



Untold Histories Around The Fort Anjengo

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Summary: *Its current obscurity has erased the rich three-hundred-year history of Anjengo Fort, the first English settlement in Kerala. This biography of the fort reveals a past of conquest and resistance, scandal and struggle.*

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“Fishermen for years used to talk about a shipwreck some distance from the shore at Anchuthengu. In January 2015 scuba divers photographed the wreck and identified it as the Dutch ship ‘Wimmemum’ from 1754.”

- Fr Lucians Thomas, St. Peter’s Forane Church, Anjengo, 2024

Anchuthengu (*Anjengo*) is a coastal village northwest of Thiruvananthapuram on a sandy isthmus between the sea on the west and the backwaters on the east.

“In the old days, load carriers would rest during a journey by placing their head-load down on a big stone slab called “thaangi” (a raised stone bench). It is believed that there were five such slabs on the way to the water, with the fifth and last at Anchuthengu. Giving it the name ‘Anchu’ (fifth) ‘thaangi’ (stone) which eventually became “Anchuthengu,”

- Nelson, 70, a worker at the Fort, 2024



Figure 1. Oil Press Stone at Anchuthengu Junction. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

At the tri-junction of roads on the way to Anjengo fort, called Anchuthengu junction, stands a two-foot-tall conical stone that was part of an earlier cattle-drawn oil press, which locals claim dates way back in the village's past. A village legend believes Anchu (five) and

Thengu (coconut) refers to a five-branched coconut tree that existed here.

Anjengo’s commanding location over land and sea, and climate, which was favourable for pepper growing, made it important for the colonial spice trade. It was a critical port in the Spice Wars between the Portuguese, Dutch, and English from the 16th to the 18th centuries. To take advantage of this, the Anjengo Fort was built by the English East India Company (EIC) around 1696 CE. Located near the village of Anchuthengu, the fort was the East India Company's first permanent post on the Malabar Coast, serving as the first signalling station for ships arriving from England.

Delays in Construction

In the 17th century, the area was under the control of the Rani of Attingal, and her control of the pepper lands in this region led the English to call her the ‘Pepper Queen’. The Dutch, after capturing the Portuguese fort of Quilon, demanded a monopoly on the pepper and cinnamon trade. This was opposed by the English, and in 1684, they secured permission from the Rani of Attingal to construct a factory at Anjengo, which was to become the first permanent settlement of the

English East India Company in the Malabar region.

Exclusive possession of pepper was a fixed point in the Dutch trade policy and they were reluctant to allow the English any part of it. This led to growing rivalry between the Dutch and the English in Malabar, more so when, in 1688, the Attingal Rani granted Vettoor (*'Rettorah'*) and Vizhinjam (*'Brinjohn'*) to the English to establish factories. In August 1694, the Attingal nobility forced the Dutch to abandon their settlement at Anjengo, which was plundered and burned down.¹ In the same year, the Rani of Attingal signed an *Ola* (order) under which the English East India Company (EIC) in Anjengo was granted permission to erect a fort, warehouses, and residences for their factors; and she also granted them all the pepper in the Attingal region that they might contract and pay for at a certain fixed rate. The East India Company settled at Anjengo for two reasons—first, the trade in pepper and calico (textile) piece goods,² and second, the advantages that the river and neighbouring creeks gave in bringing the produce by boat to their warehouse.

Worried about the construction, the Dutch put pressure on the Rani of Attingal to stop its construction. The English rejected her request, following which the Rani tried to blockade their supplies, but the English got supplies

delivered by sea. The Dutch objection delayed construction by three years, after which construction started.

The English fort, built of earth and *surki*, was attacked and demolished by the local people. The British forced the local people out of their land and built a brick fort. The locals again gathered, destroyed the new fort, and chased away the British.³

-Anchuthengu panchayat record, 1996–97

After defeating the Rani's troops, the East India Company commenced construction of the fort in January 1696, paying the Rani a rent of 75 gold coins per year.⁴ In June 1696, pirates destroyed the Bengal Pilot Service's sloop *Gingali* at Anjengo. In 1697, locals attacked the fort, which was not complete, but the English prevailed. And thus, somewhere in 1698–99, the fort was completed.

Not an Easy Life

Life in the East India Company forts and outposts was isolating for the resident English men and women who represented British influence in this corner of India. Separated from the local population by language and beliefs, an unfamiliar climate, unknown diseases, and their impact on health were matters of concern. Many died young, as indicated by the two tombstones beside the fort. Deborah, the wife of John Brabourne, the first commodore of Anjengo, died young

¹Mark de Lannoy. 1997. *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore*. Leiden University, 1997.

²Logan, William. n.d. *Malabar Manual 1 1841-1914; Publication Date 1887*. Vol. 1. p. 350

³Anchuthengu panchayat records-1996-97

⁴Anchuthengu panchayat records-1996-97

at 28 years of age, spending her last years at Anjengo before her death in 1704.

The major attraction for the English 'volunteers' to come to India was the dream of amassing "pepper and pagodas (gold coins)" through private trade. In late 1717, William Gyfford came to Angengo with his wife Katharine. The Malabar Coast was famous for its spices, which earned huge fortunes for Company servants. For example, Robert Adams, senior factor at Tellicherry, operated many private trading ships and was said to have earned a fortune of more than £100,000. Anjengo seemed to be a place to earn enough for a comfortable retirement, and Gyfford and his wife were eager to build their fortune.

EIC officials were paid poorly, so they were allowed to trade privately, as long as such activity did not interfere with the East India Company's interests. Officials were posted to distant places, and communication was difficult, making fraud, malpractice, and swindling widespread. Competitive private trade interests created ill will between English officials, and since their private trade used company ships and warehouses, it became entangled with the East India Company's affairs. For these reasons, the chief factor at Anjengo, John Kyffin refused to leave his post and instead spread rumours that Gyfford used his beautiful wife to achieve his ends.

The Fort at Anjengo

Surrounded by sea and brackish backwater, Anjengo Island has a shortage of fresh water. Today, the only perennial source of fresh water in Anchuthengu is the well inside Anjengo Fort. Villagers come here during water shortages and are used by all residents when other modern sources (piped water and tanks) dry up.

-Nelson, 70, a worker at the Fort, 2024



Figure 2. The northeast view of Anjengo Fort, 1772. Image: Wellcome Library, London.

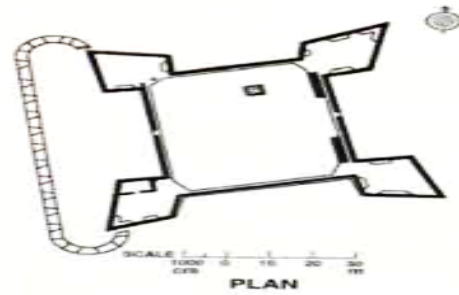
The shape, size, and design of Anjengo Fort were quite different from other structures built around that time. It had two entrances, one east towards the river (backwater) and another west (facing the sea). Surrounded by high walls of laterite, the fort served as a military armoury during its active years, and the laterite is invisible as it was covered by lime plaster. The fort could house about 400 soldiers and was built to secure the well and the surrounding area used for the warehouses and some dwellings of the British. The jetty and landing stage approached from the gates on the east and west and could also be easily defended by the fort gun batteries, giving

the British control over trade in this region.

In 1711, Charles Lockyear, a visitor to Anjengo, described the Fort as housing 40 soldiers and ‘Topass’ artillerymen of Luso-Indian origin. The housing within its walls was a basic construction, with thatched palm roofs and wooden walls that were embedded inside the loose sand.⁵ Sailors and traders were regular visitors to the port, where commercial conversations with the East India Company officials covered, for example, the prices that could be obtained by fine Bengal silk up the coast, what Anjengo pepper, fine cotton cloth, and betelnut would fetch at Surat, and the rate of exchange between the great variety of coins and currency used in the trade.⁶

Features of the Fort

The main features of the fort are the lookout points, or bastions, set to give a commanding view over the surrounding land and sea. Built in a rectangular shape, 256 feet wide, the fort has no vaults or subdivisions, but has all the facilities required for a military base.



Figures 3 a & b. Drawing of Fort Plan (1980) and Photo of Anjengo Fort from the top of the lighthouse. Image: (a) ASI (b) JANAL Archives, 2024.

Surgeon Ives of the Royal Navy in 1754⁷ described the fort as ‘small but neat and strong’. Each of the four bastions mounted eight guns, while an equal number of guns were placed between them. The river flowing a hundred feet to the east (back) of the fort gives a ‘pleasant ambience’ to the place.⁸ On the bastions facing the sea, the steps and walls are all that remain of a gallows. On the adjacent sea-facing bastion, a thick, seasoned teak log lies on the parapet floor, while supporting clamp bases on the bastion and parapet floor can be seen. These are all that remain of a tall

⁵Charles Lockyer. 1711 From *An account of the Trade in India containing rules for good Government in trade, price courants, and tables with descriptions of Fort St. George, Acheen, Malacca, Condore, Canton, Anjengo, Muskat, Gombroon, Surat, Goa, Carwar, Telichery, Panola, Calicut, the Cape of Good Hope, and St. Helena*

⁶Sutton, Jean 2010; *The East India Company’s Maritime Service, 1746–1834*

⁷A British naval surgeon and writer of the book ‘From England To India In The Year 1754’

⁸Anjengo Factory Diaries (quoted by Nagam Aiya, op. cit; vol 1) p.3-15.

light mast (Fig. 2), a signalling station for ships arriving from Britain.⁹

On the north-western corner of the fort, below the sea-facing bastion with the gallows, a sunken vault containing an entry into a tunnel can be seen. Various legends about the tunnel exist, but it is clear that it was intended for those inside the fort to escape by sea. During the construction of a well at a nearby house between the fort and the sea two decades ago, workers came upon a tunnel emerging from the fort. The tunnel was closed so that the well could be dug further.

I had seen the tunnel inside the fort before it was closed. It was pitch dark, and there were steps going down to the tunnel. I could hear the sound of waves on the shore. No one knows how long the tunnel was, and there were stories of people and animals who went inside and never returned. That's why it was walled up a few decades ago.

-Nelson, 70, a worker at the Fort, 2024

On the west side of the fort, outside the high walls, are seven stone pillars, and the base of three others, which were used by the British to bind and punish prisoners and slaves. A low archway into the fort made it difficult for attackers to enter. The fort originally only had a low sea wall outside, but a higher wall was built by the Archaeological Survey of India

⁹Hamilton, Alexander. (1727) 1744. *A New Account of the East Indies*.

as new houses were built outside the fort. The light mast on the southwestern bastion at Anjengo (Fig. 2) was built of teak wood and had a lantern at the top to guide ships at sea. This was finally replaced in 1988 by a new 125-foot-high lighthouse that was ten metres away from the fort. However, the new lighthouse is shorter than the old teak wood light mast.

Exploitative Taxes and Cruel Traders

On 11 April 1721, on the day of Vishu, the Hindu New Year, Katharine Gyfford, the commander's wife, saw her husband, and most of the officers and men of Anjengo leave to meet the Rani of Attingal to pay their respects and present their annual gifts. The next day, the few left behind—mostly the infirm, women, and children—were indoors, sheltering from the heat, and did not notice birds furiously circling objects floating in the river. Towards evening, a few Topasses came straggling back to Anjengo Fort, heavily wounded, their bodies smeared with mud and blood. It was then that they learnt of the 'Attingal massacre', the killing of 140 Englishmen who had gone to the Rani's Palace the previous evening.¹⁰

Samuel Ince, the chief gunner of Anjengo, who was left behind with a few men, took the lead in the fortress' defence. He first destroyed the stores of gunpowder in the magazine, so it could not fall into the

¹⁰Emily Gilchrist Hatch. 1933. *Travancore: A Guide Book for the Visitor*.

hands of their enemy. He then ordered the survivors to stock the fort with bags of rice, salt, fish, and the Company's treasure, all of which were stored in warehouses outside the fort. Meanwhile, the women and children of the factory were rushed into the "Prosperous," a ship carrying cowries from the Maldives in the harbour, which soon sailed away.¹¹

A few days later, an army of Attingal nobility attacked Anjengo Fort, but the attempt was unsuccessful and many were killed. They plundered the surroundings of the fort, including the English house settlement and warehouses, looted and burned it, and besieged the fort for six months. It was extensively damaged, but they were unable to capture it; their efforts set fire to the thatched roofs of the buildings inside, leading to its dismantling. Six months later, in October 1721, the arrival of more British troops from Thalassery provided relief to the survivors at Anjengo Fort.

The Attingal Rebellion of 1721 was the first organised agitation against British rule in Kerala. Following this incident, the Venad treaty was signed by the Raja of Travancore with the East India Company at the Anjengo fort in 1723, giving the English the right to monopolise the pepper trade and establish factories throughout the country.

¹¹Mark de Lannoy. 1997. *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore*. Leiden University, 1997., p. 33.

The Backbone of English Supremacy

A Topass gunner from Anjengo served as artillery master for Marthanda Varma of Travancore, marking the start of his plan to build an army along European lines. By 1739, Marthanda Varma's wars of conquest forced him to seek the assistance of the English settlement at Anjengo for arms. The English were worried that a Dutch attack on Attingal in 1740, would reach Anjengo fort, so fearing damage to their spice trade, they decided to increase military help to Travancore.

On 15 January 1742, the Travancore king visited the English at Anjengo, where he succeeded in obtaining several pieces of heavy artillery. The English at Anjengo supplied 150 soldiers, 500 guns, and 6 barrels of gunpowder to the Travancore Army and trained them on the grounds outside Anjengo Fort, along with European-style cavalry and infantry.

During the wars of the Carnatic (around 1744), Anjengo was used as a depot for military stores, and by 1750, Travancore purchased large quantities of red cloth for uniforms from the English at Anjengo. In 1759, when Yusuf Khan attacked Puli Tevar's territory with the help of Travancore troops, they received fresh military supplies from Anjengo.¹² The Anjengo Fort also played an important role in the Anglo-Mysore wars (1798-99),

¹²Kunju, A. P. Ibrahim. "Travancore and the Carnatic In The XVIII Century: Fresh Light Thrown by the Matilakam Records." p. 373

as the fort was used to store ammunition for the British who fought against Hyder Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, the then rulers of Mysore.

Anjengo was the first port of call for all inward-bound ships. The *Snow* (or *snauw*, a two-masted sailing vessel), *Luconia* was constructed in 1748 by the Bombay dockyard for the Anjengo Pilot Service. As other ports in India developed, Anjengo became less important, and in 1776, it was reduced to a residency. In 1802, the 260-tonne ship, *Anjengo*, the largest ship built at the boatyard in Anjengo was launched. Its owner, John Tady Dyne, was the last East India Company resident at Anjengo Fort.¹³

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the trade had fallen off and in 1792, the town was reported to be in a state of decline. In 1809, during the disturbances in Travancore, Anjengo was completely blockaded, leading to the factory at Anjengo being closed the next year, and Anjengo was transferred from the English East India Company to the English Residents in the Travancore court.¹⁴

Conclusion

St. Peter's Forane Church was constructed 400 years ago by the Portuguese. A recent renovation exposed a graveyard

containing the tombstones of Portuguese soldiers and priests dating back to 1800.

– Rev. Lucians Thomas, Anjengo.

Generations of fishermen around the Anchuthengu coast know of a particularly bountiful portion of the sea between Varkala and Anchuthengu, where an old shipwreck 50 metres below acts as an artificial reef and marine nursery. Recently, it was identified as the Dutch trading ship 'Wimmemum', which sank here in 1754 after an attack by pirates.

As a fishing village, Anchuthegu has a continuous history of awareness and resistance. In November 1993, a much-publicised conflict took place here between the traditional fisherfolk and owners of mechanised boats or trawlers over the rights to fish in the sea. The area was home and fishing ground to more than 20,000 traditional fishing families, their only occupation being fishing on a day-to-day basis.

The trawlers were not only violating the monsoon trawling or night trawling ban in the territorial waters, but they also wanted to establish total control over the whole fishing area. It has taken a long and painful struggle for workers to resolve this, leading to some kind of balance between the traditional and mechanised workers today.

The violent events of 1993 had a profound impact, and the people of Anjengo have shown resilience and ingenuity in the face of adversity. What was once called an

¹³*Calcutta Review* (October 1898), Vol. 107, No 214, p. 211

¹⁴Emily Gilchrist Hatch. 1933. *Travancore: A Guide Book for the Visitor*, p. 93-98

inhospitable sandspit is now a reminder of the strength and determination of those who walked these grounds. “The

encroaching sea may someday sweep away this narrow spit of land, but it will never be forgotten.”

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