

ART. XX.—*Governor's House, Keswick.* By Brigadier
J. W. KAYE.

Read at Penrith, July 3rd, 1956.

PROBABLY none of Keswick's many visitors who go to Messrs Fink's (previously Cooper's) grocery stores in Lake Road know that they are shopping in a building named "Governor's House". Probably few of the town's residents know it either; if they do, they are most likely unaware of the odd little twist of 18th-century history from which the name derives. It is odd because, if a certain *East Indiaman* had sailed up the Hoogli to Calcutta only two days earlier than she did, there would have been no Governor's House in Keswick.

Towards the end of the 17th and early in the 18th century there was living in Keswick a certain Edward Stephenson. We know next to nothing of him; he may have been that Edward Stephenson to whom the churchwardens of Crosthwaite paid 11/6d. for wood in 1702, £5 in 1711 "for rayling the altar about and for six quarts of wine at Pentecost" and, in 1714, £4. 13s. od. for twelve gallons of wine at 7d. a gallon. This piece of arithmetic we do not follow, but so it is recorded in the churchwardens' accounts of the time. It is more important that Edward Stephenson married Rebecca, daughter of John Winder of Lorton. Their eldest son, also named Edward, was baptized in Crosthwaite church on 8 October 1691, the year in which he was born. He is the subject of this story.

On 24 November 1708 he was elected as a writer in the service of the Honourable East India Company. Probably he received this appointment through the good offices of his mother's third brother, Jonathan Winder who, from 1705 to 1707, was one of the two chairmen of the Company's united council.

The boy arrived in Calcutta early in February 1710 and is shown in a list of the Company's servants in November of the following year as a sub-accountant. He seems to have made a good beginning; only a year later he was specially commended in the 75th paragraph of a report on factors and writers that was sent on 10 December 1712 from Bengal to the Court of Directors in London:

"Can complain of none for ill behavi (*sic*) or immorality, all behave well, some deserve extra.ry praise, vizt 3 p'sons, Crisp, Stephenson, Falconer."

By reason of this commendation, young Edward was advanced one year in service and accordingly became a factor in February 1714, exactly four years after his arrival in Bengal and while still in his twenty-third year.

Even better things were to follow. The time had come for an embassy to be sent to Delhi to obtain from the emperor territorial and commercial privileges for the Company. At the head of the embassy was John Surnam; second to him was an Armenian, Khwajir Sarkad, and third in seniority was young Stephenson of Keswick. He was given 250 rupees to provide himself with an outfit of clothes and, the presents for the emperor having been loaded into boats, the embassy set sail up the river early in April 1715. The 900-mile journey to Delhi took two months, the later stages being accomplished by elephant. The task of the embassy in Delhi proved to be one of great responsibility for Stephenson. The Armenian seems to have been a contentious fellow who fought throughout with his colleagues, the conduct of the mission falling, therefore, upon Surnam and his young assistant. For two years in Delhi they struggled and waited for what they had come to obtain — two years of exasperating delay and Oriental procrastination. At least they had time to see what few Europeans had seen before them — the splendours of the Mogul court.

Splendours there must still have been, although they

were fast giving way to mere corruption. Aurungzeb had died in 1707 and he proved to be, as he had predicted that he would be, the last of the great Moguls. He was followed by a series of comparative nonentities, each of whom came to a violent end, after a reign that was as short as it was destitute of glory.

At the time of the embassy Farukhsiyar was emperor. At long last he and his vizier, Sayyid Abdullah Khan, were prevailed upon to issue a number of imperial rescripts and orders, increasing and securing the commercial privileges of the English in every part of India. These may have been of no great significance in themselves; none the less, the long, tedious but finally successful negotiations of John Surnam and Edward Stephenson in Delhi marked an important point in the history of the English in India. On 18 July 1717 the embassy left the capital and reached Calcutta near the end of November, after an absence of 2½ years.

At the age of 26 the widely experienced Stephenson had reached a stage of rapid advancement. He had established himself as one of the best of the Company's servants in Bengal. He was appointed chief of the factory at Balasore, on the shore of the Bay of Bengal. Apart from the factory it was a place of no great importance at that time though it later became a gun-testing establishment similar to that at Eskmeals. In July 1718 Stephenson was transferred to the Council at Patna, being confirmed as its chief a year later, and awarded £800 for his services with the embassy to Delhi. In 1720 he was taken into the Bengal Council and there followed eight years of uneventful service, first as chief at Patna and then as chief at Kasimbazar during which, at the age of thirty-three, he became second in seniority in the Council of Bengal. Suddenly, in 1728, he was called upon to fill the highest post of all.

The governor of Bengal at this time was Henry Frankland, a great-grandson of Oliver Cromwell. This

was his second term of office; he had resigned in 1719 but resumed the governorship in 1726 when Governor John Deane returned to England — either at his own wish or else at the behest of the Court of Directors. The Honourable Company's Consultations Book of Fort William records as follows:

“On Friday 23rd August 1728. The Hon: Henry Frankland Esq:, late President, having after a sickness of about twelve days, departed this life at one o'clock this morning, and the Worshipful Edward Stephenson Esq: being next in succession, who is now Chief at Kasimbazar, it is unanimously agreed that we dispatch a pair of qasids to advise him that the Government of this place devolves on him.”

Travel was slow and, although Kasimbazar is only some 150 miles north of Calcutta, more than three weeks had elapsed before Stephenson arrived at Fort William. We turn again to the Consultations Book:

“17 September. This morning at nine o'clock the Hon: Edward Stephenson arrived here from Casimbazar and took his place at this board as President and Governor of Fort William in Bengal to which he succeeds on the death of the late President the Hon: Henry Frankland Esq:, and accordingly the Commission and keys of the Fort were now delivered to him.”

So, eighteen and a half years after his arrival in India and at the age of thirty-seven, Edward Stephenson of Keswick became governor of Bengal. It may seem that he was unduly young for such onerous distinction but at that time heavy responsibility often fell on young shoulders. Clive was but thirty-two when he fought the Battle of Plassey: Warren Hastings became a member of the Calcutta Council at twenty-nine and Governor-General at forty. Inspection of the great Park Street burial-grounds in Calcutta shows that the captains of *East Indiamen* were often, and their chief officers almost always, young men of less than thirty years of age.

The end of Stephenson's governorship was as sudden as it was unexpected. The day after his arrival at Fort William the Consultations Book records as follows:

“18 Sept: 1728. At eight o'clock in the night arrived here John Deane Esq: who produced the Honourable Company's commission for appointing him President and Governor of all their affairs in Bengal; which commission was read in the Consultations Room, Fort William, in the presence of all the Company's servants etc: and accordingly the keys of the Fort were delivered to him by Edward Stephenson Esq:.”

It seems that John Deane had been superseded by the Bengal Council and then reinstated by the Court of Directors in London. Having been Governor for thirty-five hours, Stephenson returned as chief to Kasimbazar and served there for one more year. He resigned at the end of 1729 and returned the following year in the ship *Eyles* after an absence from home of just over twenty years.

There can have been no disgrace in his supersession; his reactions to it we do not know. He seems to have left no record. If he sought fame, he must have been a disappointed man; if fortune, then he should have been well pleased. While still a young man he had become governor of Bengal and he had acquired (by what was then legitimate trading) sufficient to enable him to live — for another forty years as the event proved — in quiet comfort in the land of his birth. Conjecture wanders over much that we would wish to know of this man. At least we can judge him to have been fortunate. He served in Bengal at a time when, as Macaulay wrote — “for every man who, in the early days, came home with wealth to be dubbed a nabob, twenty were laid to rest in the graveyards of the East.” This is probably a wide understatement. Fifty years after Stephenson had left India, Rennell, the intrepid and accurate surveyor of Bengal, computed that “scarce one out of seventy men returns to his native country”.

Stephenson married — presumably after his return to England. The death of his wife is recorded on p. 108 of the *Gentlemen's Magazine* for 1744. Of his life during his long retirement we know little. Such information as

we have was derived in the old India Office library from the works of C. R. Wilson. These are listed at the end of this paper. Wilson was informed in 1898 by F. H. Winder of Southsea (a descendant of the Winders of Lorton) that Stephenson lived at Borfield Lodge in Essex, that he had a house in Queen's Square, London, and that he had built himself a house in Keswick which he named "Governor's House". From an old picture that was in the possession of the late Tom Wilson of Keswick it is evident that the house is now the Derwent Club. The shop that has the name "Governor's House" stands immediately behind the Derwent Club in what was, presumably, Stephenson's garden.

According to the register and records of Holme Cultram, Stephenson, then "of Great Bardfield, Co: Essex", purchased the manor of Holme Cultram for £11,000 in 1732. In about 1748 he obtained possession, as the result of a suit in the Court of Chancery, of Scaleby Castle from Richard Gilpin who owed him £7,000. At this time Stephenson is described as being "of Abbey Holme". In 1741 Matthew Robson conveyed Stonegarthside Hall to Stephenson, who sold it in 1761 to Thomas Holme (CW2 lxi 187). It seems evident, from the extent of his properties, that he had retired with considerable wealth from his twenty years' service in Bengal. To what extent he lived in the North we do not know. It may be that the northern climate did not suit one who had so often experienced Macaulay's "summer solstice, a season when the fierce heat of Bengal can scarcely be rendered tolerable to natives of England by lofty halls and by the constant waving of fans". It was certainly at Bardfield Lodge that Stephenson was visited in January 1765 by Orme, the historian, who was seeking information concerning the embassy to Delhi of which Stephenson was then the sole survivor.

Stephenson died at Queen's Square on 7 September 1768, just forty years after his journey to Fort William

to assume the governorship. A large stone slab below the chancel steps in Crosthwaite church bears the following inscription:

EDWARD STEPHENSON ESQ:

LATE GOVERNOR OF BENGAL. OBIIT 7 SEPT 1768

AETATE SUO 77.

A brass inset to the slab carries his armorial bearings. This inscription and the name "Governor's House" on bill-heads seem to be the only memorials of this forgotten governor apart from what can be found in the India Office library. There may be others; we have not found them. Some fields on the outskirts of Keswick are known as "the Howrahs" If that land once belonged to Stephenson, the name may well indicate that he lived, when in Calcutta, in a suburb of that city that doubtless was far less insalubrious than Howrah is now. C. R. Wilson was informed by F. H. Winder that a descendant of the Stephenson family lived in Paris in a house that also bore the name "Governor's House".

Stephenson left no will; administration was granted to his brother John of Tottenham High Cross, who died in 1771 leaving an elaborate will. His following dispositions show the Cumberland connection of the family: To the Rev: Mr: Christian (Clerk) £50; To Hannah Wilson of Keswick £20 for mourning, and the same to my steward, William Graham of Sikeside, Cumberland". Mr Christian was then Vicar of Crosthwaite.

As letters of administration were granted to his brother, it seems unlikely that Edward Stephenson had children. We have traced none — but have searched no registers other than those of Crosthwaite. There is a Keswick legend that a son — also named Edward — was an officer of an *East Indiaman*; having failed to make his fortune he opened an inn (now the Golden Lion) at Keswick. He is reputed to have called it the Sceptre and

Telescope, sceptre in honour of his father's rule in Bengal, telescope by virtue of his own career at sea. This legend may be apocryphal, though it is hard to see that it could have been invented. If it is true, the man may well have been an illegitimate son of the Governor.

Historically, Edward Stephenson is of little importance and he has long been forgotten even in the town of his birth. His name does not appear in the list of Bengal governors which was for long accepted as being complete and correct. He was, it is true, Governor for little more than a single day, yet his life more than covers the interval between Job Charnock, founder of Calcutta, and Robert Clive. He must, from his record, have been an interesting personality in the factory days of the great Company; he was, moreover, a member of the embassy to Delhi. The names have come down through history of many who took part in episodes less remarkable than that and it is fitting that he should be commemorated, even if only by the letters in the floor of Crosthwaite church and by the name "Governor's House" in Keswick.

Authorities.

Bengal Past and Present by C. R. Wilson.

Early English in India, iii, by C. R. Wilson (with foreword on p. xix by W. K. Firminger, written after Wilson's death).

Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. lxxviii, 167. A short biography by C. R. Wilson.

Consultations Book of the H.E.I.C.S. Fort William.

Winder pedigree and marriage of Edward Stephenson and Rebecca Winder, CW₁ xii 439.