

AN ECCENTRIC ENGLISHMAN

In this article, Derek Barnard gives some further information about the time which William Cobbeit spent in the Medway area and his sufferings under military rule.

The article on that eccentric Englishman, William Cobbett, in the last *Newsletter* prompted me to enlarge on his stay in Chatham. The information is from *William Cobbett: Englishman* by Anthony Burton, published in 1997 by Aurum Press. Anyone with the slightest interest in history will find this book a delight as it describes the life and times of this man of humble birth who, through self education, proved that the pen is mightier than the sword and became famous throughout the land.

Leaving home at ten he had various jobs, and at the age of sixteen, finding himself in Portsmouth, attempted to join the Navy but was refused. During a short stay in London he saw a poster advertising the Marines and walked to Chatham to join up. He took the King's Shilling but found he had enlisted into His Majesty's 54th Regiment of Foot, the West Norfolks.

'When I told the captain that I thought myself engaged in the Marines "By Jasas, my lad," said he, "and you have had a narrow escape." He told me that the regiment into which I had been so happy as to enlist was one of the oldest and boldest in the whole army, and that it was at that time serving in that fine, flourishing and plentiful country, Nova Scotia. He dwelt long on the beauty and riches of this territorial paradise, and dismissed me, perfectly enchanted with the prospect of a voyage thither.'

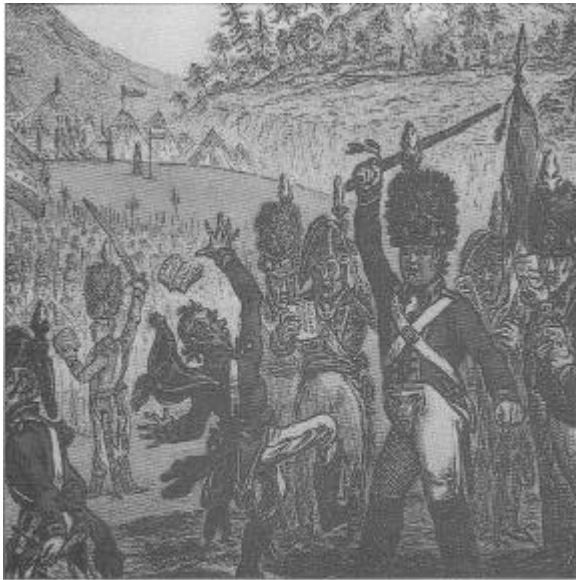
William then faced up to a very miserable thirteen month stay in Chatham Barracks on the wretchedly low pay of sixpence a day. 'Of my sixpence, nothing like fivepence was left to purchase food for the day. Indeed, not fourpence. For there was washing, mending, soap, flour for hair powder, shoes, stockings, shirts, socks and garters, pipe-clay and several other things to come out of the miserable sixpence! Judge then of the quantity of food to sustain life in a lad of sixteen, and to enable him to exercise with a musket weighing fourteen pounds, six or eight hours every day.'

'I remember, and well I may! that upon one occasion I, after all absolutely necessary expenses, had, on a Friday, made shift to have a halfpenny in reserve, which I had destined for the purchase of a red herring in the morning; but when I pulled off my clothes at night, so hungry then as to be hardly able to endure life, I found that I had lost my halfpenny! I buried my head under the miserable sheet and rug, and cried like a child.'

Only having had a few days schooling in his life, but having been taught to read and write by his father, his early experiences had made him realise that no progress could be made in life without learning. He used this period for intense self education. 'The edge of my berth, or that of my guard-bed, was my seat to study in: my knapsack was my bookcase; a bit of board lying on my lap, was my writing table; and the task did not require anything like a year of my life. I had no money to purchase candle or oil; in winter time it was rarely that I could get any evening light but that of the fire, and only my turn even of that. And if I, under these circumstances, and without parent or friend to advise or encourage me, accomplished this undertaking, what excuse can there be for any youth, however poor, however pressed with business, or however circumstanced as to room or other conveniences? To buy a pen or a sheet of paper I was compelled to forgo some portion of food, though in a state of half starvation; I had to read and to write amidst the talking, laughing, singing, whistling, and brawling

of at least half a score of the most thoughtless of men, and that, too, in the hours of their freedom from all control.'

By the time the regiment set sail for Nova Scotia in March 1785 he had been promoted to corporal and clerk to the regiment. Perhaps more important was the extra twopence a day which came with the promotion.



A Gillray cartoon showing Cobbett attempting to kick some sense into officers later in Canada.



Another Gillray cartoon lampooning Cobbett leaving the land to join the Army