

Professors Peeps of the department of architecture at the University of British Columbia was consulting architect in the partial reconstruction by the federal and provincial governments of Fort Langley, which was officially opened in July.

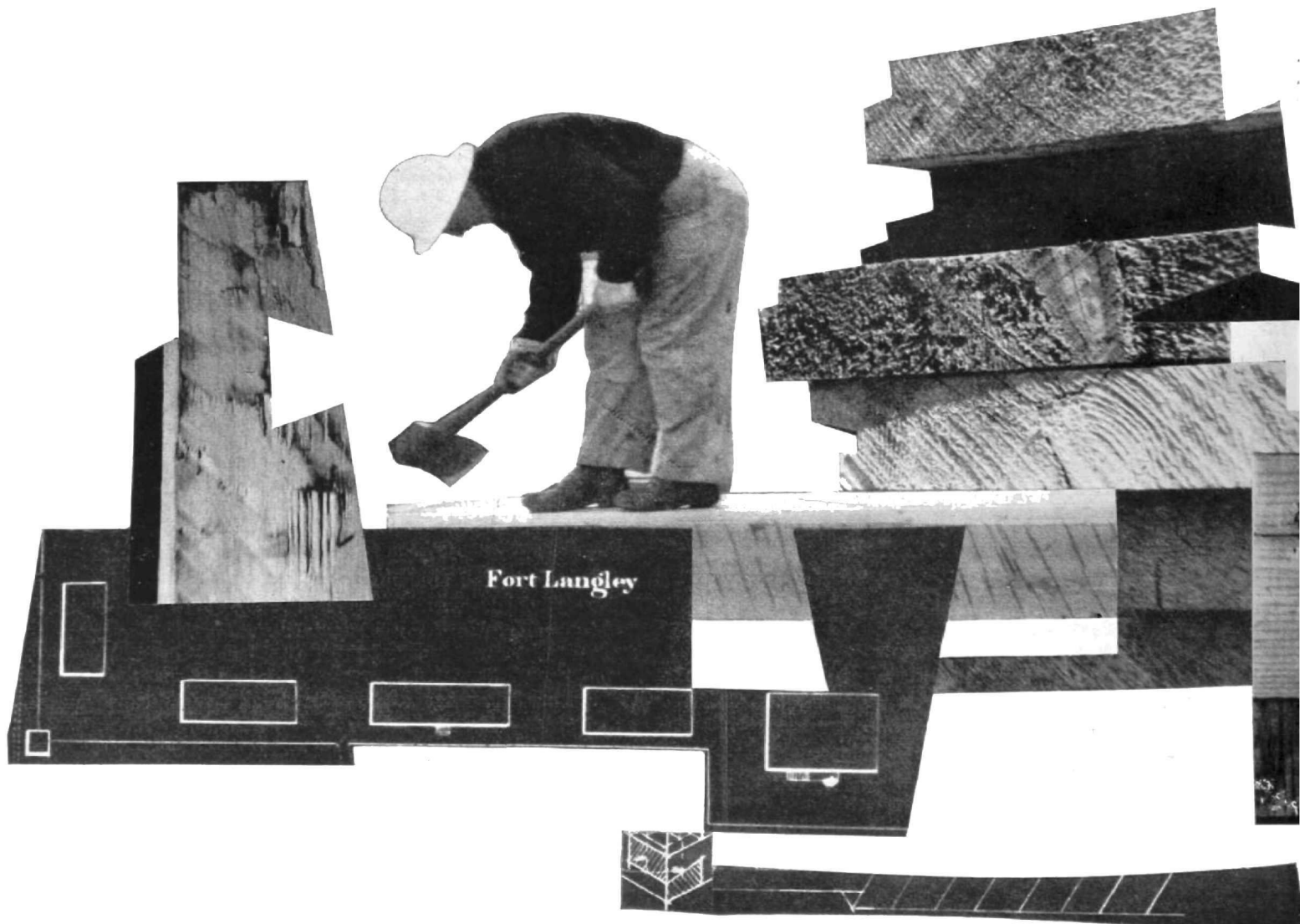
IT has been very properly stated that, from the moment of the proclamation of British Columbia as a colony from Fort Langley on that drear and drizzly day, Friday 19th November 1858, the brief glory of the fort began to wane. Certainly, the movement, early in 1859, of the new capital to Queensborough, later to be called New Westminster, did little to encourage the maintenance of the old buildings. It is recorded that, by 1864, the palisade was being dismantled and the buildings being allowed to fall into disrepair. In 1872, the officers' quarters, which had been the scene of the colony's creation, had become so unsafe as to necessitate its destruction.

Perhaps one may feel that, in this latter gesture, the curtains had been closed on the old Hudson's Bay Company fort but this was not entirely the case. One building was to remain and, in 1925, the Dominion Historic Sites and Monuments Board accepted custody of the building with one acre of land and erected a cairn and tablet there.

So was the original spark kept alive throughout the years, its significance becoming the more apparent as the province grew until, in 1953, eyes were to be turned again to this modest white building, open on Wednesdays and week-ends, standing in a gentle landscape.

This tale is of an attempted re-creation in part that has just begun. The words are used advisedly. Its material parts lay embodied in an array of blueprints, correspondence, photographs, technical data, field sketches and scribbled notes. It would seem proper that one should look to these, to sift and to organize, to mould from them a wholly coherent picture of Fort Langley as it stood some 100 years ago.

To attempt to do so would be superficial. They capture only by word or drawing, no matter how accurately, the purely physical aspects of fabric or structure and at best present a picture of reconstruction, empty, cold, impartial and impersonal.



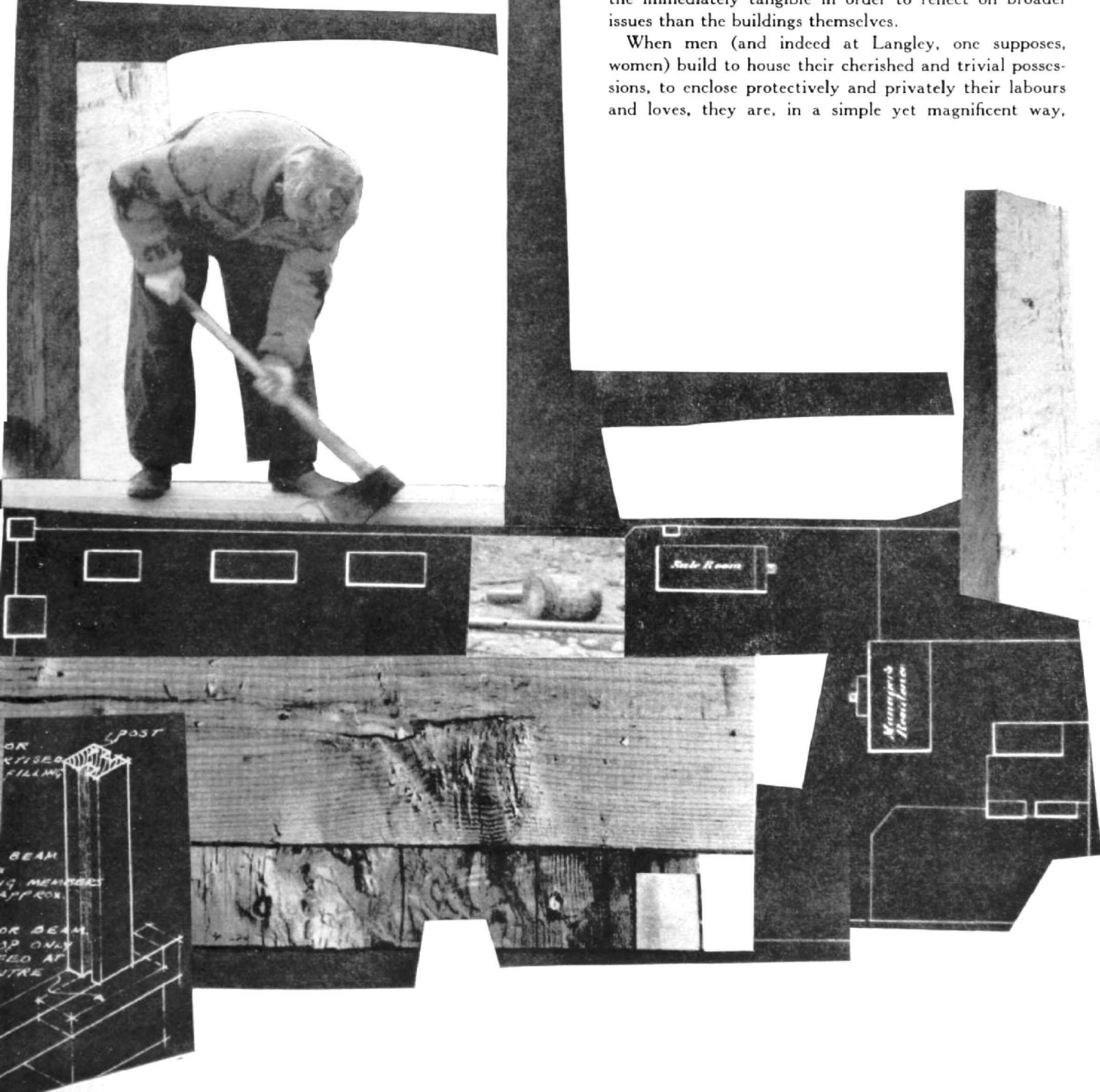
FORT LANGLEY IN RE-CREATION

BY J. CALDER PEEPS

To try to wrest from them a picture of *total* reconstruction would be a severely limited over-simplification for, like all good research work, they represent only a stopping point along a line of enquiry and are radically incomplete. Commencing some long while ago, they merely form the adequate basis for reconstruction little further than the extent contemplated at present.

From an architectural viewpoint, to talk of historical reconstruction and its meaning, the real problems underlying it and, in a sense, some of the problems which it finally poses, one must detach oneself for a moment from the immediately tangible in order to reflect on broader issues than the buildings themselves.

When men (and indeed at Langley, one supposes, women) build to house their cherished and trivial possessions, to enclose protectively and privately their labours and loves, they are, in a simple yet magnificent way,



entering into a bond with nature. Essentially, through their hands and ingenuity, they are creating or re-creating a particular piece of environment shaped for their own purposes but, nonetheless, only a refashioning of the world about them. The extent to which the immediate environment poses the major problems and the extent to which they are dependent upon its resources will be reflected in the finally created form.

Here at Langley a little world was born out of and from the landscape, a world measuring, tidily and precisely, 250 by 675 feet and enclosing within its almost rectangular periphery, a microcosm of the lives of a handful of people, some 13 buildings seated selectively upon the brow of a

But, most particularly, one must bear in mind that, without the people, the buildings are nothing, are empty shells which we must populate and activate by our own contemporary imaginations—but this guardedly for the process is subjective, romantic and can be maudlin.

In this sense then, any attempt wholly and simply focussed from the outset upon material reconstruction and measured wholly and simply in these terms would be as valueless as it was limited by the cold, irrefutable evidence supporting it.

Architecturally Fort Langley, like the many other H B C forts expeditiously created, was of little merit to sophisticated eyes. Its basic form of timber construction was

with luck, of their disposition but hardly of their ever-changing purpose or, worse, of their interiors. Yet these must have played a very real and a very intimately-loved part in the lives of those they sheltered at a time when "it seemed as though dripping skies had formed a permanent canopy over the land."

This then, was something of the realization of the author in commencing his part of the work, an understanding that no fount of information would spring forth (perhaps it would have been unfortunate had it done so), the warning from the experience of others that written evidence could be dangerous, hearsay worse and artistic evidence licentious.

interior by Mallandaine, a photograph of a bastion, an old model, Mr. Joseph Morrison (the fort's last survivor), some metal markers in the ground bearing the word "Palisade" (of unknown origin) and, providentially, the remaining building, recently recapped, reshod and generally resuscitated, but substantially in its original form. There were also some very misleading illustrations.

The following year saw renewed interest and the matter ceased to be of purely academic importance. Now the problem was to be more precisely of a constructional investigation with reference to both palisade and buildings.

As to the first, the constructional answer was simple and had ample precedent. Stripped cedar logs about 18



The only original building at Fort Langley, which was renovated and used as a museum.
J. C. Peeps



The old building at an earlier stage, before it was taken over by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board.



Still earlier—the existing building in 1894. Connected by a pen in front of which sheep are grazing is the blacksmith's shop
B.C. Archives

hill, a world differing only in its orderly form but not in its substance from the land about it.

So, it would be to the landscape that one should look for first clues and, indeed, it may be first to the landscape that one should give heed in bringing to life again this earlier state.

Yet again, one must consider that the organic landscape itself does not give freely all of its clues. Fundamentally unchanging in its basic form, the original modification of its face which began then has continued unceasingly so that it can now only hint at the manner in which it must have acted as background and foreground. Only part of the truth remains.

standard, the size and location and the use of its buildings to a large degree arbitrary, conditioned only by a recent and rule-of-thumb experience. These were simple buildings lacking the delicate turn of phrase or, perhaps, the latest architectural *mot juste* but, nonetheless, in an unsentimental way, speaking with a direct and honest vocabulary whose robustness was matched only by its bluntness and, on occasions, by its vulgarity.

There could have been little reason for recording the particular architectural characteristics for their own sakes. These buildings were there to serve and, having served, to fall into a quick-forgotten decline. Perhaps, at best, some accurate record may be made of their number and,

On the one hand, there was the need for an unremitting pursuit of authentic data, coldly, objectively, above all patiently and, on the other, in the absence of such information, the need for the empathetic projection of oneself back into the real time of Langley to feel intuitively what problems they must have faced and the manner in which they would have dealt with them—with a willing acceptance of the ugliness which such solutions might suggest.

The problem in 1953 was to a large degree academic, concerned as it was with pursuing the general nature of the fort as to its content and disposition of buildings.

Certain sources of information existed, varying in degree of reliability. These included an 1858 sketch of part of the

inches in diameter and 17 feet in height were embedded about three feet in the earth, their ends sometimes charred against rot and, to avoid the disadvantages of taper, alternately arranged butt and tip down, their abutting faces broad-axed for close jointing. In turn, a pair of heavy horizontal girths about 20 feet long were housed into the internal face, fastened by stout, tapered pegs to each log and, at their ends, tenoned into mortises in larger posts which had been more deeply embedded. Without any particular defensive need, the upper surface of the palisade was not spiked but simply weathered to shed water.

It was also believed that set into the palisade were four sets of double gates of split logs, similarly ledged, of the

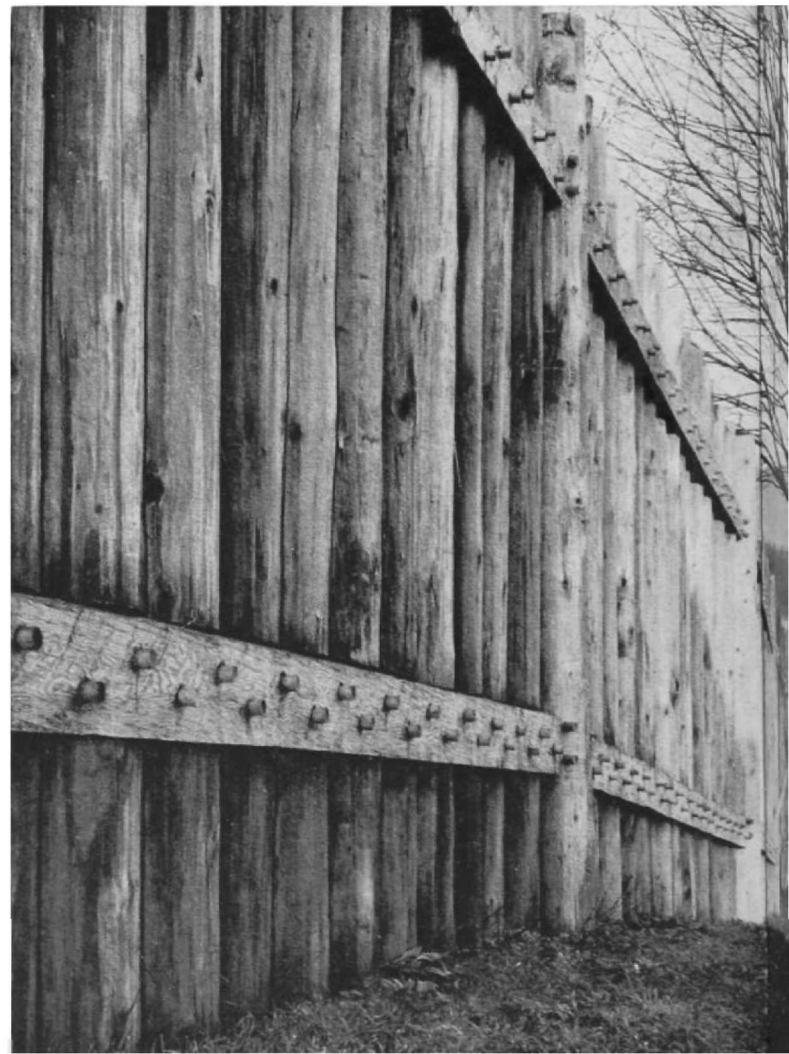
same height and jointly about 14 feet in width. Into one of these was set a smaller wicket gate allowing easier individual use. It seemed hardly possible to hang gates of such a tremendous weight simply by metal hinges and more likely that they were pivoted by their side members, the foot resting in stone and the head housed in a horizontal log spanning between massive side posts as at Fort Nisqually. Paradoxically, this form of palisade construction was one subject to constant deterioration and the need for replacement yet it seemed that only from possible fragments held for a century in the earth could any accurate information be obtained about its location.

Now, the existing two-storeyed building became the essential point of focus and showed itself, despite amendment, to follow the typical *poteaux-sur-sole* form common in other forts and to be of western red cedar throughout. (This form of construction has been well described by Marius Barbeau in *The Beaver* of December 1945.) Little light could have penetrated the upper small-windowed and musket-apertured walls but the winter winds must have done so and perhaps the occasional bird found a measure of comfort amongst the unceilinged roof members had it come upon one of the fist-sized openings which came as the unseasoned timbers shrank and teetered drunkenly down and askew within their channels.

One can suppose that it was principally the stout whip-sawn and adzed planks, three inches thick and twelve inches broad, pegged to the floor beams, that were the main sustaining elements in the upper floors. One descended precipitously by way of a steep, open-treated stair to the lower floor where at least some cheer came from the larger casements, the pot-bellied stove and, for a while, the sweet-smelling cedar. Undoubtedly, against this iron, black-hot monster both the garrulous and the meditative must have spat sizzingly from tilted handyman's chairs, elbows rested on heavy-topped, square-legged thumping tables and thoughtful eyes in their rarer moments of relaxation must have rested on the exposed beams, both strength and all-accommodating hanging space, dimly candle and coal-oil lit, during the grey Langley twilights and black Langley nights.

Two important buildings under reconstruction were in certain respects treated with an aesthetic eye.

One of these is of greatest importance, the officers' quarters from whose main hall the proclamation was to be read. Fortunately, as to the exterior, two good sources of information existed. The first, the Mallandaine sketch showing the building, full, two-storeyed, of ample six-bay breadth, about 70 feet wide and 33 feet deep, capped by a massive hipped roof. Unlike the others it ran continuously without stone pads from the earth, its central entry some





Left, top :

The massive double gates set into the palisade, from the interior. The wicket gives access for people without opening the heavy gates which pivot at the sides.

S. E. Read

Above, right :

The upper floor of the reconstructed No. 3 building showing the small casement windows and unceilinged roof which were typical.

S. E. Read

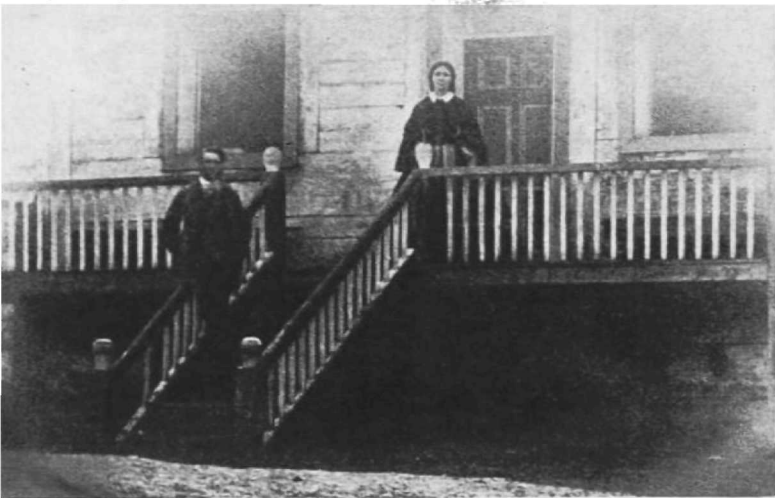
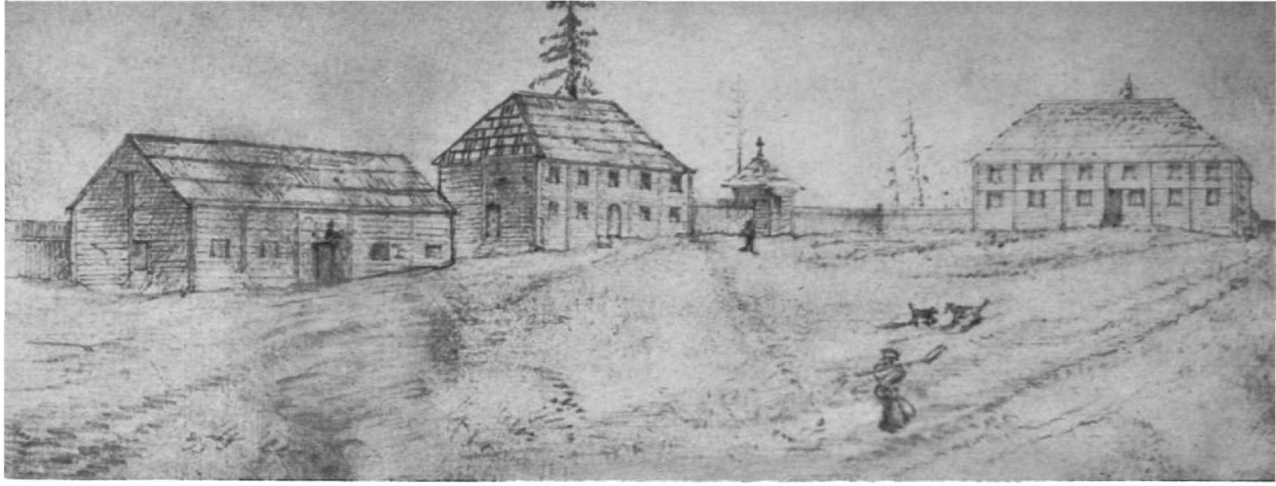
Left :

Part of the western palisade, from the inside. The 17-foot stripped cedar logs are sunk three feet into the ground. The heavy horizontal timbers are fastened to each log by tapered pegs.

S. E. Read

four feet above the ground, approached by simple steps. The second was a photograph of W. H. Newton and his wife standing on the steps and reputed to have been taken in 1858. In the light of more recent evidence, this may have been taken later for, unlike the Mallandaine drawing, it shows a short verandah in addition to the steps and an elegantly panelled door, which was undoubtedly eagerly awaited from Victoria. At all events, the exterior here is white and, having regard to the particular importance of the building, one would reasonably assume that it had always been so.

Here also, as with the other buildings, knowledge of the internal layout was impossible to obtain. It was hearsay that the main floor, resting over the potato-cellar in which Dr. Tolmie sought refuge from the groaning wind-buffeted frame in 1872, contained the main dining hall for the fort's officers, the factor's parlour, office and bedroom and, probably, also a bedroom for the clerk. The kitchen was



W. H. Newton and his wife in front of the officers' quarters. He was at the Fort from 1858 to 1860 and again in 1874.

reputedly separate from and to the rear of the building where it had access by a secondary door.

The upper floor was given over in its entirety to sleeping space for the visiting officers.

The second building showing aesthetic consideration is, oddly, the bastion. Here, two-storeyed, 15 feet square, it had at the peak of its roof a timber finial or pinnacle some 6 feet in height and, whilst of rudimentary design, nevertheless consciously conceived. One wonders what sense of authority prompted this significant silhouette and, indeed, what respect it must have drawn from the native Indians eying it across the broad and muddy breadth of the river.

To this extent only, moving patiently and sometimes painfully slowly back into the panorama of Fort Langley, did its vague details and personality gradually become clearer like a forgotten face in which one remembers the smile but rarely the shape of the lips.

The moment of urgency and critical consideration came in 1956 on the decision to commence partial reconstruction of the fort and, with it, came two particular considerations. The first of these was the realization that the true story

of Fort Langley was written largely in the ground and that, in the absence of authentic documentary evidence, it would only be by excavation that part of it could be revealed. The second was that one was standing, as it were, astride time from the present casting back into the past in order to create something for the future having particular regard for the fact that, wholly authentic, the reconstructed buildings would collapse as ignominiously but rather more expensively than they had done before.

To deal with the first: the program was necessarily limited in time and intent being aimed only at locating the palisade line. Raised above the earth, it seemed proper to assume that the fallen timbers and the pad-stones of the buildings would have been dragged clear of the ploughshares and that only general evidence of locations would



Edward Mallandaine's sketch of Fort Langley at the end of 1858. The view is from the north, the building on the right being the manager's residence or officers' quarters.

B.C. Archives

be gained by unearthing human impedimenta discarded or dropped in passing. As to the palisade, however, despite reports that this had been dismantled, it was reasoned that, deteriorating as the posts would be at ground line, no one would have gone to the trouble of wresting their decayed roots from the earth. Allowing for a certain further

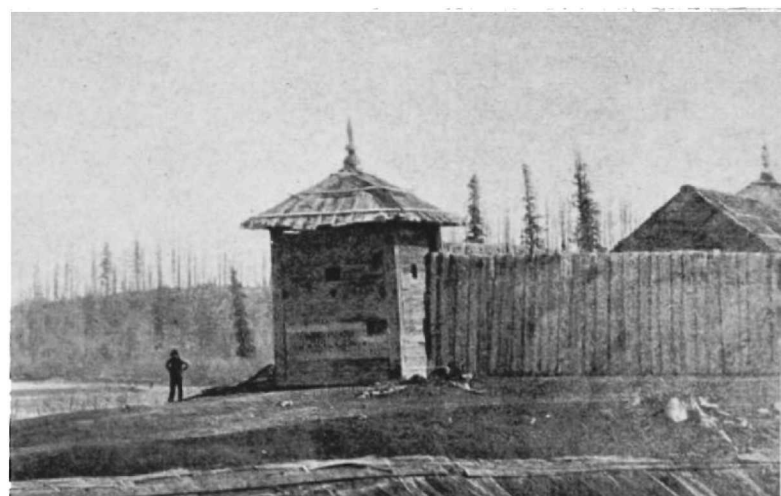
HBC claims at Langley, sketched and dimensioned and bearing the date, 10th October 1862. More providentially and almost sardonically included with them was a neat and full layout of the fort itself complete with scale.

Particularly, it confirmed the basic accuracy of the Mallandaine sketch and showed that, instead of the old



The rebuilt northeast bastion with part of the outside of the palisade.

J. C. Peeps



The original northwest bastion, from a photograph taken in 1862.

B.C. Archives

deterioration and some damage one might hope at least to find fragments remaining. So it proved to be; 44 positive findings were made.

These posts appeared to have been fully-round, varying in present condition from a black mud squelching between one's fingers at the grasp to a dried out but solid form. This variation was undoubtedly due to the double conditions of highly variable ground nature and to the replacement of rotted posts which was constantly necessary. Under test at the University of British Columbia, they were shown all to be of western red cedar.

Generally, no significant archaeological findings were made although many tiny fragments of china and glass were unearthed together with a large number of wrought-iron cut nails. One area, however, was fruitful. This was adjoining the northeastern corner where many pieces of scrap iron were found giving substance to the idea that the first building here was the blacksmith's shop.

It was, therefore, a tremendous stroke of luck when Mr. Willard Ireland, Provincial Librarian, unearthed from the Archives a sheaf of field survey notes by one Sgt. McColl of the Royal Engineers, being a survey of the

model's seventeen buildings, there were only some thirteen in all, the officers' quarters at the south with kitchen at rear, five on its east running northwards, four to its west side parallel to the others, with two across the north boundary and three bastions only.

Cryptically and aggravatingly, having offered so much, it named only two of the buildings, the officers' quarters themselves (termed here Manager's Residence) and a sale shop immediately to its east. It was about this latter that James Douglas had written to J. M. Yale on 27th April 1858, "I now send a supply of deals to complete the Fort Langley sale shop and also a person named Daniel Adams who has contracted to do all the work . . .".

At the lower banks to the northwest, some 200 feet away, was the pier and slightly south of that, by McColl but not by Mallandaine, were two large buildings between 80 and 150 feet in length supposed to be the salmon packing houses and across whose memory the Canadian National Railway now thunders.

It was right, therefore, in the decision to begin reconstruction, that haste should be made slowly, within the limitations of what was already known about the structure,

One of the sounder stumps of the old palisade that was unearthed by the excavators.

C. Peeps



J. C. Peeps

Number 3 building, nearly completed, shows clearly the post-on-sill method of construction, the whole raised on stone pads as protection from the earth.

and the present state of the area. The past years had seen the quarrying of the southeasterly portion, the Canadian National Railway track had required a steep embankment cutting across the north face, and an intervening road passed through the whole.

In certain respects, some advantage came from the railway cutting for, whilst preventing construction of the trade shop, the northwestern bastion and the building between them together with that length of palisade, it opened the view to the north. Over the river could be seen the stretching flatness and calm of McMillan Island, an Indian reserve, with its delightfully typical little wooden church, dark, steep-pitched and with an elegant spire, set quietly against a backdrop of trees and these, sometimes mistily, against the mountains. On the other hand, the road meant that full advantage could not be taken at this time of the Mallandaine sketch showing clearly the nature of the exterior of the two buildings which stood where the road lies. The quarry was only to limit the palisade and to prevent the building of the southeastern bastion.

For these reasons attention was directed to the erection of the maximum amount of palisading with one pair of approach gates, to the northeastern bastion, to the building immediately opposite to that suggested as a possible warehouse (and named, in doubt, Building No. 3) and, lastly, to the officers' quarters.

Having told the tale so far it is at this point that one senses the anticlimax for, in truth, the foregoing is only

in the nature of an introduction. Beyond this one is, to some large extent, concerned with technicalities. The basic problem has been essentially one of determining how, with the potentialities and limitations of contemporary resources in material, labour and financial terms, reconstruction may be authentic without suffering the disintegration which went hand in hand with the original form. Certainly, the Government has shown an outstanding concern to ensure that a truly worthy result should be obtained.

It seemed legitimate that advantage should be taken of contemporary machinery to square the materials rather than to work from the round log on the site and, indeed, as a standard form of construction was used, that pre-fabrication of parts would be logical. More apparent than real was the anticipated difficulty of obtaining labour able still to use the broad-axe and adze; experience showed that, not only were such men still around and actively interested, but that their accuracy in craftsmanship could be higher than the machinery in which we are inclined to place so much trust.

Fundamentally, the material to be used was western red cedar, easily worked but not the strongest of timbers and, with a record of good resistance to the environment, nevertheless unpredictable in specific performance.

This was to apply particularly to the palisade whose members, with an additional girth for strength, were to be embedded in the earth. Fortunately, contemporary

science has made it possible to inject a resistance into the material against the rigours of the earth. By pressure-preservation, this liberty only was taken with the material. Beyond the hand-craftsmanship, one other liberty—the raising of the near half-ton timbers by machinery in contrast to the time when “as men under Chief Factor James McMillan sweated at building a fort of logs, Indians fired

The Fort Langley enclosure from the northeast bastion. The near building is the old structure, now the museum; the far one is the reconstructed No. 3 building.

S. E. Read



S. E. Read

Looking north from the fort, across the Fraser River to McMillan Island with its little wooden church, and the mountains beyond.

the forests and the acrid smell of burning foliage seared the lungs of the toilers.”

About these buildings, of course, grass will not grow under the steady drip from the roof. Indeed, the grounds must have been a dismal, miry sight. Present proposals call for the verging of the two erected buildings with a local stone gravel, the same material being used to mark out the original foundations of the other buildings with such identity as can be given.

One particular difference stands out in this and it is here that one returns to the opening comments on landscape. Fort Langley was born out of its immediate environment, and so modified its face, but the straight, coniferous timbers no longer exist having been replaced by a smoother gentler, rural profile. Because of this, timbers destined for contemporary use have been dragged from the Fraser and brought back to serve the old fort again. With these the other final and proper gesture is being made by the replanting of coniferous stock about the palisade.

Here, then, is the halting point. Contemporary resources and old materials go patiently hand in hand to breathe life again into this place of our beginnings.

One is left with two thoughts; what those one hundred years from now may think of our actions and, indeed, if they may be contemplating the restoration of a restoration. And what the Indians across the *Stahlo prole* (Fraser River) really thought about those pinnacles set against the leaden sky. ♦



Craftsmen working with axe and adze to fashion the hand-hewn timbers for the reconstruction.

J. C. Peeps