

The Northumberland Fusiliers in Abbottabad, 1879*

By Omer S.K. Tarin

In Abbotabad's Old Christian Cemetery (established around the same time the town was, c. 1853), there are many old and fascinating graves of European people dating from between the 1850s to the 1940s—each grave telling a story, or in some cases, linked to broader historical contexts of the British colonial period. While many of these graves have either some inscription/s identifying them, or some sort of record in the old registers at nearby St. Luke's Church, there is one very interesting monument that has remained unidentified for a very long time, until only a short while ago.

One fine day, I went along with Rev. Riaz, the Vicar of St. Luke's, to have a look at the Old Cemetery (OCC) where some *mazdoors* were cleaning up the rough and wild grass and restoring the cemetery to order. There, hidden in a clump of grass, was a short stone obelisk, a sort of memorial or monument, which was in an extremely poor state, and which stated:

“In mem [ory] of:

P[vte] Carroll

P[vte] J. Bird

[Pvte] W. Bodycott

[Pvte] M. Jamerson (sic)

[Pvte] W. Barrett

--- G. Bodycott

---W. Davie

Of the Ist ---, who died in 1879 and were buried near this spot.”

Now, this was a fine mystery indeed! Who could all these soldiers have been, who died together here in Abbottabad in 1879 and were buried somewhere near this obelisk set up to commemorate them? Most of the British officers buried at the OCC Abbottabad were one way or the other connected to *Indian Army regiments*, i.e. commanding native troops; but these were all names of English/British privates/soldiers, so, rather obviously, they belonged to a British regiment or battalion posted in India (not too common, really); and a regiment which had been in Abbottabad, sometime during 1879, for some reason, and some sort of tragedy had claimed a number of them. What had happened, then?

Between Spring 2009 and Autumn 2010, the names on the mysterious obelisk led me on a fine chase. The main records at St. Luke's were silent, and all the regimental archives in Abbottabad (the Frontier Force and Baluch regiments) and Rawalpindi (army archives/records) yielded nothing at all. Similarly, a thorough search of the British Library's India Office Records (OIOC) proved negative. I was quite nonplussed at this stage but, by a wonderful stroke of luck, one day a small glimmer of light revealed itself, suddenly! The very kind Vicar at St. Luke's, Rev. Riaz Mobarek, knowing my mad predeliction for historical research, graciously opened up access to all his church records in Abbottabad. After weeks of digging through these, one day I came upon a very small entry in a diary by one Rev. Henry Fisher Corbyn, to the effect that the men listed on the obelisk were from the 1st Battalion of the 5th (Northumberland) Fusiliers and that they had

died at Abbottabad during an outbreak of cholera, in June of 1879.

Now, this was something to go on at last. Armed with this basic knowledge, an approach was made to the regimental museum of the Northumberland Fusiliers, which very much still exists and thrives in ---; and where Mrs. Lesley Frater of the museum's staff, in response to my query, very generously made available (a) various extracts from the regimental journal the *St. George's Gazette* for the period 1878-1889, which also included a digest of their services during this time and (b) also pointed out an extremely useful volume, by Private H. Cooper, *What the Fusiliers Did, an Account of the Part Taken by the 1st Battalion, 5th Northumberland Fusiliers, in the Afghan Campaigns of 1878-79 and 1879-80*, which was originally published privately in Lahore, 1880, and reprinted by the Naval and Military Press, UK more recently. From these, and other sources, it was finally possible to discover what the 1st Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers was doing in Abbottabad in 1879 and something, too, of the circumstances surrounding the outbreak of cholera there at that time.

In October 1878, the Battalion, then on a tour of duty in India, was stationed at Chakrata, where they received notice for service in Afghanistan—in what was to be termed the 'Second Afghan War'—and about the end of October, they set out, 775 of all ranks, bound for Peshawar.

After a period of relative inactivity at Nowshera and Peshawar, the battalion was moved to Jamrud in December of 1878, and for the next three months, were deputed to escort convoys up the Khyber Pass; and also took part in a few small skirmishes with the local tribes. On 21st March 1879, the Battalion was then moved up the Khyber Pass to Basawal and remained there for about two months, engaged in several actions and faced with regular night-time raids on them by local tribesmen, out for loot. One young man, Private Ashton, who stepped out of camp at night to answer a call of nature, and was 'cut to pieces'. It was very hot and there were many sandstorms and hordes of flies and illness, including cases of cholera, broke out and these were quarantined in a 'cholera camp'.

The situation became rather worrisome for the 1st Battalion, 5th Fusiliers, when thankfully and opportunely, on 26th May the Ameer of Afghanistan sued for peace and a (temporary) peace treaty was signed whereby a British Resident and his garrison/team were to be stationed in Kabul. In the first week of June, the 1st Battalion was ordered to march out and go to Abbottabad, to spend the summer there and rest and recuperate after their exertions. On the 8th of June, they came down from the Khyber Pass, in hard, searing weather, and, in the words, of Private Cooper:

“We started off again on the morning of the 11th [June] marching day after day until we arrived at Hasan Abdul (sic). The march thus far had been extremely fatiguing, on account of the intense heat, which at times was over 130 degrees in the tents. I am sorry to say we lost many men on the road from cholera, and as no coffins could be procured for the bodies, they were each sewn up in a blanket and buried near the road side with nothing but a stone to mark their graves”. Having now left Afghanistan and the Frontier far behind them, the entire battalion marched on doggedly and finally reached Abbottabad by 21st June 1879, the various companies stretched out, marching in slowly over 2-3 days. Private Cooper was very glad to get there:

“Next morning, we marched to Abbottabad, which is a beautiful place, full of fine trees. A splendid little English church [St. Luke’s] stands near the centre of it, which puts one in mind of the country villages at home. We pitched our tents in rear of the cantonments on a nice, grassy piece of ground which was as level and well-kept as a gentleman’s lawn. We not thought we were rid of that foul disease, cholera, but unfortunately during the two days we stayed there, several fresh cases occurred; all of which, I am sorry to say, proved fatal”.

In fact, someone had blundered. The poor 1st Battalion of the 5th Fusiliers had not been camped ‘in rear’ of the cantonment and the populated area/s but almost in the middle of these. No cases of cholera had occurred in Abbottabad prior to the arrival of the 5th Fusiliers, but before long it was not only the soldiers that were succumbing to it. Cases began to appear among the local inhabitants and this caused a concerned and indignant European resident of the hill town to write an angry letter to the *Pioneer* newspaper:

“Sir, The 5th Fusiliers arrived at Abbottabad a few days ago, en route to their new hill station [supposedly up in the *Galiyat* hills]. Instead of camping on open ground, this Regiment, fresh from the ‘cholera wave’, pitched their tents on the parade ground of the 6th Punjab Infantry in a low situation, and almost in the midst of the cantonments. Instantly, streets and bazaars were swarming with soldiers and camp-followers, carrying infection wherever they went. What was the consequence: cholera immediately broke out where not a single case had before existed; and Abbottabad is now having its turn of this frightful complaint. Who the gentlemen were who thrust the Regiment down in the middle of the town, I know not. But I do know that the whole land, with plenty of water, was before them to choose a suitable camping ground as they please[d]”.

Once again, the miserable Fusiliers were ‘shunted out’ and sent up to the *Chungi* (toll station) on the Nathiagali road, into an isolated situation up a nearby hill, where they had to labour to set up their own barracks for the rest of the summer; finally obtaining some respite by end-July of the year. The respite itself didn’t last too long, because back in Kabul, the Afghans duly massacred the newly-appointed British Resident, Sir Louis Cavagnari, and his little garrison and thus the second phase of the Second Afghan War commenced; and on 29th October 1879, the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers set out, back to the fighting again and, at very long last, went back home to England in late 1880. However, during their little time up in the hills, they were at least able to make or commission the present little obelisk/monument to their comrades who died in Abbottabad, on arrival, resulting in public outcry.

Private Cooper, in a poem which concludes his volume, has the last word:

“But wars and disease their victims will have,
And no-one on earth can say nay;
No man can prevent the cold hand of grim death
From taking his comrades away;

May their faces and names on your minds be engraved,
May you ever remember each man;
Who fell mid the battle or from foul disease,

In the campaigns in Afghanistan.”

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