

GUNFIRE AT COFTON HACKETT, 1831 - 1871

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In 1979 the discovery of a number of three-pound and six-pound cannon balls imbedded in the ground on the western slope of Cofton Hill brought to light a forgotten fact - that from 1831 to 1871 the artillery range of the Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry had been on the Earl of Plymouth's property in the Lickey Hills.

The Yeomanry Cavalry, one regiment to each county, was started in 1794 mainly, if not wholly, as an integral part of the vast force raised for the defence of the country against French invasion during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In 1803 the Yeomanry Cavalry numbered no less than 44,000 men, well trained and equipped largely by private and voluntary effort. Although its services were never required in the field, save against the ineffectual French landings at Fishguard (in Wales) in 1797 and Killala (in Ireland) in 1798, this large mounted force undoubtedly contributed much to the security of the country.

The end of the French Wars in 1815 was followed by the discharge of large numbers of men from the army and navy into an economy depressed by the long and difficult transition from wartime to peacetime production. The result was mass unemployment, with no effective system of poor relief to prevent extreme hardship and suffering. This led to riots in various parts of the country, which had to be restrained by the Yeomanry Cavalry as there was no police force at that time.

By 1822 the revival of economic activity and prosperity gradually ended the hardships of the post-war period, and rioting ceased to be a threat. The government, saddled with the enormous National Debt resulting from the long French wars and financially crippled by the abolition of income tax when the war ended, was seeking every means of reducing its expenditure. With the return of external and internal peace the Yeomanry Cavalry seemed to have lost all purpose, and it was, therefore, disbanded in 1827 as an economy measure.

But the government had misjudged the situation. The period of post-war prosperity was brief, and by 1829 many things began to foreshadow another and more widespread outbreak of general disorder. The situation was complicated by the determination of the middle class of professional men, factory owners and shopkeepers to gain the right to vote for members of Parliament, and its success in persuading the working class that parliamentary reform would lead to the satisfaction of all its grievances.

The establishment of the Metropolitan Police in London in 1829 by Sir Robert Peel relieved anxiety about the maintenance of law and order in the capital but lack of both effective police forces and Yeomanry Cavalry left the rest of the country at the mercy of rioting mobs. As a result in 1831 the Worcestershire magistrates invited the Earl of Plymouth 'to resuscitate the lately disbanded Yeomanry Cavalry' and to take command as Colonel-Commandant.

Such was the anxiety about the maintenance of law and order among the landed gentry and farmers that the regiment of Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry was raised, uniformed, equipped, and trained with amazing speed. It consisted of a regimental headquarters situated at Lord Plymouth's mansion Hewell Grange, between Redditch and Bromsgrove, and ten troops of horsemen, two based at Hewell, each of the remaining eight in towns scattered throughout the county. Each troop consisted of fifty NCO's and men, officered by a Captain, a Lieutenant, and a Cornet. A permanent Drill Sergeant, a pensioner from a regular cavalry regiment, was appointed to each troop.

By September, 1831, the training of the regiment was sufficiently complete for it to parade at Worcester for inspection and official approval. 553 men of all ranks paraded out of an authorised establishment of 662.

At this period it was usual to attach what were called 'galloper guns' to cavalry regiments, and two three-pounder guns were accordingly issued to the regiment of Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry. These were horsed with a team of four horses apiece, and manned by a detachment of a sergeant and twenty-two gunners, commanded by a lieutenant. Although authorised, the artillery was supernumerary to the establishment until 1843, and the government's financial grant to the regiment was not sufficient to pay for the artillery. Therefore, the whole cost of the artillery was borne by the Earl of Plymouth out of his own pocket. Between 1831 and 1843 the Earl of Plymouth and his brother-in-law, Colonel the Hon. Robert Henry Clive, who succeeded as Colonel-Commandant on the Earl's death in 1833, and retained the command until his own death in 1854, paid £18,470 towards the upkeep of the regiment out of a total cost in the same period of £63,891.

The gunners were shown as supernumerary to the establishment and were paid by the Colonel-Commandant out of the private fund. They were attached to the Tardebigge Troops, and all came from the Hewell Estate. They had a Sergeant Instructor who was a pensioner of the Royal Horse Artillery. They drilled and exercised with the guns every Saturday afternoon. The guns were kept in a building of the stables at Hewell Grange which became known as the Cannon House. The ammunition also was paid for out of the private fund.

The firing range used by the gunners when they practised with live ammunition was situated on the Lickey Hills, then part of the Hewell Estate. The guns fired from a field called Narborough's Field, eastwards across the valley into the western slope of Cofton Hill over a distance of about a thousand yards. From Narborough's Field Cofton Hill appears as much higher ground, and, therefore, formed an effective stop-butt for the three-pound cannon balls. The fact that the intervening ground was much lower greatly reduced the risk of a ball striking anyone who trespassed on the range. (Narborough's Field can be found by entering the Lickey Woods at the junction of Twatling Road, Mearse Lane, and Lickey Square, and turning right along a minor path a few dozen yards from the entrance gate. A long straight path leads to an open scrubby square field - hawthorn, bracken, etc.)

In 1843 the gun detachment was included in the establishment and adequately financed by the government. In 1853 two six-pounder guns were issued to replace the three-pounders, and a captain and four drivers were added to the establishment. But as the three-pounder guns had been paid for by the Earl of Plymouth they were regarded as the private property of his family, and were retained at Hewell when the six-pounders were issued. In 1871 the artillery detachments of the Yeomanry Cavalry were abolished, and the two six-pounder guns were returned to the Ordnance Department in 1873. The use of six-pounder guns on the range from 1853 to 1871 explains why the cannon balls found on Cofton Hill in 1979 included twenty-three three-pound balls, and twelve six-pound balls (as well as many fragments amounting to a number of additional balls which cannot be estimated).

Between the re-formation of the Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry in 1831 and the foundation of the county police forces on the model of the new Metropolitan Police in 1839 the Yeomanry Cavalry was frequently called out by the magistrates to prevent or put down riots - their arrival at a place threatened by rioting was usually enough to prevent it.

This period of social and political unrest fell into two phases. Up to the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832 the purpose of the agitation was to persuade or force the government to extend the right to vote for members of the House of Commons to the solid and prosperous middle class, and as far as was practicable to give each vote equal weight in electing a member. It was contrary to its nature and contradictory of its claim to political responsibility for the middle class to support its demands by rioting. But the working class had been led to believe that the reform of Parliament would cure poverty and unemployment, and it readily supported the demand by rioting, particularly in towns. In the country violence was directed chiefly against the introduction of labour-saving machines (harvesting machines, threshing machines, etc.), which the agricultural labourers feared would reduce their wages or even throw them out of work. So they broke machinery, burned ricks, and tried in other ways to intimidate the farmers.

The Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry were in action against the rioters in 1831 at Upton-on-Severn (where the boatmen and hauliers were resisting the introduction of horse-towing), Worcester, Stourbridge, Dudley, Wolverhampton, Castle Bromwich (riots by colliers and nailers), and Tewkesbury. As a result the disturbances which in 1831 were general throughout England and Wales assumed far smaller proportions in Worcestershire than in most of the neighbouring counties, 'notwithstanding the unusually dangerous and lawless character of the colliers, nailers, and others of the same class, so numerous both in town and country districts'. Lord Plymouth and his regiment received many votes of thanks from magistrates and public meetings for their support in saving the country from mob-rule.

After the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832 rioting was soon resumed when the working class found that the new middle class Parliament and government produced by the reform of Parliament was if anything more hostile to its attempts to improve its living standards than the unreformed Parliament had been. This movement is known as 'Chartism', though the agitation spread beyond the direct supporters of the People's Charter, which set out demands for the further extension of the right to vote and other political reforms.

But in 1839 the new county police forces became responsible for the maintenance of law and order, and the Yeomanry Cavalry ceased to be used to support the magistrates against violence.

On 15th May 1834 the whole regiment of Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry paraded on top of the Lickey Hills to the north-west of the old highroad between Birmingham and Worcester (which had been diverted along lower ground through Rubery in 1831). The occasion was the laying of the foundation stone by the Lord Lieutenant of the County, Lord Lyttelton, of a memorial to the character and public services of the 6th Earl of Plymouth. On a commanding site over-looking Bromsgrove and the whole wide extent of the Severn plain was raised an obelisk of Anglesey marble with a total height of 91 feet 6 inches.

Of a total subscription of £982, £576 was raised within the regiment,
whose name heads the inscription on the base of the monument :

ERECTED

BY THE WORCESTERSHIRE REGIMENT OF YEOMANRY CAVALRY

TO MARK THEIR LASTING GRATITUDE

TO THE HONOURED MEMORY

OF THEIR BELOVED AND LAMENTED COLONEL COMMANDANT

AND BY THE COUNTY AT LARGE

TO COMMEMORATE

THE DISINTERESTED, SOLID, AND EFFICIENT

PUBLIC SERVICES

AND

TO COMMEND TO IMITATION

THE EXEMPLARY PRIVATE VIRTUES

OF

OTHER ARCHER, SIXTH EARL OF PLYMOUTH

SOURCES

Personal communications from Mr. J. Edney.

Letter to the Editor of The Bromsgrove Messenger, dated 2 November 1979 -
from Mrs. Marian R. Thornett (nee Blunn).

Margaret Dickins, One Thousand Years of Tardebigge. Birmingham(Cornish)
1931

Anon., The Yeomanry Cavalry of Worcestershire, 1794 - 1913. Privately
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Anon., Memoranda Relative to the Worcestershire Yeomanry Cavalry, now
the Queen's Own, Raised by Other Archer, 6th Earl of Plymouth, in
1831; now under the Command of Lieutenant-Colonel the Honourable
Robert Henry Clive, M.P. London, Printed by S. and J. Bentley, Wilson
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Foreword by Lieut-Colonel R.H. Clive. [Birmingham Reference Library,
Social Sciences Dept., 357.14 (207566)].

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