Philatelic Society of Trinidad & Tobago

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Bulletin

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St. Mary's College, Frederick St., Port of Spain

President and Bulletin Editor: Mr. John Chay Tel: 637-7876

Hon Secretary: Mr. Robert Franco Tel: 637-3603

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A Visit to Lord Harris' Home

By Edward Barrow.

Belmont House does not sit in the middle of an important town, not even in the suburbs. To put it in local parlance, it is in the bush. Well, as bush as an English county like Kent gets; the roads that lead to it are minor, single lane B roads, signs are not abundant, and the Sat. Nav. struggles to give precise directions. To set the context right, bush here consists of hedgerows, solitary old stately trees in grassy fields where farm animals graze. Occasionally, small thickets of trees breakup the gently rolling landscape. It is the stuff of the bucolic landscapes of Gainsborough.

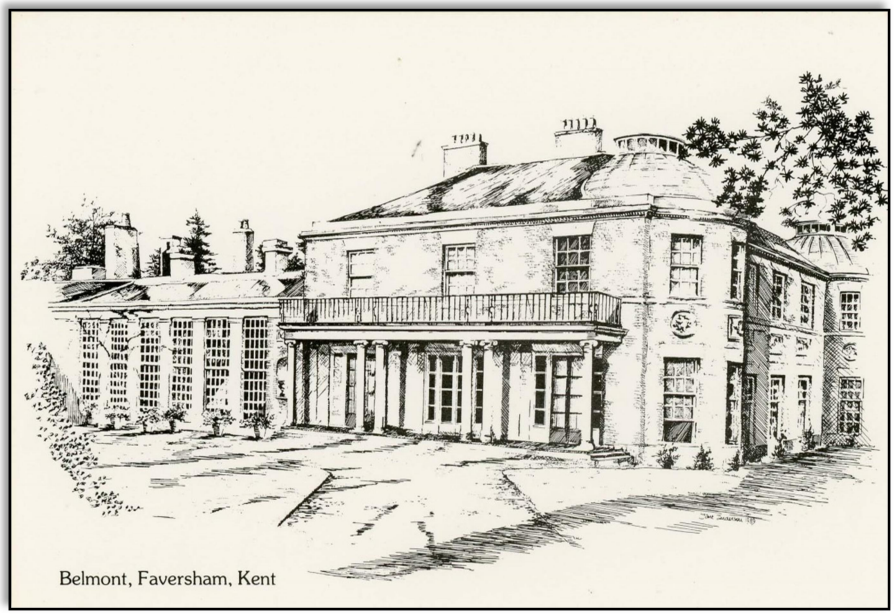

Fig. 1: Postcard of Belmont House, the home of Lord Harris



Fig.2: Postcards of Cazabon Paintings from the Lord Harris Collection, French Negress in Gala Dress (top left), Mulatto Girl (top right), Sunrise, Near Port of Spain (bottom).

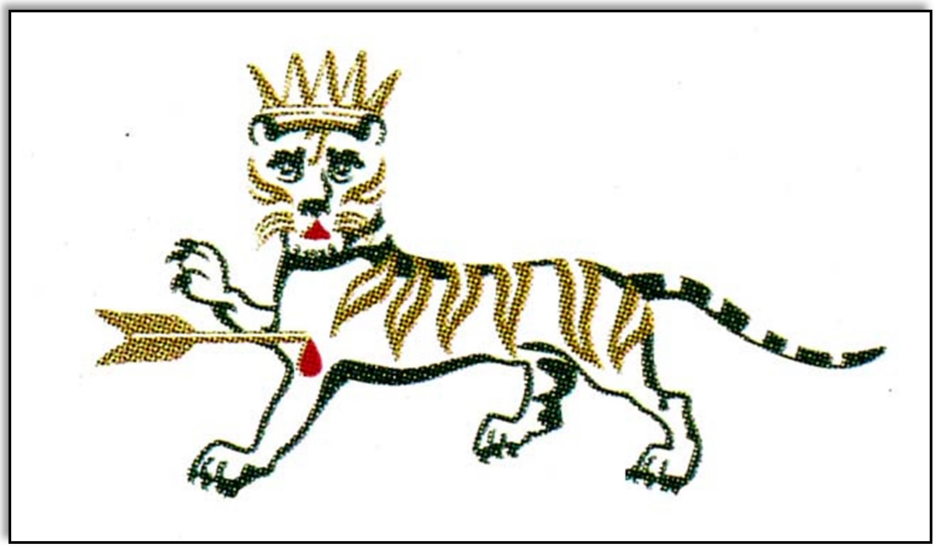

Fig. 3: Harris Family Emblem.

The 3rd Lord Harris looms large in Trinidad's history; he was a governor with vision, energy and good moral instincts. His focus was developing the island's economy, but he did not just see the solution as merely supplying cheap labour to plantations. He pressed for new infrastructure- roads, railways and an inland postal system that was one of the first in the British Empire. He also championed human development by helping found the first public library, starting the government funded education system, and insisting that Indentured labourers be allowed to bring their wives and children with them.

In our history books he is often presented as a singular figure, sent from England in 1846 he did such and such and then vanishes elsewhere in 1854. This is the way history tends to be written, like the above. Visiting his home, Belmont House, gives a different less "Trinidad only" perspective; here our Lord Harris has to compete with the other Lord Harris' for space. He is one of many.

Belmont House and grounds are elegant but unassuming, sitting on an estate of 400 acres. Built in the latter part of the 18th Century, the original owner Colonel John Montresor was a military engineer who served in the American Revolutionary War. He was accused of embezzling funds and had his property seized by the state and sold at auction. The estate was purchased by the First Lord Harris who had gained a sizeable fortune for his role in defeating the Sultan of Mysore at the Battle of Seringapatam in 1799. This battle was crucial in helping cement British control over a large part of Southern India. The defeated Sultan had a tiger as his emblem and this was

adapted as part of the Harris family emblem, albeit in an inverse manner; here the tiger is pierced by an arrow.

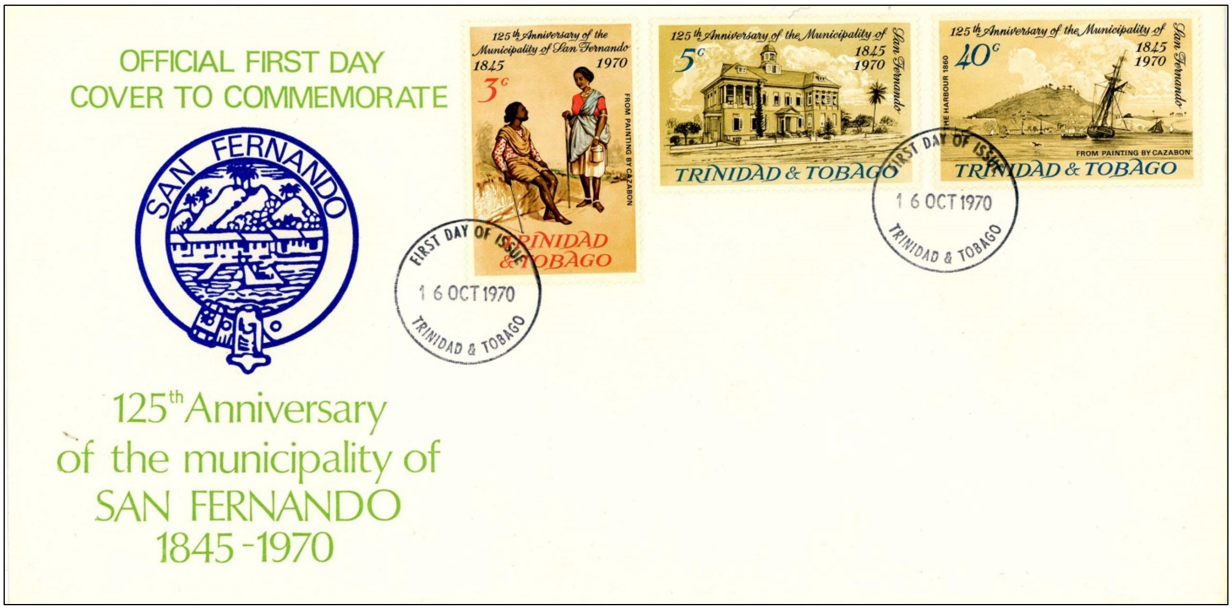

Figure 4: 125th Anniversary of the municipality of San Fernando Issue on First Day Cover (1970). The 3c and 40c feature Cazabon Paintings.



Figure 5: New Definitive Stamps of 1976, four of which feature Cazabon Paintings.

The second Lord Harris followed his father into the military and his highpoint was to command the 73rd Regiment of Foot at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Sandwiching our Lord Harris to the right is his son, the fourth Lord Harris; he was a renowned cricketer and the second person to captain an English Cricket Team. He was actually born in Trinidad, as was his mother. I am not sure why there has not been a movement to claim that his cricketing prowess was due to his Trinidadian roots. His mother was a Trini and he was born in Trini, do we really need any more proof!

The fifth Lord Harris certainly left his mark on Belmont House with a collection of clocks that, if you didn't know better, you might think was formed by an obsessive Dr Who type. Numbering 340 clocks and watches in all, they fill the corridors and rooms. At no point is a clock not in sight. Lord Harris No 5 even held the Harry Potteresque title *Master of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.* That title must have come with a ceremonial hat and a wand.

So how does our Lord Harris fare for billing amongst his peers? Well he doesn't have the military or sporting accolades of Number 1, 2 and 4. This is probably a reflection that competent governance is not easily packaged or explained as military victories and sporting achievements, and perhaps sadly, not appreciated as much. There are swords, medals, military memorabilia, stuffed animals, and sporting trophies that can represent successes in combat of one kind or the other but what physical entity can adequately represent the rebalancing of a cruel immigration policy.



Figure 6: Postcard of Harris Promenade, San Fernando (Circa 1920)

In terms of artefacts, what does save our Lord Harris from eclipse by his peers is his association with Trinidad, and more pointedly his patronage of Michel-Jean Cazabon, our premier 19th Century artist. The guides and staff seem well aware of the importance of Lord Harris' collection to Trinidadians and his paintings grace many of the halls and rooms. It is a sign of respect that one bedroom is exclusively decorated with Cazabon's work. The scenes are some of the best and only representations of Trinidad in the mid 1800's. The guides are kind, if you let them know you have an interest in his work they will allow you to stay longer. But an extra ½ an hour is really not enough, you can easily spend that time examining one painting like the *Overview of the Savannah*, looking for landmarks and being amazed at what has changed since the 1850's.

The 6th Lord Harris who died in 1995 was the last of the line as he had no children. In many ways he seems like a suitable full stop as he was not interested in the grandeur of the title and public life. He was more interested in farming and left the estate and house as a charitable trust. In his official portrait he reputably posed in his favourite sweater replete with holes as a silent rebellion against formality.

Our Lord Harris is well represented here in Trinidad; there is the promenade in San Fernando and the square in Port of Spain which bear his name. At one time there was a statue of Lord Harris in the middle of the square which was allegedly damaged in late night revelry. It was subsequently removed and the pieces are reported to be collecting dust in a City Corporation building. I think there is a good case for either repairing or replacing the statue as a mark of respect for a figure that has had an enduring positive impact on Trinidad and still continues to be relevant in our age.



Figure 7: Postcard of Lord Harris Square, Port of Spain (Circa 1920)