

The Biscuit Boys

Section 084

The Berkshire Militia

Introduction

Of all the predecessors of the Royal Berkshire Regiment it is the Berkshire Militia which always seems to be forgotten, but they were the predecessor of the 3rd Battalion and their origins go back well beyond the history of England to Anglo Saxon times. Their definitive history was compiled in 1897 by Emma Thoyts who had great difficulty in finding any records. This section is a summary of the salient points of that history to fill in a very important part of the Regiment's history.

Origins -The Fyrd

The earliest origins reflect the type of society typified by both the pre-Roman tribes of Britain and the Vikings of the latter part of the first millennium. Every young man was expected to be a warrior and to play his part in the defence of his home and where deemed expedient, plunder those of his tribe's neighbours. With the arrival of the Romans this need rapidly disappeared as the Romans imposed their 'Pax Romanum' and provided a highly competent professional army to defend and attack. When the Roman army was withdrawn in 410 AD the citizens were faced with the age old problem of defence without the professional army but instead offorming their own citizen's army they relied overmuch on mercenaries often recruited from the ranks of their potential enemies. The resulting Anglo-Saxon occupation was an almost inevitable consequence and gave a lesson which has remained in the English consciousness ever since.

For about another 400 years the need to bear arms to defend ones home and to serve the interests of the king remained a very ad hoc arrangement. But it was the Danish invasions of the 9th century which forced the issue and persuaded King Alfred that a better and more formal set of arrangements were needed. The result was the creation of Burghs which were fortified towns into which the citizenry could retire when threatened and an obligation on every land owner to provide knights and men at arms on call. The area covered by a Burgh was known as an

Honour and the obligations were defined in terms of hides with one hide expected to provide a knight and four men at arms. Hides were grouped into Hundreds which were nominally 100 hides but as they used the Roman military system of counting, a typical hundred would be more like 80 hides with a premier hundred having 160-200 hides. Most of west and central Berkshire fell into the Honour of Wallingford with Reading as the Premier Hundred. It was a force made of such men that fought for Harold at Hastings.

The Normans found this a very suitable arrangement for building their feudal system but the basis was obscured to a great extent because the Domesday Survey compilers organized their work by county and landowner and as King William had made sure that each new landowner had his lands scattered around the country, the hideage of individual towns and villages is often hard to reconstruct. The formal groupings for military and security purposes was based on families. Ten families were grouped into a tything with each member of a tything responsible for the behaviour of all the rest, ten tythings formed a Hundred and the Hundreds formed the building blocks for the County with a Duke or Earl having overall responsibility. The way the system worked was that the Duke could call upon his citizenry when the need arose to maintain order or when the king called for men to serve in one of his campaigns. He did this by placing the requirement on one or more of his hundreds who in turn passed it down to the parish level.

The military force that was called out in this way was the Fyrd or when it was called out for local civil purposes it was known as the Posse Comitatus. The arrangements were fomalised in the statutes of Westminster in 1285 and this imposed an obligation on every able bodied men to train and to muster twice a year with their arms and if necessary demonstrate their proficiency in competitions or tournaments. These obligations remained in force until repealed in 1553.

The Berkshire Fyrd

The details of the call outs of the Berkshire fyrd are difficult to find and we see merely glimpses. On Feb 15th 1322 King Edward II called upon John de Somery then Lord of the manor of Sulham to gather as many men at arms as he could and meet him at Gloucester. In 1514 Berkshire was required to provide 29 men of which 9 must be bowmen. In 1542 the call was for 24 horses with harness and sodier for service in Scotland. A tax was authorized to pay for this to be levied on all the county. This contrasted with the previous arrangements whereby parishes had to maintain the families of men called to arms and often preferred to pay a mercenary to do the job.

In 1544 the call on Berkshire was for 13 horses and 24 foot soldiers for the French wars and a charge of 40 marks was levied to pay for equipping them.

In 1574 there was a general muster in anticipation of an invasion from Spain but this never materialized. The call was repeated in 1585 and Berkshire's contribution was 1000 foot soldiers, 200 light horse and 230 horsemen for the Queen's personal bodyguard. The threat was even more real in 1588 with the Armada approaching. The final call to repel a Spanish invasion came in 1599 when 140 men from Reading were called on.

Another general muster was called in 1614 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.

The Civil War and Commonwealth

When the civil war broke out in 1640 King Charles I called out his forces as before. The Abingdon Division was to find 240 men but only 120 came forward to fight for the Royalist cause. As a result 100 men were called in from Reading with more to follow. When the army reached Northamptonshire in the march northwards the men from Berkshire refused to serve the king and set off back home. Later the seven ringleaders were arrested and executed.

Berkshire men must have returned to serve the Royalist cause as on the 29th Sept 1643 at the First Battle of Newbury, the Berkshire contingent formed part of Lord Hopton's Brigade under the overall command of Major General Sir Jacob Astley. By 1644 there were two Berkshire forces, one on the

King's side under Astley and one on Parliament's side under the Earl of Essex..

When the civil war ended the two sides were merged and the militias placed under 'commissioners' New officers were appointed on the 23rd August 1650. The colonel was Arthur Evelyn, John Blagrove was the Lt Col and Vincent Goddard the Major, There were two troops; H under Capt Arthur Evelyn with Lt William Stephenson and Comet Richard Greene; and F under Capt Vincent Goddard with Lt Andrew Keepe and Ensign Arthur Home. Over the next few years further officers were appointed as the Troops built up to full strength but when the Commonwealth came to an end, the Troops were disbanded and the men were sent home with their horses on the 5th Sept 1659.

Restoration to Revolution

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.

They were called out in the Dutch Wars and in 1666 Berkshire sent three companies of 'lusty, well armed' men for the defence of the south coast. 300 men from the Berkshire Regiment of Militia under Major Peacock were based at West Cowes. They were dismissed 27th July 1667 when their commander was Lt Col Saunders.

The next major callout was in 1685 when there was a general muster to deal with the Monmouth rebellion but the next few years were relatively quiet.

The militias were re-embodied in 1715 in response to the Jacobite rebellion. On the 25th October the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, the Duke of St Albans, was ordered to bring the militia up to full strength and efficiency. Each parish in the county was ordered to find a number of soldiers according to their population. By now the standing professional army was well established but there was some unease as so many of the members were mercenaries, mainly Hanoverian.

In 1756 the forces were once more reorganized and the militias were now aligned with their county line regiments. The next year on July 25th 1757 the Berkshire Militia was embodied with an establishment of 560 men under the Duke of St Albans. Wokingham, although in Wiltshire, was ordered to

contribute to the Berkshire force. There were two divisions, one for Hungerford and Illsley and one for Newbury and Speen. Reading contributed five companies with Wallingford and Wokingham contributing two each. There was a rule that if any man fell out through sickness or other cause then he had to be replaced by the parish in which the fallout occurred with the parish officers being reimbursed.

The subsequent period from 1757 to 1815 was one in which war was the norm rather than the exception. Service in the militia was compulsory with a term of service of three years. At any given point in time the militia could be 'embodied' or 'disembodied' The status of embodiment required residence in a camp or barracks and although restricted to service in the United Kingdom, they were otherwise treated very much as regular infantry. When disembodied however only attendance at the annual camp was required and quite often this was not even called.

Under these new arrangements the regiment was first exercised as a whole in June 1759 under the command of Major Dodd at Whitley Wood. Their return of April 1759 showed a strength of 8 companies of 70 privates with 30 sergeants and 20 drummers. After Whitley Wood it marched to Marlborough and then to Hungerford and then Devizes. Thereafter it wandered between the Hungerford/Newbury area and Winchester seeing duty as Witney in March 1761 suppressing riots and in March 1762 guarding French POWs at Winchester.

The militia was disembodied again in Oct 1762 and it was back to just annual training. In 1771 all militias were required to have both a light company and a regimental band.

The annual camps were often quite eventful as in 1774 when they mustered at Newbury and Benham Mansion caught fire. The militia were called out to help extinguish the flames and to save the furniture.

War with America

A second embodiment took place in March 1778 to cover for troops fighting in the American War of Independence. Their three senior officers were Colonel Arthur Vansittart, Lt Col Charles Saxton and Major John Walter. During the next five years they spent some time in Kent from June 1778 and in Feb 1779 two companies went to Banbury and Woodstock. The Woodstock contingent were to escort 1000 Spanish POWs marching from Portsmouth

to Shrewsbury. Five companies were sent to Winchester in 1780 to guard POWs there. The whole regiment went to the Barnet/Hampstead area in April 1781, moving to Maidstone in May and returning to Berkshire in November 1782. They were disembodied in March 1783.

On the 25th May 1792 the officers and the band went on a river excursion to Hardwick House where Phillip Powys provided lunch. The river banks were crowded with sightseers to watch them go by.

War with France

The successes of the American militia forces in the War of Independence showed what a citizen's army could achieve and laid the foundation for the defence of England during the long years of conflict with France. The threat was seen as very real in 1792 following the French Revolution and the Berkshire Militia was reembodyed in December. In February 1793 the Berkshire Militia was sent to garrison the south coast towns in Kent in case of invasion. They were switched to Southampton in August on account of a threat from Cherbourg.

Service in the Militia was beginning to prove very onerous on the men and their families. The men who were required to serve were selected by ballot but could avoid service by the use of substitutes and they could insure against the cost of this provision. In 1792 a typical insurance cost £10 but by 1809 sums as high as £60 were being required.

There was an even greater panic in 1794 when men came forward to form volunteer corps, known as the Supplementary Militia. There were at least four such units formed, The Windsor Foresters, The Loyal Berkshire Volunteers (at Reading), The Wantage Volunteers and the Abingdon Independent Cavalry. They were used to perform the duties of the regular militia in the County when they were absent.

Over the next few years the Berkshire Militia roamed as far as Plymouth on the South Coast and to winter quarters in Bristol. They were reviewed by King George III at Weymouth on the 24th September 1798.

One of the problems they encountered was a defection of men to the regular army and in June 1799 at Portsmouth no less than 263 privates and four officers transferred. Another 150 men under Captain Holdsworth joined the 15th Foot in October and sailed for Holland.

With the signing of the Treaty of Amiens in 1802

the Berkshire Militia were again disembodied. on the 24th April.

Napoleon

The peace lasted only a few months and on the 30th March 1803 they were reembodyed. 180 men volunteered for the regular army and the rest marched off to Ashford in Kent with the Supplementary Militia looking after duties in Berkshire.

Over the next few years they travelled far and wide: in Ipswich 1804, to the west country (Taunton and Torbay) in 1805, Portsmouth in 1806, Yarmouth in July 1809 and Nottingham and Derby in 1811. This latter service was to control the Luddites. They moved on to Lancashire in 1812 suppressing riots and then back to Plymouth for the Winter of 1812-13

In April 1804 they were one of twelve county militias to be awarded the soubriquet 'Royal'

At its peak in 1809 the Berkshire Militia boasted three supplementary regiments, the First under Lt Col F Page with ten companies, The Second under Lt Col Hemy John Kearney of 8 Companies and the Third (Royal) under Lt Col George, Marquis of Blandford.

The First and Second Regiments were called out to keep order in Reading in 1811 along with two troops of volunteer cavalry and a detachment of the Queens Bays. This was part of the reaction of agricultural workers against farm mechanization which was seen as a threat to jobs.

In 1814 the Royal Berkshire Militia had been serving in Ireland since May 1813. They had landed at Cork and had served at Athlone and Galway and were at Tuam when it was decided to bring them home. Their departure from Newry was delayed for a while but eventually they sailed for Liverpool on two ships, one of which nearly foundered in the awful weather. The order for them to march back to Reading was cancelled and they stayed in Liverpool until September 1815 following the Battle of Waterloo when at last the war was deemed to be over.

However the other two regiments were disbanded earlier in 1815 and as they were dismissed, recruiters for the Blues and the 7th Hussars were on hand to get them to join the regular forces. Many reenlisted and they were sent to join Wellington's army still wearing their Militia uniforms and many fought as such at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815.

The final disembodiment took place on March 14th 1816 with only a nominal headquarters padre retained.

Nineteenth Century

After the Napoleonic Wars there was seen to be little or no need for the Militia and it carried on in a very half hearted fashion. They had been 30th in the order of precedence of county militias in 1778 but by 1833 they had risen to 7th, a position which was formally confirmed in 1857.

With the looming war in the Crimea in 1852 it was decided to reorganize the army, Captain Alexander Nowell Sherson of the 72nd Regiment was appointed adjutant of the Berkshire Militia and told to find it. He had a nominal roll of officers, but only the Colonel, a Lt Col, a major, a Captain, an Ensign and the Doctor were in any way effective so new commissions were needed. It took until 1855 to bring them up to strength. The Militia's equipment was stored in Reading Gaol and consisted only of 12 old muskets and two old drums, one of which had been used to store old documents. The key difference was that whereas previously membership was a matter of obligation, now it was to be purely voluntary.

The first training took place between the 11th November and 1st December 1852 at Reading using the old parade ground at the Forbury. They formed 8 companies of which the 1st was a grenadier company chosen for height and the 8th was the light company. The officers established a mess in 1854. One new recruit when asked to swear 'to maintain true allegiance' misheard and swore 'to maintain two religions'

An Act of 1855 enabled the Militia to volunteer for limited overseas service in the Mediterranean to relieve regular units required for the Crimea. The Berkshire Militia volunteered for this service and sailed for Corfu on 1st Jan 1856. Here life seemed to be one round of parties but when they returned to England on the 26 May 1856 they were granted their only Battle Honour 'Corfu' The voyage home was on the Imperador and they were accompanied by 150 men of the 3rd Middlesex. They ran through storms until they reached Algiers and put into Gibraltar for coaling. Just after they left Gibraltar they collided with a Brig and then had a very rough crossing of the Bay of Biscay and the Channel. They arrived at Spithead at 3pm on the 11th June. By the 13th they were back at Reading to find

they had been disembodied on the 8th May. They were finally paid off on July 4th.

The Indian Mutiny caused them to be reembodyed in 1857 and they went first to Aldershot where they joined the Royal Lancs Militia to undertake the home service duties of the regiments sent to India.

A new Volunteer movement began in 1860 but this was quite different from the previous Volunteer movements and eventually it formed the basis of the Territorial Associations.

In 1872 the nominal strength was increased from 777 to 800 and in 1875 to 903. Their HQ had been at Mill Lane Reading for many years but in 1877 it was moved to Brock Barracks to be closer to the Royal Berkshire Regiment.

The 3rd Battalion

In 1881 the Cardwell reforms took place and the Royal Berkshire Militia Regiment became the 3rd Battalion of the Berkshire Regiment. It temporarily lost its Royal which was not regained until Tofrek in 1885.

By 1892 they were 1050 strong of which about 80% were men from Berkshire, many of whom had previously served with the 1st Battalion.

In 1893 they were brigaded into the 18th Infantry Brigade as part of the Reserve forces.

They were presented with new colours on the 18th May 1898 at Windsor

The annual training for 1899 was at Abingdon and they finished up by a recruiting march to Wantage and Faringdon with little success.

The South African War

The South African War broke out before the training planned for 1900 and on the 19th Feb 1900 the battalion was embodied and moved to Kilkenny in Ireland In June 100 of the men under Captain Southey returned to Reading to join a draft from the 2nd Battalion for service in South Africa,

The remainder moved to Kilworth Camp in Co Cork on the 14th July where they suffered rain and flooding while training. The camp was repeated the following year with somewhat better weather.

In May 1901 a draft of 50 men left for South Africa to form a Mounted Infantry Company

They left Kilkenny on 13th July 1901 returning to Reading via Waterford. Within three days they had all received new clothes and a cash payment of 10s,

followed by a further payment of £3 and a final payment ranging from £15 to £18.

Over the next few years the annual training was at Farnborough (June 1902), Cowshott (1903), Churn Camp (1904 and 1905), Bulford Camp (1906), Perham Down (1907) and finally Churn Camp (1908)

The 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion

Under the Haldane reforms which saw the introduction of the 4th Battalion as the Territorial Force, the 3rd Battalion lost all its connections to the Militia and became the Special Reserve Battalion. The main changes were that new recruits to the regiment came to the 3rd for six months initial training and regular officers from the Depot came to join the annual camp which was reduced from 28 to 21 days.

As an incentive men had to demonstrate their proficiency at the butts and could then receive proficiency pay.

Lt Col Barker took over command in 1909.

Annual training took place at Salisbury Plain (1910), Felixtowe (1911), Churn Camp (1912) and Perham Down (1913). Their last ever annual training took place at Felixtowe at Landguard Fort in May 1914

Bibliography

Emma Thoys 'The Berkshire Militia'

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