

Section 061

Regimental History - Pre 1881

Introduction

This work is mostly about the Royal Berkshire Regiment between 1914 and 1919 when it was engaged in the First World War. It seems appropriate to provide a very brief outline of the history of the Regiment and both its preceding and succeeding units of the British Army.

The Berkshire Regiment was formed in 1881 by the amalgamation of the 49th and 66th Regiments of Foot with the Berkshire Militia and now forms part of The Rifles having previously been merged in 1959 with the Wiltshire Regiment as the Duke of Edinburgh's Royal Regiment. Merged again in 1992 with the Gloucestershire Regiment to form the Royal Gloucestershire, Berkshire and Wiltshire Regiment and again in 2007 with the Devon and Dorset Regiment to form the 1st Battalion of The Rifles with the Territorials also forming part of the 6th and 7th Battalions of The Rifles

In this section we cover the period from earliest days to the Cardwell reforms of 1881. We are not trying to write a detailed regimental history but rather to record a few salient facts which have come to hand during our research into the Great War and which may not have been recorded in one or other of the proper regimental histories

The Berkshire Militia

The Berkshire Militia had its origins in the Saxon 'fyrd' which was a citizens' army to defend its local territory. Over the centuries it was called out on numerous occasions, notably when the Spanish Armada threatened in 1588. It was re-embodied in 1758, then dispersed, called out again for the American Revolution and again to meet the threat of Napoleon. It was reformed again for the Crimean War and again for the Indian Mutiny. In 1881 it became the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion of the new Berkshire Regiment.

For more details see section P080

The 49th Regiment

The 49th Regiment was originally formed in 1743 for garrison duties in Jamaica but very soon saw service in a much wider sphere. During its early days it served in the American War of Independence fought as Marines under Nelson and distinguished itself in Canada. In 1812, General Sir Isaac Brock, Commander-in-Chief in Upper Canada and himself an ex-member of the Regiment, was

killed at its head whilst leading a charge at the battle of Queenstown.

In 1872, it acquired a County connection with Hertfordshire and in 1817, at the particular request of Princess Charlotte of Wales, it also adopted her title.

It fought in the so-called Opium Wars in China in 1839-42 and also in the Crimea where it won three Victoria Crosses. It is from this campaign that its famous China Dragon badge was born.

The 66th Regiment

The 66th Regiment was originally raised in 1756 at Morpeth in Northumberland as the second Battalion of the 19th Regiment (Green Howards) under the command of Colonel Edward Sandford. Its formation arose from the need to expand the British Army on the outbreak of the Seven Years War. It became a Regiment in its own right two years later and adopted the additional County title of Berkshire in 1782.

The first few years were spent in England, initially in the north-east but then relocating to the south east in 1759. After some unfortunate incidents in which large drafts of men balked at being transferred to other regiments they relocated again to the southwest, working closely with the 19th Foot helping to keep order and look after French prisoners. This was followed by a brief stay in Ireland from May 1763 to April 1764 when they were sent to Jamaica.

They were back in England in 1773 and Ireland in 1776. It was here that they received their 'Berkshire' designation although no one could offer an explanation as to the connection with Berkshire and Ireland. A few years later they were overseas again in Jamaica and St Vincent where new colours were presented. They were left behind when the Regiment moved to Gibraltar in 1792 and have not been seen since.

In December 1795 it was back to the West Indies with the 69th Foot to deal with black insurgents on Santa Domingo. When they left in April 1798 691 men and 15 officers out of an original complement of over 1000 had died of disease. After one more year in Jamaica they moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia in May 1799 where they were reinforced by men from the 7th Fusiliers. After a brief spell in Newfoundland they returned to England in October 1802 to re-organise and form a second Battalion.

The 1st Battalion sailed for Ceylon, taking four months

over the voyage and landing at Trincomalee 18th July 1803. A large contingent was sent to Madras in July 1809 to be joined by the rest of the battalion in April 1814, being used to deal with problems in Nepal. They returned to Dinapore in India in March 1816. Finally they moved to St Helena in July 1817 to rejoin the 2nd battalion.

The 2nd Battalion spent some time re-organising at Winchester before being sent to Ireland from March 1804 to March 1809 when they was sent to Lisbon to support the Peninsular campaign of Sir Arthur Wellesley. In this campaign the 2nd earned most of the battle honours of the 66th, Douro, Talavera, Albuhera, Vittoria, Nivelle, Nive, Orthes and the Pyrenees. After suffering some heavy losses they were joined with seven other remnants to form a provisional battalion and although six of the other regiments eventually broke away, Wellington kept the 2/66th and the 2/31st together until the end of the campaign in 1814. They reached Cork 15th July 1814 and after spells in the Hampshire area where they were brought back to full strength they were sent off to St Helena to re-merge with the 1st Battalion. Here they guarded Napoleon until his death in 1821 and in May of that year they returned home to England.

A spell in Ireland followed from March 1823 until June 1827 when they moved to Quebec and on to Montreal in May 1830 and York (Toronto) in May 1833. Back to Quebec in May 1835 finally arriving back at Gosport 3rd December 1840.

Over the next few years the 66th saw service in Scotland, Ireland, Gibraltar, Barbados, with detachments on several other islands and then back to Quebec in May 1851. More service back in England and Gibraltar followed before they were sent to India in December 1857 in response to the Indian Mutiny, returning in 1865, stopping off en route at St Helena to mark the 44th anniversary on Napoleon's death.

Spells of duty in the Channel Isles and Ireland followed until orders were received for a return to India. in 1870. There followed nearly ten years of routine guarding the Empire until 1880 when they were sent to Afghanistan and disaster at Maiwand. The remnants of the regiment arrived back at Portsmouth on the 18th February 1881 and being based at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight prepared themselves for the merger with the 49th and the Militia to form the new three-battalion Berkshire Regiment.

Bibliography

F L Petrie *The Royal Berkshire Regiment* Vol 1