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## The peculiar tale of how London's Canary Wharf got its name



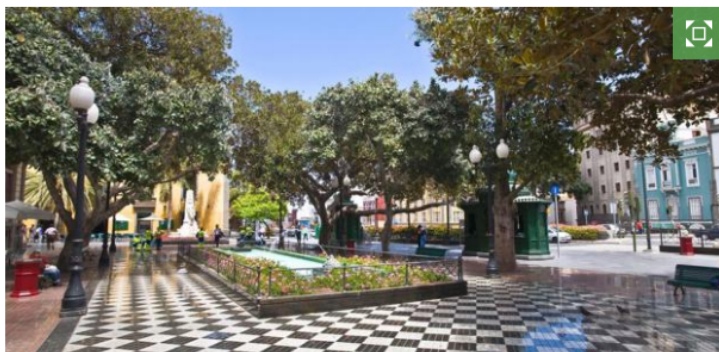
By Ross Clarke

13 September 2018

I sat on the veranda of the **Hotel Santa Catalina** sipping 'un té británico' (a British tea) and looking out on the manicured lawns that seemed to stretch down to the sea. Despite the heat in Las Palmas (a tempting 28C), the Brit in me was happy to sip on a good cuppa, even if I did have to ask for it 'con leche fria aparte' (with cold milk on the side).

My afternoon companion was Angie Cabrera, a local English teacher and native of the island of Gran Canaria, who has researched the history of the British in the Canary Islands (which have been part of Spain since the 15th Century) and uses it as a cultural, historical and linguistic lesson for her secondary school students.

"The hotel was built by the British," she told me over the brim of her teacup. "British architects and everything. The Hotel Metropol in front of us as well was a British build, although it is now the council offices. The Metropol was a favourite of Agatha Christie." I found out later the crime writer is thought to have penned more than one of her novels there.



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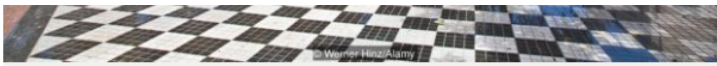


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The city of Las Palmas on Gran Canaria has been popular among Brits as a holiday destination for decades (Credit: Werner Hinz/Alamy)

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It turns out, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, to afford the city its proper title, was *the* holiday destination for discerning British tourists long before the package holiday boom of the 1960s and '70s turned the island's hotter, drier south into the sun-worshipping holidaymaker mecca that it is today (some 858,118 Brits visited Gran Canaria in 2017 alone). But how did this tiny island (just more than an hour top to bottom by car) off the coast of West Africa become such a hotspot for British tourists around the turn of the 20th Century?

My tea stop was just the latest part of the story Cabrera had been regaling me with all day. We started our tour down near the city's main port, Puerto de La Luz, on Alfredo L Jones Street – or as the locals say, '*Al-freh-doh ehleh chon-ess street*'. The Mr Jones in question was not Canarian or even Spanish, but was, as his surname might suggest, born Alfred Lewis Jones in Carmarthenshire, South Wales, in 1845. What he was to do for this mid-Atlantic city, however, more than justifies this prominent epitaph. You see, while Jones' story is virtually unknown outside of the islands, some might say that the Welshman put the Canaries on the map.

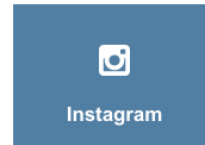
"He wasn't the first here," Cabrera explained. "But he's the one who really made it happen."



The Canary Islands owe their reputation as a holiday hotspot to Alfred L Jones, a 19th-Century Welsh businessman (Credit: Marek Slusarczyk/Alamy)

Back when steam was king, the Canaries were strategically important for passage from Britain to the Americas, being the last fuelling port before sailing on across the Atlantic. A constant supply of good-quality coal was needed to power ships on the final leg of their journey, and coal from the collieries of the UK was brought over in ships to be stored in the port of Las Palmas. Jones owned several collieries, including one in Maesteg, South Wales, but his main business was shipping. Having been part of many of the most prominent

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shipping and trading companies of the late 1800s as a shareholder and owner, he founded The Grand Canary Coaling Company in 1886. Due to Gran Canaria's lucrative location and his easy access to coal, supplying the port of Las Palmas was an obvious business opportunity.

Bringing coal from the UK was all well and good, but returning empty ships made no business sense to Jones, so he looked for a way to make the return voyage more profitable. He came up with the idea of taking local produce back home.



The Canary Islands were strategically important for the British shipping industry as the last fuelling port before the Atlantic crossing (Credit: G.I. Dobner/Alamy)

Local resident and expert on the British in Las Palmas, Betty Burgess explained, "Alfred was a friend of **Edward Fyffe of British banana fame**, through whom he started exporting bananas, potatoes and tomatoes in his ships into the UK, principally Liverpool but also other ports. Bananas had been grown in the Canaries since around the 16th Century and were mainly used for animal feed or fertiliser until this point."

Bananas were considered exotic in the UK at that time, but steadily became commonplace in the British diet as the banana boats became more frequent. Tomatoes had a similar destiny. Considered bad for the health in the islands, according to Burgess, they were increasingly cultivated due to their appreciation abroad.

It was this constant stream of fruit ships arriving into the South Quay Import Dock in London's docklands that led to the renaming of one of the dock berths. Let to Fruit Lines Limited in 1937, it was named after the place of the fruits' origin, the Canary Islands, and what we now know as Canary Wharf came into being.

With ships making such regular journeys between the UK and Las Palmas, plus a solid foundation of British people living in the city (some 437 were registered as residing in the city in 1910), an unofficial British colony was created, bringing with it investment, infrastructure advances and social culture.





After shipping coal from the UK to the Canary Islands, Jones stocked his ships with bananas to make the return trip more profitable (Credit: Marcel Bakker/Alamy)

The very first mass wave of tourists started to reach the archipelago's shores in the late 1800s thanks to reduced fares negotiated by Jones on his ships, and hotels were built to cater to this new influx of visitors. Those with bronchial problems particularly favoured Las Palmas, as the temperate climate was thought to be beneficial to health.

"Look at the street names," Cabrera told me as we left the port behind and made our way to the Ciudad Jardín neighbourhood of the city – the 'home' of the British back in the early 1900s. I spotted 'Calle Lord Byron' among other street names as we wandered up to the brightly whitewashed Holy Trinity Church. I leaned in to read the plaque on the wall. It was built by British-born, Las Palmas-based architect Norman Wright in 1892 through the generosity of Jones, among other benefactors, and opened for Anglican worship in 1893. Services here are still carried out in English.



Let to Fruit Lines Limited in the 1930s, London's South Quay Import Dock was renamed Canary Wharf after the fruits' place of origin (Credit: Greg Balfour Evans/Alamy)

Religion wasn't the only thing the British brought with them; they introduced the telephone and telegraph, the first banks, an animal protection society, British-style sandwich loaves, frozen meat, the first piped water supply, and a dedicated social club, **The British Club**, which still exists today.

Burgess explained that sports were another notable introduction to the city. "Most sports were introduced by the British, and before the end of the 19th Century there was the first golf club in Spain – the **Royal Las Palmas Golf Club** – some of whose founders were British," she said. "The Tennis Club was possibly the first in Spain also, affiliated to the All England Lawn Tennis Association; a British-Canarian won the Spanish Championship in 1907 and received a trophy from the king."

She continued, “Surprisingly for an island, water sports, and indeed swimming for pleasure, were practically unknown at the time, so the British were instrumental in popularising them.”

The current **Metropole Swimming Club**, which stands next to what was the Hotel Metropol, has its origins as the hotel’s recreational pool, thought to be the first on the island.



The first wave of British tourists arrived on the Canary Islands in the late 1800s thanks to reduced fares negotiated by Jones on his ships (Credit: Islandstock/Alamy)

As Cabrera and I continued to make our way through the city, I found more clues to the unique British history. Even in the branch of clothes shop Mango in Triana high street, I saw enormous wooden doors with thick iron hinges emblazoned with a British ironmonger’s details.

“We even use our own versions of English words that were overheard by the locals at the time,” Cabrera told me. “*Queque* (cake), and *naife* (knife) for a start”. We took a seat at a bar and I glanced at the menu. “What’s *bistec*?” I asked. “What does it sound like?” she replied.

Beef steak, of course.

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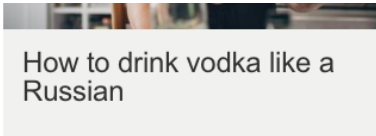
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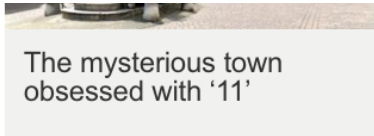


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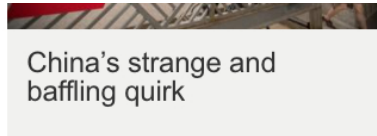




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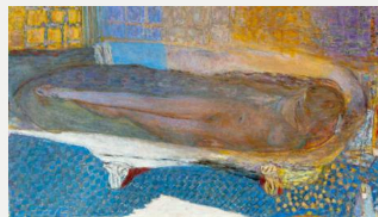
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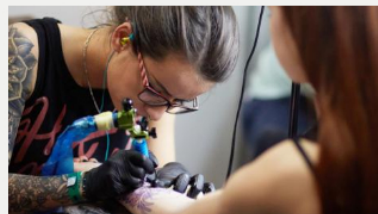
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