The Drinking Fountain

A Memorial to George Phipps Prevost

Estimated reading time: 8 minutes



Drinking fountain Remembrance Day 2020

A Lucky Find

While surfing for titbits on Stinchcombe's history, I found an A H Baldwin & Sons ***military sale catalogue*** from 2014. One of the lots consisted of an old photo, two infantry officer's swords, a sword belt and two tin hat boxes. So, what was the

reason it came up in my search? Well, these items had belonged to George Phipps ***Prevost***, who our drinking fountain commemorates. Luckily for me, the catalogue gives brief details of his life, including highlights of his military career. Naturally, I was inspired to find out more.

Early Life

The story begins on 10th November 1830 with George's birth in ***Chalford*** . He was the eldest son of Sir George Prevost, Baronet and clergyman and his wife, Jane. Unusually, young George's own father baptised him, at ***All Saints church*** in Bisley. At the time his father was curate to Thomas Keble, brother to leading light of the ***Oxford Movement*** , John Keble. By 1834, the family lived in Stinchcombe, where Sir George became the Perpetual Curate. No doubt we will hear more about this leading Stinchcombe resident and eminent clergymann in Our Virtual Village.

Young George was home educated until he went to university. In those days the ***student experience at Oxford University*** was very different from now. For one thing, an Oxford education was mainly aimed at future clergymen. Given his subsequent choice of career, this may not have suited George. Nevertheless, in 1852 he left ***Balliol College*** with a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Joining the Army

The following summer, 22 year old George purchased a infantry commission in the 85th Foot. Bear in mind that it was normal at the time to buy commissions. Starting out, like George, in the junior officer rank of Ensign cost over £40,000 at today's prices. Possibly the Bank of Mum and Dad helped out! Official prices for the higher ranks were hundreds of thousands of pounds in today's money. Unofficial prices in fashionable regiments were much higher.



George Phipps Prevost
by Unknown photographer
albumen carte-de-visite, early 1860s
NPG Ax9572
© National Portrait Gallery, London

A Crimean Charge

By 1855, George was with the 23rd Foot, also known as ***The Royal Welch Fusiliers***. He set out for the ***Crimean War*** in May of that year. Undoubtedly, George endured terrible conditions during his 14 months on the Crimean Peninsula. We know from his military records that he was slightly wounded on 8th September 1855. This was during the ***final attack on the Redan***, which was part of Sebastopol's fortifications. Military historians now regard the attack as unnecessary.

The sale catalogue contains a poignant quote from a letter George wrote home while waiting for the order to advance. He says he would give his eyes "for a view of Stinchcombe Hill".

Amazingly, we have a sketch of the event by eyewitness Lieutenant Radcliffe. The British lost nearly 400 men in this ill-considered action and many more were wounded. One fortunate consequence for George was promotion to Adjutant to replace a man who died of his wounds.



Charge of the 23rd at the assault of the Redan September 8th 1855

The Relief of Lucknow

Almost one year after returning to England, the 23rd Foot sailed for China. Unsurprisingly after the Crimean War its ranks contained many raw recruits. During the voyage the ***Indian Rebellion***, or Mutiny as it was called then, eropted. As a result, the ship was diverted to Calcutta.

A wing of the 23rd Foot joined ***Lieutenant General Sir Colin Campbell's*** force. Campbell's task was the relief of Lucknow, following an unsuccessful attempt 7 weeks earlier. Over 1,000 women, children and wounded were trapped in the fortress and Government buildings known as The Residency. The odds were stacked against Campbell, who had some 8,000 men against at least 30,000 rebels defending the city.

Campbell reached ***Lucknow*** on 14th November 1857 and only 5 days later had achieved his goal. This was after brutal fighting with many casualties on both sides – Thomas Jones Barker's painting presents a sanitised version. We know from his military records that George was present by 12th December so he probably missed the worst.

After soldiers had moved the survivors to safety, Lucknow was temporarily abandoned. By March 1858, George was back for its successful recapture. This time he was definitely in the thick of the action and received another minor wound on 11th March. George and Captain Duff are mentioned in despatches for their role in the advance on the iron bridge.



The Relief of Lucknow, 1857 by Thomas Jones Barker oil on canvas,1859 NPG 5851 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Medals

Members of the Lucknow relief force, including two from the 23rd Foot, won many Victoria Crosses. George himself received the Indian Mutiny medal and the Lucknow clasp awarded to troops engaged in the final operations there. He already had the Crimea medal and Sebastopol clasp. Interestingly, the engraving on the drinking fountain shows three medals. I suspect that the one on the right, with no clasp, is a medal for long service and good conduct.

Marriage

During a spell back in England George married Charlotte Arabella Anderson in 1862 . Like George, Arabella was the child of a Baronet. Sadly, the couple remained childless throughout their marriage.



Charlotte Arabella Prevost nee Anderson

Further Career

George continued in the 23rd Foot, spending time in Malta, Gibraltar and Canada. Later, he commanded the 1st Battalion of his regiment and possibly the entire regiment. During this time he was stationed in Wales, including Newport and Brecon. Newspaper articles of the day refer to social occasions he attended, often with the regimental band performing.

An article of 9th August 1880 reports that the 23rd paraded at Woolwich before sailing for India. Interestingly, it says Colonel Elgee had recently succeeded Colonel Prevost. The photograph below, taken at ***Woolwich Barracks***, may be the last of George with his beloved regiment. He is on the far right, next to the regimental mascot – a large white goat.



Col Prevost (far right) at Woolwich Barracks about August 1880

George's last post was as Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General for the Home District. Although this senior administrative position was an honour, he may have missed the cameraderie of the regiment . He and Charlotte moved to Chart Lodge, an impressive residence at Seal Chart in the parish of ***Seal***, near Sevenoaks. George died of heart disease in March 1885, only 6 months from a well-earned retirement.



Chart Lodge at Seal, near Sevenoaks in Kent

The Erection of the Drinking Fountain



A drawing of the drinking fountain by local resident John Pinch

A couple of years later, Charlotte donated the drinking fountain as a memorial to her late husband. After evening prayers on 7th July 1887, the great and good of Stinchcombe gathered for the opening ceremony. George's father gave a short address and offered up a prayer. Everyone sang the hymn "***A Living Stream***", a most appropriate choice. The water, piped from Church Farm, flowed clear and abundant.

The village mason, Mr Higgins, built the drinking fountain using local brown stone. Presumably, the date on it is the date he engraved the grey marble tablet. It shows George's three medals and a sword very much like one in the sales

catalogue. Above these are the Prevost arms, side by side with those of the Anderson family. The inscription includes fitting lines of verse from ***George Herbert's*** early 17th century work 'The Temple'.



Close-up of the drinking fountain inscription

And finally …

Do take a closer look at the drinking fountain next time you pass. While you are there, spare a thought for George Phipps Prevost who went from a Stinchcombe boyhood to events straight out of the history books.