

Australia's Barossa Valley wine region and Penang – an interesting connection



Face of the Penangite to whom the Barossa Valley owes its name.

There is an interesting but little-known historical connection between the Barossa Valley in South Australia and Penang in Malaysia. The world famous Barossa Valley wine region owes its name to a Penangite.

Two and a third centuries ago, just before the start of the British presence in Penang in 1786, Francis Light the colonial administrator and founder of Georgetown had a second child with his wife Martina Rozells. This son, William Light, was born on 27 April 1786 just up the coast in Kuala Kedah near today's Alor Setar, where Francis Light had established a trading post under an arrangement with the Sultan of Kedah. It was in August of that same year and just four months after the birth of William that Francis Light first landed in Penang and launched Britain's trading and colonial presence here.

Francis Light brought his wife and two children over from Kuala Kedah to Penang and so this is where William grew up. At the age of six, however, William Light was shipped off in 1792 to England to be educated. His schooling ended quite early because he opted for a military career, volunteering there to join the Navy at age 13 and subsequently entering the Army through buying himself a commission at age 22. He rose through the officer ranks and became a colonel after seeing service in a number of places which included England, the Mediterranean region and India. During his career he took part in Europe in the Wars against Napoleon of France, including the Peninsular War in Spain.

Francis Light, William's father, died in Penang in 1794 two years after William left for England.

In 1835 at the age of 49 William was appointed as the first Surveyor General of the newly founded British colony of South Australia. It is well documented that he selected a site in 1836 and laid out the beginnings of the colony's capital city, Adelaide. He is therefore widely recognised as the founder of Adelaide. What is little recognised, however, is his specific connection with the world-famous Barossa Valley.

In 1837 William Light surveyed a range of hills some 50 km to the north east of Adelaide. He was struck with its similarities to a rocky ridge along the coast near the port of Cadiz in southern Spain, that had been the site of a fierce and bloody battle, which had occurred while he was serving with the British forces in Spain during the Peninsular War campaign. That battle, in which Spanish and British forces were victorious over French forces, but which achieved very little, took place around a rocky ridge which the British referred to as Barrosa Hill, from the name of the local area. The battle, in which many thousand soldiers of several nationalities died, became known and is still known as the Battle of Barrosa. It took place on 5 March 1811 when William Light was 25. The name Barrosa in Spanish derives probably from the muddy-red colour of the low cliffs between the nearby beach and the summit of the ridge (*barrosa* in Spanish meaning muddy or muddy-red in colour).

The memory of that battle and its topography remained vividly in William's mind some 26 years later and he was motivated to name those hills in South Australia the Barrosa Ranges in honour of the Battle of Barrosa and the British and Spanish victory over the French in 1811. However, the name was subsequently registered incorrectly as "Barossa", apparently due to an administrative error in transcribing the name "Barrosa". The adjacent valley which runs along the south west flank of these hills and where the wine is now produced subsequently adopted the already misspelt version of the name: Barossa.

William Light died in Adelaide in 1839, two years after naming the hills.

It is hard to understand why this connection between Penang and the Barossa Valley is not more widely recognised in Penang or in the Barossa region itself. The source of the Barossa name is clearly accepted, together with William Light's role in this. The connecting link to Light as an original Penangite seems, however, to have been overlooked – perhaps surprising in view of Penang's twinning with Adelaide.

5 March 2011, the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Barrosa, the key event in history to which the Barossa Valley owes its name, passed apparently without note in Penang or Adelaide or in the international wine trade.

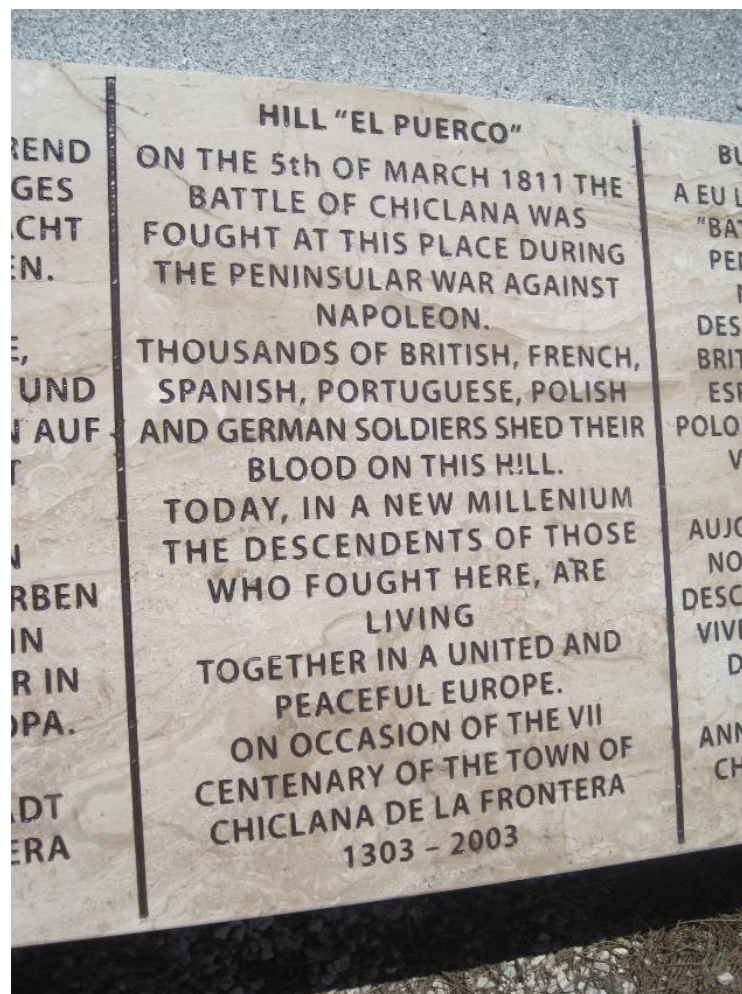


Barossa Ranges today – reminding Light in 1837 of Barrosa Hill and the 1811 battle in Spain.

Today the area around the battle site in Spain, some 20km south-east of Cadiz, is largely ruined by uncontrolled tourist-oriented property development. However, the very top of the hill remains relatively undeveloped and there is a new monument, erected in 2003, which describes how thousands of British, Spanish, Portuguese, French and German soldiers lost their lives in this one event.

The battle was originally known as the Battle of Barrosa, in British military history sources, but is now often in Spain known as the Battle of Chiclana, referring to Chiclana (Chiclana de la Frontera, in full), the nearest town of any size. The Barrosa hill or ridge was so named at the time by the British from the name of the local area and the beach; this name is still used and seen today in the residential areas in that vicinity. The hill subsequently also acquired the name of Cerro del Puerco (meaning hog hill or pig hill) and has recently been more elegantly renamed Loma de Sancti Petri, or Saint Peter's Hill.

The monument placed on the hill in 2003 carries a multilingual text in several languages and the English panel on it is shown below:



The 2003 memorial on the Barrosa hilltop

In 2019 another memorial was erected nearby by the Royal Irish Regiment, successor to the Royal Irish Fusiliers, one of whose forerunner regiments, the 87th Regiment of Foot, was among the British contingent that fought in the Battle of Barrosa. That regiment distinguished itself particularly in the battle by some heroic actions in capturing a French regimental eagle (a standard, equivalent to a regimental flag).



The 2019 memorial erected by the Royal Irish Regiment

The Royal Irish Regiment in fact has a history going back to 1689, when one of its forerunner regiments, the 27th Regiment of Foot, was raised in Enniskillen (in today's northern Ireland).

Suggestions in some Australian sources that *barrosa* means "hill of roses" in Spanish are totally mistaken. The word *barrosa* just means muddy and has nothing to do with roses – although it might have been nice to have a romantic association like that. Unfortunately Barrosa was and is, even more so now, an unattractive place with a bloody history.

The image at the start of this article is from the statue made in England and sent to Penang in the 19th century to commemorate Francis Light. The statue now stands inside Fort Cornwallis. Since no suitable image of the deceased Francis Light was available to the sculptor in England, the face was modelled on the features of his surviving son William, the subject of this note.

Australian visitors to Penang ought perhaps to be told that they can see the ultimate source of the name of their beloved Barossa Valley in the face on this statue inside Fort Cornwallis.

This article was originally published by me in the November 2010 Penang Club Magazine and subsequently in 2011 in the Penang Heritage Trust Newsletter. It has here been updated for the more recent research that reveals that William Light was not personally present in 1811 at the battle of Barrosa, as was traditionally believed, but was elsewhere in Spain at the time, accompanying the British Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of Wellington. It is now understood that William Light applied the name Barrosa to those similar-looking hills near Adelaide 26 years later to commemorate the Battle and the British-Spanish victory in it over the French, but particularly to commemorate his close friend, commander of the British forces in the Battle, Lieutenant General Thomas Graham.

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