

## CHAPTER IV

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#### The Building of Government House and its Builder

And further yet that noble edifice,  
The seat of Government and Wellesley's pride,  
Type of the brains that fill that noble head of his,  
And the high horse he loved so well to ride.  
'Twas built against the British powers allied

When o'er the dams and banks of Leadenhall  
His grand magnificence poured forth its tide.  
Directors' tears cemented each fair wall,  
And joint stock sighs but firmer knit each rising hall.

Tom Raw the Griffin, 1824.

Government House owes its existence to Marquis Wellesley, Governor-General from 1798 to 1805. He assumed office on the 17th May, being then Baron Wellesley and Earl of Mornington and went into occupation of the Government House of those days, generally known as Buckingham House, which stood practically where the South-East wing of the present house stands. It was a house built round three sides of a quadrangle facing South on to the Esplanade and was rented from Nawab Dilwar Jung. Lord Wellesley was dissatisfied not only with the state of disrepair in which he found the building but also with the unsuitability of the rooms which he considered to be too few in number and too small in size for their purpose. Within a month he had decided to build a more suitable residence and is credited with having declared that India should be ruled from a Palace and not from a Counting House; with the ideas of a Prince, not with those of a retail dealer in muslins and indigo. Without consulting or even informing the Court of Directors of what he was doing he proceeded at once to put his plan into execution and called on Captain Wyatt (an Engineer officer and nephew of a well-known English architect named James Wyatt) and Edward Tiretta, an Italian who was the East India Company's Civil Architect, to prepare plans for the building. Captain Wyatt's design was preferred and accordingly he is the architect responsible for Government House. The Chief Engineer, Major-General Cameron, was then instructed to furnish an estimate of the cost which he put at £66,150 which was accepted and the work was put in hand forthwith.

On 2nd October, 1798, Nawab Dilwar Jung signed a deed of release and assignment of the rented Government House for £13,450 and other houses and land were purchased in order to make the compound, the total cost of which, together with the £13,450 paid for the old Government House, was £71,437.

There was no ceremonial laying of any foundation stone, the Governor General having left for Madras in connection with the Mysore Campaign (which resulted in the storming of Seringapatam at which Tippu Sultan was killed on 4th May, 1799), but the first brick was laid on 5th February, 1799, by one of the supervisors, a Mr. Timothy Hickey of the Engineer Department, otherwise unknown to fame.

The house was completed on the 18th January, 1803, although its construction had been

sufficiently advanced to permit of official Parties and Levees being held in it from April 1802 onwards and Lord Wellesley took up his residence in it many months before the last artisan was out of the house.

The cost of the buildings was 87,790 and 18,560 was spent on Furniture and plate so that with the 71,437 spent on acquiring the land on which it stood, the total cost was about 178,000 in addition to which 3,433 was spent to make two new streets (Government Place North and Wellesley Place). Lord Curzon estimates that this total cost is only a third or a quarter of what it would have cost to build the house a hundred years later. That this estimate is not far wrong may be gauged from the fact that its valuation for municipal rates to-day is in round figures Rs. 19 lakhs or 142,500 while the grounds are valued at Rs.48 lakhs or 360,000, a total of 502,500, the subsidiary buildings being valued at Rs. 2-1/4 lakhs or 16,000. The result of the expenditure was, in his words, to provide what is without doubt the finest Government House occupied by the representative of any Sovereign of Government in the world. But since he wrote those words Viceroy's House, New Delhi, has been built and Government House, Calcutta, must without question yield pride of place to that impressive palace.



For several reasons some mention must be made here of the Council House which was one of the houses demolished to make room for Government House. First, because it was itself an old Government House; second, because it gave its name to Council House Street and third, because the present South-West wing containing the Governor's private apartments stands on part of its site.

The Council House was a large and handsome edifice built round three sides of a quadrangle and it belonged to the Company having been built in 1765 in the general reconstruction after the troubles of 1756 and 1757. It was intended to house a large number of Government offices as well as the Council Chamber, but for the first ten years of its existence it was appropriated by the Governor as his official residence until in 1775 Warren Hastings for the convenience of public business relinquished it and for the Governor General's occupation hired Buckingham House to its East which Lord Wellesley found so inconvenient.

Lord Curzon in his book erroneously describes the site of Buckingham House and the Council House as being in the South-East and South-West corners of the present compound but Baillie's map of 1792 reproduced in Volume I of Curzon's book makes it clear beyond doubt that both fronted on to the Esplanade Row which ran in a straight line in continuation of Dharamtolah Street to Chandpal Ghat. The drive running past the South front of Government House used to be part of the Esplanade Row and is on exactly the same alignment. Since the old Esplanade was interrupted by the great South-East and South-West gates of Government House it has been

divided into two Esplanade East, facing the Ochterlony Monument and Esplanade West on to which face the Town Hall and the High Court.

So much for the actual building of the house. Now for some detailed description of its famous builder which has been purposely omitted from earlier chapters as it seemed appropriate that he should have a place to himself.

In view of the large mass of literature there is about Lord Wellesley it is as unnecessary as it is impossible to give here anything more than the briefest sketch so as to afford some impression of the kind of man who conceived and built Government House.



Lord Wellesley was only 37 when he assumed office and he held office for 7 years, there was being only three Governors General who have exceeded this---Warren Hastings, 13 years; Marquis Hasting 9 years; and Lord Dalhousie 8 years.

He was an intimate friend of Pitt and shared Pitt's distrust and Dislike of the French. His main idea was to smash the French power in the East and to beat them in the race to form an Empire in India. Napoleon was at the time in Egypt with his undefeated legions dreaming of the conquests of Alexander the Great and was in touch with Tippu Sultan in Mysore. Lord Wellesley achieved his object at a monetary cost which infuriated the Court of Directors in London, but he doubled the territories of the Company, transforming it from a mercantile body into a political power with a preponderating influence throughout India. His method of achieving his object was to pursue the policy that the British must be the one paramount power in India and that native Prince could only retain the personal insignia of sovereignty by surrendering their political independence. When Princes refused to enter into satisfactory treaties he declared war on them. The history of India since his time has been but the gradual development of his policy which received its finishing touch when Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1877.

The first war he fought was against Tippu Sultan before he had held office, a twelve-month, and it was completely victorious. His share of the prize money of Seringapatam amounted to £100,000 but he refused to take it. For this victory he was made an Irish Marquis and the Court of Directors in 1801 voted him an annuity of £5,000 per annum for life. Tippu's seat in the Throne Room and the two guns flanking the Private Entrance are trophies of this campaign. In addition to the annuity, the Directors presented him with a Star made of some of Tippu's jewels: his picture in the Brown Drawing Room (reproduced as the frontispiece of this book) shows him wearing this.

The next war, some three years later, was the Third Maratha War, 1802-1804, fought

because some of the Maratha Princes refused to be bound by a treaty signed by the Peshawar of Poona who was military head of the Maratha Confederacy.

The campaigns which made up this war are perhaps the most glorious in the history of British arms in India, and the heroes of them were General Arthur Wellesley, younger brother of Lord Wellesley and afterwards Duke of Wellington, who laid the foundations here of his subsequent career, and General Lake afterwards Lord Lake.

This war ended in an enormous addition to British territory—the Madras Presidency practically as it exists to-day for one thing, Orissa and the territories North of the Jumna and west of Benaras for another—and it finally broke up and finished French military power in India and left it in no doubt that Britain was the paramount power.

He also entered into peaceful treaties with other Princes in accordance with his policy.

This gives us the picture of a far-seeing and determined man of strong will, inflexible and even ruthless in carrying out his purpose and yet there was a great streak of vanity in his make-up.

When he started for India in November, 1797, he had already fully made up his mind to fill a role not only in the political but in the social sphere as well which would leave all his predecessors far behind and would set (as it did) an example which probably few of his successors would be able or willing to follow. The Morning Chronicle wrote: "To such a degree is his frigate encumbered with stores, carriages and baggage that should the reencounter of an enemy make it necessary to prepare for action Lord Morning ton will inevitably suffer from clearage in the course of six minutes a loss of at least £2,000."

To him pomp and parade were the indispensable mechanism of Oriental Government and he elevated the spectacular to the level of an exact science. His entertainments, ceremonies and processions, equally with his palaces, were a part of his conception of British rule in the East and no sooner was the new Government House open than it became the scene of a series of entertainments such as had never before been seen in Calcutta.

He was not only an aristocrat but an autocrat too, and he treated the members of his Council with almost undisguised contempt and also had the greatest contempt for the European society of Calcutta although he entertained it so lavishly.

He treated the Court of Directors with almost equal contempt and entirely disregarded their injunctions to keep the peace, not to meddle with the Native States and to husband the depleted resources of the Company. It is typical of his dealings with them that only in March, 1802 when the new Government House was already about to be the scene of official entertainments and had been building for over three years did the Court hear for the first time of its existence ! There had been constant complaints and rebukes from the Court to Wellesley about his administration to which he sent haughty replies or none at all, and this specific instance produced the explosion rendered inevitable as a result of the ever-growing tension over the whole field of policy—his wars, his treaties and alliances, his appointments and his sublime indifference to orders from Home.

The Court would gladly have dispensed with his services but he had the constant support of Pitt, the Prime Minister, and of Lord Castlereagh, President of the Board of Control. However, when they had obtained sufficient detailed information about the cost of Government House the Court drew up a prodigiously long dispatch reviewing all the past delinquencies of Lord Wellesley and conveying their censure. This dispatch, while acknowledging his brilliant services, accused him of such a series of constitutional deviations, frequent disregard of all authority and continued assumption of new authority that the character of Indian Government had been changed into a pure and simple despotism. The Government House crime figured largely in the detailed complaints.

The Board of Control refused to approve the dispatch but drafted another one, much less severe in tone which, while saying nothing about the building of Government House, rebuked Wellesley in dignified terms for despotic and unconstitutional methods of administration. Wellesley had, however, left India before this was sent off.

For some years after his return attempts were made in the House of Commons to censure him and even to impeach him but these were all negated by large majorities and he subsequently filled, until he was an old man of 75, many honorable offices, viz., Ambassador Extraordinary to Spain, 1809; Foreign Secretary, 1809-1812; Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, 1821-1828, and again 1833-1834; Lord Steward, 1832-1833; and Lord Chamberlain, 1835.

In 1827 he was even offered the Governor Generalship of India again by Canning in succession to the not very successful Lord Amherst, but Wellesley, who was then 67 and Viceroy of Ireland, refused it.

In his old age when he was somewhat impoverished, the Court of Directors voted him the sum of £20,000 which was a noble and handsome gesture on their part in view of the bad terms on which they and Wellesley had been their ways parted.

The Wellesley family played a great part in establishing the British Empire in India and indeed, it was very much a family affair, for apart from the guiding genius of Wellesley himself there was his younger brother, Arthur, who conducted the brilliant campaign in the Deccan during the Third Maratha War while yet another younger brother, Henry, afterwards Lord Cowley and Ambassador at Vienna and Paris, was Wellesley's Private Secretary.

Wellesley died in 1842 at the age of 82 and is buried in the chapel at Eton. He is one of the few men who have been educated both at Eton and Harrow. His career at Harrow was, however, short and was brought to a class after an incident in which a new and unpopular head master was locked out, Wellesley taking a prominent part in the affair. He then went to Eton.