

April 2019

The King's Shilling: Old English folk musicians

In the last meeting of our season of talks, on 10th April Glendale Local History Society members were treated to a presentation by the folksong and history group, *Old English*. They described the experience of those who took 'The King's Shilling' by joining the Army in the 18th and 19th centuries and of those who recruited them.

Using a mixture of talk and song, the Group gave us a feeling for the 'Recruiting Officer', a common figure in the period. In contrast to the Navy, which required capable seaman, army recruiters just needed able bodied people. Recruiting parties went round the country, enticing people with the offer of the King's Bounty, worth much more than the pay of a farm labourer, and, according to the sales patter, with a freer lifestyle and access to 'wine, women and song'. Some recruits were attracted by the thought of escaping family obligations, and unattractive apprenticeships. Yet despite this, the Army was not popular. It had a reputation for corruption. Some army recruits were put off by the calibre of others. So the Recruiting Officer had to work hard at the arts of persuasion. They dressed in a colourful way, cultivated a good sales talk, and went to many of the less respectable places of the time in search of recruits. Not surprisingly, the character of the Recruiting Officer featured in folksongs and in plays of the time, usually as rumbustious figure of fun.

Life was not so easy for the army recruit. The reality of army life was not quite as the Recruiting Officer described. Many folksongs are laments about leaving loved ones behind. There were a good few deserters. One song described a roguish piper from Rothbury, who signed up, then deserted, and then signed up again, a repeated pattern which allowed him to get the King's shilling each time he signed up. But many were killed and, unlike the world wars of the twentieth century, there were no war memorials to remember them. Reflecting the class divisions of the time, the ordinary soldier was disposable manpower. Only casualties of the officer class were remembered. At times of great need of army recruits, especially during the Napoleonic wars, additional volunteer infantry militias were created. The Duke of Northumberland's tenants were expected to join the Percy Tenantry Volunteer Infantry. But the more affluent could buy their way out of this commitment by paying someone else to take up their obligation. This practice was greatly resented by the poorest groups, especially as these militia were deployed after the Napoleonic war to put down riots and other disturbances among those experiencing the high cost and scarcity of food supplies.

The *Old English* group illustrated the talk with slides and with many songs, encouraging us to sing the choruses. This proved a very enjoyable way to end our season.