

October 2022 The History of Berwick Barracks

Speaker: Rt. Rev. Dr Stephen Platten

Most members of GLHS know Berwick reasonably well and the location of the splendid barracks which are to the east of the centre of the town. The Right Reverend, Dr Stephen Platten, retired Bishop of Wakefield and a resident of England's most northern town, gave a most entertaining lecture on the history of the barracks, the oldest in Britain.

My dearly beloved Managing Director {a.k.a. The Leader of the Opposition} and I habitually walk the ramparts in an anti-clockwise direction and our attention is always diverted to the barracks, designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor no less, and built under the direction of Captain Thomas Philipps, a military engineer. Having passed the guardroom by Quay Walls which has a small exhibition of life in the Guardroom and then the Powder Magazine encased in a strong wall in case of explosions, one comes to the barracks themselves. Of course, the attention one can give accompanying grandchildren on the ramparts is limited by the views, even though one's descendants could fall 20 metres, a prospect their parents may view with little enthusiasm.

Stephen explained the history of the town which pre-dated most of the listeners' knowledge. For example, Athelstan incorporated Berwick into England in 927 but it was the battle of Carham in 1018, a victory for the Scots, which cemented the town's strategic significance. The castle at Berwick is notable for being the only English castle which was initially constructed by the Scots, under King David I. Like that of Newcastle and in contrast to, say, Warkworth, the castle is on the north side of the river and a bulwark for the English.

Berwick has had a tumultuous history. From the Scots' rejection of John Balliol, the protege of Edward I, as their king in 1296, conflict was inevitable and Berwick's strategic location ensured it was in the middle of any conflicts. Most of us know that Berwick was passed repeatedly from England to Scotland and vice versa until finally secured in 1482 for Edward IV by his younger brother, Richard Duke of Gloucester, later Richard III, whose bear emblem is incorporated in the town's coat of arms. The House of Commons baulked at how much the campaign cost for such little gain, so the town has even had an indirect influence on the progress of our parliamentary democracy. The ramparts are the longest 16th century walls in Europe and, as Stephen reminded us, are similar to some fortifications of the period in Italy. Indeed, the ramparts were the biggest budgeted cost of Elizabeth I's reign.

I had always thought that after 1482, and Flodden in 1513 and the death of Scotland's James IV, Berwick had become more tranquil, but this was not the case. During what was known as the 'rough wooing', Henry VIII tried to impose his will on the borders; he wanted to marry his son, later Edward VI, to the infant Mary Queen of Scots. Thus, Berwick's strategic importance was confirmed.

We learnt that Berwick was a garrison town with troops billeted on the residents, which was very unpopular given their propensity for alcoholic consumption and other activities in so called 'bawdy' houses, on which I shall not enlighten innocent readers. The Jacobite rebellions of 1715 (and of 1745) shocked the English establishment and construction of the barracks began in 1717. The barracks required 600,000 bricks and accommodated 600 men

and 36 officers. The men lived 8 to a room and 2 to a 'crib' bed. They were required to cook and wash in their rooms and each room had a 'slop' bucket. Some men had their wives and children in their room with privacy afforded only by a curtain or two. The officers had their own rooms. Men were provided daily with 1½ lb. of bread and a 1 lb. of meat, but the quality of rations was variable, to put it mildly. The regiment ensconced at the barracks was the 25th Regiment of Foot, which later metamorphosed into The King's Own Scottish Borderers [KOSB].

Initially the barracks were popular as they removed the soldiery from the town's residents, but the behaviour of the military continued to be problematic. The Board of Ordnance claimed that there were insufficient funds for 'utensils', so it was not until the publicans of the town were required to provide or fund them that the barracks could be occupied.

With the accession of the House of Hanover secured, the need for barracks on the border with Scotland was much diminished. This changed with the Napoleonic wars at the end of the 18th century but the barracks were abandoned when these wars ended, and they were only re-occupied in the 1850s. The KOSB returned in 1881 until 1963, although territorial units and cadets continued to occupy it (our plumber informed me that he had had to stay there) and English Heritage is now responsible for the site. The western portion of the barracks is currently unused and there are plans to turn it them into apartments. If this is so, the future of the barracks should be less turbulent than the past, subject only to the travails of conveyancing and leasehold law.

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