

Building Fort Prince of Wales

Extracts from "An Account of Six Years Residence in Hudson's Bay"

By Joseph Robson

The Library of Hudson's Bay House in Winnipeg contains a number of old and rare books dealing with the North. This is the first of a series of articles in which extracts from these books, of interest to "Beaver" readers, will be reprinted.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Joseph Robson was a stone-mason and surveyor, employed by the Company at Churchill from 1733 to 1736, and at York Factory and Churchill from 1745 to 1748. He did not altogether approve of the way things were done there, as the following extracts show; but as he himself admitted, he was young and fond of shewing his abilities. Reading his account of the building of the great stone fort—after Louisbourg and Quebec the strongest fortress on the continent—one begins to understand why it took nearly forty years to build (from 1732 to 1771). Robson was one of the chief witnesses before the parliamentary committee appointed in 1749 "to enquire into the State and Condition of the Countries adjoining to Hudson's Bay and of the trade carried on there." In his evidence he mentioned that there were never more than ten men employed at one time on the building of the stone fort, and sometimes only two or three.

IN the year 1733 I embarked on board the Mary frigate, commanded by Captain George Spurrell, bound for Churchill-river in Hudson's-Bay. We sailed from Gravesend the 16th of May, put into Tynmouth [Tynemouth] the 24th, touched at Carstown [Carestonholm, now Stromness] in the Orkneys the 7th of June, and arrived at Churchill-river the 3d of August.

I was ordered directly to Eskimaux-point at the entrance of the river, where I found several persons employed in laying the foundation of a stone-fort [Prince of Wales]. The principal workman was an old man, named Tuttie, who had been a labourer to masons in London, and knew nothing of the theory of building; and the person whom the governor had appointed overseer, was one Thomas Giddins, formerly a common soldier, but lately a hosier near London, who failing in his business was taken into the Company's service and sent to Churchill-river, not as a tradesman, but as a common servant. Under such influence was the building carried on, as if it had been the first attempted to be made by the nation to whom it belonged.

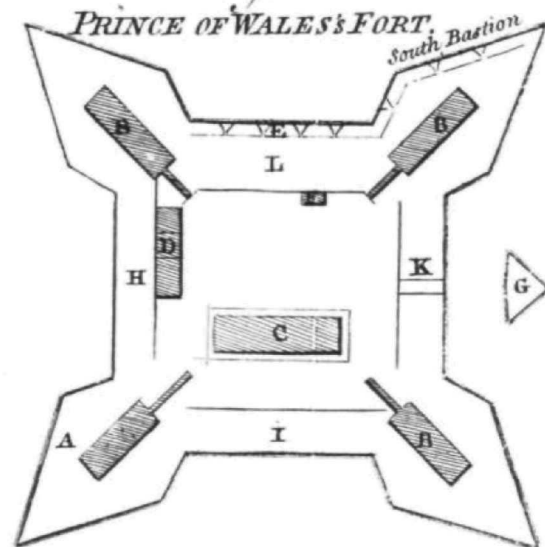
In these circumstances it was natural to conclude, that the governor [Richard Norton] would be pleased to find a man capable of conducting the building pro-

Although of such imposing dimensions (one hundred yards square, with the outer wall nearly seventeen feet high) and armed with ten 24-pounders, twenty-two 12-pounders, and eight 6-pounders, the fort was surrendered without a shot being fired, to Admiral de la Perouse, in 1782. The French had three ships and four hundred men: the British, under Samuel Hearne, had only thirty-nine men to fire the forty guns. This scarcity of manpower lends credence to Professor Morton's theory that the fort was built primarily to protect the Company's ships, which could seek shelter in the river mouth while the sailors went ashore and fired the guns. De la Perouse tried to demolish the fort but only partly succeeded. The government engineers who repaired it a few years ago expressed the opinion that it could never have stood for long against a bombardment; and perhaps Hearne was of the same opinion. Certainly Joseph Robson would have agreed with them.

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- A. Magazine —
- B. Store Houses —
- C. Dwelling House —
- D. Offices —
- E. What is built of Stone Parapet
- F. Governors Cook Room —
- G. A Ravelin to defend the Gate.

Fig II.



The Original Plans Rampart was 43 Feet, but the Gov. was sure that 25 Feet would do very well, I was order'd therefore to lay the Foundation 25 Feet thick as H, I, K. When the Cannon was try'd they ran of the Wall so L was pull'd down K Built up according to the first Plan H, I, and K not done yet.

Scale 114 Feet in one Inch

Diagram from Joseph Robson's book. H, I, and K were later widened to 39, 37, and 42 feet respectively.



In 1934, the year before the fort was repaired, Governor Cooper (centre) visited the ruins with Michael Lubbock and Capt. Smellie. Note the absence of mortar between the stones.

perly; and accordingly I ventured to interfere in the direction. But upon the governor's first visit, who, as it was the season for the coming in of the ship from England, was obliged to reside chiefly at the old factory five miles distant, I found myself egregiously mistaken. He shook his horsewhip at me, and asked, Who made me a director over these men? But notwithstanding this discouraging check, I still applied diligently to the work; for I was young and fond of shewing my abilities, and was besides much grieved to see a building of such consequence ruined thro' ignorance and want of care.

The next time the governor came, he offered me a dram, and told me I must do nothing without first acquainting him. But as he lived at so great a distance, I thought it wrong to retard the work by sending to him for instructions which I knew he was incapable of giving; for he was an absolute stranger to the rules of building, having been brought up from a boy in Hudson's-Bay, where nothing is to be learned but the language and manners of the natives, and the methods of trading with them.

The stones we made use of being of the pebble kind, could only be hammered into shape. The choosing out those which were most proper for the purpose was the first step, the laying them near the place where they would be wanted the next, and the fixing them to the best advantage, and with least hammering, was the third and principal. The second only was the province of our overseer, who in every thing else acted under my direction as mason; and being piqued at

receiving orders from a stranger, who, perhaps, examined too narrowly and reprov'd too freely for his interest, he took every opportunity of secretly opposing my plan, and often ordered the labourers to lay the stones down wrong. This retarded the work exceedingly; for I was determined to rectify all mistakes, whether they proceeded from ignorance or malice. Indeed after I left the country the building proceeded in the old way, without any useful guidance or inspection; and every error past uncorrected. This was evident upon my return in 1746; for part of that which they had conducted had tumbled, and much more of it bulged; and I am convinced that if the cannon upon the rampart had been loaded and fired for service, much of it must have fallen upon the first or second discharge.

We left off building in the beginning of September, and repaired to the old factory five miles up the river [built by James Knight in 1717; and abandoned in favour of the stone fort in 1740].

In the spring of 1734, all hands were employed to hawl down necessaries on a large sled upon the ice, and to prepare materials for the building against the weather would permit us to work. By this time I discovered in what manner affairs were managed in the Bay, having contracted an intimacy with the surgeon, who had lived in the country three years.

As the wind suffered very little snow to lie on the hill where the fort was to be erected, upon the first thaw I began to examine whether it was laid out conformably to the plan; but finding it very ill executed, I altered the piquets, and had the foundation dug afresh; and the governor seemed pleased, and secretly offered me such trifling favours as they bestow upon the Indians. We contended, however, about many points; and with some difficulty I obtained mortar, which tho' not very good was yet better than none. I was solicitous for the perfection of the building, and therefore opposed every step which I thought not calculated to answer the end; while he, on the contrary, seemed more desirous to have much work done, than to have it well done.

In the year 1744 I embarked aboard the prince Rupert [second H B C ship of that name], George Spurrel commander, bound first to Churchill-river, and afterwards to York-fort. I lived with the captain upon very good terms, and conversed freely with him about the affairs of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The stone-fort at Churchill-river was once mentioned; and the captain informed me, that it was very badly executed after I left it; for some parts had fallen, which were obliged to be rebuilt; and others were ready to fall: but that which I had conducted, he said, stood firm, and he believed would continue to stand.

When we had run almost across the Bay, and were got near some banks to the northward of the Churchill-river, the captain expressed his regret that they were not tried for cod; for it seemed highly probable to him, he said, that there was almost as many to be taken there as at Newfoundland. However, he did not stay to make the experiment, but made the best of his way for Churchill-river, where we arrived soon after.



The fort in course of rebuilding by the Dominion Government. H. E. Cooper and W. E. Brown of the H B C stand in one of the embrasures. Beyond is the fort gate.

I went ashore immediately, for I was impatient to see the fort; and at the first view the effects of the extraordinary salary allowed the governor for expedition, were easily perceived. Instead of a defensible fort capable of resisting the force of an enemy, it had in many places yielded to its own weakness and the attacks of wind and weather; and was not only unworthy of the name by which it was distinguished, but even of the persons at whose cost it was built.

APPENDIX NUMBER II

An estimate of the expence of building the stone-fort at the entrance of Churchill-river, called Prince of Wales's-fort.

Prince of Wales's-fort is a square fort with four bastions. But before I begin the estimate, it may be proper to observe, that as no labourers were set apart for the building, which always was stopped as often as any other kind of business interfered; and as no regular account was kept of these frequent interruptions; it will be difficult to form an estimate in any other way, than by taking the quantity of work that was done during the three years that I was concerned, and the number of masons, labourers, and horses, that were necessary to perform that work; and then computing the expence of the whole, in proportion to the expence of this part.

	£	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
Charges of ditto in the ship.....	8:	8:	0
Ditto—in the country at 6d per day each for three years.....	109:	10:	0
Three hundred pounds wt. of gun-powder 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.....	1425:	18:	0

†I was informed, that, after I came away, masons were sent over at £18 per annum each.

*These men are hired in the Orkneys.

All the stone, lime-stone, sand and the wood for burning the lime, was upon the spot. Most of the stone and lime-stone lay within a quarter of a mile's distance from the fort, and none at more than half a mile's distance.

The little smith's and carpenter's work also that was done in these three years, for neither lead nor iron was used in cramping the stones, was performed by the Company's common servants whose charges are not to be brought into account, till the expences of building the house within the fort are rated. So that the expence of the fort in the first three years, at a large allowance, does not exceed £1425: 18: 0: I carefully examined how much of the wall was built in this time, and found that, at the same expence, and with the same number of hands, the rampart might have been finished in six years more, and in a far better manner; for great part of what was afterwards done has tumbled, but what was then done stands well.

In these three years we built two bastions and the curtain between them about seven feet and a half high; and also laid the foundation of another bastion, and built a curtain and half a curtain, and one face of the bastion about two feet and a half or three feet high; which made considerably more than one third of the measurement of the whole rampart: trebling, therefore, the first three years expence, and only deducting the price of four horses valued at £60, the charge of the whole rampart could not exceed £4217: 14: 0.

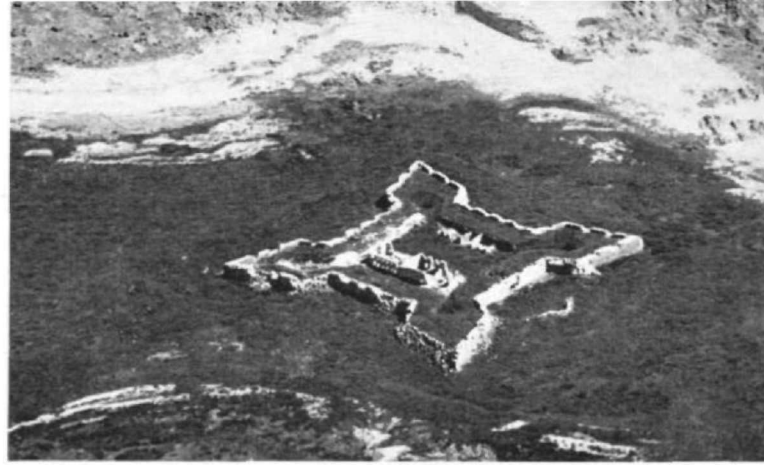
The next part to be estimated is the parapet. This was at first built of wood; but as the wood was supplied from the old demolished fort five miles up the river, and as the carpenter put it up in thirteen weeks, with very little assistance, the expence of it to the Company could not be very large. In the year 1746, I assisted in building the stone-parapet; and tho' I had only two masons with me, and much of my own time was taken up in selecting proper stones and in surveying, yet the parapet was carried along the flank of a bastion and curtain in one summer; and if the governor had not obstructed the work, but had allowed us a stated number of labourers having always either too few or too many, we should have been able to have finished another flank.

The two masons could not do much to the parapet after I came away, as they were employed in erecting a battery at Cape-merry on the other side of the harbour: at the time, therefore, that it was represented, that the building had cost the Company between thirty and forty thousand pounds, very little more than a fifth part of the parapet was completed, the expence of which may be easily ascertained; for, if a flank and curtain were made by three masons, in one summer and autumn; surely, four masons and eleven labourers might do as much in one year; and the expence of four masons, eleven labourers, and four horses, with utensils for one year, cannot exceed 460 l.

A house was built within the fort, the length of which, from out to out, was 101 feet 6 inches; the breadth 33 feet; and the height of the wall 17 feet, making two stories, with a flat roof covered with lead: but all the materials, except iron, lead, glass, and some large beams, were procured upon the spot; and I would undertake to build such a house there, with the advantage of carrying materials from England in the annual ship for 600 l.

Three of the bastions had arches for storehouses 40 feet 3 inches by 10 feet; and in the fourth bastion was built a stone-magazine 24 feet long, and 10 feet wide in the clear, with a passage to it thro' the gorge of the bastion, 24 feet long, and 4 feet wide. Now comparing the expence of building these, with that of the other parts of the fort; I think, that two thirds of the expence of the first three years would be sufficient; that is, four masons, eleven labourers, and four horses, etc. for two years, amounting to about 920 l. with 42 l. more for the lead made use of to cover the magazine.

In 1783 Hearne re-established Churchill post on the site of the "old fort" shown on this plan from Robson's book. Trading was carried on there until 1932, when the Company built the present store across the river.



Aerial view of the fort as it was left by Perouse. Compare with Robson's diagram. R.C.A.F. photo.

I have rated the expences of the masons and labourers, as if they had been constantly employed upon the building both winter and summer; whereas, the building could be carried on only from May to September, and during the remaining seven months, the people were engaged in other business for the service of the Company, by which they defrayed, at least, the charge of their maintenance for this interval, which yet I have placed to the account of the fort. Indeed, in the whole estimate I have rated every article so high, that an experienced workman, if he was acquainted with the nature of the country, would not compute the total expence at so much by some hundred pounds.

It appears, therefore,

FIRST, that in the year 1749, the Company could not have expended more than £6239: 14: 0. And,

SECONDLY, that, as a fifth part of the parapet was then finished for £460, and the rest, consequently, might have been done for £1840 more, the whole expence of completing the fort, and all the buildings within it, cannot possibly exceed £8000.

