

## **LT. COL. JOHN SHEFFIELD GILBERT RYLEY**

### **A short history of an Officer in the British Indian Army**

#### **‘A grave uncovered, a life rediscovered’**

In 2009 as part of a ‘tidy up’ in our churchyard of St.Peter and St.Paul, Bleadon, a gravestone was uncovered which bore an inscription that aroused the curiosity of those who had found it. Although the lettering was very indistinct eventually the following was revealed:-



**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**  
**LT. COL. JOHN SHEFFIELD GILBERT RYLEY**  
**LATE OF THE 5<sup>TH</sup> BENGAL LIGHT CAVALRY**  
**DIED IN BLEADON MAY 31<sup>ST</sup> 1891 AGED 83**

After some basic internet research I discovered that the 5<sup>th</sup> Bengal Light Cavalry along with other similar regiments had played quite an important role in the Anglo-Afghan and Sikh wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as being heavily involved in the Indian Mutiny. This got me wondering about the life and exploits of this officer from the Indian army, and how he had come to end his days in Bleadon. To this end I posted a notice on the village website asking if anyone knew of the whereabouts of any of his descendants.

Earlier this year, having almost forgotten about it all, I was amazed to receive an e-mail from a Mr Hugh Davies informing me that his wife was a descendant of John Ryley, (distaff side), and he sent me some details concerning the life and career of our mystery Indian Cavalry officer.

Here is his story as far as we know it; most of the facts may be verified from official records of the time, along with historical details of the battles. Other information has been gleaned from Census records and various registry entries.

John was born on August 16th 1808 in London to John and Charlotte Catherine Ryley and was baptised in Marylebone several months later on February 17th 1809. At this time his father was a Justice of the Peace and may have been Deputy Lieutenant of Hertfordshire, therefore a man of good position

John attended Harrow school from 1823 -1825 and after becoming a cadet there he went on to pursue a military career, arriving in India in late 1826. Here he took up his post as a Cornet in the 1st Bengal Light Cavalry. This rank was the lowest grade of commissioned officer in the British Cavalry and his duties would have traditionally included carrying the standard or 'Cornet'. (After the Army Reform Act of 1871 this rank was replaced by that of 2nd Lieutenant).

Later in September of that year he was posted to the 2nd Bengal Light Cavalry and after promotion to Lieutenant eventually went on to become the Adjutant to this regiment in 1834, during the Jodhpur Administration.

It was at this time that he met Marianne Christian Walker Watkins and they were married in Delhi on September 20th 1838. Marianne herself came from a good army background, being the granddaughter of Mary Cooper (née Skinner) whose brother was Colonel James Skinner, founder of The First Bengal Cavalry, better known as Skinner's Horse. This was one of the most famous cavalry regiments during the turbulent times of the Raj.

In 1839, during the First Anglo- Afghan war John fought in the battle of Ghazni (or Ghuznee), famously a very bloody affair, and was awarded a medal for his services. After the disbandment of the 2nd Light cavalry he went on to do duty with the 3rd Light Cavalry in 1841, following that he was posted to the newly raised 11th Light Cavalry in 1842 and then finally to the 5th Light Cavalry at the end of that same year. We next find him as Station Staff officer at Landour in 1844 where he stayed until 1848, during which time he was involved in the First Sikh War, a conflict between the British East India Company and the Sikh Khalsa Army. He was decorated further for his actions as Battalion captain during the battle of Sobraon in 1846; he went on to be involved in further engagements during the 2nd Sikh War and in 1848 was badly wounded at the battle of Ramnagar.

After this time we can only assume that John was no longer able to be a fighting cavalryman as his army record appears to end here and the next time we hear of him he is in Scotland with his family. The census of 1861 shows John and his wife living in Edinburgh along with their 3 young children, and Marianne's mother, Maria Watkins. They are maintaining a large house and employing at least four servants. 1871 finds them still there although by this time their son Sheffield doesn't appear on the list - sadly there is no further record of him so there is a possibility that he died in childhood.

At some point during the following twenty years John and Marianne moved from Edinburgh to Somerset, where they are listed, in the census of 1891 as living in 'Seaview', Bleadon, along with 2 servants. The reasons for the move will never be known but perhaps the sea air in this part of the world may have been more beneficial to their health; Weston-super-Mare at this time certainly had a reputation for being a favoured resort for Victorian society. After John's death in May of 1891, Marianne moved away from Bleadon to Surrey, where one of her daughters was residing, and she outlived her husband by some 23 years. The registration of her death in 1914 in the Croydon area shows her as being 96 years old at the time.

Researched and written by Penny Robinson