CHAPTER 3. BRITISH PERIOD (1796 – 1948)

As events, objects and people recede into history, unless conserved in some way, even the biggest monuments will crumble. Therefore the legacy left behind by the British, Sri Lanka’s most recent conquerors, is the best preserved in its plantation industry, its road and rail network, and many public and private buildings.

The British attack came from the north of Colombo with the support of their ships from the sea. They crossed the Kelani river on bamboo rafts and reached the Pettah through Kayman’s gate. On the 16th of February, 1796 all the settlements of the Dutch East India Company passed to the British East India Company without a prolonged struggle. But it was not till 1815 with the capture of Kandy, that Colombo became the capital of this island nation.

At this time, nine years after the ouster of the Dutch, the city had not changed much. The Fort was mainly occupied by the British; the Pettah, which was a pleasant residential area, by the Dutch and the Portuguese; and the suburbs by the Sinhalese, Tamil and Moorish people, the whole population of Colombo amounting to about fifty thousand inhabitants.

The main thoroughfare in the Fort was called King Street, which became Queen Street when Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne and is the current Janadhipathi Mawatha. The first British governor of Ceylon, Frederic North, lived in a single storey house at the junction of the present York Street and Baron Jayathilaka Mawatha. This is the site on which the iconic Cargills building now stands.

Moving Out of the Fort
The demolition of the walls of the Fort was begun in 1869 and the moat filled up to allow for the expansion of the city. While the documents detailing the exact reasoning for this move has not yet been discovered, several issues, such as those given below may have been contributing factors.
By the first decades of the 19th century, Britain's superior military technology, naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, economic prosperity and political power gave the small community of British immigrants the confidence to reside outside the defensive walls of fortified towns. Also, by this time, developments in military technology and strategy had rendered this type of fortification obsolete (Raheem & Colin-Thome, 2000).

Furthermore, urban planners in this period believed that the high walls of fortified towns impeded circulation of air. This was a powerful consideration in an era which believed in the restorative powers of sea breezes and that foul air contributed to malaria. Public sanitation and health was a matter of high priority for the British in the East due to the many diseases which had no respect for colour or status.

Elsewhere in the world too, in Bombay and Vienna for instance, walls of old fortified towns were coming down around the same time to allow for urban growth. A critical factor in this urban transformation of Colombo was the advent of the railway and its location as a harbour.

The rail service began in 1864 with the construction of the Main Line between Colombo and Ambepussa, with trains terminating at the Colombo Terminus (the current National Railway Museum). It was not till the walls of the fort were demolished and the Beira Lake filled in and reclaimed that the present Fort railway station was constructed.
The other important reason for the growth of the city was its strategic position in commerce and shipping. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 significantly increased shipping traffic and Colombo was made the principal port of Ceylon over Galle in 1871.

The movement of population outside Pettah proper is reflected in the names of streets such as Old Moor Street, New Moor Street, Chetty Street and New Chetty Street. New suburbs were laid out, their residents being mainly the higher officials of the civil, judicial and military establishments. Large commodious bungalows with panoramic views were set in spacious gardens surrounded by several acres of land, in the Cinnamon Gardens and around the Beira Lake, the whole reflecting an unhurried lifestyle orientated towards recreation and sport.
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Mutwal became a fashionable suburb and mudaliyardon was congregated around Wolvendaal where the vaults of many Sinhalese families are to be found in the churchyard attached to the old Dutch church. Cinnamon Gardens was also a fashionable suburb with large, luxurious homes, with cinnamon plantations around, where there was a more rural atmosphere.

Figure 28: Big Bagatelle, one of the earliest residences in Kollupitiya, Colombo 3. Later the site of Alfred House. S. Slinn & Co. 1868. Images of British Ceylon.

Kollupitiya was a flourishing suburb with beautiful villas on either side of the road shaded by lovely gardens. The most imposing of which was Alfred House, the palatial residence of Mr. Charles de Soysa where Alfred the Duke of Edinburgh and Duchess were entertained at a banquet where gold plate was used. The grounds on which the house stood stretched from Bagatelle Road to School Lane in the south and from Galle Road in the west to Thurstan Road (Hulugalle, 1965).
The bungalow was an architectural creation of the Europeans in the east. Derived from the Indian prototype of the Bengali hut or bungalow, it was adapted by civil and military engineers to suit the entire range of building structures for the British community and their dependents, from governor’s house to military mess, club, chummery, resthouse or hotel. In the first decades of British rule, they were modest-sized bungalows, but over the years they evolved into larger complexes in a residential building style, typical of 19th century colonial architecture.

In this respect, the British designers and planners in 19th century Ceylon retained many of the aesthetic and practical architectural features of the Dutch. The use of the verandah as an architectural device gave the street frontage of civic buildings a homogeneous and uniform character, both in scale and size. In the central business districts within the Fort and Pettah, the typical colonnaded verandah so characteristic of the Dutch and early British period, gave way to arcaded and covered
pedestrian walkways. This was a distinctive feature of urban design within the heart of Colombo in the early 20th century (Raheem, 1996).

Figure 30: Prince Street, now Baron Jayatilleke Mw. in the Fort in the early 1900s with its covered pedestrian walkways. Plate. Lankapura.com

Figure 31: Undated photo of York Street with its rows of shade trees, tramlines and its colonnaded walkways. The Cargills building is seen at right, built on the site of the residence of the first British governor of Ceylon. www.lankapura.com
Symbolic Spaces in Colombo

Galle Face

Before it became an important landmark in Colombo’s urban history as a centre for recreation and leisure activity, the area occupied by Galle Face Green which bordered the Fort to the south, was regarded as a vital buffer zone by Portuguese and Dutch military strategists who kept it free of trees and natural obstructions.

During British times, this area developed into a symbolic centre. It was the arena where status and power were displayed. It was the space to display the latest dress, the most modern carriage or other accessory. It was the scene of flirtations, of gossip, political and social. Since this was a public space, the British could not always dominate this area. The indigenous people, whether elite or hoi polloi could also use the Galle Face Green, and whether they realised it or not, were influenced here by Western lifestyles. In this way, horse racing commenced here in the 1820s and cricket in the 1830s.

Figure 32: Undated photo of horse races at Galle Face Green with the Grandstand in the background. www.imagesofceylon.com
But this area was still considered a part of the British security system in the event of a ‘native rebellion’, so the Galle Face Green (along with Racket Court to the west of the Fort ramparts) remained a military reserve which was meant to preserve an open field of fire. For this reason, the British military high command opposed the lease or sale of any plots of land in these areas, and refused permission for buildings in this area. This was the primary reason for the Turf Club’s decision to locate its new racecourse and grandstand at a site in Cinnamon Gardens in 1898 (Raheem & Colin-Thome, 2000).

As the city has become more and more congested, this security concern may have saved Galle Face Green as one of only two large public recreation spaces (the other being Vihara Maha Devi Park) available until recently to the inhabitants of Colombo.

Beira Lake
Sri Lanka has no natural lakes. The Beira Lake is a creation of the Portuguese as a strategic defence for the fort. It was probably created by damming a rivulet so that the marshy terrain in the area became a lake. The lake covered a little over 400 acres.

Figure 33: Postcard of Galle Face Green and the Hotel in 1908. www.lankapura.com
in the 16th century and at present due to land reclamation and silting has reduced to 176 acres.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Dutch with their experience in building dykes and canals in Holland, transformed the lake and enhanced its aesthetic value and natural beauty. It has been suggested that the lake is named for an engineer named De Beer, who in 1700 constructed a sluice gate to control the flow of water from the lake.

Sir Patrick Geddes, the sociologist and pioneering town planner, who submitted a report on "Town Planning in Colombo" in 1921 wrote:

"At sunset especially, looking over the Lake to the palm forest of the lakeside bungalows, this is by far the finest park view in Colombo, and only second to the totally different seascape of Galle Face. Hence I cannot too strongly emphasize the plea that, though the great Lake and the north of this one are now being completely commercialised, this one portion of the city's old beauty should be spared for the future. The economic return from spoiling this end of the Lake can after all be but small, but the loss to the city is incomparably great." (Hulugalle 1965).

Within the last half century, the Beira Lake has been reduced to a cesspool and a dumping ground for the city's effluvia. A population explosion has led to large shanty towns and extensive human settlements on its banks and today the lake is being choked by the growth of aquatic vegetation. However, in the last few years, efforts have been made to clear its banks and to establish walking paths around the lake so
that Colombo's inhabitants may once again enjoy this space. More improvements are anticipated under the Metro Colombo Urban Development Plan mentioned above.

A Fort Streetscape - Chatham Street

![Figure 35: Rare bird's eye view of Chatham Street from the clock tower in the 1860s. Images of British Ceylon](image)

Virtually all the buildings along lower Chatham Street in the 1860s were single storeyed structures. The street façade, as mentioned in Chapter Two in the section on Dutch architecture, was a continuous colonnaded verandah of tall timber posts supporting eaves overhanging the street. The pavements were raised high above the street and the open sewers that ran along the streets, an unsightly feature in most of the streets in the fort in the 19th century, proved hazardous and unsanitary.

With the installation of the underground sewerage system in the 1900s, the pavements were reduced to street level. The powdery gravel treatment of the road, which is evident in the photographs was resurfaced and macadamized around the same time. Shade trees, which were a characteristic feature in all street fronts within the Fort of Colombo, and other Dutch coastal towns in the 17th and 18th centuries were reintroduced in the 1890s, as seen by the tree guards in figure 37.
Figure 36: Lower Chatham Street, looking west towards the clock tower. Undated photo by Skeen & Co. www.imagesofceylon.com

Figure 37: Chatham Street, early 1900s. Skeen & Co. www.lankapura.com
References


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