

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 58

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From the Editor

The stories in this Echo are drawn from the history of the local militia. Once upon a time, every county had its regiments and battalions of volunteer soldiers, drawn from the available male population. Until 1871, these army corps were controlled by the county's Lord Lieutenant. They met regularly, and were trained and drilled by their own officers.

Until the early nineteenth century, every village held a ballot to determine which local men would be sent to join the county's army. You can't imagine that happening today. Though it was unlikely that you would have to fight, it was still a responsibility that could not be taken lightly. The element of compulsion also meant that it could not be ignored.

This period of conscription did not last. Once Napoleon was defeated, the militia gradually transformed itself into a proper volunteer force, made up of those who found a positive reason to join. Indeed, the income from service often supplemented the seasonal work of the labourers who made up its bulk. By supporting the working man, the militia put its roots deep into the community.

While there were always risks of injury when you were training with weaponry, those who served in the Berkshire militia were mostly called upon to keep peace on the home front. The risk of seeing active service was, in hindsight, comparatively small. Nor did the militia tend to travel far, with only isolated examples of ventures overseas.

Some of the history of the Berkshire militia lives on in the archive of the Lieutenancy, recently catalogued here at the BRO. Yeomanry House, in whose grounds we sit, provides another reminder. The militia may be gone, but they are not forgotten, and we are pleased to be able to acknowledge them today.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Introductory visits

Just getting started in family or local history? Come along to one of our free introductory visits to see what's available here to help your research.

The next dates are: 30 January; 16 April; 9 July; all at 2 p.m. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

A New Probate Index for Berkshire

The revised Archdeaconry index, spanning the whole collection from 1480-1857, should be available on CD early in the new year. It will cost £25.

Ask at the desk, or check the BRO or Berkshire Family History Society websites for details.



QUESTIONS to be answered by a Candidate for First Appointment to a Commission in the
Auxiliary Forces.



and Surnames? *Robert Gray Cornish Mowbray*
 day? *21 (21st May 1891)*
5.6½
 ? *Middlesex*
 e you educated? *Eton and Balliol*
 Where do you live? *Warenes Wood, Mortimer, near*

Berkshire Militia Facts

The Militia was called out to Witney in 1761, after the parish's commons were enclosed by the local landowners. The town's poor rioted, and various regiments were called on to suppress them.

Mutiny in the Forbury

In 1809, the Reading Corps of Volunteer Infantry was disbanded in controversy. The full story behind this has now been revealed in the correspondence of the Earl of Radnor, Lord Lieutenant and colonel of the Berkshire militia (D/ERA/O25).

In June 1809 Radnor received a letter from his lieutenant-colonel, reporting that he and the militia had been 'most scandalously insulted' on 5 June by the Reading Volunteers, 'many of whom endeavoured to stir up my regiment to mutiny' when they were assembled to celebrate the king's birthday.

On the day in question, there was due to be an official parade. Some of the Volunteers who were in London Street addressed the militia men as they marched past, saying, "Boys, stick out for your guineas", and shouting, "stand out for your rights". They were referring to a controversial decision not to pay the men a bounty of two guineas which was supposed to be paid on recruitment to those volunteering for militia service. The militia men felt that they were being mocked. There was a scuffle, bayonets were brandished and then the Woodley Cavalry arrived. The militia sergeant was allegedly assaulted by the mob but rescued by his men. After a while Major W B Simonds, one of the Volunteers' officers, arrived and attempted ineffectually to pacify his men.

The parade itself proceeded without incident. After leaving the Forbury at about 4 p.m., the militia men were sent to local pubs, while the officers went to dine with a senior officer at

the Crown. But the day was not yet done: they were disturbed in the middle of the meal by a message from the Royal Berks Regiment that some of the Volunteers were behaving in a disorderly way at the Regiment's own parade. Major Simonds was dispatched again to see what was going on.

He found the Volunteers again urging the militia to stand up for their rights. Eventually matters descended into a full scale riot. Major Simonds appealed to his men to disperse, but they replied that he "he had nothing to do with them, and they could go where they pleased".

Lord Liverpool, the Home Secretary, was asked to take a view. He stated that 'It is impossible that conduct so disgraceful and scandalous can be passed over unpunished', and insisted that the Volunteers be disbanded unless they could prove their innocence of wrongdoing.

Radnor defended the actions of the Volunteers, who he regarded as his men. He protested the 'unwarrantable and unprecedented' harshness of the decision. A dim view of the Home Office was taken elsewhere too, with local landowner Richard Benyon adding 'It is not for me to censure the proceedings of His Majesty's Secretary of State in this business, though they appear to me very extraordinary'. Benyon feared that the disbandment would arouse discontent in Reading, and also that many good men might be lost from military service by the blanket ban on their corps.

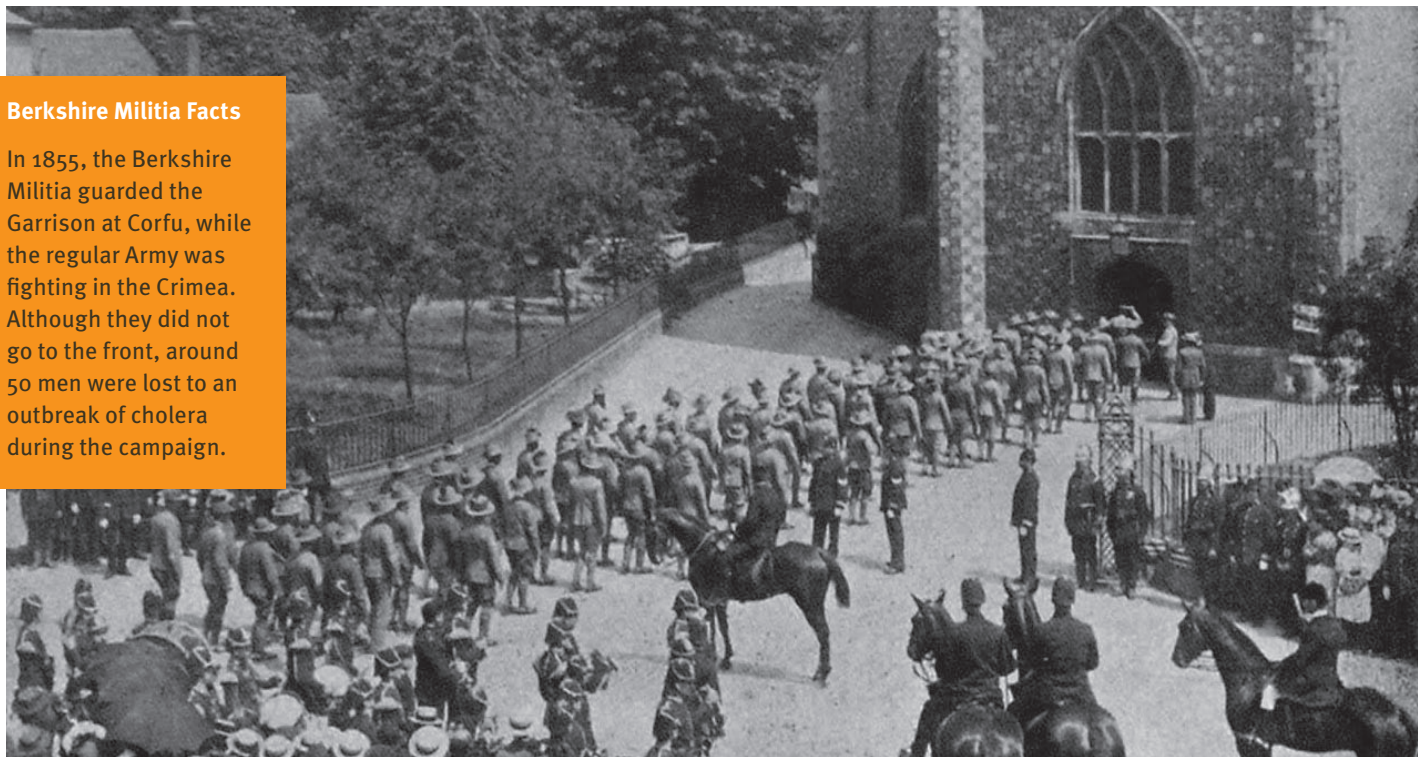
But all pleas on behalf of the Reading Volunteers were ignored, and they were disbanded in disgrace.

Right: Militia officer's application form, 1872 (L/B1/1/1)
 Left: Rules of the First Berkshire Rifle Volunteers (L/B10/3/3)



Berkshire Militia Facts

In 1855, the Berkshire Militia guarded the Garrison at Corfu, while the regular Army was fighting in the Crimea. Although they did not go to the front, around 50 men were lost to an outbreak of cholera during the campaign.



Drama of a dishonest officer

Not all members of the militia were pillars of the community. Edward Tew Thomson was an officer in the Royal Berkshire Militia for eleven years, whose military career ended in public ignominy. His story is preserved for posterity in the records of the Berkshire Lieutenantcy (L/B). A self-styled 'dramatic author', he received a commission as a Lieutenant in 1852, and in 1858 became a Captain.

After ten years' service, Thomson suddenly resigned on 31 July 1862. He said that he had served too long, particularly overseas. However, the real reason behind his request became apparent soon after: Captain Thomson owed the regiment a considerable amount of money, and was being investigated for it.

His debts were outlined in a letter to the militia colonel. In June 1862, Thomson had written a cheque to a tailor in Reading for the sum of seven pounds. It bounced. Nor was this the first time that Thomson had pulled this sort of stunt. He already owed the Regiment around twenty pounds, mostly 'expenses' he had withdrawn to pay his men, and he owed other tradesmen in Reading a further fifteen pounds.

Thomson had managed to duck and dive repayment of these various debts for the previous two years by telling more and more elaborate lies. At one stage, he had even told his

commanding officer that he would not be able to answer letters as he was in Paris. He was found in Reading shortly afterwards.

It was inevitable that Thomson would be relieved of his commission. The militia grandees concluded the 'absolute necessity of his immediate dismissal that the conduct of the Regiment may not suffer any further by his iniquitous practices.'

Thomson was removed from his post on 14 February 1863. He spent the next few years moving from address to address, running up a string of debts everywhere. He was declared bankrupt more than once and spent time in jail. Three years after he was dismissed from the militia, Thomson was still using his title of 'Captain' and spelling his name in different ways in order to mislead his hapless creditors.

Berkshire Militia Facts

The Militia was revived across the country by the Militia Act 1757, when the country was in the middle of the Seven Years War with the French and needed to augment the professional army.

Berkshire Militia Facts

George III inspected the Berkshire Militia on Friday 26 July 1799 at Bulmershe, as part of the nation's defences against Napoleon. Over 20,000 spectators watched the event.



New to the Archives

Parish records

A particularly exciting discovery has been a volume of churchwardens' accounts for East Ilsley, 1743-1752, which immediately precedes those already here (D/P74). Some stray poor rate assessments for East Hagbourne (D/EX2198) and 18th and early 19th century churchwardens' and poor law records for Wallingford St Peter (D/EX2055) have also been deposited. Also of exceptional interest is the diary and memoranda book for the busy parish of Clewer St Stephen, 1868-1900 (D/P39B).

We have received the first deposits of records from three modern parishes: Abingdon St Michael (D/P1D), Reading St Matthew (D/P176), and Spital (D/P39C), including registers of marriages, 1957-1986, and banns, 1957-2002. We have completely revised the catalogue for Earley St Nicolas to incorporate a great deal of new material (D/P193), and we have received marriage registers from Binfield, 1987-2009 (D/P18).

Local government and politics

The Wallingford collection mentioned above (D/EX2055) also includes printed miscellanea relating to elections, 1720-1880, which show problems arising when the ballot was not secret. The Newbury borough charters and ordinances, 1596-1685, have also now been placed in our safe custody (N/IC). The records of Reading Women's Co-operative Guild, 1905-2000s (D/EX2203), show the work of a working class women's semi-political campaigning organisation; a regular topic in the early years was the problem of adulterated food in the shops. We have also catalogued records of the Reading Liberal Club, 1909-1953 (D/EX2114); and the minutes and yearbooks of Slough Borough Council, 1974-2008 (DC/S).

We have been given a rare glimpse into the activities of a mayor in the late 18th and early 19th centuries thanks to the detailed memoranda of Joseph Toomer, mayor of Newbury three times between 1791 and 1815 (D/EX2229). His disapproval of the slave trade and animal cruelty (he stopped badger baiting in the town) are more in keeping with modern beliefs than his concern about the 'seditious principles' expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man. The memorandum book of Reading councillor George Steward (D/EX2159) is less interesting than Toomer's,

but does include mention of opposition to a controversial decision to make local ratepayers pay for the costs of improvements to private streets in 1856.

Reading borough finances

Our long running programme to make the earlier records of Reading Borough accessible has finally been finished. Miscellaneous accounts from the period 1607 to 1815 (R/FA14) include a payment for transporting a Catholic priest who had been arrested in 1608, fines paid by individuals for 'being assembled together in great terror of the people', and market toll accounts naming the stallholders, 1800-1816. There are also receipts for the borough's many expenses (R/FZ2), including payments for persons with plague in the 17th century, and accounts for some years listing prisoners in the house of correction.

A particularly exciting discovery is a tax roll for Reading in 1297 (R/FT1). Only a handful of residents were rich enough to have to pay this tax (assessed at a ninth of the value of moveable goods); anyone whose goods were worth less than 9 shillings was exempt. Also valuable resources are returns of various taxes from the late 16th and early 17th century (R/FT2-5), and records of tolls and 'pontage', a charge levied on those bringing goods across Caversham Bridge, from the 17th and 18th centuries (R/FZ1).



The Reading Co-operative Women's Guild (D/EX2203/7/1)

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9pm, Fri 9-4.30.
Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please call us for further details.

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Call on **0118 937 5132** for more information.

