

Sauntering through Santhome, looking for lost fort and hidden castle

Madras Inherited's virtual heritage walk took history enthusiasts on a journey reminding them of Santhome's forgotten past



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By Roshne Balasubramanian

Express News Service

CHENNAI: The iconic and scenic Marina beach on one side, vehicles plying on the other ; churches, a magnificent basilica with inquisitive tourists and devotees swarming its grounds, several quaint lanes and buildings with a Portuguese hangover interspersing the teeming thoroughfare that is Santhome. The mention of the area conjures up vivid imagery of all this and more.

But, do you know that it was once fortified — with high walls, bastions, gates and whatnots? “This is a locality that stands apart in the city. It’s a world of its own. While we all know about Fort St George, how many of us know that Santhome was

once a fortress, in fact, twice the size of Fort St George? The demolition of the San Thome fort walls had been carried on so meticulously that when the British acquired Santhome in 1749, they could not even trace the line of fortification,” said Ashmitha Athreya of Madras Inherited, while showcasing a map of Santhome in the 1600s to 20-odd heritage enthusiasts, as part of a virtual heritage walk.



Photos: Binsan Oommen Baby, Triple O PIXEL

With visual aids, including recorded videos of its lanes and building, the walk took us on an immersive exploratory journey of the neighbourhood — a land of settlers and traders; merchants and middlemen, industries and institutions. We sauntered through the quaint streets in the locality, while gazing at the intricate ornamentation of age-old churches including the Santhome Basilica, St Rita’s Chapel and the St Thomas English Church. “A sparkling white church by the sea, this is the oldest Protestant Church in Santhome. It was built in the 1840s and was consecrated in 1842. The church has remained a major worshipping place,” said Ashmitha.

While most stories about the locality have been forgotten, others have been immortalised through time and the crevices of the age-old structures. Galilee House on Nimmo Road off Kutchery Road. “When the Portuguese set sails and established a flourishing trading port here in 1522, they also went on to create settlements in the area. Houses and churches were built and soon, they also began marrying those from the Indian community. These offsprings later came to be known as Anglo Indians. Eventually, Santhome was dotted with residences that belonged to them.

These houses usually belonged to those who were financially well-to-do,” she explained. Traces of these large, spacious houses, with picturesque porticos and sunshades, otherwise known as garden houses, can now be found along the Nimmo Road, named after a Portuguese free merchant — Erskine Nimmo of the 18th century. “The Galilee House, despite having gone through several changes over the years, could be the only remnant of the Portuguese eratype building in this area,” she said. Soon, we reached our last destination — the lesser-known Leith Castle.

“Thomas Parry, a trader, resided on this mammoth property. After his death, major general James Leith bought Parry’s Castle. After being passed down many generations, today, the structure stands between modern structures and is hardly visible. After Santhome came under the control of the British in 1749, they raised a redoubt by the shore that would keep Adyar under observation. The only remains of this small fort — of the San Thome Redoubt — stand within the grounds of the Leith Castle,” she said.

TRACING THE TOWN

1 Between 1567 and 1582, San Thome grew as a Portuges settlement and an important trading port. Until then, the town of Mylapore, then located near the shore, was pushed back to its current location.

2 St. Thomas, one of the 12 apostles of Jesus is said to have died in Madras in 72 AD. He was buried at the Santhome Basilica, which was earlier a small chapel. Later, his mortal remains were taken to Europe, with a relic left behind at this church, for worship. The Neo-Gothic style structure was built in the late 1890s and was renovated later. This is one of the three churches built over the tomb of an Apostle of Jesus Christ, the other two being the Basilica of Saint Peter built over the tomb of St. Peter in Rome and the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela built over the tomb of St. James, Spain.

3 The Leith castle was named after James Leith, who entered the army in 1781, became major-general in 1825, and died in Madras in 1829, after serving as judge advocate-general for nearly thirty years. On the grounds of the house, the Santhome redoubt, was built in 1751 as a refuge for the garrison of Mylapore. The erection of such small suburban forts or redoubts was part of the Company’s plan for the protection of the outlying quarters of the city.

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