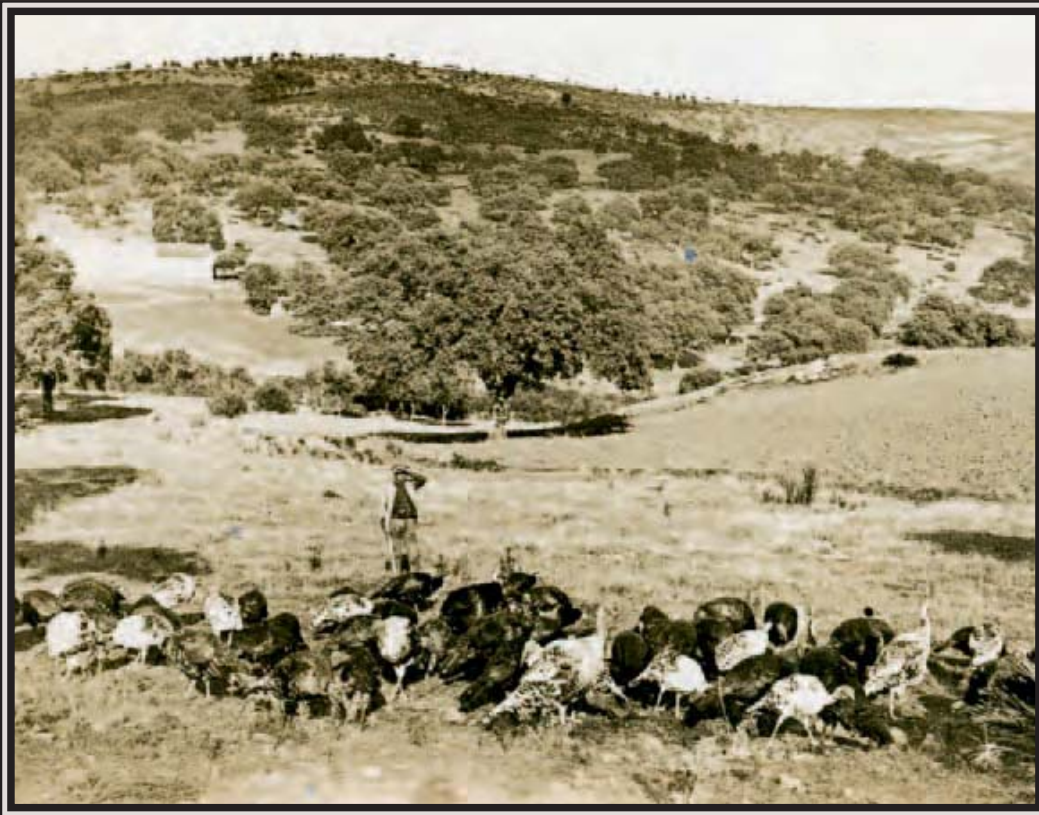


BACK TO THE ROOTS OF RIO TINTO

Ralph Mills goes digging in Spain to unearth the curious story of the Rio Tinto model farm, the man they called el terremoto and a London banker named Rothschild . . .



As you drive north westwards from Seville, the Andalusian countryside of Huelva province gradually changes from parched plain to gently rolling, tree covered hills. As the road signs begin to point towards Portugal, the scenery is dotted with stands of cork oaks, cypress, poplars and chestnut trees.

It's utterly rural until, beyond Nerva, the road abruptly curves and dips and you are surrounded by the great orange and grey landscape of the Minas del Río Tinto.

Although the two thousand year old mines gave Rio Tinto its name, the Group has had no connection with the Spanish mines since 1954, when they were sold to Compañía Española de Minas de Río Tinto. Mining ceased in the early 2000s, and the mines have

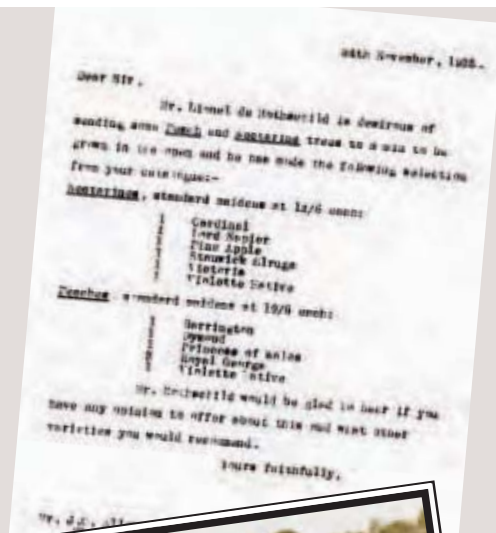
become the haunt mostly of tourists, geological field trips, industrial archaeologists and scientists investigating the origins of life on earth and the likelihood of life on Mars. Today, the pits and plant are mothballed, though they look as though they could spring into life at any moment.

Drive past the mine and the wooded countryside almost immediately closes in again, until you reach the small town/large village of El Campillo.

I'm here to get directions to Río Tinto Fruit SA, because I've heard that it is on the site of my goal – whatever remains of *la finca experimental de Río Tinto* – the Rio Tinto Experimental Farm.

Back in the 1920s, an unlikely relationship sprang up between Walter Browning, the fierce, gun toting,

From the archives (right), instructions from Lionel de Rothschild for a shipment of fruit trees from a nursery in Berkshire, England, to Rio Tinto in Spain. Scenes from life down on the farm: turkeys (previous page), pigs and farm workers (below).



no nonsense general manager of the Rio Tinto mine – nicknamed “*el terremoto*” (the earthquake) by his staff – and Lionel Nathan de Rothschild (1882-1942), head of the N M Rothschild bank in London (a major shareholder in Rio Tinto). Rothschild was fond of describing himself as “a banker by hobby – a gardener by profession”, and was much happier collecting rhododendrons and developing his Exbury estate than engaging in the world of finance. Today, Exbury, on the lovely Beaulieu River in the New Forest near Southampton is among the most popular destinations for England’s garden enthusiasts.

In the mid 1920s, Rothschild and Browning hatched a plan to create an experimental plantation that would ascertain how a range of plant species would survive at Rio Tinto. We don’t know how they met, but the project was probably part of Browning’s attempts to show that the land around the mines was fit for farming, despite repeated claims that it had been poisoned by sulphur fumes.

In 1916, advised by the University of Copenhagen, he’d appointed a company forester, the 26 year old Kai Hase, who, with characteristic energy, went on to supervise the planting of over 9,000 hectares around the mines with pine trees. He employed children from the company schools, who,

each equipped with a spike and a small cloth purse of pine seeds, crawled over the hillsides making holes into which they dropped seeds. The *piñoneros* were paid 50 céntimos (half a cent) a day. The forestry flourished. By 1954 over 14,000 hectares of forest and farmland were handed over to the mine’s new owners, and many of those trees or their offspring can be seen today, despite recent fires.

For his home, Hase had chosen an area of land near the wetlands of Zumajo, south of Río Tinto, realizing he could use the water to irrigate his land. He built himself a bungalow, accommodation for farmworkers, stables and farm buildings, and settled down with his new wife to create a model farm.

In the early days the farm used human waste as manure (collected by women and brought to the farm by donkey) from Río Tinto town’s malodorous *Depósitos de Higiene*, which elicited the wry remark from one local contributor to a Rio Tinto web discussion that: “The English made use of our sweat, our blood and our excrement!”

It was here that Browning and Rothschild decided to locate their experiment. In documents preserved in the Rothschild Archive it is apparent that Lionel travelled to the farm and met Hase, who he rather imperiously referred to as “the Dane”, taking photographs to record his visit (it is not known if any survive).

“I promised the Dane some English peaches and nectarines, some persimmons and some hickory seed,” he wrote in November 1925, having ordered the hickory from Atlanta in the US and the persimmons from a nursery in Yokohama, Japan.

A year later Browning reported that the trees were doing well, and in return for the plants Rothschild sent to Spain, Browning sent back acorns “of the sweet variety we grow in this country”, seeds of rock rose (*Cistus*) and later, grapefruits. Browning had brought grapefruit trees from Florida, and the 30 specimens in the Zumajo orchards were, he thought in 1926, “the only ones growing today in Spain.”

A couple of years later, Rothschild was again sending plants to Spain, this time including eucalyptus, yucca, clematis and exotic plants from Chile, Tibet, New Zealand and other far flung places visited by the plant hunters and explorers who were stocking his Exbury gardens. But after that the story of the experimental farm seems to end, perhaps because of Walter Browning’s abrupt and acrimonious departure from Rio Tinto the previous year. Rothschild’s last letter was to Rio Tinto chairman Sir Auckland Geddes, who may not have shared Browning’s interest.

Kai Hase died young, in the early 1940s. Rio Tinto continued to rent the farm to his widow, who was much liked by both *los ingleses* and the Spanish employees.

Isabel Naylor de Méndez, whose father was head of Rio Tinto’s workshops first at the mine and then in Huelva during the 1940s, has happy memories of the

farm. “Visiting the farm was a great treat,” she says. “Around the farmhouse they grew vegetables and fruit trees, and they also kept pigs and cows. The farm provided members of the staff with milk, butter and fresh vegetables, and every morning produce was brought on two donkeys and we picked what we needed.

“Mrs Hase managed about 15 to 20 employees on the farm. She was a charming lady who used to give we children a wonderful Christmas party. There was a badminton court next to the house and further up the hill there was the cattle shed, where we all tried to milk the cows. Poor animals!”

Members of the Rio Tinto web forum *Minas de RíoTinto Libre* also remember the farm and Mrs Hase fondly, and mention the unusual trees that surrounded the farmhouse, including palms, medlars and persimmons. It was also a favourite place for picnics, and the Zumajo reservoir was popular amongst sports fishermen.

Mrs Hase continued to manage the farm, with Vicente Delgado González acting as overseer, until the mines were sold in 1954. She retired to Punta Umbría, on the Atlantic coast near the port city of Huelva, where she lived with the Sevidanes family at the Esperanza tavern. Eventually she returned to Denmark, where she died, leaving behind much material relating to the farm.

Those records are today being cared for by Manuel Sevidanes, owner of the Zumajo tavern in Huelva, whose great grandmother, grandmother and mother all served as housekeepers to the Hase family. Sr Sevidanes hopes that the material will eventually reside in the *Casa Museo de los Ingleses* – the English House Museum – in Punta Umbría, a replica of the chalets that Rio Tinto constructed on the sand dunes beside the Atlantic in the 1880s to accommodate holidaying staff members. The dozen Rio Tinto chalets at Punta Umbría are considered by some to be the precursors of Spain’s thousands of holiday homes.

Today, on the site of the experimental farm, Río Tinto Fruit is a modern large scale orcharding company that achieves the nearest that fruit growing can come to “coals to Newcastle” – exporting oranges to the US. But no one I spoke to there knew anything of the experimental farm, and as I drove through its orchards it was obvious that any solid evidence has either been obliterated or would be very hard to find. They did tell me, however, that it was the excellent environmental records kept by the

British company back in the first half of the twentieth century that had persuaded the founders of Rio Tinto Fruit that it was indeed possible to grow citrus and other fruits successfully in the area.

Mrs Naylor de Méndez and locals confirm that the Zumajo farm buildings have vanished. And it seems that any trees planted in the experimental project of the 1920s have almost certainly been lost amongst the thousands of neatly sinuous rows of citrus trees planted by Río Tinto Fruit. But perhaps some specimen of *Gordonias axillaris*, originally from “Upper Burma” is growing amongst the stands of oaks that Río Tinto Fruit has preserved amongst the orange trees, or an exotic *Tripterigium* vine is winding its way around a fence post.

Ralph Mills is a writer and archaeologist based in Nottingham, England.

Today, on the site of the old experimental farm, Río Tinto Fruit runs a modern large scale orcharding operation (below), alongside the former mining area (right).

