

Chapter 13

Saul Solomon of St Helena, 1776-1852

If one man dominates St Helena's history it must, according to 'the outside world', surely be Napoleon Bonaparte. But the experience of daily life tells St Helenians differently. Long before Napoleon arrived, Saul Solomon had founded a business that, after over 200 years, still wields considerable influence. Yet its founder, St Helena's "Merchant-King", is as little known as St Helena's other benefactors.¹

Saul Solomon (*illustration 22*) was born on 25 December 1776 in Margate, Kent, England, one of eleven children of Nathaniel Solomon and Phoebe (née de Mitz, born in Leiden, in the Netherlands). According to Joan Comay, he set out for India aged twenty, but "became ill and was put ashore" at St Helena. In 1798 Saul is recorded as a Private in the Grenadier Company commanded by Major Thomas Greentree. Having been made Corporal, he transferred to the 5th Company commanded by Capt. J. Desfountain in 1800, but he does not appear in muster rolls after 1801.

Trade rather than drill soon seduced the young Solomon, but while Solomon & Co.'s notepaper declares "Established 1790", I doubt he had already set up in trade at fourteen! He is, however, said to have had "a general store and boarding house" well before 1800 (although this conflicts with his military service), reputedly charging 30s. [£1.50] a day. This exorbitance brought success, as St Helena's mini-economy was most profitable when catering for 'the carriage trade'. In 1811 Solomon "joined his stock & trade with Messrs Dixon [*sic*] & Taylor", and to lubricate local trade they issued a token copper currency of 70,560 halfpennies "Payable at

¹ For their generous assistance I am particularly indebted to Robin Gill for providing a copy of Saul Solomon's death certificate, and to Ian Baxter of the then India Office Library & Records for seeking Solomon's EIC records. *Ed:* Details of Saul Solomon's parents and birth have been taken from a family tree by Michael Allen. Details of his military service have been taken from information collated by Colin Fox.

St Helena by Solomon, Dickson and Taylor”, which circulated alongside the East India Company’s local coinage until well after the Crown took over the island in 1836 (although John Taylor had withdrawn by January 1815). In need of committed workers, Saul sent for his brothers, Benjamin, Joseph, Lewis, and Charles. There also came the Moss family, whose Hannah married Joseph in 1814. Lewis married Julia Magnus in 1818, taking his other name, Gideon, as surname; Benjamin wed Eliza Chamberlain in 1823; while Saul himself was married thrice: before 1800 to Margaret (Lee?), in 1815 to Mary Chamberlain and in 1824 to Harriet Bryan. A significant Jewish community was thus established at St Helena. Yet it did not last.

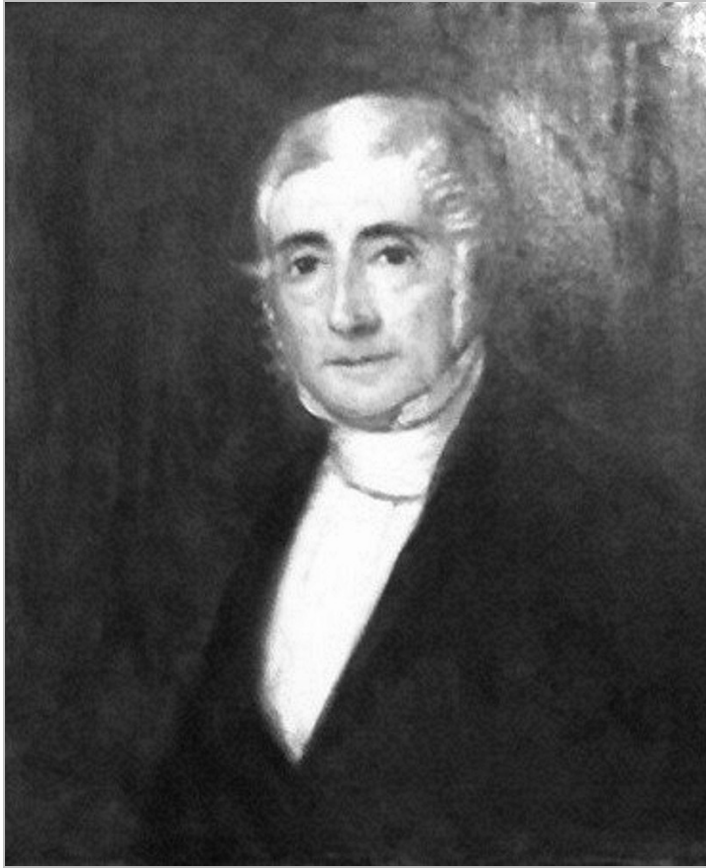


illustration 22: Saul Solomon

One reason was migration to the Cape from the 1820s. Joseph’s family went about 1830, leading to the rise of their son, Saul (1817-92) - the famous “member for Cape Town” and founder of *The Cape Argus* - whose memorial is in St James’ Church, though St Helenians do not yet claim him

as a distinguished compatriot. A more potent reason, perhaps, was the integration of the remaining members into the island community. No Jewish rites were observed; most became active Anglicans. Saul was undertaker at many Anglican funerals, and in 1818 at that of Napoleon's Roman Catholic valet, Cipriani.

Trade and Industry

Solomon's success owed much, though by no means all, to Napoleon's exile. By 1816 the population had doubled to c.8,000, bringing wealth and opportunities of a kind he was well placed to exploit. But Lt Basil Jackson was not impressed:

We military officers went to the boarding-house of Mr. Saul Solomon, and were well entertained at a cost of 30/- [£1.50p] per diem each, and 15/- [75p] per servant. I remained there but four days for which £6 seemed to me an extravagance for a subaltern officer. In conjunction with Lieut. Wortham of the Royal Engineers a lodging was hired and we shook the dust off our feet at the door of Mr. Solomon.

Solomon was not in business to entertain subalterns, when there was a luxury trade and busy commercial markets to be met. For the latter he provided legal and insurance services, for the former fashions and jewellery. And whether they traded under the name of Solomon, Gideon or Moss, Saul was architect of their fortunes.

A business bonanza was not his only Napoleonic legacy, however. It earned him a reputation for dubious loyalty to the government. Hudson Lowe listed the Solomon brothers, with their clerk Bruce, as the chief suspects aiding Napoleon, finding even their name to imply "some predisposition to engage in illicit speculation". His premises, being venues for visitors and favoured entrepôt for the entourages of both Governor and ex-Emperor - and their ladies - became notorious for gossip and intrigue. The now wealthy merchant took an impish delight in snubbing the Governor, once refusing to lend him a silver salver wanted to impress an illustrious guest - whom *he* was entertaining later! He was even said to have smuggled a silken ladder into Longwood in a chest of tea to help Napoleon clamber down a cliff into a waiting boat! He was an assumed admirer of the exile and certainly Longwood's clandestine correspondence passed through his hands - at a price. In 1840, as French Consul, he was among the favoured few to accompany Napoleon's coffin aboard the *Belle Poule*.

Anti-Semitism is nevertheless evident in remarks about “the Jew Solomon”. General Lefroy relates a case of an officer in 1842 refusing to pay the “outrageous charge of old S-, a well-known Jew”, which led to a Court of Inquiry on the ship home. Overcharging was the commonest complaint; even Napoleon grumbled at his 12/- [60p] per lb for macaroni, while the cost of Cipriani’s funeral still makes a French author wince, “the Jew Solomon” giving Montholon the bill for 1,400 gold francs “as soon as the candles were extinguished”. Yet opinions differed, even about his shop. One sneered that it was “so run down in stock that they could not find even a paper of pins”, whereas another found “everything from diamonds down to cloves and tintacks”. But one official commented significantly that Solomon was “a very different man from what had been represented to [me] on [my] arrival”. He did not court popularity, either as an innovator - setting up the first island press in 1806 - or in driving a bargain; he was known at the Cape for challenging the value of deliveries when they arrived! One Cape merchant, Richard Prince, who came in 1813 to enforce payment of Saul’s debts, stayed to set up a rival concern which traded for eighty-nine years, leaving Prince’s Lodge as his legacy. Solomon’s role as a money-lender created another source of friction, and in 1835 he was sued unsuccessfully in the Admiralty Court over a bond. Solomon, in turn, successfully sued the *Times* newspaper for libel in 1845 for claiming he had sold poisoned water to shipping.

A Boom Time For Some

Following the island’s transfer from the East India Company to the Crown, the Solomon empire continued to flourish and the family’s businesses were then listed as:

SAUL SOLOMON Merchant and Agent
GEORGE MOSS Employ of Mr. Solomon
JOSEPH SOLOMON Tavern Keeper
ISAAC MOSS Boot & Shoe Maker
BENJAMIN SOLOMON Merchant
S. MAGNUS Jeweller
LEWIS GIDEON Merchant, Jeweller & Notary Public.

Jamestown boasted two other jewellers (Charles Oswald and Thomas Richards), a watchmaker (W. Tracy) and a silversmith (Joseph Saunders). They were trading when the island was, wrote George Brooks Bennett, in “the full flood of its prosperity”.

Everybody and everything appeared to be flourishing. Money was abundant and trade was brisk. It could hardly be otherwise with so many and such splendid ships [...] arriving crowded with passengers. Jamestown was in a state of continual bustle.

During Saul's business career ships increased from about 150 to over a thousand a year, and St Helena became a haven for American whalers and a base for the Royal Navy's anti-slavery squadron, with a Vice-Admiralty Court condemning slavers and unseaworthy vessels to the benefit of Jamestown's ship chandlers.

Solomon had funds for speculation when it mattered, which perhaps explains partners such as the shadowy Dickson and Taylor, George Janisch of Teutonic Hall, and Robert Morrison, who had the fact inscribed on his grave in 1865 (Daniel Hamilton's memorial in 1867 also records service to the Company). But when calamity fell, like the collapse of the St Helena Whale Fishery Co., it was rivals, Thomas Baker, John Scott and others, who lost, not Solomon, Gideon or Moss. Ironically, forty years later his successors ignored, or were ignorant of, this experience and made a disastrous investment in the island whaler, *Elizabeth*. If Saul speculated unwisely, it has yet to be discovered. At the watershed of St Helena history - the island's transfer from the Company to the Crown in 1834 - he was again among the winners, as old Company landed families sold out at great loss, while merchants took their pickings and prospered.

Saul was no less skilful in climbing the social ladder as the Napoleonic era receded. Despite being 'in trade', which normally put one beyond the pale of polite society, he and his partners were invited to sit with 'gentlemen' on various committees - Benefit, Benevolent, Fire and those of other social welfare societies. Solomon, Gideon and Moss virtually ran the Annuity Fund Committee. Indicators abound of rising social status. In 1823 Saul's daughter Phoebe married Capt. T.M. Hunter of the St Helena Artillery; in 1838 his son Henry (1806-47) became Colonial Surgeon and Health Officer, whose widow married Governor Sir Patrick Ross; they were leading Freemasons, churchwardens and Justices of the Peace. For fifty years they almost monopolised the prestigious post of Sheriff ("no salary") through Saul Solomon (1839-42, 1846-50), Lewis Gideon (1842-4, 1852-6), Nathaniel Solomon (1850-52, 1859-60), George Moss (1870-80) and Saul Solomon jun. (1880-88). In short, during the founder's lifetime, Solomon & Co. became pillars of the Establishment and of the Church, to be symbolised finally by Homfray Welby Solomon (1877-1960), grandson of Bishop Welby, Churchwarden and Member of Council (from 1898),

commercial and social island Supremo - “King Sol”. His death on 30 October 1960 at eighty-three ended the Solomon dynasty at St Helena, and in 1974 the firm, dominating island production and commerce, was ‘nationalised’ by the St Helena Government. Among his Victorian competitors only W.A. Thorpe & Sons now survive as independent merchant-landowners.

A Voyage to Remember

But to return to Saul Solomon, the founder. In 1850 he visited England with an unmarried daughter, probably for medical reasons, staying at his son-in-law’s fine house, ‘Eastwood’ in Portishead, overlooking the Bristol Channel. There, on 6 December 1852, he died from “softening of the brain, paralysis, apoplexy, nine months certified”, accompanied only by an illiterate nurse, Mary Devine. His death certificate gave his age as seventy-five and occupation “Consul”, reflecting his appointments as “Consul for Lübeck, Bremen, Hamburg, the Brazils, Spain and Austria; Vice-Consul for Belgium; Consular Agent for France; and Commercial Agent for Holland”. His wish to return to St Helena was honoured in a rather bizarre sequel, revealed by Mrs Harriet Tytler sailing home from India in 1853 on the SV *Camperdown*:

At the Cape we took in fresh passengers, among them a Miss Solomon [who] confided to some of us a burden on her mind [...] Unknown to everybody she had brought her father’s corpse on the ship to have it buried on his beloved St Helena. The burden was a terrible one for fear that if the sailors found it out, they would chuck her father overboard. Of course we were all under vow not to disclose the terrible fact of a corpse on board, so that when we reached St Helena and the contents of that case were safely landed, her brother Nathaniel came on board and [...] invited us to his hotel as guests.

If the *Camperdown*’s crew were unaware of the contents of Miss Solomon’s luggage, people at St Helena were not. Both local papers, recording the death of “our late Sheriff in London” [*sic*], had announced that he was to be buried on the island, the *St Helena Chronicle* reporting on 19 February “that his remains are at the Cape”.

As soon as the intelligence reached this place, the whole of the shop windows were immediately half closed, the greater part still remaining so on our going to press.

The *St Helena Herald* welcomed the news “that he is to be buried on the Island”.

This will give many an opportunity of paying their last tribute of respect and attachment by following his remains to the tomb.

Both editors expected Solomon to be remembered more as a philanthropist than as a businessman, which reads curiously today, given his firm’s omnipresence and local amnesia about philanthropists! While he enjoyed “the ample rewards of commercial perseverance and successful speculation”, remarked the *Chronicle*, “his heart and hand were ever open to the claims of distress and poverty”.

He was a liberal supporter of public institutions and joined heartily in the promotion of all schemes for the common good. He was a valuable and useful member of society and will long be remembered by many, amongst whom the writer is one, as a person not more distinguished for his remarkable success in life, than for the kindness towards others, the liberality and generosity of disposition by which he adorned it.

The *Herald* was more succinct:

He had his faults, for who has not? Let them be forgotten. But he had also his virtues and amongst them not the least remarkable was his benevolence. We have many living witnesses of his kindness to the distressed and suffering; and to his readiness to impart to them more substantial proofs of sympathy than mere words.

“The remains of Mr. Saul Solomon” arrived on 2 March 1853 - on the *Perseverance*, not the *Camperdown*, according to the *Herald* - and were interred two days later in Jamestown’s lower burial ground. The *Chronicle* carried a brief account next morning:

All the civil servants of the Government, a number of military officers, and a very large concourse of people attended at [St James’s] Church and followed the corpse to the grave. The Burial Service was read by Rev. R. Kempthorne, Rural Dean assisted by Rev. W. Helps, Garrison Chaplain and Messrs. Estcourt and Chambers.

The *Herald*, pursuing the philanthropic theme, mused that “even a two years’ absence prior to his decease could not cool [peoples’] remembrance of his kindness to them”.

The concourse of people attending the funeral was very large and many seemed deeply affected - a proof of the strong affection which they must have had for S. Solomon. This attachment seemed not confined to any particular class, for while the poor appeared most deeply to lament the loss of one whose kindness to them was almost proverbial, there were mourners there of every rank of society.

A twenty-one minute-gun salute was cancelled “in consequence of the severe illness of a gentleman in town”, a symbolic recognition both of his importance and his humanity.

“Under the Trees”

The inevitable sequel, the Executors’ Sale, was held at Jamestown’s traditional auction site, “under the Trees”, on 23 January 1854. It was, the *Herald* commented, “no small land sale for such a small place as St Helena”. Indeed, it needs an economic historian to interpret its significance in the context of the island’s economy, as the Executors divested themselves of prestige properties “offering a splendid opportunity for the profitable investment of capital”. First to be offered among the “rare selection of most desirable dwelling-houses” were The Briars, The Brewery, and The Pavilion, “carefully preserved by the late Proprietor in the same state and with the same internal arrangement as used by the Emperor”. The auctioneer, Isaac Moss, commended The Briars House, “with Coach Houses, Outbuildings and every convenience”, as “one of the best and most commodious Residences in the Island” which,

from its elevated position and fresh pure air has always been in great request as a residence by those who seek to combine the Pleasures of the Country with the advantage of being within a few minutes distance from Town.

The grounds, “before [being] planted by the East India Company with Mulberry Trees” had been, he stressed, “one of the most profitable fruit gardens in the Island”. There followed another eight “valuable properties”, no fewer than six in Main Street. Lacking names and numbers, they cannot easily be identified, though to Moss and potential purchasers they were “too

well known to need many particulars". The house formerly rented by Captain Knipe, "well known as the best and most convenient in Town", was apparently to be sold with vacant possession, while tenants of the others doubtless viewed proceedings with some apprehension. Three of the most desirable, "of precisely the same character", were occupied by H. Weston, Lee Solomon and Dr Marshall, "for many years past let to highly respectable Tenants". James Scott's house and shop "in an excellent business situation" was followed by the Jeweller's Shop and Dwelling House of "W. Green, near the Market". This left two "spacious premises", one on the road to Ladder Hill occupied by Mr Beattie, "well adapted for any purpose requiring extensive space", the other "the Blacksmiths' Forge and Yard [behind] Solomon and Moss' Stores", let to J. Truebody. Finally were offered shares in the St Helena Hotel, "a safe and profitable investment".

"There has rarely been such a large sale, or one which excited such interest" declared the *Herald*. "A considerable number of buyers" were joined by others "interested in watching the value of property on the Island at the present time". Some good prices were realised, but others, in the paper's opinion, were "only middling". "For instance a house which lets at £75 p.a. fetched £1,250, while another which lets for £40 p.a. only brought £211." The sale raised "somewhere between £4,500 and £5,000".

Today the name Solomon is the best known in St Helena. But only as a business. Saul Solomon is barely known, though his gravestone survives. I found it in 1971 by the north wall of St James' Church, among those rescued, when the Burial Ground was cleared to make a Children's Playground. It could hardly have been more modest:

Sacred to the Memory of S. Solomon, Esq.
who died in England
on the Sixth of December 1852
Aged 76 years.

May this brief biographical reconnaissance encourage others to seek out more about the life and achievements of St Helena's remarkable "Merchant-King".

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