

CANTERBURY BARRACKS

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Summary

The notes upon which the following outline is based were assembled as input to the Exhibition of Canterbury history from 1600 to the present day, held 16 November to 19 December 2012 in the Sidney Cooper Gallery, Canterbury.

The threat of Napoleonic invasion in the late 18th century led to a massive increase in troops stationed in Kent cities and towns. Numbers in post at the three large barrack sites in Canterbury exceeded 3000 in each of the early years, and fluctuated around 2,000 for the following century or so. Despite the scale of this influx, to a city showing a total civilian population (with suburbs) of between eleven and twelve thousand, little has been written on how this military presence affected city life.

The aim of the following note has been to give some idea of the scale and location of the various barrack sites, and to suggest how this influx impacted on the social, economic and political life of the city.



Blondin entertains a crowd of 5000 at Canterbury barracks 1871

(Illustration by David Hobbs for the 2012 Exhibition)

Annex A Bibliography
Annex B Illustrations

CANTERBURY BARRACKS

Location and size

The construction of large barracks in Canterbury started in the mid-1790s as part of a wider programme to counter the threat of invasion by Napoleon. Before this, militia troops had been stationed or billeted in the city but on a scale of dozens rather than thousands. Of the 146 new sites chosen in the 1790s, 22 were in Kent, the county closest to France. The cavalry barracks came first, in 1794, then infantry barracks in 1798, followed by artillery barracks some years later. Altogether, the three adjacent plots on Northgate Street (now known as Sturry Road) spread over nearly half a mile. Detailed plans¹ show something of what went on within the barrack sites. In addition to soldiers' quarters, there were canteens; stables; forage barns (for horse feed); riding schools known as manèges; dung pits; a forge; gymnasia; and firing ranges; later additions included a hospital (1811) and military graveyard, a garrison church (1840s) and the Cavalry Theatre (before 1870)².

Numbers in the barracks prove difficult to judge, partly as regiments were arriving and departing at a high rate (regimental records suggest that more than 100 were stationed at Canterbury some time during the 19th century), but also that some soldiers were billeted in the town, and some civilians lived in the barracks. A War Office return for 1809 shows 3750 officers and men in Canterbury with stables for 1080 horses. Census estimates³ suggest that every year, for a century or so, around 2000 soldiers lived in these barracks⁴.

Social impact

The impact of around 2000 soldiers on city life was bound to be substantial - particularly as the city civilian population at the start of the 1800s was only around 11,000 to 12,000. The arrivals and departures of over 100 regiments⁵ during the following century, many with striking formal uniforms and memorable nicknames, added great colour to the local social scene. Massed field manoeuvres on Barham Down⁶, involving hundreds of volunteer and regular troops, became a welcome spectacle enjoyed by 'a vast assemblage of spectators from the adjacent towns and villages'; military bands played for the public in Dane John gardens; officers were conspicuous at the Barham races; 'Officers of the Garrison' appear as patrons on theatre programmes; and

¹ see for example War Office plans in the National Archives WO 78/3259, 3260 and 3261; also MPH/1/735 and 739

² see Annex B images 1 to 5

³ see web sites www.histpop.org and <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/>

⁴ Burnham (2010) p.79

⁵ for details see Kitzmiller (1928)

⁶ Kent Register 1795 p.154; also Essex Standard 12 April 1861

soldiers engaged in local sporting events of football⁷ and cricket⁸. Relationships between the city and military seemed generally positive. The Sussex militia, quartered in the city in 1793, were given Christmas dinner⁹ in their barracks by public subscription, to reward their 'orderly and soldier-like behaviour'. In 1795 soldiers in Kent barracks were made available to assist in the local harvest¹⁰. On the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, the city mayor visited the parade ground to present each man leaving for South Africa with tobacco, matches and a suitably inscribed pipe. Celebrations of the relief of the Ladysmith siege in February 1900¹¹ included free beer for all men in the barracks, and release of soldiers imprisoned for minor offences. The city developed a special relationship with Royal East Kent Regiment (the Buffs)¹². The Buffs' first depot was established in Canterbury in 1817, and become permanent in 1873.

Economic impact

The barracks created local employment in terms of their demand for goods (food supplies for troops; horses; horse forage¹³; boots; gloves, etc) and services (pubs; clubs; rented accommodation; tailors; cleaners; washerwomen; builders¹⁴; removal of dung; labourers and army schoolmasters). One individual who became very wealthy through the barracks was William Baldock of Petham¹⁵, who acquired land in 1793 and built huts on it for lease as St Gregory Barracks. When William died in 1812 *The Tradesman* reported that the agreed rate of 6d per soldier had made William a fortune. Property leases in Canterbury Cathedral Archives show that William sold this plot to the government just before he died for £25,500. Some supplies were needed in very large quantities beyond the scope of local firms. Coal for example was purchased for Canterbury barracks in lots of 15,000 bushels¹⁶. Many large contracts were advertised in the London Gazette and handled by the Barracks Office in London. We know that meat supplies in the 1880s came from London because disputes over putrid batches reached the press. High military demand pushed up prices for some basic foodstuffs. The Canterbury magnate and flour miller James Simmons was thanked by the Burghmote (city council) in 1801 for supplying the poor of the city with flour below the high market prices¹⁷.

⁷ see Annex B image 6

⁸ Bateman (1991) p.38

⁹ Kent Register December 1793

¹⁰ Kent Register 1795

¹¹ Bateman (1991) p.135-6

¹² see pamphlet *The Buffs (Royal East Kent Regiment) 1572-1961*

¹³ Trewman's Exeter Evening Post 3 April 1800

¹⁴ London Gazette 24 August 1805 p.1081

¹⁵ *The Tradesman* vol. 10 Jan-June 1813; also Canterbury Cathedral Archives catalogue note at CCA-CC-P/E/CP/12

¹⁶ London Gazette 28 June 1803 p.773

¹⁷ Panton (2007) p.22

Political impact

Another role for local military forces was protecting the state from threats of serious social disorder, particularly during the early decades of the 19th century before police forces were effective. So when Sir William Courtenay led the rebellion of poor farm workers in Bossenden Wood near Faversham¹⁸, the 'last armed rebellion on English soil', it was a detachment from the 45th Regiment at Canterbury barracks which arrived to re-establish order. Lieutenant Henry Boswell Bennett paid with his life when Courtenay shot him at blank range¹⁹. As the right to vote was extended beyond the better off, the vote of soldiers in garrison towns could be important²⁰. In Canterbury the electoral roll in the 1860s contained 3508 names of which around 130 were military. This may well have helped the Liberal party success in the 1868 election.

Health

Overcrowding, poor sanitation, poor drainage, poor ventilation and the stress of military life made the barracks unhealthy places to live, and by 1815 the new military hospital had 150 patients²¹. Soldiers who had served in India were particularly prone to recurrent fever. Firearms were readily available for those with suicidal thoughts - when Private Bramesley of the 15th Light Dragoons²² learned of his discharge in January 1800 he hid in the barrack cellars and shot himself through the head. When the influenza epidemic of 1890 reached Canterbury²³, the garrison hospital was extended to cope with the 200 soldiers affected. Sewage from the barracks caused public health problems for many years, as it passed to settling tanks under Master's Exotic Nursery (now Pound Lane Car Park) where it would overflow into the river²⁴. Finally, venereal disease was a continuing problem - sufferers were treated in the military hospital 'itch ward'!

Crime

Large numbers of soldiers, living in boredom away from families and sometimes in anticipation of war, also brought problems. Drunkenness in city pubs was rife, many with names which said much about their clientele: Royal Dragoon²⁵, Ordnance Arms, Gun Tavern and many others. The

¹⁸ Rogers (1962)

¹⁹ see Annex B image 7

²⁰ Rosenbaum (1910); also Spiers (1999)

²¹ see Army Medical Department Statistical, Sanitary and Medical Reports, vol. 4 for 1864 (1866); also Accounts and Papers: Army Medical Department: Barracks Works vol. 33 (1862); and Medical Report on Canterbury City by George Rigden for 1861 (BMJ 13 December 1862)

²² Jackson's Oxford Journal 18 January 1800

²³ Weekly Irish Times 11 January 1890

²⁴ Bateman (1991) p.79-80 and 122

²⁵ see Annex B image 8

city court reports mention innumerable minor offences, committed by officers as well as their men. When, for example, Karl Marx²⁶ visited Canterbury in March 1866²⁷ he heard city gossip surrounding the case against a Captain William Merchant of the 7th Hussars, who had been fined £1 for knocking on doors in Havelock Street as a prank. Some offences were far more serious. The worst example involved officers and men of the 13th and 14th Light Dragoons, who were arrested in April 1841 following drunken disturbances. They offered a bribe to the PC to release them, and when this failed sent a message to their men to come to their aid. The soldiers duly arrived from the Prince of Orange pub, attacked the police cell with a crow bar, and forcibly released their colleagues.²⁸

Other impacts

Links between the city and barracks were particularly important in the case of serious fires²⁹. In August 1865 a serious fire broke out in Mercery Lane and spread out of control, despite the efforts of local fire forces. Arrival of the 'engine from the barracks' with a 'strong body of military' was greeted by loud public cheers. When quarters of the 11th Hussars were destroyed by fire in November 1891³⁰, the threat to horses and to explosive stores was obvious. The barracks water supply proved inadequate to deal with the blaze, 'little could be done until arrival of the Cathedral steam engine'. Finally, the presence of troops could bring a little excitement and colour to the lives of local people. A good example would be the visit of Blondin, the high wire acrobat³¹, to Canterbury barracks in October 1871. Before a crowd of 5,000, many brought to the city on special train services, Blondin³² performed on a 400 ft rope, including walking blindfolded; in a sack; cooking an egg whilst he sat on the rope; standing on a chair with one leg on the rope; and carrying Lt George Onslow of 20th Hussars³³, superintendent of the Garrison Gymnasium, on his back. His finale was crossing the rope on a bicycle.

Today

The main barrack blocks were demolished by the mid-20th century, and the modern Howe barracks built off St Martin's Hill. Apart from buildings on Sturry Road now in use as TA barracks, very little remains of Canterbury's 19th century military presence. The water source³⁴, protected by iron railings, still stands a few yards from the hall of the Cavalry

²⁶ Meier (1984)

²⁷ Kentish Gazette 20 March 1866

²⁸ For examples of crime involving troops see London Standard 17 April 1841; Daily News 25 April 1856; web site *Kent History Forum - Canterbury Riot 1841*

²⁹ Bateman (1991) p. 69, 70, 101

³⁰ Yorkshire Herald 21 November 1891; and Glasgow Herald 17 November 1891

³¹ see summary page above; also Kent Gazette 26 September 1871 and 17 October 1871

³² more on Onslow and his wife in Kentish Gazette 20 March 1897

³³ see Annex B image 9

³⁴ see Annex B image 10

Theatre³⁵; two regimental insignia³⁶ have survived, one transferred to the entrance to the new Howe Barracks³⁷, and the other mounted on an external wall of the Gulbenkian Theatre (recently obscured by building development on the site); and regimental names can just be read on the fading tomb stones of the garrison church³⁸.

³⁵ see Annex B image 11

³⁶ see web site for Queens Royal Surreys (queensroyalsurreys.org.uk)

³⁷ see Annex B image 12

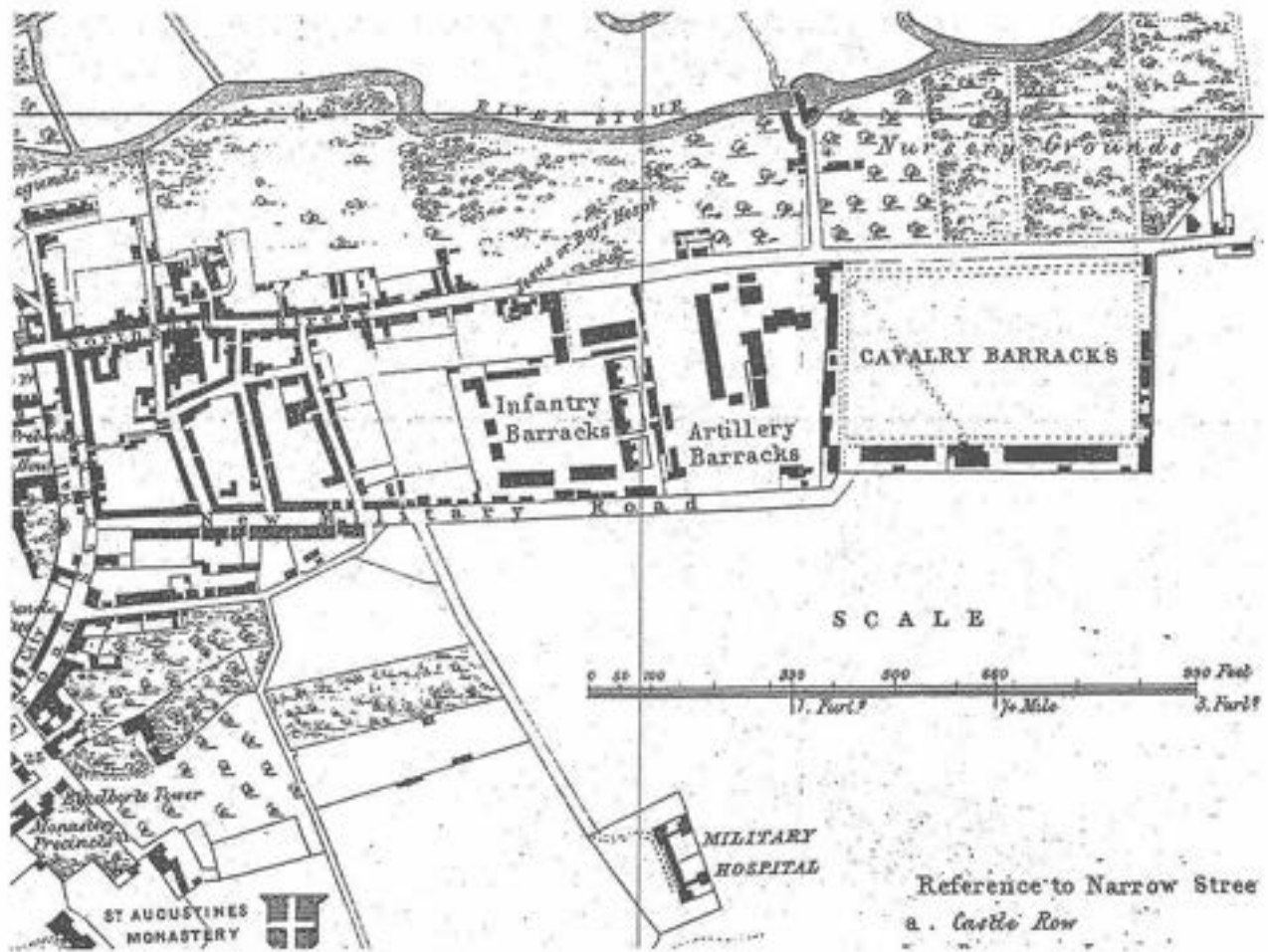
³⁸ see Annex B image 13, and church details in www.canterburykfhs.co.uk

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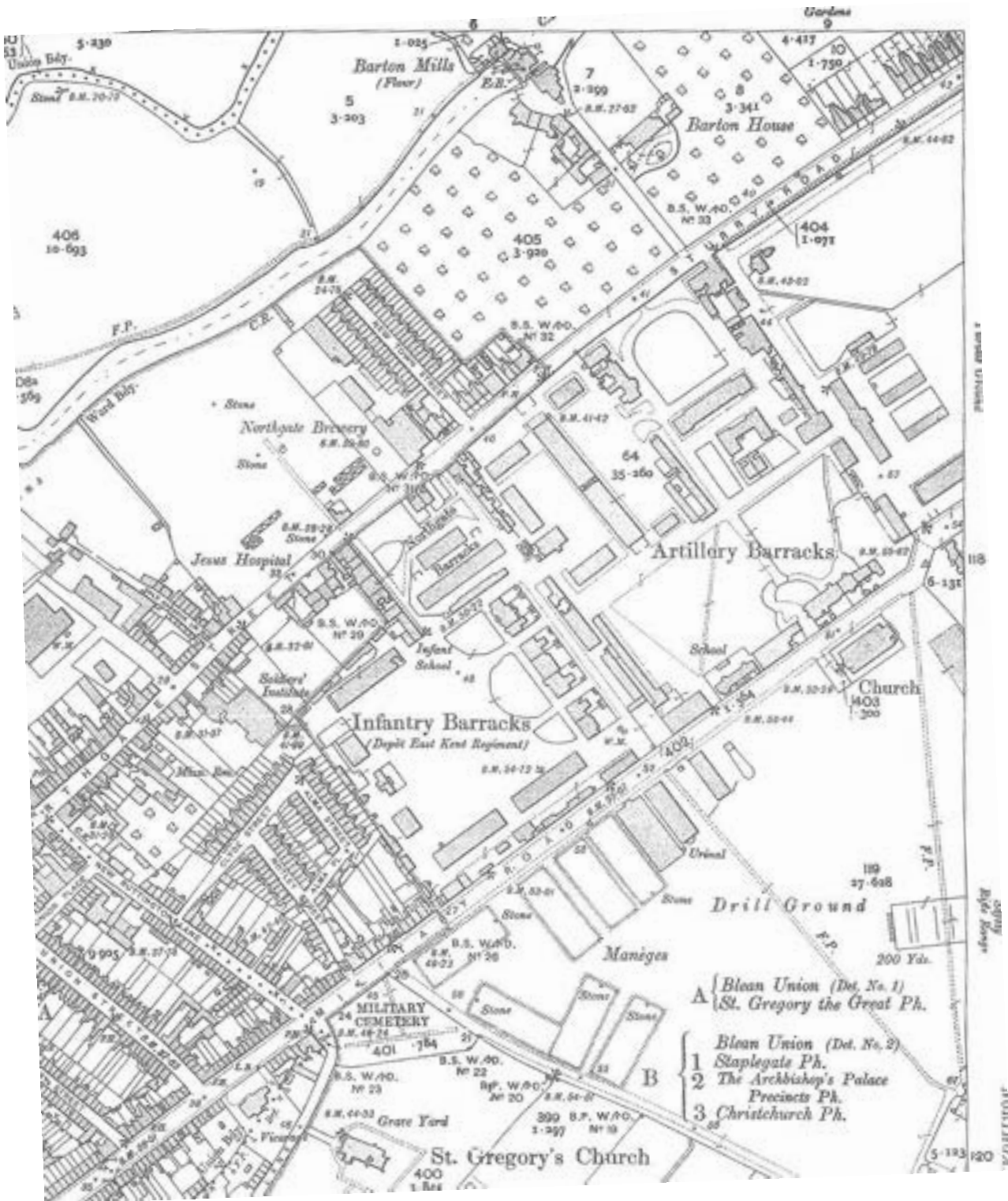
In addition to press and other sources detailed in footnotes, the books and journals listed below were consulted in the course of this study:

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ILLUSTRATIONS



1 Extract from Collard map of 1843 - a full version appears as front endpaper in Bateman (1991)



2 Ordnance Survey map 1906 originally 1:2,500 - from Old Ordnance Survey Maps Canterbury 1906 (The Godfrey Edition)



3 British Library 'A view, in bistre, of the Royal Cavalry Barracks, at Canterbury: copied apparently from an engraving by Ravenhill, in 1795, after J. Lawrence'



4 Westgate Museum (temporarily closed) - part of an early 19th century view of Canterbury including troops at Canterbury barracks



5 Soldiers on parade at Canterbury barracks (around 1900? source uncertain)



6 football poster
Canterbury Cathedral Archives
CCA-U519/4



7 memorial to Lt Bennett
Canterbury Cathedral nave
(see Chas web site entry for more detail)



8 former Royal Dragon pub in Military Road



9 Lt George Onslow

http://www.hussards-photos.com/UK/UK_20_Onslow.jpg.htm



10 water source in Military Road



11 Northgate Community Centre in Military Road
(former Cavalry Theatre)



12 Howe Barracks Littlebourne Road



13 All Saints church Military Road
(former Garrison church)