



Admiral Sir Edward Belcher,  
R.N., K.C.B. From the "Illustrated London News."

## Royal Navy Ships on the Columbia River in 1839

Introduction and Notes  
by George M. Douglas

115 years ago Capt. Edward Belcher of later  
Arctic fame took a naval survey ship up the  
Columbia to Fort Vancouver

AT the conclusion of the Napoleonic wars, Great Britain had developed a large naval establishment. In an effort to find useful employment for some of the ships and men the Admiralty applied them to peaceful works of great benefit to mankind, which under different conditions might never have been accomplished. The survey of the whole Pacific Ocean from the great ice barrier of the Antarctic to the Arctic shores of North America commands admiration for its practical value and for the comparatively short time of its achievement. Notable among these able explorers and surveyors are Beechey, Belcher, Kellett and Collinson.

Edward Belcher was the descendant of a prominent New England family whose founder emigrated from Essex, England, in 1618. Each generation produced notable men: Edward's great-grandfather was Governor of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, and later of New Jersey, where during his time of office, he became interested in the foundation of Princeton University. His grandfather was the first Chief Justice of Nova Scotia and his father, Andrew, a prominent merchant of Halifax and a member of the Council of Nova Scotia.

Edward Belcher entered the Royal Navy in 1812. After various services in European waters he was appointed assistant surveyor to Captain Beechey of H.M.S. *Blossom* and sailed on a voyage of exploration and survey which lasted for three years, and which covered the Pacific Ocean, the Behring Straits and the shores of North America eastward to Point Barrow. The *Blossom* returned to England in 1828, Belcher was promoted to Commander, and later to Captain on survey vessels in European waters.

In 1835 Beechey took command of the *Sulphur* of 380 tons and *Starling* of 110 tons for further survey and

scientific work in the Pacific Ocean. Beechey's health failed him, and in 1836 he was obliged to return to England. Belcher was sent to Panama to assume command of the ships. Kellett, first lieutenant of the *Sulphur*, had been acting commander until Belcher came, and Collinson, Beechey's assistant surveyor, had been first lieutenant in addition to his other duties. On Belcher's arrival Kellett took command of the *Starling*, and Collinson remained first lieutenant on the *Sulphur*.

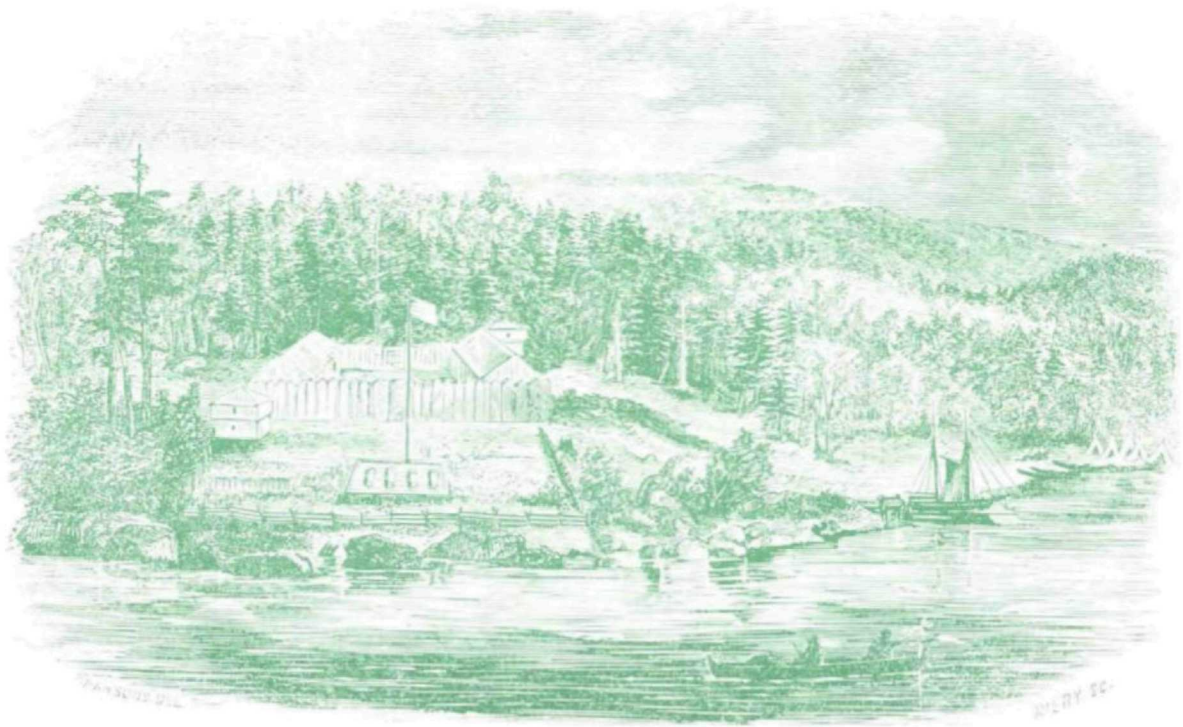
Thus it was that these three men, who later became so prominent for their services in the Franklin search, first came together.

In the early summer of 1839 both ships were at Honolulu, and Belcher ordered the *Starling* to proceed direct to the mouth of the Columbia River and await the arrival of the *Sulphur*, on which ship Belcher later joined her after carrying out some work in northern Pacific waters. The two ships met at the appointed rendezvous in July.

Belcher found that the shoals at the entrance to the Columbia had materially changed during the past two years, and both ships grounded. The *Sulphur* floated off undamaged on the flood tide; but the *Starling* was not so fortunate. On weighing anchor she "tailed" and lost her rudder. Belcher had not intended to take her up the river to Fort Vancouver, but this now became imperative. His account of the voyage to the fort and back follows.

HAVING seen the ship securely moored, and constructed a temporary rudder for the *Starling*, we started on the morning of the 31st for Fort George.

On the *Starling's* arrival Lieut. Kellett communicated with Mr. Douglas the chief of the Hudson's Bay Co. at Fort Vancouver, who very promptly sent us a guide, pilot,



Astoria, later Fort George, at the mouth of the Columbia, as it appeared when taken over by the North West Company from the Pacific Fur Company in 1813. From Gabriel Franchere's Narrative.

and interpreter; and Messrs. McLeod and Birnie came down to call on him. The latter is clerk in charge of Fort George. Off this fort, the well-known "Fort Astoria" of Washington Irving, we anchored for the night. It has dwindled considerably since the Hudson's Bay Co. took charge who removed their chief establishment to Fort Vancouver, and allowed it to run to utter ruin. Not a vestige remains.

A small house for Mr. Birnie, two or three sheds for the Canadians, about six or eight in number, and a pine stick with a red ensign now represented Fort George. Not a gun or warlike appearance of any kind remains. One would

rather take it for the commencement of a village than any noted fort. The scenery is similar to that of all the northern coast—wooded to the water's edge, and differing little excepting in the varieties of pine.

The navigation is rather cramped, and it is really surprising that with so much capital at stake in shipping etc. the company have not brought up a set of pilots, by which many thousands might have been saved independent of the creation of such a useful body of men.

After walking the bounds of ci-devant Astoria in company with Mr. Birnie who explained where its lines formerly occupied, but where wilderness and desolation

Fort George as it appeared in 1839. From the two-volume work by Belcher. "Voyage of the Sulphur," published in 1843, from which the above extract has been taken.



now reigns, as well as examined the great fir mentioned by [David] Douglas, Mr. Birnie accompanied us on board to dinner, and afforded us much valuable information respecting the river as well as the natives.

On the morning following we proceeded on our voyage through the Tongue Point Channel, and after grounding occasionally, which I take to be according to practice, managed by sunset to find a soft spot for the night on "An unknown spot where no bank ought to have been" according to our pilots.

This delayed us one day because vessels grounding on the top of an evening flood do not float off with the returning day tide, consequently we were compelled to await the night tide, which is generally higher in the Columbia by about five feet, and probably caused by the sea breeze which blows strong near sunset.

Our detention occurred close to the "Pillar Rock" considered the second stage in the journey up. There is but little to interest one here, all the river, between this and Tongue Point as well as ten miles above being an immense archipelago of islands and flats. Pillar Rock rises abruptly from the river in five fathoms, and is about thirty feet above sea level. The summit has an area of ten feet by five, with light bushes and long grass.

On the 5th of August we passed around the southern side of Puget's Island and without anything worthy of remark reached Oak Point, where we anchored for the night. At Puget's Island the scenery may be said to change, the foliage being mixed with ash, willow, alder, maple, etc. I noticed the cypress also among the pine, but its timber here is of no value.

At Oak Point the river becomes narrow, and the navigation, from a general sufficiency of depth for vessels drawing fifteen to eighteen feet is very simple; the breeze generally blowing up the river from ten A.M. until four P.M. At several of my positions I noticed numerous water-snakes but they were harmless. They are termed "The fishing snake" by the people at Fort Vancouver, where I had an opportunity of witnessing their worrying a fish on shore by seizing it by the pectoral fin and *guiding* it into shallow water and eventually on the mud. In one of the largest of these snakes we found several full-formed young, probably within a few days of their birth; proving these reptiles to be viviparous.<sup>1</sup> . . .

On the 9th, after being nearly devoured by mosquitoes, we reached Fort Vancouver, where we were very kindly received by Mr. Douglas, and apartments allotted to us.

Fort Vancouver is situated in Lat. 45° 35' 53" N Longitude 122° 20' 10" and, as the crow flies, 82 miles from Cape Disappointment, the northern head of entrance into the Columbia.

It stands about 300 yards within the northern edge of the river; is a picketed enclosure three hundred yards square, the pickets being eighteen feet high, composed of roughly split pine logs. No particular attention to strength has been paid to its construction. It is furnished with three gates, two of which are invariably open by day. The houses of residence, as well as storehouses of the company are

within this enclosure, forming two squares. No guard is observed. The trading store is open during working hours, and any increase in the number amongst the Indians would not excite uneasiness on the part of the officers.

In the eastern square the main building is occupied by the chief, in which also is the *sala* or mess room. In front of the steps of this building are two long twenty-four pounders ship guns, and two short merchant ship carronades twelve or eighteen pounders. . . . On the left, at right angles, are the quarters of the other clerks, traders, etc. Those who have married the Canadian half-castes generally live in their quarters, or only come to the general table when it suits. It is not a little strange in a community so long established, that the women should still be almost totally unacquainted with the language of their husbands.

In the rear of the fort is an excellent kitchen-garden and orchard occupying about the same space as the fort (three hundred yards on its sides) and behind this a large tract of cultivated land, with extensive storehouses, barns, etc., and abundance of grain in stacks.

To the westward are situated, without the palisades, at a distance of a quarter of a mile, the hospital and houses of the Canadian establishment, forming a complete village. All is apparently defenseless; although when turned out, every man will be found with a well-trieved rifle and *couleau de chasse*, or other efficient means of defence; and their partners are efficient helpmates, in the literal sense of the word.

Yet comparing this spot with Sitka, and other places, it speaks volumes for the discipline to which the Indians have been reduced, as well as for the *content* with which all the tribes are evidently embued.

In the neighbourhood, about two miles down the river, they have a very extensive dairy, numerous cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, etc.; and, about three or four miles up the stream, water mills for grinding, sawing planks, and an establishment for curing salmon—the two latter objects forming the principal export to the Sandwich Islands.

Some few years since, the company determined on forming settlements on the rich lands situated on the Wallamette and other rivers, and providing for their retired servants by allotting them farms, and further aiding them by supplies of cattle, etc. That on the Wallamette was a field too inviting for missionary enthusiasm to overlook; but instead of selecting a British subject to afford them spiritual assistance, recourse was had to Americans—a course pregnant with evil consequences, and particularly in the political squabble pending, as will be seen by the result. No sooner had the American and his allies fairly "squatted" (which they deem taking possession of the country) than they invited their brethren to join them, and called on the American government for laws and protection!

This position has not only become the bone of contention which has again aroused the Americans, but from the fact of containing many of the old servants of the company unaccustomed to restraint, and whose first appeal is to their trusty rifle, is very likely to cause some

1. My copy of Belchere's book has a book plate "McClure." There are frequent marginal annotations and sketches. In the margin here is written: "Common in Esquimaux Harbour at the entrance."—G.M.D.



Interior of Fort Vancouver in 1860, showing on the left the chief factor's residence, with the "two long twenty-four pounders ship guns" in front. B.C. Archives.

trouble. They are now loud in their claim of right to the soil, and a colony of Americans was en route in the plains when we quitted.<sup>2</sup>

The vessels employed by the company are as follows; one steamer and four sailing vessels.

Barque Columbia	310 tons	6 guns	24 men
Vancouver	324 "	6 "	24 "
Ship Neride [Nereid]	283 "	10 "	26 "
Sch. Cadboro	71 "	4 "	12 "
Steamer Beaver	109 "	5 "	26 " <sup>3</sup>

The population in the employ of the company, including natives, etc., varies from five hundred and fifty to six hundred men and officers; but not more than ten native Indians are permanently employed. The hunters are equipped with hunting instruments, firearms, traps, etc., each outfit amounting to between £40 and £50 per man. The communication to Hudson's Bay in the March and September journey usually occupies three months and ten days.

The Wallamette settlement was commenced in 1830, by a few of the H.B.C.'s retired servants, which has increased up to the present period to fifty-four souls, or fifty-four farms. It includes: 24 Canadians, H.B.C.; 20 American stragglers from California; 10 Clergymen, teachers, etc., American Methodist Mission. . . .

The average produce of the soil per acre is as follows; 15 Bushels pease, 20 Bushels wheat, 30 Bushels oats, 35 Bushels barley, which is said to be consumed in the country.

Garden produce—peas, apples, plums, peaches, strawberries, raspberries and general kitchen stuff and potatoes, thrive, and are plentiful. The trade of the Columbia consists chiefly in furs. Timber, salmon, and butter, and potatoes, are exported to the Sandwich Islands. The climate is healthy, but rather unpleasant. The seasons gradually change, as in Europe: being temperate in summer, ranging as high as 95° to 100° in the shade, and in

winter as low as 4°. The prevalent diseases are fever, ague, and catarrhal affections. Consumption is frequent among the natives.

Having completed the *Starling's* refit we commenced our return, surveying the river downwards. We had reached Puget's Island when we unfortunately drifted on a snag, (or stump of a tree under water) and broke her rudder short away, taking with it the lower part, with all the metal work. On this occasion I merely despatched the requisite officers to Fort Vancouver with fresh demands, and moved downwards with the *Starling* to Fort George, where I purposed bringing the ship [the *Sulphur* is meant here] to assist in the survey.

The *Starling* being complete, we dropped down to Baker's Bay, taking leave of our friend Mr. Birnie, in charge of Fort George, who had been unremitting in his attentions. . . .

On the morning of the 14th of September we quitted Baker's Bay, with light breezes, but, owing to the peculiarity of the currents, did not clear the heads until the wind failed, compelling us to anchor.

Before the tide had done, the sea-breeze came on very strong; very fortunately, I had taken the precaution to reef and be in a position to beat out, and had just completed, when the strength of the breeze parted our cable. Sail was made in time to tack short of the dangers, and as the opposite course led to sea, I was heartily glad, after this second escape, to leave the anchor, and get clear of this disastrous port.

Any attempt to recover the anchor would have proved futile, and probably resulted in losing the only one remaining, with imminent risk to the ship. The *Starling* at the same instant met with a similar accident, leaving also her last anchor but one.

Heartily sick of this nest of dangers we took our final look at Cape Disappointment and shaped our course for Bodega. ♦

<sup>2</sup>. The annotator of my copy has marked the last two paragraphs heavily with the remarks "True, True."—G.M.D.

<sup>3</sup>. This seems to me a very heavy armament for the crew available! Perhaps the guns were a defence against attack by Indians when at anchor.—G.M.D. See "Iron Interpreters" in this issue—Ed.