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5. A HISTORIC MONUMENT ON HUDSON BAY

BY

F. J. ALCOCK

On the shores of Hudson Bay stands a historic monument which rivals in interest the better known fortresses of Quebec and Louisburg. Like these two strongholds, the history of Fort Prince of Wales at Churchill is part of the story of the struggles between France and England for the mastery of the northern part of the American continent. The reason for the building of this most northerly of the American fortresses, the story of its construction, its history and capture, and the condition in which it stands to-day seem to be of sufficient interest to warrant restatement.

Fort Prince of Wales stands on the summit of Eskimo Point, a low ridge of rock jutting out into Hudson Bay on the west side of the mouth of Churchill river. Opposite is another, but shorter, promontory—Cape Merry. Between these two low ridges lies the harbour of Churchill, the only natural harbour on the west coast of Hudson Bay.

Churchill harbour was discovered in September, 1619, by a Danish sea-captain named Jens Munck who with two ships spent the following winter there; it was not, however, until the establishment of The Hudson's Bay Company that any settlement was made in the region. After The Hudson's Bay Company received its charter from King Charles I, in 1670, trading posts were soon established at the mouths of the larger rivers which flow into the Bay. Within fifteen years there were five of these forts, Albany River, Hayes Island, Rupert River, Port Nelson and New Severn. A fishery for white whales was established in the year 1686, at the mouth of Churchill River, the name being given after the newly-appointed governor of the Company, John Churchill, afterwards first Duke of Marlborough. Later, in 1715, a wooden fort, to which the name Fort Prince of Wales was given, was built by Captain James Knight about five miles up from the mouth of the river at the point where the present buildings of the Hudson's Bay Company now stand.

The years 1690 to 1697 saw a series of conflicts between the French and English on Hudson Bay. In 1690, York, the

Company's chief port on the Bay, situated at the mouth of Hayes River, was captured by French forces under the command of the famous French-Canadian admiral, Pierre le Moyne d'Iberville. Two years later it was recaptured by the British, but d'Iberville again, in 1697, sailed into the Bay, defeated a British fleet, and once more took possession of York. By the Treaty of Utrecht, 1713, all the country which had been taken from the British was restored. There now arose in England a strong sentiment in favour of strengthening all the Company's forts on the Bay to prevent a recurrence of the disasters of 1694 and 1697. It was not without considerable opposition among some of the directors of the Company that such a course was determined upon; but, in the end, the fortification party won out and it was decided to build a new stone fort of great size and strength at the opening to the Company's best harbour. This would always be a refuge to which the Company's ships and servants from the other trading posts along the coast could retire in case of necessity. (Cf. Plan of the Fort, by J. B. Tyrrell, 1894.)

The work on the new fort was begun in 1733 and completed in 1771. It was designed by competent engineers who had served under Marlborough; but the actual construction did not always progress smoothly. The best account of the early years of building is given by Joseph Robson, an engineer who was sent out from England by the Company to superintend the construction of the fort and who has written an account of his six years experience on Hudson Bay. Robson apparently had great difficulty in carrying out his work sufficiently owing to the interference of the governor at Churchill and to the lack of competent workmen. There seems but little doubt that if he had had the full support of the local authorities, the new stone fort would have been built in much less time, at considerable less expense and in a much better manner than was actually the case. Only one example of this need be cited. The original plans called for a rampart forty-two feet thick. The governor, however, was so certain that a wall twenty-five feet thick would do instead that he ordered the foundations to be so laid. When the cannon, however, were tried, it was found that they ran off the wall so that it was necessary to rebuild the walls according to the original specifications.

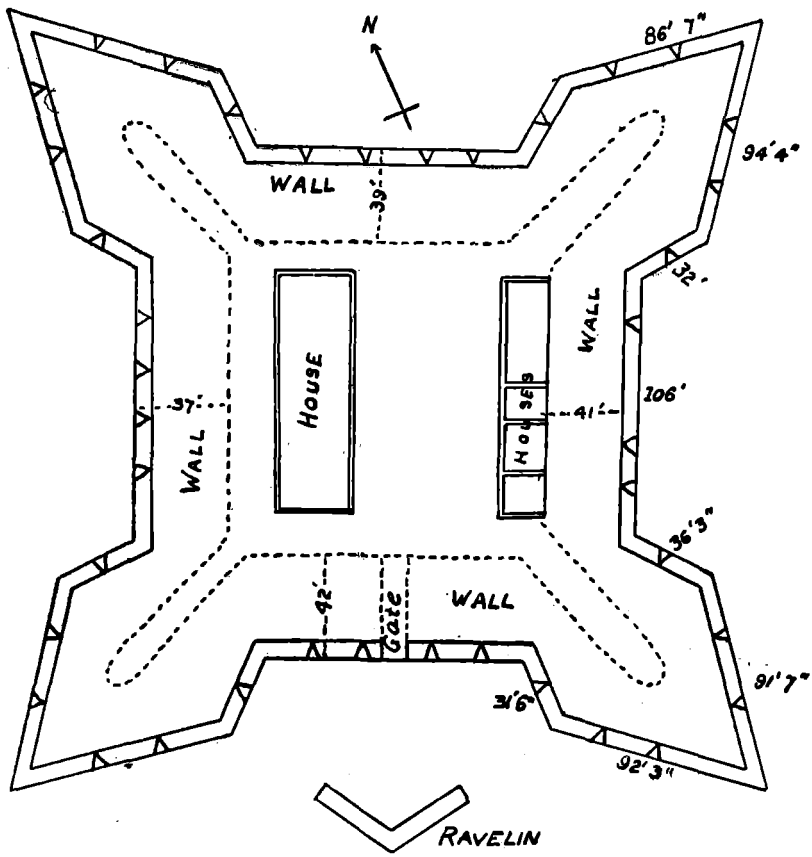
Robson's interesting estimate of the cost of building the fort during the first three years of construction gives some idea of the cost of labor and living at that date.

	£	s.	d.
Four masons at £25 per annum each for three years ..	300	0	0
Maintenance of ditto at 5s. per week each.....	156	0	0
Ditto in their passage out and home, five months	20	0	0
Eleven labourers at £6 per annum each for three years	198	0	0
Maintenance of ditto at 5s. per week each.....	429	0	0
Ditto in their passage out and home.....	55	0	0
Four horses at £15 each.....	60	0	0
Charge of ditto in the ship.....	8	8	0
Ditto—in the country at 6d. per day for three years	109	10	0
Three hundred pounds wt. of gunpowder for blowing up stones.....	15	0	0
Utensils for three years, as carriages, ropes, blocks, etc.	60	0	0
Iron-crows, great hammers, etc.	15	0	0
Total	£1,425	18	0

Robson estimated that the rampart could have been completed in six more years, at a total cost of £4217 : 14 : 0, and that the total cost of the whole fort including the stone parapet on top of the walls and the stone buildings inside the walls should not have cost the company more than eight thousand pounds. The materials for the structure were all close at hand. The stone used for the walls was the grey quartzite of the rock ridges of Churchill, and none of this had to be moved more than half a mile. Limestone and sand, and wood for burning the lime, were also found nearby.

The completed fort has a length of 310 feet on the north and south sides, and 317 feet on the east and west sides, the measurements taken from the corners of the bastions. The walls vary in thickness from 37 to 42 feet and have a height of 16 feet 9 inches from the base to the top of the parapet. The parapet is 5 feet high and 6 feet 3 inches thick. The outer part of the wall is formed of dressed stone with the exception of the part facing the river. The parapet contains forty embrasures and the guns for these, which vary in size from six to twenty-four pounders, are still to be seen lying on the wall. Three of the bastions contained storehouses and the fourth a powder magazine. (See "A North-west View of Prince of Wales' Fort

in Hudson's Bay, North America. By Samuel Hearne, 1777.") Inside the fort are the remains of a stone house 103 feet long and 33 feet wide. The fort is surrounded by a flat gravel-covered terrace absolutely barren of trees, and the base of its walls now stands seventeen feet above ordinary spring tide.



Plan of Fort Prince of Wales, Churchill, Man., by J. B. Tyrell, 1894 (Walls, 37 to 42 feet thick 16 feet 9 inches high; scale; 80 feet=1 inch).

It was from this fort that Samuel Hearne was sent in 1769 by Governor Norton to investigate reports of copper deposits in the region northwest of Churchill. After two unsuccessful attempts, Hearne finally succeeded in reaching the Coppermine

river. This third journey of Hearne's was probably the most noteworthy feat of exploration accomplished by the Hudson's Bay Company. As a reward for his services Hearne was appointed Governor of Fort Prince of Wales.

Hearne's record as governor is not as creditable as the reputation he made for himself as an explorer. It was during his regime that Fort Prince of Wales suffered its one and only attack. On August 8, 1782, a French fleet consisting of the "Sceptre," of seventy-four guns, and the "Astarte" and the "Engageante," each of thirty-six guns, under the command of Admiral La Pérouse appeared off the fort. The garrison consisted of but thirty-nine men, and when, on the following morning, four hundred French soldiers approached the fort and demanded its surrender, Hearne immediately replied by seizing a tablecloth and hoisting it over the parapet. The attacking forces, though comparatively strong in numbers were in very poor condition after a long sea voyage; most of them were wretchedly clad and half of them were barefoot. Had even a show of resistance been made, it might have meant the saving of the fort. Hearne has been very severely criticized for his hasty surrender. The greatest blame, however, must rest on the Company for providing such a feeble garrison after going to the expense of constructing such a fortress. The French artillerymen of La Pérouse spent two days in endeavouring to demolish the walls. They succeeded in displacing the upper rows of the massive stones, in dismounting the guns, and in blowing up the gateway, but the massive walls resisted all their efforts. With their stores replenished by this capture, the French fleet sailed south and captured York Factory with the same ease as they had taken Fort Prince of Wales. Hearne was carried to France as a prisoner by the French admiral.

In the following year peace was signed between France and England and Hearne was sent back by the Hudson's Bay Company to take charge again at Churchill. He did not attempt to occupy the stone fort but established his residence five miles up from the mouth of the river on the site of the original post of the Company. The stone fort was never rebuilt. It stands today in the same condition as that in which La Perouse left it, interesting as a historic monument but serving no practical purpose except perhaps as a beacon to mark Churchill harbour.