

Images of mid-19th-century Corfu on permanent display at Mon Repos



Photographs by John Davenport Shakespear.

The island of Corfu boasts its own Shakespeare – minus the final “e.” John Davenport Shakespear, a British officer, lived on the island along with his family sometime during 1856 to 1860 and fell in love with the medium of photography. His wonderful collection of images is now the basis of a new display at the Mon Repos residence.

The former royal palace has been operating as a museum of antiquities in recent years. Shakespear’s photography collection, donated by his family to the Greek state in 2005, is a suitable addition. Shakespear fought in the Crimean War and was seriously wounded. He returned to England, met Louisa Caroline Sayer, his future bride, and together they moved to Corfu where their daughter was born. On the island, they met the artist Edward Lear, who sold his photography equipment to Shakespear who went on to capture images of Corfu before its incorporation into Greece.

Major John Davenport Shakespear RHA

Having been invalided home from the Crimean War, where he had fought at Alma, Balaklava and Inkerman, he met Louisa Caroline Sayer, married her and before they could set off on their honeymoon was posted back to the Crimea in 1855. Louisa sailed with him, however by the time they got to Corfu where the ladies were to be put ashore, the war had come to an end. Major Shakespear was posted as part of the garrison in Corfu under the British Protectorate. Ida Nia was born the following year and baptised in the Garrison chapel of St George in September 1856.

The family lived in Condi terrace in the flat above Edward Lear. He described Louisa as ‘one of, if not the nicest women here.’

Edward Lear sold his ‘photographic equipment’ to John for 15/- and with that the Major, who probably didn’t have a lot to do in Corfu, took many photographs of the town, over 70 of which have survived and are currently with the Paleopolis museum of Corfu being prepared for exhibition.

