

4th KRRC at Dover 1894-6

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About dawn on the 31st May 1894 the black-coated 4th Battalion of the King's Royal Rifle Corps arrived at Dover on the troopship *Tyne*, having sailed from Gosport. For some reason only known to the captain, he refused to berth at the Admiralty Pier and they had to endure the inconvenience and indignity of being landed by tug that plied back and forth across the harbour. The battalion assembled on the pier before breakfast, and, headed by the band of the West Surrey Regiment, marched up the hill to The Citadel at the Western Heights. There they replaced the 27th Fusiliers who marched out on a posting elsewhere. The married men were posted to the Married Men's Quarters at South Front Barracks.

The Citadel was a large and imposing old, moated Napoleonic era fortress that squatted low and hidden on the chalk hills protecting the western approach to Dover from the Folkestone direction. It could only be described as an unpleasant, unpopular and damp billet, separated from the town



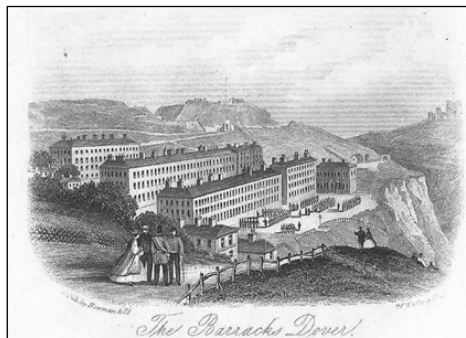
*King's Royal Rifle Corps
Cap Badge*

by a long fifteen-minute march up a very steep hill. On their arrival the men had only straw to sleep on and it was a good couple of weeks before mattresses arrived. They shared it with a permanent detachment of Royal Artillery who manned the heavy defensive guns pointing up the old Folkestone Road. South Front Barracks were constructed in the early 1860s and were casemated and set into a hill between the

slopes of The Citadel and the cliff overlooking the shore. Capable of holding 600 men at a push, it had its own set of Married Men's Quarters and was a couple of minutes march from the gates of The Citadel. Dover, having no regiment of its own, had two or three battalions moving in and out of these barracks, and others, every couple of years.

The 4th KRRC was at that point 801-strong and was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Reginald Chalmer who had been appointed as Chief of the Corps in 1890. His second in command was 42-year-old Major Horatio Reginald Mends with Captains Markham, Prendergast, Henniker, Pakenham, Ryder, Clark, Oxley (Adjutant) and Hon. St. L. Jervis. The Lieutenants were Hon. J. Brownlow, Vernon, Eustace, Sackville, and Second Lieutenants Long, Hordern, Hon. R. Cathcart, Wyndham and Blundell-Hollinshead-Blundell with Quartermaster Lieutenant O'Shea.

It was not the first time the battalion had been to Dover; they had been stationed there in 1858, the year after they had been raised in Winchester. After a couple of years, they had been despatched to Canada, then in 1875 had gone to Dublin and then



Barracks Western Heights, Courtesy Dover Museum

on to India in 1877 where they stayed until 1891. The battalion then moved to Burma, serving there until for one year in 1892 it finally returned to the UK and was posted to Gosport. This was the first time the KRRC had been stationed in the Southeast District since 1887 when the 2nd battalion was posted to Shorncliffe under the command of Colonel William Lewis Kinlock Ogilvy.

Shortly after they arrived, on the 20th June, the battalion lost a man. At about 11.30pm on the 14th. Private John King, 22, 'D' Company's storeman, was on his way to his billet at No.1 Hut at the Western Outworks, attached to the Citadel by a small bridge. It was a dark, wet, and windy night and, because he was unfamiliar with the site, prior to walking across the parade square he asked Private Wingfield of 'O' Company how to get to his block. Unfortunately, King somehow lost his way, failed to find his way through a lighted archway guiding the path on the bridge, lost his footing and fell forty feet into the moat. The next morning Private J. Doyle was working in the ramparts when two boys pointed out King's body lying in the grass. Doyle summoned assistance and quickly arrived with a stretcher and rapidly rushed him to the Military Hospital where Surgeon-Captain Dennis Reckitt performed an examination.

King stated he had fallen in the previous night but was found to have serious internal injuries, inflammation of the right lung and multiple fractures. Despite his best efforts, Reckitt was unable to save him and he passed away on the 20th. At the Inquest at

the Hotel de Paris under Coroner Sydenham Payn, the verdict was 'Accidental Death', and a letter was written to the Military Authorities to improve lighting at the archway. King was buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Dover with a Rifles Cross topped headstone inscribed "Erected by the officers, non-commissioned officers and men of 'D' Company."

On the 13th August the band played at the cricket ground to mark the start of Dover Cricket Week, the first day commencing with a match between The Queen's Regiment and the Royal Marines from Deal. Ten days later, the band performed at an afternoon and evening fete and concert on the band stand on the Promenade Pier, along with the bands of the Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment and the Queen's Regiment, assisted by the Dover Choral Union. It was a spectacular day of swimming races, and fancy-dress swimming tournaments, with the admission price of sixpence donated to funds for the Western Heights Garrison Church Improvement Fund.

The band played again on September 6th at Dover College grounds during another spectacular, this being the Grand Assault-at-Arms again to raise money for the church. Organised by the Gymnastic Staff of the South-Eastern District, the college grounds had displays of sword play, gymnastic displays on the bars, dismounted combats, boxing and horseback lance exercises. That week also saw the battalion engage in annual rifle training at the range at North Fall Meadow, close to the Castle. The public attended the Ropewalk at Aycliffe on the 20th September for the battalion sports event, this included running races, tent pitching, tug of wars, and bayonet fighting. Skirmishing races were a particular highlight, with soldiers in full dress leaping over hurdles and firing volleys in between.



The grave of John King KRRC

On the 15th October, Major Mends was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and assumed command from Chalmers who had completed four years' service as Chief of the Corps. His place was taken by Major Robert Henry Gunning on transfer from the depot at Winchester. (Later promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, Gunning was killed in action against the Boers on the 20th October 1899 at Talana Hill).

Friday 19th October saw the KRRC and other troops engage in a mock invasion exercise. The Dover and Shorncliffe troops were the 'invaders' who had made it a few miles ashore and established defensive outposts on the main Dover-Folkestone and Dover-Canterbury roads. These invading troops consisted of the Royal West Surreys holding Swingfield, the West Ridings around the village of Coldred, the KRRC at Lydden Hill and a detachment of the East Kent Volunteers. Signalling parties were deployed defending the connecting lines. The defenders were to be cavalry from Canterbury, but, somewhat bizarrely, the cavalry failed to find the defenders and when 'Cease Fire!' was sounded at 13.30 barely a shot had been fired.

During the exercise, an Officer of the Rifles holding a strongpoint on the Canterbury Road saw three cavalry trotting towards him. He ordered the men to open fire and they blazed away merrily. However, the horsemen ignored it until they were just twenty yards away. A burly sergeant then shouted:

"Are you firing at us?"

"Who are you?" replied the officer.

"Oh" replied the amused sergeant. "We are Lord William Seymour's bodyguard", referring to the General Officer Commanding the South-Eastern District. "Why don't you paint your faces green then, to show what you are?" The officer replied. The troopers rode off, confused. It seems

the Rifles had been firing at baffled horsemen who had nothing to do with the battle.

The day was marred by a rather idiotic practical joke played on a Rifleman. His colleague decided it was a good idea to empty the content of his blank powder cartridge into his unsuspecting friend's pipe and covered it in tobacco so he would not notice. When he lit his pipe up, it exploded on him with a huge jet of flame. The poor soldier suffered bad powder burns to his face and was rushed to hospital and the soldier who had played the prank was promptly arrested.

On November 30th a draft of one sergeant, one corporal and one hundred privates left Dover for Portsmouth en-route for Gibraltar. On the 7th December and in the run-up to Christmas, a large party organised by the sergeants was held in the gymnasium of the Heights for 150 invited guests, both military and civilian, the evening lasting until 4am. The band played again on the 28th December at the Town Hall for the Annual County Ball and played eighteen dances to 200 guests. Football season commenced in early 1895 and the KRRC fielded their own team, regularly playing other units at the Danes football ground. One private, Reynolds, even joined the main local Dover football club to permanently replace one of their own members. A battalion cricket team was also formed.

The spring saw annual musketry training at the Dymchurch ranges, with the first batch of 100 new recruits undergoing practice from 28th March to the 11th April, and, the rest of the battalion following on from the 10th June to the 15th July.

On Tuesday 16th April, Private James Carrah was brought before Dover Police Court, charged with breaking a glass window

and the panel of a door at *The Park Inn* public house in Ladywell. The Landlady, Mrs Louise Sexton, testified that on the previous night Carrah and a colleague had come into the pub demanding a drink, but she refused as he was already obviously quite drunk. Carrah became abusive and used filthy language, threatening to smash the pub up, and had to be removed by the landlady's husband. Outside he then smashed a glass pane in the door and kicked it, the police constable was called for, and he was promptly arrested. The Magistrates fined him £2 10s for damage repairs.

The band performed again the 8th May 1895 at Dover Town Hall with Dover Choral Union in a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Martyr of Antioch* and other selections. In late May Private Gibbons was arrested for theft from a shop. At his trial he stated that he had stolen the items with the express intention of getting caught as he had hoped that if he were convicted, he would be discharged from service! Unfortunately, no records survive as to whether he was successful. During these months the rest of the battalion would have been engaged in drill at The Citadel, route marches and rifle practice at the many ranges around Dover.

The Annual Kent Manoeuvres began on Monday the 3rd June, the regulars, militia, yeomanry and volunteers, assembling on the banks of the Royal Military Canal and in the fields between Hythe and Ashford. The 4th KRRC along with the West Riding Regiment left Dover on the previous Saturday on a long route march to the location. With the aid of a dozen traction engines, vast camps stretching across entire fields were set up for both the 'invading' and 'defending' armies.

During the first mock battle on the Monday the 3rd, the 4th KRRC, the Royal Irish Rifles and Kent Yeomanry acted defensively

against the aggressors of the West Surreys, West Ridings, Sussex Volunteers, Royal Engineers, Dragoons and Field Artillery, a total of about 4,000 men. Following the commencement of hostilities in the late afternoon, the Yeomanry first defended the Canal by 'destroying' bridges, in reality this was by planting signs on them marked 'Bridge Destroyed'. In the evening, the attacking force successfully crossed a bridge over the River Rother that the defenders had missed. The Irish Rifles scouted ahead and engaged the Sussex Volunteers. The invading Royal Engineers then prepared a specially constructed pontoon bridge they had made to cross the river slightly north of Iden. Nonetheless, the attackers managed to cross one of the 'destroyed' bridges and force the heavily outnumbered Irishmen to retreat. 'Cease Fire!' was called at 1am Tuesday morning and the troops returned to their camps.

Fighting recommenced at 9am with a barrage of defending artillery. Despite this, battalion after battalion crossed the bridge at Iden and quickly the regular infantry, after a feint at the canal at Appledore, managed to outflank the guns which were forced to limber-up and retreat. Fighting ceased at midday. On Wednesday, the scenario was that the invaders had crossed successfully but now had to halt for stores and reinforcements and that the defenders, now supplemented by Volunteers from Ashford, could mount a counterattack. At 10am the battle started, after an hour the Rifles had been successful and managed to begin the drive the enemy back. The invaders then brought up artillery and began to pound the Rifles who were exposed and caught in the open. Infantry followed and outmanoeuvred them, forcing the Rifles to retreat back to the village of Warehorne. When the final 'Cease Fire' was sounded the attacking force was certainly in the superior position although the result

was never seriously in doubt as the defenders had been seriously outnumbered from the start. Following the end of the exercise, the 4th KRRC proceeded to Lydd to undertake musketry instruction. They returned to Dover on the 29th June.

Saturday the 6th July saw another loss of a man by the battalion. Private Thomas William Sears, 22, had been in the town drinking but on his way back to barracks had fallen into the Wellington Dock opposite the Commercial Quay and drowned. Private Charles Walker, who shared the same room as Sears at the Citadel, had seen Sears in the *Lord Wolseley* public house at about 22.45, talking to a soldier of the East Surreys, but he did not seem particularly worse for drink. Charles Everitt of the barge *Benjamin Little* stated at the inquest that he had heard a splash at about 23.20, heard a groan and saw a man submerge under the water. He was unable to do anything as he could not see the body. Wallace Brown, of the Diving Cutter saw a crowd gather on the dockside and ran to retrieve a grapnel. He managed to snare Sears and pull his body up onto the deck of the *Benjamin Little*. Police Constable Vincent and others desperately tried to resuscitate Sears, but it was to no avail. The inquest returned a verdict of 'Accidental Death' and it was concluded that Sears had probably tripped over a loose chain fence at the edge of the dock where grapnels were tied up. A letter was written to Dover Harbour Board recommending the tightening up the chains in the area.

On the 10th August the second battalion sports day was held at the Ropewalk at Aycliffe and was very well attended by the public. August 28th saw another event at Dover College grounds again to raise funds for the Church. This was another fete and concert with stalls, displays and a tea tent as the battalion band, and others, played on.

At about the same time the officers clubbed together and donated three guineas to the Dover Regatta Fund. On the 3rd September the battalion formed a guard of about 100 men on the Admiralty Pier when Nusrullah Khan, the Shahzada of Afghanistan, departed for the continent on a yacht, to a resounding artillery salute from the Castle.

The 12th September 1895 saw the battalion engage on a night attack on Fort Burgoyne. The battalion formed part of the attacking force along with the Royal West Surreys, a detachment of Royal Engineers and a battery of Field Artillery from Shorncliffe, the force under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Nourse of the Surreys. The defenders consisted of the Royal Artillery and the Duke of Wellington's Regiment under the command of Colonel Ditmas, R.A. The attack began at 21.30 when the heavy guns at the fort opened fire at the assembled attacking force on the plain opposite, about a mile away. The Field Artillery returned fire whilst a party of infantry managed to sneak up to the fort and attempt to advance with pickaxes and grappling irons. Spotted by the defenders, they were subjected to hail of fire and forced to retreat. A second sortie was made by the Rifles and Surreys using scaling ladders who managed to enter the trenches protecting the fort and begin to climb the walls. Ditmas ordered a sortie by the Duke of Wellingtons' who managed to surprise the attackers from the rear. When 'Cease Fire' was called, the two parties were firing at point-blank range at each other. A similar such exercise took place at the end of September.

On Friday 1st November Private Chatfield demonstrated his prowess on the piano by playing at a Smoking Concert at the Soldier's Institution. Attended by many of the senior officers of the garrison, the concert had been arranged to say farewell

to a draft of the 4th KRRC who were about to embark for Malta, and to welcome the East Surrey Regiment who had recently arrived. KRRC men provided much of the entertainment, Private Cooper sang 'I'm one of the jays', 'Father do come home' and 'Nonsense up to date' to the demands of encores, Private Walsh sang 'He felt a draft', Lance-Corporal Smith gave a mandolin solo and Corporal Pope played the banjo.

On the 18th November Colonel Mends presented the annual prizes to the men of the 1st Volunteer Battalion of the East Kent Regiment at Maison Dieu Hall in front of a large group of the public and inspected the company which had been drawn up in parade order by Captain Vernon Knocker. In late November the KRRC provided three men to attend the Soldier's Institute to give instruction in trades to ex-soldiers, the first classes being that of bookbinding over two days a week. The East Surreys also provided three men and the Royal Artillery a further two.

Further concerts followed, including the band performing at a production of Rossini's *Stabat Mater* on the 4th December in the Town Hall accompanied by the Dover Choral Union and conducted by Mr. H.J. Taylor FRCO.

January was marked with a series of 15-mile route marches that were dictated by the War Office, the marches taking place every Thursday and Friday, with the East Surreys doing the same on Monday and Tuesdays. The regiment that remained behind adopted the garrison duties of the other for those particular days. These winter route marches were an adoption of a system that had been utilised by the German army for many years and was deemed to be a successful one, assisting greatly in manoeuvres.

The bands were again utilised on the 23rd February at the Soldier's Institute following the arrival at the Admiralty Pier of a detachment of the 3rd KRRC at Shorncliffe on board the paddle-steamer *Lady Vita*. There was a rare unfortunate incident in late March when Private John Greyless was sentenced at the Borough Police Court and sent to prison for 21 days for knocking down and kicking Mary Ann Johnstone in Snargate Street.

Another concert was played on Sunday 5th April on the Promenade Pier and two further on the 22nd and 23rd April at the Town Hall to raise money for the Gordon Boys' Orphanage. The battalion left Dover for Lydd on the 28th April for a couple of days training in conjunction with the 3rd battalion at Shorncliffe. On the night of the 1st May the battalion carried out manoeuvres around the area of Fort Burgoyne in conjunction with the 2nd West Yorkshires. No blank cartridges were utilised, the exercise being to practice navigation at night using compass bearings.

On the 8th May 1896 the battalion was piped down from the Citadel to the railway station by the band of the West Yorkshires, whereupon they departed for Aldershot at 9 o'clock. Aside from the two deaths, it can be said that their stay in Dover had been quiet and, unlike their first period at Dover, remarkably free of petty crime and other incidents. They had truly marked themselves as a popular regiment by becoming heavily involved in local community life.

Sources:

Dover Express archives.

The King's Royal Rifle Corps Chronicle, 1904