

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE WELLCOME INSTITUTE LIBRARY

THE NEW LAZARETTO AT SIROS (SYRA), GREECE, IN 1840*

Detention in a Lazaretto has been defined: “imprisonment with the chance of catching the plague” . . . a serious drawback to the pleasures of an Eastern tour¹

THE illustration (Fig. 1) shows the busy harbour of Siros (then called Syra) in 1837. The island lies at the centre of the Cyclades group, south-east of Athens. During the War of Greek Independence in the 1820s, it had remained neutral and had greatly benefited through increased trade and from the many refugees who settled there. The town was divided into two: the old Roman Catholic upper town, built on a conical hill and crowned by a Capuchin monastery, can be seen above a row of windmills; the new buildings of the lower town, where most of the refugee Greek traders lived, spread along the waterfront, with its bazaars and wharfs, serving the many tall-masted vessels on the right. To the east of Siros, on a similar conical hill, rises the old Greek town of Ermoupolis. On the right of the picture, in front of the church, can be seen the imposing house of Mr Richard Wilkinson, the British Consul. By virtue of its good harbour, one of the best in Greece, with a lighthouse and free port, Syra quickly gained importance in the early nineteenth century. Its population rose in three decades from a mere 5,000 to over 21,000 in 1838, and doubled again by the mid-1840s. All the trading vessels from the Levant touched there, as well as regular passenger services between such important places as Marseilles, Alexandria, and Istanbul. Since all goods and persons coming from the Near East were obliged to undergo a period of quarantine before entering Europe, such a place as this required a large, well-run lazaretto. The original lazaretto at Syra, however, left much to be desired, and it was not until late 1839 or early 1840, that an elegant and salubrious establishment was opened for the use of travellers. Fig. 2 shows the position of the building across the bay from the town and Fig. 3 shows the arcade and north-east corner as seen from the inner courtyard.

The word “lazar” in English derives from the sick beggar Lazarus of the New Testament story (Luke, XVII, 20), and has been in use since the Middle Ages to describe a sick or poor person, especially the “unclean” leper. Such people were cared for in isolation in a lazar-cote, or lazar-house, which, in the course of time, changed to the Italian “lazzaretto” with the specialized meaning of a quarantine establishment for suspected plague cases. It was in such a place that travellers from the East were detained. In certain cases, it was possible to pass the quarantine period on board ship,

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¹ Murray's *Hand-book for travellers in Greece*, new ed., London, 1854, p. 13.

but usually the traveller was confined in the official lazaretto. This may have been nothing more than an old hulk moored apart from the general shipping, but the better establishments were built on lines similar to a monastery or prison – an isolated community behind a high wall.

Lazarettos were first established in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, subsequently at all trading ports along the European Mediterranean seaboard, and also round the coasts of Great Britain. The plague, an endemic disease in the Ottoman Empire, was held to be highly contagious. For this reason, both people and goods coming from that area were isolated for a period of quarantine in a lazaretto before being allowed to continue their journeys. Merchandise and personal possessions were purified by constant airing, frequent turning, and fumigation. Certain items, such as cotton, straw, feathers, and, above all, paper, were considered to be important sources of infection. Books and artists' sketches were hung up to air and outgoing letters disinfected in various ways – by dipping them in vinegar, for instance, or by holding them in tongs over sulphur fumes. They were often slit by a blade to ensure that the sterilizing effect went right through. Then a cachet, or authorized stamp, was affixed to show that disinfection had been carried out. The length of confinement for travellers depended on whether they had come from a place where the plague was raging, or had entered "clean". Their stay might be for only a few days, or as much as the full "quarantine" (forty days).

The basic plan of a lazaretto comprised a series of rooms built in a square with an arcade and a central courtyard or garden, rather like cloisters, allowing both free circulation of air and protection from rain. The detainees were supposed to expose themselves and their clothes to the air every day, but the rooms were arranged in such a way as to keep each party separate, and a guardian, or guardians, according to the numbers involved, assigned to enforce these measures. At strategic points, such as at the ends of the single-storey rows, there were tower blocks where, as in a prison camp, the whole area could be watched over by the governor and guards. The governor himself usually occupied upper rooms. Sometimes there were rooms over the "cells", which were used as warehouses for merchandise under quarantine. In a well-planned establishment there would also be a hospital with a resident doctor; a chapel and burial-ground with a chaplain; guards to enforce the quarantine regulations and to correct unruly behaviour from the lower classes, soldiery, or sailors bored by their confinement; a prison for their correction; and the essential washing facilities and disinfection areas. A locanda, or eating-house, where food could be prepared and furniture hired, might also be found within the compound, or just outside it. For recreation there were gardens and a parlatorio (reception room), where visitors could be seen and spoken to behind a wire lattice. It might also be possible to go for a row in the harbour.

The restricted life in a lazaretto must indeed have been very tedious for those with few personal resources, and a verminous room, sheer misery. Journeys to the East, however, were seldom made by idle tourists, and travellers were admonished: "should you . . . be thinking of perpetrating a book or . . . to write up your journal . . . there is no place equal to the Lazarett. By thus rationally employing yourself, instead of grumbling at a necessary confinement, each succeeding day will bring with it fresh

pleasure, rendered still more acceptable from the conviction that it has not been time entirely thrown away.”² The travellers were, in the main, commercial businessmen and traders, scientists, archaeologists, or landscape painters. Such people could use the time to their advantage. The naturalist Hugh Edwin Strickland (1811–53), while staying in the first lazaretto (a fishing boat) at the Piraeus in 1835, added to his collection of shells. “I generally began the day with a bug-hunt”, he said; “I then took the old guardiano in the boat, and used to pull to one of the square piers built by Themistocles at the entrance of the harbour; there I landed, and sent the old man to catch echini and limpets for *his* breakfast while I took a swim in the crystal wave, and often brought home a rich harvest of conchology.”³ Charles Fellows (1799–1860), a traveller and archaeologist, with his young artist assistant George Scharf *jr* (1820–95), after four months of continuous travel on horseback, sleeping either in their own tent or in the public “khan” or inn of the Levant, were glad to be settled in the comparative comfort of the new lazaretto at Syra in June 1840. They also profited from this enforced respite; Fellows wrote up his notes, put his thoughts in order, and began preparing the material for the book he was to write; Scharf inked-in his sketches and coloured the views that were to illustrate the book. Scharf told how, in the evening, “we wandered to the rocks on the shore, but with that exception, never left our room during daylight. The full moon induced us to sit in the little square before our row of houses till ten or eleven o’clock. The last week of our confinement was relieved by the arrival of a German party, whose nightly concerts afforded us much gratification.”⁴ Scharf also described the guardian in charge of them. He was “a very entertaining fellow, who spoke Greek and knew only a very limited number of Italian and English words, but his pantomimic gestures were doubly expressive and amusing”. He “keeps off bystanders at the distance of his wand’s end.” However, when he presented himself – presumably for payment – after their release (and, of course, his own), the guardian was dressed “in a remarkably neat and gay Greek costume, which was a very great contrast to the shabby rags which are sported in the Lazaretto.”

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Greece formed part of the Ottoman Empire, which extended along the whole of the southern and eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean and inland, northwards, to include the Balkans and Hungary. In 1828, Greece became an independent nation and introduced quarantine laws imposing detention in a lazaretto on anyone arriving from Turkish territories. Greece was, however, still considered to be part of the Levant by the rest of Europe. Travellers returning home via that country had, therefore, to submit to a second period of quarantine – for instance, at Trieste or Malta. The first Greek lazarettos were built at Hydra, Spezzia, Ægina, and Syra. When Athens became the seat of government in 1834, a spacious new establishment was built behind the custom-house at the port of the Piraeus, replacing the wretched fishing boat in which Strickland had been confined. Although the Piraeus eventually took the trade away from Syra, from the late 1830s

² T. H. Usborne, *A new guide to the Levant*, . . . London, 1840, pp. 83–84.

³ Sir William Jardine, *Memoirs of Hugh Edwin Strickland*, London, 1858, p. cxlii.

⁴ MS. diary in the British Library; by courtesy of the British Library Board. Scharf (later Sir George) became the first director of the National Portrait Gallery. He also accompanied Fellows on the Second Xanthian Expedition to Turkey in 1843–44.

and for the next thirty or forty years Syra was “the great emporium”, “the Liverpool of modern regenerated Greece”.⁵

The first lazaretto at Syra, built near the harbour, seems to have been very badly constructed and by the late 1830s had, in fact, become notorious for the dreadful conditions under which the unfortunate traveller was housed. John Carne (1789–1844), traveller and artist, gave the following account of it in 1837:

The most wretched of the houses of Syra would have been perfect comfort compared to the interior of the lazaretto, which is a disgrace to Syra, and a disgrace to England in permitting it to exist even a day longer. The walls rested on the naked rock: the floors were of rock, only a boarding raised in one part, four feet above the floor, and on this the beds were laid:⁶ the rats ran in and out by dozens; the whole place swarmed with them; and every thing, provisions, clothes, sketches, were slung up to the roof for safety from their inroads. When it rained, . . . it poured without mercy: the inmates were half drowned. . . . The company within was in keeping with the accommodations; certainly such a horde of dirty ruffians, with an exception or two, never before was seen.⁷

The following year, in August 1838, at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, this lazaretto at Syra was singled out by Dr John Bowring (1792–1872) as an example of the dangers travellers were subjected to in the name of health regulations. Bowring had been visiting the Levant on behalf of the government to inquire into furthering trade relations and had especially looked into the matter of quarantine regulations and establishments. He expressed himself forcibly on the subject of unhealthy lazarettos in general, and claimed that frequently people entered such places in perfect health, but, while undergoing quarantine, contracted the plague or other diseases such as dysentery, and might even die as a result. “In the Lazzaret at Syra”, he particularized, “where the exactions are monstrous, and where lately there was not even a water-proof roof to shelter the invalid, I have seen a person come out of his imprisonment having had his garments devoured by rats, and his person disfigured by multitudinous vermin.”⁸

The subject of quarantine, often discussed in travellers’ accounts, was certainly one to be considered before setting out, as both comfort and expense were involved. Murray’s *Handbook*, that indispensable guide for all travellers, recommended that “Hydra has one of the best Lazarettos in Greece. It is a spacious new building. . . . The rooms are good, well arranged, clean, and well ventilated. . . . The Lazaretto at Egina is also good . . . and provisions much cheaper than at Hydra.”⁹ On the other hand, quoting “B” (possibly Bowring), it cautioned: “The Lazaretto at Syra is abominable, and ought by all means to be avoided.”

The British Consul at Syra, Mr Richard Wilkinson, was well aware of the lamentable state of the establishment, which clearly could not be allowed to continue. It was, indeed, urgent that the uncomfortable, unhygienic, and inadequate buildings be

⁵ W. R. Wilde, *Narrative of a voyage to Maderia* . . . , Dublin, 1840, vol. 2, p. 436. William Robert Wills Wilde (later Sir William) (1815–76) was a surgeon of Dublin and an Irish antiquary. He was the father of Oscar Wilde.

⁶ The same arrangement as rooms in a Turkish *khan* or inn, used for overnight stays, each occupant supplying his own furnishings and bedding and providing his own meals.

⁷ John Carne, *Syria, the Holy Land, Asia Minor*, . . . , London, [1836–38], pt 2 [1837], p. 37.

⁸ John Bowring, *Observations on the oriental plague and on quarantine*, . . . , Edinburgh, 1813, p. 13. Bowring (later Sir John) was a physician, traveller, and linguist.

⁹ Murray’s *Hand-book for travellers in the Ionian sands, Greece, Turkey*, . . . , London, 1840, p. 16.

replaced by a new structure, worthy of the rising town with its increased traffic and prosperity. In a letter dated 10 October 1838, Wilkinson affirmed: "The Lazaretto of Syra is in a very wretched condition; some repairs have lately been made, and it is the intention of the Government to build a new one on the other side of the harbour opposite the town."¹⁰ He continued, however, with the proviso: "The plan has been made and approved; but the financial situation of the Greek Treasury is such, that it may be some time before this very necessary building is erected." Nevertheless, on 9 April 1839, the foundation stone was laid with due ceremony, the king¹¹ having supplied substantial funds.

The importance of this lazaretto may be judged by considering the amount of other necessary building that must have been going on in the town, to keep pace with its rapid expansion. That the king provided money for it is no less remarkable. It must be remembered that Athens only became the capital city of Greece in 1834 and was still being laid out, the old Turkish town having been torn down. The Piraeus was still hardly more than a landing-place with a stand for carriages to make the five-mile journey to the capital. The new king was very unpopular with the people and much criticized over the building of his large palace (now the Parliament Building), begun in 1836, though not finished until late in 1843. By helping the mainly Roman Catholic island of Syra in its project, this Roman Catholic monarch may have sought an opportunity of gaining support for himself, as well as encouraging commercial enterprise. In this he was certainly justified; within a comparatively short time, the customs duties collected at Syra formed a sizeable part of the Greek revenue. But Wilde, in condemning the expenditure of £150,000 on the royal palace, said: "Where . . . has this money come from? Perhaps a solution to this query may be found by an examination of the items in the expenditure of the loan granted by England, France, and Russia to regenerate the exchequer of this bankrupt kingdom."¹² This same answer may well apply to the actual source of the funds for the Syra lazaretto, and England, therefore, might have been, after all, indirectly involved in this enterprise and her "disgrace", as Carne put it, exonerated.

Fellows and Scharf were going to stay in Athens on their way home from Turkey. Significantly they passed the two-week quarantine period in the new lazaretto at Syra rather than the one at Piraeus. Fellows may have learned of the change at Syra through his acquaintance with the Vice-Consul at Rhodes, who was Richard Wilkinson's brother. On his arrival, Fellows wrote a letter dated 5 June 1840 to his publisher John Murray *jr*. There are two copies of this letter, one on flimsy paper, slit through in several places, showing that it passed disinfection unopened. On it there is the Syra cachet with an open wreath of leaves of the type used throughout the 1840s.¹³ Before describing his travels and discoveries, Fellows wrote: "Quarantine and the existence of a regular post marks the verge of our European world, . . . No instance of plague has occurred in the whole of Turkey during the last 2 years. Therefore our

¹⁰ In Arthur T. Holroyd, *The quarantine laws*, . . . , London, 1839, p. 45.

¹¹ King Otho (1815–67), second son of King Ludwig I of Bavaria; first king of Greece, 1832–62.

¹² Wilde, *op. cit.*, note 5 above, vol. 2, p. 444.

¹³ The leaves may be olive, the symbol of peace and a tree grown on the island, or laurel, the classical symbol of honour. When King Otho visited Syra in October 1840, the streets were strewn with laurel, and children carried laurel branches.

detention is but 14 days here, and probably only a day or two at Trieste. I believe none of our party would have regretted had it been longer, for we have much occupation in threshing out the corn of our late abundant harvest [the results of his explorations].¹⁴ He obviously found the place both comfortable and clean, especially important as he suffered dreadfully from insect attacks.

Fellows, a wealthy and influential man, would certainly have occupied the best rooms available. Scharf gave a description of them and filled in some details: "The apartments are a series of low rooms with a door, windows and chimney, about twelve in a row, each door numbered and turned in various directions. We had fortunately a very comfortable one assigned to us with a guardian to watch us and keep us from touching other people. Without him we are not permitted to stir and in his absence are tied or locked in our room." The rooms were empty to facilitate fumigation, but, like most travellers, they had their own beds with them. Additional furniture could be hired and meals served from the adjoining locanda; Galton listed the charges.¹⁵

At the beginning of September 1840, Francis Galton, with two young friends, was quarantined at the new lazaretto on his way home from a rapid tour of Vienna, Istanbul, and Smyrna, before entering Trinity College, Cambridge. He stated that the quarantine buildings enclosed a large square, in the centre of which stood an ancient altar, recently found at Tinos, a nearby island. His rooms "opened at the back into a cheerful covered balcony which looked on the sea". This was one of the twelve between the two end towers. He described the guardian with the wand, but added: "Violation of quarantine is a very serious offence. A soldier would shoot a person without mercy . . . if that appeared to be the only way of preventing it". However, his ten days' rest at Syra "was by no means ungrateful. I made myself occupation, and they passed pleasantly". When it was time for giving "pratique", the medical officer lined them up and looked at their tongues, then told them to copy him, "whereupon he clapped himself sharply under the left armpit with his right hand, and under the right armpit with his left hand. Similarly on the left and right groins. This was to prove that none of the glandular swellings . . . of 'bubonic' plague were there . . . Then . . . he shook each of us cordially by the hand, and we were freed."¹⁶

¹⁴ I wish to thank John Murray Ltd for kind permission to quote Fellows's letter. John Murray *jr* (1808–92) was the son of John Murray, founder of the publishing house. Fellows (later Sir Charles) discovered thirteen ancient cities in south-west Turkey and organized two expeditions to Lycia to bring the "Xanthian Marbles" to the British Museum.

¹⁵ Francis Galton, MS. diary of a holiday in 1840; in University College London (Galton Papers 66).

	Dr.	Lep.	
Room & Guardian [for a 10-day stay]	52		[in 1838 the cost was 4½ Dr. a day]
Bed Table Chair & Candlestick	13	50	
Candles 3		75	
Water 3 jars		30	
Mending Breeches	1	50	
— Boots 2 p.		5 50	
Washing		2	
Food 5½ Dr. per day [=4/-]	[55]		

The exchange was about 28 Drachmas=£1; 50 Lephta=5d.

¹⁶ Sir Francis Galton, *Memoirs of my life*, London, 1908, pp. 53–54. Galton (1822–1911), founder of the science of eugenics, was the cousin of Charles Darwin. His friends were a Dr Russell (aged twenty), and William Bowman (1816–92), knighted in 1884, who became the first president of the Ophthalmic Society.

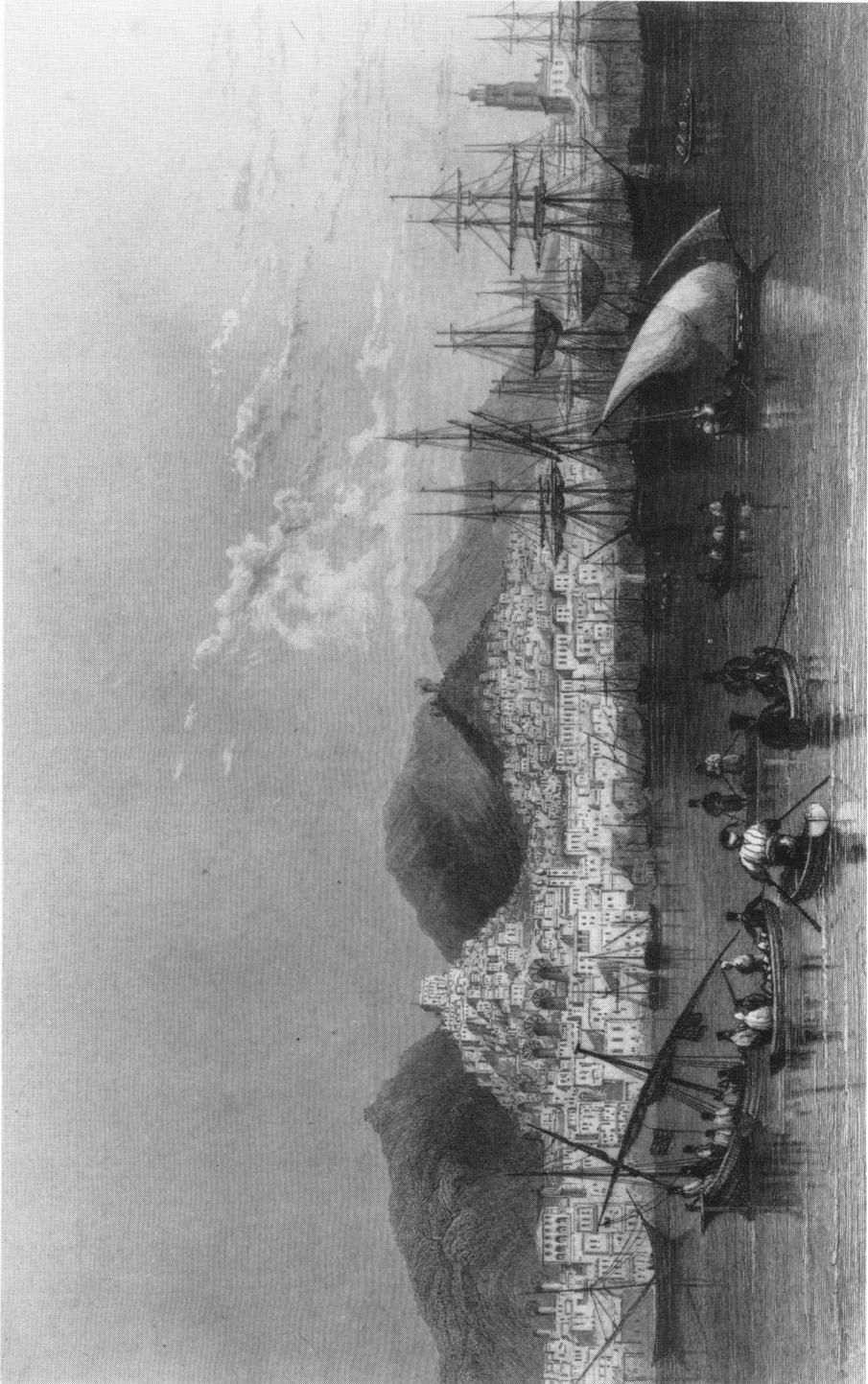


Figure 1. Syra in 1837. The old town of Syra is shown on the hill on the left; the Greek town, Ermoupolis, is on the hill on the right; Mr Richard Wilkinson's house is seen on the far right, in front of the church. (Engraving in the Wellcome Institute Library, London.)

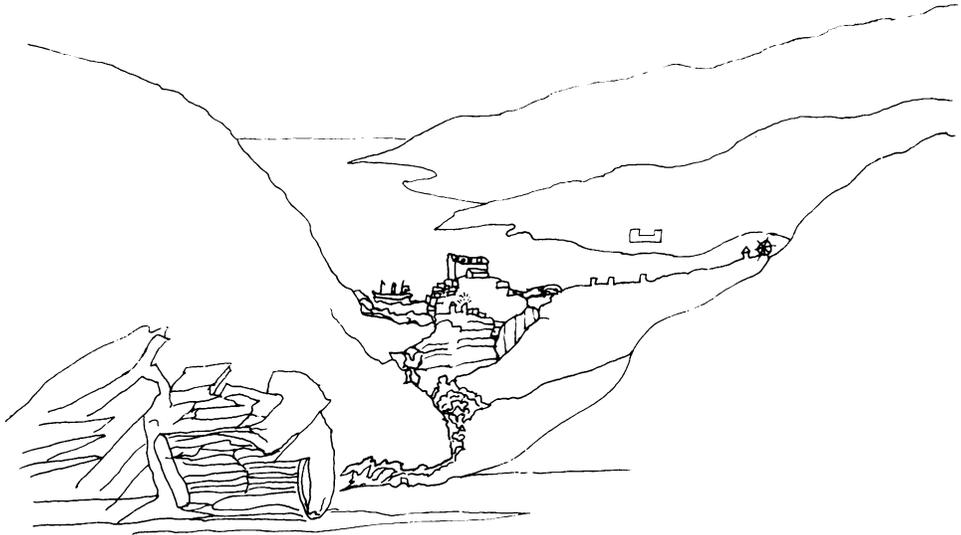


Figure 2. View from hill above Syra, 1840. The lazaretto is shown across the bay on the right.

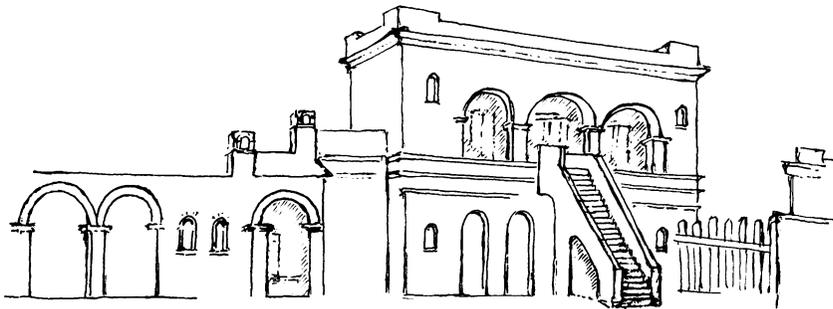


Figure 3. Arcade and north-east corner of the lazaretto from the courtyard, 1840.

(Figures 2 and 3 are redrawn from sketches in Francis Galton's MS. diary of a holiday in 1840, pp. 93, 101. University College London, Galton Papers 66. Reproduced by kind permission of the Librarian.)

A week later, on 21 September 1840, the Jewish philanthropist Moses Montefiore (1784–1885) and his party arrived at the quarantine station at Syra from Alexandria. Although they had arrived earlier in the day, a sick person on board had delayed their landing at the lazaretto until after dark, by which time the staff had retired and the new arrivals (about a dozen persons) were left to pass the night in “two miserably dark rooms”. Next day, however, thanks to the intervention of the British Consul’s son-in-law, the Montefiore party were housed in “apartments set aside for noblemen . . . very comfortable rooms, beautifully situated, commanding a fine view of the town and port”.¹⁷ His secretary, the linguist, Dr Louis Loewe, called them only “the best apartments”.¹⁸ These were most likely also to have been in the row of twelve rooms described above. The whole party had performed *spoglio* on the first day, which enabled them to leave a few days earlier than otherwise, though, in the event, they were so comfortable they stayed on. *Spoglio* consisted in having a bath and re-dressing in a complete new outfit that had been fumigated for half-an-hour. Galton did this to leave early from his second quarantine at Trieste, but Fellows and Scharf do not seem to have availed themselves of this practice at either lazaretto.

It was just over a year from the laying of the foundation stone, when these travellers spent their quarantine in the new establishment. A complex as large as a lazaretto would naturally take some time to complete, and Montefiore’s initial experience and the fact that the three young men seem to have stayed in the same block as their richer and more important compatriots suggests that the building was still unfinished. Nevertheless, there certainly was the elegant courtyard with its decorative sculpture closed on the shore side by the row of rooms already described. Galton’s sketch (Fig. 3) shows the graceful façade and a marble staircase at the north-east corner. These surely led to the superintendent’s apartments and reception rooms for distinguished visitors, possibly even the king himself when he came to the island at the beginning of October to celebrate his name-day. The staircase giving access directly to the upper storey would ensure a certain protection from possible foul air at ground level and was, therefore, practical as well as imposing. Montefiore had found the edifice sufficiently worthy of distinction to have it illuminated at his own expense in honour of King Otho’s visit.¹⁹

The new lazaretto at Syra was finally built to a high standard, which it maintained throughout the following decades until, at the end of the nineteenth century, lazarettos for the detention of travellers from the East had become obsolete. Osborne, in his *Guide*, published in September 1840, exclaimed: “I intend to pass my next quarantine there, should I chance to find myself once more rambling about the Levant”.²⁰ He had breakfasted with friends in the courtyard “keeping of course at a very respectable distance from them, and eating off a separate table”. The friends were very content as “owing to the indulgence of Mr. Wilkinson” they had been able to amuse themselves by rowing round the neighbouring uninhabited islands to shoot rabbits. On receipt of

¹⁷ Sir Moses Montefiore, *Diaries of Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore*, . . . , edited by Louis Loewe, London, 1850, vol. 1, p. 263. Moses Haim Montefiore was knighted in 1846.

¹⁸ Louis Loewe, *The Damascus affair. Diary . . . July–November 1840*, Ramsgate, 1940, p. 39. Loewe (1809–88; PhD Berlin) accompanied Sir Moses on his travels, 1839–74.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁰ Osborne, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 83.

Illustrations from the Wellcome Institute Library

Fellows's more up-to-date information, the excellent conditions in the new buildings were recognized in Murray's *Hand-book*, published in August 1840, with the statement: "The Lazaretto has lately become one of the best in the Levant",²¹ thus correcting the earlier condemnation. The new edition of 1854 gave Syra pride of place in the recommended list: "It will be useful for [travellers] to remember that the best Lazarettos in the Levant are those of Syra, Piraeus, Corfu and Malta".²²

²¹ Murray, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, p. 375.

²² Murray, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, p. 14.