

CHAPTER V

Barrackpore

Here from the cares of Government released
Indian Governors their ease enjoy,

In pleasures

by the contrast much increased
Their intermediate moments they employ.
Wellesley first stamp'd it his. He was the boy
For making ducks and drakes with public cash,
Planned a great house that time might not destroy ;
Built the first floor, prepared bricks, beam and sash
And then retired, and left it in this dismal hash.

Tom Raw the Griffin, 1824

In telling the story of Government House it is necessary to take notice of Barrack pore also not only because both are the creation of Lord Wellesley and more or less contemporaneous but because Barrack pore is complementary to Government House in the same way that Vice regal Lodge, Simla, is complementary to Viceroy's House, New Delhi. The Governor General used to spend the whole of the year in Bengal, apart from tours, Barrack pore being his habitual summer residence. Lord Amherst was the first Governor General to go to Simla : he only went for one year, 1829, while on the march in Northern India, and the practice did not become an annual custom till the time of Sir John Lawrence in 1864, although several Governors General in between spent some hot weathers there. Even after that date the Viceroys, as the Governor of Bengal still does, used Barrack pore House as a country house for week-ends.

The present house, however, is but a shadow of the house there would have been had Wellesley started this project earlier and been able to see it through before he left India.

As in the case of Government House, Calcutta, the whole business was carried through without the knowledge of the Court of Directors who, as soon as they heard of it, explicitly forbade any further expenditure on it. As Wellesley was no longer in India their orders were obeyed! A portion of their dispatch ran as follows:--"Our surprise and astonishment (i.e., at the building of Government House, Calcutta) have been much increased by the communications made to us (in the Bengal Public Letter of 4th July, 1805) by which we learn, notwithstanding the heavy expense already incurred on account of the Government House at Calcutta, that a Building of considerable extent has been commenced at Barrack pore for the residence of the Governor General; this too at a time when our finances are in a state of the utmost embarrassment, and when we are called upon to make the greatest exertions to supply you with funds from Europe to assist in defraying the extraordinary expenses of the war. How to account for the inconsistency of such a proceeding we know not. To what purpose this building can be converted we are at a loss to conceive, having no plan or estimates to form an opinion on the subject; but we positively direct that no further expense be incurred upon it without our previous sanction, trusting that our present Governor General (i.e., Sir George Barlow) will be particularly mindful of our repeated injunctions with regard to Public Works and Buildings in future, and at the same time studiously endeavor to diminish the expense we have hitherto incurred on this account."

As a matter of fact the Directors need not have troubled to send These instructions for Lord Cornwallis who succeeded Wellesley in July 1805 and had very different ideas had at once ordered the building of Wellesley's new Palace to be stopped and the uncompleted building was finally

pulled down and the materials disposed of –probably partly in enlarging the present house by Lord Hastings (1813-1823). To turn to the circumstances this led up to the creation of Barrack pore House and Park.

A British cantonment had been founded at Barrack pore (whence the name) in 1775 and bungalows for Europeans soon sprang up round it. In 1875 Government bought 70 acres of land and two bungalows for the occupation of the Commander-in-Chief which were destined to form the nucleus of the present Park and House.

On 31st December, 1800, Wellesley wrote to Sir Alured Clark, the Commander-in-Chief, announcing that he intended to resume the Commander-in-Chief's Barrack pore residence for the use of the Governor General and that other suitable arrangement would be made for the Commander-in-Chief. In accordance with this decision the transfer was made on 1st February, 1801, the Commander-in-Chief being given a house allowance of Rs.500 per month in lieu, and Wellesley started to occupy the house almost at once. He was content with it for the next three years, though he immediately set about enlarging and improving the Park, and it was not till the beginning of 1804 when the new Government House in Calcutta had been open for a year and so ceased to pre-occupy his mind that he bethought himself of building a new palace at Barrack pore. He therefore began to find the same sort of fault with his Barrack pore House as he had found with the Council House and Buckingham House in Calcutta and said that it was unsafe and must be pulled down and a fresh house built.

He accordingly had it demolished and started to build an enormous palace estimated to cost £50,000 (a comparison of this with the estimate of £66,000 for Government House, Calcutta, will give some idea of the kind of house Wellesley would have put up if he had stayed on) and even dallied with the idea of constructing a straight avenue to connect the two Government Houses! The expense of this, which would have had to be driven through a thickly populated part of Calcutta, was however, too much even for his magnificent conceptions. His new palace had been completed as far as the ground storey when in July, 1805; he resigned and returned to England. Its site was about 200 yards South-East of Lady Caning's tomb and by proceeding along the road which runs from the House past the tomb till the gate is reached which opens on to the public portion of the Park mounds of earth can be seen immediately in front of the gate and across the public road which are the remains of excavations made in 1924 as a result of which the foundations were discovered as well as those of a Green House which Lord Hastings put up when he demolished Wellesley's uncompleted palace. This Green House is marked on old maps. To the west or river-side of these remains is a masonry chabutra on which the band used to play.

While this new house was being built Wellesley constructed a Temporary house, consisting of three large rooms opening on to a verandah, some 700 yards to the North-West which was the nucleus of the present house, the three rooms being what is now the central block of the building. Sir George Barlow who was Governor General from 1805-1807 converted each corner of the south verandah into a small room thus greatly improving the comfort of the residence but it was left to Lord Hastings (1813-1823) to throw out the wings on either side and to add the North Portico and the upper Entrance Hall, now used as a billiard room, which converted the house into its present form, more than doubling its size and rendering it capable of accommodating a limited number of guests as well as the family of the Governor General.

The house itself is, as a matter of fact, badly adapted for a summer residence as its design is not suited for the purpose. What is needed is a series of rooms which will catch the South breeze at night and while this condition was fulfilled by the original three-roomed house, the building, as altered by Sir George Barlow and added to by Lord Hastings, leaves all the bedrooms with no

through draft and the suites on the North completely cut off from the South wind as also is the dining room and the large sitting room to the West of the main drawing room.

To the house itself there have been practically no structural Alterations since Lord Hastings enlarged it. Lord Auckland (1835-1842) added the balcony on the Western side; Lord Litton (1876-1880) the exterior staircase on the South front in place of an undignified iron staircase which was previously there, and Lord Ripon (1880-1884) the wooden porch in front of Lord Litton is staircase while Lord Minto (1905-1910) installed electric light, laid the floor in the drawing room and redecorated the entire house.

The house has naturally never been the scene of much ceremonial as it has always been used as a place of relaxation, but there have been balls and entertainments in it and the large central drawing room was used for services before Barrack pore church at the North Edge of the grounds was consecrated in 1847 and Bishop Heber preached in this room on 27th December, 1823, while the famous Sirampore missionaries, Carey, Marshman and Ward, used to come over the river as guests of the Governor General.

The most stormy episode it has witnessed was the mutiny of 1824 when the native regiments in the Cantonment refused to cross the water to go to the first Burmese War. Lord and Lady Amherst were in residence with the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Edward Paget, almost alone, and would undoubtedly have been captured and held as hostages by the mutineers if they had fully realized how unprotected they were. British artillery was brought up from Dum-Dum and the fight which ensued with the mutineers raged not 400 yards from the house, some of the Amherst's servants being wounded by stray bullets which entered the cook-house and also fell into the water under the windows. To add to the danger all the sentries in and about the house on the night the mutiny broke out belonged to the mutinous regiment.

Mutiny seems to have been Barrack pore's strong point for in 1852 at the time of the Second Burmese War it was only prevented by a hair's breadth, while Barrack pore was the first scene of the 1857 mutiny, the native regiment mutinying here in February and being disbanded before the main conflagration broke out at Meerut and Delhi in May.

A great deal more has been done by its successive occupants for the garden and grounds than has been done for the house.

The area of the whole Park is nearly 350 acres and the cost of Acquiring it was £9,577. Lord Wellesley is responsible for this as he started acquiring the land and making the Park as soon as he entered into occupation of the Commander-in-Chief's house and long before he conceived the idea of a second palace there. The land when he acquired it was as flat as a billiard table and was covered with swamps and jungle. Wellesley's dream was to convert this into an English park and so he set convict lab our to the task of draining and clearing the land and shaping it into hillocks and undulations, the earth for which was largely obtained by excavations in order to make pieces of ornamental water.

Desiring the distant view of a Church spire to complete the illusion of English scenery, he even gave Rs. 10,000 towards the building of the Danish Church at Sirampore, though it was then the property of a foreign government and the shrine of a non-Anglican creed!

Before he left he had completed the construction of a stable (still in use) with stalls for 36 horses and standing for four carriages together with a coachman's bungalow; the beautiful balustraded bridge over the Moti Jheel just to the North of the house; an aviary for large birds; a

bungalow for the Band and a kitchen and servants' quarters which still exist. He also constructed the exiting road from Calcutta as the first section of the Grand Tank Road and had it planted on either side with trees, it being opened to the public the day before he handed over charge to Cornwallis. Along this road is a series of tall masonry towers, one of which is close to the Flagstaff to the North of the house. Lord Curzon states that they were semaphore stations for the Governor General's use and would have been continued to Bombay had the electric telegraph not been introduced. They may have been used for signaling but official records prove that they were built by Colonel Everest in 1830 for the great Trigonometrically Survey and formed the finishing base connecting Bengal with the rest of India and the starting point for Bengal.

Wellesley also established a menagerie in the North-East corner of the Park which continued to exist for 75 years until the Zoological Gardens at Calcutta was opened by Edward VII as Prince of Wales in 1876.

A portion of the menagerie buildings still stands and is used as Malis' quarters, but the menagerie still lives, in the way things do live in India, by names given to things connected with it. The Lily Tank is often known as the Aviary Tank, there being little doubt that the conservatory on its bank with its broken Gothic arches has been made out of what was once an aviary started by Lord Auckland (1835-1842) who used some sham ruins for the purpose. Another tank is still called the Deer Tank, memories of days when there were deer in the Park, days which Lord Litton (1922-1927) tried to bring back by bringing half-a-dozen deer from Barisal and putting them in an enclosure near Lord Minto's Temple of Fame. Yet another is known as the Rhinoceros Tank while memories of Lord Wellesley's aviary are preserved by the bustee opposite the North-East corner of the Park known as Chiriakhana. The Governor General's elephants used to be kept at Barrack pore and to this day the place across the Grand Trunk Road to the North North-East of the Park is known as Hatikhana, although the last of the elephants was sold in Lord Elgin's time.

Lord Hastings (1813-1823), in addition to dismantling the beginnings of Wellesley's new palace and enlarging the present house, brought from Agra, where he found it lying in the artillery yard, the lovely lotus basin and fountain carved in relief on white marble which is in front of the South entrance of the house. It probably came originally from the Grand Mogul's palace in Agra Fort. The stone sundial close to the fountain was set up by Lord Elgin in 1895.

Lord Auckland (1835-1842) and his sisters, the Misses Eden, converted an old thatched bungalow in the flower garden into the plant and seed house which still exists and made a flower garden in front of it while Lord Ellenborough (1842-1844) laid out the broad terrace walk which runs from the lower landing stage just below Lady Canning's grave up to the house. Lady Canning (1856-1861) made the raised pathway leading from the South of the house to the upper landing stage. The girder bridge to link the landing stage was added by Lord Ronaldshay (1917-1922). Before this the ordinary landing place (called Nishan Ghat) had been higher up near the Flagstaff. Lady Canning also put the pillared balustrade round the semi-circular terrace on the South of the house, planted blue Convolvulus (Morning Glory) so as to grow over it and opened out the big Banyan tree which was previously closed in by shrubs. Lady Canning's road to the new landing stage was converted into a leafy tunnel of bamboos by Lady Ripon in 1880. Since Lady Canning realized the possibilities of the Banyan tree it has been gratefully used by every occupant of the house as an open air room for meals and for sitting in. Its age has been computed by Rai Saheb A.C. Pal, F.R.H.S. the late Park Superintendent, to be 240 years. In 1925 he questioned an old man born in about 1830 whose father had told him that the tree was there before the East India Company acquired the land in 1785: it must therefore have been a large and noticeable tree at that time. Its height is 85 feet, it has nearly 400 aerial roots and it covers an area of 60,000 square feet (which would be considerably larger if it had not been prevented from spreading beyond its present limits). The parent trunk died before Lord Mayo's time (1869) probably as the result of damage done by the great cyclone of 1864. Its rival in the Botanical Gardens at Sibpur is known to have grown from a seed deposited in the crown of a date palm in 1782. So that, though by artificial means the Barrack pore Banyan has but been allowed to attain the same circumference as the Sibpur one it is much older.

When Barrack pore is in use the Banyan tree serves as an outdoor Pavilion in which the whole day is spent till evening, meals being served there, and it has sheltered the present King and Queen as well as many other members of the Royal Family and foreign royal families.

In 1888-1889, owing to the receding of the channel, a new landing stage had to be made some 600 yards downstream (near Lady Caning's tomb) and in 1894 Lord Elgin made a road running from it to the house parallel with and close to Lord Ellen borough's Road but on the river level which he shaded with a bamboo tunnel but Lord Minto (1905-1910) cut this down as he thought it obscured the view. The lower landing place has now disappeared and all that can be seen of the bamboo tunnel are two small pillars on the right a few yards before coming to Lady Caning's tomb on one of which is a tablet saying "This avenue was planted by the Countless of Elgin in 1895". These pillars were at the corner of a platform under bowers on which were seats so that ladies could rest on their 600 yards walk to the house.

In 1904-1905, however, the channel swung back and Lady Caning's Landing place could be brought into use again and has been used ever since.

An improvement Lord Curzon made was to drain and turf Moti Jheel, the long tank between the North front of the house and the Cantonment church, which had been a prolific breeding ground for mosquitoes. The Jheel was still further filled up by his successor Lord Minto.

There are various buildings in the Park, most of which are Bungalows built to supplement the accommodation in the main house.

The original thatched bungalows were pulled down by Lord Elgin in 1863-1865 and in their place were built the present ones. Of these, the one to the North-West of the house near the Flagstaff is called Flagstaff Bungalow and is the Private Secretary's bungalow. The Flagstaff is the most of H.M.S. "Kent", Flagship of Admiral Watson which was so badly damaged in the bombardment of Chandernagore in 1757 that she had to be beached and broken up at Barrack pore. North-East of Government House are bungalows 1 and 2 intended for guests while almost due East in the Military Secretary's bungalow generally known as Honeymoon House owing to the frequency with which it has been lent for very many years to newly married couples. There are records showing that Macaulay's sister, Hannah, in 1835 spent her honeymoon in the predecessor of the present Honeymoon House and Lord Curzon tells of how one of his guests, then an official of the highest rank, wandered pensively away in the direction of this bungalow and on Lord Curzon's subsequently enquiring the reason he learned that his guest was revisiting for the first time the house which had played such an important part in his life thirty years before in the 1870's. To the West of the Military Secretary's bungalow is buried the famous race horse, "My all King," belonging to Lord William Beresford which died on the Calcutta Race Course in November, 1893. It won, among many other races, the Viceroy's Cup in 1887, 1888 and 1890. Part of the inscription on the marble monument over the grave reads: - "In memory of one who during a career of unprecedented success on the Indian turf proved himself a true king in courage, honesty and stoutness of heart and who out of a long series of equine friends stands highest in the affection of him who raised this stone, Will Beresford."

Walking from the house past the Military Secretary's bungalow a cross-drive is reached shaded by a magnificent avenue of mahogany trees which, from their age, were undoubtedly planted by Wellesley. On the other side of this drive is a fine rosary made by Lord Curzon and added to by his successor, Lord Minto. It consists of a large circular lawn surrounded by pergolas from which others radiate like spokes of a wheel. Lord Minto designed and had constructed a large stone basin and fountain 40 feet in diameter and holding 23,000 gallons of water intended for the centre of this rosary, but there were engineering difficulties about the site and so the fountain was placed in front of the Seed House and is often used as a bathing pool. Apart from the rosary many other formal gardens have been designed and laid out by various successive occupants of Barrack

pore, some of which still exist. An account of these is to be found in a booklet by Rai Saheb A.C. Pal, Park Superintendent from 1907-1931, called THE HISTORY OF BARRACKPORE PARK, which was printed in the Private Secretary's Press in 1932.

Close to Flagstaff Bungalow is a building modeled after a Greek Temple which was erected by Lord Minto (1807-1813) in commemoration of 24 officers who fell in the conquest of Java and the Isle de France (Mauritius) in 1810 and 1811.

In 1844 Lord Ellenborough added a tablet in commemoration of the officers who fell at Maharajpur and Punniar in 1843 in the fighting in Gwalior due to disputed succession in the Scandia family. As Sir Charles Napier's brilliant Sindh Campaign was fought in the same year it can only be concluded that Lord Ellenborough, the comparatively insignificant actions of Maharajpur and Punniar because he himself was present when the former was fought. Lord Ellenborough, in commemoration of this campaign also erected the Gwalior Monument opposite the water gate of Fort William, made of Jaipur marble and surmounted by a cupola made from the metal of guns taken from the enemy, in the centre of which is a sarcophagus on which are engraved the names of those who fell at the battles of Punniar and Maharajpur.

About 500 yards down the river bank from the house along Lord Ellenborough's walk is the grave of Lady Canning who died at Government House, Calcutta, on 18th November, 1861, of malaria contracted while stopping to sketch in the Terai on her way back from Darjeeling. The Viceroy decided to bury her at Barrackpore which she had loved so dearly and for the beautifying of which she had done so much and to enclose a sufficient space of ground for his successors. Fortunately none of them has had occasion to use it.

Her grave is beside the place where she used to sit and the ground was consecrated by Bishop Cotton.

The monument originally erected over the grave was designed by Lady Canning's sister, Lady Waterford, and consisted of a large marble platform ornamented with inlaid mosaic in the Agra fashion with a headstone rising at one end. This was found to suffer so badly from the monsoon rains that in 1873 it was transferred by Lord Northbrook to the south transept of Calcutta Cathedral where it stood till 1913, a simpler reproduction without the inlaid work being erected in its place over the grave. In 1913, the Cathedral authorities, finding that its great size blocked the south transept, obtained permission to remove the monument to the North portico of St. John's Church, the earlier Cathedral Church of Calcutta, where it stands to-day.

At the extreme South-East end of the Park adjacent to the Grand Trunk Road is the Eden School or Viceroy's Park School, a building of Gothic architecture founded by Lord Auckland at his own expense in 1836. This school which now calls itself the Barrackpore Government Park School always claimed to be under the special patronage of the Viceroy who one during his term of office entertained the boys in the grounds of the house and distributed the prizes. This custom has been transferred to the Governor of Bengal, who however is expected to make this an annual instead of a quinquennial function.

As regards the Park in general, originally there was little or no distinction between Park and Gardens, but as the public were increasingly admitted to the former and as the cultivation of the latter developed so they gradually acquired in some measure a separate existence although in parts there was no boundary line between the two, and roads to which the public were admitted ran through both. Lord Elgin complained in 1862 that there was only one private walk left to him, namely, that along the river bank to Lady Canning's grave, and that the whole of the Garden, as well as the Park, was open to the public. Subsequently the Vice-regal ownership was more definitely re-asserted, but during the last half century the process has been one of progressive concessions to the convenience either of the Cantonment or of the public. Lord Litton lent the Vice-regal Band Barracks as a Library and Reading Room to the Barrackpore Club in 1878 and this loan was

continued by each of his successors. At a later date the members of the club were permitted to make and to keep up lawn tennis courts in the Vice regal grounds. In 1891, Lord Lansdowne gave leave to the Barrack pore Golf Club to establish links and play in the Park, with certain reservations as to hours when the Viceroy was in residence and one of the bungalows in the Grounds was always lent to the Club members during the summer months.

Picnic parties were also freely admitted to the Park and leave was readily given to fish in the tanks. In the summer months when the Viceroy was at Simla both Gardens and Park were thrown open without restriction to the public.

There are so many trees spread over so great an area that it would be very difficult to give any account of them in a way which would enable them to be identified. There is said to be nothing else in India or indeed in Asia to compare with the Park and its broad stretches of undulating grass-land with bold clumps of trees and occasional pieces of ornamental water and much though his successors have owed to Wellesley for providing the magnificent Government House in Calcutta their debt for the peaceful English charm of Barrack pore is almost greater.