

The Alt House: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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The original concept of Glover Garden, opened in Nagasaki in 1974, was similar to that of Meiji Village in Nagoya, namely “to gather the disappearing Meiji-era Western-style buildings in one place and to make efforts for the preservation of historic assets and the development of tourism resources.” The plan came on the heels of the Japanese government’s designation of the former Glover, Ringer and Alt houses as “important cultural assets,” and it was pushed along by the increasingly important contribution of tourism to Nagasaki’s prosperity as Japan entered its period of rapid economic growth in the 1970s.

On what before had just been one part of the former European settlement in Minamiyamate, borders were delineated, chain-link fences erected, gates installed and a booth set up to collect admission from visitors. Several additional Western-style buildings that had been standing empty in other parts of the city and would have been torn down in the path of urban development projects were dismantled and reconstructed in Glover Garden near the three original houses. These included the former Walker House, Jiyutei Restaurant and Mitsubishi Dockhouse.

With its “exotic atmosphere,” lovely gardens, and breathtaking view over Nagasaki Harbor, the facility quickly gained fame as Nagasaki’s foremost tourist attraction. But although the project bolstered the local tourism industry, Glover Garden also exerted a detrimental effect in that the “Meiji Village” style of presentation blurred the distinction between the original and relocated buildings and thus resulted in the loss of much of the authentic historical atmosphere of the Minamiyamate hillside. This situation was only exacerbated by municipal indifference to research concerning the history and residents of the former European settlement of Nagasaki.

Today, the importance of Glover Garden is such that the number of visitors there serves as an index of changes in the tourism industry. Statistics released by Nagasaki City show that the number of visitors to Glover Garden peaked at the time of the Journey Exposition in 1990 and steadily decreased thereafter, the number in 1996 (1,748,675) reverting to approximately the same level as that in 1979.

Although the overall economic slump in Japan has no doubt affected these numbers, one of the main reasons for the decline seems to be the failure of the exhibits at Glover Garden to appeal to a new generation of tourists increasingly knowledgeable about foreign cultures and inclined to appreciate the “real thing.” It is obvious, therefore, that the basic concept of Glover Garden needs to be reassessed and more efforts made to highlight the true history of the buildings in Glover Garden and to implement that information in imaginative, appealing presentations.

Considerable research has been poured into the exploits of Thomas Glover but very little is known about William J. Alt (1840-1905), the British merchant who built and inhabited the Alt House in Glover Garden. The present article is a biographical sketch of Alt based on information from available sources, an introduction to one of his descendants and a discussion on the use past, present and future of the fine stone bungalow the British merchant built in Nagasaki.

Arrival in Nagasaki

William Alt’s father Daniel, a lieutenant in the British army, apparently died at a young age and left

his family in poverty. Alt took to sea at the early age of twelve to help his mother, taking a position as a cabin boy on an ocean going merchant ship. In 1859 he joined the customs service in China, only to leave this job when he heard that Japan had opened its doors and that various opportunities awaited foreigners in the ports of Nagasaki and Yokohama. Alt was still only nineteen when he arrived in Nagasaki in the autumn of 1859, but within two years he was the proprietor of Alt & Co. one of the most successful enterprises in the foreign settlements of Japan and he was making a fortune from business activities including the import of ships and military supplies and the export of tea, vegetable wax and camphor oil.

Alt's early financial success is indicated by the fact that he commissioned Scottish shipbuilder James Mitchell to construct a yacht in the spring of 1861, less than two years after his arrival in Nagasaki. A large number of foreign residents turned out on the morning of July 20, 1861 for the launching ceremony at the "Aberdeen Yard" in Naminohira (present-day Matsugae-machi). The ceremony is described in colorful detail in the English-language press:

On arriving at the Yards we found everything just as we expected . . . There was the little vessel, her masts already stepped, all ready to be started into her new life, gaily adorned, in Chatham dockyard style, with scores of flags and pennants. . . All pronounced ready, the signal given, the dog-shores knocked away, the Champagne sprinkled, the name Phantom' given and the pretty little vessel slid gently towards her future element; unfortunately however before she had accomplished the necessary distance the ground which has only recently been made and not yet piled, gave way in consequence of which she gently heeled over, and thus stayed the further proceeding until next tide. Of course for the first few moments a feeling of disappointment and some anxiety prevailed but on examination it was found that the mass of planks forming her cradle was effectually supporting her all along the bilge, and all were put immediately at ease by the assurance that there was no strain or the slightest other hurt. A large party of the company then adjourned to breakfast at the hospitable table of Messrs. Alt and Wright, and there, with many congratulations, toasted, " Success to the Phantom". . .

William Alt and his friends waited for the tide to rise in Nagasaki Harbor before returning to Naminohira to complete the launching. Although not documented in Japanese and virtually forgotten in Nagasaki today, the launching of the sixty-foot, thirty eight-ton "Phantom" is noteworthy in that the vessel was Japan's first yacht and that Mitchell's "Aberdeen Yard" was Nagasaki's first Western-style shipyard. It was, indeed, the "phantom yacht."

A Western-Japanese Hybrid

William Alt met his future wife Elisabeth on board ship. He was on his way back to England on business and Elisabeth was accompanying her parents on a vacation to Australia. The couple married in Australia and returned to Nagasaki in 1864, where the still only seventeen year-old Elisabeth is said to have burst into tears when she realized that there was no milk available here. The breathtaking scenery of Nagasaki, however, seems to have made up for the lack of familiar foods:

This [Nagasaki Harbor], the first part of Japan I saw and where I lived for four years (1864-68), was certainly a vision of beauty. I cannot think of a more beautiful place.

There is a long land-locked harbour; at the entrance are islands; one of a sugar-loaf shape with a beauty of its own is called Pappenberg, a name given by the Dutch. . . The ship winds up the harbour which is more like a very broad river, with hills on either side levelling down towards the extreme end where the town of Nagasaki stands. There are little nooks and coves at the sides. There used to be a Russian factory on the opposite side which was ugly, but it did not spoil the lovely view to any great extent. On the hot summer evenings, when the sun was going down, we used to go in my boat with six rowers along the coves and little bays that ran along the harbour side and sometimes bathed in one of the most retired of them.

Elisabeth also provides a valuable insight into Alt's efforts to process and export Japanese tea, the activity for which he is best known in Nagasaki today:

In our early days in Nagasaki, the first place I lived in Japan and where my elder children were born, excitement was raised by the sudden whim of the great American nation in favour of drinking Japanese tea. My husband quickly responded by getting ready and sending off the first ship that left Japan with an entire load of Japanese tea. I think she was called the Swanley'. It was the beginning of the tea season when the crops were coming in from the neighbouring country. It came in quite raw and the tea leaves had to be dried and then packed, and, under the the drying (or firing) and packing had to be done in the quickest possible time. The firing is done in large godowns' or warehouses. The process may be quite different now but in those days it was somewhat like that which I shall now describe. The firing went on night and day in shifts, about three or four hundred people working at a time as many women as men it seemed to me. I went to see the work at night with my husband and it was a kind of inferno. There were hundreds of copper pans of red hot charcoal and over these were being dried the raw green leaves of the tea, jerked from side to side of large flat baskets – never still for a moment. The large high building lighted by flares of some kind, the burning charcoal, the misty dust or steam from the leaves, the perspiring men and women, the former almost quite naked, the latter naked to the waist it was an inferno! Then added to these sights there was a din of indescribable noise packing of the tea seemed to be going on in the same great hall or shed, [where] packing seemed mostly to consist of the wooden chests into which men were pouring the already fired' tea being shaken violently from one side to the other, to make the tea settle down. . . A hundred chests or more can cause a terrible noise under the process, especially on a hard wooden floor. I did not stay long nor did I again visit the godowns at night.

Soon after settling back in Nagasaki with his bride in 1864, William hired Japanese master carpenter Koyama Hidenoshin – who had already built the Glover House and Oura Church – to construct a house at No.14 Minami-yamate, one of the choicest lots in the residential sections of the European settlement. Mention of the lot appears for the first time in early Japanese lists, first in 1863 and again in 1865 and 1868. In 1863 the renters are shown as Simpson and Bedwell, both employees of Alt & Co.; in 1865 a building is said to be under construction; in 1868 Alt is shown as inhabiting the house with his wife, two daughters, a Chinese servant and an “old person,” presumably a gardener.

Records kept by Koyama include a simple floor plan of the Alt House dated 1863 and signed by C. Ansell (apparently the architect). From all this information it is possible to surmise that Alt

obtained rights to the property in 1863 and immediately commissioned the design of a house and that Koyama began construction in late 1864 or 1865. In the floor plan the rooms are shown in a handwritten script and measurements given in feet and inches, but Koyama or one of his colleagues has converted the latter to traditional Japanese shaku and sun measurements and written in other notes with brush and ink.

Just as this floor plan reveals the cooperation between the foreign designer and Japanese craftsmen, the house is a Western-Japanese hybrid featuring foundations and walls of Amakusa sandstone, Tuscan pillars around a stone veranda and a Japanese-style roof with ceramic kawara tiles. The rooms are relatively small, branching off an L-shaped inner corridor, but they have high ceilings and tall windows providing a generous view over the harbor. At the rear, a brick building is connected to the house by a sheltered corridor and contains a kitchen and servants' quarters, and beside this there is a room carved out of the surface of the hillside and blocked off with a heavy metal door. The former is thought to be a later addition, but the cave-like room – which is cool even in summer – may have been built by Alt as a place to store the milk and other foods so dearly missed by his wife.

Although certainly an expression of William Alt's tremendous financial success, the construction of this imposing house may indeed have been motivated by the wishes of his wife and the impending birth of the couple's first child, a daughter named Mabel born in Nagasaki in 1865.

A Friend of Iwasaki Yataro

Like his compatriot and rival Thomas Glover, William Alt made great strides in business around the time of the Meiji Restoration of 1868 when the clans of southwest Japan were purchasing huge quantities of guns, ammunition, second-hand steamships and everything else they needed to topple the shogunate and to modernize Japan. One of his most important encounters during this period was with Iwasaki Yataro, the young samurai from the Tosa Clan (present-day Kochi Prefecture) who had been stationed in the clan's trading agency in Nagasaki in 1867 and who, with Alt's help, would go on to establish Mitsubishi Shokai, successor of the company known today throughout the world.

The close relationship between Alt and Iwasaki is revealed by the description in the latter's biography of an excursion Nagasaki foreign settlement on horseback. When the pair arrived at the boundary of the designated settlement, Alt suggested that they turn back because the treaty regulations banned foreigners from proceeding any further. But Iwasaki spoke to the sentry at the gate: "You are aware I'm sure that the government has issued a proclamation ordering all citizens to avoid disputes with foreigners. If you block our passage here, the British Minister will almost certainly submit an emphatic protest to the Nagasaki Magistrate. If he does, your responsibility will be brought into question. Fortunately no one else is around, and so I strongly suggest that you look the other way as we pass and thereby keep the peace on all sides." The sentry immediately bowed to this and let the two pass. Alt, who as a result enjoyed a rare glimpse at the forbidden Japanese hinterland, was of course duly impressed by the samurai's wit and pluck, and after this the two became close friends and business confidants.

In August 1867, Alt had an opportunity to return the favor. Two young sailors on the British warship *Icarus*, were found dead on a Nagasaki street with wounds obviously inflicted by samurai swords. The British consul, Marcus Flowers, was infuriated that British citizens were still unsafe

on Nagasaki streets eight years after the Ansei Treaty and the opening the port, and he pointed a blaming finger at the Kaientai, a group of disengaged Tosa samurai promoting the clan's commercial and military interests here. His reason for jumping to this conclusion was that a Kaientai ship had been seen leaving Nagasaki Harbor the evening of the murders. As chief of the Tosa Clan's trading agency in Nagasaki, Iwasaki – accompanied by William Alt – called on Marcus Flowers to assure him that the Kaientai members were innocent and that he would make every effort to find the criminals. After much delay – and vociferous complaints from the British government – Iwasaki finally determined that samurai of the Kuroda Clan (present-day Fukuoka Prefecture) were responsible, that the matter had been reported to clan officials but kept secret, and that the leader of the guilty party had already been ordered to commit seppuku. The incident was finally resolved in early 1869 when the rest of the criminals were apprehended and imprisoned and the lord of the Kuroda Clan paid an indemnity to the sailors' bereaved families in England.

By this time William Alt had moved with his family to Osaka, then the financial center of Japan. Iwasaki Yataro, recognized for his success in Nagasaki and already the rising star in the Tosa Clan's efforts for modernization, also moved from Nagasaki to Osaka in 1869 to take up the position of chief of the clan's agency in the port. William and Elisabeth Alt and children moved to Yokohama after only eighteen months in Osaka, apparently because of an inability to accustom themselves to life in an opulent but traditional Japanese house. In her memoirs, Elisabeth called the stay in Osaka “the most unpleasant part of my seven years in Japan.”

With the Meiji government safely launched, Iwasaki and other young entrepreneurs turned to the task of promoting Japanese prosperity through the introduction of Western technology and the boosting of commercial activity.

In October 1870, the government issued an order for all enterprises operated by the feudal domains to close. The Tosa Clan circumvented this regulation by officially abolishing its trading and shipping agency but replacing it with an enterprise called Tsukumo Shokai that took charge of the clan's three foreign-built ships – the Tsuru, Yugao and Momijinoga – on a commission basis and like its predecessor carried merchandise and passengers on the Osaka- Tokyo and Kobe-Kochi routes. All of the above three steamships had been sold to the Tosa Clan by Alt & Co. The Yugao and Momijinoga were renamed second-hand ships, but the Tsuru had been built in Glasgow County Lanark in January 1870 and sold to the clan in October the same year, just when the clan's trade agency was regrouping as a quasi-private enterprise.

Iwasaki would soon emerge as the leader of this company, which underwent several name changes before evolving into “Mitsubishi Shokai” in March 1873. Business was also booming for Alt & Co. and various opportunities lay ahead, but it seems that William's health problems and the demands of a young family convinced the Alts to return in England. Thus in 1871 William Alt left Japan, never to return, carrying not only numerous memories of a country bursting out of the shell of isolation but also riches gleaned from trade and one of the finest collections of Japanese art ever to reach British shores.

The Alt family settled in a mansion in Surrey, near Chertsey, and William spent the rest of his life in affluent semi-retirement. During his latter years he suffered from bronchial troubles and bought a villa at Rapallo, Italy, where the Alt family spent nearly every winter and spring until it was sold shortly after William's death in November 1908 at the age of sixty-eight. Elisabeth continued to

live in London with her two unmarried daughters until she died there in 1923.

Four of the eight Alt children had been born in Japan, but the oldest, Mabel, was still only six years old when the family returned to England and so memories of life in Nagasaki, Osaka and Yokohama quickly faded in the Alt family, just as the adventures of William Alt and his contributions to Japanese modernization were all but forgotten in Japan. In fact, it was not until the autumn of 1985 that the Alt family and Nagasaki were finally reunited.

Hearing from a friend who had visited Nagasaki that the Alt House was still standing, Viscountess Tessa Montgomery of Alamein – great grand- daughter of William and Elisabeth Alt – came to Nagasaki in the autumn of 1985 to see the house and to donate excerpts from her great-grandmother's unpublished memoirs to Nagasaki City. These memoirs and the family tree accompanying them opened new windows on the Alt family and their activities both in Japan and later in England.

Tessa Montgomery's father-in-law is the famous British field marshal Bernard L. Montgomery who was elevated to peerage in 1946 as the First Viscount Montgomery of Alamein in honor of his achievements during World War II. Tessa's father, Frederick "Boy" Browning, was also a British army officer, and her mother was the celebrated novelist Daphne du Maurier.

The Unknown Descendants

Daphne du Maurier was born in London in 1907, daughter of actor Sir Gerald du Maurier and granddaughter of Punch magazine illustrator and satirist George du Maurier. Her first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, appeared in 1931 when she was still in her early twenties. An instant success, the book brought her not only fame and wealth but also the attentions of a handsome soldier, Major (later Lieutenant-General Sir) Frederick Browning, grandson of William Alt.

Her subsequent novels also became bestsellers, and some – like *Jamaica Inn* and *The Birds* – were adapted for film. Certainly the most famous and influential of these cinematized works is *Rebecca*, an enchanting story about a nameless young woman who marries a wealthy noble but finds herself living in the shadow of his former wife Rebecca. The film version, which appeared in 1940, was produced by David O. Selznick of *Gone With the Wind* fame and directed by Alfred Hitchcock as the latter's first movie in the United States. The movie, named Best Picture at the 1940 Academy Awards, remains today as a cinema classic.

Although now one of the best-known authors in the world, Daphne retreated into a life of quiet seclusion with her husband and children. After the death of Frederick Browning in 1965, she moved to a fourteenth-century mansion named Kilmarth which she immortalized in the novel *The House on the Strand* and where she lived in peaceful solitude until her death in 1989. Richard Kelly, professor of English at the University of Tennessee, wrote about an encounter with Daphne du Maurier in an obituary to the famous author:

In November 1988, I visited Daphne du Maurier in Kilmarth. She appeared quite small, sitting in a chair surrounded by piles of newspapers she had been reading. I had known her face from photographs taken in her youth, a beauty made haunting and foreboding by the deep shadows around the eyes. In her eighties, those eyes retained the same dark mystery of the recluse who had chosen to live amongst her memories and the ghosts that filled the room in photographs, paintings and memorabilia. In the dining room there was a large oil-painting of her as a young woman, many photographs of her

father in jaunty poses, numerous medals that had been awarded to her husband during the war and a photograph of Dwight Eisenhower inscribed to him. “Boy” Browning and Gerald du Maurier were the great heroes of her life and her fiction, the two ghosts of her past that embodied all the love, adventure and romance that through her writing she generously and skillfully shared with us all.

The Alt House Today and Tomorrow

The January 28, 1871 issue of The Nagasaki Express carries a small advertisement for the sale of the “stone bungalow formerly occupied by W.J. Alt, Esq.” The advertisement was placed there by Alt & Co., which continued to operate after the return of its founder to England. Just who responded to the advertisement is unclear, and the directories of foreign residents of Japan included entries on the house only from the year 1880 when Kwassui Women’s College used it briefly as a schoolhouse. After this, a succession of foreign residents called it home, including R.L. Irvine and other Protestant missionaries, U.S. Consul W.H. Abercrombie (who also used it as his consulate), Nagasaki Hotel Manager R.F. Inman, and Frederick Ringer’s eldest son F.E.E. Ringer.

After Ringer’s death in 1940, the house was purchased by Kawanami Toyosaku, the flamboyant owner of Kawanami Shipyard. Kawanami had purchased the Matsuo Shipyard on Koyagi Island at the mouth of Nagasaki Harbor in 1936. In the midst of the industrial explosion before and during World War II he built a 100,000-ton dock said to be the largest in the Far East at the time on the island and succeeded in the mass production of standard-issue ships, at one point reaching a capacity of one ship every two weeks. Ironically enough, while Kawanami lived richly in the former Alt House, hundreds of British and American prisoners-of-war labored under brutal conditions in his factories.

Kawanami Shipyard fared badly, however, during the final months of the war, suffering from such a lack of steel that it had to build ships out of concrete and from such a monetary shortage that it could not pay the salaries of its staff. The company was forced to close all the factories on Koyagi Island in January 1946, and its once illustrious owner – barred from public office by the Allied Occupation because of his wartime activities – became embroiled in labor disputes and legal battles with his former employees.

Vacated by Kawanami and damaged by the atomic bomb explosion, the Alt House was rented out after the war and served as a makeshift apartment block for as many as six families until finally being sold to Nagasaki City in 1970, refurbished and incorporated into the new Glover Garden in September 1974.

As mentioned above, its subsequent role as tourist mecca ensured the preservation of the physical structure but did little to promote an understanding of or interest in the colorful history of the house and the stories of its former inhabitants. Now, the best way to bolster Glover Garden’s flagging admission and Nagasaki’s diminishing cultural heritage is surely, not to follow in the footsteps of “Huis Ten Bosch” and the other artificial theme parks that dot the Japanese landscape, but to showcase some of the true stories of the Alt House and the other unique buildings that look out onto a changed and changing Nagasaki Harbor.

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