

OLD FORT WILLIAM  
AND THE BLACK HOLE

A NOTE BY  
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# OLD FORT WILLIAM

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## BLACK HOLE.



**T**HE FIRST FORT WILLIAM IN BENGAL has to-day almost completely vanished from the sight and the memory of the citizens of Calcutta. Few persons know what the fort was like or where it stood. Fewer still, I believe, know that a fragment of one of its arcades is still standing within the compound of the General Post Office. In India frequent changes make short memories. Yet there are reasons of special force why the first Fort William in Bengal should not be forgotten. The old fort claims regard and commemoration from our filial piety. Modern Calcutta is its child and heir. It was the nucleus round which the city grew, and was the main guarantee of the permanence, safety, and prosperity of the early settlement. The old fort further claims regard and commemoration from our natural compassion with the suffering of a great human tragedy, for within its walls was situated the Black Hole prison in which, on the stifling night of June 20, 1756, a hundred and twenty-three brave souls were needlessly and cruelly done to death through the stupidity of those in charge of them.



Of late, however, much has been done to discharge our long neglected duty of regard and commemoration to the old fort. Its principal lines and features have been marked out, the site of the prison has been covered with polished black marble and a tablet placed on the wall above, and a white marble replica of the obelisk erected by Governor Holwell over the grave of the sufferers has been re-erected at the site by His Excellency Lord Curzon. The models now exhibited to the public of the first Fort William in Bengal and the Church of St. Anne represent efforts of another sort to enable modern Calcutta to realise more clearly the vanished past. With the aid of these reproductions in miniature of the old fort and church, and with the further aid of this note and the pictures and plans collected to illustrate subject, it is hoped that any doubts and obscurities that may have been felt regarding the history and topography of these deeply interesting buildings will be finally removed.

The first Fort William was not built in a day nor yet in a year, neither was it the work of a single man. The idea of establishing a fortified post somewhere near the mouth of the Hugli, as the best means of protecting the English trade from the oppressive exactions of the Nawab of Bengal and his officials, seems to have been first suggested by William Hedges who was Agent and Governor of the East India Company's affairs in the Bay of Bengal during the years 1682-1684. The choice of Chutanuttee, or Calcutta, to be the site of the fort must be ascribed to Job Charnock, who actually began hostilities with the Nawab. Under Charnock's direction the English withdrew from Hugli, and after occupying Chutanuttee temporarily in December 1686, and again in November 1687, at last permanently settled there on the 24th August, 1690. In 1693, after Job Charnock's death, Sir John Goldesborough visited Chutanuttee and found it in great disorder. No permission had been received from the Mogul, or the Nawab, definitely allowing the settlement, and no sort of fort had been begun. Accordingly, Sir John ordered a spot to be enclosed with a mud wall whereon to build



a factory, when permission should be granted, and bought a house for the Company, which he intended to enlarge and use for offices. In 1696, when Mr. (afterwards Sir) Charles Eyre was Agent at Calcutta, the long delayed permission to build a fort was virtually conceded by the Nawab, owing to the dangerous insurrection of Rajah Subah Sing, and a little later a *nishan* was received from Prince Azim-ush-shan for a settlement of the Company's rights at Chutanuttee, on the basis of which they rented the three adjoining towns, expecting that the revenue arising from them would defray the charges of the small garrison required for the protection of the factory. But there were still many difficulties in the way of building the fort. The Company wished to have one sufficient to protect their servants and property, but they feared to attempt fortifications on a large scale lest their appearance might excite jealousy in the native government. For military reasons the Directors recommended that the fort should be in the form of a pentagon; but the Council in Calcutta thought it safer to adhere to a rectangular shape. There was also the difficulty of finding trustworthy officers to carry out any scheme. In 1699 the Company determined to make a great effort. Bengal was declared a separate presidency, and its fort was to be called Fort William in honour of the king. Sir Charles Eyre, who had returned to Europe, was sent out again with ample instructions, means, and powers. But he returned hastily after seven months' stay in India and left the work of building Fort William to his successor John Beard. At the beginning of 1704 John Beard was succeeded by the Rotation Government,<sup>1</sup> which added the two western bastions and the greater portion of the river wall. Under the three succeeding governors, Anthony Weltden, John Russell, and Robert Hedges, the fort was completed, the latest additions being made in 1716 or 1717.

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<sup>1</sup>The Rotation Government was conducted by a Council of eight, of which the two chairmen presided in alternate weeks.





THE earliest portion of the fort was the south-east bastion and the adjacent walls. The north-east bastion was built by Governor Beard about 1701. He also in 1702 began the Factory or Government House in the middle of the fort. This 'piece of architecture' was completed by the Rotation Government in 1706. The north-west and south-west bastions were put together hastily at the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. The church of St. Anne, which stood immediately outside the fort before the east curtain wall, was built in the days of the Rotation Government and consecrated on the Sunday after Ascension Day, June 5, 1709. In 1709 too the great tank in the green before the fort, the modern Dalhousie Square, was extended and deepened, and the earth taken out was used to fill up the space between the two new bastions, the bank being faced with rubble and ballast. The river wall was begun in February, 1710, forming a wharf before the fort faced with brick and protected by a breastwork and line of guns. The western curtain begun by Governor Weltden in 1710 or 1711, was completed in 1712. A letter from Bengal, dated December 10, 1712, states that 'the wharf is finished but not the breastwork on it. The strong landing stage and the crane at the end of it, which will work at all times of the tide, are nearly done. Within the fort all that remains is a little work on one of the curtains with the construction of a broad walk round the walls and the reconstruction of the long row or central range of lodgings, running from the east to the west curtain, which are now decayed and ready to fall.' Another letter from Bengal in 1716 states that 'the long row of lodgings for the writers is finished and commodious, and that the breastwork will be finished.' Here practically the building of the fort ended. No ditch was ever made round it. It was, therefore, of very little real use as a fortification, especially as it was commanded by the church and several houses outside it. The Court of Directors not unjustly criticised Fort William in 1713 as making 'a very pompous show to the waterside by high



turrets of lofty buildings,' but having 'no real strength or power of defence.'

The subsequent additions to the fort were made not to strengthen its defences but to increase its warehouse accommodation. The import and export warehouses were situated in the arcades built within the south curtain. In March, 1729, the warehouses were further enlarged by building a verandah before them in the south-east corner of the fort, which undoubtedly obstructed in some degree the way to the south-east bastion. In 1741, there being still a want of warehouse room, Governor Braddyll built a very large one against the south end of the fort. It extended from the south-east to the south-west bastion and projected 100 or 120 feet beyond them enclosing a large area. 'By these means the two bastions were rendered of very little use for defending the south end of the fort, for the curtain between them was now become the inner wall of a warehouse and a large passage broke through it into the fort, by way of a door to this new warehouse.' From this time onwards the fort remained practically unchanged in shape till it was taken by Siraj-ud-daula in 1756.



**I**N order to picture it as it then was we must remember that in those days the river Hugli flowed much further east than it does now, and where the present Strand Road is was then deep under water. The actual site of the fort was the ground now occupied by the General Post Office, the New Government Offices, the Custom House, and the East Indian Railway House. The warehouses built along the south side of the fort skirted Khoila Ghat Street. The north side was in Fairlie Place. The east front looked out on Clive Street and Dalhousie Square, which in those days was known as the Lal Bag, or the Park. The fort was in shape an irregular tetragon. Its



north side was 340 feet long ; its south side, 485 feet ; its east and west sides, each 710 feet. At the four corners were small square bastions (1, 2, 3, 4), which were connected by curtain walls about four feet thick and eighteen feet high. They were built of thin tile bricks strongly cemented together. Each of the four bastions mounted ten guns, and the main east gate, which projected, carried five. The bank of the river was armed with heavy cannon mounted in embrasures on a wall of solid masonry (22), and the space between this river wall and the west curtain was closed at each end by small cross walls with palisaded gates. There were, however, as has been said, no proper ditches or military out-works of any kind to protect the other three sides of the fort. Within, the fort was cut into two sections by a block of low buildings running east and west (5), and chambers and arcades were built all round against the curtain walls, their roofs serving as ramparts. The two sections were connected by a narrow passage. The northern and smaller section of the fort contained the magazine for arms, the military stores, the shop for medicine, the smith's shop, and the like. It had one small river gate (8) near which stood the flag-staff (25). In the centre were the armoury (6) and laboratory (7). The block of buildings (5), which separated the north section from the south, known as the Long Row, contained the damp, unhealthy lodgings of the young gentlemen in the Company's service. These were the Writers' Buildings of the first-half of the eighteenth century. The south section of the fort had two gates, one (9) leading to the river, the steps and the landing stage, with the Company's crane 'to work at all times of the tide' at the end (11); the other (10) opening out upon the great avenue to the eastward, the road which we now variously call Dalhousie Square. North, Lal Bazaar, Bow Bazaar, and Baitakhana. The buildings on the south side of the fort were used for storing the Company's goods. The export and import warehouses (12), built on outside the south curtain in 1741, followed the line of Khoila Ghat Street. Of the



arcades within the south curtain a portion (23) is still standing in the yard of the General Post Office, being used as a shed for the wagons. West of the warehouses was the carpenter's yard (21). In the middle of the south section of the fort was the Governor's House (13), which Hamilton describes as 'the best and most regular Piece of Architecture that I ever saw in *India*.' This building formed three sides of a rectangle. Its west and principal face was 245 feet long. In the centre of this face was the great gate, and from it a colonnade ran down to the water gate and the landing stage.<sup>1</sup> Entering the great gate and turning to your left, you ascended the grand staircase which led to the hall and the principal rooms of the factory. The south-east wing contained the apartments of the Governor. A raised cloister ran round the three sides of the court enclosed within the building. On either side of the east gate of the fort (10) there extended a double row of arches parallel to the east curtain wall. The first row of arches served to contain the range of rooms built against the wall (14, 15, 16), the second row of arches formed a verandah, or piazza (18), west of the rooms. The Black Hole tragedy occurred in the rooms to the south of the gate which were formed by dividing off the space between the curtain wall and the first row of arches by a number of cross walls (14, 15, 16). Each of these arches measured 8 feet 9 inches. The first four arches formed the court of guard (14) and were left open to the piazza before them. The next nine arches formed three rooms, communicating with each other, used for the soldier's barracks (15). They were separated from the piazza before them by a small dwarf wall or parapet wall, built between the arches. The fourteenth and fifteenth arches were completely walled in and used as the Black Hole or military prison (16). This room was the most southern of the series. Its east side was the curtain wall, on its south side was a

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<sup>1</sup> There was a similar colonnade in Fort St. George, Madras. The columns were of stone, and were carried off by Dupleix to Pondicherry, but were subsequently brought back to Madras. The colonnade is still standing, having been converted into a record room.



blank cross wall built between the curtain and the south pier of the fifteenth arch. Its north side was a similar wall having a door opening inwards giving entrance to the prison from the barracks. Its west side was formed by the two bricked-up arches, with a window left in the centre of each. Along the east wall of the barracks and the Black Hole was a wooden platform (24), about six feet broad, raised three or four feet from the ground, and open underneath. South of the Black Hole there were no more rooms, the remaining space being taken up by a straight staircase (17), fifty feet long, built against the east curtain wall, leading to the south-east bastion (2). The verandah, or piazza (18), which ran all along west of the rooms was low and clumsy, but it protected them from the sun and the rain. Its arches were wider than those which formed the west side of the rooms, and measured 11 feet 3 inches.



**S**UCH was the old fort as it stood by the river side in the first-half of the eighteenth century, and such it remained till the year 1756, when Siraj-ud-daula, Nawab of Bengal, attacked and took the settlement. The settlers were quite unprepared. At first they vainly tried to defend the whole of the English quarter, but they were soon forced to abandon positions which were easily turned by the overwhelming numbers of the enemy, and to withdraw to the fort. There all was confusion. It seemed almost impossible to hold the fort, but no one could decide what should now be done. Governor Drake and the majority of the English residents hurriedly made their escape to the ships in the river, leaving Holwell and some 170 others to their fate. After a brief but gallant struggle the place was taken. On the evening of the 20th June, the Nawab entered the fort in his litter by the north river gate (8). Holwell had three interviews with him. After



much useless discussion the Nawab retired to rest giving orders that the prisoners should be secured for the night, but that no harm should happen to them. What followed may best be told in Holwell's own words.

'As soon as it was dark, we were all, without distinction, directed by the guard over us to collect ourselves into one body and sit down quietly, under the arched verandah, or piazza (18) to the west of the Black Hole prison (16), and the barracks (15) to the left of the Court of Guard (14); and just over against the windows of the Governor's easterly apartments (19). Besides the guard over us, another was placed at the foot of the stairs (17) at the south end of this verandah, leading up to the south-east bastion (2), to prevent any of us escaping that way. On the parade (where you will remember the two twenty-four pounders stood) were also drawn up about four or five hundred gun men with lighted matches (20). At this time the factory was in flames to the right and left of us; to the right the Armoury (6) and Laboratory (7); to the left the carpenter's yard (21); though at this time we imagined it was the cotta warehouses (12).<sup>1</sup>

'They ordered us all to rise up and go into the barracks (15) to the left of the Court of Guard. The barracks have a large wooden platform for the soldiers to sleep on, and are open to the west by arches and a small parapet-wall, corresponding to the arches of the verandah without. In we went most readily and were pleasing ourselves with the prospect of passing a comfortable night on the platform (24), little dreaming of the infernal apartments in reserve for us, for we were no sooner all within the barracks than the guards advanced to the inner arches and parapet-wall, and with their muskets presented, ordered us to go into the room at the southernmost end of the barracks, commonly called the Black Hole prison, whilst others from the Court of Guard,

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<sup>1</sup> Here Holwell tells the affecting story of how Leach, the Company's smith, who had made his escape, returned to show Holwell the way to escape too, and how in the end they both preferred to stay and share the fate of their fellow prisoners.



with clubs and drawn scimitars, pressed upon those of us next to them. This stroke was so sudden, so unexpected, and the throng and pressure so great upon us next the door of the Black Hole prison, that there was no resisting it; but like one agitated wave impelling another, we were obliged to give way and enter; the rest followed like a torrent, few amongst us, the soldiers excepted, having the least idea of the dimensions of a place we had never seen: for if we had, we should at all events have rushed upon the guard, and been, as the lesser evil, by our own choice, cut to pieces.

'Figure to yourself, if possible, the situation of a hundred and forty-six wretches, exhausted by continual fatigue and action, thus crammed together in a cube of about eighteen feet, in a close sultry night, in Bengal, shut up to the eastward and southward (the only quarters from whence air could reach us) by dead walls and by a wall and a door to the north, open only to the westward by two windows strongly barred with iron, from which we could receive scarce any the least circulation of fresh air.'

At six o'clock the next morning, when the door of the prison was opened, only twenty-three persons were found still alive. The bodies of the dead were promiscuously thrown into the ditch of an unfinished ravelin in front of the east gate, and covered with earth. On this spot Holwell subsequently erected an obelisk.



THE remaining history of the fort is soon told. While in the possession of the Nawab some of the inner buildings were demolished and a mosque erected, but after the recovery of Calcutta the place returned to its original uses. In June, 1758, the Company's goods were all removed and the place was entirely given up to the Military for barracks. Towards the end of 1759, orders were given to build slight apartments on 'the Cotta Godowns (12) and the



Long Row (15)' for the reception of the officers of Colonel Coote's battalion, and in 1760 the space between the East Gate and the Black Hole prison was made into a temporary church. By the beginning of 1767, all the military were withdrawn from the place, in order that it might be converted into a Custom House, and various buildings were erected to adapt it to its new uses. From this time onwards its fortunes steadily declined. The river gradually receded, and the tide of life left it to flow in other channels. It was part of the older and humbler order of things, and the new and victorious generation disdained its poor sad walls of thin brick. It at length disappeared during the reforming administration of the Marquess of Hastings. The foundation stone of the New Custom House was laid on Friday, February 19, 1819, with imposing Masonic ceremonies, and all Calcutta congratulated itself upon the vast improvement thus effected in the appearance of the city.

At the beginning of 1821 a further improvement was effected by pulling down the old obelisk erected by Holwell to mark the spot where those who perished in the Black Hole had been buried. *The Calcutta Journal* for April 6, 1821, informs its readers of this last improvement with evident satisfaction, but on April 11, a writer signing himself BRITANNICUS is rightly indignant at this 'act of sacrilege' and hopes that the tombs of Job Charnock and Surgeon Hamilton 'will not undergo a similar process of conservancy.'

From this time onward for some eighty years Calcutta remained without even a sculptured tablet to the memory of those hundred and twenty-three of her citizens who perished faithful to their duty. Well-informed writers made contributions from time to time to the local journals and periodicals about the early history of the city, but they failed to attract much popular attention.







IN 1882 a determined attempt to fix the site of the Black Hole prison was made by Mr. R. R. Bayne, C.E., of the East Indian Railway Company, who, in the course of erecting the railway offices in Fairlie Place, came across the foundations of the whole of the north end of the fort. He carefully traced out the walls, the slopes of the north-east and north-west bastions, the little river gate, and the central building used as the armoury. He thus settled the topography of the north end of the fort, and from this he attempted to infer the topography of the south end. His views were adopted by Mr. H. E. Busteed in his charming *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, and have in consequence become familiar to the public. But they were however altogether incorrect with regard to the south end of the fort and the site of the Black Hole.

The excavations of Mr. Bayne and the writings of Mr. Busteed aroused considerable interest in the old fort, and during the next few years a number of attempts were made to clear up the doubtful points in topography, particularly the position of the east or main gate of the fort and the Holwell monument which stood in front of it. No real progress, however, was made till the year 1889, when Mr. T. R. Munro discovered in the King's library in the British Museum a large map of old Calcutta, dated 1753, on the scale of 100 feet to the inch. This map was drawn by Lieutenant Wells of the Company's Artillery, and was designed to show a project of a new fort by Colonel Scott, the Engineer at the time. But it also shows the old fort in great detail. Mr. Munro at once recognising the importance of this plan had a tracing of it prepared which he deposited with the Public Works Department, and at the same time presented a photograph of it to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

The writer of this note first began to study the topography of the old fort in 1891. In that year a portion of the Custom House was pulled down and the ground opened up for laying down the foundations of the new offices of the Calcutta Collectorate.



These excavations brought to light the foundations of the east gate, and the portions of the fort south and west of it. With the copy of the large plan of the fort made by Wells in 1753 it was easy for me to trace out all the walls. After determining the topography of the east gate and the structures south of it, including the Black Hole, I investigated and fixed the true positions of the Long Row, where the writers had their lodgings, which cut the fort into two, the Factory or Government House in the centre, where the governor had his apartments or offices, also the curtain walls, especially the south curtain wall with old arcades within it, which are still standing. In 1895-96, when the old house, which used to store the Post Office records, was pulled down to make room for the new building, I was able to test the accuracy of my previous conclusions and trace out clearly the lines of the south-west bastion of the fort. The excavations were this time made with great care. None of the walls were cut away, and the lines of the curtains, the slopes of the bastion, the ramp of the staircase, the river wall and gun platforms could be seen in clear unbroken continuity.

My conclusions were placed before Government and the public. It was perceived that at last sufficient evidence was now forthcoming to fix beyond all doubt the sites of the Black Hole and the Holwell monument and to determine the rest of the topography of the fort. On February 28, 1900, a special meeting, at which Lord Curzon was present, was convened in the yard of the General Post Office by His Excellency's order to consider the whole question. His Excellency personally inspected the site of the old fort, especially that part of it where the Black Hole was situated, and the measures necessary for commemorating the various points of interest were discussed and decided. In consequence of the decisions then reached the massive masonry gate at the east end of the Post Office was removed, so that the site of the prison might be easily visible, and the site itself was covered with polished black marble and enclosed with a railing, an inscription on a black marble tablet being placed on the wall above.



From this spot onwards round the outline of the old fort the site of the original walls and bastions, whenever unoccupied by later buildings, has been marked on brass lines, sunk in a stone pavement, specially laid for the purpose, while the identity of the different features of interest has been indicated by inscribed tablets affixed to the adjoining walls. With the consent of the family the statue of Sir Ashley Eden, which had been erected upon the exact site of the old Holwell monument, was removed to Dalhousie Square and a replica of the original memorial in white marble was erected on the spot.



HIS beautiful obelisk is the personal gift of Lord Curzon to the City of Calcutta and was unveiled by His Excellency on December 19, 1902, on which occasion he made the following speech:—

‘I daresay that the worthy citizens of Calcutta may have been a good deal puzzled on many occasions during the past four years to see me rummaging about this neighbourhood and that of the adjoining Post Office in the afternoons, poking my nose into all sorts of obscure corners, measuring, marking, and finally ordering the erection of marble memorials and slabs. This big pillar which I am now about to unveil and the numerous tablets on the other side of the street are the final outcome of these labours. But let me explain how it is that they have come about and what they mean.

‘When I came out to India in this very month four years ago, one of the companions of my voyage was that delightful book *Echoes from Old Calcutta* by Mr. Busted, formerly well known as an officer in the Calcutta Mint, and now living in retirement at home. There I read the full account of the tragic circumstances under which old Fort William, which stood between the site where I am now speaking and the river, was besieged and



taken by the forces of Siraj-ud-Dowlah in 1756; and of the heroism and sufferings of the small band of survivors who were shut up for an awful summer's night in June in the tiny prison known as the Black Hole, with the shocking result that of the 146 who went in only 23 came out alive. I also read that the monument which had been erected shortly after the disaster by Mr. Holwell, one of the survivors, who wrote a detailed account of that night of horror, and who was afterwards Governor of Fort William, in order to commemorate his fellow-sufferers who had perished in the prison, had been taken down, no one quite knows why, in or about the year 1821; and Mr. Busteed went on to lament, as I think very rightly, that whereas for 60 years after their death Calcutta had preserved the memory of these unhappy victims, ever since that time, now 80 years ago, there had been no monument, not even a slab or an inscription, to record their names and their untimely fate.

'It was Mr. Busteed's writings accordingly that first called my attention to this spot, and that induced me to make a careful personal study of the entire question of the site and surroundings of old Fort William. The whole thing is now so vivid in my mind's eye that I never pass this way, without the Post Office and Custom House and the modern aspect of Writers' Buildings fading out of my sight, while instead of them I see the walls and bastions of the old Fort exactly behind the spot where I now stand, with its eastern gate, and the unfinished ravelin in front of the gate, and the ditch in front of the ravelin into which the bodies of those who had died in the Black Hole were thrown the next morning, and over which Holwell erected his monument a few years later.

'Nearly twenty years ago Mr. Roskell Bayne, of the East Indian Railway, made a number of diggings and measurements that brought to light the dimensions of the old Fort, now almost entirely covered with modern buildings; and I was fortunate enough when I came here to find a worthy successor to him and coadjutor to myself in the person of Mr. C. R. Wilson, of



the Indian Education Department, who had carried Mr. Bayne's enquiries a good deal further, cleared up some doubtful points, corrected some errors, and fixed with accuracy the exact site of the Black Hole and other features of the Fort. All of these sites I set to work to commemorate while the knowledge was still fresh in our minds. Wherever the outer or inner line of the curtain and bastions of old Fort William had not been built over I had them traced on the ground with brass lines let into stone—you will see some of them on the main steps of the Post Office—and I caused white marble tablets to be inserted in the walls of the adjoining buildings with inscriptions stating what was the part of the old building that originally stood there. I think that there are some dozen of these tablets in all, each of which tells its own tale.

'I further turned my attention to the site of the Black Hole, which was in the premises of the Post Office, and could not be seen from the street, being shut off by a great brick and plaster gateway. I had this obstruction pulled down, and an open iron gate and railings erected in its place. I had the site of the Black Hole paved with polished black marble, and surrounded with a neat iron railing, and, finally, I placed a black marble tablet with an inscription above it, explaining the memorable and historic nature of the site that lies below. I do not know if cold-weather visitors to Calcutta, or even the residents of the city itself, have yet found out the existence of these memorials. But I venture to think that they are a permanent and valuable addition to the possessions and sights of the capital of British rule in India.

'At the same time I proceeded to look into the question of the almost forgotten monument of Holwell. I found a number of illustrations and descriptions of it in the writings of the period, and though these did not in every case precisely tally with each other, yet they left no doubt whatever as to the general character of the monument, which consisted of a tall pillar or obelisk rising from an octagonal pedestal, on the two main faces of which were



inscriptions written by Holwell, with the names of a number of the slain. Holwell's monument was built of brick covered over with plaster, like all the monuments of the period in the old Calcutta cemeteries; and I expect that it must have been crumbling when it was taken down in 1821, for I have seen a print in which it was represented with a great crack running down the side, from the top to the base, as though it had been struck by lightning. I determined to reproduce this memorial with as much fidelity as possible in white marble, to re-erect it on the same site, and to present it as my personal gift to the city of Calcutta in memory of a never-to-be-forgotten episode in her history and in honour of the brave men whose life-blood had cemented the foundations of the British Empire in India. This pillar accordingly, which I am about to unveil, is the restoration to Calcutta of one of its most famous land-marks of the past, with some slight alterations of proportion, since the exact dimensions of Holwell's original pillar were found to be rather stunted when placed in juxtaposition to the tall buildings by which it is now surrounded. There is some reason to think, from the evidence of old maps, that the ditch in which the bodies were interred and the earlier monument above them, were situated a few yards to the eastwards of the site of the new monument: and I had excavations made last summer to see whether we could discover either the foundations of Holwell's obelisk, or any traces of the burial below them. The edge of the old ditch was clearly found, but nothing more. However, that we are within a few feet of the spot where those 123 corpses were cast on the morning of the 21st of June, 1756, there can be no shadow of a doubt, and their memory is now preserved, I hope for ever, within a few yards of the spot where they suffered and laid down their lives.

There are, however, two very material alterations that I have made in the external features of the monument. Holwell's inscriptions written by himself with the memory of that awful experience still fresh in his mind, contained a bitter reference to



the personal responsibility for the tragedy of Siraj-ud-Dowla, which I think is not wholly justified by our fuller knowledge of the facts, gathered from a great variety of sources, and which I have therefore struck out as calculated to keep alive feelings that we would all wish to see die. Further, though Holwell's record contained less than 50 names out of the 123 who had been suffocated in the Black Hole, I have, by means of careful search into the records both here and in England, recovered not only the Christian names of the whole of these persons, but also more than 20 fresh names of those who also died in the prison. So that the new monument records the names of no fewer than 60 of the victims of that terrible night.

'In the course of my studies, in which I have been ably assisted by the labours of Mr: S. C. Hill, of the Record Department, who is engaged in bringing out a separate work on the subject, I have also recovered the names of more than 20 other Europeans who, though they did not actually die in the Black Hole, yet were either killed at an earlier stage of the Siege, or having come out of the Black Hole alive, afterwards succumbed to its effects. These persons seem to me equally to deserve commemoration with those who were smothered to death in the prison, and accordingly I have entered their names on the remaining panels of this monument. We therefore have inscribed on this memorial the names of some 80 persons who took part in those historic events which established the British dominion in Bengal nearly a century and a half ago. They were the pioneers of a great movement, the authors of a wonderful chapter in the history of mankind: and I am proud that it has fallen to my lot to preserve their simple and humble names from oblivion, and to restore them to the grateful remembrance of their countrymen.

'Gentlemen, in carrying out this scheme I have been pursuing one branch of a policy to which I have deliberately set myself in India, namely, that of preserving, in a breathless and often thoughtless age, the relics and memorials of the past. To me the past is sacred. It is often a chronicle of errors and



blunders and crimes, but it also abounds in the records of virtue and heroism and valour. Anyhow, for good or evil, it is finished and written, and has become part of the history of the race, part of that which makes us what we are. Though human life is blown out as easily as the flame of a candle, yet it is something to keep alive the memory of what it has wrought and been, for the sake of those who come after ; and I daresay it would solace our own despatch into the unknown, if we could feel sure that we too were likely to be remembered by our successors, and that our name was not going to vanish altogether from the earth when the last breath has fled from our lips.

‘I have been strictly impartial in carrying out this policy, for I have been equally keen about preserving the relics of Hindu and Musulman, of Brahman and Buddhist, of Dravidian and Pathan. European and Indian, Christian and non-Christian are to me absolutely alike in the execution of this solemn duty. I draw no distinction between their claims. And, therefore, I am doing no more here than I have done elsewhere, if I turn to the memories of my own countrymen, and if I set up in the capital of the Indian Empire this tardy tribute to their sacrifice and suffering.

‘Gentlemen, how few of us ever pause to think about the past, and our duty to it, in the rush and scurry of our modern lives. How few of us who tread the streets of Calcutta from day to day ever turn a thought to the Calcutta past. And yet Calcutta is one great graveyard of memories. Shades of departed Governors-General hover about the marble halls and corridors of Government House, where I do my daily work. Forgotten worthies in ancient costumes haunt the precincts of this historic square. Strange figures, in guise of peace or war, pass in and out of the vanished gateways of the vanished fort. If we think only of those whose bones are mingled with the soil underneath our feet, we have but to walk a couple of furlongs from this place to the churchyard where lies the dust of Job Charnock, of Surgeon William Hamilton, and of Admiral Watson,



the founder, the extender, and the saviour of the British dominion in Bengal. A short drive of two miles will take us to the most pathetic site in Calcutta, those dismal and decaying Park Street Cemeteries where generations of by-gone Englishmen and English women, who struggled and laboured on this stage of exile for a brief span, lie unnamed, unremembered, and unknown. But if among these forerunners of our own, if among these ancient and unconscious builders of Empire, there are any who especially deserve commemoration, surely it is the martyr band whose fate I recall and whose names I resuscitate on this site ; and if there be a spot that should be dear to the Englishman in India, it is that below our feet, which was stained with the blood and which closed over the remains of the victims of that night of destiny, the 20th of June, 1756. It is with these sentiments in my heart that I have erected this monument, and that I now hand it over to the citizens of Calcutta, to be kept by them in perpetual remembrance of the past.'



THE models of the fort and church have been made by the carpenters from plans, elevations and sections prepared on a uniform scale under my directions. The series of plans and elevations was extensive and covered every feature and detail of the buildings. The mass of information now collected together about these buildings is so complete that very little was left to conjecture. The ground plan has been established by actual excavation. The direction and thickness of every wall and of the slopes of every bastion, the area of the rooms, the breadth of the staircases, the breadth of the columns and of the spaces between them, all these have been fixed by observation and measurement of actual remains *in situ*.



Coming next to the elevation of the buildings above the ground plan thus fixed, it is to be noted that we have a bone, and a very considerable bone, left of the body we desire to reconstruct. Within the Post Office compound we have still standing a fragment of the arcades belonging to the south side of the fort, and till 1895 there was also a fragment left of the south curtain wall. The arches appear sunk because the ground level of the old fort is at least a foot and-a-half below the present ground level. Allowing for this and extending the wall and the arcades round all the sides of the fort according to the established ground plan we recover almost certainly their original elevations. We have besides views of the fort by Daniell, of late date, it is true, in 1786, when the fort was in decay, but still of very great utility. One shows the south-east bastion and the whole of the east front, from which most of the details of this side of the fort can be made out. In another we are looking down at the east gate past Writers' Buildings. This does not help much, as we only gain a distant front view of the gate. A third view shows the river front. This too is not so helpful, because at the time the view was taken the fort had become the Custom House and a new front had been built out concealing the curtain wall. Thus the view shows us little more than the two riverside bastions.

We are fortunate, however, in possessing two much better and much older views of the riverside of the fort. One is an engraving by Vandergucht taken from a picture in the India Office by Lambert and Scott, painted about 1735, and published in 1736. This picture gives us practically every detail of the west elevation of the fort and the Factory or Government House within it, and beyond we also see the lofty spire of St. Anne's Church. In the great cyclone of 1737 the lofty spire fell and had to be replaced by a low cupola. This is shown by our second picture of the riverside of the fort, an engraving by Van Ryne published in 1754. In this picture the fort is viewed from the north-west, so that we gain from it some of the detail of the north elevation.



The model of the church was built up in the same way and from the same materials. The work had, to a large extent, been already done for me by the Rev. H. B. Hyde, who has published a plan and elevation of St. Anne's in his *Parish of Bengal*, but when I actually came to the making of the model, I found it necessary to introduce a good many modifications.

The complete model of the fort and the model of the church are on the scale of 10 feet = 1 inch.<sup>1</sup> The separate model of the south-east corner of the fort, intended to show the interior arrangement of the court of guard, the barracks, the Black Hole, and the staircase to the south-east bastion, is on the scale of 6 feet = 1 inch.



**I**T is hoped that the reader of this note after studying the model of the fort and retaining its main features in the mind's eye will as soon as possible pay a visit to the actual site on the west side of Dalhousie Square. The best way is to turn down Khoila Ghat Street and to enter the Post Office compound through the gate between the Old Post Office building and the new red brick Post Office buildings. This brings you at once to all that now remains of the old fort. The sunken arches before you, where the Post Office wagons are now kept, were once part of an arcade within the south curtain used for the import and export warehouses. The Post Office employés have their tiffin room above, and two arches at the east end have been closed in and made into a kitchen. The room thus formed is a good deal larger than the Black Hole, but it serves to give some idea of what it was like. The line of the south curtain wall has been marked out by brass lines let into a stone pavement running in front<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The model should be compared with the annexed plan.

<sup>2</sup> Originally it was *behind* the old arcades, for what is the front of the arcade was formerly its back, and what we should regard as its back was its front looking out into the central space within the fort.



of the old arcades. Before 1895 a portion of the old curtain wall was still standing, a double wall of thin bricks.<sup>1</sup> Two tablets with the following inscriptions indicate the nature of the site :—

The brass lines in the stone  
on the adjacent ground  
mark the position and extent  
of the south curtain  
of old Fort William.

The two lines of twelve arches  
to the west of this tablet  
are all that now remains above ground  
of old Fort William and  
originally formed a portion of the arcade  
within the south curtain.

The Black Hole prison was a small room  
formed by bricking up two arches  
of a similar but smaller arcade  
within the east curtain  
south of the east gate.

Passing on from this, to the right, up the compound of the Post Office, till you reach the gate in Dalhousie Square, you are walking along what was once the site of the parade ground. In the old days of the fort instead of the Post Office buildings on your right you would have had ranges of arches used for warehouses ; on your left would be the open parade, partly paved with brick on edge and partly turfed. At the Dalhousie Square Gate you come to the actual site of the Black Hole. The tablet above has the following inscription :—

The marble pavement below this spot  
was placed here  
by  
Lord Curzon, Viceroy and Governor-General of India,  
in 1901  
to mark the site of the prison in old Fort William  
known as the Black Hole

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph No. 24 shows this.



in which 146 British inhabitants of Calcutta  
were confined on the night of the 20th June 1756,  
and from which only 23 came out alive.

- The pavement marks the exact breadth of the prison, 14 feet 10 inches,  
but not its full length, 18 feet,  
about one-third of the area at the north-end being covered  
by the building on which this tablet is fixed.

Another tablet with the following inscription intended to guide  
visitors from Dalhousie Square to the site has been placed at the  
corner of the Post Office, by the gate, on the side facing the  
square:—

Behind the gateway  
immediately adjoining this spot  
is the site of the Black Hole prison  
in old Fort William.

Passing through the gate into the square, turning to the  
right, and ascending the steps of the Post Office, the visitor will  
see brass lines let into the main steps. These mark the angle of  
the south-east bastion, the thickness of the wall being exactly  
indicated by the space between the lines. On the adjoining wall  
is a tablet with the following inscription:—

The brass lines  
in the adjacent steps and pavement  
mark the position and extent  
of part of the south-east bastion  
of old Fort William.  
The extreme south-east point being  
95 feet  
from this wall.

The visitor should now turn round and proceed northwards  
along the footpath. At the corner of the red brick building  
opposite the marble replica of the Holwell monument is a  
tablet with the following inscription:—

Sixteen feet behind this wall  
was the entrance of the east gate



of old Fort William through which  
 the bodies of those who perished  
 in the Black Hole were brought and  
 thrown into the ditch of the ravelin  
 on the 21st June 1756.

The visitor will now naturally cross the street to the white marble replica of the Holwell monument which marks the spot where the bodies were buried. The original inscription gave only the few names that Holwell could remember and gave some of them inaccurately. The present fuller and more accurate lists are due to a careful examination of contemporary records, lists, and registers, which was conducted by Lord Curzon, in co-operation with Mr. S. C. Hill. The inscriptions are as follows :—

## I.

This monument  
 Has been erected by  
 Lord Curzon, Viceroy and Governor-General of India,  
 In the year 1902  
 Upon the site  
 And in reproduction of the design  
 Of the original monument  
 To the memory of the 123 persons  
 Who perished in the Black Hole Prison  
 Of old Fort William  
 On the night of the 20th of June, 1756.  
 The former memorial was raised by  
 Their surviving fellow-sufferer  
 J. Z. Holwell, Governor of Fort William,  
 On the spot where the bodies of the dead  
 Had been thrown into the ditch of the ravelin.  
 It was removed in 1821.

## II.

To the Memory of  
 Edward Eyre, William Baillie,  
 Revd. Jervas Bellamy, John Jenks,  
 Roger Reveley, John Carse, John Law  
 Thomas Coles, James Valicourt,



## OLD FORT WILLIAM

John Jebb, Richard Toriano,  
 Edward Page, Stephen Page,  
 William Grub, John Street,  
 Aylmer Harrod, Patrick Johnstone,  
 George Ballard, Nathan Drake,  
 William Knapton, Francis Gosling,  
 Robert Byng, John Dodd,  
 Stair Dalrymple, David Clayton,  
 John Buchanan, and Lawrence Witherington,  
 Who perished in the Black Hole'prison.

## III.

The names inscribed on the tablet  
 On the reverse side to this  
 Are the names of those persons  
 Who are known to have been killed  
 Or to have died of their wounds  
 During the Siege of Calcutta  
 In June, 1756,  
 And who either did not survive  
 To enter the Black Hole prison  
 Or afterwards succumbed to its effects.

## IV.

The names of those who perished  
 In the Black Hole prison,  
 Inscribed upon the reverse side  
 Of this monument,  
 Are in excess of the list  
 Recorded by Governor Holwell  
 Upon the original monument.  
 The additional names, and  
 The Christian names of the remainder,  
 Have been recovered from oblivion  
 By reference to contemporary documents.

## V.

To the memory of  
 Peter Smith, Thomas Blagg,  
 John Francis Pickard, John Pickering,



Michael Collings, Thomas Best,  
 Ralph Thoresby, Charles Smith,  
 Robert Wilkinson, Henry Stopford,  
 William Stopford, Thomas Purnell,  
 Robert Talbot, William Tidecomb,  
 Daniel Macpherson, John Johnson, and  
 Messrs. Whitby, Surman, Bruce,  
 Montrong, and Janniko, who perished  
 During the Siege of Calcutta.

## VI.

To the Memory of  
 Richard Bishop, Francis Hayes,  
 Collin Simson, John Bellamy,  
 William Scott, Henry Hastings,  
 Charles Wedderburn, William Dumbleton,  
 Bernard Abraham, William Cartwright,  
 Jacob Bleau, Henry Hunt,  
 Michael Osborne, Peter Carey,  
 Thomas Leach, Francis Stevenson,  
 James Guy, James Porter,  
 William Parker, Eleanor Weston, and  
 Messrs. Cocker, Bendall, Atkinson, Jennings,  
 Reid, Barnet, Frere, Wilson,  
 Burton, Lyon, Hillier, Tilley, and Alsop,  
 Who perished in the Black Hole prison.

Returning from the monument and recrossing the road the visitor should enter the compound of the Custom House. The line of the outhouses seen on the right is roughly the line of the Long Row in which the early writers lived. The outhouses bear a tablet with the following inscription:—

To the west of this tablet  
 extended the range of buildings  
 called the "Long Row"  
 which contained the lodgings  
 of the Company's writers  
 and divided the old Fort  
 into two sections.



Walking on through the compound of the Custom House the visitor soon comes to a tablet on his left marking the position of the west curtain wall. Immediately beyond this wall was the wharf and then the river which has now retreated very much further to the west. The inscription on the tablet is as follows:—

The brass lines in the stone  
on the adjacent ground  
mark the position and extent  
of the continuation of the west curtain  
of old Fort William  
near where it was met by the Long Row.

If before reaching the last noticed tablet the visitor had turned to the left, or if now returning from this tablet he turns to the right and pushes his way still further amidst the purlieus of the Custom House, he will be rewarded by finding the brass lines which mark the position of the north wall of the factory, the inner building of the fort. The tablet close by has the following inscription:—

The brass lines  
in the stone on the adjacent ground  
mark the position and extent  
of a portion of the north wall  
of the Factory, the principal building  
in the centre of old Fort William.

Leaving the compound of the Custom House the visitor should proceed to the north-east corner of the East Indian Railway office which was also the north-east corner of the fort. A brass line in the stone on the ground and a tablet commemorate the fact, the inscription being as follows:—

The brass line in the stone  
on the adjacent ground  
marks  
the position and extent  
of part of  
the north-east bastion  
of old Fort William.



Proceeding down Fairlie Place the visitor has on his left what was formerly the line of the north side of the fort, and he soon comes to a tablet with the following inscription marking the position of the north-west bastion :—

The brass lines  
in the stone on the adjacent ground  
mark the position and size of part of  
the north-west bastion  
of old Fort William.

Continuing a little further down Fairlie Place, entering the gate on the left and proceeding on till he reaches the quadrangle inside the East Indian Railway office, the visitor will see on the wall to his right one more tablet with the following inscription :—

• The brass lines  
in the stone on the adjacent ground  
mark the position and extent of the  
northern portion of the west curtain  
of old Fort William.

This tablet marks the position of the  
North River Gate through which Siraj-ud-Daula entered the fort on  
the evening of the 20th June 1756.  
Behind this tablet to the south of the  
gate stood the great flag-staff  
of the fort.

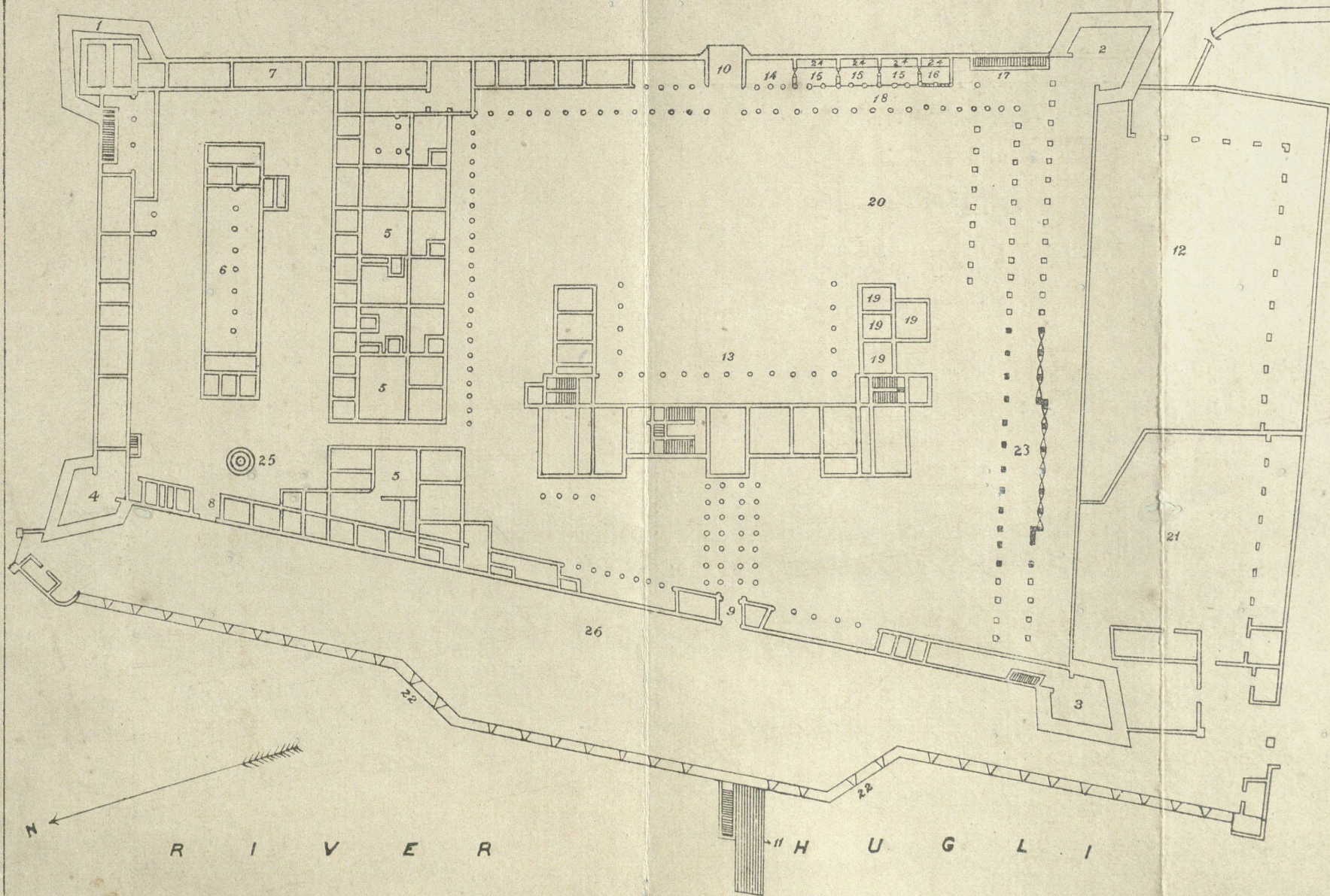




# FORT WILLIAM, 1756.

Scale 90 Feet = 1 Inch.

[The scale of the model of the fort is 10 feet = 1 inch.]



## REFERENCES.

1. N.-E. Bastion.
2. S.-E. Bastion.
3. S.-W. Bastion.
4. N.-W. Bastion.
5. Writers' Buildings.
6. Armoury
7. Laboratory
8. North River Gate.
9. South River Gate.
10. East Gate.
11. Landing Stage Stairs and Crane.
12. Export and Import Warehouses
13. Governor's House.
14. Court of Guard.
15. Barracks.
16. Black Hole.
17. Stairs to the S.-E. Bastion.
18. Verandah.
19. Governor's Apartments.
20. Parade.
21. Carpenter's Yard.
22. River Wall.
23. Arcades still standing.
24. Wooden Platform.
25. Flagstaff.
26. Wharf