

GREEN MOUNTAIN.

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ASCENSION Island in the South Atlantic is one of Britain's most isolated possessions, lying in mid-ocean about 750 miles north-west of St Helena, while the nearest points on the Brazilian and African coasts are respectively 1,150 and 910 miles away. Except for a few stacks, now separated from it by narrow sea channels, the island stands alone, almost triangular in outline, its 34 square miles culminating in Green Mountain's height of 2,817 feet. By comparison, the Isle of Man is 220 square miles in area, its tallest peak of Snaefell rising to 2,034 feet.

Ascension is of volcanic origin and the shapes of nearly thirty extinct craters can still be clearly seen, one surrounded by a broad rim being called the Devil's Riding School. Some are round and some oval, practically all with truncated summits sloping towards the south-east from which direction the trade wind blows. All the year round this trade wind provides a cool and refreshing breeze, and, though the island is only 8 degrees south of the Equator, the climate is remarkably pleasant. The temperature varies very little and is usually between 75 and 85 degrees round the coast.

The island is named from its discovery by a Portuguese explorer on Ascension Day 1501. Dampier's Springs are called after an Englishman who was wrecked there in 1701 but the island was uninhabited until 1815 when Napoleon arrived at St Helena. In this year the British Government garrisoned Ascension and it came under the rule of the Admiralty. Royal Marines built a fort and quarters at a point on the north-west coast, later known as Georgetown, which was used as a supply base for ships of the West African station.

At that time there was far more disease than now in those parts and fever-stricken men from these ships were sent to a sanatorium built on the side of Green Mountain. Ascension provided complete isolation and its extremely healthy position

made it ideal for recuperation. One ought to refer to the island during these years as "she" rather than "it" for as a shore station she was H.M.S. Ascension. But in 1922 the Admiralty ceased to be responsible for the island which then became a dependency of St Helena. Ascension's situation makes it an important cable link between the continents bordering the South Atlantic and for technical reasons it is also a good relay point for wireless transmissions between Britain and Canada.

There is no native population but usually there are about 150 people connected with Cable and Wireless (Holding) Ltd., living in Georgetown. This number includes thirty British officials with perhaps twenty wives and children, and 100 workers from St Helena. The tour of duty for the company's employees is normally only two years. This is largely because there are few recreations on the island though tennis courts and even a nine-hole golf course have been laid out amongst the lava rubble. Swimming is generally dangerous owing to the rolling surf but it is possible to bathe in Comfortless Cove and in Dead Man's Bay, however grim their names may sound. Communication with England, St Helena and South Africa is maintained by a monthly boat each way. In May 1947 the King and Queen, returning from South Africa in H.M.S. Vanguard, stopped about a mile off Ascension and the inhabitants came out in motor-boats from Georgetown harbour to greet the Royal Family. Ascension is a member of the Postal Union and, like many other British Colonies, has a fine set of postage stamps. Yet, with so few people to use them, they are seldom seen except in collectors' albums.

In the recent war the island served as a refuelling base on the long stretch from Brazil to West Africa for comparatively short range aircraft flying from the United States through to the eastern theatres of war. But for Ascension these aircraft and their crews would have had to be transported by sea on the devious voyage round South Africa at a time when the Mediterranean was closed to the allies. This little island, however, divided the South Atlantic into two air hops of reasonable length and within the fuel capacity of

the medium bomber fitted with additional tanks. New machines were flown from the North American factories to the Middle East in ten days and to India in a fortnight. The R.A.F. employed special ferrying crews whereas the U.S.A.A.F. planes, which greatly outnumbered them, were in most cases delivered by combat crews going out to form new squadrons. At the busiest period more than 100 of these transient aircraft were making an overnight stop at Ascension.

As in several other strategic British islands in the western hemisphere the airfield was built by U.S. Army Engineers. American officers arrived in two warships on Christmas Day 1941 to make a reconnaissance and in March 1942 a task force 1,500 strong reached the island with nearly 100 heavy vehicles, including several bulldozers which had to be put ashore by raft. Three months later the first aircraft were using Ascension. The problems of construction were entirely different from those encountered in Great Britain. The choice of a suitable area was severely limited by the rugged terrain of crater hills separated by dry watercourses, the whole surface being formed of volcanic cinders. For an airfield of similar size in the flat Vale of York or in Lincolnshire it would merely have been necessary to remove some fences and fill in a few ditches. On the other hand, in Ascension the volcanic ash itself, so readily available, provided an excellent foundation for the airfield and, owing to the prevailing wind, only one main runway was needed. Part of this coincided with "Wideawake Fair" in the south of the island, a small plain which was the breeding ground of thousands of Wideawakes or Sooty Terns (*Sterna fuliginosa*). They were soon persuaded to nest elsewhere in case they endangered aircraft by fouling their propellers, but their name is perpetuated in "Wideawake Field."

Another great advantage was the negligible rainfall, presenting no major difficulties in drainage during the layout of "Wideawake Field." In two years on and off the island with the R.A.F. Transport Command, I never knew heavy rain there, but it appears that every seven or eight years Ascension is subjected to a cloudburst, after which

grass springs up in gullies which have remained dry for many seasons. If this was Scotland one might expect to meet some older members of the rural community who were more than willing to reveal any significant meteorological events which had occurred during their youth. But, Ascension having no indigenous population and the written record being incomplete, the frequency of these cloudbursts must remain a matter of local tradition and speculation rather than of personal observation. Even so, the presence on the lower levels of the tableland of steep ravines which end in small bays may well support the idea of periodic deluges. Since rain so rarely falls except on Green Mountain, which appears to attract the occasional clouds downwards to its summit, the greatest need of the island is water supply. Just sufficient for the cable and wireless personnel and for the small garrison in Georgetown is obtained from large catchments on Green Mountain. Also near the top of Green Mountain is the only area under cultivation on the whole island and this amounts to little over ten acres. Here, there are a few springs for the farm which is the sole source of fresh vegetables and meat for the people of Georgetown. Under a British manager, half a dozen natives of St Helena work the farm which includes pigs, sheep and cattle.

Though Green Mountain is thus the main factor in human existence on Ascension by producing most of the food and water, various types of seafood are also caught, chiefly tuna, sailfish, amberjacks, squids and crabs. Schools of dolphin are often seen leaping out of the sea across the bows of the fishing vessels, but they are better to watch than to eat. Besides the shore-crabs there are land-crabs too which swarm all over this parched island and it seems strange to see them with their sidelong gait walking at ease high up the slopes of the mountain. Sea turtles come up the beaches at night, between January and May, to lay their eggs which resemble ping-pong balls. The turtles are caught and kept in ponds until, with the departure of the next ship, they begin their journey to a London market. Occasionally they are hatched in captivity and one of these, named Punch, was presented to the Regent's Park Zoo in 1945 by Mr and

Mrs Corns of the Cable and Wireless Company. Now and again, as the only exportable commodity besides turtles, small deposits of phosphates have been worked. These represent the residues accumulated from centuries of bird colonisation, organic matter leached and hardened by the tropical sun. Below Green Mountain there is nothing to hide the bare outcrop of the rock except a few castor oil plants (*Ricinus communis*) and prickly pears (*Opuntia vulgaris*) which are thinly scattered down to about 2,000 feet. The Americans solved the water shortage by bringing their own equipment for the distillation of sea water. In course of time they also started to grow fresh vegetables. These were planted, not in proper soil, for there was no spare productive ground, but in troughs of the volcanic ash irrigated by water containing the minerals required for their successful growth.

Almost complete freedom from rainclouds gives Ascension splendid visibility, always a vital consideration in operating air transport across the South Atlantic. With Ascension Island as destination an aircraft's route sheet can list no alternative, Wideawake Field being the only possible land-fall after the "point of no return" has been passed. Nor did the patrol squadrons often miss a flight by reason of the weather at their island "carrier." Mr (afterwards Sir) David Gill also chose the clear skies of Ascension in 1877 for his determinations of solar parallax, measuring the distance of the planets from neighbouring stars.

Other naturalists have visited the island from time to time, the best known being Charles Darwin. He reached the island in July 1836 on board the research ship *Beagle*. Between them the *Beagle* and another ship, the *Adventure*, spent eleven years cruising in the waters round South America, anchoring in numerous bays and inlets for the scientists to conduct their explorations. After the *Beagle* sighted Ascension, Darwin recorded in his memoirs his first unfavourable impression: "The day was clear and hot and I saw the island, not smiling with beauty, but staring with naked hideousness." He only spent five days ashore on this occasion but returned in H.M.S. *Challenger* forty

years later for a closer examination. From Darwin's investigations into the volcanic rocks of Ascension came an account which has long taken its place as one of the classic descriptions in the study of igneous phenomena. When he knew the island better, Darwin became less critical of its shortcomings. But he was never there long enough to appreciate the tremendous sense of relaxation given by the wooded uplands of Green Mountain to those who spend their days on the desert land over which it towers. In temperate countries we are accustomed to look down from the bare and craggy hills on to the green woods and valleys, but in Ascension the position is reversed and from the desolate wastes below we can only gaze upwards to the dominating form of—Green Mountain.