

Typhoid Outbreak at Fort Burgoyne

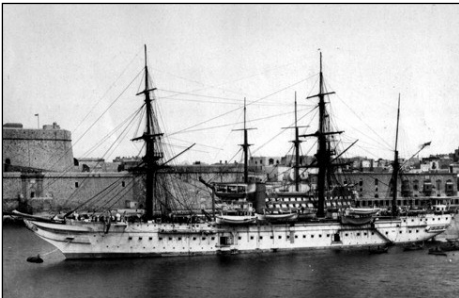
Barry O'Brien – Dover Tales

On June 21st, 1887, the *Glasgow Herald* newspaper reported that the 4th Brigade Scottish Division Royal Artillery had left their Barracks in Cupar, Scotland, en route for Fort Burgoyne.

Situated almost midway between Dundee and Glenrothes, the town is believed to have grown around the site of Cupar Castle, which was the seat of the sheriff and was owned by the earls of Fife. Today it is home to 'C Squadron' of the Scottish and North Irish Yeomanry, as well as ATC 571 (Cupar) Squadron.

Having completed the 25 mile train journey to Burntisland, the Fife Militia then boarded *HMS Tamar*, the fourth ship of the line to bear that name. Launched in June 1863, *HMS Tamar* was built in Cubitt Town on London's Isle of Dogs, a dual-powered vessel with masts and a steam engine, giving a speed of 12 knots. The ship had formed part of the 1874 Naval Brigade during the Ashanti War and had taken part in the 1882 bombardment of Alexandria.

It had been expected that the overall journey from Cupar to Dover would take



HMS Tamar

the Fife Militia two days to complete and it is clear that the troops travelled with no small degree of trepidation, given recent events at their destination i.e., "Fort Burgoyne, so far as its construction will permit, the remainder of the Corps being encamped close at hand". Presumably this encampment would have been at Northfall Meadow.



Buffs Badge

Since the December 1886 death from Typhoid, at Fort Burgoyne, of 28 year old Lt Herbert St David Jarrett, serving, at the time, with the 'The Buffs (East Kent Regiment)', the fort had been under close scrutiny, with standards of sanitation there having been a matter of discussion in Parliament on several occasions.

In nineteenth-century Britain the risk of catching typhoid, (a bacterial disease acquired by the consumption, of water mainly, but sometimes of food, that has been contaminated by sewage containing

the salmonella typhoid bacterium), was almost an accepted fact of life. Furthermore, the disease would infect all walks of life. Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, was thought by many to have died of the disease in 1861 and the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), his servant and Prince Leopold all contracted it while staying at the same country house.

Although known about for centuries, probably since Roman times, during the nineteenth century, typhoid appears to have travelled along the trade routes to most corners of the world, causing several pandemics as it did so. On three occasions, during 1826-1838, 1846-1854 and 1863-1868, the disease entered Britain, giving rise to nationwide epidemics.

Speaking in the House of Commons on February 8th 1887, Edward Norris, MP for Tower Hamlets, Limehouse, campaigner for public charities and Captain commanding the 2nd Sussex Artillery Volunteers, asked the newly installed Secretary of State for War, Edward



Secretary of State for War, Edward Stanhope

Stanhope, "Whether, since the death of Lieutenant Herbert Jarrett from typhoid fever, said to have been contracted at his quarters in the barracks at Dover, any official inspection of those barracks has been made; and, if so, with what result; whether any measures have been taken, or are being taken, to remedy the insanitary condition of certain quarters in these and other barracks from which complaints have been received; and, if he will state who is responsible for the general supervision of such matters of vital importance to the health of our officers and men?"

In response, The Secretary of State confirmed that "The barracks at Dover have, since Lieutenant Jarrett's death, been most carefully inspected by the principal Medical Officer and the Commanding Royal Engineer, who have failed to discover any insanitary condition which would account for that sad event. The drains were in perfect order. The water has been analysed and found quite fit for human consumption. Even the milk used at the mess was tested without result. There was a little dampness found in the officers' quarters, which is now being remedied; but it was quite insufficient to account for an outbreak of typhoid fever. The general responsibility for sanitary matters rests with the principal Medical Officers of districts acting under the General Officers commanding. Immediate steps are always taken to remedy such defects as are brought to light." Stanhope responded to a further remark by Mr Norris that he "was not aware whether similar complaints had been received by the War Office with regard to the insanitary condition of the barracks at Portsmouth and at Dublin".

This latter remark referred to several reported instances of typhoid fever among the troops of 2nd Battalion Royal Welsh

Fusiliers stationed at Dublin Barracks, mostly amongst the officers, with a small number of cases proving fatal. In response to a question in Parliament from Colonel Hughes-Hallett, MP for Rochester, asking whether the Dublin Barracks should be condemned, Mr Northcote assured the Colonel that "all precautions which can be taken to ensure good ventilation and drainage in the Royal Barracks in Dublin are thoroughly attended to, and money is provided in next year's Estimates for this purpose".

In April 1887 Mr. Norris again returned to the matter when he asked the Secretary of State for War, "Whether any further information has reached him as to the sanitary condition of the barracks at Dover ... whether the death of another young officer, Mr. [Charles?] Keegan, and the illness of a private soldier, are attributable to typhoid fever contracted in the barracks; and, if so, whether he will cause immediate and searching inquiry to be made into all the facts of these cases, and, if he will state whether complaints have reached him as to the insanitary condition of other barracks".

In response Mr Stanhope advised that "According to a report received this morning, careful investigation has failed to discover in Fort Burgoyne, where these cases of enteric fever unfortunately occurred, any insanitary conditions which will account for the disease; but a further minute inspection shall be made and steps taken to remove immediately every possible source of disease to which any suspicion can attach ... We have received complaints from other barracks also; and we shall in every case, if the complaint appears to be well-founded, remedy it with the least possible delay".

Mr Preston Bruce, MP for Fifeshire, West, doubtless mindful of impending plans for

the Fife Militia, also raised the issue in Parliament on May 17th asking the Secretary of State for War, "Whether a 'further minute inspection' has been made into the sanitary condition of Fort Burgoyne, at Dover, as promised by him; and, if so, with what result?"

Replying on behalf of the Secretary for State Surveyor General of the Ordnance, Mr Henry Northcote, MP for Exeter, advised that "Examinations have been made, both by the Medical and Engineer Departments, without discovering any cause which will account for the recent cases of typhoid fever at Fort Burgoyne. Arrangements have, however, been made for an independent examination by an expert of the Local Government Board, which may, I hope, result in the discovery and removal of any insanitary condition." Mr Northcote went on to confirm that three companies of the 2nd Battalion East Kent Regiment were quartered in the Fort as recently as May 12th when the battalion went to Lydd for training, although it appears, his response overlooks the reported death by typhoid of Officer Keegan.

Two months later and only 8 days prior to the planned departure from Cupar of the Fife Militia, Mr Preston Bruce once again spoke on the matter in Parliament, asking Mr Northcote "Whether the expert of the Local Government Board has inspected Fort Burgoyne, with reference to the cases of typhoid fever which occurred there; whether he reports the sanitary condition of those barracks to be satisfactory, or as in need of improvement; and, whether it is still intended to quarter here, about the 23rd instant, a portion of the 4th Brigade Royal Artillery (Fife Militia)?"

Mr Northcote replied that "The Report of the Inspector of the Local Government

Board as to the sanitary condition of Fort Burgoyne has not yet reached me; but the General Officer at Dover has telegraphed that the Inspector is of opinion that the fort will be in a perfectly sanitary condition, providing certain small alterations are made. These can easily be effected before the 23rd instant; and, under these circumstances, the 4th Brigade, Scottish Division, Royal Artillery, will be moved there on that date."

Fortunately, the stay of the Fife Militia at Fort Burgoyne during the summer of 1887 appears to have passed off without further incidence of typhoid and, save for the 1897 Maidstone epidemic, there were no further reported outbreaks of typhoid in Kent.

The Maidstone epidemic was the last of the 19th century, commencing mid-August and over by the year's end, with a total number of 1847 reported cases including 132 deaths, the cause reportedly being traced to extremely low standards of accommodation and sanitation at nearby hop gardens, although the hop-pickers only arrived at those accommodations on 20th August and the incubation period for the disease is at least two weeks. Moreover, the Public Inquiry found no evidence of typhoid among the hop-pickers themselves, but did observe that the privately owned Maidstone Water Company had, at the request of the Town Council, reduced the frequency with which samples of the water supply were tested from monthly to quarterly intervals, the last of the samples before the epidemic began having been taken in June.

A successful trial of a typhoid vaccine developed by bacteriologist and immunologist Sir Almroth Edward Wright was subsequently carried out among the staff at nearby Barming Asylum. Having graduated in medicine in 1883, Wright

worked with the British Armed Forces to develop vaccines and promote immunisation and by the early 20th Century a widespread typhoid vaccination programme had been introduced.

Problems with sanitation at Dublin Barracks continued, with a March 1889 article in the *British Medical Journal* reporting a memorandum written by Mr Stanhope that "A sum of £10,000 was taken for services in connection with the Royal Barracks at Dublin, the sanitary conditions of which have attracted our very serious attention." The Barracks remained occupied, however, and were taken over by troops of the Free State Army in December 1922 when they were renamed Collins Barracks. They were only closed as recently as April 1997, having been in continued occupancy since 1704.

Lt Herbert St David Jarrett lies within St Mary's Church burial ground, Harrow on the Hill, Middlesex.

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*Sir Almroth Edward Wright,
Bacteriologist and Immunologist*