

CONSERVATION OF COLONIAL BUILDINGS?

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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON FORTS IN GHANA

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Auschwitz, Oradour, the Killing Fields, Cape Coast Castle — Names of places that conjure up the most unspeakable memories of man's inhumanity to man. All are carefully preserved 'lest we forget'. But you may well ask why Cape Coast Castle is included in that notorious list and the simple but disturbing answer is the 'slave trade'.

A W Lawrence estimated that over approximately a four hundred and fifty year period between twenty and thirty million slaves were transported across the ocean to slave colonies in the Caribbean and both South and North America. The vast majority were shipped be-

tween 1650 and 1800. Slaving expeditions into the interior were undertaken and huge numbers of people rounded up. However only the young and strong were selected for transportation and the old and weak were simply 'discarded' — people were treated as merchandise. Despite the value of slaves as an expensive and highly marketable commodity their treatment on board ship was extremely harsh. Danish log books for the period 1777–89 demonstrate that ship fatalities for the trip between West Africa and the Caribbean consistently ran at a level of about 15%. The actual figure was probably much higher as fatalities amongst the crew and officers for the round trip (Denmark — Africa — Caribbean — Denmark) could also reach as high as 35%. It is probable that figures showing losses were understated in order not to discourage the investors who financed the chartered companies which were directly responsible for the slave trade.

The trade forts and castles were built along the length of the West African coast commencing at the mouth of the Senegal river and running eastwards down the coast to Nigeria. There were originally about forty large castles and forts on the coast with the greatest concentration to be found between Beyin and Ada in Ghana, the former Gold Coast Colony.

The size and appearance of most of the forts, like Elmina, Shama and Cape Coast Castle evolved over the centuries in response to the changing occupants and military conditions. The oldest castle, Elmina, though originally constructed by the Portuguese as a medieval fort with round towers, was subsequently altered by the Dutch after its capture in 1637 into a vast rectangular fort with a series of curtains and bastions expressly designed to accommodate the requirements of the cannon. Another early Portuguese fort at Shama, built in 1525, evolved in a similar manner with the Dutch retaining the original fort as a keep but surrounding it with an extended curtain and pointed bastions some time after 1682. W J Varley demonstrates how the West African forts reflect the major changes in military architecture that swept through Europe between the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries in response to the wide-scale use of the cannon. The sheer number, quality and variety of the forts that have managed to survive virtually untouched since their abandonment in the late nineteenth century makes this collection of buildings particularly unique.

They were originally constructed as trading posts and were never intended for colonial conquest. The fortifications were designed for protection from attack as much by other Europeans as by the local Africans. Most



Figure 1 Elmina Castle, Elmina, view into the main courtyard of the Governor's residence.

of the forts changed hands a number of times over the centuries. Some remained little more than small fortified trading posts, whereas others developed into substantial castles which acted as the local company headquarters for the smaller buildings. Elmina, Cape Coast Castle, Christianborg and Princes Town, all acted in that capacity and were substantial castles with inner and outer courtyards, low triangular bastions and half-bastions and projecting spurs. With the development of the slave trade storage became even more of a problem and vast cavernous dungeons were built, as at Cape Coast Castle, to contain the slaves prior to embarkation.

With the exception of the early castles constructed by the Portuguese Crown all the remaining ones were built, maintained and paid for by private companies. These companies would have been given their charters and monopolies by their respective countries and most of the European nations were represented on the coast at some time or other. The earliest fort was constructed at Elmina in 1482 by the Portuguese as a land base in their quest for gold. Their success in discovering vast quantities of gold soon attracted other Europeans to the area. Dutch, English and French pirates as well as legitimate trading companies sought to benefit from the fabled wealth of the 'Gold Coast'. Following close on their heels came the Danes, Swedes and Germans. Even the Duke of Courland from Latvia set up a trading fort in The Gambia, so determined was he not to 'miss the boat'. However, the profits to be gained from gold were

soon eclipsed by those that could be made from the insatiable demand for slaves in the new American colonies and the Caribbean.

The forts grew in size, number and importance due to the immense wealth generated by the slave trade. The demand for slaves stemmed initially from the shortage of suitable workers to man the plantations in the Portuguese and Brazilian colonies in South America and the Caribbean. Subsequently the Dutch, French, English and Americans all needed slaves to service their sugar and cotton plantations in North America and the West Indies. The economic importance of the sugar industry to Britain in the eighteenth century can be gauged by Admiral Rodney's decision to abandon the American Colonies in favour of protecting the West Indies from conquest by the French during the American War of Independence.

The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 by the British Government, preceded four years earlier by the Danes, rang the death knell for most of the forts. The economic recession that followed in the wake of the abolition of slavery gradually forced all the European governments to take over the responsibility for the upkeep and administration of the forts from their bankrupt companies. The companies were then restricted to strictly commercial affairs. Pacification of the coastal areas had already been achieved and what little trade continued could be done without the protection of the forts. The continuing decline in trade led to a gradual European withdrawal from the coast. The forts

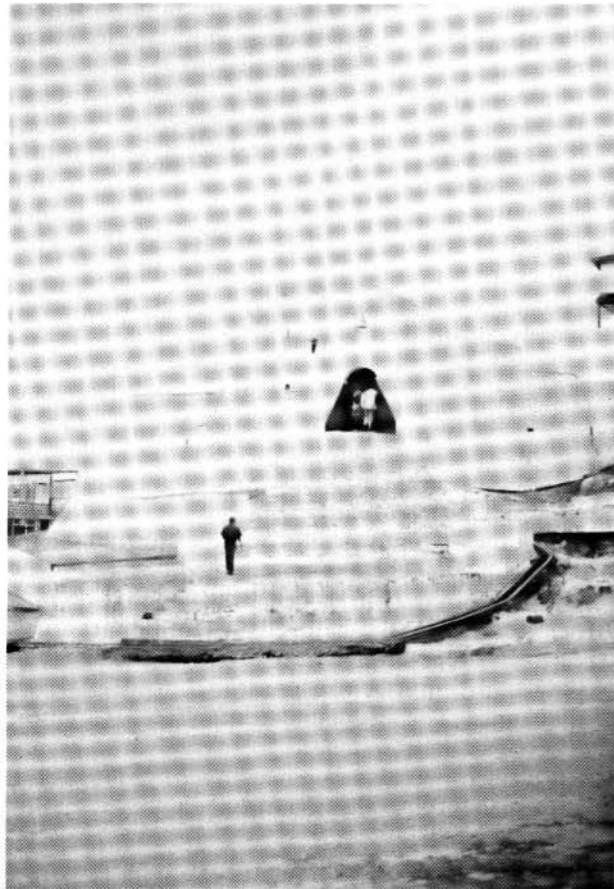


Figure 2 Fort Sebastian, Shama, the main entrance from the south-west.

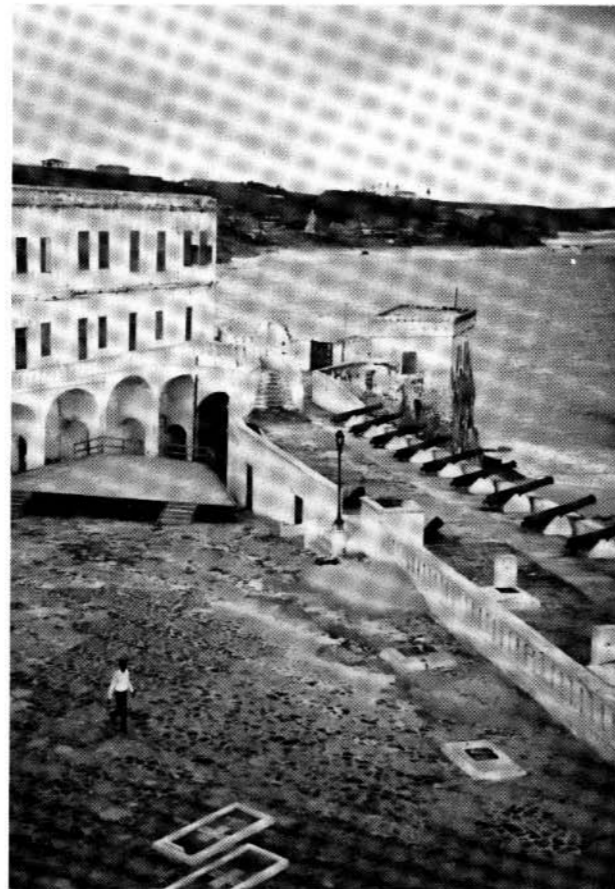


Figure 3 Cape Coast Castle, Cape Coast, the sea battery.



Figures 4, 5 Fort Amsterdam, Cormantin, the approach from the sea, above, the approach from the land, below.



were either abandoned or, as in the case of the Danes and the Dutch, sold to the English in 1850 and 1872 respectively.

Alone among the European countries Britain maintained its political and trading control of the coastal area. Its hegemony did not last unchallenged for long. The rapidly expanding Ashanti kingdom was absorbing and conquering all its immediate neighbours. From its base in the interior at Kumasi it was moving towards the coast and threatening its arch rivals, the pro-British Fanti tribes. Rather than withdraw entirely from the coast Britain chose to expand inland more and more, which inevitably brought it into direct conflict with the Ashanti kingdom. After a number of 'bloody' wars the Kingdom was suppressed in the late nineteenth century. Cape Coast Castle had a brief renaissance as the disem-

barkation point for British troops in their expeditions against the Ashanti. With the transfer of the capital from Cape Coast to Accra came the military demise of the Castle. The other forts, having lost all military significance, had already been abandoned or else converted for civilian use, such as lighthouses, prisons and post offices.

The value and significance of these forts was only recognised and appreciated in the last days of the colonial occupation when a programme of conservation was initiated after the inspection carried out in 1951 by D H St J O'Neil, Chief Inspector of Ancient Monuments (Great Britain) with the assistance of Professor W J Varley. Their research was further supplemented and expanded by Professor Lawrence's magnum opus *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa*. This book provides a comprehensive and painstaking analysis of the evolution of the forts through archival research and archaeological examinations of the structures themselves. A programme of restoration of the most significant forts was commenced during the last years of the colonial administration and was continued after Ghana gained independence in 1957.

The architectural and cultural significance of the forts has been recognised by UNESCO and ICOMOS. Collectively they are now numbered as one of the World Heritage Sites which places them on a par with Venice, Bath, and the Pyramids. They are a major cultural monument to the interaction of European, American and African nations, which, though representative of an unfortunate period in history, still deserve preservation no less than the English *bastide* towns in France or the

English castles in Wales. The politics and misery associated with their use and construction should no more blind us to their merit than the construction of the pyramids. However, their preservation and construction pose a number of practical as well as cultural problems.

The European visitor or conservator has to be sensitive to the cultural associations they still retain for the Africans and Afro-Americans. With the oldest forts dating back to the fifteenth century it is easy to separate the historical past from the physical present and perceive them as being no longer any more emotionally charged than the English castles in Wales. However, to the Afro-Americans the nightmare of the Atlantic transportation that began a few hundred years ago still haunts many of them today. They come to Ghana looking for their roots. The American melting pot that has absorbed so many different nationalities and cultures has not eradicated the alienation and feeling of separateness caused by colour. For them the visit is not a tourist recreation but a pilgrimage. There can be no question of a 'Theme Park' approach. The presentation of background historical information has to be dealt with the utmost sensitivity.

Because of the obvious and clear links that the buildings have with slavery, they have engendered little empathy for their preservation amongst the local inhabitants. Although it makes perfect sense to conservationists to preserve these forts for their historic and architectural worth, to the indigenous people of Ghana they represent a radically different cultural heritage and memory. For instance local ceremonies are still held in Fort Metal Cross, Dixcove, to appease the spirits of the two dead children who were sacrificially entombed alive to 'appease the Gods' during the construction of the fort.

The maintenance of these monuments has to be done at central government level and places a very considerable burden on the meagre financial resources available to the government. The funding of repairs and restoration of the forts is even more difficult. Since Independence the economy of Ghana has suffered a series of financial set-backs and has seen its foreign earnings collapse. The price of cocoa is now lower in real terms than at Independence. Conservation needs to compete for a part of the very limited resources of the



Figure 6 Fort St Anthony, Axim, the northern bastion and gun port.

Government often against other priorities which are either politically or socially more popular.

It is very difficult for any Third World government to justify the allocation of part of its budget to preserving monuments that do not have any immediate effect or bearing on the day-to-day existence of the local inhabitants who struggle to survive in a subsistence economy. When a country's economy is so small that it cannot afford to provide basic health provisions such as drainage or running water, it has to tread a very delicate path about spending money on other areas that might foster resentment or unrest.

Tourism as such hardly exists outside of Accra. The two most important forts, Elmina and Cape Coast Castle have at the most a dozen visitors a day, whereas the others have that number a week. The revenue from tickets can hardly pay for the guardians' wages. There is no spare to pay for maintenance, let alone restoration.

Local funding of the repairs is equally difficult. Most of the forts and castles are located in small inaccessible towns and villages which do not benefit from either an industrial or a service economy to generate the funds necessary to run a local economy. The vast majority of the population is outside of the 'cash economy' and does not contribute to it in any form of taxation.

Fortunately, some of the very small forts, such as the ones at Shama and at Apam, are used as community buildings to house the local post office and Magistrates' Courts. Consequently the community can afford to maintain and preserve them. Neither the Government nor the Local Authority can afford to pay for a caretaker to guard the ruins of the 'English Fort' at Commenda with the result that, where it is not occupied by squatters, it is used as a source of building materials and will eventually disappear.

Other forts have not been so fortunate as Shama and Apam in the 'new' uses that they have been put to; both the Accra forts as well as those at Winneba and Anomabu are all used as prisons. Given the local housing conditions that most Ghanaians have to put up with it might cause immense resentment if the current occupants of those prisons were decanted into new buildings.

The west African climate has an extremely destructive effect on the forts and their building materials because of its extremely high humidity level which is combined with the corrosiveness of the sea air. The



Figure 7 Fort St Jago, Elmina, the front gate and drawbridge.

strong winds that continuously blow off the Atlantic ocean often directly onto these buildings, which are nearly always located on the edge of the sea, help to accelerate the speed of decay. Elmina when it was occupied as a police training school was maintained to a very high standard. Unfortunately with the school's departure the building has been left empty most of the time and has suffered a severe decline in its condition.

Almost any use, if it does not alter the essential historic fabric of the building, is preferable to it being left empty. In the past there has been a cycle of repair and consolidation followed by another period of lack of maintenance and neglect inevitably leading to another cycle of repair and neglect. It is essential to break that cycle and ensure that the buildings have appropriate new uses.



Figure 8 The English Fort, Commenda, fragmentary remains of the southern bastion.

A SIX-POINT PLAN FOR THE FUTURE PRESERVATION OF THE FORTS

- 1 In order to be able to guarantee the long-term preservation of these forts it is necessary to undertake a thorough survey of the forts to establish their current condition and use.
- 2 The forts should be used to provide the 'seed corn' for the development of tourism in Ghana. No other African country is so fortunate in having such a large collection of forts and castles.
- 3 Many of the forts are small and lend themselves to community use which is in no way incompatible with their preservation and conservation. The forts are a scarce economic resource that could be used to assist and focus the community. The proposed works of the Bristol Bond at Senya Bereku could act as a suitable role model for many of the other forts.
- 4 The link between the Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol with its educational programme supported by the Overseas Development Agency and the Leverhulme and Rhodes Trusts could further assist with the educational profile of these buildings. The

museum is currently assisting in the duplication of archive material relating to the forts for the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board. In addition, the museum, along with the Bristol Bond, is fostering educational links between Britain and Ghana.

5 An international programme needs to be established to assist the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board to co-ordinate the different European Countries' conservation efforts in Ghana. Each country with a colonial link with Ghana, such as Denmark, Holland, Britain, Sweden, France and Germany, could 'adopt' a fort and provide the capital funding required to restore and convert them.

6 The use of the forts as prisons is a particularly inappropriate one both politically and culturally. Every possible assistance should be given to the Ghanaians to fund and find new uses for those forts. World monuments are a world responsibility and the Ghanaian government should receive financial assistance in their preservation.

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