



## Robinson: The Legacy of an English Family in the History of Portalegre

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### ABSTRACT

There are moments in history when the material mixes with the immaterial, and the Robinson Factory, commonly known as the Cork Stopper Factory, represents the auric moment when this happens. On the initiative of an English family, Portalegre witnessed the building of a genuine industrial empire in the second half of the 19th century, which began to decline in the second half of the 20th century under the aegis of Sociedade Corticeira Robinson S. A., founded in 1931. The year 1848 marked the beginning of an auspicious period in the history of Portalegre. George Robinson and his family settled permanently in Portalegre, acquiring a small factory that, step by step, they transformed into a powerful empire. The dynamics of the Robinson family went beyond the cork industry, and the philanthropic nature of the numerous initiatives they took part in stands out. This article reveals the legacy of the English Robinson family and exposes the catastrophic situation in which the former cork empire finds itself. The analysis points to various solutions, highlighting, among others, the importance of publicising the family's vast legacy and contributing to the preservation of the industrial heritage, which is currently in an advanced state of disrepair.

**Keywords:** Portalegre, Robinson, Cork Industry, Press, Philanthropy.

### INTRODUCTION

The narrative presented here is in line with the line of research that the author has been developing over the last decade, in which the valorisation of local heritage in the municipality of Portalegre comes to the fore. Set between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the publication entitled *Robinson – The legacy of an English family in Portalegre* is the result of painstaking research into the countless sources and bibliographical references available in the Robinson Foundation's archive, hosted on its website and available in the archive of the Portalegre Municipal Library.

It is worth highlighting the remarkable series of publications promoted and financed by the Robinson Foundation—numbering around two dozen—which were directed and coordinated by António Camões Gouveia, a central figure in their organisation and publication. Revisiting this valuable collection of documents from the Robinson Foundation proved essential for preparing this scientific article.

I also mapped the regional press between 1903 and 1941, emphasising the two regional weekly newspapers: *O Distrito de Portalegre* and *Semanário A Rabeca*. All these documents are in a good state of preservation despite the enormous instability of the current Robinson Foundation, which was founded by public deed in 2003 under the tutelage of the founders<sup>1</sup>.

Concerning the aims of this scientific article, the following objectives are outlined: to deepen knowledge of the state of the art, to analyse the trajectory of the Robinson family in Portalegre, and to understand the region's economic impacts and social transformations. In addition, there is another central objective of this publication: to enhance the vast legacy of the cork empire under the aegis of the Robinsons, whose preservation of the

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archaeological and industrial heritage represents the safeguarding of a collective reminiscence, marked by the tireless work of men and women whose dedication forged a unique identity. This article also aims to enhance and restore the Robinson site, thus contributing to its reopening to the public and preserving the memory of the many people from Portalegre who dedicated their lives there.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many reference works were revisited, allowing the theme to be framed in the period under analysis, with a particular focus on the economic situation, which made it possible to understand behaviour and attitudes in a specific region such as the Alentejo. Hélder Fonseca's doctoral dissertation focuses precisely on this point. In a more general context, Jaime Reis explains Portuguese economic backwardness from a historical perspective in a scientific article published in the journal *Análise Social*. More comprehensively, historian Pedro Lains, in his publications mentioned and quoted in the bibliography, provides an in-depth understanding of the Portuguese economy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasising foreign trade. This analysis is complemented by the work of José Mendes, who compared the Portuguese industry with that of its European counterparts.

Additionally, historian Carlos Faísca, in his scientific article published in the journal *História e Economia*, focuses on cooperative strategies in the forestry sector, highlighting the cork sector as the *ex libris* of the Portalegre region and the main raw material used by the Robinson factory. Meanwhile, António Ventura, a historian from Portalegre, explores the social conflicts during the Robinson era and the union minutes of the cork workers who worked at the Robinson factory.

Around two dozen publications from the Robinson Foundation, whose director and coordinator was the historian Camões Gouveia, were of enormous relevance to the writing of this scientific article. These collections provide an in-depth understanding of the importance of the cork industry for the region and the country. The publications analysed include: For the history of the Foundation; ArqRob. The archive of the Robinson Foundation; The Convent of St Francis in Portalegre; Church of the Convent of St Francis: history of the building; One hundred years of tourism in Portalegre; *Novos Habitantes | Sociedade Musical Euterpe*; *Perguntas à Fabrica I*; *A ideia nuca abala*; *Conflitos sociais em Portalegre no tempo dos Robinson*.

Ultimately, it is regrettable that few publications address and reflect on the legacy of the Robinson family, both for the region and the country, considering that the exploitation of raw materials such as cork significantly impacted the national economy. Furthermore, the Robinson family's philanthropy seems to be falling by the wayside, given the lack of studies and works published on the subject.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative analysis methodology was adopted, as this plays a crucial role in producing scientific articles, especially in areas that involve an in-depth understanding of social, cultural and behavioural phenomena. By favouring a detailed exploration of the perceptions, experiences and meanings attributed by individuals to the phenomena studied, this approach allowed for a rich and contextualised analysis that goes beyond numbers and statistics. The qualitative methodology provided valuable insights that can reveal new dimensions of the topics under investigation, contributing to more comprehensive and grounded knowledge. In addition, the flexibility inherent in this approach allows for continuous adaptation to the context and evolution of the study, guaranteeing a more in-depth and meaningful investigation. Thus, in this context, I sought to interweave the information available, mainly in the Robinson Foundation's publications, with the news broadcast in certain press organisations, namely the *Distrito de Portalegre* and *Semanário A Rabeca* periodicals, to build a narrative based on in-depth and rigorously grounded knowledge.

## INDUSTRIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN PORTUGAL: FROM THE 19TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY

From the turn of the 19th century into the 20th century, Portugal was a poor country with significant economic backwardness (Reis, 1984) and insipid industrialisation compared to its European counterparts (France, England and Germany). Distinguished by its endless constraints, Portugal had some peculiarities: i) high levels of poverty; ii) political vulnerability; iii) slow modification of the spatial structure of the transport network as a whole; iv) subordination to foreign capital (Lains, 1985); v) low productivity; vi) slow growth of the Portuguese population; vii) a high illiteracy rate (Carvalho, 2011).

The gap between Portugal and the more developed countries was perhaps greater than in the past (Reis,

1984). Various questions may arise to explain this phenomenon, bearing in mind that Portugal, at the beginning of the modern era fostered the creation of a vast empire and that, strangely or not, it became dependent, placing itself on the periphery of industrial Europe at the end of the 19th century (Lains, 1995). Some authors tend to find explanations for this phenomenon:

Para explicar este «fracasso» têm sido apresentadas combinações diversas das seguintes influências retardadoras: 1) a perda das colónias, a devastação causada pelas invasões napoleónicas e a agitação provocada pelas guerras civis no início do século; 2) a concorrência estrangeira resultante de barreiras alfandegárias baixas; 3) um mercado interno de pequenas dimensões baseado numa economia agrária atrasada; 4) uma burguesia débil e dividida e, como tal, incapaz de promover os seus interesses ao nível do Estado; 5) uma escassez de capital, em geral, e, particularmente, para fins industriais; 6) a deficiência do ensino ao nível elementar e técnico (Reis, 1984, p. 208)

Furthermore, the extremely high illiteracy rates (Carvalho, 2011) is another explanation that must be added to many other questions, always assuming the comparative method with other reference countries on the European continent.

Como dissemos na altura própria procedera-se, em 1878, ao censo da população portuguesa. Daí até ao fim do século efetuaram-se mais dois recenseamentos, um em 1890 e outro em 1900. A população portuguesa recenseada, do continente e das Ilhas, apresentou um aumento, entre as datas extremas citadas, de cerca de 900 000 mil habitantes, e a taxa de analfabetismo diminuiu, mas muito modestamente: 82,4% em 1878; 79,2% em 1890; 78,6% em 1900 (Carvalho, 2011, p. 675).

The preponderance of the rural world over the urban world undoubtedly marked the country's economic and social structure with distressing poverty levels. Even so, and despite its dependence on foreign capital, Portugal was slowly moving towards a frank industrial development capable of reversing the trend of perpetuating feudalism, whose protectionism (Lains, 1987) was one of the obstacles to capitalism. However, at the turn of the century, Portugal was already performing well (Lains, 1995) in terms of the performance of its economy.

At the beginning of the 20th century, some areas of Portuguese industry began to reverse the trend of previous centuries and boosted the textile, metallurgical and cork sectors. In fact, the French consul, on a visit to the city of Porto as part of the Industrial Exhibition in 1891–1892, already emphasised this (Mendes, 1980).

The Portuguese cork industry experienced exponential growth in the Alentejo region at the end of the 19th century, specifically from 1880 onwards, with exports being one of the main bulwarks of the Portuguese economy until the Great War (Fonseca, 1992). The huge availability of raw materials gave a new lease of life to the cork industry, especially in the production centres located in the centre and south of the country due to the dense areas of cork oak plantations. Despite this, we can't ignore the fact that there were some residual investments in the cork sector in the north of the country, such as the Menéres factories (Parreira, 1998).

Devido a um conjunto de condições edafoclimáticas favoráveis, bem como a um contexto histórico particular, que permitiu ao sobreiro sobreviver à desarborização que, por exemplo, a norte do Tejo levou à drástica redução da sua presença (Faísca, 2014a, pp. 11-16), o Alentejo afirmou-se, no século XIX, como a principal região de produção florestal de cortiça de Portugal (Faísca, 2018b, p. 102).

In a true strategy of cooperation, business strategies in the Alentejo cork forestry market of the 19th century were the result of a planned attitude on the part of entrepreneurs, with profit as their main goal. In this context, and as had happened in the past, the arrival of some English families in Portugal intensified, as happened with George William Robinson and his family<sup>2</sup>.

Do ponto de vista externo verifica-se que o frouxo desenvolvimento da indústria portuguesa e a precária protecção pautal (até 1892) foram circunstâncias habilmente aproveitadas por alguns países nas suas exportações para Portugal. Tal como havia sucedido à Grã-Bretanha, as nações mais industrializadas do continente europeu — Bélgica, França, Alemanha e Suíça — e os Estados Unidos da América do Norte passaram a ter imperiosa necessidade de alargar os respectivos mercados externos, devido aos consideráveis progressos da sua indústria, especialmente a partir de meados do século XIX (Mendes, 1980, p. 35).

The strong presence of the English in the kingdom has always been a constant in the transition from modernity to contemporaneity, with greater incidence at certain crucial moments: the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 (Gouveia, 2009a) and the French invasions. To foster an entrepreneurial spirit, the British sought to capitalise on investments in Portuguese territory early, always with the connivance of the political powers, whether in the wine-

<sup>2</sup> After George William Robinson's death in 1895, his son George Wheelhouse Robinson was appointed the head of the industrial empire.

growing or timber sectors.

Desde tempos remotos que indivíduos de nacionalidade britânica, de cruzados a piratas, membros da família real, comerciantes, militares, embaixadores, turistas, membros do clero, viajantes, escritores, encontraram motivos para se deslocar ao extremo oeste da Europa. Para os que escolheram estas paragens, Portugal foi sendo, em diferentes épocas, um ponto de passagem obrigatória (Gouveia, 2009a, p. 39)

Throughout the 19th century and under the aegis of the Communist Manifesto, the class struggle intensified, where the use of jocular terms to define British industrialists was flaunted by some of the press, especially those with umbilical links to the labour movement.

(...) por detrás da barricada da luta de classes, que entrevi os industriais que durante a segunda metade do século xix montaram as primeiras fábricas em Portugal. Nos jornais operários, a lista dos adjetivos usados para os descrever era particularmente colorida. Os industriais eram todos «cúpidos», «egoístas», «avaros», «miseráveis», «despóticos», «obesos», «ventrudos», «lascivos», «crápulas» e «debochados». Os símiles ilustram os sentimentos prevaletentes: os industriais eram «vampiros», «gibóias», «abutres», «tigres». O que os distinguia do resto dos mortais era a sua maior dureza de coração, uma característica que os tornava particularmente aptos para explorar o semelhante (Mónica, 1987, p. 819).

Despite the sheer radical vision assumed by the workers' newspapers, where the class struggle was all too evident, some of the bourgeoisie managed to nuance their attitudes in the field of philanthropy; although driven by popular pressure, it was always a dominant feature of an English family, the Robinsons.

### **ROBINSON AND CORK: THE CREATION OF AN EMPIRE IN PORTALEGRE**

The history of the Robinson family (Figure 1) in Portalegre is inseparable from the industrial and social progress of this Alto Alentejo region, reflecting the blend of entrepreneurial spirit, innovation and social responsibility that the family has instilled in its activities.

The Robinson epic in Portalegre began in the 19th century when George William Robinson, a visionary English<sup>3</sup> businessman, decided to invest in a cork factory, a raw material abundantly available in the region with growing exploitation. This decision was not merely a commercial initiative but the beginning of a profound transformation in Portalegre's economic and social fabric. George William Robinson introduced modern cork processing techniques. He also fostered a culture of quality and rigour that quickly gave his company a prominent position on the national and, eventually, international industrial scene.

<sup>3</sup> George William Robinson was born in 1815 in the town of Wakefield, located in York County, England. He was born into a British family that would leave a significant mark on the cork industry. George William grew up in an environment that valued entrepreneurship and innovation. This background was instrumental in shaping his character and guiding his professional life. On April 30, 1895, George William Robinson died and was succeeded by his son, George Wheelhouse Robinson, in the cork empire in Portalegre.



**Figure 1.** The Robinson Family (top, left to right, George Wheelhouse Robinson, Mary Chadwick Robinson and John Alvaro; bottom, George William Robinson and his wife, Sarah Ann Robinson) [Taken from: Gouveia (2007b, p. 12)]

After visiting various places along the Portuguese coast, George William Robinson and his family decided to settle in Portalegre in 1848 and bought a small cork factory from Thomas Reynolds. Gradually, they increased their investments and annexed some of the surrounding areas, as happened with the public auction of the Convent of St Francis (**Figure 2**). Favoured by the situation that resulted from the implementation of liberalism in Portugal, which led to the extinction of the religious orders, some English families acquired a series of buildings through public auction, thus enabling the construction of several factories in the most diverse enterprise sectors.



**Figure 2.** Robinson Factory, in the former Convent of São Francisco Building [Taken from Gouveia (2007b, p. 14)]

Thus began a true diaspora of an industrial empire that operated uninterruptedly for many decades. It employed hundreds of men and women and established Portalegre as an important industrial centre south of the Tagus.



A Fábrica de Cortiça Robinson foi durante século e meio um caso invulgar no panorama industrial português. Fundada pelo empresário inglês George William Robinson, manteve ao longo do tempo uma laboração sem interrupções, sabendo sempre renovar-se mau grado as naturais dificuldades conjunturais. A sua história confunde-se com a história de Portalegre, do Norte Alentejano e da Indústria Corticeira Nacional. Essa história consubstancia-se num importantíssimo património histórico, com destaque para um rico espólio no campo da arqueologia industrial. A empresa conservou numerosas estruturas e equipamentos do século XIX, alguns em perfeito estado de funcionamento, apesar das renovações tecnológicas periódicas (Gouveia, 2007b, p. 9).

Firstly, the Robinsons wanted to be able to exploit the raw material directly at its source, so they avoided importing the cork to process it in British territory. This strategy reduced costs and accumulated profits. Considering that the British market imported large quantities of Portuguese cork, we can understand the business strategy adopted by some British families. Naturally, the development of the cork industrial complex brought with it the emergence of a series of services capable of fighting back in a region undergoing rapid economic and financial development:

(...) delegações da Caixa Económica Portuguesa (Dezembro de 1887) e do Banco de Portugal (1 de Abril de 1891). A primeira contava em 1901 com 472 depositantes e um total de 124.247\$297 réis. Em Maio de 1898, o Banco de Portugal instalou-se numa casa própria, comprada por 5.000.000\$000 réis. Em 1900 foram tomadas 1305 letras no valor de 337.908\$592 réis sobre o país, e 131.983\$550 sobre o estrangeiro. Os lucros da agência de Portalegre foram de 10.934\$804 réis (Gouveia, 2012c, p. 8)

Imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit, George Wheelhouse Robinson<sup>4</sup>, successor to George William Robinson, deeply understood that the continuity of his cork empire depended on complete harmony between workers and bosses, with cooperation being the essential way to achieve the common good. Without any hesitation in stating this conviction in front of the most diverse audiences, the British capitalist stood out for his strategic vision, contradicting the opinion of some sceptics about the actions of the British bourgeois in Portuguese territory.

### ROBINSON'S PHILANTHROPY: A PORTRAIT IN THE PRESS

As tradições d'esta nobre família estão ligadas à história da industria no districto de Portalegre. Procurar aquelas é elucidar esta. A perseverança na execução d'um plano e unidade d'acção n'ele dispendida fizeram a glória d'um nome e o progresso d'uma região. Bello exemplo para imitar-se e proveitoso estudo a fazer-se (Districto de Portalegre, 1903, p. 1).

Also, in this section of the newspaper, the Robinsons deserved to be given a lot of prominence – “*Grandiosa Comemoração*” is the headline on the newspaper's front page, clearly showing the locals' affection for the family. The event took place in the old Royal Factory and was attended by 1600 people to celebrate George Milner Robinson's coming of age. The press rejoiced at this celebration and said Portalegre faced yet another kindness from the illustrious Robinson family. They also emphasised that this display of affection was unprecedented in the region and the country.

The legacy of the Robinsons in the municipality and region of Portalegre is so comprehensive that we can't overlook the civic participation and philanthropic spirit of their family throughout various eras, unquestionably marking Portalegre's society, which still retains some striking features: the industrial and human heritage; as João Paulo da Costa Amado states in the book *ArqRob: o arquivo da Fundação Robinson – O futuro das nossas memórias* (Gouveia, 2007b, p. 8). These considerations lead us to inventory the participation of the English family in various areas, combining a capitalist and philanthropic vision, capable of sustaining the cork empire; thus, the participation in the most diverse institutions is listed: a) founding the Evangelical Church; b) taking part in the founding of the Portalegrense Workers' Union Society (1896), c) taking part in the founding of the Portalegre Commercial and Industrial Association (1898); d) taking part in the João Baptista Rollo Crèche project

<sup>4</sup> George Wheelhouse Robinson was born on 17 September in the city of Portalegre, the result of the union between British entrepreneur George William Robinson and his wife, Sarah Ann Robinson. Growing up in a family marked by industrial tradition and a spirit of innovation, George Wheelhouse was imbued from an early age with the values that guided the cork empire founded by his father.

Educated to continue leading the family business, George Wheelhouse demonstrated a deep understanding of the social and economic dynamics that sustained the cork industry. Recognising the importance of a harmonious relationship between employers and workers, Robinson adopted a business vision that prioritised cooperation and the common good, a relatively advanced approach for the context of the time. Throughout his life, George Wheelhouse Robinson not only consolidated the cork empire in Portalegre but also expanded its operations, always focusing on innovation and quality.

(1903), e) founding the Recreio Operário Theatre (1903); f) founding the Robinson Private Volunteer Fire Brigade (1908). Their active participation in associations led to the sustained growth of many organisations—eager for support and protection—that rejoiced whenever the Robinsons took part in certain initiatives.

Continuing to revisit some regional periodicals, the *Distrito de Portalegre* and the *Semanário A Rabeca*, we find news items that periodically present the Robinson family's role in the municipality and region of Portalegre. They praised the cork-making empire and echoed their participation as benefactors in various institutions, as highlighted in the *Semanário A Rabeca* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Portalegre Volunteer Fire Brigade Headquarters [Taken from the *Semanário A Rabeca* Anno 12, n. 555, February 20, 1927, p. 2]

In this veritable diaspora of the Robinson legacy, we find the foundation of the Robinson Private Volunteer Fire Brigade in 1908, under the aegis of George Wheelhouse Robinson and honoured with the rank of Officer of the Military Order of Christ. Given the size of the cork empire, the creation of a team of volunteer firefighters duly equipped with the necessary equipment began to be justified. Given the vulnerability of the raw material to fire, it was perfectly understandable to have a fire brigade capable of intervening quickly. The participation of Robinson's Private Volunteer Fire Brigade (Figure 4) was not limited to this function; in fact, it was common practice for them to participate in recreational ceremonies and events.



Figure 4. Image Robinson Volunteer Fire Department [Taken from Gouveia (2007b, p. 20)]

In this assortment of philanthropic endeavours, we find one of Robinson's most extraordinary welfare initiatives—the creation of the João Baptista Rollo Crèche—which began operating in 1903 or 1904; however, its inauguration was recorded in 1905. The purpose of this crèche was to welcome, protect and educate the sons and daughters of cork workers, complying with the regulations that obliged employers to set up a crèche if they had more than 50 women working there<sup>5</sup>.

#### Artigo 1.

E fundada na cidade de Portalegre uma associação de beneficência denominada Associação protectora da Crèche João Baptista Rollo.

#### Artigo 2.

A creche tem por fim alimentar e guardar durante o dia as crianças, cujas mães, por necessidade de trabalhar fóra de suas casas, não podem vigial-as.

§. único – O edificio da crèche, por nenhum motivo poderá receber crianças em numero superior ao que permitir a capacidade dos dormitorios e salas de recreio, computando-se sempre a cubagem na proporção de 8 m<sup>3</sup> por cada criança (Rollo, 1904, p.3.)

A careful analysis of regional periodicals highlighting the *Distrito de Portalegre* showed that the Crèche João Baptista Rollo (Marchão, Henriques, & Campos, 2021) was moribund (an expression used in that newspaper) soon after its inauguration. Serious economic problems meant it was lost in time, thus losing the pioneering charity work in the municipality of Portalegre. “Continua sendo objecto de vivos commentario nos centros de cavaco d’ esta cidade a situação d’ esta sympathica instituição relativamente ao legado que lhe foi deixado e que parece ter-se desfeito como uma bola de sabão” (Districto de Portalegre, 1907, p. 1).

The Robinsons participated in a centenary association, the Banda Euterpe, which was consecrated by four patron partners: George William Robinson, Francisco António Barroqueiro; António Ferreira Baptista and Thomaz Frederick Robinson (Districto de Portalegre, 1910). Alluding to the Golden Wedding, the newspaper *Distrito de Portalegre* also highlighted the celebration, highlighting the presence of the Robinsons.

As bodas de ouro da Euterpe. Pelas 8 horas da noite, realizou-se n’ uma elegante sala da sede da banda Euterpe, a sessão solemne, comemorando a taustosa data do quinquassimo anniversario d’ aquella distincta corporação. A salla estava repleta de pessoas de todas as classes sociais (...) Constituida a meza pelo sr. George W. Robinson, secretariado pelo sr. Conego José Maria da Ressurreição, foi aberta a sessão, foi aberta a sessão. O sr. Robinson, depois d’ uma pequena alocução à gloriosa data da Euterpe, dá a palavra aos oradores (Districto de Portalegre, 1910, p. 2).

On 15 April 1917, the *Semanário A Rabeca* ran a headline on a subject of local interest, where concern about the future of the cork empire was a constant.

Toda a gente conhece qual a situação critica porque estão passando as classes trabalhadoras, isto a avaliarmos pelo que ouvimos dizer não só ás remedidas, isto é, aquelas que têm garantido o pão de cada dia, como também as que se governam dos seus rendimentos. A maioria da população de Portalegre vive do seu trabalho nas fábricas que aqui existem, sendo a Fábrica das Rolhas «Robinson» a que maior numero de operários tem. Devido à enorme hecatombe que se desencadeou no mundo, esta fábrica ressentiu-se, a ponto de não poder sustentar a sua elaboração ordinária e normal. D’ isto começam advindo dificuldades para os seus operários (Semanário A Rabeca, 1917, p. 1).

During the Great War, some factories were experiencing enormous economic difficulties due to the slackening of consumption. As is clear from the news, the people of Portalegre feared the delicate situation the cork empire was going through, where hundreds of workers and their families depended on their wages to survive.

### THE END OF AN ERA: THE DECLINE OF THE ROBINSON CORK EMPIRE

After several decades at the helm of the cork empire, which began in 1848 when the Robinson family acquired the factory from their compatriot Thomas Reynolds, the Robinson family gradually lost its influence. In 1931, the Robinson Bros. Ltd. company was created, made up of shareholders George Wheelhouse Robinson (\$50,000), William Henry Frazer (\$20,000), Ellen Mary Frazer (\$20,000) and George Frazer Shannon (\$5,000). In the 1940s, the Sociedade Corticeira was created to replace the Sociedade Robinson Bros, Lda. and, in 1946, the company's share capital and shareholder contributions changed: Manuel Pinto de Azevedo (\$1,000,000); Manuel Pinto de Azevedo Júnior (\$600,000); Eng. Luís Delgado Santos (\$1,000,000); Eng. Alberto Augusto Mendonça

<sup>5</sup> At the end of the 19th century, around 260 men and 420 women worked in the factory (Ventura, 1987).



(\$500,000); Eng. Cipriano Ribeiro Calleya (\$550,000 550); António Ventura Santos Fernandes (\$200,000); Maria Carmina Ventura Santos Fernandes Calleya (\$200,000); Maria Cecília Ventura Santos Fernandes (\$200,000); Pedro Vítor Pinto Vicente (\$875,000) and Tomás de Azevedo e Silva (\$875,000) (Gouveia, 2007b).

The departure of the Robinson family from Portalegre was a complex and multifaceted process influenced by a series of interconnected factors. One of the main elements that motivated the withdrawal was the transformation of the cork industry throughout the 20th century. Over the years, global competition intensified, new production techniques were introduced, and the traditional structure of the industry was changed. These changes required constant adaptation and modernisation of the Robinson Factory, challenges that became increasingly difficult to overcome, especially as competition from large industrial conglomerates increased.

In addition to market pressures, the Robinson Factory also faced increasing financial difficulties. The need for substantial investments in modernisation, combined with reduced profit margins, placed the company in a delicate financial position. The national economic situation, marked by successive crises, further aggravated the problem, making it increasingly difficult for the family to maintain a profitable operation in Portalegre.

Another significant factor was the demographic evolution of the Alentejo region. Rural depopulation, exacerbated by the migration of young people to large cities in search of better opportunities, limited the availability of labour and reduced local economic vitality. This demographic change weakened the support base for the factory, making its operation more difficult and contributing to its decline. Moreover, as the generations passed, the Robinson family's priorities began to change. Thomas George Robinson's descendants, many of whom had more tenuous ties to Portalegre, began to focus on other opportunities within and outside Portugal. The management of the factory gradually lost its central role in the family's life as different interests and investments became more attractive.

This gradual loss of interest, combined with the natural wear and tear caused by decades of operation, led to a gradual disinvestment in the factory. The difficulties in adapting the business to new market realities and the realisation that the traditional business model was no longer viable in the long term precipitated the final decision to close operations. The Robinson family's departure was also motivated by the attraction of new opportunities in more dynamic and profitable sectors and regions, contributing to the decision to move away from Portalegre.

In short, the Robinson family's departure from Portalegre resulted from a confluence of economic, social and family factors that, over several decades, led to the decline of the factory and the eventual decision to abandon the region. This decision marked the end of an era, but the Robinson family's legacy remains in the industrial heritage left behind and in the collective memory of the local community.

## **FROM PRODUCTION TO PRESERVATION: THE ROBINSON FACTORY AND ITS FOUNDATION**

The Robinson Factory, located in the heart of Portalegre, played a crucial role in the local economy, employing hundreds of workers and becoming a driving force for economic and social development. However, the factory faced serious difficulties in its final years of operation, and today, only traces of its former grandeur remain. The ruins that remain are silent testimonies of an era of prosperity that has been lost, accentuated by the lack of modernisation of machinery and infrastructure under the management of the last administrations, which exposes the technological obsolescence of a century ago.

With the factory's closure in 2009, the need arose to ensure its legacy would not be lost, given its historical and cultural value. A few years earlier, in 2004<sup>6</sup>, the Robinson Foundation was officially established, with the support of the Portalegre City Council, public and private entities, and the Robinson family itself, which recognised the importance of perpetuating the memory of its contribution to the city.

The Robinson Foundation's mission is broad and multifaceted, encompassing the preservation of industrial heritage, promoting culture and knowledge, and developing educational and social projects. Its main objective is to rehabilitate and revitalise the industrial complex of the old factory, transforming it into a space for culture and innovation accessible to the entire community. This physical and symbolic rehabilitation seeks to return to the city one of its historical landmarks, now adapted to contemporary demands.

One of the Robinson Foundation's most ambitious projects is creating a museum dedicated to the factory's history and the cork industry in Portugal. This museum—part of the vast complex of the old factory—aims not

<sup>6</sup> In the initial analysis for the recognition of the Robinson Foundation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs suggested adjustments to the statutes, especially regarding the lack of an enabling rule for the two founders of the foundation, the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre and the Northern Alentejo Tourism Region, as well as the value of the asset allocation. These changes were approved by the Municipal Executive on March 30, 2004, and by the Municipal Assembly on April 6, 2004, with the deed of rectification of the statutes carried out on June 3, 2004.

only to tell the story of the company and the Robinson family but also to reflect on the evolution of the cork industry and its impact on the Portuguese economy and society. The Foundation has been gathering and cataloguing a vast collection of documents and materials, including everything from old machinery to historical records, photographs, audiovisual recordings and oral testimonies from former factory workers.

In addition to its museum activities, the Robinson Foundation is also dedicated to promoting research and the study of traditional industries, focusing on cork, and developing educational programmes that involve the local community and visitors of all ages. Through partnerships with universities and other academic and educational institutions, the Foundation has encouraged studying Portalegre's industrial history, which has contributed to training a new generation of researchers and specialists.

The cultural dimension of the Robinson Foundation has also been manifested in the organisation of cultural events, temporary exhibitions, and artistic activities that seek to revitalise the space of the old factory and integrate it into the city's cultural life. These initiatives aimed to preserve the past and create a dialogue between industrial history and contemporary artistic expressions, thus promoting innovation and creativity.

The creation of the Robinson Foundation in Portalegre represents a significant milestone in preserving and appreciating the city's industrial and cultural heritage and perpetuating the legacy of the Robinson family. This foundation was established at the beginning of the 21st century to safeguard the memory of the Robinson Factory, one of the most emblematic cork industries in the country, which for decades shaped the economy and society of Portalegre.

The Robinson Foundation emerged in a context in which it became imperative to preserve the vast heritage left by the old factory, whose history dates back to the 19th century, when George Robinson, a British entrepreneur, laid the foundations of what would become one of the most important industrial complexes in the Alentejo region. Despite numerous attempts to preserve and enhance the heritage of the former cork empire, the Robinson Foundation faces several problems, particularly of a financial nature, aggravated by the lack of political coordination between the various stakeholders.

Created to preserve the legacy of the Robinson Factory, an important landmark of the cork industry in Portugal, the foundation has struggled to maintain the integrity of its facilities and fulfil its cultural and educational mission. Despite efforts to revitalise the complex, including the organisation of cultural and educational events, the lack of financial support and infrastructure degradation have been significant obstacles. Many buildings in the industrial complex are in ruins, reflecting the difficulty in maintaining this vast industrial heritage, which is the largest in the Iberian Peninsula in terms of industrial archaeology. Today, the Robinson Foundation continues to be seen as a potential attraction for the city, but it requires greater appreciation and concerted action to ensure its future sustainability and the conservation of the associated heritage.

## CONCLUSION

It is recognised that the presence of English industrialists in Portugal, commonly referred to as bourgeois, was the target of some satire due to their overly "bourgeois" attitude; however, in 1848, Portalegre welcomed a family that challenged these preconceived ideas, which in many cases were a pure reality.

In this revisitation of the past, we find the legacy of the Robinson family as a lasting mark in the daily lives of many people from Portalegre, whose past boasts a city full of dynamism, where manufacturing activity was mixed with cultural, social, recreational and religious activities. The Robinson Factory, located in Portalegre, has become, over time, a symbol of excellence and innovation. Since its establishment, the factory has not only stood out for the quality of its products but also for its significant impact on the lives of local inhabitants. By creating jobs and introducing infrastructure and services that benefited the community, the Robinson family made a decisive contribution to the region's socioeconomic development.

The English family's involvement in numerous institutions is thus worthy of note: the Evangelical Church; the Teatro Recreio Operário; the Robinson Private Volunteer Firefighters; the Sociedade União Operária Portalegrense; the Associação Comercial e Industrial de Portalegre; the Sociedade Musical Euterpe and the Crèche João Baptista Rollo. Therefore, it is understandable why many people from Portalegre were always delighted whenever the Robinsons were present at various gatherings. In this authentic diaspora, several regional newspapers, *O Distrito de Portalegre* and the *Semanário A Rabeca* have been published, reporting on the Robinsons' involvement in initiatives of various kinds, to the great enthusiasm of the people of Portalegre.

The Robinsons' legacy goes beyond the economic sphere. The Robinson family has always shown a deep concern for the well-being of its workers and the community in general. This attitude is reflected in several social and cultural initiatives, including support for education and health and promoting cultural activities in the region.

Their contribution to the community of Portalegre was not restricted to the material sphere but extended to active involvement in the cultural and civic development of the region. This aspect is still remembered and respected today.

The Robinson Factory symbolised the height of industrialisation in Portalegre and the family's resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the economic crises that marked the 20th century, the factory remained in operation for a considerable period, thanks to its directors' determination and strategic vision. The name Robinson remains associated with a time of prosperity and technological advancement in the cork industry, which contributed so much to Portalegre's prominence in the country's industrial context.

Today, although the factory has closed its doors, the impact of the Robinson family on Portalegre remains indelible. The factory complex, now deactivated, represents a heritage of undeniable historical and cultural value. The ruins of the old factory are an eloquent testament to the capacity for transformation and innovation that the Robinson family brought to this region and constitute a repository of collective memories that continue to shape the local identity.

Given the worthy narrative presented on the legacy of an English family in Portalegre between the 19th and 20th centuries, this publication values the memory of the people of Portalegre, whose archaeological and industrial heritage, through which hundreds of men and women passed, is in a serious state of degradation, entangled in a web of interests that does not allow for its recovery. The historian aims to contribute to the requalification and preservation of the vast heritage found there, appealing to its richness and diversity, whose enhancement should be seen as a recognition of the workers who worked there. Making this space a tourist landmark, capable of standing shoulder to shoulder with its peers at a national and international level, could be one of the viable destinations.

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## ETHICAL DECLARATION

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