



This map of the country around York Fort—seen on the north side of the Hayes River an inch from the eastern extremity of the Point of Marsh—is taken from Robson's "Account of Six Years' Residence in Hudson's Bay." He was at York between 1745 and 1748.

# York Factory 1714-1716

by T. E. Tyler

*"The said most Christian King shall restore to the Kingdom and Queen of Great Britain to be possessed in full right for ever, the bay and streights rivers and places situate in the said bay and streights, and which belong there-unto no tracts of land or of sea being excepted, which are at present possessed by the subjects of France. . . ."*

SO ran the tenth clause of the Treaty of Utrecht 1713, which closed the first round in the struggle for possession of the Bay; a struggle which was not finally decided until the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The Hudson's Bay Company, since 1697, though reduced to one post, Albany, had clung grimly to its possession and its rights and was now receiving a just reward.

Through the minutes of the Committee meetings for 1714 there can be felt running the current of excitement arising from the Company's longed-for success. James Knight was proposed as Governor of Port Nelson, and as such he was to accept the French surrender. The Company's elation may be measured by their acceptance of

his eight points which included a salary of £400 per annum; a share in the profits of any new trade in furs, minerals, oil and bones; a fur coat, a beaver coat and any presents which the French chose to give him.

Knight duly set sail and on his arrival on Sept. 5th, 1714, the ceremony of taking possession of York Factory was conducted without incident. The French, before departing, sold their remaining provisions to him, a purchase which later was to prove of great value. The Company servants were unfortunate in that they had arrived in September, when the all too brief summer had almost ended, leaving them very little time in which to prepare for winter. For the fort was in a sorry plight, and Knight, when writing to Governor Beale at Albany Fort later in September, painted a very gloomy picture: "I found the fort in a most miserable Condition all Rotten & Ready to fall not Scarce Defenceable against ye Natives if they have a mind to Assault. neither is it to be Repaired any other way but by building another wch cannot be done

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where this Stands for the banks of the River are Washed away to ye Undermining of the House & Flankers [Bastion's] sides. . . ."

But, for the coming winter, Knight had no alternative to patching up the existing building even if its walls were "as soft as wet bread." The men therefore set about taking down the sides of the old house and putting up planks and slabs, between which they packed earth. Thus they settled down to the numerous tasks which were so necessary for that time of the year. Stores were put away, the malt going into the cellar. An oven was built, a garden staked out, a smith's shop fitted up and beer brewed. The garrison kept their "eye in" by shooting at a mark and by hunting. Wood was chopped for winter fuel and grass was cut for the animals. In the meantime hands were abroad locating suitable trees, cutting timber and squaring it in readiness for the building of the new fort.

So the winter passed, with the customary good cheer and extra rations at Christmas and other festive seasons. Then on May 7, 1715, came the first major setback which was to be but the forerunner of a series of mishaps leading to hardship and despondency. The garrison were completely unprepared for the breaking of the ice, and the floods which always followed, when the river thawed inland before the mouth was free. Knight had sat down to dinner when the

water came flooding in, forcing the garrison "to leave the Factory & betake our Selves to the woods and gett on Trees & Stages the Water Rising above nine foot upon the land & continued up for Six Days, wee looking every minute when ye Factory would be tore to pieces. The Ice lay heap'd & crowded at least 20 foot higher yn [than] the Factory. . . ."

The loss in livestock and provisions was considerable, but Knight immediately set his plans for the rebuilding of the fort. In the meantime the wrecked fort was patched up as a temporary residence.

The daily routine tasks were therefore extended to include the repair of the flood damage. The garden was once again railed off, dug and sown. Some geese were shot and fish caught. A light palisade was erected and hung with the cook house door, the old gates of the fort being too heavy for such a light structure. While some men cleaned out the lower rooms and the yard, others were kept busy cutting and squaring timber for the new building. Before laying the four-foot beams under the foundation of the new house, the men dug a cellar, and by August 19, two months after the foundations had been laid, they had built the two-storey dwelling house as high as it was intended. By the end of the month the ground was set for the moat surrounding the house and flankers so that the men could

raise the ground about the house to protect it from ice and the flood. September came and winter drew on apace. To Knight's chagrin, no Company ship arrived with fresh stores and trading goods, and he was faced with a winter of limited rations. The fourteen bushels of turnips dug from the garden were therefore a welcome addition.

By this time, it had been decided to dispose of the sheep and goats which Knight considered unsuitable for that country; for, according to him, in winter they froze, and in summer they were eaten full of holes by the flies. They never attained a size which would warrant the labour involved in feeding them, nor the danger inflicted on the fort by the absence of so many of the garrison during the hay-making season.

Meanwhile the Governor had not been neglecting his primary duty of encouraging trade and had been endeavouring to contact the Northern Indians, or Chipe-wyans. William Stewart, with an Indian chief and a "slave" woman, had returned after a hazardous but successful journey to their territory, and had brought back ten natives whom Knight planned to train as interpreters for what he had hoped would be the great influx of Northern Indians in the coming summer, bringing with them what he firmly believed to be the most valuable furs of all the trade. (See *Beaver* Dec. 1952, p. 42.)

However, in spite of this success, Knight, owing to the shortage of trade goods, especially powder and guns, was faced with failure. By the end of May the Indians had become discontented and insolent. In view of their threatening attitude all work was now at a standstill, and the men unable to venture abroad to get timber. This tense situation lasted a fortnight and was eased for a little while only with the departure of the Indians. The relief, however, was short-lived. Indians still arrived from even further afield. Knight calculated that some had taken twenty-eight days to come down-stream and would take three months to get back home. These "Upland Indians" had not been down for fifteen years and were keen on trade. Some had even come without their bows and arrows in anticipation of the guns, powder and shot that they hoped to receive. Now they were in a quandary, for if they awaited the arrival of trading goods, their families might starve; but if they attempted the return journey immediately, without weapons, they themselves might perish.

The garrison was in a desperate situation. Its defences were still to be completed, powder was low and the Indians hostile. The servants were forced to remain in the vicinity of the fort and were unable to hunt for fear of enraging the Indians by a display of powder which, they had been told, did not exist. Knight was also chary of cooking, for the smell might rouse the natives who were in such desperate straits. Some had not eaten for three days, many were nothing but skin and bones, and several lay down before the fort to die.

By August 12 all the spare food was used up. A check on remaining provisions showed that the possible weekly rations which could be issued to eke out yet another year should the ship not arrive, was two and a half pounds of

flour and a pint of peas per man. The situation was still worsening. The Home Indians warned Knight to keep his men near the fort to prevent an attack on them by the Upland Indians. Especially boastful were a band who had successfully attacked the French in 1712, killing several of them and destroying a quantity of stores. These were now threatening a similar attack on the English.

Desperately Knight made his last bluff. He informed the natives that a ship was expected in ten days, and on its arrival all would be well. This measure was imperative, for there were now over one thousand Indians in the area, lying for over a hundred miles up the river; and the fort was yet to be enclosed. What relief then must have been felt by the whole garrison when on August 31, the palisade was completed and the fort enclosed.

Three days later their faith was fully justified. The firing of guns out to sea denoted the arrival of a ship, and when the fog lifted the following day the arrival was identified as a Company vessel. The Indians went wild with delight. They pranced along the river banks shouting and yelling, and late into the night the celebrations continued in the light of leaping fires and waving torches.

Knight and his small garrison had passed through two critical years in the re-establishment of York Factory. They had learned their lessons through the hard way of experience, and Knight, in his Factory Journals, did not fail to record the difficulties and hardships they had endured, so that the London Committee would take steps to guard against their recurrence. ♦

Copy of Knight's 1716 plan of York Fort showing the new factory. X is the dwelling with warehouse on top; Y the flankers or bastions; Z the palisade. WW shows where "the ice drove and never stopt."

