



INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth Walkway on Ascension Island is a 7 km pathway connecting 10 of Georgetown's and the Island's highlights. The Walkway can be enjoyed as a continuous route over a couple of hours or in sections. There are several points of Commonwealth significance, marked along the way in bronze, which can be explored in more detail by downloading the Commonwealth Walkways app or visiting: www.outdoortrust.com.

THE ASCENSION COMMONWEALTH WALKWAY

Ascension is a volcanic island in the Atlantic, midway between Brazil and West Africa. The island was first discovered in 1501 by a Portuguese seafarer, João da Nova. It was then rediscovered by Alphonse d'Albuquerque on Ascension Day 1503, hence its name. Being dry and barren, no one bothered to raise a flag until the British garrisoned the island on 22 October 1815 in order to prevent a French rescue attempt following Napoleon's imprisonment on St Helena. In 1815 the Captains of HMS *Zenobia* and HMS *Peruvia* came ashore and established a small British Naval Garrison here.

The main settlement on the island was originally called the Garrison but was renamed Georgetown in 1830 following the death of King George IV. After the death of Napoleon, Ascension was used as a mid-Atlantic sanatorium and a victualling station for ships engaged in anti-slavery patrols along the coast of West Africa. Georgetown continued to develop, becoming an important communications link for the world when the Eastern Telegraph Company arrived here in 1899. Underwater cables were laid from Cape Town to St Helena, and via Ascension, Cape Verde and Madeira.

After 1922, ETC took over the running of the island after the Royal Navy left and only their contracted workers, mostly from St Helena, were allowed to live here.

The island became an important military base during the Second World War, with the Americans establishing a base here and building Wideawake Airfield (named on account of a noisy colony of Sooty Terns) during 1942. Approximately 4,000 US servicemen were stationed here and 25,000 planes flew through Ascension, providing crucial support for the war effort in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and China. The last US servicemen left in 1947.

In 1956 the Americans returned to build a space tracking station to monitor rockets launched from Cape Canaveral. Prince Philip visited the island briefly in 1957, aboard the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, judging it: "exactly like a huge heap of different coloured cinders or clinkers with a white sandy beach round the edge."

In the 1960s the BBC established its Atlantic Relay Station here, NASA built a ground tracking and relay station and Cable and Wireless built a satellite earth station in support of the Apollo Moon Landings. In 1964 the Colonial Office sent its first British Administrator to govern the island.

In the 1970s NASA lengthened Wideawake Airfield to accommodate emergency landings for Space Shuttle Flights, which would start in 1981. In 1972 Duff Hart-Davis wrote *Ascension, a story of a South Atlantic Island*, a lively book about the Island, which began with the memorable line: "It has never played any major role in history, and probably never will." As it happened, it became a vital refuelling station during the Falklands War of 1982, with up to 350 planes taking off daily.

Following the Falklands War, the RAF established a permanent presence on the island. The

European Space Agency built a tracking station to monitor its Ariane satellite-launching rockets and the US Air Force built one of four remote GPS ground control antenna sites in the world.

Today, Ascension has a population of approximately 800 people spread across four settlements – Georgetown, Two Boats Village and the British and US Bases.

Points of Interest

1. The AIG Building

The Ascension Island Government Building is the office of the British Administrator, the island having had an Administrator since 1964. It is a two storey stone building with an internal upstairs gallery and serves as the headquarters of A.I.G.'s administration and finance team. The building was originally a Petty Officers' Mess, built between 1899 and 1903. Before that a cottage with a tank and store on the south east side occupied the site. Since then it has been variously, the offices of the Eastern Telegraph Company, a hostel and a newspaper office.

Marc Holland, the Administrator, laid the foundation disc of the Queen's Walkway, outside the AIG Building on 17 November 2015.

2. Captain William Bate's Grave

Captain William Bate's Grave is in the cemetery behind Deadman's Beach, the principal cemetery on the island to the southwest of Georgetown. It was the cemetery for the Royal Marines Garrison. Captain Bate was Commandant of Ascension Island from 1828 until his death from fever at North East Cottage, on 15 April 1838. He produced many changes on the island, including building a tank holding 1,200 tons of water. He also named the settlement Georgetown on 3 April 1829, in honour of the birthday of King George IV.

His grave notes the names of many of his shipmates who died at the garrison at the same time. Another early grave is that of Commander Thomas Saville Griffinhoof, RN, Commanding Officer of the sloop, HMS *Primrose*, who died in 1830. The cemetery contains many wooden headstones, made from ship's timbers, which have survived for nearly 200 years, and is surrounded by a dry stonewall. Despite this storms and floods have battered it over the years.

Here too is the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery with six men killed in the First World War and one in the Second. The inner part of the cemetery contains more recent graves, and outside its walls is a pet cemetery.

3. The Heritage Museum

The Heritage Museum is entirely run by volunteers from the Ascension Island Heritage Society. That society was founded in 1966 on the initiative of Doug Rogers, one of the Americans on the island, who persuaded the then Acting Administrator, Major Anthony Beyts, to gather together all the interested parties. Sir John Field, Governor of St Helena, became their Patron, and allowed Fort Hayes to be used as a museum. Amongst things they display are geological specimens, a wooden coffin (discovered in Comfortless Cove), and a Victorian fire engine.

The museum also contains many historical items linked to the island, along with wireless equipment, photographs and documents charting the island's history. A recent find was an historical bell.

Between 2014 and 2015 the museum was completely restored and revamped. The Heritage Museum was reopened on 22 May 2015. The Historical Society has many on-going plans for the museum, including a Community Room and the Faces of Ascension project.

4. Fort Hayes

Fort Hayes was built in 1848 and is the larger and better preserved of the two Georgetown forts. It was largely rebuilt after 1881 and there were further changes during the two World Wars. When the Heritage Museum is open it is possible to enter the precincts, which afford fine views over the capital and the harbour. Below it is a gallery, used as an exhibition space in conjunction with the Museum with many historical photographs of life on the island, furniture, plates, knives and forks, and machinery used in everyday life.

On the other side of the Pier Head stands Fort Thornton (formerly Fort Cockburn), now a ruin, but originally built on a rock promontory in 1839 to defend the island from the French. It was later remodelled in 1880. Earlier there were fears that the French might use the island in an attempt to rescue Napoleon from St Helena (where he was held prisoner from 1815 until his death in 1821). The Fort still contains a number of underground rooms and ramparts from which a comprehensive view of Georgetown, the sea and the beaches is possible. The rusted mounts for guns can still be seen, though the guns themselves were removed after World War II.

5. Pier Head

The Pier Head was built in 1820, soon after the occupation of the island. It was formed by concrete over existing land, is a mere 30 feet wide and juts out from the shore. There was a watch house, which was swept away by the rollers in 1839 and the pier itself nearly destroyed in 1856.

The steam crane and tramway were fitted by 1862. A railway ran from the pier to the coal store, the main store and the turtle ponds to enable ships to unload coal from the UK and load turtle meat and sea bird eggs, with the minimum of effort.

It is still the landing point for all sea visitors, but today's cruise ships generally find it too rough to disembark their passengers. It is also where the island's fishing boats are unloaded.

Nearby stands the impressive AIG Stores Building once described as "the largest structure in the Southern Hemisphere." It was completed between 1848 and 1852, and combines basalt stone, timber and cast iron. It was originally Main Stores, with three interior areas for the coal, meat and eggs. It now houses the works department.

6. The Turtle Ponds

The Turtle Ponds were constructed in 1829 to hold captured turtles, which, in those days, were considered a great delicacy. The ponds were extended in 1840. In 1822 some 1,500 turtles were harvested. Many were shipped alive to the United Kingdom to be served to King George IV and to the Lords of the Admiralty. Turtle soup was often on the menu in London clubs. The turtles were shipped live and sailors named them after the great figures of the age – the Duke of Wellington, Lord Melville and the Lord Chancellor, for example. As late as

World War II, turtle burgers were served to the US troops. Since the 1950's turtles have become a protected species.

Nearby is Long Beach, the main anchorage for Ascension. Here the giant Green Turtles nest during the months between November and July, burying themselves in the sand and then after they have laid their clutch of eggs making their way back to the sea. They can be watched, but cars must not point their headlights out to sea since turtles only move in a straight line and are drawn towards the light. The Conservation Department runs twice-weekly turtle tours during the turtle-nesting season to enable visitors to learn more about these fascinating creatures.

7. Jubilee View

Jubilee View is on Cross Hill, high above Georgetown, Clarence Bay and Long Beach, formerly an important land and seamark following the discovery of Ascension Island in 1501. There are also views of Green Mountain. It is now a picnic area created to mark The Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012 and opened by HRH The Duke of Kent on 8 November 2012.

It stands adjacent to and just below the old Fort Bedford, formerly the site of Governor's Lodge and Bate's Cottage, which housed troops during World War II. It was built around 1903, but fell into bad condition and was eventually pulled down in July 1998. The ruined foundations can still be seen between two Victorian cannons dating from 1866 and a pair of 5.5 inch naval guns from HMS *Hood*, which were removed from that ship in Malta in 1935, and are periodically restored by the volunteers.

8. St Mary's Church

St Mary's Church was built between 1843 and 1846, the foundation stone being laid by Mrs Dwyer, wife of the Commandant, Captain Thomas Dwyer, on 6 September. The first Bishop of St Helena consecrated it in 1861. The church was modernised between 1879 and 1880, with a chancel and new altar added. In 1912 the church got a new roof, and electricity was installed in 1924. It used to be run by Lay Readers, and the first resident priest took over in 1967. Every Sunday there is a Eucharist service at 10.30, with occasional other services.

In 1957 Prince Philip visited and noticed many memorials to Royal Marines, including "one rather pathetic little memorial to a young seaman who lost his life while driving the daily cart up Green Mountain. It must have been quite an undertaking because some of our party who went up found it hard enough by car."

Outside the church are memorials to soldiers who served on the island, and a large stone commemorates Alexander Duff Gordon, Commander of HMS *Hegate*, who died at the age of 36 on 2 December 1856. There are two stained glass windows in memory of the service men who died in the Falklands War of 1982.

9. Bicentenary Park

The Bicentenary Park was created in 2015 to mark the Bicentenary of the first occupation of the island by the British on 22 October 1815. It consists of a newly landscaped area and a garden with fine plants contained by a wooden fence. In October 2015 a weekend of celebrations was held here to mark the anniversary, including performances by the Band of the Royal Marines.

10. Exiles Building

Exiles Building is one of the most imposing landmarks in Georgetown. It was built in 1830 as a single storey Marine barracks to house the troops stationed on the island. It still bears the cypher of King William IV and the date 1836. An extra floor was added in 1848, which brought the housing capacity to 150 Marines. A clock was added to mark the time instead of the firing a gun each hour. The Marines joked that it chimed “Oh Gawd” every quarter of an hour as time seemed to pass so slowly on the island.

It remained in use until 1903 and was then used as stores and emergency accommodation until 1922, when the Royal Navy left the island.

Exiles Building became the Ascension Club. The Exiles Club created their own shield and motto which they displayed in telegraph stations around the world. It shows a swimming horse with a trident (known as the Hippocamp) and the motto ‘Oceanus non dissociat’, which means ‘the ocean shall not separate’.

COMMONWEALTH WALKWAYS

Her Majesty The Queen has given The Outdoor Trust permission to create walkways in cities throughout the Commonwealth marked with Her personal Royal cypher. The Trust plans to create 100 new walkways in the main towns and cities of the Commonwealth’s 71 nations and territories in the next four years.

The Commonwealth Walkways will be within reach of two billion people - a third of the World’s population - 60% of whom are under 30 and 37% of which are currently not active enough to benefit their health.

All the Commonwealth Walkways will be dedicated to The Queen’s unfailing service and leadership as Head of the Commonwealth for more than 65 years and will be a lasting practical legacy that can continue to be appreciated.

The Walkways will thread together 3,000 of the most significant highlights of the Commonwealth and each will be marked permanently with a large bronze plaque, which proudly displays The Queen’s personal ‘EIIR’ Royal cypher.

The Commonwealth Walkways app allows smart phones to pick up images, text and video explaining the importance of the iconic features and promotes the principles and values of the Commonwealth too.

At the start of each walk a permanent embossed interpretation panel, similar to those already installed by the Trust outside Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle and in Valletta Malta, (the first Commonwealth Walkway which was opened by The Queen in November 2015), will be set in the ground illustrating the route, key points of interest and the relevance to the Commonwealth.

The trust is working in partnership with city Mayors, schools and businesses to ensure as many of the 100 permanent Commonwealth Walkway routes are at least started in all Commonwealth nations and territories by 2018, the time of the next Commonwealth Games.

For more information visit www.outdoortrust.com.