

The Writers' Building, Calcutta : Facets of History Untold

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The first brick of the Writers' Building was laid in 1776 and its construction was completed in 1780 marking the arrival of the first three-storied edifice of the town. Thomas Lyon, the carpenter-turned building contractor of the East India Company, was its architect. The building became first a leasehold property of the East India Company and then of the British Government in 1863.

In 1765 the Mughal Emperor appointed the Company as his Diwan, i.e. the authority in charge of the revenue administration of the Bengal Presidency. The Company required an effective administrative machinery to manage the affairs of the newly acquired settlements. The Court of Directors wanted its own bureaucracy to be utilized. The Company's junior civil servants then known as writers, however, needed some training and disciplinary control before assuming such responsibilities. The need for a building which would bring all of them under a common roof arose. The only three-storied edifice of the town thus became both a training centre and a residence of the Company's junior servants and came to be known as the Writers' Building.

The Building was used for sundry purposes. The Fort William College was set up here in 1800. The Bengal Engineering College was located here for a while from 1856. The Secretariat offices of the Government which were scattered in various parts of the city came to be housed here from 1878. Sections of the Building were also hired by merchants, individuals, store-houses, counting houses, East India Railway Company, etc.

Between 1881 and 1883, the entire southern façade of the Writers' Building was completely refurbished. The statuary sculpted by the eminent W.F.Woodington was added to it in 1883. The Palladian structure of the old Building eventually made way for a 'Neo-Renaissance' style of architecture.

The Writers' Building since then has become an architectural marvel of the city of Calcutta and has appropriately been given Grade I heritage status.