

BRITISH HOUSES IN LATE MUGHAL DELHI

SYLVIA SHORTO



British Houses in Late Mughal Delhi

WORLDS OF THE EAST INDIA COMPANY

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*BRITISH HOUSES IN LATE
MUGHAL DELHI*

Sylvia Shorto

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Gavin, and my son, Hamish.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the years I have been gathering material for this book, I have seen extraordinary changes take place in the city of Delhi. To be sure, the city and its surrounding countryside have always been in flux, with observers ready to express concern about how the future might differ from the past. In a letter written in 1821, for instance, William Linnaeus Gardner, who had married into the Mughal aristocracy, worried about proposed British modifications to local land settlements and about how the excessive taxes and rigid tenancy regulations then being introduced by the agents of the East India Company would ‘ruin and destroy the old hereditary families’.¹ His was just one voice in the longer stream of time, and his voice was ignored. Yet nothing from that period in history can compare to the rapid changes that a post-Independence Delhi is experiencing in the twenty-first century, making accurate narration of the many histories of this great city all the more important in the present moment.

Land and houses are inextricably linked. This book is about houses built by a group of East India Company officials between 1803 and 1853, during the transitional period when the Company first arrived in Delhi. It is about how houses were planned and built, and how the land for building them was acquired. It is about the ways the houses both related to and resisted established architectural conventions, both those in the city of Delhi and those in the minds of the incoming Company officials who would now use building to help secure their power. It is about meaning in the location of these houses.

The book straddles disciplines. In one sense, it is a work of architectural history, and as such it draws on early studies in the field that considered formal or functional variations to European precedent and assumed transplanted versions of an architectural core into an Indian periphery. It also references more recent critical texts, including interpretive work on architecture as material culture, not yet applied to building in early-nineteenth-century Delhi. But facts and interpretation must be in accord if interpretation is to have lasting value. When we examine a house closely, it can tell us a great deal about the mentalities of the people who built, owned or lived in it. My focus in preparing this book has been first to return to archival sources and then to consider critically how any new information uncovered might help us

¹ National Army Museum (hereafter NAM), Gardner papers, letter 88.

understand lives and social practices, both at the time of building and as use changed over time. In the analyses of Henri Lefebvre, architecture gives a physical frame to the way people interrelate with those who share their space. Both builders and planners shape physical environments that embody sets of socially accepted rules that they themselves endorse, whether consciously or unconsciously. Users then make these environments real by acting in and on them and by altering them for their own benefits. But how might these ideas be transposed to help us understand historical urban landscapes that were subverted or adapted after conquest? And how are distinctions, the differences between everyday practices and the social and political structures within which they exist, played out in an occupied city by a specific group of individuals? No society is static. If pre-existing buildings within neighbourhoods bear the imprint or mental map of the past, what might they tell us when they are adapted to suit the different and changing social needs of individuals from an incoming or over-powering group? How does the location of new building link to these changes?

In another, interrelated sense, the book is a group biography. Individual lives are an important window onto the past, and scholars are now beginning to consider the roles that personal, family and collective micro-stories can provide in wider historical frameworks when charting the rise of early modern Britain from mercantile to imperial power. If a private house and its contents define the boundaries of the self, then by writing about houses I am inevitably also writing about the individuals who built them. My narrative here is limited to the interconnected 'lives in building' of five Company officials – David Ochterlony, Charles Metcalfe, Robert Smith, William Fraser and Thomas Theophilus Metcalfe – and to the fifty-year period between the British conquest of Delhi and the death of the second Metcalfe, four years before the Revolt of 1857. But though there is a strong biographical dimension to this study, I hope it will not be read as an uncritical celebration of Scotsmen riding around with multiple wives on gaily caparisoned elephants. All the five life stories have proved to be far more complex than that.

The building activities of these five men have had to be carefully pieced together. Many local records were lost during the Revolt, and no single major source or group of sources provides authoritative information on British houses in the city in this period, either directly or indirectly. In returning to archival records to seek out new facts, I have had in mind an underlying set of questions, the foremost being to question how the knowledge they contain was constructed. The documentary resources I have used include private papers as well as official, public accounts, and I give equal consideration to both and – subject to my language limitations – to both British and Indian accounts. Official records are limited in their scope, but informal, private papers, particularly the letters and notebooks of women, give narratives of a different reality, full of observations about domestic detail that would otherwise be lost

to us. While the accounts of individuals are always held to be more subjective than official accounts, they reveal far more freely the complexities of colonial culture within specific contexts than do bureaucratic texts with their conventional formats and codified language. Private papers give us glimpses of lived experience, and they are invaluable fragments of archaeological evidence of otherwise undocumented discourses and beliefs. They can help us understand the experience of home life, revealing social, economic, technical, material and emotional concerns. Diaries, letters and travel journals are all used here to help reconstruct the domestic experience of the five men. Of particular interest have been the Fraser of Reelig papers, which have not been used before to narrate Delhi's buildings. The Gardner papers, the Canning papers, the Monson papers, the Lawrence papers and the Templehouse papers have also been consulted. In different measure they help clarify the sequences of building and the lives, ambitions and motivations of the individual builders. They all advance our overall understanding of life in Delhi in the early nineteenth century. But this, it turned out, was not enough. Information from archival sources has had to be cross-referenced against other types of record including visual representations – paintings, drawings, maps and photographs made for a variety of patrons – to try to fill gaps in our knowledge. Each provided its own perspective on building in Delhi, and each put up something of a struggle to be analysed within the terms of its own discipline, resulting in a richer and more detailed picture of changing British responses to the Mughal polity they gradually displaced.

Combining these varied sources, the book examines the houses built by the five East India Company officials in early-nineteenth-century Delhi. An introductory chapter outlines how we know what we know of Delhi in the eighteenth century – its social and physical topography immediately before conquest in 1803. The book is then organised into five chapters that focus on the lives of each of the five officials and their building (and collecting) activities, through a methodological dialogue between texts and surviving material culture. The study of Robert Smith has been particularly productive, as he not only built extensively but was also himself a painter. As Garrison Engineer in Delhi after 1822, Smith is known to have been involved in designing a number of monumental public buildings and in the restoration and conservation of several others. In the book I attribute houses to him on stylistic grounds through evidence in his drawings. Houses designed and lived in by Smith in England and in France after his departure from Delhi support these attributions. Considered as a group, these five lives demonstrate a shift from the initial embrace of Indian living to a manipulation of that way of life for political ends, as attitudes towards the country hardened before the outbreak of the inevitable Revolt in 1857. A concluding chapter reflects on the always present, semi-conscious desires of my subjects to return to live in houses in Britain. As an entry in *Hobson-Jobson* tells us, 'Nobody calls India

home – not even those who have been here thirty years or more, and are never likely to return.²

Cities are the most intricate texts of all. As palimpsests, they embody layered information about the age in which they were built and the social and political circumstances of the generations who used and changed them. The city of Delhi still remains the most important primary source for its own study. Patterns of use can be imagined from those quarters where historic fabric still remains. But this must be augmented by secondary sources to try to explain parts of the urban fabric that are no longer there to see. Much of Delhi's early-nineteenth-century built heritage simply does not exist any longer. Houses have long since crumbled and their bricks been reused, and what remains is fast being obliterated by other pressures, often more immediate than preservation. As Delhi expands into what now seems to be an almost limitless global megacity, and as its population burgeons and its middle classes swell, traces of a past that were once palpable, both in physical remains and in social practices, are quickly sinking below the surface, pushed down by time and relentless outside influences that do not abate. A new archaeological layer is being formed that will be very hard to excavate in the future. But embedded in change there is a discontinuous understanding of the past through the fragments of continuity, and this can give a narrative structure to histories. A chronological order does not quite work for my narrative, but perhaps neither does the one that I have chosen to use, of individual lives through their building. But whatever it still lacks, this book needs to be published now. The only constant is change, and even in the very near future a different book would surely have been the result, for that is the condition of our time.

In addition to the scholars whose work I have tried to build on, many friends and colleagues helped me during the course of researching this book. I would like to single out Kathy Fraser, whose own book on the lives of the five Fraser brothers was being written at the same time. I also thank Cathy Asher, Tim Barringer, Clive Cheesman, Andrew Cook, Ned Cooke, Abir El Tayeb, Narayani Gupta, Alireza Korangy, Marius Kociejowski, Rami Saab, R.C. Sharma, Richard Saumarez Smith, Nalini Thakur, Jim Wescoat and Ahmad Yehya for being generous with their time and their wide-ranging realms of expertise. William Dalrymple very kindly shared his transcriptions of the letters of William Linnaeus Gardner and of the Wak Kani letters. The archivists who helped me in Nice, Rome and Venice were consistently supportive despite my terrible French and Italian, enabling me to fill some of the voids in what we know of Robert Smith's life. Essential financial support came from the American Institute of Indian Studies, the American University of Beirut, and from the Paul Mellon Foundation in the form of a Senior Fellowship and an Author Publication Grant. I am very, very grateful.

² *Letters from Madras*, 1837, cited in Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases ...* (London and Calcutta, 1886), p. 421

ABBREVIATIONS

IOR	India Office Records, British Library
NAI	National Archives of India
NAM	National Army Museum
TNA	The National Archives, Kew

GLOSSARY

akhbār	newsletter or bulletin
almirah	cupboard or wardrobe
bangla	vernacular Bengali house type
baoli	step well
baradari	garden pavilion
bībī	beloved
bigha	measure of land varying from a third of an acre to an acre, depending on yield and productivity
begum	lady of rank
bundh	closure or sluice
chabutra	raised viewing platform
chandni	white cloth spread over carpet to designate special area
chārbāgh	formal Persianate garden divided by water channels into quadrants
chhaja	broad projecting eave
chhatra	raised domed pavilion; an umbrella
chobdar	usher or attendant
chowrie	a fly-whisk
chunam	fine polished lime plaster resembling marble
dak	relay postal system; a post station or traveller's rest house
dālān	a veranda or peristyle
dargāh	Sufi shrine or burial place
deohri	public hallway of a house, often approached via a dog-leg bend to ensure visual privacy
dhobi	washer-man
dīvān	chief minister; minister responsible for fiscal administration
dīwānī	fiscal agency; revenue
doab	land between two rivers
durbar	ceremonial public reception; also an audience chamber
firmān	official decree















ghazal	Persian verse form composed of couplets
godown	store room
guldasta	pinnacle topped with a flower form
hajj	annual pilgrimage to Mecca
ḥammām	bath complex
hasht bihisht	literally, eight paradises. A formal Persian-derived plan with eight chambers surrounding a central core
hauz	man-made water tank or reservoir
haveli	mansion
howdah	ceremonial seat for riding on an elephant, sometimes with a canopy
hukkah	water pipe
hurkaru	running footman
imām	Muslim religious leader
īvān	vaulted hall open on one side to face a room, court or garden
jagir	revocable land assignment, or grant of income from such land
jharna	fountain
jharoka	small projecting covered balcony
jhil	seasonal freshwater lake
kārkhāna	artisanal workshop
khānabāgh	domestic garden inside a residential complex
kharīf or khurīf	seasonal crops harvested in the autumn
khil‘at	robe of honour or other honorific gift
kincob	rich silk fabric with patterns woven in a weft of gold- and silver-wrapped thread
kos	a variable measure of distance of 2,600 ‘ordinary paces’ or approximately 2 miles
kotla	fortress
kutcheri	court premises
lakh	one hundred thousand
lakhauri brick	flat thin rectangular indigenous brick
mahal	house or palace, in particular its inner, women’s apartments
maḥalla	neighbourhood
mahout	elephant handler
mansabdar	member of the non-hereditary imperial bureaucracy of the Mughal Empire, commander of an army
maqbara	mausoleum, tomb
maund	variable unit of measurement by volume. The measure was standardized by the British in Bengal

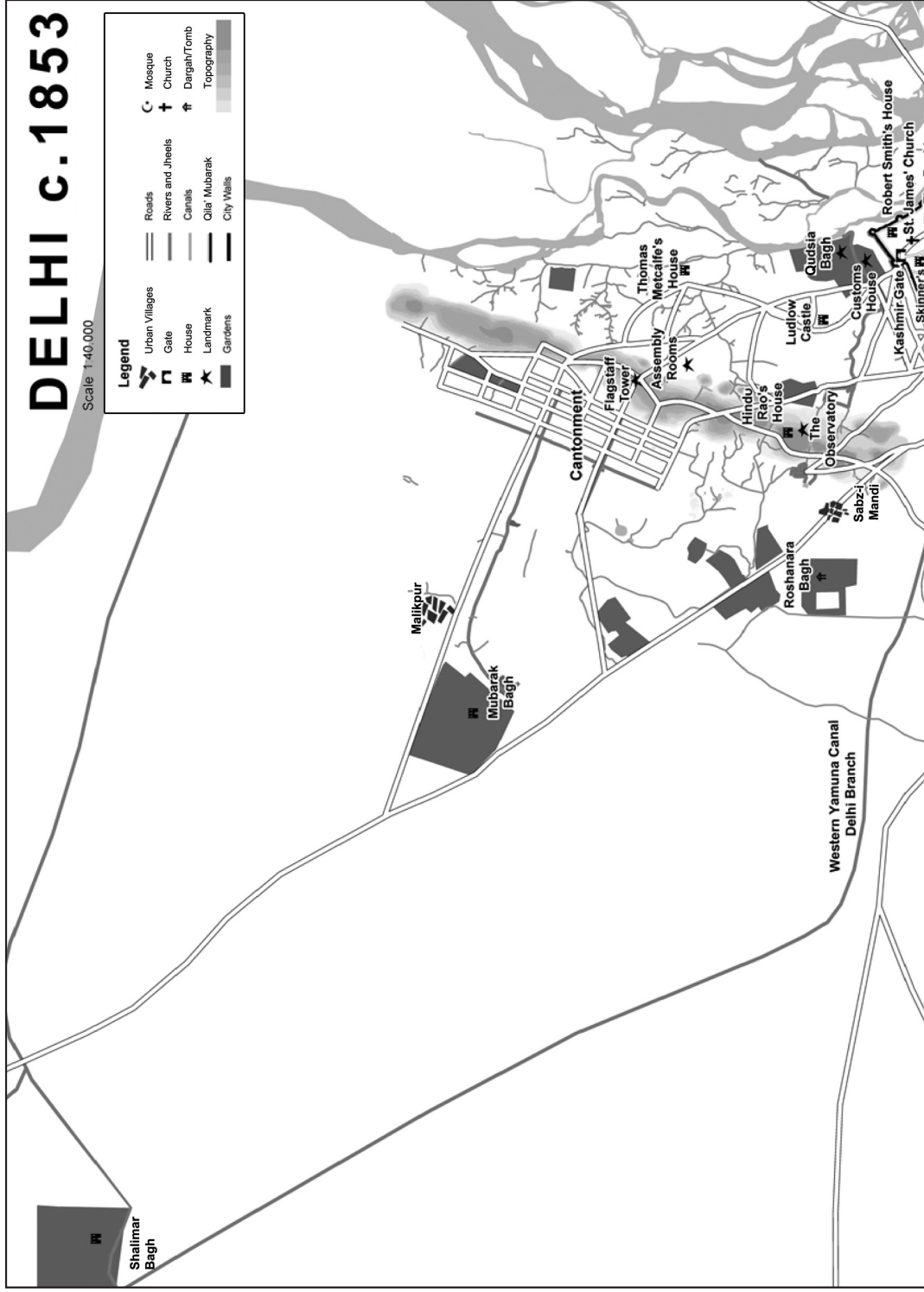
	in 1833 at 82.28 lbs (100 Troy pounds). 1 maund = 40 seers = 1,200 dams
minar	tower
mohur	gold coin
mu'āf	rent-free land
munshī	scribe, translator
musāfirkhāna	a lodging for pilgrims
mushā'ara	poetry assembly
musnud	a bolster for reclining
muthamman bagdhadi	square plan with canted corners
naqārkhāna	ceremonial drum room
nautch	performance by professional dancers
navvāb	Mughal viceroy or holder of rank; later an independent ruler
nazr	ceremonial gift presented to a superior
nujīb	informal infantryman or militiaman
nullah	watercourse for drainage
palankin	covered litter carried on horizontal poles
palkee	a palanquin; by extension, in procession
pankah	canvas-covered swinging fan suspended from a ceiling; a fan
parganah	unit for the collection of revenue consisting of a group of villages and their surrounding countryside
pīr	Sufi holy man
pukka	a permanent or brick-built structure
purdah	veil; cloth screening women's quarters
qaṣīda	panegyric verse
qil'a	fort
rajput	military caste of Northern India, traditionally landholders
rang mahal	women's quarters; literally, coloured palace
ṣadr	law
sarkar	government
sepoy	a native foot soldier
serai	lodging for travellers and their animals; caravanserai
shahr āshob	lament for a city
shikār	ceremonial hunt
shish mahal	mirrored room or apartment
suba/ subahdār	province/provincial governor
taḥṣīl	administrative sub-district for collection of village revenue

taḥṣīldār	collector of revenue for a sub-district
taikhāna	suite of subterranean rooms for the hot weather
takhallus	literary pen-name
talwar	a curved sword with a broad tip
tatti	woven screen
toshkhāna	treasury; strong room for the receipt of ceremonial gifts
‘umarā	nobility
urs	death anniversary
vazīr	principal minister
zamīndār	holder of a patrimonial rental estate; landowner
zanāna	accommodation for women

DELHI c.1853

Scale 1:40 000

Legend	
	Urban Villages
	Gate
	House
	Landmark
	Gardens
	Roads
	Rivers and Jheels
	Canals
	Qila' Mubarak
	City Walls
	Mosque
	Church
	Dargah/Tomb
	Topography





Map of Delhi, c. 1853.