescent boy has long been recognised. His mother died from "fever" six years later on 1 June 1860.⁶

There is a tradition within his family that as a young man, Thorpe bought and sold at good profit copper used to sheath the bottoms of slave ships, but there is some doubt about this because most ships were being broken up when he was still only a child. It is not known whether Thorpe kept on his father's premises, but when aged about 20 he placed a newspaper advertisement in June 1863 showing he was operating "The General Store", having formed a company, Messrs. W. Thorpe & Co. Here he claimed his company had "*secured the stock of Mr Lambert at a price which will enable them to offer to the public a large lot of first class goods at prices little more than half their value*". Value for money was to be the touchstone of Thorpe's future approach to business.⁷



The intimidating figure of William Alexander Thorpe

The following year, the 16 September 1864 edition of the St Helena Guardian carried two separate advertisements. The first was by a Scotsman, Donald McDonald. Two years earlier, he had married Eliza Charlotte Doveton and his advertisement announced his shop would sell “*a splendid assortment of goods direct from England per steamer Eastern Province which are all marked at unusually low prices*”. Simultaneously, Thorpe announced that “*the firm of Thorpe & Co. have this day been dissolved by mutual consent*”, adding the warning that unpaid debts “*unless immediately settled will be handed to an Attorney for Collection*”. For the next six years, Thorpe and McDonald would work together. Family tradition suggests that Thorpe was employed by McDonald’ as the “Shop Boy”. Certainly, the shop was owned by McDonald, but the above advertisements hint at something more akin to a merger of interests. Their shop located on Market Street is still owned by Thorpe’s descendents. The book *The Doveltons of St Helena* praises McDonald for managing his business “with skill and profit”. However, a business founded on direct supplies from the UK was never likely to succeed at St Helena where the number outward-bound ships from Britain calling at the island were so few in number. The downward trend in shipping was only likely to be exacerbated by the opening of the Suez Canal at the end of 1869 and it is probably no coincidence that McDonald sold the business and buildings to Thorpe the following year, on 1 November 1870.⁸



Thorpe and McDonald's Shop

A few months before this, on 26 June 1870, William Alexander Thorpe (storekeeper aged 27) married Rosina Jane Harris (aged 21, daughter of William and Jane Harris née Wood), at Jamestown Parish Church. According to Thorpe's obituary, she was normally known as "Rose" and her father worked as a baker. Their first child William was born three months later on 25 September. In total, they had twelve children, ten boys and two girls. Rosina may have influenced Thorpe to be confirmed at St James church in November 1872.⁹



Rosina (Rose) Jane Thorpe née Harris

Donald McDonald was by no means the only trader to acknowledge defeat in the face of the decline of St Helena's economy. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was merely the first of many body blows over the next 50 years. An immediate impact was felt in 1870 when manning levels of the garrison were reduced from 448 to only 178. Following the end of the vice-admiralty, the 1870s witnessed a period of economic retrenchment when Governor Patey, under the direction of the Colonial Office, savagely reduced the cost of the civil establishment by almost two-thirds. This led to considerable economic depression and the departure in a single year of about a quarter of the population. Meanwhile, over the 20-year period 1866-1886, the total number of ships calling at the island each year collapsed from 918 to 377. Some 20 years later in 1906, the number of ships had dwindled to just 32. A crude measure of the effect of this can be made from the fall in annual custom receipts over the same period: £17,257 in 1866; £6,580 in 1886; £4,864 in 1906. The latter half of the 1880s witnessed a confused period when British military policy was divided between the Colonial Office's desire to strongly fortify St Helena against invasion and the Royal Navy's preference to defend its base at Ascension. In 1890, Governor Grey Wilson lamented that St Helena was "*too insignificant and remote from the mother country to arouse any general interest, we have for many years been the plaything of fate . . .*". Having spent £50,000 over several years installing heavy guns to protect Jamestown, in 1891 most of the men in St Helena's artillery were transferred to Sierra Leone and Mauritius. This additional cut initiated a new phase of emigration, mainly to South Africa. Whilst the first three years of the new century were relatively buoyant due to the influx of Boer prisoners and British guards, the next decade was one of remorseless economic decline. Probably the worst blow came with the closure of the garrison in 1906, as a direct result of which Governor Gallwey stated begging had been seen for the first time on the island.¹⁰

In the teeth of this economic storm over a period of more than half a century, Thorpe did not just survive but significantly grew his business. Like Solomon half a century earlier, this was mainly at the expense of competitors who were forced to sell up cheaply and leave the island. During the latter decades of the century, Thorpe was in a position to acquisitively buy many large country houses and expanded his farming interests to the point where he owned over 1,000 acres of land, farming forming a significant part of his business. By 1905, he had purchased the whole of the ridge lands from Scott Alexander for £1,500. Soon after, he bought houses such as Woodlands, Woodcot and Mount Pleasant in which his descendants still live today.



Thorpe Country Shop with corrugated iron counter

Thorpe had a very simple business philosophy. He communicated this to staff and customers alike by placing in each of his shops large signs emblazoned with the letters "SPQR". Ancient Romans would

have recognised this as the Latin phrase *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (“the senate and people of Rome”) whilst modern-day retailers know it to mean “service, price, quality and range”. In Thorpe’s time, it had a third meaning - “small profits, quick returns”. Victorian and Edwardian market traders in England frequently displayed SPQR on their stalls, the term probably owing its origins to a near contemporary of Thorpe, Charles Broadway Rouss (1836-1902). This multi-millionaire New York City department-store tycoon famously operated a SPQR strategy, which essentially comprised attracting masses of poorly paid New Yorkers into over 40 attractively displayed stores by offering goods at very keen prices. The key element of this approach was to maintain a very tight control over costs, especially the cost of stock offered for sale.¹¹

Thorpe successfully adapted this retail strategy to his cash-strapped customers at St Helena. His approach was precisely the opposite to that operated by Solomon in more affluent times and much of his early success can be attributed to the failure of competitors to adapt to the straightened economic conditions. However, on a remote island like St Helena where almost all his goods needed to be imported, tight control over costs was exceedingly difficult to achieve and his primary skill was in the sourcing, purchasing and shipment of goods at keen prices. This is far more easily said than done and on the occasions when he failed to offer the best prices the joke went round that the SPQR signs meant, “small people quickly robbed”.

He was also keenly alert to other business opportunities. A good example of this comes from the story of the *Royal Harrie*. In January 1883 Lloyds of London reported the brig *Royal Harrie* had grounded at its moorings at Porman (near Catagena, Spain). The ship may not have been adequately repaired before next sailing to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). In early 1884 on the homeward voyage from Colombo to London, the ship was leaking so badly that it was forced to call into St Helena. Orders were eventually received to discharge the cargo at the island. Thorpe purchased the ship at auction and set to work to repair it. On 22 March he entered into a contract with the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, who then administered Ascension Island, to collect and buy guano from there, as well as from Boatswain Bird Island, located some 270 metres off the east coast. Much of this had already been taken by earlier expeditions. Thorpe was very punctilious to ensure the Admiralty gave written confirmation that his work was satisfactory at every stage. G. Parsons R.N. (Captain in Charge at Ascension) reported on 22 December that the only guano on Boatswain Bird Island was located on the ledges and crevices of the almost perpendicular cliffs. Thorpe employed a team of men to collect and load the ship. The task was completed by 10 January 1885, Captain Pastor confirming that the *Royal Harrie* had taken away 70 tons of guano. Separate written confirmation was given that all the guano had been cleared, the contract having been faithfully completed. Thorpe discharged the guano at St Helena and then presumably sold the ship in London, where it arrived in August 1885. Back at Ascension, the guano rapidly built up again, a group of ornithologists reporting plentiful quantities of newly deposited guano deposited at Boatswain Bird Island some 70 years later.¹²

In addition to his shops, Thorpe also operated a ships’ chandler business for incoming ships. Inevitably, this business was in decline due to the slow down in visiting ships. The St Helena government was excessively lethargic in taking effective action to offset this and it was only in 1886, some 17 years after the Suez Canal opened, that the “Passing Ships Ordinance” was passed. Before this, no physical contact was allowed with ships, even those passing without any intention of stopping at the island, unless they had first been boarded by the harbour master to verify compliance with island health regulations. Given freedom for the first time to trade with passing ships, Thorpe fitted out the schooner *Alert* to supply fresh vegetables, meat and eggs. It is believed he preferred to barter these goods for items such as wheat grain, which were in short supply on the island and could be sold at profit. However, he certainly did not have a monopoly, the Blue Book for 1889 reporting that between 20-30 boatmen were employed in the same trade. Of 604 ships sighted that year, 261 were passing and traded with boatmen, 55 passed and did not trade and 288 called into the island.¹³

Another maritime opportunity arose with the arrival at St Helena of the French Brig *Meridien* (Captain Poirier) on 28 May 1890 with about 690 tons of cargo from Cochin, including plumbago, coconut oil and coir. The ship had been at sea for 67 days en-route to New York and suffered severe

storm damage off the Cape. The cargo was steadily offloaded and ship inspections by surveyors appointed by Solomon Moss Gideon & Co. on the 30 May, 10 June and 14 June finally concluded permanent repairs overseas would greatly exceed the ship's value. Following instructions from the owners, the last of the cargo was offloaded. The ship was auctioned on 7 August and won by Thorpe for an unknown price. Repair work commenced on 26 August, the ship being brought closer to shore. It was initially speculated Thorpe would use *Meridien* as a whaler, but on 18 September the island newspaper announced it would be sailed to the West Indies carrying ballast. Near disaster was averted when the main cable parted and the ship drifted a long way out to sea. Luckily this occurred during the day otherwise the ship could easily have been lost. Following inspections by officers of the Royal Navy, *Meridien* was registered as seaworthy on 24 December. George Parkhurst Vinall, married to Ian Bruce's great aunt Sabina Bruce, was appointed captain to take the ship to the West Indies, where it is presumed it was sold.

As he acquired land, farming began to represent an increasing share of his business. He was elected onto the committee operating the New Market, opened to the public in May 1865 under Ordinance No. 5 of that year. As reported in the 1889 Blue Book, his farming enterprises included coffee.¹⁴

Thorpe's position as a leading citizen was recognised in 1892 when the St Helena government appointed him as coroner, replacing T. E. Fowler who had undertaken the job for some 37 years. Thorpe did not need the money and agreed to work on a fee basis rather than a fixed salary. He was later appointed Justice for Peace. He also participated in public events, for example in 1897 it was reported that Thorpe had supported celebrations for Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee with the donation of several hogsheads of ale at a party held by Governor Sterndale at the Castle.¹⁵

A peculiar feature of Thorpe's business was that he hoarded coins collected through his shops, exporting thousand of pounds worth each year. There are several possible explanations such as cash payment for imported goods, but there may have been a side benefit to his actions. The relationship that inflation has with a restricted flow of coinage has long been recognised. The island's economy was exceedingly small whilst Thorpe's hoarding was on a very considerable scale. Whether or not it was his intention, his actions would have made it much easier for all traders to raise their prices. In 1910, Governor Gallwey complained that Messrs Thorpe & Sons were persistently exporting most of the island's small coinage, estimating Thorpe had exported about £5,300 in the year, almost as much as total government revenues. Gallwey had countered by importing £3,655. In 1911, Thorpe's export of coins rose to £7,800 and £5,310 needed to be imported. However, the St Helena government seems to have taken many years to wake up to what Thorpe he was doing. He had probably been hoarding and exporting coins for at least the past decade, possibly far longer, because there is a memory within the Thorpe family that during the lucrative Boer War period he was fined for breaking an agreement to give Solomon exclusive rights in the unloading of cargo from ships in Jamestown Bay. When forced to make this payment he took his revenge by arranging for a wheelbarrow to be wheeled down to Solomon's office filled to the brim with sixpences.¹⁶

St Helena's flax mills struggled to achieve profitability ahead of the First World War, but the market was far more profitable during the war when demand was much greater. It is a curious fact that Thorpe never took advantage of this buoyant market, the first Thorpe mill not opening until 1922, some four years after his death. Thorpe will certainly have remembered the abortive attempt over seven years from 1874 to operate a flax industry and may have been cautious not to be pulled headlong into it. Certainly there was early interest in flax, his son Edwin participating in a Flax Committee of potential growers and millers in 1907. He had also started growing flax on Mount Pleasant, as evidenced by a letter in Nick Thorpe's family archives dated October 1918 from Jack Thorpe who several months after his father's death applied to the partnership to make use of this land. Flax was to be the Thorpe partnership's main source of income for more than 40 years after his death.¹⁷

Thorpe does not seem to have left the island very often, only being found on passenger lists in 1908, 1909 and 1914. According to his obituary, this last trip was to undergo an operation, returning on the

outbreak of the war. He seems to have been as benevolent to his two daughters as he was tyrannical to his ten sons. When his eldest daughter Ethel married Thomas R. Bruce (Ian Bruce's grandfather) in 1899, a lavish wedding was held to which everyone from Governor Sterndale downward was invited. It is believed Thorpe gave the couple land in Briars village and money to build a house. Thomas was required to give a £100 bond for the "due discharge of his duties" as postmaster and any other office he might hold in St Helena, and this was paid by Thorpe on 3 January 1899. Ethel died from TB and pneumonia in August 1904 and Thorpe effectively adopted her three surviving sons William Bruce (then aged four) and the twins Eric and Donald Bruce (a few months old). He lavished money on them and included them in his will as if they were his own children, the above passenger lists showing he accompanied them to England for their private education. He also set up his other daughter Helena Florence Thorpe to live in London. As requested in his will, she later shouldered responsibility for these grandchildren in England when Thorpe died.



Thorpe giving away Florence Alyce Knipe in 1894 for marriage to William E. Thorpe

His harsh treatment of his sons probably arose from the fact that he expected them to work in his business, yet his standards would have been very exacting. Possibly, the death of Thorpe's wife Rosina (chronic rheumatism & cardiac disease) on 5 September 1898 removed all constraint with his sons. One, George Francis, drank himself to death whilst still in his early 20s. Three other sons (William Ernest, Henry James and Arthur Edward) left the island to make new lives for themselves overseas (the first two in South Africa, the third in Australia). When Thorpe wrote his will in 1912,

only five sons (Donald Henry, Frederick Ralph, Edwin Alfred, Cecil Randolph and Harold Cyril) were still involved in the business, but this was reduced to four when Donald emigrated to New Zealand about 1914. Another son, John Alexander, fell out with his father and was only briefly involved in the business. “Jack” was the longest surviving son and continued to live on the island, showing great enterprise in organising regattas, cinema shows and finding overseas employment for Saints, for which he was awarded earning an OBE in 1960, but he never went back into the business. Thorpe’s poor relationship with his sons may have been revealed at his funeral when they opted out of acting as pallbearers, leaving the task to his friends. Bishop W.A. Holbech officiated at the funeral assisted by Canon A. Porter and Reverend C.F.S. Wood and he was buried in the Knollcombe Baptist cemetery.¹⁸



W.A. Thorpe Grave, adjacent to his wife Rosina & daughter Ethel

Thorpe’s final will was drawn up on 20 September 1912. The Union of London & Smith’s Bank and four of his sons (William, Donald, Edwin and Frederick) were appointed trustees of his estate. Probate was granted in London on 20 July 1918 and amounted to £33,147 14s 6d. Over £22,000 of this was distributed to his ten surviving children (£15,500), daughters-in-law (£2,100), Thorpe grandchildren (£1,200), Bruce grandsons (£4,000) and non-family members (£165). Unusually, the will decreed that the bank was the final arbiter of all decisions made regarding the estate. His property was divided between the five sons then still working in the business (Donald, Frederick, Edwin, Cecil and Harold), but Thorpe was anxious to ensure his large country estates were not precipitately sold off. These properties therefore formed part of the trust. Those sons who remained business partners during their lifetime had the free use of the properties, but the ownership of the properties was only released from the trust to their descendents when the last business partner died. Although he emigrated to New Zealand, Donald must somehow have remained a partner because his descendents eventually also inherited property and land. Thorpe’s will made no provision to allow his daughter Helena to join the business trust as a partner.¹⁹

After William Thorpe’s death, the principle business focused on the flax industry. This generated considerable income for the brothers, if not for their workers. Of the four remaining active partners, Frederick died at Cape Town on 19 June 1947 whilst on medical referral from St Helena. Cecil died at the island on 23 June 1955. Harold (who lived in the UK for about a decade from 1939) died at St

Helena on 30 January 1959. Edwin, the self-styled “Rajah” of St Helena, was the last partner to die, on 4 February 1964. Edwin left his estate (valued at £43,486, duty £6,326) to his nephew Donald, son of Harold Thorpe and this helped fund the creation of today’s business. A Mr Burke was sent out by the bank to St Helena in 1964 and, as the final arbiter, lived up to his name by decreeing that the properties should be split between Thorpe families as jointly owned possessions. It took many years of negotiation for Donald, who died on 31 October 1986, and his sons Michael and Nicholas, to untangle the consequences of Mr Burke’s decisions. Nick and Michael ran the business as a partnership after their father’s death until 2003 when Michael resigned as a partner. Nick, after six months a sole proprietor, created W. A. Thorpe & Sons Ltd Company No 1 in the newly established St Helena Registry of Companies. Nick retired earlier this year, but two of his three children are active in the family business.²⁰

Note: We are aware of only one biographical description of William A. Thorpe, namely Lawrence Green’s 1962 book “Islands Time Forgot”. Green (1900-1972) was a South African journalist who wrote in a raconteur style, rarely providing sources for his stories. Thorpe is described sensationally as a wholly corrupt businessman. Much of this appears to have come from a conversation with one of Thorpe’s sons (not named but presumably either Edwin or Jack Thorpe) and the remainder may simply have been island gossip. Where it has been possible to check Green’s claims, they have been shown to either be wholly wrong, both in detail and timing, or unlikely. Without doubt, William Thorpe was an exceptionally sharp businessman, but whatever evidence ever existed for criminality has been buried far more deeply than anyone has so far dug.²¹

Note: We should like to thank Ed Thorpe for taking all the modern-day photographs. All internet references were accessed between March-May 2014. To save space, these are quoted with abbreviated “tinyurl.com” addresses. All Times newspaper stories were sourced from its archival web site.

¹ **Ethel Mary Thorpe:** Thorpe’s eldest daughter, born 18 February 1878, married Thomas Robert Bruce on 21 February 1899. They had four sons: William Alexander Bruce born on 18 January 1900; Stanley Thorpe Bruce born on 21 January 1902 but died a year later on 13 January 1903 from bronchitis; Donald and Eric Bruce born on 2 May 1904. Ethel contracted TB and died from pneumonia on 11 August 1904. **W. A. Thorpe’s death:** Eric Bruce related the circumstances directly to Ian Bruce in the early 1960s. Donald Bruce told an almost identical story to his daughter, who recently recounted it by phone.

² **Death Registration** 6560, St Helena Archives/LDS Film # 1259105, Marriages 1852-1930. **Funeral:** The pall was carried by H. W. Solomon, E. J. Warren, F. Deason, J. Deason, T. L. M. Adams and T. R. Bruce - ‘The Island’s Great Loss’, *The St Helena Guardian*, 24 January 1918.

³ **Apathetic islanders:** ‘General Cronje at St Helena’, *The Graphic*, 24 March 1900, 418. This article is fairly typical of other commentators stating, “*the ‘native’, whose wants are easily supplied by a meal of fish and rice, is of a naturally indolent disposition, and not alive to the necessity of ‘working’ for his daily bread.*”

⁴ **Biography of Saul Solomon:** Trevor W. Hearl and Alexander Hugo Schulenburg, *St Helena Britannica, Studies in South Atlantic Island History* (London: Society of Friends of St Helena, 2013), 165–174. **Downturn in Economy from 1836:** Philip Gosse and Trevor W. Hearl (Introduction), *St Helena, 1502-1938*, New Edition (Oswestry, Shropshire: Anthony Nelson Limited, 1990), 302–303. **Establishment of Vice-Admiralty Court:** J.P. Van Niekerk, ‘The Role of the Vice Admiralty Court at St Helena in the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Preliminary Investigation (part 1)’, *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History* 15, no. 1 (2009): 100., also <http://tinyurl.com/ngrfsyk>

⁵ **W. A. Thorpe’s baptism:** This date is quoted in Nick Thorpe’s family bible. **Marriage of W. A. Thorpe’s parents:** Richard Kempthorne was the Anglican Colonial Chaplain from 1839, Rural Dean from 1852 and Archdeacon until he left the island in 1859 - Edward Cannan, *Churches of the South Atlantic Islands, 1502-1991*. (Oswestry: Nelson, 1992). **Other Thorpes:** Civil registrations, Jamestown Archives/LDS Births 1853-1898 Film #1259104; Marriages Marriages 1852-1930 Film 1259105; Deaths 1857-1936 Film #1259106: Private Joseph Thorpe (aged 30, previous occupation labourer, arrived at St Helena from India [22nd Regiment] on Jemmia) and served in the St Helena Regiment - St Helena Regimental muster list for 1827 compiled by Colin Fox and presented on the Friends of St Helena web site. He died three years later and was buried on 16 August 1830 - British Library, India Office, N/6/3 f.114. A Robert Thorpe (shoemaker, policeman and jailer at Rupert’s Bay prison) also lived at St Helena. He married Ellen Farmer sometime before 1855 and the births and deaths of three daughters Louisa, Angeline and Caroline Thorpe) are recorded between 1855-1859, none surviving for more than a few months. Robert died from cancer of the mouth on 5 December 1871 aged 49.

Registrations as follows: birth Nos. 132, 251, 604; death Nos. 331, 575, 1043, 2837. A Thomas Thorpe (age 50, labourer) is reported as having died on 26 March 1869 from chronic diarrhoea - Ibid registrations, death No. 2530. Mary Jane Thorpe, the illegitimate daughter of Emma Thorpe and Robert Chapple (private soldier) was born on 15 November 1869 and was later recorded working as a servant married James Fox (Private in the Royal Scots) at Ladder Hill on 26 August 1887 - Ibid registrations, birth No. 1694; marriage No. 1887. When she married, Mary Jane Thorpe claimed to be 21 although she was actually only 17. **Susannah Easthope's birth:** British Library, India Office, N/6/2 f.205. **Her parents' marriage:** British Library, India Office, N/6/2 f.145. **Her father:** Listed (aged 53, labourer, general conduct good but infirm and finds it difficult to earn a living) in the 1839 list of liberated slaves published by Colin Fox on the Friends of St Helena web site. His slave ancestors were probably given the Easthope surname by the long-established St Helena family who (according to Hudson Ralph Janisch, *Extracts from the St. Helena Records* (B. Grant, 1885), 3) first arrived at the island in 1673. **Her mother:** Ann Scott was baptised at St Helena on 28 December 1794 - British Library, India Office, N/6/1 f.104

⁶ **Schooling:** Dorothy Evans, *Schooling in the South Atlantic Islands, 1661-1992* (Oswestry: Anthony Nelson, 1994), 60. **Henry Thorpe's business and death:** The Thorpe family bible contains a note Henry Thorpe died at the age of 43 in 1853, suggesting he was born about 1810. **Affect of father's death on adolescent son's career:** Salman Akhtar, *Matters of Life and Death: Psychoanalytic Reflections* (Karnac Books, 2011), 162–6, also <http://tinyurl.com/p5hvs8q>. **Death of Susannah Thorpe née Easthope:** Ibid registrations, death No. 1150.

⁷ 'Notice', *The St Helena Guardian*, 15 June 1863.

⁸ **Donald McDonald, personal and business life:** Edward Carter, *The Dovetons of St Helena: A Family History*. (Cape Town, 1973), 54–56. **Thorpe's purchase of McDonald's shop business and buildings:** Legal documents in the possession of Nick Thorpe.

⁹ **Marriage registration #779**, Jamestown Archives / LDS Marriages 1852-1930 Film #1259105.

Confirmation certificate in the possession of Nick Thorpe, service conducted on All Saints Day, 3 November 1872, signed by the Bishop of St Helena, Thomas E. Welby.

¹⁰ **Economic retrenchment in the 1870s:** 'St Helena', *The Times*, 15 December 1873, 10.; 'St Helena: Letter To the Editor of The Times', *The Times*, 26 December 1877, 5. **St Helena defence costs; reduction of artillery manning levels; emigration due to garrison reduction:** 'Parliament, House of Commons, Wednesday June 17, Supply - Navy Estimates', *The Times*, 18 June 1891, 6. W. Grey Wilson, *Annual Colonial Report No 26* (St Helena: HMSO, 1890), 3; W. Grey Wilson, *Annual Colonial Report No 63* (St Helena: HMSO, 1891), 6–7.

¹¹ Orison Swett Marden, *Talks with Great Traders* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co, 1901), 71. Also, <http://tinyurl.com/me68gww>

¹² Note: All records name the ship Royal Harrie except the 1 March 1884 report which names it *Royal Harry*.

Grounding of Royal Harrie: "Lloyds: Wrecks and Casualties," *The Times*, 2 January 1883, 8. **Discharge of Cargo at St Helena by Royal Harry:** 'Lloyds: Wrecks and Casualties', *The Times*, 1 March 1884, 12. **Letters from Captain in Charge at Ascension** dated 22 December 1884 and two letters dated 10 January 1885: St Helena Archives. **Guano deposits in 1950s:** Bernard Stonehouse, 'Bird Behaviour on Sunny Isle', *The Times*, 2 August 1958, 9. **Arrival of Royal Harrie in London:** 'Foreign Arrivals', *The Times*, 27 August 1885, 9.

¹³ R. L. Antrobus, *Annual Colonial Report No 118* (St Helena: HMSO, 1889), 3–4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13. **Election onto the New Market Committee:** *The St Helena Almanac and Register for the Year of Our Lord 1877 and the 40th Year of Her Present Majesty Queen Victoria Containing a Detailed Account of the Public Departments and Local Institutions* (St Helena: Government Printing Office, 1877), 71.

¹⁵ **Appointment as coroner:** W. Grey Wilson, *Annual Colonial Report No 99* (St Helena: HMSO, 1892), 6.

Donation of ale: R. A. Sterndale, *Annual Colonial Report No 240* (St Helena: HMSO, 1897), 9.

¹⁶ **Relationship between specie shortage and inflation:** Brad Pasanek and Simone Polillo, *Beyond Liquidity: The Metaphor of Money in Financial Crisis* (Routledge, 2013), 28–29, also <http://tinyurl.com/mpzy6ag>. H. L. Gallwey, *Annual Colonial Report for 1910, No 675* (St Helena: HMSO, 1910), 5; H. E. S. Cordeaux, *Annual Colonial Report for 1911, No 714* (St Helena: HMSO, 1912), 4.

¹⁷ Ken Denholm, *Island of St Helena: The Flax Industry 1874-1966 (Unpublished Draft)*, 1994.

¹⁸ **John Alexander Thorpe OBE:** *The London Gazette*, 12 February 1960, 1083. also

<http://tinyurl.com/mhh3pth> **W. A. Thorpe Pallbearers:** T. R. Bruce, H. W. Solomon, E. J. Warren, F. Deason, T.L.M. Adams and J. Deason.

¹⁹ **W. A. Thorpe Will:** In the possession of the Thorpe family. **Probate record for W. A. Thorpe:** Principal Probate Registry. Calendar of the Grants of Probate and Letters of Administration made in the Probate Registries of the High Court of Justice in England. London. **The Union of London & Smith's Bank** was acquired by National Provincial Bank in 1918, which merged with the National Westminster Bank in 1970.

²⁰ **Edwin Alfred Thorpe Estate:** 'Latest Wills', *The Times*, 20 October 1964, 14.

²¹ **Claimed biographic details:** Lawrence George Green, *Islands Time Forgot. Memories of Africa's Busy Islands and Robinson Crusoe Outposts, of Strange and Remote People, on the Liner Tracks and in the Solitudes*

of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (London: Putnam, 1962), 96–97. **Lawrence Green’s writing style:** <http://tinyurl.com/mxqvex5>. **Discussion:** Green’s book suggests Thorpe was in danger of being prosecuted over illegalities in the purchase of copper plate from broken-up slave ships. It is claimed Rosina Harris knew what he had done and therefore Thorpe hurriedly married her to prevent her giving evidence against him as the principal Crown witness. The likelihood that a baker’s daughter would be in a position to overhear illegal trading of scrap copper is doubted. A more convincing reason for a precipitate marriage would have been Rosina’s advanced pregnancy, giving birth to her first child William only three months later. The timing also seems wrong, the marriage being in 1870, many years after most slave ships were being broken up in the 1840s/1850s. At the peak of Vice-Admiralty Board adjudications in 1850 (60 captured or destroyed ships), Thorpe was only aged eight, and the numbers before the Board tailed off very rapidly thereafter with only two adjudications in the first half of 1853, three in 1854, one in 1855 and three in 1855. [J.P. Van Niekerk, ‘The Role of the Vice Admiralty Court at St Helena in the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Preliminary Investigation (part 2)’, *Fundamina: A Journal of Legal History* 15, no. 2 (2009): 1–56., also <http://tinyurl.com/nv9npc7>]. Certainly, Thorpe was an adult when the last two slave ships were brought to St Helena in 1865 [Andrew Pearson et al, *Infernal Traffic: Excavation of a Liberated African Graveyard in Rupert’s Valley, St Helena*, 169 (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2011), 24], but it is not obvious why, if these were sold and broken up, this would be delayed by five years until 1870. Green also claims that once married, Thorpe next acquired on the cheap the two brigs described above. Green’s timing is entirely wrong, the first ship being bought 15 years after his marriage and the second 20 years after. It is also claimed that *Meridian* (should be *Meridien*) sailed to Ascension for guano rather than *King Harrie*. One of Thorpe’s sons is quoted as saying that “his crafty father” bribed the surveyor to report the ships were only worth hundreds rather than thousands of pounds. This allegation of a corrupt backdoor deal flies in the face of the fact that, both ships were sold by public auction (as also was all copper sourced from broken-up slave ships) where others could likewise make low bids. Green rounds off the guano story with the dramatic claim that the Admiralty eventually had to pay Thorpe a massive legal settlement of £60,000. However, a considerable search of Admiralty and newspaper archives has failed to locate any mention of this payment. Again, his death is wrongly said to have been due to falling over a cliff after walking away from an argument with one of his sons in a blind rage. He was certainly not on good terms with his sons, but this version of his final accident is factually wrong. Extraordinary claims are also made by Green about Thorpe’s will. For example, it is suggested that three sons each inherited £140,000 and that the inheritances of his daughters-in-laws would be jeopardised if they spent less than half their lives living at St Helena. Even a cursory reading of William Thorpe’s will shows this is nonsense. Nick Thorpe can recall Thorpe’s daughter Helena, on a visit to St Helena in the 1960s, destroying a copy of Green’s book at Jamestown Library because she considered it sensationalist and slanderous. To date, no evidence has been found that contradicts this opinion.