



Benjamin Lacam's long legal battle with the East India Company

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Report From the Committee to whom the Petition of Benjamin Lacam, Sole Proprietor of New Harbour in Bengal, was Referred. Printed in the Year M.DCC.LXXXIII. [&] Report From the Committee to whom the Petition of Benjamin Lacam, Sole Proprietor of New Harbour in Bengal, was Referred. Ordered to be printed 10th July 1806.

London, 1783 & 1806. Two extracts in blue wrappers; pp.52; & pp.62, with folding map, 660 x 455mm, with original hand colour.

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A pair of official Parliamentary reports relating to Benjamin Lacam's campaign for compensation from the East India Company for his work investigating a safe route from the Bay of Bengal to Calcutta. The map in the 1806 pamphlet is 'Navigation through the Eastern Channel, and Channel Creek with the Boat-track of Captain Cumberlege, in his Survey of the depths of Water between Suuger Sand and Light-House Sand'. In 1772 Warren Hastings made Calcutta (now Kolkata) the capital of British India, reflecting the importance of the trade carried out there. However the Hooghly was a problematic river to enter, made dangerous by sand banks. Benjamin Lacam was commissioned by the East India Company to survey the delta and recommend a location for a new harbour to cope with the increased trade in Calcutta, with a naval dockyard. Lacam picked a site 63 miles downriver of Calcutta and recommended a channel east of Saugur Sound for access, and acquired enough land for anchorage, dry docks,

granaries, water tanks and a deer park. In 1783 Lacam submitted a report to the E.I.C. proposing that the site would be 'productive of the most important advantages both to the East India Company and the Public, in a financial, and much more in a political and naval view'. However, due to either accident or malicious design, a commissioner altered some of the soundings displayed on the report's chart before it was passed to General Cornwallis, Governor of the Bengal Presidency. This made it appear that the approaches to the New Harbour were too shallow, and, despite testimonials from several East India captains that the route was navigable at all seasons, Lacam's grant was stopped. Severely out-of-pocket, Lacam demanded compensation but, despite an apologetic letter from the commissioner admitting his error in 1789 and his channel becoming the main entry to the Hooghly, the East India Company refused him. Clearly obsessed with the wrong done to him Lacam would talk to anyone who would listen: the memoirist William Hickey (1749-1830) met Lacam in London and records him 'tormenting me for an hour with his hackneyed subject, New Harbour'. Lacam was still petitioning Parliament to intervene in 1806. In 1809 the East India Company agreed to raise his pension from £600 to £1,000, with his wife to receive £600 should he die.

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