

The First Green Jackets?

by
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All the histories of the former regiments which make up the Royal Green Jackets tell us that they were formed in the middle to later years of the 18th century. As a new recruit to the 1st Bn. the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (43rd & 52nd) in late 1954, I was not only trained to march at 140 paces to the minute and to carry my rifle at the trail, but I was also instilled with a pride in the regiment's long and illustrious history. Indeed, I still have my copy of Col. Crosse's *A Short History... for the Young Soldiers of the Regiment*, which was issued to all recruits, together with the programme of the Ceremonial Parade held at Osnabrück in October 1955 to mark the bicentenary of the 52nd. If my memory serves me correctly at a distance of nearly half a century, I was a member of the No. 1 (Escort) Company under Major Dennis Fox that day. But over the past few years I have often wondered if the spiritual and territorial origins of the Oxford and Bucks don't go back a lot further - to the time of the English Civil War.

As a boy I was proud of the fact that I was born and brought up in Buckinghamshire, and learned to cherish the history and traditions of that county. Listening to an episode of 'Children's Hour' at the age of 9, I learned of a fellow countryman from the 17th century whom I have studied and admired ever since.

Though virtually unknown these days compared with his more illustrious cousin Oliver Cromwell, John Hampden was a Buckinghamshire landowner whose family traced its descent to before the Norman Conquest and who owned vast estates in several counties. Hampden followed the route of university, legal training and Membership of Parliament that was customary for men of his class in those days, but soon found himself up against the dictatorial policies of King James I and his son Charles I.

John Hampden sprang to national fame in 1637, when, like many others, he refused to pay the illegal Ship Money tax levied by the King. Although he lost the ensuing court case, Hampden's bearing and the national publicity made him the most famous man in England, and when Parliament was recalled in 1640, he was, like his descendant Winston Churchill exactly three centuries later, recognised as '*... Patriae pater*, and the pilot that must steer their vessel through the tempest and rocks which threatened it'. From this Hampden received the soubriquet 'The Patriot'.

Hampden's opposition to Royal policy made him a marked man, and in January 1642 he was one of the Five Members whom the King tried to arrest in the House of Commons. This incident appears to have strengthened Hampden's militancy, for it was he that proposed that the King place the Tower, the militia, and the principal forts in Parliament's hands. 'By God, not for one hour!', Charles retorted, knowing that control of the militia - the part-time military force in each county first raised in Elizabethan times - meant the control of the country.

When the King raised his standard in August 1642, it signalled the formal start of the English Civil War. Parliament had already appointed the Earl of Essex to be Captain General of its army, and he issued commissions to 20 colonels in July. Despite their lack of military training, Hampden and his lifelong friend Arthur Goodwin raised regiments of foot and horse respectively, and tradition has it that Hampden mustered his Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire tenants on Chalgrove Field, near Watlington, in August. He was certainly recruiting in Aylesbury the following week, but the recruits did not come exclusively from the two neighbouring counties. Captain John Raymond was drumming up as far away as Ipswich in January 1643.

Many other Parliamentary peers and gentlemen raised regiments, and they all wore coats of different colours - Denzil Holles's Redcoats, Lord Brooke's Purplecoats, Lord Saye and Sele's Bluecoats. 'Colonell John Hampden His Regt. of Foote' were known as the Greencoats from the colour they adopted.

The establishment for a foot regiment was 10 companies of varying strengths to give a total of 1,200 men, plus officers, though the Greencoats never mustered more than 963. The Colonel, Lt. Colonel and Major each had a company; the Colonel's being commanded on his behalf by a Captain-Lieutenant. Each company, which had its own distinctive colour of six-foot-square painted taffeta, was composed of pikemen - armed with an 18-foot pike of ash, and musketeers - equipped with the unreliable matchlocks - in the proportions of roughly two to one.

Under Hampden's leadership, the Greencoats were active in the early stages of the Civil War. They were involved in a skirmish at Southam, then moved on to Coventry, Northampton and, with the rest of the Army, followed the Royalists to Worcester. When both armies turned back towards London, Hampden and his Greencoats were charged with escorting the train of artillery, and arrived at Edgehill only in time to repulse Prince Rupert's cavalry who were looting the baggage train in the streets of Kington. The regiment was in the forefront of the engagements at Brentford, Turnham Green and the siege of Reading, and Hampden was noted for leading from the front. 'I have seen

Him in the front of's Regiment -in Green', wrote one of his captains in an elegy. This courageous behaviour was to be Hampden's undoing.

In June 1643 Essex quartered the Parliamentary Army, which included the Greencoats, at Thame, with outposts in the surrounding villages. On the evening of 17th June the King's nephew Prince Rupert led a party of some 2000 foot and dragoons out of the Royalist headquarters at Oxford on a night sortie to beat up several of these detachments. When the alarm was finally raised, Hampden, who had probably been out visiting the outposts, gathered together whatever troops he could find and set out to delay the returning Royalists until reinforcements could be sent from Thame to cut off Rupert's retreat.

Hampden's harrying was successful, and at Chalgrove Field, 2 miles short of the vital river crossing at Chiselhampton, an irritated Rupert halted his troops and set an ambush, lining the lane to the bridge with dragoons. The Parliamentary troops pressed on, but early in the engagement Hampden was wounded by two musket balls in the shoulder from behind. Accompanied by the faithful Goodwin, he rode to Thame, where he died on 24th June.

Everyone on the Parliamentary side was devastated by Hampden's death, and it is said that even the King offered to send his physician from Oxford to attend the wounded man. His regiment of Greencoats carried his body from Thame to his ancestral home at Great Hampden for burial, singing the 90th Psalm on the way and the 43rd on their return.

The command of the Greencoats went to Col. Thomas Tyrell, who already had his own regiment which was garrisoning Aylesbury. Under Tyrell the Greencoats took part in the relief of Gloucester and the First Battle of Newbury, and were involved in the debacle in Cornwall, where all the Parliamentary foot were forced to surrender. In October 1644 Richard Ingoldsby succeeded Tyrell as Colonel, and the regiment fought at the Second Battle of Newbury.

This was the Greencoats' last engagement as such. In 1645 they were absorbed, under Ingoldsby's command, into the New Model Army, that all-conquering force that went on to defeat the King at Naseby and later to execute him. The various coloured coats were replaced by a standard red, and when, in 1659, Col. George Monck led his New Model regiment from their posting at Coldstream across the Scottish border and down to London to effect the Restoration of the Monarchy, the colour of his soldiers' coats became that of the British Army for the next 150 years.

But history has a way of twisting around upon itself. In 1803 the 43rd (Monmouthshire) and the 52nd (Oxfordshire) regiments became Light Infantry and, together with the 95th Rifles, formed the new Light Brigade under Sir John Moore. As with the regimental rifle companies that had been in existence for some 50 years, these regiments wore green uniforms as opposed to the almost universal red. In 1881 the amalgamated 43rd and 52nd became the Oxfordshire Light Infantry, and in 1908, on the disbandment of the old Royal Bucks King's Own Militia, 'Buckinghamshire' was added to the name. When, 50 years later, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry became a part of the Green Jackets Brigade, the wheel had come full circle. I like to think that the Greencoats of the 17th century lived again. Indeed, in another form, they do. When I helped to form the John Hampden Society in October 1992 at Hampden House, a Guard of Honour was provided by Col. John Hampden's Regiment of Foot of the English Civil War Society, and their Commanding Officer, Derek Lester, became a member of the Society's committee.

When I was researching this article, I noticed that there are a couple of regimental family trees at Slade Park Barracks in Oxford. One of these apparently takes the antecedents of the 43rd back to a regiment of Volunteer Militia raised by a Colonel Bulstrode in Buckingham in June 1642. Investigation proves this to be an error dating from Victorian times and perpetuated in a number of publications. The Bucks trained bands - the portion of the militia called out for annual training - did assemble in June 1642, but at Aylesbury. Henry Bulstrode of Hedgerley, near Beaconsfield, was not involved in this, but he did raise a regiment for the main Parliamentary Army in October 1642 and subsequently became Governor of Aylesbury.

I believe that the true forerunners of those of us who were proud to serve in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were the Greencoats of John Hampden the Patriot.