Volunteers and Militia

By Steve Harrison

Royal Lancashire Militia Officers, 1870s. Preston Barracks: Lancashire Infantry Museum
Standing Army

Britain had a long standing aversion to a large standing army. Fears that the army could be used against its own citizens was deep rooted and a cause of great suspicion during Stuart times.

There was also a dislike of the idea of a large standing army on the grounds of cost. When large numbers were conscripted there sometimes followed anti-conscription riots.

In 1793 the French Revolution led quickly to war with Britain. The relatively small British standing army (compared to Continental European armies) of about 40,000 was supplemented by the Militia.

The Militia

Militias, raised locally on a county basis, had a long history in England but practice varied greatly and in many areas little by way of training took place.

The Militia Act of 1757 led to a trained and equipped national force, still organised by county. The Militia was local in character. Militia officers were gentlemen. Ordinary militia soldiers were local farmers, tradesmen and labourers. If there were insufficient volunteers they were conscripted by ballot from their own communities to serve for five years, unless they could pay for and produce a substitute. Most substitutes were illiterate manual workers.

Uniforms and weapons were provided and regiments were assembled for training and to deal with civil disturbance. Through serving in a militia many ordinary civilians had experience of military service.

In the 19th Century, during periods of increased deployment of troops abroad, the state depended on the militia to fill the gap at home. Militias were raised (embodied) and then disembodied depending largely on the risk of invasion and/or the need to deploy the regular army abroad. Being locally based there was always concern from the state that those conscripted might not carry out orders against their local populations.
Volunteers

From 1745 a third ‘force’ developed, again rather haphazardly, across the country. Like the Militia it was based on counties and it allowed for Volunteer Regiments to be formed. These were different to the Militia.

In the first place, until 1804, there was no oath of loyalty. Those who volunteered wanted to be clear that they could not be deployed abroad against their will. Deployment was restricted to a fixed number of miles around their home town, unless there was an invasion. Initially Lancashire was not an area with a high proportion of volunteers. The southern coastal counties tended to have the highest rates of volunteering as they felt most at risk from Continental European invasion.

Volunteer regiments were made up of amateurs. They were not bound by military regulations. Members were free to resign (although local self-imposed rules sometimes modified this). There were some benefits to volunteering. Members could not be conscripted into the militia, which gave a degree of certainty for those in business. Some taxes were also exempted, including the horse duty and hair powder duty (1 guinea a year).

There was a democratic element to the volunteer regiments. The Commanding Officer did not have total control. He was not commissioned by the Crown. Officers were in many cases obliged to consult a committee and act by its decisions, a dependent position that was believed to be unique. When money was required from the Preston Volunteers’ fund in May 1797, the officers were required to state the purpose in writing to the committee, which then considered the reasonableness and propriety of the request. The force was actually managed by a committee of Preston townsmen, only two of whom were in the volunteer corps.
Local, self-appointed civic figures took command. It was Nicholas Grimshaw who commanded the Royal Preston Volunteers (RPV), formed in March 1797. Among his officers were Joseph Seaton Aspden and William Cross. The three of them were lawyers and would become the owners of the first three houses built on Winckley Square.

The RPV, like most volunteer regiments, designed their own uniforms, gave themselves military titles and divided their (110) men into two groups; Grenadiers & Infantry. The Grenadiers had a scarlet coat with blue facings, a blue wing edged with a little gold fringe on each shoulder and a yellow button with RPV embossed on it; light pantaloons edged with scarlet & black and a smart cocked hat with a black cockade and black feather.

The Infantry had similar uniforms but with a small hat, a black cockade and a green feather.

When it was pointed out to volunteer regiments that the distinctive colours they were choosing would show the French which of the fighters were professional and which amateurs, many reverted to colours that matched those of the regular army and militia.
They included a fine for being ‘in liquor’ 10 shillings (50p) per officer, 5 shillings (25p) other ranks. When ‘Attention’ was called there was to be no talking or laughing in the line; failure to comply led to a fine of 6d (2.5p).

Each member paid towards the cost of a band. Officers paid 1s per week (5p), privates 3d. Non-attendance or resignation was punished with a 10 Guinea fine or Court Martial.

There was no formal training, no quality control of the officers, no pay. They gave themselves titles and uniforms which matched those of the regular army and Militia.

Grimshaw and his officers were Tories and associated with the Corporation. The other major power broker in the town was Lord Derby, a Whig. A fellow Whig, John Watson, mill owner in Preston, Penwortham and Walton le Dale established a second volunteer force, the Loyal Preston Volunteers (LPV). Most recruits were his employees, living close to his mills. The overall leadership was Grimshaw’s. There was some disquiet in Government circles at the arming of large numbers of working men when the radical ideas of the American and French revolutions were being quoted by reformers at home.

Status locally could be gained through financial support for Volunteers. It demonstrated patriotism. In 1803, during a downturn in trade, John Horrocks proved his credit worthiness by donating £1,000 to the RPV. In 1800 Lord Derby threw a dinner. The toast was the officers of both Volunteer Regiments. Enthusiasm for serving, albeit part-time, waned nationally when no invasion occurred.

In 1803 the Volunteers re-formed against a fresh French threat. John Watson’s LPV was first with 500 men. Nicholas Grimshaw revived the RPV and had 800 men ready. The RPV quickly raised £3,000. Watson’s speed meant he was placed in overall command by Lord Derby, Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire. Grimshaw was outraged. Grudgingly, the RPV accepted the outcome. Nationally, over 440,000 men were members of Voluntary Regiments in 1803.

Watson’s business failed in 1807. At the time it was second only to the Horrocks’ empire. The officers, including two sons of Watson, were also insolvent as a consequence of the business failure. There were concerns that Watson’s men might use their arms in an insurrection. No new officers could be found and the LPV was disbanded.

Rules and Regulations were drawn up locally by the Royal Preston Volunteers. Note that these were agreed by the members and not determined by the Crown or the Commanding Officer.
John Watson appears regularly in reports into conditions in his mills, which included Roach Bridge and what became Vernon’s Mill in Factory Lane, Penwortham as well as Lord’s Mill in Dale Street, which he bought from Lord Derby, and a mill in Moor Lane.

He appears to have been a heartless, ruthless master in an age when the bar for being a caring employer was set very low. His exploitation of orphans was considered by many to be unacceptable even then. He later spent time in Lancaster prison as a debtor and, at his death in 1813, his estate was worth less than £100.

In 1808 the Government decided that the time for volunteer a Militia. The Infantry from the RPV along with the separate volunteer Preston Rifle Corps were merged into the Amounderness Regiment of Local Militia. Their commanding officer was, of course, Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Grimshaw!

The Preston Rifle Corps had almost been disbanded when its commanding officer, Captain Thomas Ogle, was thrown into Lancaster prison with debts of over £44,000. But it too survived long enough to become part of the Militia.

Given its nervousness about armed working class men, the state had also established a further force - The Yeomanry. Recruited from the upper classes and mounted on horses they too were local and used principally to control local populations at times of tension/social upheaval. It was the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry which made the first charge at Peterloo in 1819, before the Regular Army Cavalry and the Cheshire Yeomanry were deployed.
The shooting of civilians in Lune Street in 1842 was carried out by Regular soldiers, the 72nd Highlanders. The order to shoot was given by the Mayor, Samuel Horrocks Junior, who earlier in the year had moved from his home at 9, Winckley Square to the family mansion at Lark Hill (Now Cardinal Newman College). Local militia were also on the streets but were not called upon to fire on their fellow Prestonians. The day after the shooting, the 72nd Highlanders left Preston and were replaced by the Yeomanry.

The Militia in Preston served as the garrison in Gibraltar for one year from June 1855. They were deployed to free the regular army there for service in the Crimea. The Commanding Officer was John Wilson-Patten, 1st Baron Winmarleigh. Major James German, of what is now Starkie House on the Square, was closely associated with the Militia.

He provided a mess for the officers of the Militia in Starkie Street. We are still trying to identify the actual location of the Mess which once held portraits of five Commanding Officers.

Rifle Volunteer Corps would re-emerge in Preston and across Lancashire in 1859 when once again there was a risk of war with France.
Key sources

The History of the Parish of Preston in Amounderness in the County of Lancaster; Henry Fishwick

The Middlemost and the Milltowns: Brian Lewis

The British Volunteer Movement, 1793-1807; Austin Gee

Cotton Mills of Preston; T C Dickinson

A History of Walton le Dale and Bamber Bridge; David Hunt

The Horrockses: Cotton Kings of Preston; Margaret Burscough

Preston Cotton Martyrs; J S Leigh

A History of Preston; David Hunt

History of Preston; A Hewitson

See Useful Links on this website

National Army Museum
https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/civilian-soldiers

Handlist 72 from Lancashire Archives:
Sources for the history of the militia and volunteer regiments in Lancashire
https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/media/52092/Handlist72militiaandvolunteers.pdf

The Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment.
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http://www.lancashireinfantrymuseum.org.uk/