

Canterbury and the Army ⁸⁶²

FOR those who relish the assault of nostalgia in its most melancholy, gnawing form, a stroll is recommended up Military Road, through the first gap in the towering, prison-like wall on the left, and around the august slabs of red brick and their tatty, corrugated attendants that are spread among hard open spaces to a distance of over half a mile.

These were the barracks, once so sparkling, bustling and immaculate, at their peak the home of over 1,000 soldiers and 500 horses, magnet of visits from the great and the gazes of the multitude source of trade for the people of Canterbury and a conspicuous contributor to the flow of life through her streets.

By GREGORY BLAXLAND

Now they no longer belong to the Army. With broken windows — although many have been preserved by the military passion for putting up bars—with paint flecked, hedges and trees run wild, and grass weed sprouting with dumb insolence round the edges of the squares, and yet with a certain forlorn and impressive dignity, they undergo the end that has been hanging over them so long, despatch by the demolition men to make way for the humdrum, unromantic, unmilitary new.

The first entrance is into what was the home of The Buffs, the Old Infantry Barracks. Once past the guard-

room and its so obvious cells, the lay-out is cosy, with the buildings facing each other around the square. On the east side are the officers' mess and senior married officers' quarters, both fine Georgian-style buildings of warm maturity and square solidity, undeservedly obscured by the growth of their privet hedge.

On the south are the men's barracks, long, less elegant and built of harsher brick, with no trace remaining of such squad names as Morgan, Sidney and Churchill, those father-founders of The Buffs. On the west are the old cookhouse and dining hall and an austere little building, on which the remnant of the letters M.S.Q. denotes that it was occupied by soldiers' families. On the north, similar in style to the men's barracks, are the office block and sergeants' mess.

The Buffs established their depot here in 1873, under the Cardwell reforms in 1872, which stabilised regimental depots. It appears that most of the buildings were already there, for we learn from Hasted that two gentlemen generously subscribed money in 1798, under the stimulus of war, for the construction of barracks for 2,000 privates adjacent to the existing cavalry ones.

The Buffs reckoned 400 as the capacity of their barracks, but no doubt they packed them in tighter of yore and there would have been no need to have wasted space on such luxuries as office block, lecture rooms and sergeants' mess.

Incidentally, The Buffs' first visit to Canterbury was a brief

one in the winter of 1702 immediately on their return from plundering Cadiz and Vigo as an opening venture in the War of the Spanish Succession. Probably they were billeted on the citizens and the imagination soars at the thought of these lusty heroes rushing from scenes of domestic conquest to fall in with their cumbersome muskets and their newly-invented bayonets as the streets throbbled with beat of drum.

Irish Buffs

The Buffs made other visits in 1736-37 and, also on return from war, in 1748, but were away in the West Indies, recruited mainly with Irishmen, when the regiment was ordered to "take the county name of Third or East Kent," apparently for the haphazard reason that the Colonel, Major-General William Style, lived in Kent.

This was part of a scheme introduced in 1782, and as regards the "gentlemen and considerable inhabitants" of East Kent, Style was instructed that "nothing can so much tend to conciliate their affections as an orderly and polite behaviour towards them."

The Buffs were denied the chance to prove this until their depot came permanently to Canterbury in 1873, and, of course, it was much easier for recruits and their instructors to "conciliate affections" than hardened warriors returned from a campaign.

An advance in this direction may have been made in 1881, when Canterbury's citizen soldiers of the East Kent Militia became part of The Buffs. The Militia, of course, had a history older even than that of The Buffs, though the East Kent dated only from 1759, when the Kent Militia was divided.

To South Africa

Normally embodied for a month's training each year, The 3rd Buffs (as they became) had their moment of glory in the South African War, their return from which was the cause of great celebration in Canterbury.

Alas for the Militia, in 1908 they were turned into the Special Reserve, which spelt their eventual doom, and the two Volunteer battalions (dated 1859) were fully ab-

Then, at the end, we come to that former military showpiece of Canterbury, the Old Cavalry Barracks, later re-named Wemyss. The lay-out is linear, with four blocks of varying antiquity covering a frontage of at least 300 yards, and what a splendid sight they must have made from the Sturry Road before their western foreground was besmirched by huts and sheds and the eastern one by the more salubrious Belisha-style buildings that now contain the staff of former Territorials, atavistically styled Volunteers.

In the centre, with pillared porch, is that mellow paragon of Georgian symmetry and solidarity, the officers' mess. It is adorned with the most flamboyant coat of arms that can ever have been designed; the lion is chocolate with great rolling eye, the unicorn white and gold, and both loll nonchalantly beneath various standards and the royal arms themselves, which are topped by a visor and plumed crown.

Granville Baker, in his "Old Cavalry Stations," gives 1794 as the year in which these barracks were built and occupied by the Romney Light Dragoons. Possibly the mess may have been built earlier, but the block beside it, known as the West Wing, was presumably built in this year. It is in the verandah style, with a long, flowing line marking the floor between the stable stalls down below and the troopers' quarters above, and one can almost hear the stamp of hoof and jingle of bit. On the other, eastern, side of the mess are two Victorian blocks bearing the date 1892 and titles Waterloo and Balaclava. They are taller than the other block, rather more pompous but nonetheless imposing.

Cromwell's Ironsides

Cromwell had brought his Ironsides to Canterbury and they are believed to have had requisitioned quarters where Artillery Street is today. Subsequently, the 3rd King's Hussars came in 1698, finding billets and stables over a wide area, and cavalry became a permanent part of the population.

A book of rhyming profiles, called "Ball Room Votaries," written in 1810 by a certain Hunter of the Queen's Bays, throws vivid light on the social butter caused by this regiment

and they caused a great stir, for not only was the present Duke of Gloucester — "Mr. Prince-Henry-Sir" in sergeant-major parlance — among their officers, but they had a band of great magnificence. They were followed by the 6th Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers) who after amalgamating with the 3rd left Canterbury for Colchester in 1926, never to be replaced. It was the end of a long and lustrous association.

Since then the Royal Corps of Signals would appear to have been longest in occupation of the cavalry barracks, and it was after their Colonel Commandant, Sir Henry Wemyss, that the barracks were re-named in 1948.

But now Military Road is military no longer and the only Army property left are such adjuncts as the Garrison Church, a solid, clean and pleasing emblem of Victoriana, the very much less pleasing rows of married quarters known as the 80 M.S.Q., the old gymnasium better known as the Cavalry Theatre, and such lesser monuments as the windowless Militia Barrack, which is said to have been built on the personal order of Queen Victoria to house officers in convalescence from the Crimea.

Canterbury still has her soldiers, but they no longer proudly display themselves on pay night in their scarlet, blue or razor-creased khaki, and the city surely is the duller for it. Whether or not they have endeared themselves to the inhabitants, I can vouch for the fact that they have themselves always regarded this as a most desirable station, the more so for its comparative isolation in military terms. And many, brought to Canterbury by the lottery of military service, have since made it their home. I speak as one myself.

Special Reserve, which spent their eventual doom, and the two Volunteer battalions (dating from 1859) were fully absorbed within The Buffs as the 4th and 5th Territorial Battalions.

These enthusiasts had in their early days been great figures of fun in their rifle green uniform, and even if they could not match the hilarity raised by the band of the Royal East Kent Yeomanry when their borrowed horses dispersed them, at first beat of drum, to all parts of the city, they, nonetheless, had to endure such indignities as being pelted by urchins on drill parade.

Proud of their status and conscious of the contempt of most regulars, many opted out rather than be dressed as Buffs. But with the aid of two world wars the relationship between full-time and civilian soldiers showed great improvement, and it was fitting that in 1948 Canterbury should confer her highest honour on her adopted regiment, the Freedom of the City.

Swallowed up

The Buffs had by now moved into their fine new barracks on St. Martin's Hill, since named Howe after a revered depot commander, now alas dead, and more recently selected as the home of the regiment that has swallowed up The Buffs (and five others), The Queen's Regiment.

The Old Infantry Barracks, evacuated by The Buffs in 1947, had, meanwhile, been filled by a unit of the Royal Army Pay Corps. This corps also has long association with Canterbury and is now resident in a block within Chaucer Barracks. The main building here, mature and imposing, was built as a military hospital and bears the date 1810, but has since become a white elephant and, sadly, seems likely to share the fate of those on the other side of Military Road.

Journeying on eastwards from the Old Infantry Barracks one comes to a jumble of huts and undistinguished brick buildings known as the Old R.E. Lines. Originally, and for many years, there were horsed gunners here, in support of the cavalry. On their departure in the late Twenties a detachment of Foot Guards came for a while, and they were followed in 1930 by 59 Field Company, of the 4th Divisional Royal Engineers, who remained until going to war in 1939. These barracks suffered badly from bombing and have since served merely as an overflow.

written in 1810 by a certain Hunter of the Queen's Bays, throws vivid light on the social flutter caused by this regiment with the balls they organised at the assembly rooms. Then in March, 1815, came the great departure and the cavalry paraded outside Chaucer Barracks (according to a painting) to ride away to join the army Wellington was fast assembling in Belgium. If the Bays went, they missed the Battle of Waterloo.

For a period, astride the arrival of our present century, the Cavalry Depot was established at Canterbury in place of a regiment, and at one time it was under command of Colonel French, who was to become Viscount French of Ypres. Along the north side of Military Road, where now there are flats, the recruits first sat on wooden horses in one shed and then progressed through the tribulation of the covered riding school next door to the far spread outdoor jumping maneges; where many a loose horse bucked and farted while the sergeant roared at a prostrate trooper, "Who told you to dismount?"

Array of colour

In the evenings (in any case on Fridays) there would be a glorious array of colour as the troopers stepped out in their pill-box hats, their burnishers shining on their shoulders, and their double-breasted coats of blue with fronts of many different colours, yellow, white, grey, cherry, scarlet, according to regiment, to mingle with buff-faced redcoats and gold-embroidered gunners.

There was many a scuffle—woe betide the Buff who sought to enter the Royal Dragoon—and it was not unknown for a trooper to be wheeled home on the large rowelled spurs, mashed to make them jingle, that he wore with his overalls.

Sometime in the 1900s the Cavalry Depot went elsewhere and Canterbury became the station for the regiment next on the rota for service in India. There were wild scenes, a correspondent has recalled, when the time came for embarkation and the "swadis" (or "swadies," as pronounced) had their last fling round the town. Wise tradesmen put their shutters up; others laid siege to the barracks next day, demanding compensation.

The 10th Royal Hussars came to Canterbury on the return to peacetime soldiering in 1919,