

Thomas Theobald Oldfield (1843-1905)

Colour Sergeant 22nd Regiment (Cheshires)



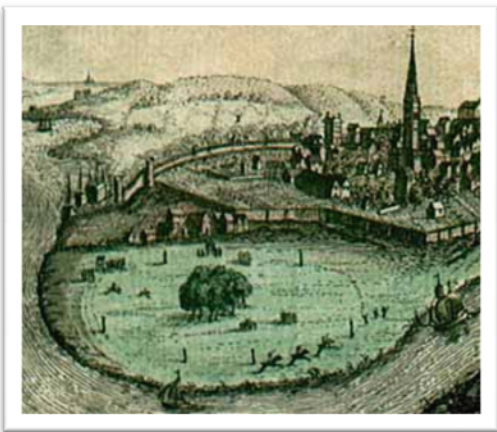
Early Years

My maternal third great grandfather Thomas Oldfield was born in Gargrave, Yorkshire on the 16th April 1843, his parents were Stephen Oldfield, a plasterer, and Elizabeth Conolly. He was their 4th child and 3rd son, ultimately he was to be one of 10 children, with all but one surviving to adulthood. The family moved to Habergham Eaves, near Burnley, Lancashire in the 1850s. The children were employed in the cotton weaving industry, with Thomas being a mule piercer¹ when he enlisted in the army.

The Army

On the 20th December 1858, in Burnley Lancashire, Thomas enlisted in the 2nd Battalion of the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment of Foot which was being formed as a new battalion. He claimed to be 18 years old, but in reality he was only 15. Was he running away from the cotton mills and/or his family?

The 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment was first raised on the Roodee in Chester in 1689 for service under William and Mary, although the regiment did not serve in Cheshire again until 1988.



Around 1615, the Roodee was described as "a very delightful meadow place, used for a cow pasture in the summertime; and all the year for a wholesome and pleasant walk by the side of the Dee, and for recreations of shooting, bowling and such other exercises as are performed at certain times by men; and by running horses in presence and view of the mayor of the city and his brethren; with such other lords, knights, ladies and gentlemen as please at these times, to accompany them for that view".

During the intervening 300 years, it spent much time on garrison duty in the Empire. At Dettingen it won the distinction of wearing the oak leaf whilst parading for Royalty and also on certain Regimental days. The story is that the 22nd protected the king (George II), who was commanding the field, from being taken prisoner by the French. The king picked a sprig of oak from a nearby tree and presented it to them. The taking of Louisburg in Nova Scotia was its most famous 18th-century event; the Grenadier Company going on with Wolfe to Quebec. A 22nd Grenadier appears to have been present at the death of Wolfe along with Ensign Browne. The regiment proceeded after the Seven Years War to the West Indies finally taking its place in New York for the American War.

A spell in India led to the 22nd being the only English Regiment in Sir Charles Napier's force to conquer the Scinde. The great battle at Meeanee on 17 February 1843 is celebrated as the Regimental Day. The Regiment spent most of the 19th century in the Indian sub-continent or its dependencies. A 2nd Battalion was raised in 1814 for a short while and it was being re-raised in 1858.

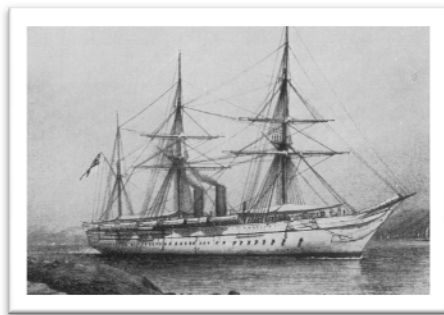


¹ Mule Piercer pieced together threads that broke in the cotton spinning mills.

Thomas's records indicate that he was first stationed at Parkhurst in the Isle of Wight. However on the 25th April 1859 the 2nd/22th was placed under orders to increase the strength of the Mediterranean garrison, stationed in Malta. They were presented with their colours by a daughter of the late General Sir Charles Napier. They embarked at Portsmouth, from Aldershot, on the 11th May 1859 arriving in Malta on the 20th May. Thomas continued at Parkhurst from May 1859 until May 1860, being admitted to Hospital with one bout of dyspepsia followed by three bouts of fever.

Upon arriving in Valetta, Malta, Thomas suffered some further bouts of fever. The battalion had a strength of 870 men, within four months of its arrival at the Floriana Barracks, it had 169 cases of fever with one death.

In September 1862 Thomas was promoted to corporal, after receiving his first good conduct pay increase in December 1861. However in January 1863 he was charged and found guilty of neglect of duty, resulting in demotion and loss of his good conduct pay. This was reinstated in January 1864 and he was again promoted to corporal in Oct 1864.



On the 13th July 1865, the 2/22nd embarked aboard the HMS Orontes, a steam propelled troop ship for Gibraltar, losing two men from Cholera during the journey. From Gibraltar they were immediately reassigned to the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, arriving on 4th October 1865. Thomas was promoted to sergeant in June 1866, just 23 years of age.

On the 6th September 1867 the Battalion (800 strong) landed at Liverpool from the HMS Orontes after a journey of 49 days. They marched through the streets of Liverpool, bronzed and healthy. From Lime-street Station they were despatched by train for Newcastle-on-Tyne. They were at Newcastle Barracks (later known as Fenham Barracks). On the 20th July 1868 at the Cramlington Parish Church, Sargeant Thomas Oldfield married Mary Jane Matthews. They became parents on the 13th August 1868 to a daughter Elizabeth.



Mary Jane Matthews was the daughter of John Matthews, a coal miner, and Ann Perry. She had been born in Buckland Monachorum in Devon in 1844. Cramlington was a colliery village a few miles north of Newcastle. John Matthews was one of the 295 experienced miners who "invaded the north" from Cornwall, Devon and Dorset in December 1865. They were brought in by the pit-owners as "strike-breakers", and stayed, though marginalised, as there was no work back in the West Country.

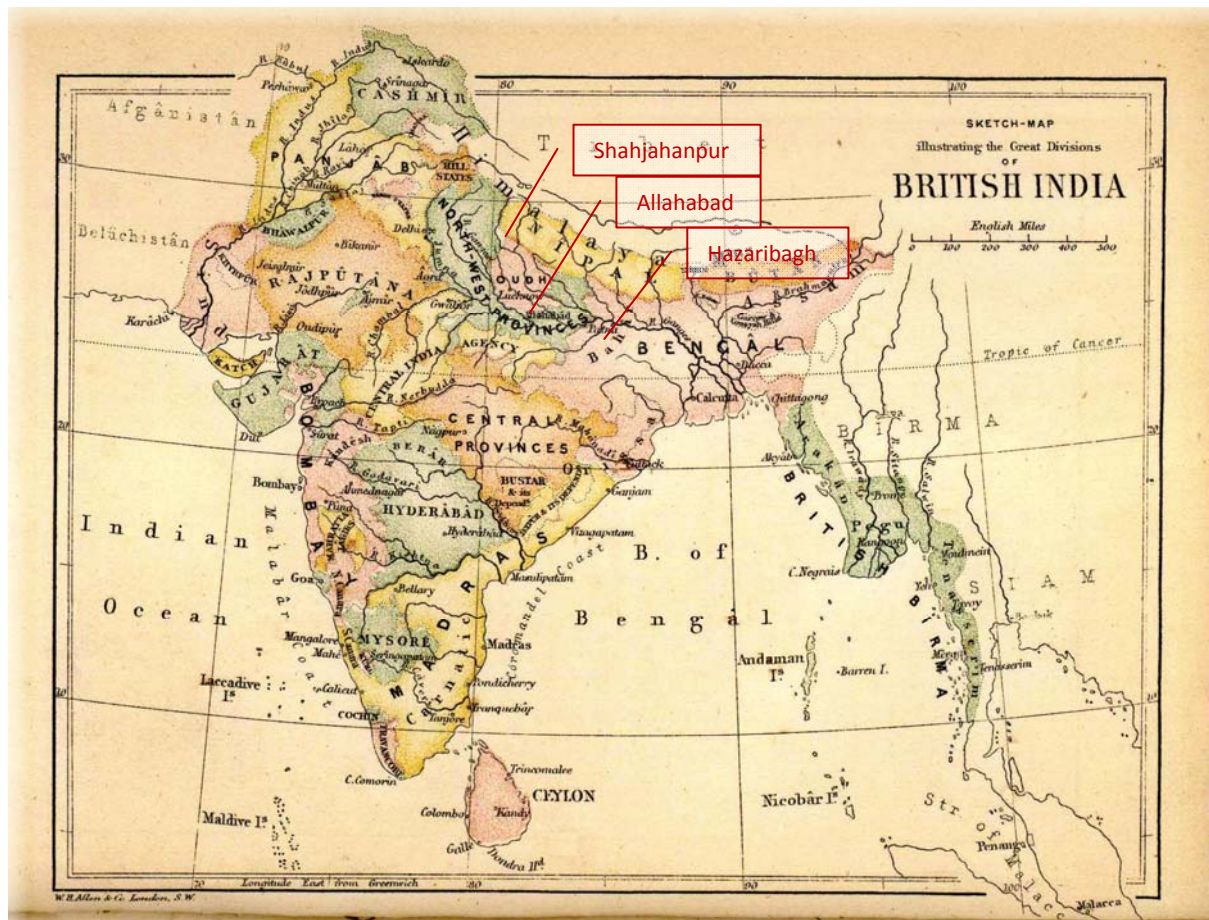
The battalion was moved to Hillsborough Barracks (pictured) in Sheffield in April 1869. In January 1870 two companies of the regiment were deployed to Thorncliffe following riots against strike-breakers being brought in by mine-owners. There were also concerns, following Fenian Riots in Manchester, with potential of calling out the troops if necessary.



The regiment moved to Aldershot in September 1870. In the 1871 Census Thomas was recorded with the battalion in Aldershot, while Mary Jane was with her parents in Cramlington. Elizabeth has not been found in this census.

In April 1872 Thomas was appointed Colour Sergeant for the battalion, but only for four months. In September of this year the battalion was transferred to Fermoy, county Cork, Ireland for just over a year before being ordered to India, arriving in November 1873.

The battalion remained in India, first at Hazaribagh in Jharkhand (1873-1875), then Shahjahanpur (1875-1878) and Allahabad (from 1878) in Uttar Pradesh.



In April 1875 Thomas was again promoted to colour sergeant. Historically the colour sergeant protects the ensigns who are responsible for carrying their battalion colours to rally troops in battle. During ceremonial events it is from the colour sergeant that the ensign collects the colours of the

battalion or regiment. For this reason, to reach the rank of colour sergeant is considered a prestigious attainment, granted normally to those sergeants who had displayed courage in the field. In this case Thomas, and presumably the battalion, had not been in action during his term of service. Pictured are the colours of the 1st Battalion, with which the 2nd was amalgamated after WWII.



In 1879 Thomas married again to Mary Josephine Austin, a native of Ireland, possibly a widow. What happened to his first wife is a

mystery. Whether she and his daughter had accompanied him to India is also unknown. However his intended place of residence after his discharge in 1880 is 3 Albion Row, Cramlington – possibly indicating that this is where his daughter was residing, with her grandparents.

On the 9th March 1880, a regimental board was held to verify and record the services, conduct, character and cause of discharge of Colour Sergeant Thomas Oldfield. The termination was at the completion of his second period of engagement and after 21 years 77 days service of which over 13 years was spent abroad. On discharge he was described as 5' 7½" tall, grey eyes, brown hair with sallow complexion and no scars.

Soldiers of the regiment were rewarded for good conduct with good conduct badges and small increases in pay. A handful of outstanding soldiers are chosen each year for good conduct medals and gratuities. Below is outlined his rewards for good conduct and the granting of his Silver Medal.

24/12/1861	Granted first Good Conduct Badge and pay increase
28/01/1863	Found guilty of neglect of duty and lost good conduct pay
24/12/1866	Granted second Good Conduct Badge and pay increase
24/12/1870	Granted third Good Conduct Badge and pay increase
24/12/1876	Granted fourth Good Conduct Badge and pay increase
10/04/1878	Granted Silver Medal for Long Service & Good Conduct with a gratuity of £5
23/12/1879	Granted fifth Good Conduct Badge and pay increase



A circular silver medal on ornate swivel scroll suspension; the face with a trophy of arms, an escutcheon with the royal arms centrally; the reverse inscribed 'FOR / LONG SERVICE / AND / GOOD CONDUCT' above an arabesque. The medal was instituted in 1830 and has undergone various changes in design and award criteria since that date. At the time this example was awarded, the requirement was 18 years' exemplary service.



After the Army

A black and white photograph showing the exterior of the Old Rectory. The building is a large, multi-story stone structure with several windows and a prominent chimney. It is situated on a street, with a paved area in the foreground and some parked vehicles visible on the left. The photograph is framed by a white border.

His daughter Elizabeth, aged 12, is a boarder at St Ann's Industrial School and Orphanage in Cale Street, Chelsea. It was a convent school for poor girls run by the Daughters of the Cross, a Belgian Catholic order of nuns.

[illegible]

His own daughter returned to Northumberland and married Samuel Seccombe on the 12th June 1886. She gave her age as 20 (she was 17), describes her father as Thomas Oldfield, coal miner, and is given away by her uncle George Matthews. The relationship between father and daughter does not appear close. Samuel Seccombe was born in Cornwall and travelled with his family to Northumberland to break the miner's strike. Elizabeth and her family moved to the coal mines of Reynoldsville in Pennsylvania in 1887 before returning to Northumberland in the mid 1890s. My great grandmother Elizabeth Ann Seccombe was born there in 1889. Thomas's daughter died in 1950, twenty years after her husband Samuel, both in Northumberland.

One of Thomas's stepdaughters, Margaret Dixon, married John Nicholls on the 26th December 1887. In the 1891 Census John Nicholls is the bar house keeper of "The Anchor" in Staines Road. Thomas Oldfield is a master baker, living in Tivoli Road, with wife, stepdaughter Mary and a granddaughter Elizabeth Nicholls.

² There were two. The Royal Elthorn Regiment of Militia Light Infantry or the First Middlesex (East) Regiment of Militia. In 1881 they became the 3rd and 4th Battalions of the Middlesex Regiment, later the 5th and 6th Battalion when the Regiment was augmented by two territorial battalions, those called the 3rd and 4th.

Mary married John Fairley, a sergeant in the Royal Fusiliers, on the 1st November 1896.

On the 24th February 1898 Ann Oldfield was buried at Hounslow Heath. Again Thomas wasted little time remarrying on the 21st July 1898 to Esther Holding Bexley Slade, another widow, with at least four children. His occupation was given as a house furnisher. In the 1901 census he is a house furnisher shopkeeper, living at The Anchor House in Staines Road. He appears to have accumulated a number of addresses, perhaps as a landlord – 1-6 Gloucester Road, 7-10 Tivoli Road and The Anchor, Staines Road.

At Anchor House on the 8th January 1905 Thomas Theobold³ Oldfield died of “shock from self-inflicted wounds while of unsound mind” as reported after an inquest. He was 61 and an army pensioner and furniture dealer. His estate was probated by his widow Esther on the 25th February, sworn at £303. I haven’t been able to find out what happened to Esther after Thomas’s death.

Syphilis

On the 14th January 1868 Thomas was admitted to Newcastle Military Hospital with a bubo, this was attributed to syphilis. The treatment regime was blistering and lasted 14 days. In 1866 he had been admitted to hospital in Mauritius with eczema and in October 1867 in Newcastle with pneumonia. It is possible that these illnesses are related to syphilis as well. If Thomas’s daughter was a full-term baby she was conceived in mid-November 1867. There is no evidence that she was born with the disease – she lived till she was 82 and had eleven children who all survived infancy. So it is probable that Thomas was infected in Newcastle in December 1867.

Syphilis is a very unusual disease, with unusual patterns. The first stage begins after an approximate 3-week incubation period. During this stage all symptoms appear; rash, breaks in the skin, sores, and a person feels generally unwell. After a period of about 9 months, all the symptoms disappear, even without any treatment, and the second, latent stage starts. In this stage, a person is not infectious and syphilis can only be detected through a blood test. The latent stage lasts from 1 to 50 years.

In the third and final stage - the tertiary stage the disease causes permanent damage of parts of the body; ulcers of the skin, lesions on ligaments bones or joints. Tertiary syphilis is most serious when it attacks heart, the brain or the nervous system. When syphilis attacks the brain it causes the inflammation of the brain, called "encephalitis". In a 1930 published textbook "The Human Mind", Karl Menninger gives the following description of syphilis:

“Many people who have syphilis don't know they have it. Those who do know it rarely suspect the possibility of its affecting the nervous system. Brain syphilis follows original infection by many years. It is difficult for the public to realize that syphilis far more frequently betrays itself by queer conduct than by starting skin eruptions. Brain syphilis may exist for years without being suspected by anyone, least by the victim.”

When the sickness attacks the nervous system it is called neurosyphilis, and it can kill, paralyze or render insane. The psychosis caused by encephalitis or neurosyphilis is accompanied by progressive paralysis, and it is called general paresis.

³ First time this second name had been used in official records.

This disease was most often spread through sexual contact but it also spread congenitally, where mothers would infect the infants in their womb. Most infected babies did not survive birth or infancy.

George Dartnell, Inspector-General of Hospitals, wrote to the British Medical Journal in April 1860 on the prevalence and severity of syphilis in the British Army and its prevention. He states “a very large proportion of our best and most efficient soldiers are constantly confined to hospital, at heavy pecuniary loss to the state, and loss of efficiency to the army; while considerable numbers are annually lost to the service altogether, by deaths and invaliding, from this loathsome disease.” He continues on to discuss the effectiveness of regular inspections of prostitutes as an effective means of controlling the disease, but his primary motive for writing the article was to promote the early reporting and treatment of the disease. Where he had encouraged the enforcement of mandatory reporting of the disease:

“Simple excoriations were quickly got rid of; and chancres, being in their very first stage, rapidly healed under the local application of caustic and water dressing. The men were discharged to barracks in a few days;and their constitutions were saved from the poisoning of the syphilitic virus, or of mercury given for its cure. After some time, the old cases of secondary syphilis, and sloughing buboes and chancres, were got rid of; and by the end of three months we scarcely had a case of syphilitic disease in the hospital.”

From Thomas’s medical records and his continued service in the army his infection became latent. Whether it came out of latency and was the cause of Thomas’s unsound mind at the time of his death is unknown, but is possible.

Appendices

1	1851 Census Gargrave Yorkshire Thomas Oldfield
2	Movements of 22 nd Regiment 2 nd Battalion
3	Marriage certificate for Thomas Oldfield and Mary Jane Matthews, 20 July 1868, Cramlington Parish Church
4	Birth certificate for Elizabeth Oldfield, 13 th August 1868, Shankhouse Cramlington
5	1871 Census Aldershot Hampshire Thomas Oldfield
6	1871 Census Cramlington Northumberland Mary Oldfield
7	Service Record (on discharge) for Thomas Oldfield of 2/22 nd Regiment of Foot, 9 th March 1880 Allahabad
8	1881 Census Heston Middlesex Thomas Oldfield
9	1881 Census Chelsea London Elizabeth Oldfield
10	Marriage certificate for Thomas Oldfield and Ann Dixon, 24 February 1886, St Paul's Hounslow
11	Marriage certificate for John Nicholls and Margaret Dixon, 26 December 1887, St Paul's Hounslow
12	1891 Census Heston Middlesex Thomas Oldfield
13	Marriage certificate for John Fairley and Mary Dixon, 1 November 1896, St Paul's Hounslow
14	Marriage certificate for Thomas Oldfield and Esther Slade, 21 st July 1898, St Paul's Hounslow
15	1901 Census Heston Middlesex Thomas Oldfield
16	Death certificate for Thomas Theobald Oldfield, 8 th January 1905, Hounslow

References

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