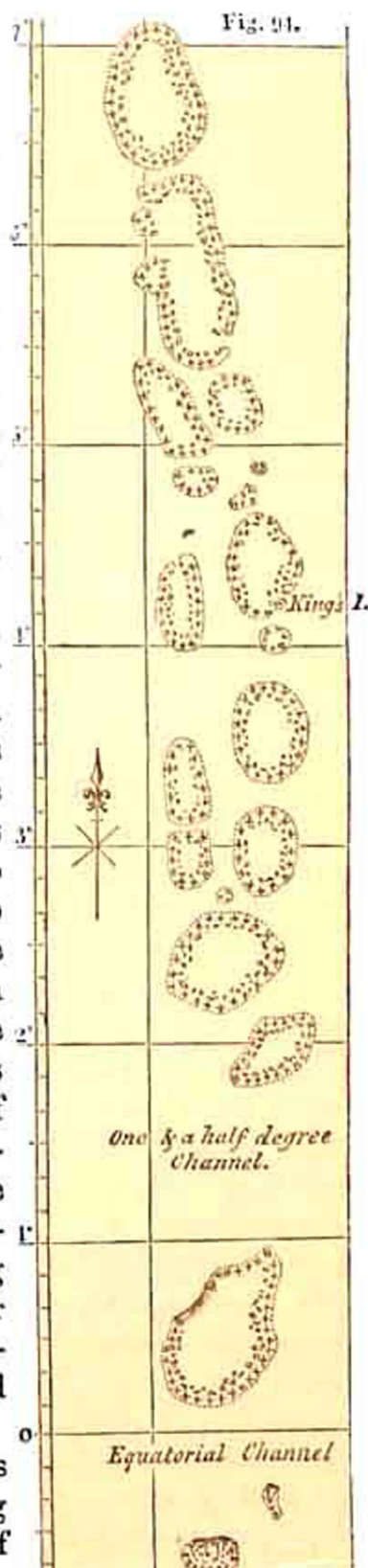


The width of the circular strip of dead coral forming the islands explored by Captain Beechey, exceeded in no instance half a mile from the usual wash of the sea to the edge of the lagoon, and, in general, was only about three or four hundred yards.* The depth of the lagoons is various; in some, entered by Captain Beechey, it was from twenty to thirty-eight fathoms.

The two other peculiarities which are most characteristic of the annular reef or atoll is first, that the strip of dead coral is invariably highest on the windward side, and secondly, that there is very generally an opening at some point in the reef affording a narrow passage, often of considerable depth, from the sea into the lagoon.

Maldiva and Laccadive Isles.—The chain of reefs and islets called the Maldivas (see fig. 94.), situated in the Indian Ocean, to the south-west of Malabar, form a chain 470 geographical miles in length, running due north and south, with an average breadth of about 50 miles. It is composed throughout of a series of circular assemblages of islets, all formed of coral, the larger groups being from forty to ninety miles in their longest diameter. Captain Horsburgh, whose chart of these islands is subjoined, states, that outside of each circle or *atoll*, as it is termed, there are coral reefs sometimes extending to the distance of two or three miles, beyond which there are no soundings at immense depths. But in the centre of each atoll there is a lagoon from fifteen to forty-nine fathoms deep. In the channels between the atolls no soundings can usually be obtained at the depth of 150 or even 250 fathoms, but during Captain Moresby's survey, soundings were struck at 150 and 200 fathoms, the only instances as yet known of the bottom having been reached, either in the Indian or Pacific oceans, in a space intervening between two separate and well characterized atolls.

The singularity in the form of the atolls of this archipelago consists in their being made up not of one continuous circular reef but of a ring of small coral islets some-



* Captain Beechey, part i. p. 188.