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Embassy history British Embassy Addis Ababa

Permanent diplomatic relations between Britain and Ethiopia began in 1896. These pages will give you a brief overview of diplomatic relations between the two countries, as well as providing information about the embassy compound and ambassador's residence, both of which are of historical and environmental interest.

Early links between Britain and Ethiopia



The history of British interest in Ethiopia dates back over half a millennium.

The earliest known message to Ethiopia from a European ruler was from King Henry IV of England.

Deeply interested in Jerusalem, and in the possibility of Christian Ethiopian assistance in securing it from the Saracens, he despatched a letter in 1400, couched in the warmest friendship to the 'King of Abyssinia, Prester John'.

British interest in Ethiopia revived in the seventeenth century.

A British scholar, Brian Walton, included the Ge'ez, or Ethiopic, alphabet in his *Introductio ad Lectionem Linguarum Orientalium* of 1653.

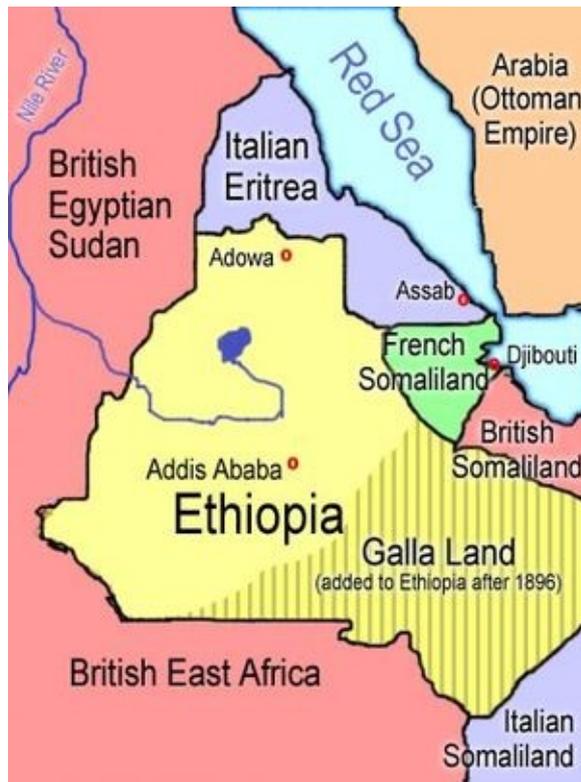
The German Hiob Ludolf's famous *Historia Aethiopica* was translated and published in English in 1684, as *A New History of Ethiopia*.

An English gentlewoman, Ann Morland, who died in 1695, had her tombstone in Westminster Abbey partially written in Ge'ez, as visitors to the Abbey can see to this day.

Less than a century later, in 1732, Samuel Johnson, the English lexicographer, obtained his first commission, of five guineas, for translating an early seventeenth century account of Ethiopia by the Jesuit author Jeronimo Lobo. Johnson was so fascinated with the country that he made it the setting, in 1758, of his famous allegorical novel *The Prince of Abyssinia*.

A Tale. Its first page bore the title This History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia, for which reason the work was thereafter almost invariably known as Rasselas.

Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile, which contributes the bulk of the water reaching Egypt, later attracted the attention of the Scottish laird James Bruce, who conceived the ambition of 'discovering' the source of the river. Landing at the Red Sea port of Massawa in 1769, he made his way to the then Ethiopian capital Gondar, which he was the first traveller to describe in any detail.



He remained in the country until 1772. His finely illustrated five volume *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, which contains many chapters on Ethiopian history, was published in Edinburgh in 1790, and became overnight one of the great classics of European exploration literature.

The nineteenth century, the century of the steamboat, the electric telegraph and the machine-gun, witnessed a great expansion in contacts between Europe and the rest of the world.

Britain was deeply involved in this development, with the result that several of the earliest foreign travellers to Ethiopia in the first part of the century were British.

They included Lord Valentia, who became interested in northern Ethiopia at the time of the Napoleonic wars, and his emissary Henry Salt. The latter, who visited the country twice, in 1805 and 1809-10, developed particularly warm relations with the ruler of Tigray, Ras Walda Sellassie.

Salt, a draftsman of distinction, is today perhaps best remembered for his beautiful engravings of the Ethiopian countryside, which a century and a half later were to be reprinted by the Ethiopian tourist organisation.

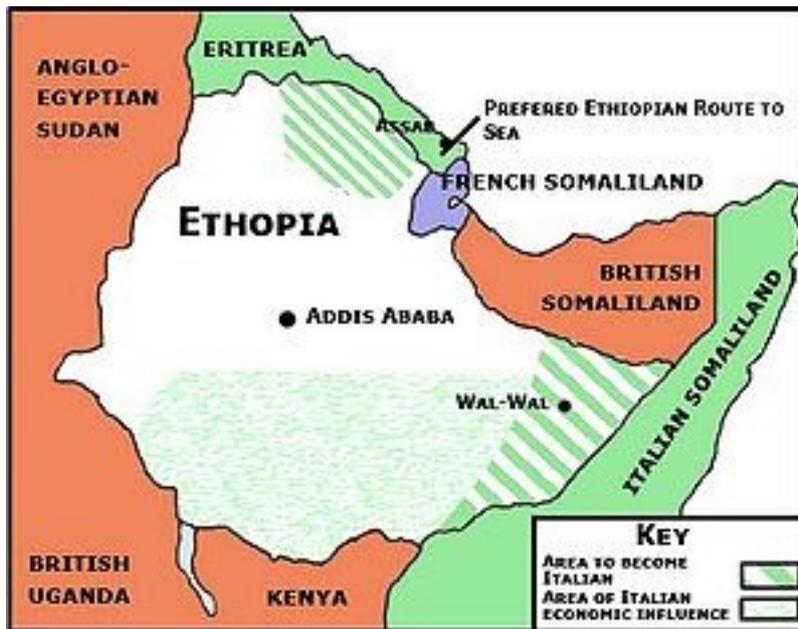
Among later British travellers mention should be made of an envoy to Shewa, William Cornwallis Harris, as well as three particularly perceptive observers, Henry Salt's employee Nathaniel Pearce, a British ship's Captain Charles Johnston, and a sometime resident of Adwa, Mansfield Parkyns.

The last married an Ethiopian wife and engendered an Ethiopian family who, over the years, played many an interesting role in Ethiopian history. Perhaps the best known British traveller of the period was, however, Sir Richard Burton, the translator

of the Arabian Nights, who in 1855 spent ten brief but memorable days in the old walled city of Harar.

Yet another Briton, William Coffin, had earlier travelled on a mission for one of the early nineteenth century Ethiopian rulers, Dajazmach Sebagadis of Tigray.

Missionaries from Britain, meanwhile, were also active in these years which witnessed the publication, by the British and Foreign Bible Society, of the first Amharic New Testament in 1824 and the first complete Amharic Bible in 1840. These and other contacts between the two countries coincided with the opening up of Anglo-Ethiopian diplomatic relations.



Britain signed a treaty with King Sahla Sellasie of Shewa on 18 November 1841, and with Ras Ali of Bagémdér on 2 November 1849.

Most of the principal Ethiopian rulers of this time also exchanged letters with Queen Victoria during her long reign from 1837 to 1901.

One of the most prominent Europeans of

mid-nineteenth century Ethiopia was an Englishman, John Bell, whom the reforming Emperor Téwodros II appointed as his Court Chamberlain. Bell's death, and that of another of Téwodros' admirers, the British consul Walter Plowden, both in 1860, led to a decline in the influence of Britain.

The failure of the British Government to answer a letter which he had despatched to Queen Victoria in 1862 led the Emperor to detain a subsequent British consul, Captain Douglas Cameron, and several other Europeans, at the fortress of Maqdala.

Téwodros persuaded the British Government to recruit a number of British artisans for him, but their journey to his camp was cancelled because of an impasse over the release of his European hostages.

The despatch in 1867 of a British expedition from India, under the command of Sir Robert Napier, to free the prisoners was followed by Téwodros' defeat in battle, and the Ethiopian monarch's dramatic suicide in April 1868, according to legend using a jewelled pistol donated to him by Queen Victoria.



At the close of the battle the British, who had no interest in remaining in Ethiopia, took back with them Téwodros' infant son, Prince Alamayehu. He was looked after by Captain Tristram Speedy (a former British consul in Massawa), and was befriended by **Queen Victoria, but died at the early age of nineteen and was buried at Windsor Castle.**

The British troops also took with them another toddler, by name Warqnah, who was found near the site of the fighting.

He was subsequently educated in India and later at Edinburgh and Glasgow, and became Ethiopia's first modern-trained physician, and, long afterwards, his country's Minister to the Court of St James.

His son Yohannes was himself a prominent physician in post World War II Addis Ababa.



Cordial relations between Britain and Ethiopia were re-established during the reign of Téwodros' successor, Emperor Yohannes IV.

Already prior to his accession to the throne he had been in contact with the Napier expedition, from which, before its departure, he received a sizeable consignment of arms which assisted his rise to power.

After his coronation, he employed a British military aide, John Kirkham, who travelled to Europe on a diplomatic mission for his master in 1872.

A decade or so later, the British Government despatched a diplomatic mission to Yohannes, with whom a treaty of friendship was signed on 3 June 1884.

An Ethiopian force, led by the Emperor's commander, Ras Alula, subsequently assisted Britain in rescuing Egyptian garrisons and European civilians besieged by the Mahdists in Sudan.

As a gesture of thanks the British Government sent an envoy, F Harrison-Smith, with two ceremonial swords, one for Yohannes, and the other for his son, Ras Araya Sellassie. Yohannes shortly afterwards sent a mission to London.

It was led by Mercha Warqé, an Ethiopian of partial Armenian descent, who had studied at the Free Church of Scotland school in Bombay.

He arrived in England with an elephant weighing four tons, which was later placed in the London zoo. Yohannes also appointed an Englishman, Samuel King, as his Honorary Consul in London.



Britain, which throughout the nineteenth century European Scramble for Africa never attempted to colonise Ethiopia, tried, albeit unsuccessfully, on two notable occasions to negotiate peace between it and its expansionist neighbours.

In 1876-7 Colonel (later General) Charles Gordon tried to mediate between Emperor Yohannes and Egypt, and a British envoy, Sir Gerald Portal, in 1887 between Yohannes and the Italians.

The Embassy Compound

The Compound in Addis Ababa is said by many to be the most pleasant

British Embassy compound in Africa and one of the loveliest in the world.

The British Embassy compound now covers about 90 acres, some ten minutes' drive from the administrative centre of Addis Ababa.

The site is hilly, sheltered on the southern slopes of the Entoto hills. The Residence is at about 8,500 feet above sea level, and is built at the top of the first steep rise within the compound.

Below it the land is laid out something like an English park. Above and beside it a densely wooded area merges into the hillside.

The Chancery, as well as administrative, consular, commercial and development sections, are all situated within the compound.

So too are 11 staff houses in addition to the Residence and the Consul's house. In 1996 a new Visa section was opened, with direct access from the street.

A force of some 35 guards ensures the security of the compound.

Within the compound, but separately enclosed, is a village where a number of the locally-engaged staff live.

The Embassy has a design statement based on the Countryside Agency's 'Village Design Statement' written to protect the distinctive characteristics of the Compound, its history and its built and natural environments.

History of the Residence

Set in lovely lawns and flowering borders, the Residence is a solid single-storey house with a tin roof, built more or less symmetrically around two internal courtyards, which provide light all year round.



At the top of two flights of wide steps, its pillared portico is covered with wisteria, in season and the two flanking wings are ablaze with bougainvillea for much of the year.

To the right, adjoining the family rooms, a veranda giving on to the side garden runs the depth of the house.

A lovely tukul, used most recently as a children's

playroom, is visible from the veranda, as is a gazebo covered in flowering creeper.

The house is compared sometimes with a hill station residence in British India, and its style evokes former times.

The architect of the present Residence, built in 1910-1911, was Mr W. C. D'Harty. Mr Wilfred Thesiger, Minister of the Legation from 1909 to 1919, was involved in much correspondence with HM Office of Works and the Foreign Office over the difficulties and problems of building the new Residence.

However, the architect, Mr D'Harty, seems to have earned nothing but praise and honour. A letter dated 20/4/11 from HMOW to the FO says: "The Board have received from HM Minister at Addis Ababa a letter of appreciation of the work of Mr D'Harty, their Clerk of Works, who has just completed the task of supervising the erection of the new Legation in that capital", and detailed the serious obstacles with which Mr D'Harty had to contend in the construction of the Legation Residence.

Mr D'Harty's success in triumphing over all these difficulties "resulted in him being frequently called in to advise on other architectural works contemplated or in progress in Addis Ababa, such as the construction of the new Italian Legation, the repair of the Russian Legation, and of many palace and official buildings, not to mention the services he was asked to render as arbitrator in any building disputes".

It is therefore hardly surprising to read in a despatch from Mr Thesiger to the FO on 12/2/11, concerning Mr D'Harty, that the Ethiopian Government wanted to give him the 3rd class of the Star of Ethiopia.

Mr Thesiger says: "Mr D'Harty, who was sent out by the Office of Works to construct the new Legation, has, during the past 2 years, always shown himself ready to sacrifice his spare time in assisting the Abyssinian Government, at their earnest request, with his advice and technical knowledge.



He has been consulted in connection with the building of the Cathedral of St. George, new buildings at the palace and many other constructions, besides asking for him as arbitrator in many building disputes."

The house is built of stone, locally quarried and originally had an asbestos roof. The present galvanised corrugated iron roof was put on about 1950.

This type of roofing was first used in the reign of the Emperor Menelik (the roof of his palace was the first of its kind, though the material used is thought to have been rather more like zinc). The interior walls of the house are lime, sand and stone.

The fine, solid doors and windows are made of the local wood called "Ted" (cedar) and the splendid door-fittings of finely worked brass were sent from England.

A letter from the Foreign Office to the Office of Works dated 10/12/09 refers to "the difficulty and expense of transporting furniture from the coast, or of getting any suitable furniture constructed locally..." The only means of transport before 1917 was by camel from the railhead of the Djibouti railway at Dire Dawa, and much of the original furniture was locally made.

Mr Wilfred Thesiger, the traveller and writer, was born in the old Legation Residence and was a year old when his family moved into the new Residence.

He remembers that his father used to read to him and his brothers each evening, seated on the front porch of the new house and that there was an uninterrupted view from the porch down the hill and over.

View from the Residence in 2003 the plain below the Legation, and he remembers no trees of any size in sight except the Shola tree. The many trees, now of great size, between the residence and the main road, had probably been planted but were small and inconspicuous.

The offices of the Minister (Ambassador) and the Chancery continued to be located in the east wing of the Residence until 1943, when the present Chancery block was built, and the Minister (Ambassador) lived in the west wing (now the Guest Wing).



It is noticeable that all the windows at the front of the Residence are so constructed that, when seated, one can neither see out nor be seen from without.

This was a deliberate device, in the event of possible siege of the Legations, bearing in mind that the years 1906-1913, when the Emperor Menelik was ailing, were years of unrest and uncertainty as to the future.

The well in the east courtyard

was sunk with the possibility of civil unrest in mind. The names and dates of previous Ambassadors are carved in the stone pillars which stud the large entrance hall.

The main drawing room, or Durbar Hall, is splendid. There is a fireplace opposite the double doors, flanked by single doors leading into the dining room beyond.

Three windows down each sidewall give on to the interior courtyards and bring light into the room even during the rains. An ebony Bechstein grand was given to the house by Emperor Haile Selassie.

A handsome stone fireplace backs on to the one in the Durbar Hall, and there is a good chandelier.

The dining room was extended in 1965 for the visit to Ethiopia of Her Majesty The Queen.

Although The Queen stayed at Jubilee Palace, the residence of Emperor Haile Selassie, during her visit to Ethiopia, the Residence was nevertheless substantially altered and extended for her.

In addition to dining room extension, Residence steps after alteration the Front Entrance steps (deemed "too precipitous") were extended and flattened, the dining room was extended northwards, and a terrace was built along the eastern wall of the house.

The Queen also had her own room in the Residence, still called the Queen's Room today.

Emperor Haile Selassie's infant son sought refuge here in the Residence in 1916 during a period of internal unrest.

In recent years the Queen's Birthday Party has been held out-of-doors at mid-day on St George's Day (23 April) in the garden beside the Residence.



Ethiopia and England share St George as patron Saint.

The Residence has also since 1996 been the venue for a St Andrew's/Burns Night Supper and 2003 saw the first St David's Day celebration and Eisteddfod.

The Residence is used for entertaining Ethiopian guests and visitors from the UK throughout the year, and the average number of people entertained in one year is between 2,000 and 2,500.

One important event is Poppy Day, which is organised by the British Community on the Saturday before Remembrance Sunday, and which raises funds for the Royal British Legion.

The Ambassador also hosts a lunch on Remembrance Day after the wreath laying at the Commonwealth War Graves.



"I am the first reigning British Monarch to set foot on Ethiopian soil".

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