



# Solid as a Rock?

## Britain and Gibraltar

**A** SERIES OF invaders – Berbers, Moors and Spanish – readily appreciated the strategic and trading value of Gibraltar, located at the very entrance to the Mediterranean. In 1704, an Anglo-Dutch force seized this prominent rocky outcrop and accompanying low-lying isthmus as part of the War of the Spanish Succession.

While the war had as its origins a dispute over who would succeed the childless Charles II to the Spanish Empire, the conflict quickly spread to include political and economic interests across continental Europe and as far as the Americas. Victory in the straits of Gibraltar led to a 300-year association with Britain. The local Spanish community, some

4,000, was forced to flee and later settled in the neighbouring mainland area of San Roque.

British occupation of Gibraltar was further cemented by the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht and under Article X, Spain was invested with “first refusal” should Britain ever decide to abandon it. The treaty also avoided the partition of Spain, preserved the Spanish Empire in the Americas, granted Britain slave trading rights in the West Indies and allowed the British to retain ownership of Minorca.

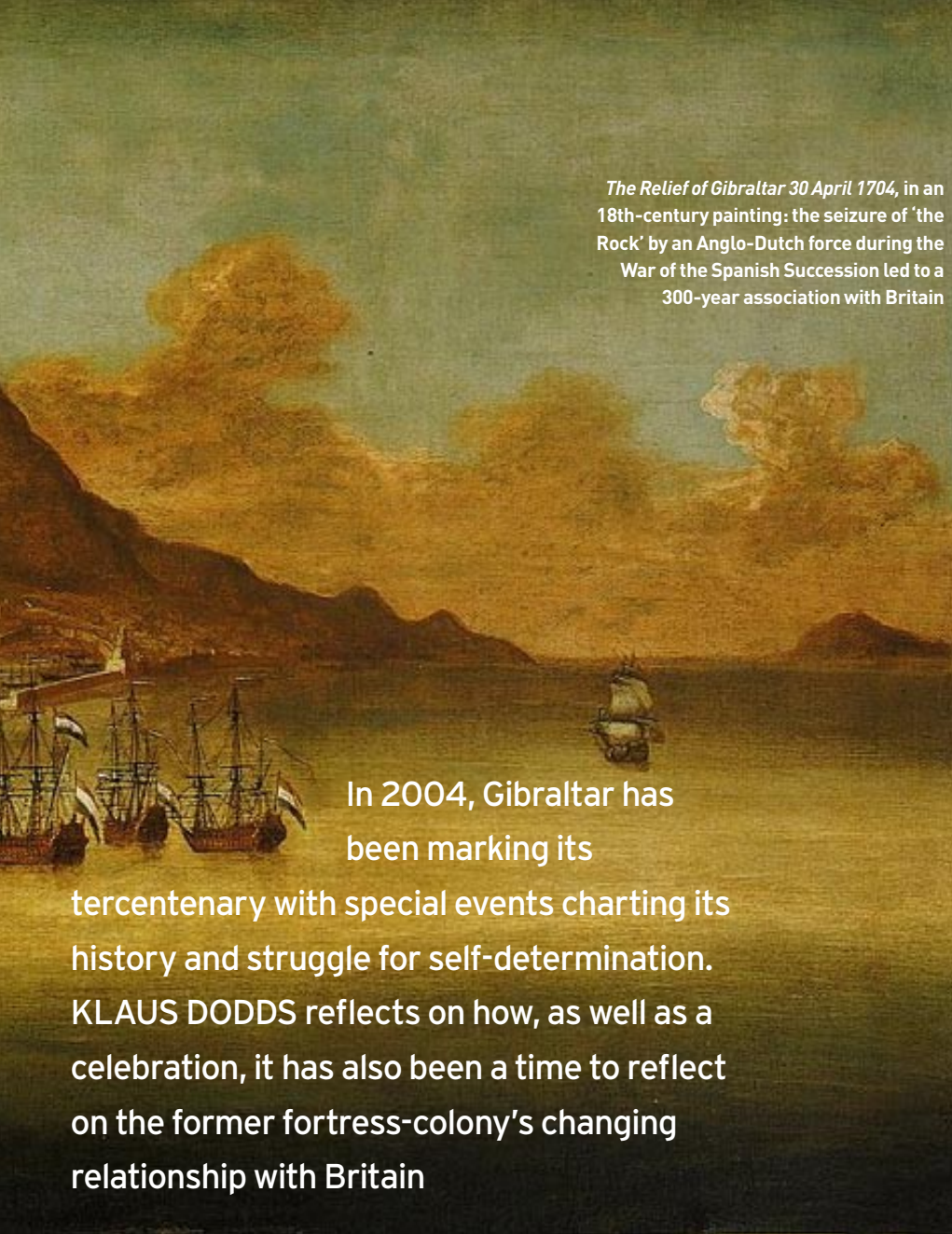
### Fortress or colony?

Gibraltar became a British naval fortress and was important symbolically as a representation of an unwillingness to bend to threats by rival imperial powers such as Spain and France. As such the needs of the fortress-colony were

likely to be considered of far greater importance than the civilian population. In the 18th and 19th centuries, however, a settler population did become established as the British developed a trading post alongside the garrison. By 1753, the civilian community was composed of 597 Genoese, 575 Jews and 351 British inhabitants. The latter were mainly merchants who recognised the trading opportunities in Iberia, North Africa and also further eastwards into the Mediterranean.

Migrants from the countries and regions bordering the Mediterranean helped to increase numbers, and by the end of the 18th century the civilian population numbered some 10,000 in addition to 7,000 British soldiers. European and North African Jewry, alongside emigres from the predominantly

*The Relief of Gibraltar 30 April 1704, in an 18th-century painting: the seizure of 'the Rock' by an Anglo-Dutch force during the War of the Spanish Succession led to a 300-year association with Britain*



In 2004, Gibraltar has been marking its

tercentenary with special events charting its history and struggle for self-determination. KLAUS DODDS reflects on how, as well as a celebration, it has also been a time to reflect on the former fortress-colony's changing relationship with Britain

Catholic communities of Malta, Portugal and the Italian port city of Genoa, enriched the civilian community. As these demographic flows increased, the multi-cultural population of Gibraltar was further cross-fertilised by the neighbouring Spanish community. The proximity of churches, synagogues and mosques is just one illustration of this enduring cultural-religious hybridity. A census of 1777 revealed there were 3,201 inhabitants including Genoese, British, Irish, Portuguese, French and Minorcans. Although the number of inhabitants on "the Rock" continued to expand, their political and legal standing depended on individual governors and their commitment to civilian development.

The long-term settlement of Gibraltar was, however, never inevitable as successive Spanish sieges placed the British forces under considerable pressure especially between 1779–83. Gibraltar was, in the words of the local historian and former Gibraltar archivist Tommy Finlayson, unquestionably a fortress

first and a colony second in the post-1704 era. Nineteenth century conflicts, such as the Battle of Trafalgar (1805), cemented the view that Gibraltar's primary function was to service the

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needs of the Royal Navy as it became embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars.

It was in the aftermath of Anglo-Franco conflict and the despatch of Napoleon to the distant British island colony of Saint Helena, that Gibraltar was, as many historians believe, officially declared a colony in 1830. However, while the 1830 Charter of Justice may have given Gibraltar a Supreme Court of Justice and independent civil judiciary, it fell short of

explicitly citing wider constitutional change. A decade later, the then Governor of the Colony, Sir Robert Gardiner, argued that the civilian community's welfare should be subsumed once more under the needs of the British military. The Governor tried to ban the Rock's merchants and landowners publicly, petitioning to the Secretary of State for the Colonies for an enquiry into administration in 1852. While this petition was stifled, Gardiner was recalled to Britain in 1855, such was the state of local unease.

### Struggle for civil rights

The difficulties for Gibraltarians becomes readily apparent when one considers how long it took for the colony to develop a civil infrastructure let alone democratic representation. In the case of the former, the outbreak of disease provoked urgent innovation. As with metropolitan Britain, an outbreak of cholera in the mid-19th century led to the creation of a new Sanitary Commission, which was charged with improving public health.

Civilian administration was finally augmented above and beyond the realm of law and order. An 1889 ordinance helped to sharpen rights to residency, by highlighting the importance of native-born individuals. It was not until 1921 that the first elections were held for a City Council in Gibraltar and the election of such a body effectively replaced the Sanitary Commission.

According to the Gibraltarian historian and political figure Joseph Garcia, the civilian population of 18,000 had been "rewarded" for its loyalty during the First World War. But Gibraltar's civil administration still lagged far behind the military priorities of the imperial centre. It had taken over 200 years for the needs of the civilian population even to be recognised in any meaningful manner.

The outbreak of the Second World War put paid to those advances in civilian governance. In the face of feared German bombing raids, 16,000 civilians were evacuated: many were sent to Britain, while others went to the British colony of Jamaica and the island of Madeira. For those sent to London, experience of the Blitz helped to strengthen their emotional connections to the mother country (although many evacuees complained of poor housing and racism by host communities). As such it helped to cement a view of a separate Gibraltarian identity, which was not

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intrinsically English. By 1942, a largely civilian-free Gibraltar was used as a base from which Operation Torch was launched by the British as part of their North African campaign against German forces. Spanish neutrality throughout the Second World War ensured that Gibraltar was never attacked from the north. This was a welcome relief to British military planners given that Nazi Germany had assisted General Franco during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. But it also carried with it a political price, as speculation was rife in Gibraltar that the British had even considered giving over the colony to Spain in the aftermath of conflict.

The plight of the remaining residents and evacuees alike caused much concern and

consternation. In December 1942, the Association for the Advancement of Civil Rights (AACR) in Gibraltar was created under the leadership of Albert Risso. With the help of a young lawyer called Joshua Hassan, it was designed to protect the interests of the Gibraltarians regardless of their wartime location. This civil rights-based organisation was inspired by an anti-colonial ideology. In elections for a City Council in July 1945, the AACR won all seven contested seats and for the first time in the history of Gibraltar, elected members outnumbered those nominated. The ending of the Second World War, therefore, ushered in a new democratic and constitutional era for the people of Gibraltar.

Developing a civil society in Gibraltar carried political risks, however. If Gibraltar developed a constitution and stronger local political element then it would help to strengthen British attachments. For the Spanish, these kinds of developments were considered very alarming. General Franco lambasted the 1950 Constitution for Gibraltar as “pseudo” and he continued to campaign for the recovery of the colony.

#### Loyal Gibraltar

Arguably, the key moment for post-war Anglo-Spanish relations and the question of Gibraltar was the 1954 Royal Tour when Elizabeth II’s



Loyal Gibraltar: Queen Elizabeth inspects North Fort in 1954

visit provided an opportunity for Gibraltar’s residents to demonstrate their loyalty to Britain. Spanish newspapers, with the tacit support of the Spanish Foreign Ministry, condemned the visit and even speculated that Spanish radicals might plan disruptive action during the royal tour. For many in the colony, it was perhaps the first time that they had been

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so conscious of the border with Spain, as British authorities strictly controlled movement in the run-up to the Queen’s visit.

“Loyal Gibraltar” was a major policy headache for British diplomats. In the 1960s a burst of activity in the United Nations ensured that Gibraltar’s colonial status was internationalised. With some skilful lobbying from Spain, the position of Gibraltar was raised in the C24 Decolonisation Committee, which meant that newly decolonised states alongside other post-colonial countries could review and question Britain’s relationship to



Dual identity: The Gibraltar flag and Union Jack



“British” bobbies guard the border with Spain

the colony. Britain and Gibraltar were forced onto the defensive and in September 1963, two of Gibraltar’s leading political figures, Joshua Hassan and Peter Isola, went to New York to defend the colony’s existence – Gibraltar was not an oppressed society and local residents wanted to retain a connection with Britain: “Nothing could be further from the truth than

to suggest that the people of Gibraltar are subjugated or exploited by a foreign power”.

In 1967 a public referendum in Gibraltar concluded that over 99 per cent wanted no formal association with Spain. Some even demanded formal constitutional integration with Britain in order to ensure that Spain never had a chance to make a claim in the future. This never materialised but it did highlight a sense of vulnerability amongst the Gibraltarians. As Roy Hattersley, the then minister of state at the Foreign Office reflected in 1976, “It would be wise to avoid innovations which might make the development of a more favourable Spanish attitude to Gibraltar less likely ... the British government considers that close integration is neither desirable nor a practicable option”.

Ironically, by internationalising Gibraltar’s contested status, Spain provided an opportunity for the Labour government of

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Harold Wilson to strengthen Britain's relationship with the colony. After the emphatic referendum result, a new constitution was agreed for the colony and the preamble made it clear that Britain would never try to impose a solution on the Gibraltarians. The right to self-determine their political future was effectively cemented in public and legal discourse, much to the irritation of Franco who demanded that Gibraltar was territorially integral to Spain. In a fit of diplomatic pique, Spain ordered the closure of the frontier in 1969 and for the next 16 years Gibraltar relied on an air-link with Britain for formal access to the wider world.

#### Stalemate with Spain

The long-term consequence of such a closure was to harden attitudes towards Franco and Spain more generally. For the political left, Franco was a convenient hate-figure and for the right, "loyal colonies" such as the Falklands and Gibraltar needed to be protected from the under-currents of decolonisation. A stalemate resulted and it was not until the Thatcher government that a new political process began in Lisbon (1980) and Brussels (1984), signalling some movement from all sides.

The lifting of border restrictions in 1985 was highly significant as was the broad transformation of Spain from fascist state to a democratic one with European and NATO membership credentials in the mid-1980s. Ironically, such a transformation did not necessarily assuage the fears of the Gibraltar residents. Could Spain ever be trusted? Would Britain now be in a better position to do a deal with a democratic Spain? A new generation of political leaders such as Joe Bossano and Peter Caruana demanded that British governments be pressurised into making no political concessions to Spain. As the British military base in Gibraltar was scaled down in the 1980s (while 60 per cent of the previous local economy was derived from the military, it is now less than 10 per cent), there was perhaps good reason to be concerned about Britain's long-term commitment to the colony (now an overseas territory).

The 1980s and 1990s were a political and cultural watershed for Gibraltar. The idea of a loyal Gibraltar just waiting to see what its imperial master decided with regard to internal policies and external relations was well and truly relegated to the past. With considerable financial wealth through financial services and tourism, Gibraltar was well placed to demand a stake in any negotiations with Spain.

When Foreign Secretary Jack Straw presented to Parliament a proposal for joint sovereignty with Spain in July 2002, he learnt

to his cost that small overseas territories such as Gibraltar and the Falklands are very effective at mobilising opposition to proposals that upset the delicate political balance. Public advertisements in British newspapers, paid for by the Government of Gibraltar, were swift to condemn the Labour government for disloyalty and for forgetting the long relationship with Britain and its armed forces. By November 2002, a public referendum had been held in Gibraltar and as with the 1967 event, about 99 per cent of the population publicly rejected any proposal for joint sovereignty with Spain. Labour's policy was in tatters. Interestingly, local groups used earlier imperial iconographic expressions of the Rock to symbolise their determination to resist this joint sovereignty proposal.

As the people of Gibraltar celebrate their tercentennial association with Britain, the mood has not been uncritical. The association has been cherished and condemned at different moments. While it may have looked like a loyal colony in the 1940s and 1950s, the 1960s onwards have witnessed an important change in the political and cultural profile of this

overseas territory. As historian Joseph Garcia has shown, Gibraltar has attained a highly developed (if unquestionably differentiated) political voice and it has also discovered and narrated its own local history, language and geographical associations. Connections with Britain remain significant and inclusion in the South West England constituency for the 2004 European elections is just one interesting example. The tercentenary celebrations in Gibraltar have not only stimulated reflection on a long and occasionally fraught association with Britain but also proved a celebration of Gibraltar's distinct history. It is clearly neither a fortress nor a colony.<sup>11</sup>

## JOURNEYS

### BOOKS

Gibraltar: History of a Fortress by Ernie Bradford (Hart-Davis, 1971); The Royal Navy at Gibraltar since 1900 by Tito Benady (Maritime Books, 2004); The Fortress Came First by Thomas James Finlayson (Ashford, Buchan and Enright, 1991)

### WEBSITES

www.gibraltar2004.gov.gi and www.gibraltar.gov.uk

## BRITAIN AND GIBRALTAR: A TIMELINE



**1704** Anglo-Dutch forces capture Gibraltar from the Spanish in the War of the Spanish Succession

**1713** Treaty of Utrecht formally cedes Gibraltar to Britain

**1779–83** "The Great Siege": Spain fails to weaken the resolve of the British to hold onto the fortress and civilian community

**1830** Gibraltar granted a Charter of Justice, which enables a Supreme Court and independent civil judiciary to be created

**1889** Ordinance issued which creates a right to residency for native-born Gibraltarians

**1921** Gibraltar granted City Council status in recognition for its contribution to the British war efforts between 1914–18

**1940** Mass evacuation of Gibraltar's civilian population in Second World War

**1942** The AACR is created and Joshua Hassan emerges as Gibraltar's most significant political figure for the post-war period

**1954** Huge public display of loyalty during Queen Elizabeth II's royal tour of Gibraltar

**1963** The UN Committee of Decolonisation discusses the future of Gibraltar

**1967** The people of Gibraltar vote overwhelmingly to reject any transfer of sovereignty in favour of Spain

**1969** Gibraltar secures a new constitution, which cements the right of Gibraltarians to determine their own political future. Spain closes the frontier for 16 years

**1984** Brussels Agreement signals restoration of British-Spanish relations and a commitment to consider the future of Gibraltar

**1985** Spain lifts its blockade of the border with Gibraltar

**2002** A public referendum held in Gibraltar rejects the possibility of a joint sovereignty deal between Spain and Britain

