



EMPEROR HAILE SELASSIE IN BATH

Keith Bowers

Bath has attracted many royal visitors throughout its history. In 973 AD King Edgar was crowned as King of all England on the site of what is now Bath Abbey. In 1973 Queen Elizabeth II visited the Abbey to mark the thousand year anniversary of that coronation.

In the 16th century Queen Elizabeth I toured the city and in the early 18th century Queen Anne came to take the spa waters for treatment for gout.

Many other royals have come to Bath over the years. The memory of some of them is reflected in present day names such as the Royal Victoria Park, the Theatre Royal, and the Royal Crescent.

What's not as well-known is that Bath played host in the 1930s to a remarkable African royal figure, who was regarded as 225th in the line of the king of kings of Ethiopia. That monarch was Emperor Haile Selassie, who traced his roots back to King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

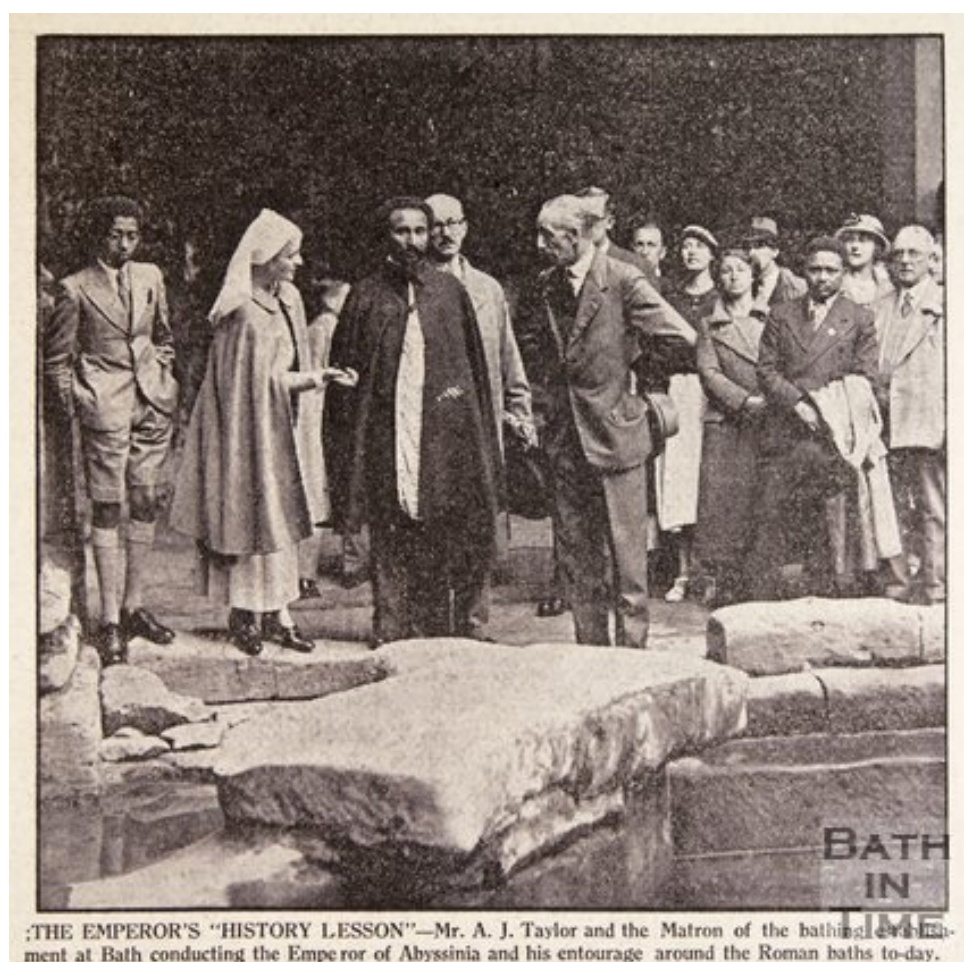
The Emperor spent nearly four years living in Bath while in exile from his home country. He had to flee Ethiopia in May 1936 after he was forced out by the invading Italian fascist forces of Mussolini. A few weeks later Haile Selassie made an impassioned speech in Geneva to the League of Nations. He pleaded for help in defeating Italian aggression but his appeal fell on deaf ears.

The Emperor first arrived in Bath by train from London in August 1936 amid a period of hot dry weather. He initially came with three of his children for a rest and to take the spa waters. He received treatment for some injuries to his arm, which had been damaged in a poison gas attack by Italian warplanes against the Ethiopian army.


The Bath Spa hotel, with its elegant, manicured gardens, played host to the Ethiopian visitors for a few weeks. During this time the Emperor visited local businesses such as Fortts in Milsom Street and the bookbinders, Cedric Chivers. Everywhere he went he was generally greeted warmly by the people of Bath, who were sympathetic to his plight.



Gardens of Bath Spa Hotel



Emperor visiting Roman Baths
(Bath in Time)



Like many visitors to Bath, Haile Selassie toured the site of the Roman Baths. Today near the entrance you can see a large black and white photograph marking his visit. A special tea party was also held in his honour in Parade Gardens by the River Avon and he also opened the Bath Horse Show.

When it became clear that the Emperor would not be able to return to Ethiopia for some time, he decided to buy a house in Bath to put down some roots for his family. He bought Fairfield House, an elegant Italianate villa on the western outskirts of the city.

During his enforced stay the Emperor would become a familiar figure - out walking with his beloved dog Rosa and regularly going to the post box. Some of his children and grandchildren became friends with local families. The Emperor also loved playing tennis and table tennis in the grounds of Fairfield.

The exile experience is very tough for anyone but, for the Emperor, the pressures of being away from his imperilled country were particularly onerous. While staying at Fairfield he received a stream of distressing news from home, including the killing in cold blood of his son-in-law Ras Desta, a commander in the Ethiopian army.

The Emperor was in mourning again after learning of the massacre of up to 20,000 Ethiopian civilians in the capital Addis Ababa. This terrible orgy of violence by Italian blackshirts was retribution for an attempt on the life of the Italian Viceroy, Rodolfo Graziani.


While in Bath the royal family was often short of ready cash, causing all kinds of practical difficulties. The household struggled to pay electricity bills and kindly neighbours arranged free deliveries of coal for heating. Haile Selassie's wife, Empress Menen, wrestled with the rigours of the English winter and at one stage left to live in Jerusalem for a while.

From time to time the Emperor went to the Little Theatre Cinema in central Bath where he was shown newsreel of international events, including the continued occupation of Ethiopia by Italian troops. There is a plaque there today commemorating his association with the cinema.

In the spring of 1940 there was a complete reversal in the Emperor's fortunes. Churchill replaced Chamberlain as British Prime Minister. Soon afterwards Mussolini declared war on Britain. Churchill approached Haile Selassie to go back to Ethiopia to partner British-backed troops to defeat Italian forces in north east Africa.

In June 1940 the Emperor went from Fairfield to London for talks. After a few days he left the south coast on a secret flight to Egypt under the pseudonym of Mr Strong. Eventually he made his way to Sudan. After a frustrating wait of several months he was able to re-enter Addis Ababa as a conquering hero on 5 May 1941. It was five years to the day since Italian troops had first captured the Ethiopian capital.

Once he regained his throne the Emperor did not forget the city of Bath. He named one of his summer residences Fairfield and he invited to Ethiopia some of the local families who had helped him during his exile.



In 1954 he was back in Bath during a worldwide tour. He was made freeman of the city in a special ceremony in the Guildhall and was greeted by large crowds outside the Abbey.

That was to be his last visit. In 1974 his government was overthrown in a communist coup and several months later he was murdered by the revolutionary government.

The Emperor's memory though lives on around the world, especially among the Fairfield House community here in Bath.



Pulteney Bridge



Little Theatre Cinema

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith Bowers lives in Bath and is the author of “Imperial Exile”, the first full account of the Emperor's time of refuge in the city.

In September 2019 Keith conducted a walk for Bathscape retracing some of the sights in central Bath associated with the Emperor's exile.



REFLECTIONS OF THE EXILE YEARS (1936 -1941)

Esther Sellassie Antohin

Almost eighty years ago, my great grandparents Emperor Haile-Selassie I and Empress Menen, my twenty year old grandfather Crown Prince Asfa Wossen, and his younger siblings Princess Tsehai and Prince Mekonnen as well as a small group of members of the household including the famous Hakim or Dr. Worqeneh, spent the exiled years (1936 - 1941) in the city of Bath, United Kingdom. Looking back, I am struck with two clear impressions. The first reflection is connected to the experience (nature) of exile itself; my generation grew up with stories of how these family members overcame the very difficult experiences of the exile years. Neither the Emperor nor Empress prior to this time had lived for any extended period in a foreign country, therefore, the enduring homesickness in their hearts can only be imagined. This brief yet anguished period, when for the first and last time Ethiopia was in the hands of the enemy fascist Italy was a severe experience which was nevertheless softened and became bearable with the warm and gratuitous hospitality of the people of Bath among whom the Emperor and family lived.

The second reflection is concerned with a particular sacred article that the Emperor and Empress brought with them to insure protection. According to an oral version of this story, the Empress had wished that the tabot would journey into exile with her family. The tabot, the most sacred item of the Church, is a replica of the Ark of the Covenant and is found in every Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. The Ethiopian Tewahedo Church historically refers to the two Oriental Orthodox churches of Ethiopia and Eritrea.[1]

The tabot was brought from the Medhaniallem (Savior of the World) Church in Addis Ababa. This church which was frequented by the Empress and the Emperor was a favorite and across the street from Genete Leul palace where they resided.

In the context of Ethiopian Orthodox faith, in times of strife, the faithful would customarily appeal to the tabot, for a sacred pledge. The motivation of why the tabot was brought into exile can only be understood from the perspective of the faithful; it was an act of longstanding prayer, an imploration for a safe return home to Ethiopia.




Bath School children greeting the Emperor
outside Bath Abbey 1954
(Bath in Time)



Emperor inspecting the guard on his return
trip to Bath in 1954
(Bath in Time)



Emperor on the steps of Bath Spa Hotel
with the Mayor of Bath August 1936
(Bath in Time)



In this way, the tabot became part of Fairfield house during the exile years. Throughout the five years, because of the tabot, the family were ensured of constant spiritual sustenance and strength.

In May 1941, exactly 5 years to the day of the Italian occupation, the Emperor entered Addis Ababa after the Italians were driven out with the help of the Allied forces, among them was British Colonel Orde Wingate. The tabot was returned to Ethiopia by the Empress when she joined her husband's triumphant return to Ethiopia. It is interesting to point out, that to this day this tabot has retained the exceptional title the 'exiled tabot'. The true definition of heritage is a tangible or intangible article of intrinsic value to a group of people and which its value endures through time into the future. Through the exile experience of Emperor Haile-Sellassie I and his family and the residency of the once exiled tabot, the story of Fairfield House, Bath has become part of the repertoire of the larger heritage of Ethiopia.

[1] The word Tewahedo means 'being made one' or 'unified' and signifies the belief in the natural union of the Divine and Human Natures of Christ.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By Esther Sellassie Antohin, great granddaughter of the Emperor Haile Selassie and Founder/Director of Heritage Watch Association, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

