

FORT STUART AND THE POST OFFICE SERVICE  
OF THE NIGER COAST PROTECTORATE

FORT STUART! The very name carries one back to the Scottish feudal system in the days long gone past. Is the name only to remind us that there are Scotsmen scattered all over the earth wherever the British flag flies, and in some places where it does not, or is it that we may recall the days of slave raiding or pirating? No! the Fort Stuart that is now before us has no relation to one or the other, but was one of the first European trading establishments on the Old Calabar River in the Niger Coast (formerly Oil Rivers) Protectorate - one of the lately acquired territories now forming an integral part of the British Empire in West Africa!

One might well ask why it is, or was ever christened "Fort Stuart"? I will endeavour to enlighten my readers. For very many years - I believe for the past four centuries - Old Calabar had been a great centre of trade, if slavery may be thus termed. In the olden days, cargoes of slaves were here collected together in the river, and in fast sailing schooners, brigs, and other craft were conveyed to the United States, the West Indies, Cuba, and the world in the West, where they became very valuable commodities on the sugar, cotton, and tobacco plantations. Many of these poor wretches died en route, and the horrors of the once "terrible middle passage" are well known. Brought down from long distances in the interior, manacled together with long forked sticks lashed round their necks, with scanty food, water, and clothing, if any at all, and the possibilities of a scourging if they lagged behind, they found themselves collected at Old Town or Duke Town - the populated centres of the river, and exchanged by their owners with the Portuguese, Spanish, and even British slavers for rum, tobacco, brass rods, earthenware, Manchester goods, guns, powder etc. In later days, many of these adventurous slavers were captured by British cruisers in or leaving the Bights of Benin and Biafra, and were taken to the Admiralty Court at Sierra Leone for condemnation and the emancipation of their freights. Long after these courts were established, occasional seizures were made, but the glories (if such they may be called) of the slave trade, with its dare-devil agents, waned and gradually disappeared.

The traffic in slaves having ceased, it was found necessary to exchange other articles with the white traders, who persisted in coming to Old Calabar, and there sprang up a large barter business in exchange for palm oil, an article of modern commerce largely used in the manufacture of soap and candles, and for lubricating purposes. In those days, sailing vessels entered the river which finds its outlet into the Bight of Biafra, opposite and about ninety miles distant from the Island of Fernando Po. Although the high mountainous peak of Cameroon, now German territory, is a good land mark, frequently vessels looking for the river mouth are delayed in the "Smokes" of the Harmattan wind, which brings with it dense fog such as



is experienced in November in London - of a regular pea soup colour. This is due to the sand blown from the desert to the sea, suspended in the atmosphere for periods varying from one to fourteen days, when it is blown back again. The decks of ships are often literally covered with fine sand and navigation is much interfered with. In February, 1898, the French steamer "La Flachet" was caught in one of these fogs and totally wrecked off Orotava, Teneriffe, and the "Rosslyn Castle" Cape mail had great difficulty in making the Island of Madeira by dead reckoning.

Having made the entrance of the river between the Tom Shot Breakers on the Western and Bakasy Gap on the Eastern side, there is a circuitous run of forty-five miles, through dense mangrove swamps with interminable shoals, to the anchorage at Duke Town - a populous place of some fifteen to seventeen thousand native inhabitants. The town is built in a horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre, shelving up and backwards from the river side to some slightly higher ground about half-a-mile distant. The town is on the left bank of the river. On the western promontory stands the United Presbyterian Mission with its church and dwelling-house nestling among the beautiful foliage of palms, breadfruits, bananas and orange groves, with the European cemetery lying peacefully below, railed in on the slope of the hill. On the opposite promontory are the Government buildings, the residence of the Consul-General and his staff of Europeans, and the barracks of the Hausa soldiers. The approach to the anchorage has a very pleasing and pretty effect with the factories or trading stations of the European merchants dotted along the river bank, and above, on the hills, the galvanized re-roofed Swiss-looking chalets of the Government buildings, and in the distance away up the river the Industrial Training Institute of the United Presbyterian Mission, now doing excellent work under the superintendence of the Rev. W. Risk Thomson. The building is erected upon a site given by Sir Claude Macdonald, K. C. M. G., the then Consul-General, now British Minister in Pekin, before his departure in July, 1895.

From Seven Fathom Point, running at right angles to the great Cross River, there is a stretch of about five miles up the river to the factories, at which, on the steamer being first observed, goes up a cry along the bank from factory to factory, announcing a ship in sight. Oh! welcome sound we all say, and pray that letters from home may bring us good tidings of those loved ones from whom we are so far distant. No sooner has the ship dropped anchor, than a flotilla of beautiful fast rowing gigs are afloat and row round the vessel ready to board her as soon as she has been granted pratique by the boarding or harbour officers, which is all very speedily effected. The yellow quarantine flag is hauled down and busy feet are hastening up the gangway ladder which has been lowered, and pleasant welcomes are extended to old friends and new comers alike.

The Customs and Postal officers, in their smart uniforms, are busy receiving the mails from the purser or attending to the ship's papers, while the captain and officers are reporting the latest advices and cablegrams received by



them along the coast - at Accra, Lagos, and Bonny - which are, of course, often quite a fortnight old, as the mail steamers only call every fourteen days. The mails are hurried ashore to the Post Office just above the Queen's Beach, so called because it is the Government landing place. Alas! it is not to Fort Stuart that the mails are now conveyed. Fort Stuart is no more! but of this later. Temporary premises have been adapted to the postal service since the disastrous fire in November, 1895, which destroyed the whole of the Post Office and Customs House and Fort Stuart in a couple of hours.

The mails are no sooner ashore in the Post Office than the staff - all natives except the Postmaster-General, who has had the work of organising the service since the inauguration of the Protectorate in 1891, of the two money making departments of the Government, i. e., Post and Customs - are busy at work in the distribution of the mails - parcel post, registered packets, newspapers, etc. - into boxes (there being no sorting tables or distributing letter pigeon-holes, all being burnt out) labelled with the names of the respective firms, employees, etc., which have been previously lodged in the Post Office as soon as the steamer's arrival was announced. The distribution invariably occupies from one to two hours, according to the number of bags received. By this time a crowd has gathered outside the door and windows of the temporary post office, with eager and extended hands waiting for news of those at home. The boxes are distributed to the various owners, the business of the department closed, and finally the office, each one retiring to ponder in the solitude of his own bosom the good or bad tidings, the mail has brought him, and to learn the latest political and commercial news of the world at large.

We must now revert for a moment to Fort Stuart, and perhaps it would have been well to have prefaced these lines by what follows. We asked ourselves at the beginning of this article, "Why Fort Stuart?" Does the name not call up the idea of massive stone walls, and embrasures with guns of ancient date peeping forth and defying all attempting invaders? Truly, when I heard the name, I fancied myself once more on the Gold Coast, where every few miles one finds the old Dutch, Danish, Portuguese, and English forts still standing as good to-day, if not better, as when they defied all assaults from within or without. These forts are such in the true sense - splendidly built, pinnaced upon rocky promontories commanding both sea and land, and in early days were practically impregnable. Compare these with our fort - "Fort Stuart." I was certainly amused when introduced to our own fort, which I will now attempt to describe.

Imagine a block of land on the bank of the river, 300 feet long by 150 feet wide, extending at the back to a high cliff above which, at some distance, is situated the United Presbyterian Mission Training Institute before referred to. Upon this block of land stood the dwelling house of a European trader, erected by a dear, good old gentleman named Thomas Forshaw, who in those days represented the prosperous firm of Stuart and Douglas of Liverpool, hence Fort Stuart. He was charged, but of course this was not true, with having built this house principally out of empty gin



cases, the receptacle in which the Hamburg spirit is imported. Fancy a fort of empty gin cases! What a safeguard against an attack of turbulent and savage cannibals! Had the liquid still remained within them, there might at least have been some security from its fiery qualities, which would soon have dispersed the marauders.

The foundation consisted of a cement floor on the sandy ground, with mangrove (a native wood) posts, extending upwards some ten feet, upon which rested a common white pine flooring. From this stage other uprights of white deal scantling a further twelve feet, upon which was fixed a galvanised iron roof. The outer walls were of galvanised iron rivetted together, the interior being divided into a central dining hall with four bedrooms on each side, the building itself being 120 feet long by 60 feet wide, making a really commodious dwelling on the first floor, with an eight foot open verandah running all round it. The lower or ground floor had, in the good old trading days of palm oil and ivory, often been filled with bales and cases of cotton goods, cases of flintlock guns, hardware of every description in barter for produce, for the agents in those days knew full well the value of the markets at home and made money hand over hand.

For many years, it is necessary to mention, the chiefs and people of Old Calabar refused to allow any buildings to be erected on shore, except possibly a cooperage for the storage of palm oil casks, and all trade barter was done on board hulks (sailing vessels dismantled and housed in with native bamboo-thatched roofs) lying anchored up and down the river in various places, each vessel being sufficiently manned and armed in the not infrequent case of attack or palaver over their trading operations.

These hulks have disappeared one by one, until there is nothing left, except the frames or ribs of some one or two which lie, like the deposited relics of a bygone age, on the other bank of the river, and are now somewhat in the way of steamer and boat navigation. The agents have now provided themselves with comfortable houses on shore, built of the usual corrugated iron, with iron walls and roofs. These, of course, are very hot during the sunshine and dry season, but are sufficiently cool and comfortable when the rains are on.

Since the Government of the Niger Coast Protectorate came into existence, a road has been made along the river bank from one end of the factories or trading stations to the other. Other roads have been made across the Consulate Hill, connecting it with Kwa Town at the back of Old Town, at the head of the stretch of the river, from the Training Institute to the Mission Hill, passing by a neatly kept native cemetery. Formerly, all persons dying were buried in their respective houses or compounds, a procedure which has since, except in the case of an important chief or big man, been entirely discountenanced on sanitary grounds.



The view from the consulate hill, looking towards the European Hospital and the Mission Training Institute, reminds one of a park-like vista with undulating grounds lying in between, with pretty roads winding their way up from the beach to the different houses on the summit of the Hill. Indeed, it makes quite a pretty picture, with the red postal letter boxes, of European up-to-date form, dotted here and there on the hill and through the town, the indicators showing the hour of the next collection in front of the door just as though one was at Piccadilly Circus. All this was dense forest and impenetrable jungle eight years ago.

Endeavouring to depict the course of administration, especially that of the Postal Department, since its inauguration in 1892, I have digressed considerably, owing to the minute details, with a view of illustrating how, in a few years, a purely semi-barbarous state has changed entirely into a well governed part of the British Empire. In 1892 the postage to this native state was sixpence the half ounce from England, without any guarantee of the letters ever reaching their destination: the postage is at present 1d. per half ounce. There were no postal arrangements whatever. The purser of the ship brought the letters to the respective ports and the mail bags were opened by those who fancied they had a right to do so. Letters were distributed indiscriminately upon the ship's deck, and those who were fortunate enough to be aboard in time might possibly secure their own correspondence. Many letters were, to my own knowledge, thrown or blown overboard. When the Government took possession it immediately took measures to correct these irregularities, and to reduce the postage to fourpence the half ounce. An officer of much experience on the Coast on postal and other administrative matters was selected by Sir Claude Macdonald to organize the Postal Department. This was done so speedily and effectively, that in November, 1892, there arose out of this chaos a postal administration admitted by the Postmaster-General of England to be working so admirably with all its ramifications as to compare favourably with any large provincial town in England. At this moment there is a regular trained staff of native officials (a photograph of a few of them is here reproduced), smart, intelligent young Africans, trained up by the Postmaster-General under his own eye, who are a credit to any administration, at least to one so recently developed and incorporated with the Colonial Empire.

It is essential here that some idea of the mail transactions should be furnished from the statistical records which are briefly hereunder shewn:-

Years	RECEIVED			DESPATCHED		
	Registered Articles	Letters Newspapers Etc.	Parcels	Registered Articles	Letters Newspapers Etc.	Parcels
1895-96	1, 834	73, 068	750	4, 017	44, 082	463
1896-97	1, 893	95, 077	1, 342	3, 963	64, 680	957
1897-98	2, 782	109, 588	1, 709	5, 162	76, 928	1, 172



There are exchange Post Offices and Money Order Offices established, in addition to Old Calabar, at Bonny, Opobo, New Calabar, Brass, Warri, Sapele and Benin; and Postal Agencies situated at Bakana (New Calabar), Kwa-lbo, and Forcados River.

The local communication is very irregular owing to there being no continuous service of steamers plying within these waters - the direct mails only arriving once a fortnight.

The mails from the Protectorate for the West African and Windward ports, vis., Lagos, Kotonou, Kwitta, Accra, Cape Coast, Elmina, Sekondi, Axim, the Timber Ports, Liberia and Sierra Leone, are taken by all steamers calling at those ports, and the same applies to the service in the opposite direction. There are three distinct services to the Protectorate, their respective terminals being Brass, New Calabar, and Old Calabar, the steamers leaving Liverpool every alternate week to the two former, and each alternate fortnight to Old Calabar; and although it has hitherto taken five weeks to reach England from the Niger Coast, it is in contemplation to accelerate the homeward voyage and perform it in 25 days.

There is occasional service to the South and South-West Coasts, the regular service to and from which was discontinued when Old Calabar was left out on the direct route.

Fort Stuart, as at first represented, might well indeed be some pretty, tropical riverside dwelling, with its cocoanut palms spreading their graceful fronds, and its wide verandah running round the house, indicative of peace and quietness. The upper part of the building was used as quarters for European officers, the lower floor was devoted to the Postal and Customs Departments.

Suddenly, at 6 o'clock one Sunday evening, on the 24th November, 1895, the sound of fire bells was heard on the top of the Consulate Hill and all along the river. In a moment, it was discovered that Fort Stuart was in flames. In the compound at the back was the Government Printing Department with its valuable presses; a few yards away was the power magazine filled with ammunition, shells, fuses, etc., of every description, belonging to the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, which it was thought would be destroyed. The Postmaster-General and other officers on the Hill heard the alarm bell and repaired as fast as possible to the flaming scene, a mile away. The fire originated in the lamp room, at the back of the house, a small room which extended from the back verandah and adjoined the kitchen, built out from it for security. It was alleged at a public enquiry held afterwards, that the fire was due to a "palaver" or row between the Government steward and the pantry boy over a match to light the latter's lamp. A spent match had been carelessly thrown away by the steward, which fell into the oil feeder, the lid of which had been left open. This instantly caught and burst into a flame, spreading rapidly to the room itself, which



had for years previously been saturated with oil without any precautions whatever having been taken for its protection from fire. It was, in fact, considered so secure, that the Protectorate Treasurer in London, sitting down comfortably in his office in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall, had actually advised Sir Claude Macdonald to discontinue the insurance policy effected upon the building.

The fire had no sooner taken hold of the lamp room than the flames spread to the back verandah, flying up under the eaves to the ceiling, and in less time than it takes to describe it, the whole building was a mass of burning timber and red-hot iron. By the time the Postmaster-General and other officers reached the scene from the hill, a matter of a few minutes only, the whole river was alive to what was taking place; the flames had swept through the entire building on the first floor, and the roof, from one side to the other, was burning fiercely. Within half-an-hour the roof fell in with a crash, making the fire more difficult to cope with. Buckets of water were passed from hand to hand by a chain of Kroo boys, and the Hausa Force soldiers had fallen in at the barracks and come down with the object of rendering assistance, if possible, and to clear and secure the ammunition in the magazine, a very dangerous undertaking, though effectively carried out. Everyone who could lend a hand did so, and good work was done by the officers and crew of the steamship "Erasmus", then lying in the river nearby, by scaling the neighbouring buildings and breaking them down so as to get clear of the fire, and pouring buckets of water upon the burning mass.

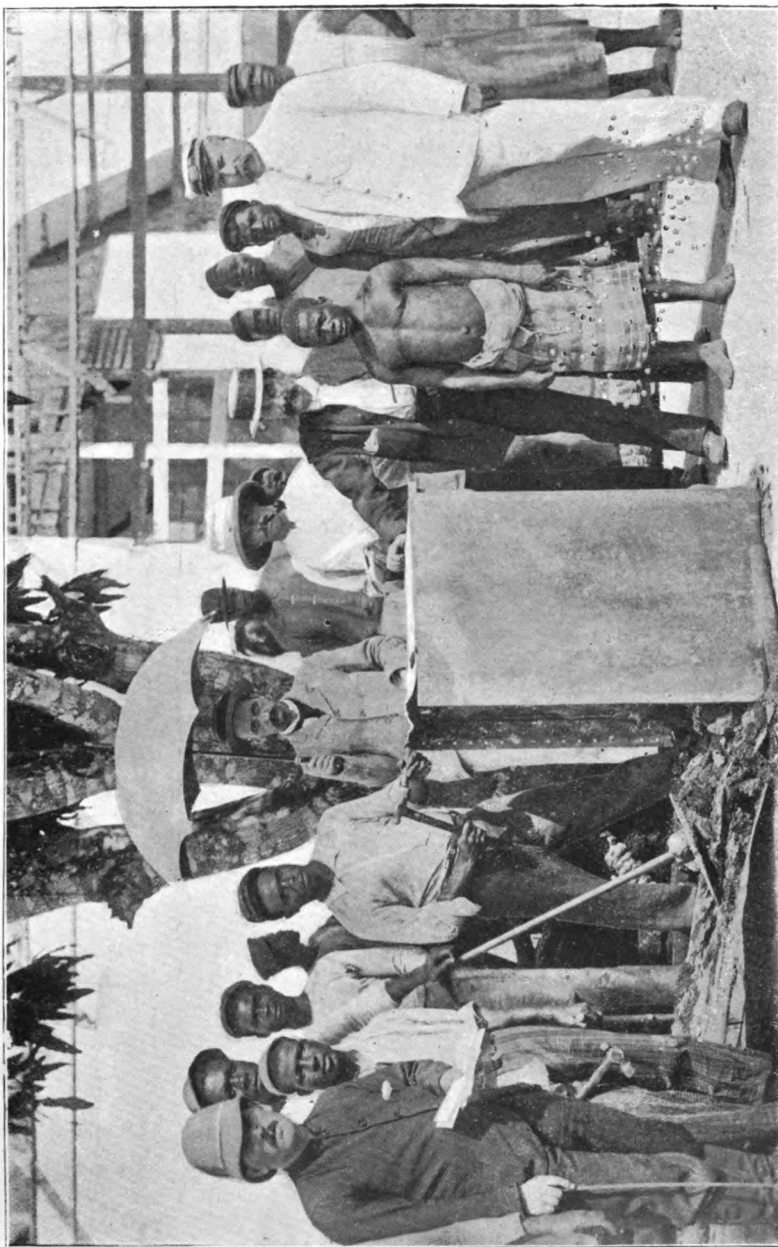
From the first, however, it was a hopeless task to attempt to save the building. All efforts were, therefore, directed to saving the contents and records of the Post Office and Custom House below, but it was impossible to save a single article. The entire building was burnt clean away in less than two hours, as may be seen by the illustration, "Fort Stuart after the fire". With the exception of the iron safes containing the stock of postage stamps, cards, and registered envelopes, hardly anything remained. Fortunately, no serious disaster occurred to those who assisted in preventing the flames spreading to the adjoining stores. The fire was practically over at about 8 p. m. - Fort Stuart in all its glory having surrendered.

A body of European officers volunteered to stand by all night, relieving each other every two hours, in case the wind freshened and blew the burning embers on to the other buildings, which, from their dry and over-heated condition, would have instantly taken fire. A very large trading establishment, the property of Messrs. Alexander Miller, Bros. & Co., was also in much danger from the flying sparks during the intensity of the fire. Happily nothing further occurred. Water was poured on the burning embers all night long by relays of Kroo boys, but what a sorry sight Fort Stuart presented when day dawned! It was thought that the destruction of the records would paralyse the two money making departments of the Government.

Not so, however! At 8 a. m. the outward mail steamer was sighted coming up the river. The steamship "Accra" had anchored below Parrot Island the previous evening, and the officers had seen the lurid sky lit up the night before, and fancied that some "bush plantation" was burning. The mails were brought ashore instantly; a shed was temporarily improvised, where the sorting of the letters, etc., took place, and the business of both departments was carried on at 8 o'clock that morning as though nothing whatever had happened. This was subsequently referred to in the Consul-General's report to the Foreign Office No. 1834, January, 1897, which appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette of January 12th, 1897, under the heading "A Compliment to the Officials."

"Before closing this report," continues Mr. Moor, "it is my duty to call attention to the able and willing assistance which has been rendered by the members of the staff in carrying on the administration effectually. All the members, I am glad to say, show a thorough interest in their work and carry it on with such goodwill in assisting one another that the work of administration is a united effort in one direction. It appears somewhat invidious to call attention to any officers specially in discharge of their duties, but I must point out the excellent organization which existed under the departments in charge of Vice-Consul T. A. Wall, which was severely tested on the occasion of the fire which occurred in the Custom House and Post Office at Old Calabar. On this occasion all the records and books of both these departments were destroyed, but though it has been an enormous labour, the returns for the year from both these departments have been re-collected from the detailed returns of the out-stations and furnished with approximate accuracy. There was little or no delay, in the carrying on of the work subsequent to the occurrence of the fire, and this, I venture to think, reflects great credit on Mr. Wall and Mr. C. E. Dale, his assistant in the Customs and Post Office Departments."





AFTER THE FIRE. BREAKING OPEN THE POST OFFICE SAFE.

[To face page 160]





THE POSTMASTER-GENERAL AND HIS STAFF.

[To face page 164.]



I hope I have interested my readers in postal work in West Africa, with its many complicated questions and its internal working, upon which I need not, however, dwell. It is pleasant to find one's self working with a staff that does one credit even though they are all black. One of the staff has, I am proud to say, been lately presented by the public with a gold watch as a mark of appreciation of his work. The photographs, from which the illustrations have been reproduced, were taken by a native of Sierra Leone.



MR. T. A. WALL.

Fort Stuart is no more; but as soon as it is possible, it is the intention of the Government to build a substantial brick edifice to replace that destroyed by fire, and it is hoped that the new office will be one worthy of its administration. A local Post Office Guide on the same lines as the British is published. The Parcel Post, registration of postal matters, and the money order system, &c., are in full working order, and it is believed that cable communication with Europe, via Bonny, and wires overland, will soon be established. Finally, Imperial Penny Postage, recently established, has received a warm welcome in the Niger Coast Protectorate.

T. A. WALL,  
H.B.M.'s Deputy Commissioner and Vice-Consul,  
and Postmaster-General,  
Niger Coast Protectorate.

M