

## **Sandbach History Society Report of the January 2024 meeting**

**Speaker: David Hearn**

At the January meeting of Sandbach History Society, which was held online, David Hearn gave a fascinating talk about the history of the Cheshire Yeomanry.

Mr Hearn explained that the Yeomanry were volunteer cavalry. They were a unit of the Home Service whose role was to defend against invasion at home. The other unit was the volunteer militia who were infantry. The Cheshire Yeomanry were founded by John Leicester, Baron de Tabley in 1797 in response to the threat of invasion by revolutionary France. Their cap badge was the Prince of Wales triple feathers. Baron de Tabley was a friend of the Prince of Wales, the future George IV, who gave permission for his crest to be used.

Whereas the militia were made up of working men, the Yeomanry were gentlemen farmers who were a "cut above the average" and wealthy as they had to provide their horse, uniform, and weapons. The Yeomanry were often portrayed in cartoons as a figure of fun in much the same way as the TV programme "Dad's Army" portrayed the Home Guard during World War II.

Once the threat of a Napoleonic invasion had subsided, Mr Hearn said that some yeomanry units were disbanded but others such as the Cheshire Yeomanry were kept, and their role changed to become an aid to civil power. When the Luddites threatened to smash the new machinery which they claimed would take away jobs, the Cheshire Yeomanry were engaged to protect the factories and factory owners.

The most infamous incident was the so called Peterloo Massacre when 60,000 people protested in St Peter's Field Manchester and around 1500 troops were involved to keep order. There were 400 men of the Cheshire Yeomanry there, and they opened ranks to let the protesters through. However, the Manchester and Salford Yeomanry charged the crowd resulting in eighteen deaths and many more injuries. The incident is recorded in the famous print by Richard Carlisle. (*see photo 1*)

Mr. Hearn then showed a painting from 1824 entitled "Sir John Leicester Exercising His Regiment of Cheshire Yeomanry on the Sands at Liverpool". However, Mr Hearn believes this is actually on the other side of the Mersey at Leasowe near Wallasey where the troops usually trained. (*see photo 2*)

At the time there were six troops of Cheshire Yeomanry with four officers and fifty four men. Discipline was strict and there were fines, for instance for being late on parade or for having a dirty uniform. The Cheshire Yeomanry wore the light dragoon uniform. Their main role was reconnaissance, but when they fought they would do so on foot with three men fighting and one man holding the horses.

The rest of the nineteenth century was a quiet time for the Cheshire Yeomanry until 1899 and the Second Boer War. At that time, the British army was stretched across the empire and extra troops were needed to fight the Boers. The Imperial Yeomanry was formed and volunteers from local yeomanries joined. The Cheshire Yeomanry had two companies, the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> and they embarked for South Africa at Birkenhead. Mr. Hearn showed a photograph of a group on the ship. Those in the front row are wearing spurs, bandoleers (a shoulder belt for ammunition) and slouch hats identifying them as yeomanry. (*see photo 3*). They fought a bloody war until the

Boers finally surrendered in 1902. There is a war memorial in Chester Cathedral to those from the Cheshire Yeomanry who died.

The next action came in 1914 with the First World War. The Cheshire Yeomanry under the command of Hugh Grosvenor, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Westminster, fought in North Africa and Palestine. Grosvenor developed the Rolls Royce armoured car which he used with great effect against the Sunissi tribe in Libya. Mr. Hearn showed a photograph of such a car with the armour and turret removed, and a member of the Cheshire Yeomanry driving TE Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) into Damascus. The armour was removed to show that he was not driving in as a military victor but as a liberator. *(see photo 4)*

Some of the troops in Palestine also fought on horseback as the terrain was very difficult for armoured vehicles which were often having punctures. Once the war in the Middle East was over the troops were moved to France, and some to Ireland in the wake of the Easter Rising. The horses, however, that had been transported to the Middle East were not brought back. At the end of the war an elaborate war memorial to the Cheshire Yeomanry who had fallen was installed in Chester Cathedral.

Mr. Hearn said that twenty years later in 1940 the Cheshire Yeomanry were sent back to Palestine with their horses and fought the Vichy French forces. It is believed that this was the last time that British forces fought with horses though the details of the action are unclear. Once this conflict was over the regiment were sent back to Europe as a signals regiment. Again, there is a memorial in Chester Cathedral to those who died. *(see photo 5)*

After World War 2 the role of the Cheshire Yeomanry changed and instead of horses they worked with armoured cars as a reconnaissance unit. The numbers dwindled and in 1967 there were just eight men left working in the Signals regiment. The yeomanry across the country became the Queen's Own Yeomanry and the Cheshire Yeomanry are now part of it. It is now a light cavalry unit in the Army Reserve, which still consists of volunteers who have other employment.

Mr. Hearn concluded by saying that to find out more he recommends going to Chester Castle to the Cheshire Military Museum where there is an exhibition about the Cheshire Regiment and the Cheshire Yeomanry. The staff there will be pleased to answer questions.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on Zoom on Tuesday February 6<sup>th</sup> at 8pm when David Hearn will again talk to us, this time about the history of the Cunard line. For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk>, Visitors are most welcome but please contact the Society at [info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk](mailto:info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk)

*Richard Vickery 07/01/24 (1014words)*

## Photographs

Photographs 1,2,4 and 5 are in the public domain and Richard Jackson gives permission for photograph 3 to be published.



1. Peterloo Cartoon Richard Carlile (Wikimedia Commons)



2 Sir John Leicester, Bt, Exercising His Regiment of Cheshire Yeomanry on the Sands at Liverpool, 1824



**3 Cheshire Yeomanry Imperial Yeomanry 2<sup>nd</sup> Boer War (copyright Richard Jackson)**



**4 Lawrence of Arabia entering Damascus**



5 World War 2 War memorial, Chester Cathedral