

When the B. B. & C. I. Railway first came to Bombay

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Now that the Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway, in the eighty-seventh year of its existence, has passed through a statutory change that ends and stamps its career as a company line with distinction, it seems a fitting time to recall the days of its advent to the city of its main terminal and the seat of its administration - Bombay.

First of all it may be shown that the railway arrived at its capital at an eventful period, when Bombay was passing through a remarkable change, and in a great flush of enterprise was casting off an old system, and had begun to devise and lay plans for a new city. At the time when, southward-bound, the B.B. & C. I. had begun to build its line away in the north, Bombay



View of "Bombay on the Malabar Coast", engraved by I. Van Ryne, and published in London, 1794. The Dutch issue of this engraving describes Bombay as in Africa. The 'Castle' on the right was built by the Portuguese, and parts of it are still used by Govt. Departments.

meant the Fort. And the Fort was a walled town. Its ramparts were still intact, and its gates were



*The old Fort Cotton Green. It was moved to Colaba in 1844.
(Reproduced by kind permission of the Director, Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay).*

guarded. At Bazar Gate in the north, facing Bori Bunder; at Church Gate on the west, facing the Esplanade, and at Apollo Gate in the south - at these three posts stood sentries who challenged after nightfall, and when the clocks struck nine no man of high or low degree could gain admission through those gates.

But by the time the B. B. & C. I. had come over the Bandra creek, the old citadel, obsolete by a century, was doomed. The great *hukm* had gone forth for demolition. The challenging sentries in white "potloons" and scarlet tunics, had gone. The pick and crowbar were at work, and walls, ramparts and gates were fast coming down.



*The inner Church Gate
Photograph taken when the demolition of the
Fort walls had just begun.*

Now what gave birth to the scheme that "unwalled the Fort" was the circumstance that

Bombay then had become enormously wealthy, and the cause of this wealth was the onset of an abnormal spell of prosperity for the city's chief industry - cotton. That business flourished as never it had flourished before, and the cause of this prosperity was the fact that civil war had broken out between the northern and southern States of America.

As that war brought about a blockade of the American cotton ports,

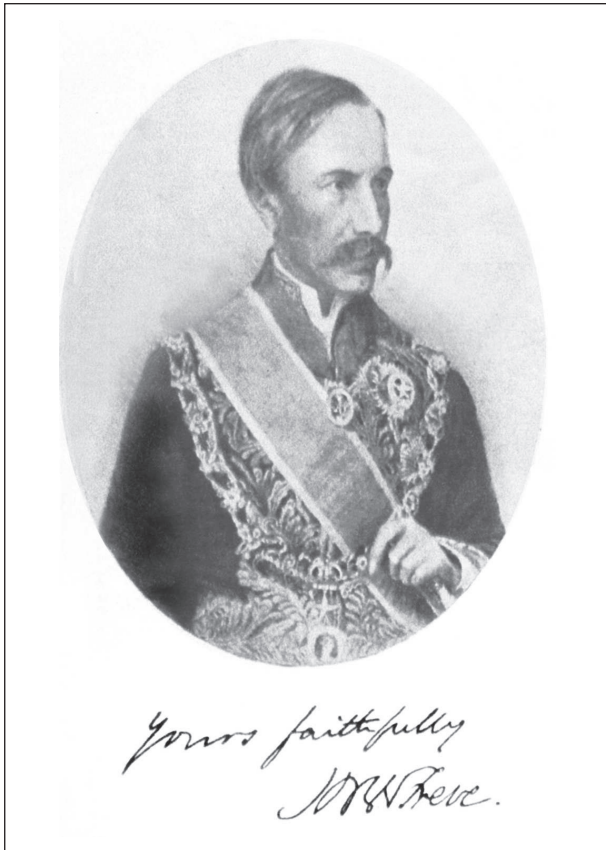
Lancashire was cut off from the main source from which she obtained the raw material for her mills. But what of India? India was a cotton-producing country and could export to Lancashire's demand. There was opportunity! There was a fact of enormous interest to that city of Western India which was the centre of the Indian cotton industry!

What followed is history. Who has not heard or read at some time or other of the Bombay "Cotton Boom" of the 1860's, which began and ended with that civil war in the American States? Who has not heard of the great "Share Mania," and of the exciting events of those years when the cotton trade brought a profit of £81 millions to Bombay?

At this particular period, Bombay had as Governor, Sir Bartle Frere, and, as experience proved, he was the right man to have at the head of affairs at such a time. Sir Bartle was spirited, energetic and resourceful, and seeing Bombay rolling in wealth, he sought to contrive matters in such a way that some of the money might be attracted to enterprise for the creation of a new town. But at the same time the Governor became convinced that in order to clear the way for

progress to this end, the ramparts of the Fort should be demolished, and that building should be permitted in the open spaces outside the old military lines.

The Governor's proposal won a ready assent. It even evoked enthusiasm. "Yes, down with the ramparts!" was the response of leading residents. "Away with those old barriers of enterprise, and let there be liberty for the builder on the Esplanade and on Apollo Bunder!" And



so in due time effect was given to the will of authority, and the ramparts were razed.

Before this demolition, the Fort has been compared to an overloaded basket with some of the contents falling out. And well has old Douglas in words of mellow humour, written of the change: "When the Bombay walls fell, great was the fall thereof. There was a great shout as when a whole people are the subjects of a mighty deliverance. Cribbed, cabined and confined, the bed too narrow to stretch upon, Bombay now threw out her arms like a giant refreshed in a new

atmosphere, and Samson-wise burst away the bonds of a hundred years."

Now at the time when the Fort "burst its bonds," the vacant area or maidan, to the west of Esplanade Road, became of great value, for, as stated, "as lands for building were very much needed and would command a high price, a project was formed for taking up a portion of this plain and making allotments of ground available for building." And Sir Bartle Frere, it is recorded, "took up this project with his accustomed zeal." Large sums in purchase



The High Court, one of the many fine buildings on the Esplanade for which Bombay has to thank the American Civil War!

money were obtained from those who bid for the allotments, and the amounts thus acquired, together with grants from Government, were collected and formed into a special fund for the construction of public buildings.

The public buildings mentioned are those that stand within the area between Mayo Road and the Esplanade Road. They include the Government Secretariat, the University Library and Clock Tower, the Convocation Hall, High Court, Telegraph Office and the building which used to be the General Post Office.

Meanwhile, with Bombay demolishing on old ground and building on new, there was much talk of that new railway that was coming on from the north on a route parallel with the coast - the



This photograph must have been taken soon after the Fort walls were demolished.

the building which he erected was also remarkable. When completed, its bulk and stature gave it striking attraction, as it stood alone in an open area. It was a most conspicuous landmark, and was the first object that caught the eye of an observer on a ship entering Bombay harbour.

At the time when the Government decided to "defortify" the Fort, and

Bombay, Baroda and Central India Railway. By this time construction had carried the line as far as Grant Road, but there it halted for some time, as it seems that portion of the route which skirted Back Bay was not ready for track-laying. In fact the Government were at this time reclaiming the foreshore of the Bay to enable the line to be built on to Colaba.

By 1867 the railway had entered the Back Bay area. A little station was established at a point somewhere near Marine Lines, and the first passenger trains had run over this section. Three years later the line had been advanced to Churchgate, and there when the railway-makers looked eastward across the maidan, they saw that the builders of the new Bombay, were as busy as ants on that Esplanade area. There they saw that towering structures caged in scaffolding had already cut off the view of the old Fort, and the clamour of labourers, and the "click," "click," of the stonedresser's chisel, reminded all that a new town had begun to arise on grounds within sight of the new railway.

Now it is a fact that not all the buildings erected at this time within the Esplanade area were Government, or public buildings. At least one private builder broke ground here, and this was John Watson. He was a remarkable man, and



The "Floral" Fountain (now known as "Flora" Fountain) was erected "some time after 1865" in honour of Sir Bartle Frere.

to offer ground for building on the west side of the Esplanade, this John Watson had been established as a silk mercer and hosier in Churchgate Street, and he had, it is said, prospered at this business and had made a great deal of money.



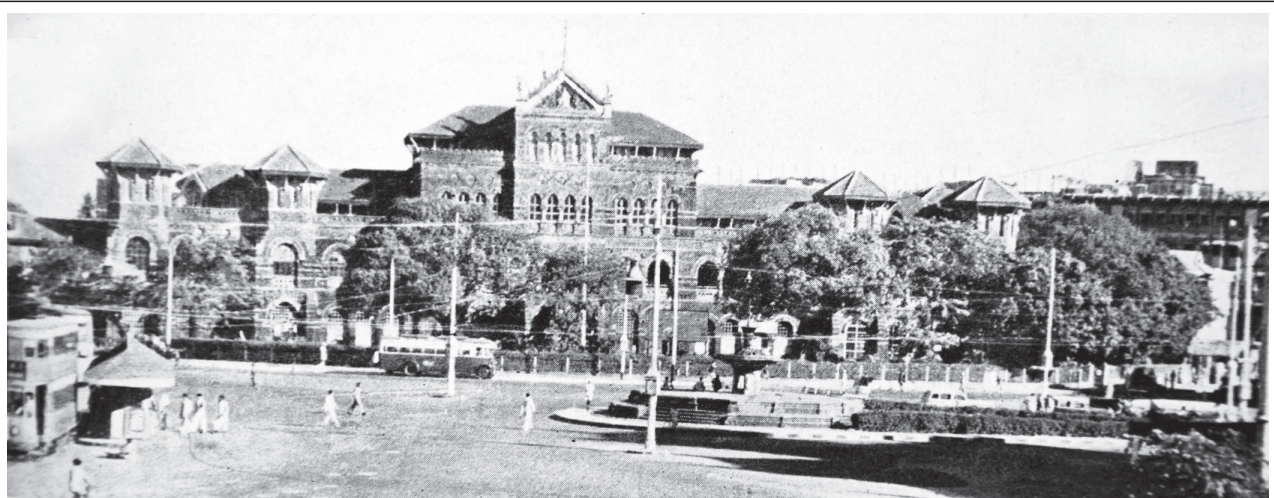
*The hotel that included "a staff of English housemaids and waitresses".
Watson's hotel building, now known as Mahendra Mansions. Army & Navy Stores on left.*

Well, when in 1864 some of this new land was put up for auction, Watson was one of the bidders, and he obtained what he had fancied for his purpose. To him was sold a plot at a price which was at the rate of Rs. 110 a yard, and on the ground thus acquired he built the Esplanade Hotel - a structure which is still standing. It is that old building which adjoins the Army and Navy Stores on the north side and has its main entrance opening towards the King Edward statue.

This hotel was not built in a day. John Watson

did not hurry. He took plenty of time in the elaboration of his plans. And he sought no professional assistance - he was his own engineer and architect. Some of the materials for construction, it is said, were imported from his native English county, which was Cumberland; and old Maclean of the "Guide" refers to the hotel as having been "built at enormous cost of iron and brick on perhaps the best site in Bombay".

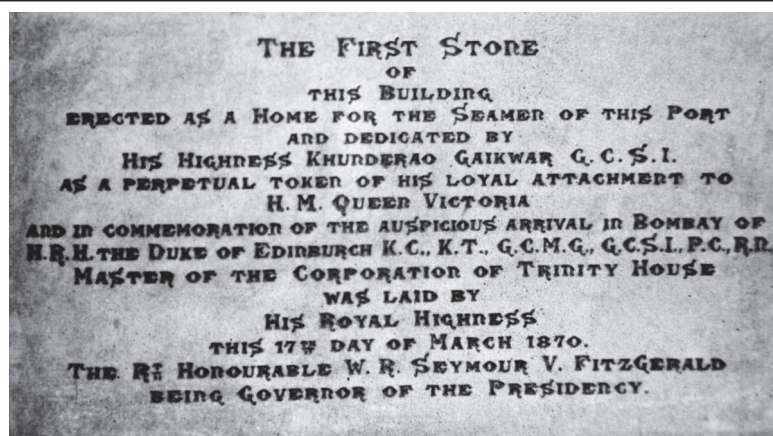
The building was completed in 1870 - the year in which, by the way, the B. B. & C. I.



*The King Alfred Sailor's Home. It was bought by Government in 1928,
at a cost of Rs. 4,44,375/-, for use of the Bombay Legislative Council.*



Many of the old Fort buildings are extant today, but not all have the spaciousness and charm of the offices of Messrs. Greaves Cotton and Co. According to the title-deeds this building was largely repaired in 1781.



Tablet in the Sailors' Home. His Highness Khanderao Gaikwar contributed Rs. 2,00,000 of the cost of Rs. 3,66,629.

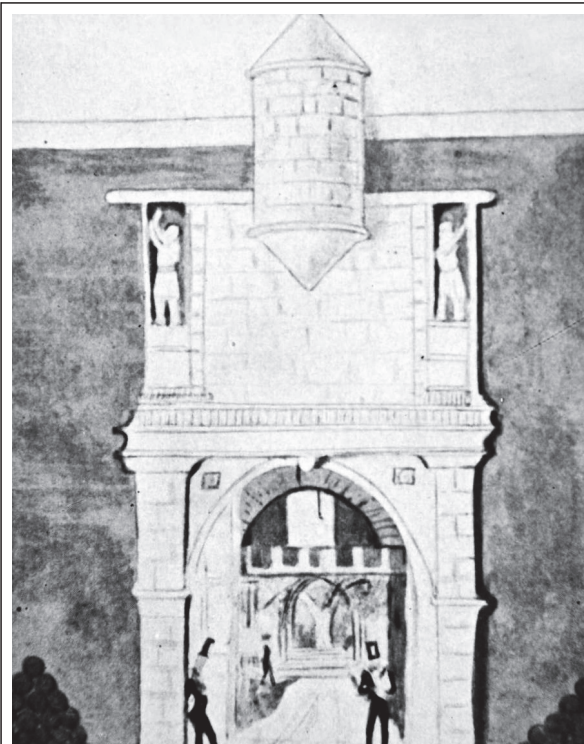
reached Churchgate. The opening was welcome and visitors were struck by the fine style of the new hotel - the hotel and its owner and builder were praised. And indeed from all accounts it is evident that Watson had spared no money in an elaborate design to make the place as home-like as possible to visitors from the Old Country. Richard Bruce, who became Commissioner in Baluchistan, tells us in his memoirs that when on his first arrival in India he put up at Watson's, "this hotel had recently been started on strictly European lines and included a staff of English housemaids and waitresses."

Watson's enterprise won him great reputation. He rose to high esteem. His name was "as good as a bank," and it became known all over India. At first his place was called the "Esplanade Hotel," but in time it came to be better known as "Watson's Hotel." And as "Watsons" it flourished and drew an overflowing patronage, till at length the owner found that his hotel was not big enough. He needed more room, and so he decided to build again.

At Apollo Pier Road, within a stone's-throw of the point now occupied by the Gateway of India, a site for his purpose was found on the large piece of ground where now stands that block of flats known as Dhunraj Mahal. There at the beginning of the 1880's, was erected the building at first called the "Esplanade Hotel Annexe," but which later became known only by the name of "Watson's Annexe."

The Annexe for many years served the purpose for which it was designed. Then time brought its changes. John Watson, pioneer "hotelier" of Bombay, having grown old, retired to England, and it is supposed that he ended his days among the hills of his native Cumberland.

The properties were sold. The old building on the Esplanade, as already mentioned, still exists, but in 1933 all relics of Watson's enterprise in Apollo Bunder vanished when the old Annexe



A view of the Gate of Bombay Castle, 1810. From a water colour drawing by Private Temple, in the library of the India Office.

was demolished to make way for that new block of flats.

The Annexe was not the first building raised on that strip of land that abuts on Apollo Pier Road on the north side. A few years before Watson had turned the first sod for his second hotel, there had arisen on a site at the top of Apollo Pier Road, and facing Wellington Fountain, a large and notable building - the Sailor's Home.



Many will remember the level-crossing at Churchgate Station



And some may remember the old station.



The scene today is very different.



But a little bit of the picturesque old station remains, and this is the view from the Govt. Law College.

This "Royal Alfred Sailors' Home " was not hurriedly put up. Its construction lasted exactly four years, a period commencing from the 28th February 1872 and ending on the 29th February 1876. And the architect of the building was F. W. Stevens - that same architect who twenty-one years later was entrusted with the design of the B. B. & C. I. Administrative Offices at Churchgate. In fact this was Steven's first work in Bombay - the first of four principal buildings which he designed for the city.

And here, to begin with, Stevens produced an example of that style by the applications of which he is so much distinguished. He cast his design for this Sailor's Home in the Gothic, and to give the building appropriate expression, to give it a fitting nautical touch, he adorned the pediment with a sculptured figure of "Neptune."

At the time this building was completed, Apollo Bunder was still almost a vacant tract, and so this brand new Sailors' Home, finished to classic perfection, stood forth with great prominence. All Bombay gazed at the work, and as it fronted the open space that extended down to Back Bay, it must have been viewed with much curiosity by travellers arriving from the north by the trains of the newly-opened B.B. & C.I. Railway.

For half a century the Sailor's Home served the purpose for which it had been built, and then served no more - Jacks of the Red Ensign and Jacks of the White Ensign having become scarce in Bombay. And of all the thousands (officers and seamen) who within that half century had put up in the Gothic hostel of Stevens's creation, one of the most noted must have been Joseph Conrad.

Yes, that author of great romances of the sea, ship captain under sail and steam, and "master of English prose and master in seamanship" as he has been called - he once stayed in that Home. And this statement is not from sailors' hearsay. We have his own story for it and it is on record. And, what is more, we may say, from Conrad's own account, that his stay in this Home was the beginning of that experience from which originated his greatest story of the sailing ship - *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

Recounting to a friend the origin of this story, Conrad has briefly told how : "One evening when sitting with other officers of the Merchant Navy on the verandah of the Sailors' Home at Bombay, a kind of palace from which the entrance into the harbour could be observed, we saw a sailing ship come in, a very fine vessel looking like a yacht. It was the *Narcissus*. A few days later I became a member of her crew. It was an entirely new ship..... The voyage from Bombay to London was performed in the manner I have described."

Of that area that extends from the Sailors' Home (or say Wellington Fountain) southwards to Colaba, it need but be said that all the buildings to be seen here stand on ground reclaimed during the latter part of the last century and early in the present century.

But the whole development of this area and also the development of Colaba which at one time had been but a military cantonment rented for Rs. 114 a year! - the whole development of this area may be traced to one basic work - the reclamation of the channel, 800 yards wide,

which up to 1835 separated Colaba from Apollo Bunder. Across that reclaimed channel bed was built the road that became known as "Colaba Causeway," but which ceased to be a "causeway," and was widened and made *pukha* shortly before the arrival of the railway.

In fact it was the reclamation of the old channel, and the building of the causeway across it, which made Colaba a part of Bombay, and enabled the cotton depot to be transferred here in 1844. Later the B.B. & C. I. founded its terminal on the site of the same old channel; and not far away to eastward on the foreshore, the dock-builder came and built the first wet dock in the port of Bombay - the Sassoon Dock. And we find Maclean recording in his Guide of 1885, that "the Gun Carriage Basin has been given up to the B. B. & C.I., who have built the terminus of their line at this part of Colaba."

Thus it had come about that Colaba, which up to the year 1835 had been cut off from Bombay by the sea, and was accessible only by a ferry boat, had become in the latter part of the same century - with its cotton depot, its docks, "bundars," and its railway terminal - an important centre of road, rail and shipping traffic.

The neighbourhood grew. Building went on. Access was further and further improved. Tramway lines were extended down to the railway station. To the north of the terminal, Wodehouse Road had opened a new way into Colaba. In 1896 the railway built itself a new station; and early in the new century the City Improvement Trust won land from the sea and created that promenade which is known as Cuffe Parade.

But before the new century had far advanced, there were signs of great change. In the matter of shipping, Colaba had become less and less important as a part of the port of Bombay. It had no berths for big ships. In 1910 the port's first wet dock had gone clean out of commission, and some years later it was found that there was not

room enough at Colaba for the cotton trade. It was proposed that the cotton depot should be transferred right away north to Sewri. There the "Green" was shifted in due time, and after 1925 the rattle of the cotton carts was no longer heard on Colaba Causeway.

And what of the railway?- now that the shipping had gone, and the cotton depot had gone, and now that the terminal was "compassed round about" by roads and buildings and had not a perch of extra space for extension?

The railway went too. It had to leave anyhow to make way for the Back Bay reclaimer's scheme. But not till midnight on the 31st December 1930 did that old terminal on the channel bed cease to function, and then the man who rang the bell for the last "departure" rang a great change of sixty years for Colaba and for the B.B. & C. I. Railway.



Old Colaba Station, 1896 - 1930.
