

CLIVE OF INDIA (1725-1774)

TIGER OF BENGAL

by David G. Evans February 1994



When Lord Clive, Baron of Plassey, bought the Claremont Estate from the recently widowed Lady Newcastle in 1768 he had reached a pinnacle of achievement, power and wealth and was still only in his early forties.

His first journey to India, just 250 years ago in 1744, landed Robert Clive at Madras after a voyage of fifteen months. There he took up the menial position of 'writer' with the East India Company. His family from Shropshire was not wealthy and his career at Merchant Taylors School had been distinguished only by his unruly behaviour and contempt for authority. An impetuous misfit, he was sent away to grow up. However, his natural daring and pugnacity did not fit easily with the sedentary life as a clerk.

At that time the British hold on Madras and Bengal was tenuous. French and Dutch expansion plans threatened and trade links were poor. Clive without military training or administrative experience of any kind, in twenty short years secured his reputation as an outstanding general, founded an Empire and established British domination over the sub-continent which was to last for two hundred years.

Four years of his career to that date had been expended on the long sea trips to and from Bengal. He had married Margaret (Maskelyne) in 1753 and of their seven children only three had survived the rigours of smallpox and enteric. It is understandable that the exertions of those years abroad took great toll of his physical and mental well-being. Ill health caused him great suffering for much of his life and laudanum became his only relief. He had acquired enormous wealth but with it an army of enemies envious of his achievements.

Claremont which he chose as his Surrey family home, was ideally located for his growing political commitment. Sixteen miles from Westminster, the impressive house by Vanbrugh with gardens by John Rocque and William Kent was already well-known to visiting aristocracy. The new estate added to the four he already owned in Ireland and Shropshire and his London home in Berkeley Square.

With his usual vitality and exuberance Clive set quickly to work, employing Lancelot 'Capability' Brown and his son-in-law, Henry Holland, to create a triumph of architectural and landscape design on the grand scale. The existing house was soon demolished and 'Home Farm' converted for the use of Clive and his family. Massive earthworks included a major realignment of the Portsmouth Road, bringing 'The Mound' within the estate, and the gardens were extensively deformed under Brown's direction.

The new house, set on the highest point of the hill, is a supreme example of elegant Palladian style and enjoys magnificent views to the south-east. Constructed of cream brick embellished in stone, the front twenty-one steps lead up to a portico supported on Corinthian columns, the pediment above bearing his personal arms.



Around the four-mile perimeter of the estate Clive built a high wall to provide secure enclosure for the many species of exotic animals he had brought back from overseas, including zebra, antelopes and deer.

The following year Clive set off on an eight month European tour scouring France and Italy for paintings and statues, tapestries, silks and carpets with which to decorate the house. Its features included Adam fireplaces and an indoor marble swimming pool.

A plan of the estate dated 1750 shows a menagerie, ice-house and melon ground, together with a brewhouse, laundry and stables. 'Home Farm' is shown as a large grouping of three-storey buildings set around a courtyard. There was a nine-pin alley behind the amphitheatre as well as a bowling green, temples and an impressive obelisk.

As construction work proceeded at Claremont, political storm clouds gathered. In 1769 a market crash impoverished many of the most important families in England. Rumours began to circulate of gross incompetence and corruption within the East India Company. The following year a catastrophic famine struck Bengal causing the death of almost half the native population. In 1772 the Company's credit failed and Clive faced vitriolic attack and personal vendetta.

His parliamentary defence of his conduct during his Governorship is held to be one of the greatest speeches ever given in the House of Commons. He left Westminster to return to his Berkeley Square home aware that his title and vast fortune might be forfeit. Whilst the Select Committee's report presented that year exonerated him, this did not bring an end to attacks from Burgoyne and others.

In May 1773, a further resolution laid before the House stated: "The Rt Hon Robert, Lord Clive, Baron of Plassey, illegally acquired his wealth to the dishonour of the State". Debate went on until four o'clock in the morning.

Even the Prime Minister, Lord North, voted against him, but eventually the clause was rejected. The House then moved without division that "Lord Clive did render great and meritorious service to his country". His ordeal was finally over or so it seemed.

The immense strain of those last two years had brought on attacks of severe depression and nervous exhaustion, joined by the agony of gallstones and recurring liver problems. He became restless and disillusioned. Laudanum, his only ally, further exacerbated his mental condition.

Claremont itself was still not finished. The exquisite carpeting, furniture and paintings had yet to be installed, although one section of the first floor had been made habitable for his use. Clive's dependence on opium increased. The family moved constantly between the South and his other homes and estates in Wales, Ludlow, and Walcot.

Back at his Berkeley Square home in November 1774, Clive was preparing to leave for Bath where he owned a house in the Circus. He took a purgative and left the room. Shortly afterwards he was found in a pool of blood dying from a self-inflicted stab wound to the throat. The exact details are unclear and for some years it was believed that the cause of death was accidental drug overdose. It is known, however, that his body was moved overnight to Shropshire where he was buried

without trace in the little church at Moreton Say. A brass plate inside the church has the following inscription.

"Sacred to the Memory of Robert, Lord Clive KB.

Born 29 September 1725 Died 22 November 1774.

Primus in Indis"

In Esher, Claremont House stands tribute to the man. The main building retains much of the magnificent interior fittings. 'Home Farm', converted to residential use, remains largely intact in a close off Claremont Lane. Curiously, a descendant of Lord Clive occupies the original bakehouse building of the old farm complex. Alongside is the ancient obelisk, surmounted by its bronze peacock.

Beyond the northern edge of the estate the 13th century church where Clive worshipped lies almost out of view behind the Bear Hotel. It still contains the pew cleaned and polished for him by Tabatha Woodman. Estate ledgers housed within the University of Wales record that she was provided with mops and cloths for that purpose.