

The Newsletter of the Patrons,
Society of Friends and Volunteers
of Rifles, Berkshire and Wiltshire
Museum



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Redcoats Review

Celebrating the 177th Anniversary of the Battle of Ferozeshah

Editorial Remarks:

To all the supporters of the Rifles Berkshire and Wiltshire Museum, whether you be a Patron, a member of the Society of Friends, a volunteer; or indeed a combination of any of those categories a warm welcome 'The Redcoats Review'. Some of you may be wondering why a Museum bearing our name has such a name. Originally, at the suggestion of that eminent military historian, Dr Richard Holmes, our Museum was called 'Redcoats in the Wardrobe'; to advertise the marvellous building the museum is housed in and pay due recognition to our past military heritage. The Newsletter is published three times a year to coincide with our founding Regiments three main historical battles, 'Tofrek' in March; 'Maiwand' in July and 'Ferozeshah' in December. Initially the news and items were restricted to the activities of the Redcoats but as the years progressed it became clear we had to add other items of interest. That led us to include items of Regimental historical interest that were not published elsewhere. We have attempted to use the newsletter as a vehicle to inform the outside world of what is going on at the museum and requested our members (initially those who were members of the Society of Friends) to pass the Newsletter on to those potentially interested individuals, with limited success. The last couple of Newsletters have included news of who and what the Volunteers are doing in the museum. A decision was made to add the back numbers of the Newsletter to the Wardrobe Museum's website under the Society of Friends page. All back copies are there and available to view. So this edition is the first to be aimed at all who support our Museum, Patrons, Friends and Volunteers. We welcome submissions from anyone within our supporters and welcome comments on it layout (take a look at back copies and compare the differing styles, let us know which one you prefer.



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FUTURE EVENTS

Normandy Battlefield Tour 17
to 21 April 2023

REGIMENTAL CHARACTERS FROM THE PAST

(A link with Lawrence of Arabia)

Lieutenant Colonel John Retallack Bassett DSO Royal Berkshire Regiment And 2nd Imperial Camel Corps

John Retallack Bassett was born on 27 Oct 1878 in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire and served with the 2nd Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment in the Boer War at one point commanding the regiment's mounted infantry detachment.



Lieutenant J R Bassett in South Africa during the Boer

After the war he served in India and in 1906 was seconded to Egyptian Army then deployed to the Sudan as Inspector at Halfa and whilst serving with a Sudanese Battalion in the South of Bahr-El-Ghazal (Contracted Blackwater fever). Later appointed Governor of a Province of Sudan on 25 Oct 1916, where he became a trusted member of General Reginald Wingate's inner circle. Following this, he took up an important role as intelligence liaison officer with the French in the eastern Mediterranean, working closely with the British Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau and then placed in command of the 2nd Battalion, Imperial Camel Corps in Sinai on 23 Jan 1917. After leading the Camel Corps into battle during the Raid on Bir El Hasana, Bassett was sent to join the British Military Mission in the Hejaz where he met King Hussein and his son Feisal to discuss military strategy. Bassett gained information on Ottoman railway lines from a network of local spies, information which even included the number of spare rails stockpiled at each station.

Bassett was thrust into the high politics of the revolt almost immediately, deputising for Colonel Cyril Wilson, who was suffering from a life-threatening dysentery condition.

Wilson was transferred to Cairo (where he would later have to have a leg amputated). The British plans for the region had been leaked in the Sykes-Picot agreement, possibly direct from Lawrence to Prince Feisal. His father, King Hussein, was so shaken by what looked like British skulduggery that he not only threatened to pull the plug on the entire revolt but also talked despairingly of suicide. Bassett had to cope with this and the diplomatic fallout of the Balfour Declaration being made public. The British sent Bassett and Commander Hogarth, former Director of the Arab Bureau, to mollify King Hussein aboard HMS Hardinge (Bassett is pictured next to Hogarth, to the king's left.) General Wingate later expressed how much he valued Bassett's key role in helping keep the revolt on an even keel: "From all Hogarth tells me you have "made good" with the King and are carrying on the Wilson tradition most successfully. Bassett stepped into the breach and brokered a number of vital meetings, sidestepping diplomatic snares before Hogarth's arrival and helping steer Hussein back from the brink.

On 8 February 1918, he delivered what was to become known as 'The Bassett Letter' from London Foreign Office to King Hussein. The letter, written in Arabic, dismissed the publication of the Sykes-Picot Agreement as an attempt by the Ottoman Empire to derail the Arab Revolt by causing mistrust between the Arabs and the British. It was this lie that eventually led Lawrence himself to alienation, disillusionment and depression. Bassett later shaped General Allenby's approach after King Hussein had resigned in writing on 28 July 1918. Although Bassett thought this a bluff, he urged Allenby to press Whitehall to openly back the King against Ibn Saud incursion into Kurma. The Cabinet agreed, and the policy averted crisis and brought back Hussein once more.

Having cracked the cipher of the Ottoman intelligence secret service, Bassett analysed accounts that provided insight into a complex network of agents, deserters, tribal sheiks, factions and bribes that mirrored British activity. The reality of a hidden intelligence war was far removed from the legend of the Bedouin tribes rising as one behind 'Lawrence of Arabia'. Following the Ottoman surrender, Bassett was sent to interrogate Fakhri Pasham, the obstinate commandant of the Turkish garrison at Medina who had continued to resist after the official armistice. He explained to Bassett that it had been beneath his dignity to surrender to a mere Captain (Herbert Garland who was attached to Emir Abdullah's forces). Bassett's intelligence background persuaded him that Fakhri was hiding something and seized his diary and accounts, concluding that Fakhri had been intending a belated alliance with Ibn Saud against Hussein.

After the war in 1929, Bassett married Evelyn Mary Gillman Burgess and thus became stepfather to Guy Burgess, the future Soviet spy and defector. Bassett was said to be 'incandescent with rage' about the defection and the secret services taped conversations and interviews with him and Guy's mother. Andrew Lownie's 'Stalin 's Englishmen' provides an insight: 'The man Eve Burgess marries is a rather interesting man called Jack Bassett, a retired Army Officer who'd served with Lawrence of Arabia in the Arab Bureau. He was an intelligence officer— indeed he had one of the first copies of 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom'— but he and Burgess did not get on very well. You can imagine Burgess feels this man has come between him and his mum, and he calls him 'The Colonel'. He does everything he can to irritate The Colonel— there's nothing you can do that irritates The Colonel more than passing the port the wrong way.'" To fellow scholars at Trinity College, College, Cambridge Guy always referred to his stepfather as a 'professional

gambler'. Although Bassett was a keen race-goer and lived near Ascot and Newbury racecourses, it was likely that he funded Guy through the banking industry, into Eton and then one of the richest of Cambridge colleges, arguably sparking another of history's great intelligence affairs, this time to Britain's detriment.



Colonel Bassett on board HMS Hardinge, sat 3rd right with Hussein Ruhmi on his left. Sat 5th left is Sherif Hussein

PRESENTATION TO THE STEVENTON HISTORY SOCIETY.

ARTICLE BY MARTIN MCINTYRE

About a year ago Steve Lucas from the Local History society approached the then Wardrobe museum Manager Tony Field asking if someone could come and give a presentation on the Royal Berkshire Regiment in the Great War, and its links with the men of Steven-ton who fell. After a short while Tony came up with a plan (according to him) as the loca-tion where I live (Hungerford) was within spitting distance from Steven-ton and therefore made me a suitable candidate for this task . . I was asked if I was willing to do this (With underlying threats apparent) I agreed to do it, regretting it two minutes later !!. Anyway the year went by and information gathered with Steve visiting the museum passing on his information about the local lads that fell from his considerable research into the local war memorial.



Seems that Mac is in a location that may provide him with Divine intervention which may keep the IT gremlins away during his presentation

Beth at the museum assisted in supplying some exhibition boards previously used in the museum for use in the Steventon exhibition.

The exhibition ran in the local Church, St Michaels, Steventon from the 9th to the 13th November with the presentation held in the church on the evening of the 8th November. I approached the task with some trepidation due to my technical incompetence with all things attached to plugs such as overhead projectors. To my delight one of the local committee members was a tech 'Wizard' who immediately became my best friend. My feeling was that about 20 members would appear, after which I would escape. The net number that turned up was 100 plus !!! I over-ran by 15 minutes with the chairman making knife-like movements across his throat, but all went well with the church roof not coming in on my head. Tea with the vicar followed, some things are on the up as they say. The local arrangement was that entry was free to all attending, but a donation to the Rifles Museum at Salisbury would be welcomed. A significant donation was made to the museum, and the feedback has been positive. The society plans to have a group visit to the museum next year.

(NOTE - Steventon is at present in South Oxfordshire and was up until the early 1970's part of the Royal County of Berkshire. The Regiment, including the DERR, recruited from this area. The local war memorial contains the names of thirteen men who died when wearing the China Dragon, and many of those I spoke to still consider that they are 'Berks'.]

THE WESSEX REGIMENT (RIFLE VOLUNTEERS)

OR

THE KEY WORDS ARE “FLEXIBILITY” AND “VERSATILITY”

Introduction

Most of the artefacts and Archives housed in the museum relate to the regular infantry regiments recruited from the counties of Berkshire and Wiltshire, whatever their former title. However part of our military history owes a great deal to our counties volunteer regiments and whilst we have published several books on the Territorial Battalions that provided such sterling service in the Victorian era and two world wars, we felt we ought to pay tribute to those who served in The Wessex Rifle Volunteers.

Background of The Militia, Volunteers and Territorials

From the earliest of time abled bodied men have been expected to part in the defence of their home. In pre Iron age that would be the defence of their hill fort. However the expansion of the Roman Empire with its invasion of Britain in 55 B. C. meant the the Britons no longer felt the need defend their home diminished. Thus when the Roman Legions left to defend Rome itself, the population had got out of the habit of forming their own fighting forces and relied on the use of mercenaries, often recruited from their potential enemies.

Until the arrival of William the Conqueror the need to bear arms to defend one's homes and to serve the interest of the King remained very ad hoc. William made sure that each new landowner had his lands scattered around the country. The formal groupings for military and security purposes were based on families. Ten families were grouped into “tythings,” ten tythings formed a “Hundred” and these Hundreds formed the building blocks of the County, with a Duke or Earl having overall responsibility. Thus when the King called for men to serve in one of his campaigns, he did so by placing the requirement on one or more of his Hundreds, who in turn passed it down to parish level. The military force that was called out in this way was the “Fyrd,” these arrangements were formalised in statutes in 1285 and remained in force until 1553.

In Elizabeth I reign there were several general musters in anticipation of invasion from Spain. In 1614 another general muster was called when it became obvious that the general state of competence left a lot to be desired. The several county contingents were sent home and told to model their arrangements on the 'trained bands' recently introduced to London.



London Trained Bands fighting off the Royalist Cavalry at the Battle of Newbury

The English Civil War saw the Royalist and Parliamentarians raise their own forces to fight each other. When the civil war ended the two sides were merged and the militias placed under 'Commissioners'. On being restored to the throne, King Charles II set about forming a professional army with the militias as his reserves. They were put back under the Lords Lieutenants of the Counties and ordered to hold a County muster once a year with each company assembling for training four times a year

So from 1660, with the restoration of the monarchy, the Standing Army was controlled by Horse Guards, until it became the War Office then morphing into the Ministry of Defence. Whereas the Militia remained under the authority of the Lord Lieutenant of the County until 1908, when the Militia became the Territorial Force and came under the control of the War Office.



Pre the First World War and during it regiments consisted of two regular battalions, a Specialist Reserve Battalion (usually the 3rd Battalion) and a Territorial Battalion (the 4th). In the First World War additional battalions raised were known as Service Battalions, aka, colloquially, Kitchener Battalions or Pals Battalions. After the First World War we went back to 1st and 2nd Regular Battalions, and the 4th and possibly 5th Territorial Battalions.

The Second World War see a further increase in the number of Territorials Battalions for each county regiment and once peace ensues most county regiments are reduced to one regular and one Territorial battalion .

Formation of The Wessex Regiment (Rifles Volunteers)

The Defence White paper of 1966 saw, in what was known as The Wessex Brigade, county infantry Territorial Army regiments form a single battalion in what was to be part of the Territorial Army and Volunteer Reserves (TAVR) This 1st Battalion The Wessex Volunteers was initially formed as follows:

- Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company (Devon), at Exeter (from 4th Battalion, Devonshire Regiment)
- A Company (Gloucester), at Gloucester (from 5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment)
- B Company (Hampshire), at Winchester and Basingstoke (from 4th/5th Battalion, Royal Hampshire Regiment)
- C Company (Dorset), at Dorchester and Poole (from 4th Battalion, Dorset Regiment)
- D Company (Berkshire), at Reading (from 4th/6th Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment)

In 1971, in yet another Defence Review The Wessex Volunteers was the foundation for the formation of two TAVR Battalions' 1st and 2nd Battalions The Wessex Volunteers. In 1972 the battalions were renamed as the 1st and 2nd Battalions, Wessex Regiment (Rifle Volunteers). Multiple detached platoons were formed for the rifle companies, and the company subtitles were omitted.



1 Wessex Regiment (Rifle Volunteers) receiving their Colours at the Annual Camp at Knock Camp on 16 June 1973

Then in 1975, the regiment was re-organised once more, including the two battalions exchanging their respective D Companies. After these changes, the structure was as follows:

1st Battalion The Wessex (Rifle) Volunteers

- Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company, at Le Marchant Barracks, Devizes.
- A Company, at Gloucester Bristol and Forest of Dean
- B Company, at Winchester
- C Company, at Dorchester and Weymouth
- D (Queen's Own Dorset Yeomanry) Company, at Poole and Bournemouth (from D Company, 2nd Battalion and a platoon of C Company, 1st Battalion)
- E Company, at Exeter, Plymouth and Barnstaple

The Devonshire and Dorset Regiment was in the process of raising their own territorial infantry battalion, and as a result, the Wessex Regiment lost the previously Devon and Dorset affiliated companies to form the new battalion; namely: E Company to the new battalion as both HQ and A Companies, and C Company retaining its lettering; the latter was replaced by a rifle company from the 2nd Battalion. Then, starting in 1992, in line with the British Army's reductions at the end of the Cold War, the battalion was reduced to a three rifle company establishment, losing D Company to the Devon and Dorsets, and both B and C companies to the 2nd Battalion. After this the structure consisted of:

- Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company, at Le Marchant Barracks, Devizes. Mortar Platoon at Andover; Anti-Tank Platoon at Stroud; Reconnaissance Platoon at Cheltenham; and Pioneer Platoon at Cinderford
- A Company Headquarters and 1 Platoon, at Gloucester
- A Company 2 Platoon & 3 Platoon, at Bristol (from the Bristol platoons of A Company, and 245 Ambulance Squadron, 155 Transport Regiment)
- A Company Recce Platoon, at Forest of Dean
- C Company, at Cheltenham and Tewkesbury

The 2nd Battalion, Wessex Volunteers was formed on 1 April 1971 from cadres of units that had been reduced in the formation of the TAVR, before being re-designated as the 2nd Battalion, Wessex Regiment (Volunteers) a year later in 1972. Its initial structure was as follows:

- Battalion Headquarters and HQ Company, at Brock Barracks, Reading.
- A (Duke of Connaught's) Company, at Portsmouth (from the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Territorials)
- B (Royal Buckinghamshire Yeomanry) Company, at Bletchley (from the Buckinghamshire Regiment, Royal Artillery)
- C (Royal Berkshire) Company, at Maidenhead, Slough, and Newbury (from the Royal Berkshire Territorials)
- D (Queen's Own Dorset Yeomanry) Company, at Poole, Bournemouth, and Weymouth (from the Dorset Territorials)
- At the height of the Cold War, the British Army decided to raise a home defence force, namely the Home Service Force. This saw the majority of territorial infantry battalions across the United Kingdom raise a Home Service Force (HSF) company, with platoons distributed across the battalion company locations. In light of this, the battalion raised E (HSF) Company in Reading, Maidenhead, Winchester, and Portsmouth. The battalion then underwent a re-organisation in 1986, and again in 1992, when the Home Service Force Company disbanded along with the rest of the force. In line with the territorial reductions at the end of the Cold War, the battalion was reduced to a three rifle company establishment.



Presentation Of Colours to 2 Wessex Regiment (Rifle Volunteers) in 1979 at Eastney Barracks Southsea, Hampshire

Roles of the Wessex Regiment (Rifle) Volunteers

The 1st Battalion was an unique TA unit in that it was the only TA Infantry Battalion role within 1 (UK) Brigade which was an integral part of a NATO roled United Kingdom mobile force whose operational deployment was to Northern European Command (Jutland/Schleswig-Holstein). Its training cycle over a two year period would involve one annual camp in UK and the alternate year in Europe. Weekend training at battalion level would be geared to their operational role practising all the phases of war that their regular army counterparts would be familiar with.



Ready for off - Exercise Crusader 80

Battalion on Exercise Spear Point 1980 in West Germany

The 2nd Battalion were raised as part of the government's plan to increase the size of the TAVR with the specific object of the security of the home base. Their annual camps tended to be UK orientated.



2 Wessex on Annual Camp on Warcop Training Area

At the height of the Cold War the Thatcher government created Home Service Force Companies and 2nd Wessex were supplemented with E Company (HSF) in 1985 but disbanded in 1992 as a result of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union.



A Section of E Company HSF 2 Wessex on a 50 mile two day route march during a competition in Norfolk in the 1980's. Notice a familiar face back in the DPM jacket looking as young as the day he left the Regulars?

In 1995, the 1st and 2nd Battalions amalgamated, to form 2nd (Volunteer) Battalion, Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment.

Although neither battalion served on operational tours, individuals from both battalions on Operation Banner tours (Northern Ireland). On becoming RGBW at least one company served for six months as the Infantry Company on the Falkland Islands, and individuals have served on Operation Grapple (Bosnia); as part of KFOR (Kosovo) and Operation Herrick (Afghanistan).

Whilst The Wessex (Rifle) Volunteers hold no individual Battalion Honours they certainly fulfilled their Regimental Motto carried on their Regimental Colour of "Their Land To Defend."

More recent changes.

Further changes were made by the MOD in 1999 by the formation of the Royal Rifles Volunteers and The Rifles Volunteers.

The Rifle Volunteers were based on the TAVR units in Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Gloucestershire. In 2007, in light of the formation of the The Rifles Regiment the Rifle Volunteers were renamed 6th Rifles.

The Royal Rifle Volunteers were based on TAVR units in Oxfordshire, Berkshire (Including the Swindon detachment), Hampshire, Buckinghamshire and London. In 2007 the Royal Rifles Volunteers were renamed 7th Rifles.

Editor's Note: I was going to recommend that anyone wishing to read a full and comprehensive that they read Martine Lee-Bowen's book "The Wessex Regiment". Sadly it is completely out of stock

NEWS FORM THE MUSEUM

Since our last edition there has been a change of personnel at the helm. In September Chris Gale took over from Tony Field.

We have been fortunate to attract Chris to the post, as the synopsis of his career clearly show what a good catch our Trustees have made. Chris gained a Master Degree in Engineering, Automotive Engineering at Bath University going onto gain a Master Degree in Museum and Galleries, Culture, Collections and Communications. Not to sit on his laurels he is completing a Doctorate in Museum Display Techniques. His previous posts include being curator of Artefacts at the Royal Marine Museum, Curator of Medals, Textiles and Badges at the National Royal Navy Museum, going on to be the Collections team Manager and then Senior Curator. More recently from 2019 until assuming his post with us he was the Curator and Museum manger of the Rifles Museum in Winchester.

Bethany Joyce our Museum Curator continues to produce new and invigorating ideas to attract, challenge and interest visitors of all persuasion. Under her encouragement and the hard work of Tom Sharp, a serving Sapper in the Royal Engineers, has devised several weekends when re-enactors will put on entertainment aimed at drawing in more visitors.

Now the Museum is closed to the Public Bethany has been busy with the volunteers cleaning the Display cabinets. We did try to take a photograph of her in action but she has been so busy all we managed to get we images of the cleaning materials and the cabinets she and the volunteers were cleaning.



Cleaning materials used by Bethany and the Volunteers during their annual cleaning of the artefacts and the Display Cases in Room No: 1



On a slightly different tack for some years the NADFAS Ladies under the leadership of Jill Makepeace Warne consolidated the medals that are not on display. In the past these medals were housed in drawers in the lower element of one of the book cases in the Library. Many years ago, to prevent the medals sliding about they were secured in location with double sided sellotape. Having undergone a conservation training session the NADFAS Ladies did an excellent job of removing the Sellotape residue, cleaning the medals and installing thin sheets of plastazote before securing the medals in situ with short pins.

Unfortunately the constant opening and closing of the drawers proved that the short pins did not keep the medals in positions as the image below illustrates.



A new method is being used and this is proving to be more successful. Each tray has a thin lay of plastazote to line the bottom of the tray. A thicker layer of plastazote is the used to cut out a recess in which the medals will lie. This is topped off with another thin lay of plastazote to cover the medals.



The example of the single medal recess shows the cut out for Honours and World War One 1914 Stars. The example of a group of medals is a rectangle cut to size and the image below shows the whole tray in its finished layout, less the covering plastazote



Anita Taylor is the volunteer who has been the dab hand cutting out the plastazote for the medals and has also kept an eagle eye on Michael Cornwell who has done the marking and correcting many of his potential errors. So far they have completed one drawer of two trays. Only another 32 drawers to go.

The front desk where volunteers interact with the museum visitors is going well. Sadly we have lost some of our valued stalwart 'front-deskers' due to the intervention of '*Father Time*'. Beth is always on the lookout for volunteers to man the desk which role can be very rewarding when dealing with the visitors. If you are local and fancy this role just get hold of Beth (Biscuits provided!!). Sadly Peter Shorten, has died depriving us of a weapons expert until the recent recruitment of Ian Perry.

There are still a number of volunteers behind the scenes who year on year carry out their functions under the stewardship of Beth (We nearly said under the lash!!).

Dan Carson-Jones who is a postgraduate student in Military History who comes to the museum weekly and assists and shadows Beth with exhibitions and other tasks.

Becky who came to the museum after Beth gave a presentation to the Local Job centre with Becky coming on board via the 'Kick Start' programme. Becky deals with the whole arena of 'Social Media' so crucial in this modern age. She sources regimental and other information for 'Facebook' 'Instagram' and 'Tic Tok' all of which have followings in particular with the younger age groups. Even the older members in this day and age are familiar with 'Facebook' which since Becky's involvement has accumulated into nearly 700 followers. (In effect digital visitors to the museum). One of Becky's initiatives was to invite members of the public to add stories of their relations who previously served in the Regiment onto Facebook. This has led to a number of contacts with information and images being added to the Regimental archive. '*Well done Becky, keep up the good work*'.

Next year there are five living history events planned for the museum, these when advertised bring in extra visitors. In addition our good friends from the Wiltshire Home Guard Living History Group set up in the museum about once a month.

Next year's temporary exhibition is going to be on the role and experiences of women connected to the Regiment over the centuries. Possibly titled '*Never mind the wife*' which comes from a comment by one officer to another as his wife was struggling in the Ganges River, India in Victorian times.

This year's exhibition centred around HRH Prince Phillips connection to the Regiment. We are delighted to announce that Buckingham Palace have agreed for the museum to retain his uniform on a permanent loan basis.

The Ghost hunts are still continuing in the wardrobe and becoming very popular with those groups. Always supervised by Alistair.



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