

Forts of the Chitral Campaign of 1895*

Bill Woodburn[†]

Contents

1	Background	1
2	Fort construction in Chitral	2
3	Chitral Fort	4
4	Forts on the Road from Gilgit	7
5	Forts on the route from the south	8
6	Epilogue	10
	References	10

1 Background

Chitral, which today is part of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, was a separate state in 1895, owing allegiance to Kashmir and thus, although beyond the then border of British India, within the British sphere of influence. At the beginning of 1895, the Mehtar (ruler) of Chitral was assassinated

*I am grateful to Col Khushwaqt ul Mulk and Maj Khush Ahmed ul Mulk for much advice and help with this study; to Shuja ur Rahman for helping us to examine Chitral Fort; to other members of the Mulk family for welcoming us to their forts; to our resourceful guide, Murad Khan; and, particularly, to Maqsood ul Mulk of Hindukush Trails, Islamabad, for our travel arrangements and constant help. I am also grateful to Mrs M. Magnuson and the staff of the Royal Engineers Library, Chatham, for assistance with the illustrations and plan.

[†]Brigadier Bill Woodburn is a retired Royal Engineer, who joined the Society in the early 1960s, when on secondment to the Trucial Oman Scouts. He served on the Council, 1984-88, and was a Vice-President from 1988 to 1992. He first visited Chitral in 1962, while exploring forts in the subcontinent. He has made a detailed study of the Chitral campaign and he and his wife took part in the Society's tour to Chitral in 1995, returning there to do further research in 1998. This article expands parts of a lecture he gave to the Society on 5 January 1999, 'Hill Forts and Mule Tracks: History in the Landscape of Chitral'.

by one of his brothers, who claimed the throne. The British Political Agent from Gilgit, Surgeon-Major George Robertson, came over the mountains to Chitral with a small military force, to find that a powerful Pathan chieftain, Umra Khan, had invaded the state from the south and was soon joined by Sher Afzal, another claimant to the ruler ship, who had come from Afghanistan. Robertson refused to accept either claimant and installed a younger brother, Shuja-ul-Mulk, as provisional Mehtar. The situation deteriorated as the advancing Pathans were joined by local parties. The force of British officers and Indian soldiers took refuge in Chitral Fort, together with the new Mehtar and other civilians; some 540 people in all. There they endured a siege that lasted six weeks, during which two relief columns were fighting their way across the mountainous terrain towards Chitral, one small column from Gilgit and the large Chitral Relief Force from the south. The story of the siege and its relief is one of the more dramatic episodes in Victorian military history ¹. This article describes the forts involved in the campaign, many of which are visible to visitors today.

2 Fort construction in Chitral

The forts of Chitral were similar to medieval castles. They were both fortified residences and the seat of power in the area. They were few in number and sited in the more important valleys. They were not very strong, being designed to represent authority and to protect members of the ruling family, and their followers and possessions, against local dissent. Defence against invading forces was carried out in the field, at well-chosen blocking positions on approach routes.

The basic building materials in the area are fractured stone, or river boulders, and locally grown timber. The mountains are still being formed and earthquakes are frequent so, in Chitral and neighbouring areas, forts are built using timber cribs as flexible reinforcement for the stone walls (Coburn, 1984). Timber beams are laid horizontally along the outer and inner faces of walls and these are connected by transverse beams running through the thickness of the wall to form a crib. The spaces between the timbers are filled with stones, sometimes using a dry-stone technique; more often the gaps between stones are filled by mud-mortar, which may also be used to plaster the face of the wall. Cement is only used in modern construction. In some walls there is a wide band of stones between one layer of horizontal timbers and the next, in others the wall is built up with the horizontal layers only separated by the thickness of a log. The latter method uses more timber, and is vulnerable to fire, but has produced more durable structures (such as the 800-year old tower at Altit, in neighbouring Hunza).

This use of timber reinforcement means that structures can only be rectangular; round towers are unknown in Chitral. The main element of the fortification that evolved is a tower about 5-6 m square in plan and 12-15 m high. Towers normally had a solid base, reinforced with timbers, with one or two stories above, the flat roof being supported by the outside walls and four internal columns. The roof would have a parapet, through which holes were made for men to fire weapons. Such towers could stand alone as watch-towers or be joined by walls to form a fort.

The usual fort was a rough rectangle, with a tower at each corner. Larger forts might have additional

¹The best contemporary accounts are: Sir George S. Robertson, *Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege* 1898; Younghusband, *The Relief of Chitral* 1895; and Lt Beynon, *With Kelly to Chitral* 1896. There is a lot of useful detail in Capt WR. Robertson, *Official Account of the Chitral Expedition* 1898. Short modern accounts are in Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game* 1990 and John Keay, *The Gilgit Game* 1979. The Society's tour to the area in 1995 was covered in Woodburn, *Chitral Centennial*, Asian Affairs XXVII:2 June 1996.



Figure 1: Sketch map of Chitral campaign



Figure 2: A Typical Fort; Drosh Fort in 1895

towers. They were sited on firm ground, with little extra foundation, and did not normally have a moat. The walls were about 8 m 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 could include a small mosque. A cross wall separated the courtyard from the private quarters. The construction was simple and bleak, though attractive carving relieved the woodwork of the mosques, some doors and the columns supporting the roofs of more important rooms.²

3 Chitral Fort

Although describing a late 19th-century drama, Robertson's *Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege* gives a full account of what it must have been like to be besieged in a castle in any period. The defenders had some old cannon, which they only tried twice and abandoned. Otherwise, were bows to replace the rifles that both defenders and besiegers used, the investment might have been a little closer, but no other details need have changed from a medieval siege. The anxiety, the negotiations, the importance of water, the care of hygiene, the stench, the hunger, the tight control of food and ammunition, the constant watch, the need to bolster morale, the repair of the walls, the repulse of attacks, and the decisive sortie, could all have been part of a 12th-century siege in Britain. The fortifications, however, would have barely sufficed in medieval times; they were sorely stretched in the era of the modern rifle.

An earlier fort was said to have been sited above the Chitral valley, on the spur where the Political Agency now is. After it was taken in a siege, when the attacker diverted the water supply, the fort was moved to the valley floor beside the river³. The new fort was roughly 65 m square, with a tower on each corner, and there was a fifth tower, the water tower, down by the river's edge.

The four corner-towers of the fort were all different. Three were about 15 m high, the west, or flag, tower was 21 m. The extra height of that tower seems to have been obtained by raising the solid base, for entry to the upper chamber in the tower was by a long external ladder that, during the siege, could only be used in the dark. The side walls between the towers were around 8 m high. On the west and south the towers barely protruded in front of the walls; a serious weakness as they could not properly cover the walls between. On the east wall the towers were a little more prominent and covered the small door in that wall. The walls had a walkway on top, shielded by a parapet. These parapets were not very robust, consisting of stones and mud-mortar with little or no timber in their construction and, during the siege, heavy rain carried away a good length of the parapet wall on the west.

The fort had been ill-prepared for the siege. The British had occupied the fort against Chitrali wishes and were cautious about their preparations. When the siege started suddenly on 3 March 1895, after the garrison had been caught in the open by a large body of the enemy, the garden walls around the fort were still intact, as were several outbuildings and numerous large trees. Over the next few nights the garrison was able to knock down some of the structures on the west side, but the enemy was able

²There is a useful description of the construction efforts in Col H.P. Leach, *Report on the Engineer Operations of the Chitral Relief Force 1895* Appendix D (4) & P1. XVI. Additional material has been culled from contemporary accounts and photographs.

³R.C.F. Schomberg, *Kajirs and Glaciers* 1938, p. 2

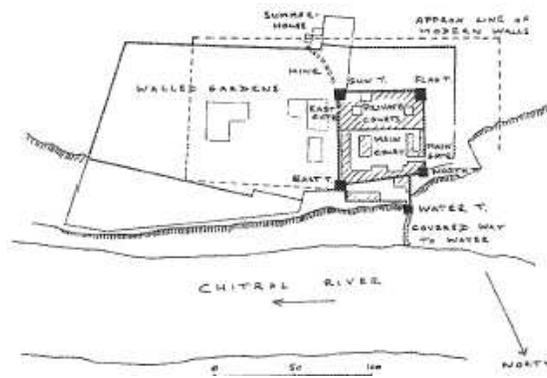


Figure 3: Sketch of Fort

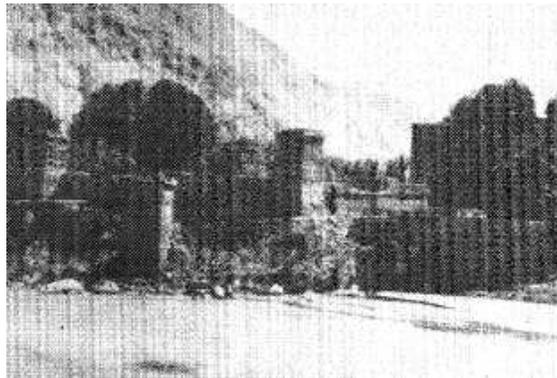


Figure 4: Chitral Fort from Across the River in 1895

to exploit what remained elsewhere and occupy positions near the fort walls. The longer range of the rifles that were now in the possession of some tribesmen meant that the fort could also come under fire from the hills across the river. The defenders erected back cover on the wall-walks to protect soldiers from this fire.

Owing to the weakness of the simple main gate, the defenders had to barricade it inside with stones and stout timbers. Passage was still possible through a small manhole. As the corner-towers contributed little to the defence of the gate, during the siege considerable effort was expended, under cover of darkness, to convert the remains of outhouses into a suitable defensive enclosure forward of the gate; what a medieval mason would call a barbican.

Two towers played a prominent part in the siege; the water and gun towers. Although the former was placed near the river, the water level drops in winter and does not rise until the snows melt in the late spring and summer; a covered way had to be built to allow the watering parties to get from the base of the tower to the water, This covered way and the tower itself came under frequent attack and had to be defended by hand-picked soldiers. Their loss would have meant surrender, as attempts to find water by digging a well had failed,

It is not clear why the gun tower got its name; it could not support a cannon. It had been built by Kalash men in the middle of the 19th century and, whilst robust, contained more timber than the other towers. The enemy tried to exploit this by placing brushwood against its base and setting fire to it

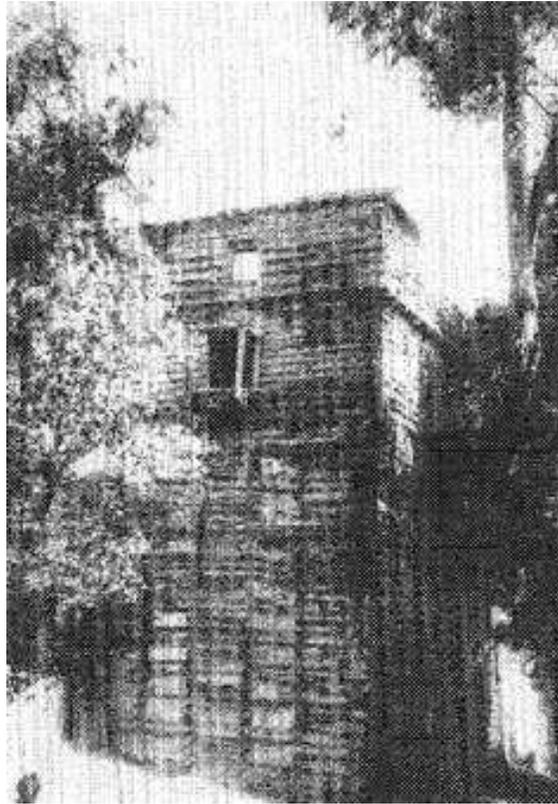


Figure 5: The Gun Tower after the Siege; Scorch marks can be seen on the Timbers on the corner of the tower. Defences have been removed from the Openings

The defenders sustained a number of casualties putting out that fire, the main problem being to create projecting loopholes from which the base of the tower could be seen. It was the gun tower that was later the target of a mine being dug towards the fort. The sortie of 100 soldiers, to take the mine and blow it up before it reached the tower, was the decisive moment of the siege. The relieving columns were now approaching and shortly after that sortie the besiegers melted away.

Traces of that scorching can still be seen on the lower part of the gun tower today, although the top of the tower has been rebuilt. Most of the rest of the 1895 fort has been demolished and a much bigger fort built in its place. The external fort walls roughly follow the old line of the garden walls, but cut off the easternmost third of the 1895 garden. The core of the fort was rebuilt in the 1920s and further rebuilding occurred in the 1940s when, for instance, the Moghul-style main gate was constructed. Even the base of the water tower, which can be seen from across the river, is a rebuild. Sadly much of the fort is now in disrepair; it needs preservation if it is to survive. Nevertheless, it is possible to follow where the line of walls went in 1895 and the atmosphere within the fort makes a visit memorable and a privilege.

4 Forts on the Road from Gilgit

The small column that marched from Gilgit to Chitral, under Lt-Col James Kelly, was to achieve lasting fame for its endurance and courage. Five stages northwest of Gilgit the force reached Gupis, where a fort had been constructed by Kashmiri forces in 1893 as an advanced base. It differed from other forts in the area, being designed for military use only. It was built of stones and mud (now pointed with mortar) and no timbers. It is square with, on diagonally opposite corners, two square towers and two round towers. The towers are squat but project well forward of the walls, giving good observation along them. The round towers were designed to mount a cannon, and George Curzon, visiting the fort in 1894, saw a brass six-pounder being fired that had once done service in the Abyssinian Campaign ⁴. The fort had to be sited near the river, to ensure water. Lt Beynon, accompanying Col Kelly, somewhat scathingly described it as built "on the most scientific principle, the only drawback being that it is commanded on all sides, and would be perfectly untenable if attacked by three men and a boy with accurate long range rifles" ⁵. The fort can be seen today on the right of the road as one leaves Gupis town to the west. It is not open, as it is still in official use. Quite a lot of external masonry has fallen down, possibly due to a lack of reinforcement.

Four more marches brought the column to Ghizr, where a fortified post had been established, consisting of a block of isolated houses which had been fortified and surrounded by a thorn hedge. One cannot be sure today where those houses were, let alone find any trace of their temporary fortification.

An epic crossing of the Shandur Pass brought Kelly's men into Chitrali territory. After a bold action at Chakalwat, the column reached Mastuj, the most important fort between Gilgit and Chitral. The site is of significance, on an old trade route to China, and there has been a fort there since perhaps the 10th or 11th century. The fort that was there in 1895 had been built in 1780 and rebuilt in 1830 after a big earthquake. The British occupied the fort, with the permission of the Mehtar of Chitral, from about 1885 until the end of the operations of 1895. Capt Francis Younghusband was based there in 1894, when there was a further earthquake: "We suddenly felt the whole place shaking. But earthquakes are common in Chitral and we did not at first move until we heard stones crashing down outside and the whole room tossing about like a cabin on board ship. . . The mountains round were in a cloud of dust from the avalanches of rock set rolling down their side by the earthquake, and the rickety walls of the fort tumbled on all sides."

The fort was about 70 m square, built of typical masonry and timber. A drawing made in 1885 shows that, in addition to the four corner towers, there was a further tower on the south wall and a gateway beside this tower; an unusually strong arrangement in Chitral. The fort was sited near water and had a well, but was now vulnerable to rifle fire from nearby slopes. In March 1895, a force of over 300 soldiers came under siege in the fort. They were not as closely invested as the fort at Chitral and were able to mount sorties to keep the enemy at bay, nevertheless they remained under siege for three weeks, until relieved by Col Kelly's forces. The fort was occupied by members of the ruling family when it came under siege again in 1917. It was held successfully for a short period against local opposition. The fort was rebuilt in 1920-23 and it is that structure that the visitor sees today; a square fort with four corner-towers. The buildings within the fort have nearly all gone, but in the area inside the main gate

⁴Freeland did not have access to the private part of the fort. The plan in Robertson adds some details to Freeland's plan but neither plan should be assumed to be totally accurate. This plan is simplified from Freeland's.

⁵Marques Curzon of Kedleston, Leaves from a Viceroy's Notebook, 1926: 139

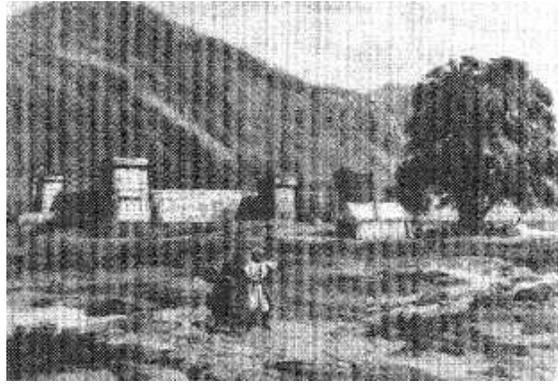


Figure 6: Drawing of Mastuj Fort in 1895

are raised platforms on either side of the covered passageway, on which retainers sat and the hawks were kept. This was typical efforts in Chitral.

Drasan Fort does not lie on the direct route from Mastuj to Chitral but is some miles up the Turikho river valley. It was known to be one of the chief forts of the country and, both to eliminate a potential problem on the flank of their line of advance and to avoid forces on the direct route, the advancing column, after a stiff fight at Nisa Gol, diverted over a range of hills to take it. In the event it was found deserted but locked. Using a tree trunk as a battering-ram, the main gate of the fort was quickly smashed open. A large grain store was found within. The fort was rebuilt at the beginning of the 1930s. Fosco Maraini's climbing party visited it in 1959 and a photograph taken at that time shows parapets on a tower and along a section of wall (Younghusband, 1895). Today only one small section of parapet remains, though even this is unusual in Chitral. Elsewhere walls are sometimes seen topped with a platform of timbers which, although they look like remains of a wall-walk, are usually there to protect the wall from the ravages of rain. Drasan fort has suffered both from rain and earthquake; it is gradually falling down.

In 1895 there were no other forts of note on the road from Mastuj to Chitral. However, beside the polo ground at Reshun the visitor today can still see the group of houses that Lts Edwardes and Fowler turned into a temporary fortification, when they were trapped there for a week in March 1895, but other walls have been erected and one cannot trace the line of their defence.

5 Forts on the route from the south

The main Chitral Relief Force, advancing from the south under Maj-Gen Sir Robert Low, had formed-up at Mardan. Its first action at the beginning of April 1895 was to capture the Malakand pass and force a crossing over the Swat river. Later, strong forts of a military style were built by the British at Malakand and at Chakdara on the Swat.

There was a strong local fort at Ramora, upstream of Chakdara, whose defenders had fled when the river was crossed. It was of typical stone and timber construction, cemented with mud. It had a deep dry ditch around it with, on the inside of the ditch, a low wall, with loopholes, running round the fort. The only entrance passed through three doorways; on the outside of the ditch, through the low wall

and in the main wall of the fort. This elaboration owed something to down country India, rather than the tradition of the mountain forts. It was decided to demolish the fort and in the process extract timbers for use in bridging the river, but early attempts with explosive proved unsuccessful, impressing the engineers with the strength of its construction. The timbers had to be extracted by hand. Sado and Landar, two square forts by the Panjkora, the next river to be crossed, had internal buildings also demolished to provide timbers for bridging.

Mundah Fort, in Bajour, was an important objective of Low's forces. It was the home base of the Pathan chieftain, Umra Khan, whose invasion of southern Chitral had provoked the whole crisis. Low's advance towards Bajour had the desired effect of drawing Umra Khan out of Chitral, though, by the time the British reached Mundah, he had fled to Afghanistan. He was reported to have taken with him eleven mule-loads of treasure from Mundah, a reminder of the role of the fort as a treasury. A drawing, made in 1897, shows the fort to be typically square, with an extra tower at what may be a stronghold at one end. The towers, as in most of the forts south of Chitral, had wide, overhanging tops. That style of tower is to be seen at Mundah today but there are many more of them; the long rectangular walls enclose a village, in the centre of which is a huge concrete citadel built in this century.

Minor forts continued to be passed by Low's forces on their way to Dir, via the Janbatai Pass (the modern road via the Panjkora Valley was opened up later in 1895). Dir had a long outer wall, with towers, surrounding a village of houses, within which was a square walled enclosure, with two strong towers on diagonally opposite corners; the citadel of the Khan. There is a modern stone and timber wall around the upper part of Dir town today but the mass of buildings, within and without, disguise traces of the past fortifications.

The first fort north of the Lowari pass, at Naghar, played no part in the 1895 operation, although the restored fort is very welcoming to the visitor today. The fort at Drosh, the most important town in lower Chitral, was of crucial influence in the early stages of the crisis. It was a strong fort for the area, with six towers, and stood on a cliff above the Chitral river. Shortly after Umra Khan crossed the Lowari pass in January 1895, he laid siege to the fort. Its commander turned out to be a supporter of Sher Afzal, a claimant to the throne of Chitral who was allied to Umra Khan. The fort was surrendered without a fight, the enemy gaining an arsenal of 200 rifles in the process. When the siege at Chitral was over in late April, officers passing Drosh were astonished to find that Umra Khan had almost completed the construction of a second fort at Drosh, less than 200 m away from the old fort. A photograph taken at the time shows the two forts, the nearer one built by Umra Khan having wider tops to its towers, in the style of south of the Lowari. During the summer of 1895, the old fort was developed by the British as a commissariat base for the forces in Chitral. In order to build storage within the fort, Umra Khan's new fort was pulled down, so that its timbers could be reused. Low's Sappers and Miners also built a new covered way to the river for the old fort. By the time that they made their plan of Drosh in late summer, Umra Khan's fort was shown as ruins. Today, the base of the old fort is the site of a school and this is sometimes mistakenly called Umra Khan's fort, for there is no trace of the remains of the fort that he actually built. The fact that Umra Khan could build such a fort in three months says a lot for the timber and stone method of construction; it was quick and could readily reuse materials from other buildings. Timbers last well in the dry atmosphere of Chitral and many forts in the area were rebuilt in the first half of this century. They are just as interesting as older structures, for they represent a long tradition.

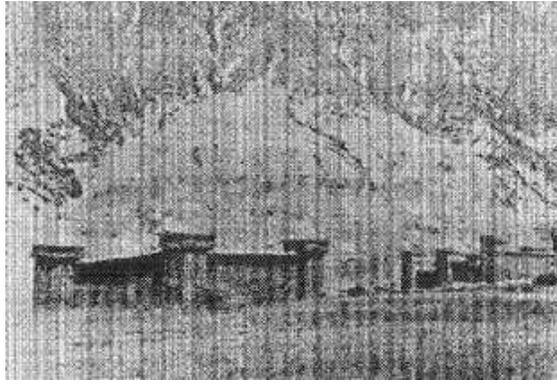


Figure 7: Drosh; May 1895 - Fort built by Umra Khan on left, old Fort on right

6 Epilogue

A new India General Service Medal was issued in 1895. There were two different clasps for the Chitral campaign. One inscribed 'Relief of Chitral' went to all who took part in the relieving columns, with silver medals for the soldiers and bronze for followers, such as muleteers. The other clasp is very much rarer, it is inscribed 'Defence of Chitral' and only went to the besieged. An example can be seen in an upper room in Chitral Fort, among the medals of His Highness Sir Shuja-ul-Mulk, KCIE, who was Mehtar of Chitral from 1895 to 1936. He was only about twelve years old when he was in the fort during the siege but when, shortly after, a visiting British general complimented his ancestors for building the fort so strong, his reply showed maturity that was to stand him in good stead for the next forty years:

"It was not the strength of the walls built by my ancestors which kept the Pathans at bay, but it was the energy and courage of the Sahibs who worked harder than their soldiers, who slept not night or day, and who had fear neither of fire nor of sword." ⁶

This was a timeless reminder that walls alone have never made a successful defence. They are, however, intriguing to explore and in Chitral part of our shared experience.⁷

References

Beynon, Lt, With Kelly to Chitral 1896. 1

Coburn, A W, The construction and vulnerability to earthquakes of some building types in the northern areas of Pakistan, K.J. Miller, The International Karakoram Project 2 1984, pp.228–252. 2

Hopkirk, Peter, The Great Game 1990. 1

Keay, John, The Gilgit Game 1979. 1

⁶The events at Drosh are well covered in B.E.M. Gurdon's, 'Chitral memories', Himalayan Journal, 1933 and 1934.

⁷The demolishing of Umra Khan's fort is reported in Leach (as in n. 2), op. cit., Appendix D (2); the plan showing two forts at PI XIII.

Leach, Col H.P., Report on the Engineer Operations of the Chitral Relief Force 1895. 2, 7

Robertson, Capt WR., Official Account of the Chitral Expedition 1898. 1

Robertson, Sir George S., Chitral: The Story of a Minor Siege 1898. 1

Schomberg, R.CF., Kajirs and Glaciers 1938. 3

Woodburn, Chitral Centennial, Asian Affairs XXVII:2 June 1996. 1

Younghusband, The Relief of Chitral 1895. 1, 4