

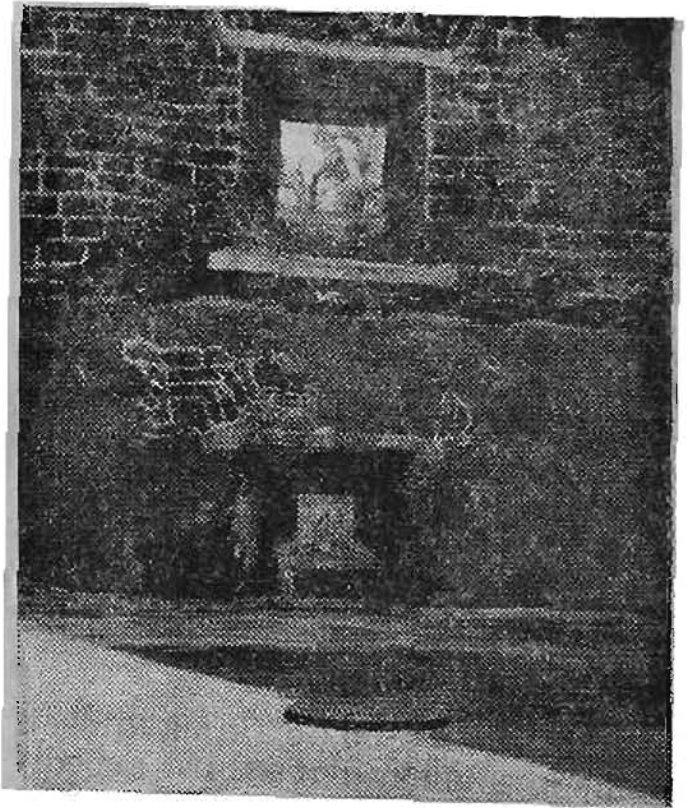
PALLIPURAM FORT

OLDEST EUROPEAN STRUCTURE IN INDIA

By "A WANDERER"

AT the northern end of the Island of Vypeen, situated in Travancore territory and overlooking the estuary of the Periyar, stands the tiny fortress of Pallipuram or Palliport, the oldest surviving piece of European fortification in India, reckoning from the day when Vasco de Gama first landed at Calicut in 1498.

Built by the Portuguese in 1507, the fortress at Palliport was not the earliest in point of construction, for it was preceded in 1503 by Fort Manuel at Cochin. But while there is no trace left of Fort Manuel (the present fort of Cochin being of much later origin) and also of the fort at Cranganore which was built almost at the same time as the one at Palliport to guard the entrance to the backwater, the fortress at Palliport has survived the onslaught of time, and stands even to-day a mute, gaunt witness of those early days when the newly acquired habit of Europeans of eating meat dressed with spices made trade in these commodities so profitable that it drove the adventurers of one European nation after another to India, regardless of the perils of a long and protracted sea voyage.



AN INTERIOR VIEW OF PALLIPURAM FORT.

It will be interesting to recall the historical background of the construction of the fort at Pallipuram. Although Vasco de Gama anchored off Calicut on the 20th May 1498, interviewed the Zamorin as the representative of the King of Portugal, and entered into arrangements with him for opening up trade with Malabar, he had to leave Calicut in August 1499, as the Moors who monopolized the trade in pepper and other spices did not

relish the competition of the Portuguese, and misrepresented them to the Zamorin as pirates.

Another Portuguese fleet, however, arrived at Calicut on the 15th March 1500, under the command of Pedro Alvarez Cabral, who concluded a treaty of friendship with the Zamorin and opened a factory at Calicut but who impatient that he was not getting the best portion of the spice trade attacked and sacked Calicut, killing 600 men, and sailed south reaching Cochin on 20th December 1500.

The Raja of Cochin whose enemy the Zamorin was, gave the foreigners a cordial reception and offered them all facilities for trade. But Cabral did not stay long enough at Cochin. He sailed out to engage a fleet the Zamorin had sent out to punish him, but unable to contact it set out for Portugal without returning to Cochin.

In 1502 Vasco de Gama himself came in command of a third expedition and after attacking Calicut and committing indescribable atrocities, sailed down to Cochin, established a factory there and returned to Portugal on 1st September.

The alliance between the Raja of Cochin and the Portuguese infuriated the Zamorin who invaded Cochin and compelled the Raja to take shelter at Vypeen. Fortunately for the Raja, however, a Portuguese fleet commanded by Francesco de Albuquerque arrived at Cochin on 20th September 1503. Albuquerque drove out the Zamorin and his forces and restored to the Raja of Cochin his possessions. The Raja was so well pleased that he allowed the Portuguese to construct a fort at Cochin. About four

years later permission seems to have been granted for the construction of the fortresses of Pallipuram and Cranganore, commanding the entrance to the backwater from the sea.

The tiny village of Pallipuram, the site of the fortress stands at the northern tip of the narrow island of Vypeen which itself lies to the north of Cochin. The little fortress is a hexagonal structure about 34 feet high, each side measuring 32 feet. It is built of laterite and the walls are six feet thick. The building seems to have been a three-storeyed one, the two upper floors being supported on wooden beams radiating from a central granite pillar remnants of which have been discovered.

The fortress is entered by an arched gateway seven feet high and five feet wide, constructed of finely dressed granite. Inside, on the ground floor is a platform five feet high with a cellar underneath, evidently used as a magazine for storing ammunition. There is also a well 16 feet deep. There are eighteen embrasures on the walls, three on each side for the three storeys, showing that the fortress could mount eighteen guns.

For the century and a half that Portuguese power was ascendant on the Malabar Coast, Pallipuram remained in the hands of the Portuguese. But in the wars of 1662 and 1663 they were overthrown by the Dutch who thus became masters of all Portuguese possessions in Malabar, including, of course, the fort at Pallipuram.

In 1766, Haider Ali of Mysore started negotiations with the Dutch

for the purchase of the forts of Cranganore and Pallipuram (the latter referred to as Azhikottai or Ayakottai—the fortress at the Azhi or bar) as they stood at key points in the approach to Cochin and Travancore which Haider wanted to invade ; but the negotiations somehow fizzled out. But when Tippu, Haider's son, began to make active preparations for the invasion of Travancore, it became imperative for this State to possess these forts which flanked the defence of the Travancore lines. In 1789 Tippu himself opened negotiations with the Dutch to purchase the forts. The Maharaja of Travancore immediately deputed Dewan Kesava Pillai to negotiate with the Dutch Governor for the same purpose, and an agreement was executed on the 31st July 1789, by which "the Dewan Kesava Pillai bought for his Master, and the Hon'ble Governor Van Angelbeck on the part of the (Dutch East India) Company sold to the King of Travancore, for the just sum of three hundred thousand Surat Rupees, the Fort of Cranganore and the Post of Ayakotta, with the cannon and ordnance belonging to them as they now stand together, with the powder magazine, though no small arms or any other effects, and further the following lands and gardens." A list of ten such gardens is given, together with the amounts for which they were leased.

Among the more important conditions under which the sale was effected was the following:—

"The King of Travancore shall not hinder the navigation of the river past the fort, either to the company's vessels or to the vessels of the King of Cochin or their subjects, whether the same be empty or loaded with rice, paddy or goods of any description, as also all floats of wood and bamboos etc., in a word all goods whatever without exception shall pass and repass free and without hindrance nor shall there be any new tax put upon them."

The agreement was negotiated in the Fort of Cochin in the presence of Powney, British Resident in Travancore, and a sum of Rs. 50,000 was paid before taking possession of the forts, the balance being agreed to be paid in four equal annual instalments "by furnishing an account of pepper annually to the amount of Rs. 62,500."

It was thus that the northern third of the small village of Pallipuram with its historic little fortress came into Travancore's possession.

Since 1870, Government have taken over the direct management of the lands at Pallipuram which were till then leased out for various periods, and the fortress, the oldest European-built fortification extant in India and dumb witness of history in the making for over 400 years, is preserved and maintained as an ancient monument.