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# Chitral

Royal Forts in  
the Hindu Kush





*Even today Chitral has lost little of its remoteness. In the great empty valleys surrounding it, the only sounds to be heard are the melancholy cry of the eagle, the occasional whine of a jeep, and the perpetual thunder of the glacier-fed torrents as they race through the precipitous gorges. But in the days of the Great Game, a more ominous sound sometimes met the traveller's ear – the crack of a matchlock.' Thus Peter Hopkirk described Chitral in his book 'The Great Game: the struggle for empire in Central Asia' (1990).*

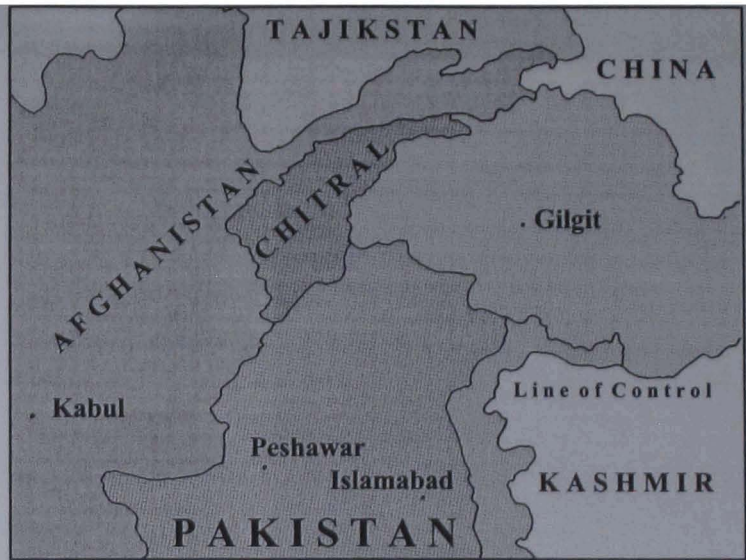
*Above and previous page. Chitral fort today, as extensively rebuilt and extended in the first half of the twentieth century. The low tower behind the white marble rock at the river's edge in the picture above is on the site of the Water Tower of 1895.*

*But whatever its remoteness, in 1895 Chitral was headline news in Britain. Four hundred British-Indian soldiers were besieged there by hostile hill-tribesmen. They held out for six weeks before two relief columns fought their way through. It was one of the minor epics of Victorian colonial warfare. Today, hardly anything remains of the original fort, and similar forts elsewhere in the region are fast disappearing. Roughly built of timber, stone and mud, they are being eroded by the elements or altered by redevelopment. For eight years, Brigadier Bill Woodburn, a retired Royal Engineer, has been studying this vanishing heritage. The forts were residences and strongholds of the former ruling family of Chitral, a small semi-independent state on the border of British India. Working partly on the ground in Chitral, partly on documents in Britain – 'they have the archaeology, we have the pictures' – Bill Woodburn has pieced together the evidence for the forts' late nineteenth-century appearance, and, with the help of architect Ian Templeton, produced a series of axonometric drawings. We invited him to describe Chitral fort at the time of the famous siege.*



Chitral (the name of a territory, a major settlement, and a river) lies in the area of high Asia where, in the late nineteenth century, with British India to the south, the Russian Empire to the north, and the turbulent state of Afghanistan to the west, Russian and British agents tried to out-manoeuvre each other and gain local influence – Kipling’s ‘Great Game’ was being played. Chitral itself, about 200km north of Peshawar and the Khyber Pass, was located at the point where the Hindu Kush mountains form the northern boundary of what is today the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Although a minor branch of the Silk Route ran through the Chitral valley, Chitral was always remote: Islam only reached there in the ninth century AD, a few hundred years after its inception, in the wake of invasions from Afghanistan. Even today entry by road crosses high passes that are blocked by deep snowdrifts for five months each year.

By the time that western travellers arrived in the late nineteenth century, Chitral had been ruled for 400 years by the Kator dynasty, who were descended from Central Asian invaders. The ruler of Chitral was called the ‘Mehtar’, a Persian word, and Persian was the language of the court – whereas most of the locals spoke Khowar. Succession to the throne passed to whichever



legitimate member of the royal family had the power to seize it, often by assassination, and then the ability to hold onto it - with the support of the noble families of the state. The architecture of the royal forts reflected the autocratic character of Chitrali society.

To guard against aggression from Afghanistan, Chitral had formed an alliance with Kashmir and thus come within the sphere of influence of British India. Only a handful of British officials had visited Chitral before 1895, but that year a small British force that had entered the country was besieged in the ruler’s fort. The story of the siege and its relief is one of the more dramatic episodes of Victorian military history, but contemporary accounts also

*Below. Chitral fort in 1895. The fort was roughly square, with a tower at each corner, and a Water Tower with a covered way down to the water’s edge. Note the marble rock still visible today, as shown in the photo opposite. The defenders were unable to fell the large Chenar trees around the fort before the siege began, providing the attackers with useful cover. This photo was taken shortly after the relief of the fort.*





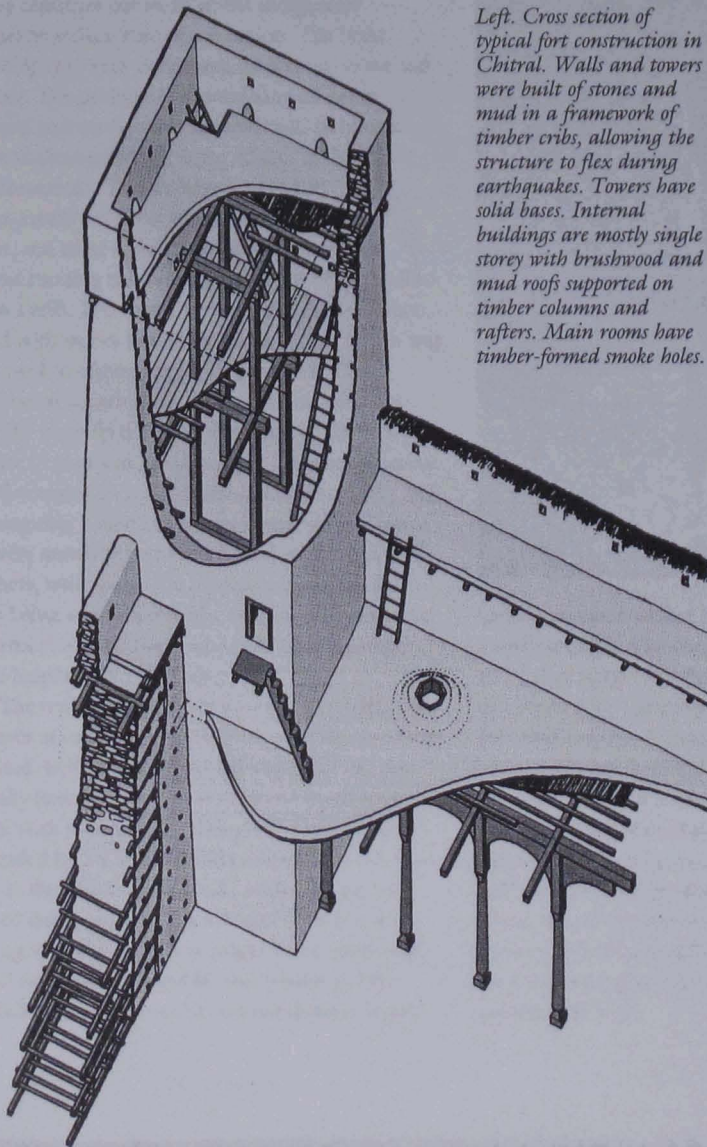
provide a unique insight into the construction and general character of the fort itself.

During the first half of the twentieth century, all the forts of Chitral were rebuilt, and in the second half they suffered from decay. Today there are only a few traces of the underlying nineteenth-century structure in Chitral Fort. By examining sites on the ground in Chitral territory, and sifting patiently through collections of documents and images in Britain, it has been possible to build up an understanding of traditional fort construction and to work out what Chitral Fort looked like in 1895.

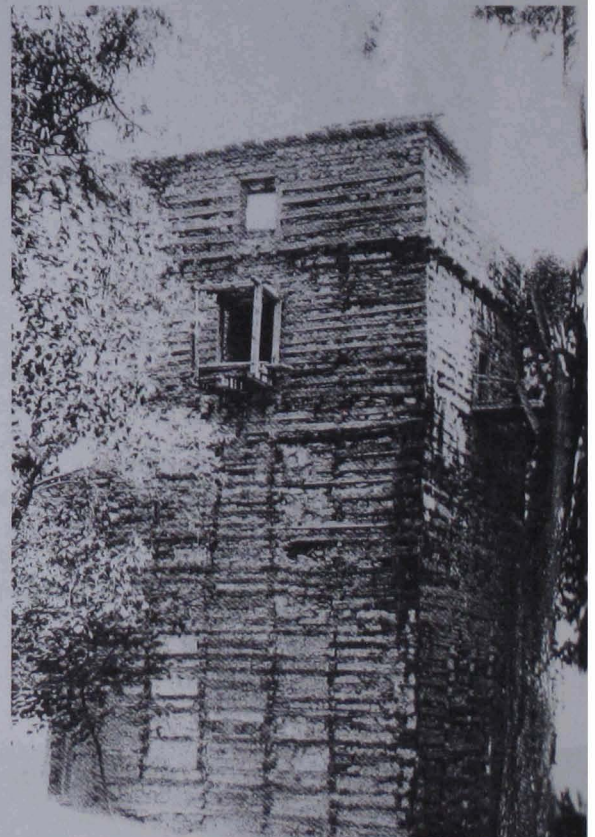
*Right. The Gun Tower at Chitral Fort today. When the fort was rebuilt in 1915, the Gun Tower was retained in part of the walls. Scorch marks can still be seen on some of the timbers where the attackers set fire to it in 1895.*



*Left. Cross section of typical fort construction in Chitral. Walls and towers were built of stones and mud in a framework of timber cribs, allowing the structure to flex during earthquakes. Towers have solid bases. Internal buildings are mostly single storey with brushwood and mud roofs supported on timber columns and rafters. Main rooms have timber-formed smoke holes.*



*Below. The Gun Tower at Chitral Fort in 1895. Built in the mid-nineteenth century, it used more timbers than the other towers. The attackers set fire to it during the siege, and the defenders sustained casualties attempting to douse the flames.*





## Royal strongholds

The forts of Chitral were similar to medieval castles. They were both a fortified residence and the local seat of power, where treasure and arms were stored. Apart from the ruler, only members of his family appointed to govern districts, had forts; so they were few in number and sited in the more important valleys. One, at Mastuj, is on a site that has been in continuous occupation since at least the tenth century, though the fort has been rebuilt several times. Another, at Drasan, was moved from a site several miles away, bringing its name with it. The forts were not very grand, but were strong enough to protect the occupant from local dissidents and assassination attempts.

The system of constructing forts had evolved many centuries before from the indigenous domestic architecture of the region. The basic building materials in the area were mud, stone and timber. The mountains around are still being formed and earthquakes are frequent, so houses were traditionally built using timber as flexible reinforcement. Timber beams were laid horizontally along the outer and inner faces of walls, and these were connected by transverse beams running through the thickness of the wall to form a crib. The spaces between the timbers were filled with stones bound by mud-mortar, which was also used to plaster the face of the wall. This method of construction was quick and adaptable.

The main fortification was a tower about 5-6m square in plan and 12-15m high. The use of timber reinforcement meant that structures could only be rectangular; round towers are unknown in Chitral. Towers normally had a solid base, reinforced with timbers, with one or two storeys above, the flat roof being supported by the outside walls and four internal columns. The roof would have a parapet with loopholes for shooting.

The traditional fort was a rough rectangle, with a tower at each corner. The forts were sited on firm ground, with little extra foundation, and did not usually have a moat. The walls were about 6-8m high, with no openings, though they might be defended by a wall walk and parapet. The entrance was in the middle of one side, with a simple two-leaved door, opening inwards and closed by a strong wooden bar. There might be an additional small side-door. The public area within had flat-roofed buildings around a courtyard, these would



include an audience hall for formal business and a small mosque. The construction was simple and rather rough, but the important rooms were decorated with attractive carved woodwork and colourful carpets. A cross-wall separated the main courtyard from the private quarters, where the women were always totally secluded. The forts would normally have a shady platform outside, where an open-air assembly could be held, and a walled garden on the side of the fort where the private quarters were, so that the women could have unobserved access. The garden would have fruit trees and small farm animals and fowl.

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*Above. Remains of a parapet at Drasan Fort in Chitral. This precious corner of the fort, which was last refurbished 70 years ago, retains the only remaining parapet section in the whole of Chitral. Earthquakes and weathering have destroyed the rest. The parapet was constructed of stone bound by mud. A rifle loophole can be seen. Note also that the timber reinforcement in the tower is clearly visible.*



# The Siege of Chitral, 1895

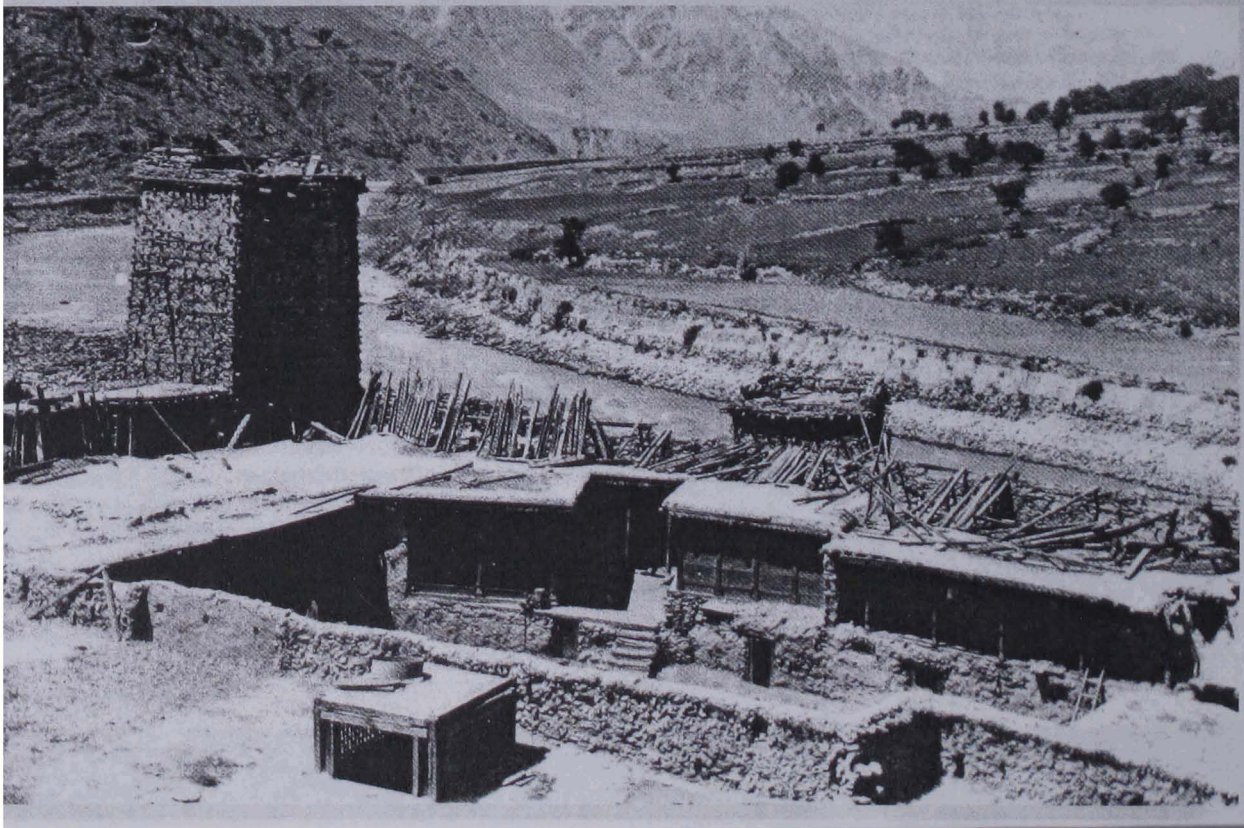


*Left. The fourteen year-old Shuja ul Mulk was made Mehtar of Chitral in 1895 and was in the fort throughout the siege. He went on to rule for 41 years, during which time the fort was substantially altered. This photograph was taken shortly after the siege. Note the fine woodcarving behind.*

*Below. A view of Chitral Fort taken immediately after the siege, looking from the Gun Tower across the roof of the Private Quarters to the Main Courtyard with the river beyond. The North Tower is on the left, the top of the Water Tower is just visible centre right, and between the two the dark veranda is the outer part of the newly rebuilt mosque. Note the timbers stacked along the parapets, the remains of screens to protect soldiers from observation and fire from the hills behind.*

At the beginning of 1895, George Robertson, the British Political Agent at Gilgit, came to Chitral with a small military escort to investigate the situation following the assassination of the Mehtar by a brother. He found that powerful Pathan forces had invaded Chitral from the south and had been joined by another claimant to the throne. Robertson, refusing either claim, placed a younger brother, Shuja ul Mulk, on the throne. The situation deteriorated and, greatly outnumbered by warring tribesmen, Robertson and his escort, together with Shuja and some Chitrali supporters, took refuge in Chitral Fort. There they endured a siege that lasted six weeks, during which two relief columns, from Gilgit and Peshawar, were fighting their way across the mountainous territory towards Chitral.

Knighthood for his leadership during the siege, Sir George Robertson wrote a vivid account of the events of 1895 in his book *Chitral: the Story of a Minor Siege* (1898). Although describing a nineteenth-century siege in the Hindu Kush, Robertson's story could have been that of a medieval siege in Britain. Some 400 soldiers and 140 civilians were in the fort. They had just enough ammunition, but medicines and rations were in short supply – they had to eat their horses – and their access to water was vulnerable – the best soldiers were set to guard the







*Part of the Chitral Relief Force in 1895. Gurkhas descending the snow-covered Lowari Pass (10,000 ft) into Chitral, with pack-mules carrying supplies.*

Water Tower. The defenders had some old cannon, which they used ineffectively twice, then abandoned. The attackers had no artillery, so the main weapons on both sides were only rifles of varying effectiveness.

One of the corner towers of the fort was called the 'Gun Tower'. The origin of its name is obscure, as it could not support a cannon. The tower had been built in the mid-nineteenth century, and it had more timber in it than was usual. The enemy set fire to it during the siege, and the defenders suffered several casualties in quenching the blaze. The enemy then nearly demolished the tower by digging a mine towards it, but a gallant sortie by the defenders destroyed the mineshaft. The base of that tower, with some scorched timbers, still remains today, providing a direct link with the siege.

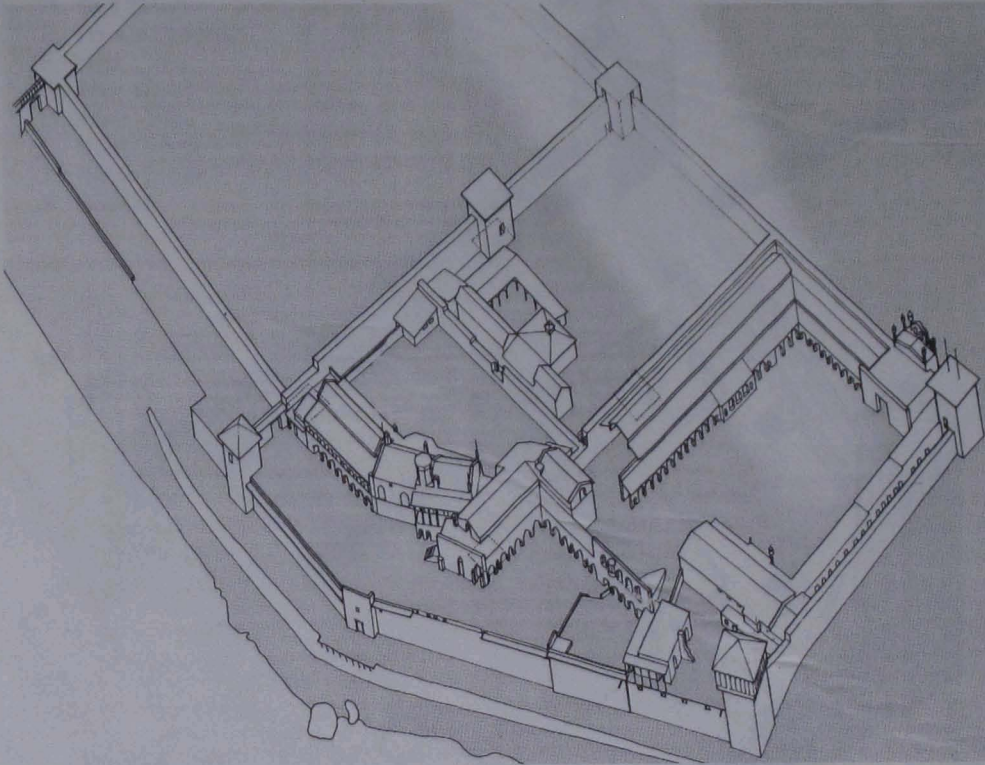
After the siege was lifted, British troops remained in Chitral, building military-style forts. These, and other government buildings, used new construction techniques, including lime mortar. This started the gradual transformation of Chitrali architecture.

*Below. Bill Woodburn with Colonel Prince Khushwaqt ul Mulk, a son of the Mehtar Shuja ul Mulk (who was in the siege of 1895 and appears on the facing page). Prince Khushwaqt, who still resides for part of the year at Mastuj fort, is one of the few people alive who can remember what life was like in the former royal forts before major alterations during the last century.*

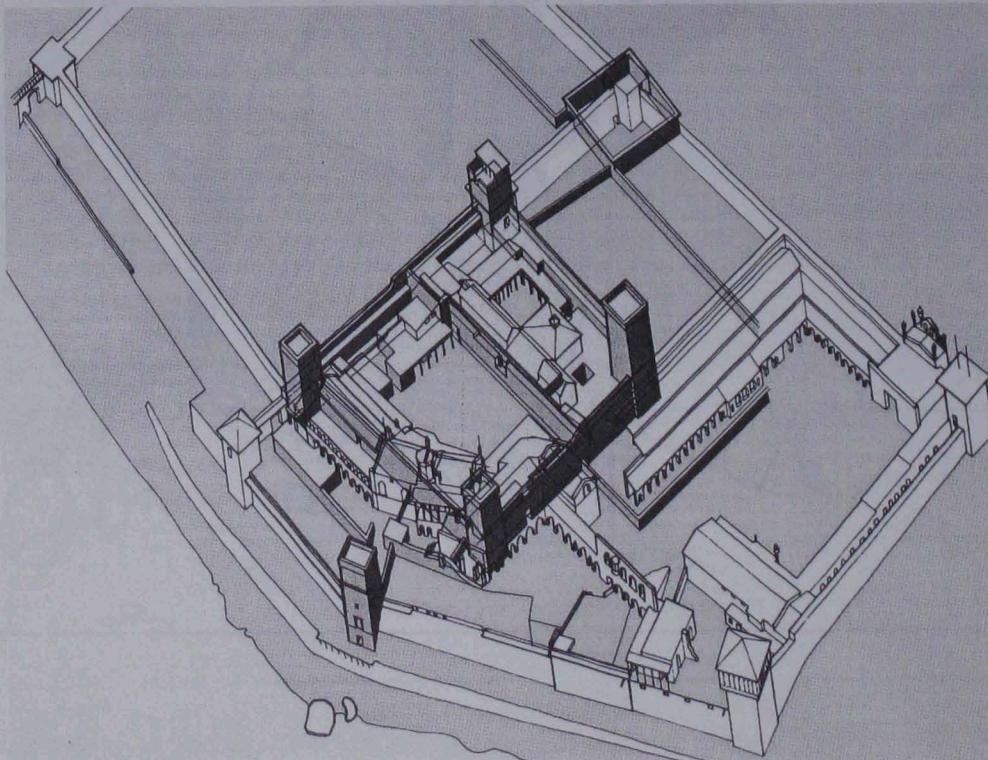




# Chitral Fort



Axonometric drawing of Chitral fort as it is today showing the main buildings, almost all of which date from the redevelopment of the fort between 1915 and 1940. (An axonometric drawing is one that is drawn to scale along three different axes - the opposite of a perspective drawing in which lines recede towards a vanishing point.)



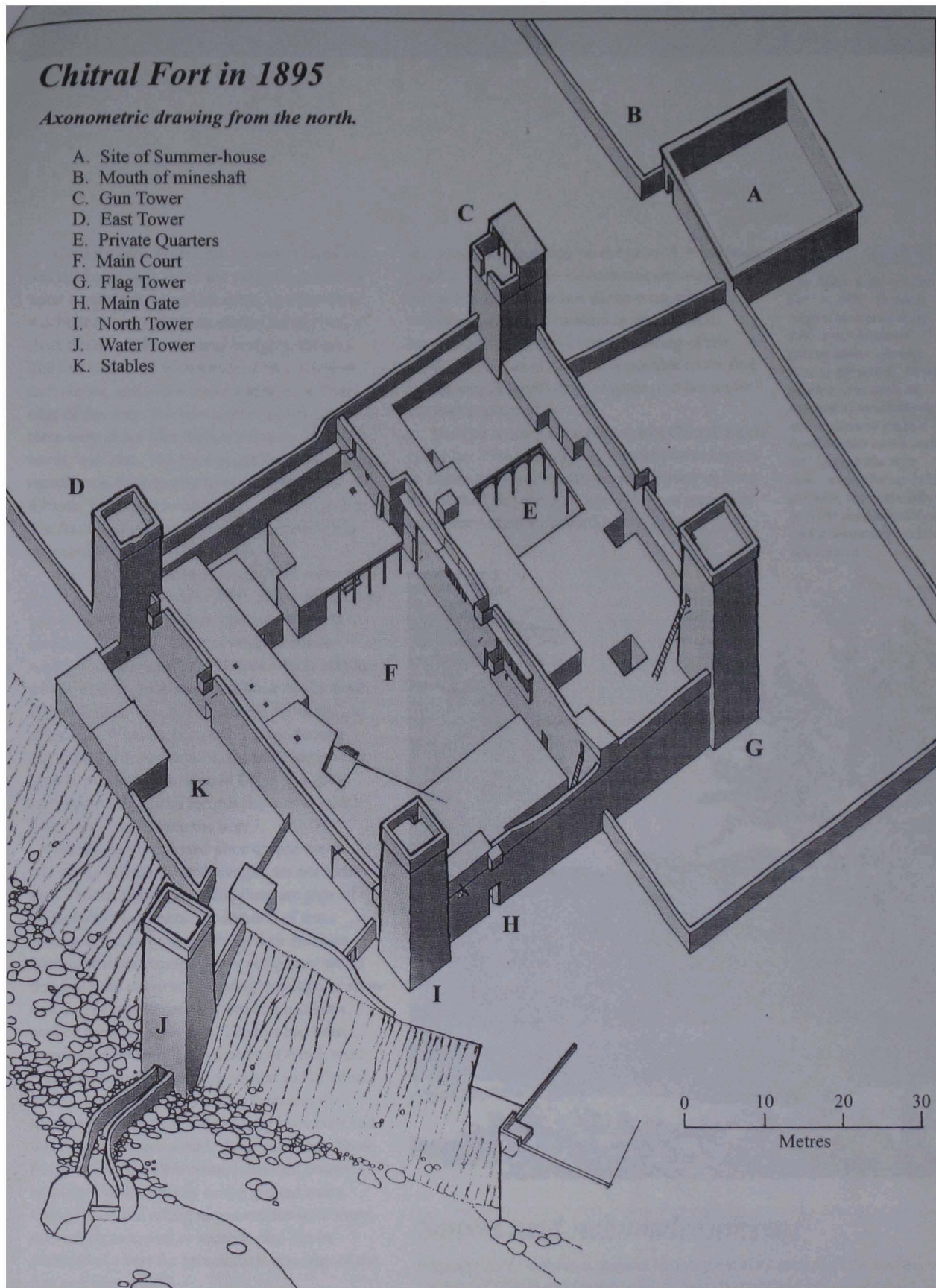
The same axonometric drawing but with the 1895 fort superimposed. It was located from three surviving features and otherwise measured off old photographs. Though most of the towers were removed, many walls continued on the same lines, doorways are on the same alignments, the mosque is in the same place, and even a small court that features highly in accounts of the siege is replicated in the redeveloped structure.



# Chitral Fort in 1895

*Axonometric drawing from the north.*

- A. Site of Summer-house
- B. Mouth of mineshaft
- C. Gun Tower
- D. East Tower
- E. Private Quarters
- F. Main Court
- G. Flag Tower
- H. Main Gate
- I. North Tower
- J. Water Tower
- K. Stables





Until the early nineteenth century, Chitral fort was sited on a spur above the valley floor, but the water supply was vulnerable there, so a new fort was built on the right bank of the Chitral river, a short distance below the only bridge in the area. The fort was about 65m square, with a tower at each corner, and a fifth tower was built near the edge of the river. The towers were all different: three were about 15m high, the fourth, the 'flag' tower, was 21m. The extra height had little tactical significance, for access to its upper storey was difficult, but high towers were symbolic of power. The fort had an extensive walled garden and was surrounded by large Chenar trees.

Two Royal Engineer photographers came with the main relieving force in 1895. A few officers also had pocket cameras, others were adept at field sketching, and so a variety of images became available, some published in books, others only in private albums. In Robertson's book on the siege, there are many descriptive passages about the fort and a copy of the earliest outline plan. Among other surviving sketch plans, the most intriguing appears in a history written in Urdu. It is only representational, but it records the uses to which rooms were put during the siege.

Although the collected photographs are a marvellous resource, camera angles are not ideal, trees obscure many views, and there are gaps where no pictures were taken. The location of some structures can be judged only by their shadows. Some of the photographs show temporary works that had been constructed during the siege, or show a section of parapet missing where it had been washed away by heavy rain. The fort had been surrounded by outbuildings, most of which were pulled down before the siege started and of which there is now no record. Among them was the summer-house, which had not long been built and was in an enclosure outside the garden wall. Three features from the 19th century fort can, however, be located with certainty on the ground today. Using these, and taking measurements from every relevant picture, a more accurate plan can be obtained as a base for axonometric drawings of the fort as it was in 1895.

Alterations to the fort started soon after the siege, but much more sweeping changes took place between 1915 and 1940, when the fort was redeveloped as a large walled palace. Today even that is partly in ruins. Using recent photographs

and simple triangulation on the ground, it has been possible to produce an axonometric drawing of the fort as it is today, without all the trees, piles of rubble and modern structures in the grounds. Superimposing an axonometric drawing of the 1895 fort on that of today, it is possible to see that a surprising amount of the original plan lies under the later structure.

Barely a century since the siege of Chitral, much of the late 19th century landscape of power known to Robertson's soldiers has crumbled away or been demolished, but there are many tasks of recording and conservation that could still be done.

*The Main Gate of Chitral Fort in 1895. It was a simple two-leaved door, with a machicolated gallery above (opening between the corbels, through which objects could be dumped upon assailants), and a gateway passage beyond where attendants sat. During the siege, stones were piled up behind the gate, the outbuildings in front were demolished, and a temporary barbican was created.*



### *Source and acknowledgments*

Brigadier Bill Woodburn is grateful for the great assistance of all the owners of the forts of Chitral and for the helpful advice he has had from many others there. Archival pictures are by courtesy of the Royal Engineers Library, Chatham, and contemporary pictures by the author. Axonometric drawings are by Ian Templeton. Bill Woodburn is currently writing a book on the forts and is still looking for photographs and drawings in libraries and private collections. Contact: [cwoodburn@onetel.net.uk](mailto:cwoodburn@onetel.net.uk)