

The Children's Tragedy

Very early in the morning of Monday May 6th 1826, the gates of the Infantry Barracks on Sheet Street in New Windsor opened, and out marched the first battalion of the Scots Guards on their way to London, after doing garrison duty in Windsor for three months. Behind the column of marching men came the baggage wagons, the women and children and the civilian sutlers and suppliers which followed every regiment in those days. Some way behind, hurrying as best as they could and with their meagre bundles hastily packed, came the women and children of soldiers, who lived 'off the strength'¹. A bugle call, audible throughout the town in the still morning air, had alerted them to the facts that the regiment was on the move. A bugle call they had anticipated ever since their husbands had been confined to barracks a few days before.

This curious procession wound its way up Sheet Street into Park Street, past Frogmore, on towards Old Windsor and Staines and on to London, but few Windsorians, who were about on early business, gave them a second glance. It was a sight they were quite accustomed to. Several times a year regiments would march in or out of one of the two barracks. Only if the bands played, they would stop and listen. Military bands were a popular diversion in the town. The highlight of the week for many was to listen to the bands on a Sunday afternoon in the park or on the Terrace. This time the bands were silent, as it was so early.

However, a few hours later the strains of military music coming from the Old Windsor Road heralded the arrival of the new regiment. This always attracted a crowd of curious onlookers who wanted to see the new tenants of the barracks. Landlords of cheap lodgings in George Street, Bier Lane, Clewer Lane or Prospect Place were ready to welcome new lodgers in the form of women and children 'off the strength', even though they could barely afford the few pence for a single room which was too often small, dark and damp.

The soldiers who arrived in Windsor on this day belonged to the 63rd of Foot², an infantry regiment of the line, not one of the proud Guards regiments Windsorians were used to. They had marched from Chatham, with two overnight stops in London and Staines, where they had been quartered in pubs and inns. What Windsorians noted immediately was, that an unusually large number of women and children accompanied this regiment. Many of the women were pregnant, and there were over one hundred babes in arms, some looking very poorly.

Within the next two days, 749 soldiers and about 400 women and children crowded into the barracks, where they shared quarters designed for 790 rank and file. Privacy was an unknown commodity in the barrack rooms. A blanket hung around the bed, was the only seclusion a family could get. Each room was home

to 29 soldiers, besides the women and children. Here they washed and cooked, ate their meals and cleaned their kits, here they gambled, drunk and swore, and here the women bore their babies and the children died. With this sort of intimacy perhaps no one cared that the privies had no doors!

What surprised the landlords of Windsor's cheap accommodation was that very few families looked for lodgings in the town. The crowded conditions in the barracks should have caused concern in Windsor, but no-one interfered in military matters. That was the business of Horse Guards. And nothing was done when the children started dying.

We need to look briefly at the recent history of the regiment to get a better picture. The 63rd of Foot had been stationed in Ireland between 1820 and 1826. Like most British regiments who had spent some time in Ireland, they had become 'very much married'; they had also taken on many Irish recruits, 182 during the last year alone. In March 1826 they were ordered back to England, first to their depot in Chatham where they would be kitted out and then on to Windsor. As they marched from Castlebar to Cork for embarkation, they were followed by another army of some 400 wives, women and otherwise with a countless number of children.

At Cork there ensued battle royal. It was against regulations for a regiment to have so many women on the strength. In Ireland military authorities turned a blind eye to what was going on, but in England it was going to be another matter. Therefore 300 women would have to stay behind and what became of these women was not the army's concern. What happened at Cork on March 25th 1825, no one will ever know, but going by other reports of such departures, it must have been a heartrending scene. Wailing and pleading women clinging to their husbands and begging to be let on board, lest they should be left destitute, sobbing children sitting on little bundles of belongings not knowing what was to happen to them. Lots were drawn to determine who could board the ship and who was to stay behind. This was always done just before embarkation, so that married soldiers would not be tempted to desert. Only six women per company were allowed to go. However, the women of the 63rd were more resourceful, they refused to let their lives be decided by a lottery. Somehow, either as stowaways or on another ship that sailed to Portsmouth and then to Chatham the majority managed to follow their soldier husbands or sweethearts to England. By the time the regiment marched to Windsor, this extra 'baggage' of women and children was still with them.

I don't know when the dying started. Maybe a number of children had already died on the long arduous march, but on May 10th, one-year-old James Groves was buried at Windsor. Another child, ten-month-old Elizabeth Holden died on May 25th. The next day Jane, wife of Patrick Smith, died aged 38. Both their children, Jane and Patrick were to follow their mother two months later. In June, 12 children died, the oldest barely two years old. William Key and his wife lost their twins within a week and Patrick Malony and his wife lost two of their