

BATTLE AT WAR AFTER 1066



Founded through conflict, its location close to the southern coast, association with the Cinque Ports and its position as a nodal point for attack and defence combined to ensure that Battle was destined to witness much military activity during the years between 1066 and 1945.

Thirteenth century

The threat of invasion from across the Channel was ever-present; King John (1199-1216), for example, visited Battle, Hastings and Winchelsea to ensure that they were adequately defended. Then in 1215 the barons forced a legal and constitutional settlement on him at Runnymede, constraining (rather than limiting) the power and authority of the Crown. These constraints were never embraced by John, but only observed as a necessity (in any event he did not have to endure them long; he died in 1216) and still less by his son, Henry III, as his reign and self-confidence progressed. The baronial party finally brought about a showdown and in 1264 the stage was set for triumph and tragedy. Simon de Montfort, an experienced and capable soldier and son of an equally capable father of the same name who had commanded the Catholic French army against the Cathars in the Albigensian Crusade, was leader of the rebel barons. At the Battle of Lewes on 14 May 1264 de Montfort achieved a resounding victory which forced the king to peace terms that were far more constrictive than Magna Carta and left King Henry III and his son, the Lord Edward, prisoners of the barons. This is taken as being the birth of parliamentary democracy in England and earned de Montfort the title 'Father of Parliament'.

Henry III and his army of approximately 10,000 men had approached Battle on or about 3 May 1264, the king being entertained at Robertsbridge abbey; he demanded money with menaces. On arrival in Battle itself Abbot Reginald led the monks in solemn procession to the king who likewise demanded 100 Marks¹ (to which the Lord Edward added a further 40!) apparently in punishment for the murder of certain men at Flimwell; however the truth is more likely that they had been killed by the King's men. The following day the army marched to Winchelsea,² making free with the abundant wine they found in the cellars there before returning through Battle on or about 6 May on their march which ended with their defeat at the Battle of Lewes.

Fourteenth century

The Hundred Years' War, 1337–1453, has left the town with its most notable landmark, the magnificent gatehouse of Battle Abbey and the section of wall that runs toward and opposite St Mary's church. Built by Abbot Alan after obtaining a Licence to Crenellate in 1338, defensive fortification is a feature that was all too familiar in this area at the time, yet one that can hardly have ensured universal confidence. The great Cinque Port towns of Rye, Winchelsea and Hastings were each attacked and burned by the French many times despite impressive defences. But if the ports provided the first line of defence the Abbot of Battle was responsible locally for early warning (an order of 1388 required him to set-up warning beacons in the 'usual places') and he also commanded the second line of defence and a

mobile reserve. Beacons, however, were not the only warning. Being within seven leagues (21 miles) of the coast, St Mary's church was permitted only one bell to be rung for services, the full peal being reserved for invasion warning.

On 29 June 1377 Rye was sacked, the townsfolk fleeing rather than standing in defence. On hearing of this the Abbot of Battle, Hamo of Offington, armed his men to defend the villages around Battle then, learning the French plans from a prisoner, made with his force directly to defend Winchelsea. The town was saved but the French razed Rye to the ground in a five-hours fire storm before leaving. Later that year they returned and set siege to Winchelsea, sending a message to Abbot Hamo to come and redeem it. Hamo held calm in the face of much taunting from the French and his intervention saved the port, but at the expense of Hastings which the French burned, having found it to have been evacuated.

Abbot Hamo did not always meet with such success. On 15 March 1380 he was routed when attempting to defend Winchelsea and one of the armed monks was taken prisoner. Many of Winchelsea's citizens were slaughtered and much of the defences were destroyed; Rye and Hastings were again burned. Following this disaster the Abbot of Battle and others were directed to re-fortify Winchelsea.

In addition we should not think that the activities of Battle men were restricted to home defence. In 1420 John Oxenbridge, who lived at Sedlescombe, accompanied King Henry V on his final campaign in France.

Sixteenth century

The trauma of Dissolution and the break of the Church in England from Rome resurrected long-dormant fears of invasion, this time not from France but from Spain. Initial threats never materialised and later, with the marriage of Queen Mary to Philip II of Spain, fears of foreign invasion all but disappeared. However tensions between England and Spain resumed following Mary's death and the accession of her Protestant sister Elizabeth. The execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587 lit the fuse of war and the following year Spain's great Armada set sail for the invasion of England. Beacons were lit at traditional sites, blazing the alarm across the county. Known sites for beacons in the Battle area at this time were Baldslo (Hastings), Bexhill, Brightling, Burwash, Fairlight, Salehurst and Stapley (Sedlescombe). Others recorded in the seventeenth-century at Netherfield and Wartling may have earlier origins. False alarms were not uncommon and created such panic when they were sounded that the Privy Council found it desirable in 1544 to issue an order requiring beacons to be set in pairs, one to be fired if ten or more enemy ships were sighted and both in the event of a landing; however no action would be taken on sight of just one beacon in one place being lit. Nevertheless it was found necessary to further amend these instructions only a year later and from time-to-time thereafter due to the continuing false alarms.

The militia system used with relative success during the earlier wars with France was refined, particularly in the years following the Dissolution (when the military responsibilities of the Abbot of Battle were necessarily taken up by the county's Sheriffs and Lieutenants) in order to meet the evolution of weaponry following the advent of firearms and growing professionalisation of war. By an order dated 16 February 1586 Sussex was to provide 800 men, 4800 lbs each of gunpowder and lead, and six cast iron cannon together with their fittings and ammunition. Bulverhythe was identified as a potential landing site and

arrangements put in place for its defence. Winchelsea was likewise identified as strategically significant. Muster lists were prepared and updated annually, to which were appended the names of all able-bodied men aged 18-60 years who would be required to fight 'should the danger become extreme'. Although they were never required to fight, the fear remained and in 1596 erupted into panic once more when the Spanish again assembled a fleet. In 1599 it was recommended that the seven days that it took to muster the militia of Sussex for the Armada threat in 1588 was no longer acceptable and that it must stand in constant readiness to achieve full muster in a single day. 'Draft-dodging' was also noted.

Seventeenth century

Along with most of southern England, Sussex officially took the side of Parliament during the English Civil Wars. It was however spared the full rigours of armed conflict, which came no further east than Arundel, but social and religious tensions were certainly present and Battle found itself one of four venues in Sussex where specially appointed committees met to inquire into the behaviour of the clergy. These local committees reported to the central 'Committee of Plundered Ministers', which had been established by Parliament and consisted of 5-10 members who were paid five shillings (25p) per day for their attendance and took evidence under oath as they investigated ecclesiastical persons for the offences of:

- * Failure to preach the Word of God at least six times a year;
- * Blasphemy, perjury, fornication, adultery, frequenting of alehouses, drunkenness, profane swearing and cursing.

Evidence was taken without the accused being present. However, he could if he wished purchase a copy of the accusation – abuse and injustice were rife as political and personal scores were settled on both sides. There is some evidence, though not conclusive, that one of Oliver Cromwell's chaplains was Dean of Battle during this period: Henry Fisher, who was so described in the parish register when his daughter was baptised at St Mary's in July 1647.

But if Battle found itself on the edge of affairs, one of its citizens placed his duty in the heart of them. John Ashburnham (born 1603), appointed as a Groom of the Bedchamber to King Charles I in 1628 and elected Member of Parliament for Hastings in 1640, absented himself from Parliament in 1642 and moved with the Court to Oxford; the following year his estates were sequestered by Parliament. He acted as one of the King's Commissioners on many occasions including accompanying his surrender to the Scots' army and was clearly held in high regard by the King, whom he accompanied to confinement at Hampton Court and on the Isle of Wight. Ashburnham was placed by Parliament on a list of 'delinquents who shall expect no pardon, and imprisoned by the Parliamentary forces on several occasions, but he escaped on at least once to return to Court. Following the Restoration in 1660 Ashburnham was himself restored by King Charles II to his position of Groom to the Bedchamber. He returned to Parliament as a member for Sussex in 1660.

Eighteenth & nineteenth centuries (to 1815)

From 1789 the French Revolution spread fear of civil unrest and foreign invasion, thrusting Battle once more into a frenzy of active home defence. Barracks were built along Whatlington Road (where even today traces of the old parade ground gravel are reportedly encountered when gardening) and many individual properties were either built or

requisitioned to accommodate officers. A colourful social life developed in the town, ‘another Ball....by the officers,...Battell is got to be the gayest place in ye world.’³ But the presence of soldiers brought a darker side, as when a sergeant was accused of murdering a woman for her money.

From 1794 reports such as the following frequently detail military activity. Unit names, strengths and locations were published by the local press seemingly making it unnecessary for the French to use spies:

Sussex Weekly Advertiser

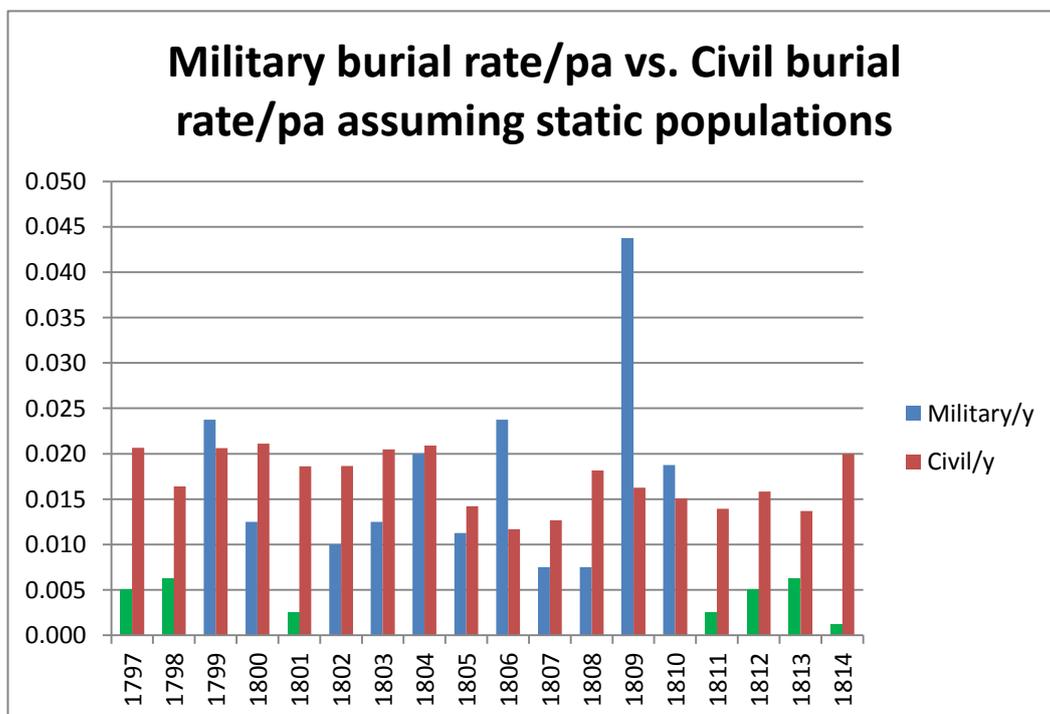
19 March 1798

‘The artillery barracks at...Battle are proceeding with great alacrity.’

23 July 1798

‘The East Kent Grenadiers from Battle marched into....Barracks on Friday.’

The barracks may actually have begun in 1797, because there were four military deaths in Battle in that year – though it is possible that they were billeted elsewhere, awaiting their own quarters. When the barracks were completed and occupied, their occupants did not have the happy history suggested above. The parish burials index lists 176 burials of military personnel and their dependents between 1797 and 1814 inclusive; the total includes nine wives and 32 children. *Non-military* burials at Battle were fairly consistent over this period, around 40 in each year with wild outliers at 27 (1806) and 55 (1814) but the military figures varied wildly. At their worst, in 1809, there were 34 against non-military 40. 24 of these were from a single regiment, the 36th Foot. (In both cases, of course, some of the dead might have been taken for burial elsewhere.)



By Keith Foord. The green entries are the exceptionally low military burial rates. The left-hand column shows the percentage of the assumed static population of the town. The chart makes the peaks, and particularly that of 1809, very clearly.

1809 was a very bad year for weather, with much snow and then prolonged heavy rain in January; there was serious flooding in some places, including London and the Thames valley.⁴ If this was a factor in the death rate, it did not seem to affect those outside the barracks, which were probably hastily-built and badly crowded. Military divisions had their own surgeons, but James Watts, medical officer appointed by the War Office, was also involved; unfortunately he left no record of why so many died. One cannot help but think that the officers of the 36th did not take as much care of their men (and their dependants) as they might have done.

An official record⁵ states that "In July, 1809 the 36th took part in the expedition to Walcheren. A noisome fever decimated the troops and in December the 36th returned home and were stationed until January, 1811 at Battle", which could explain the additional losses of 1809 but not those of the first half of 1809. On the other hand an aged resident, reported in 1902, his belief that the main cause of death was 'black fever', and that James Watts, had all clothing and bedding burned in the barracks yard.

It does not appear that the barracks caused major difficulties in the town itself. In 1802 the four-year old child of a Private was attacked by two boys and was found without hope of his recovery;⁶ he was probably John Martin, who was buried on 10 July of that year. It is unclear what happened to the boys. In 1805 three Artillery men went to court (and won the case) against the victualler on whom they were billeted, claiming that he failed to provide them with sufficient food and drink or even a proper diet.⁷ Otherwise there seems to have been nothing to report. The Abbey estate sold the barracks in 1816.⁸

As High Constable of Battle, William Ticehurst was responsible for billeting troops and his diligent records survive. In addition to the barracks and commandeered buildings, troops were accommodated in the *George* (including what is now *Simply Italian*), *The Eight Bells* (now *Costa*) and *The Chequers*. The scale of responsibility and the overwhelming impact on Battle are clear from an examination of Ticehurst's records which for the two months 18 October to 21 December 1809 show 6997 soldiers passing through the town, for 2592 of whom he was required to find billets. Evacuation arrangements were also an important responsibility for William Ticehurst and a register of carts and waggons was compiled 'in case of invasion by Napoleon to remove families up the country.' Guides were also registered. Ticehurst was effectively the founder of a family that was important in Battle for another century, filling a number of public offices and playing a full role in the community.

These records together with details of regiments in the parish registers present a rare and valuable window into the life of the town as it stood on the frontline of home defence.

There were of course many who claimed exemption from service in the Volunteer Militia and the committee set up to consider such applications for the Rape of Hastings held its first meeting at *The Chequers*, Battle on 19 March 1799.

Five local men are known or believed to have served in this period.

First there was James (name unknown) whose grave is in the churchyard. He is described as 'late lieutenant and assistant surgeon in the Northumberland Militia, who died on 11 November 1808. The churchyard also has a stone to John Boyce, aged 39, who died in March 1809; it states that it was erected by his brother officers. Neither man has yet been traced.



Much more information is available on James Watson Harvey of the Royal Navy. He was a member of the family then running the powder mills, which included 21 children of one marriage. James was baptised in 1793 and became a Volunteer First Class in the Royal Navy. The researcher responsible⁹ states that he was on the frigate *Naiad* (Captain Thomas Dundas) as a Volunteer (First Class) at the battle of Trafalgar on

This building in Mount Street is believed to have been requisitioned and used as officers' quarters

21 October 1805. The report states that he was promoted lieutenant in 1812 and in 1813 was in charge of the gun-brig *Haughty* in an assault on the port of Fiume in the Adriatic. He was made a Commander on 9 September 1815. His untimely death was ironically on the Powdermill pond, when his boat was upset; not only he but a younger brother and sister drowned. They were all buried in St Mary's churchyard, though no trace of any grave now remains. Census returns for 1841-1891 show several of Harvey's family born at Battle but none living there.

St Mary's church has a plaque to Lt Col Kingsbury (other names not given) who, it records, served 33 years to his death at the age of 46 on 14 August 1813. It states that he had been in the great siege of Gibraltar (1779-83), and in Egypt, Portugal, Spain and Walcheren during the wars after 1793. His horse was shot under him and he was seriously wounded at Salamanca, where the battle took place on 22 July 1812, but he did not die for over another year. His connection with Battle, other than his burial, is at present unknown.

The fifth man known to have served achieved the highest rank of the five and was responsible for an event made memorable by Lord Byron, with an appropriate measure of poetic licence. The first two stanzas of the nine constituting *The eve of Waterloo* are:

There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's Capital had gathered then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage bell,
But hush! Hark! A deep sound strikes like a rising knell!

Did ye not hear it?—No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing Hours with flying feet —
But hark! —that heavy sound breaks in once more,

As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before!
Arm! Arm! It is – it is – the cannon's opening roar!

Whether cannon could be heard is not known. But it is known that the news of the French arrival at Quatre Bras was brought to the ball by a Battle man, resulting in the rapid withdrawal of all soldiers there to the battle threatened at Quatre Bras. This was in the night of 15-16 June and not, as possibly suggested by the poem's title, 17 June. The man was Henry Vassall Webster of the Abbey family.



One writer states that Webster had been invited to the ball but was unable to attend:

Between 11pm & midnight, Wellington went to the Duchess of Richmond's Ball, he could not have been there long when (about 1 am) Lt Henry Webster of the 9th Light Dragoons attached to the Prince of Orange's staff, arrived.

Breathless and covered in dust and foam, he was carrying urgent news. The message Webster was carrying had left Braine-le-Comte at 10.30pm covering the distance to Brussels at high speed. He had ridden first to Wellington's HQ in the Rue Royale in Brussels.

Portrait of Henry Webster by Sir Martin Archer-Shee (1769-1850) (Hastings Museum)

Finding that the Duke of Wellington and the Prince of Orange had already left for the Ball, a servant led him to its venue. They reached there after midnight. Here Webster handed the despatch to the Prince of Orange.

The letter, from (Maj Gen Jean-Victor) Constant Rebecque contained the news that the French, who had crossed the Sambre river, invading Belgium early that morning, had that evening broken through to Quatre Bras.

Communications with the Prussian HQ in Sombreffe were therefore threatened. Napoleon was on the point of successfully driving a wedge between the two wings of the Allied forces which he then hoped to defeat in detail. A perplexed Prince of Orange passed the news to a dumfounded Duke. Now, and only now, did Wellington accept the seriousness of the situation.¹⁰

The messenger himself wrote later:

I was in my saddle without a second's delay; and, thanks to a fine moon and two capital horses, had covered the ten miles I had to go within the hour! Such as the crowd of carriages, that I could not well make my way through them on horseback; so I abandoned my steed to the first man I could get hold of, and made my way on foot to the porter's lodge.

The message clearly related to the possibility of Napoleon's men advancing to cut off Wellington from Brussels and to force his withdrawal to the Channel ports.

Webster was brother of the fifth baronet of Battle Abbey. At the time he was a Lieutenant in the 9th Light Dragoon Guards and ADC to the Prince of Orange. By 1824 he was a Captain and had been awarded the Waterloo Medal, and three non-British knighthoods: Wilhelm of the Netherlands, and the Tower and Sword and St Bento d'Avis, both of Portugal. Born early in 1793, he had joined the Light Dragoon Guards as a Cornet in March 1810. He was promoted Lieutenant in June 1811 and was slightly wounded at Vitoria in June 1813. Webster was tall: 6' 8" by one account.¹¹

Like his parents, Webster later became involved in a divorce, still a difficult end to achieve. Henry Baring MP accused him of seducing his wife. Webster did not defend himself and suffered damages of £1000; Baring's divorce took place in 1815. By this time Webster had married Grace Boddington (at St George's, Hanover Square) and they were to have two children. In 1847 – again like his father – he committed suicide, by cutting his throat with a penknife. His body was interred in the Webster vault at St Mary's, Battle. His sword is in the possession of Ralfe Whistler of Battle. Grace, by then called Dame Grace by courtesy, died at Brighton in 1866.

Nineteenth-century wars (post 1815)

Britain was very often at war after 1815, as before. The French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had a brief respite in 1802-3 and again for a few months in 1814-15, before ending in June of the latter year. British forces were in the United States in 1812-14, and involved in Portugal around 1830. There were frequent minor battles and skirmishes in India and a full-scale war in the Punjab in 1846 and then the Indian Mutiny of 1857-59. The so-called Kaffir wars in the Cape Colony carried on for several decades. There were three wars in China; the Crimea (1854-56, which included some sharp actions in the Baltic), three Anglo-Burmese wars, the Zulu wars, the first South African war of 1880-81 and the second of 1899-1902, and a variety of operations in various countries including west Africa, Crete, Egypt, the Sudan, Indonesia, New Zealand and Ethiopia.

There is little firm evidence of any involvement of Battle men in any of these operations up to 1885.

Service overseas was always dangerous, and not only for military reasons. The church records the deaths of Harriet Swain and her daughter Mary Ann, on 21 October 1821 and 25 July 1821 respectively. They were family of Major Swain of the 36th Regiment, then based on Cephalonia in the Ionian Islands. These islands had been passed to the British in 1815. They had been Venetian before the revolutionary wars and now Venice was no more and the British wanted a good base in the eastern Mediterranean. The only possible claimant was Austria, which had absorbed the rest of the Venetian lands, and Britain gave them the colony of Lissa in the Adriatic, presumably as a sweetener.¹²

Also in the church is a plaque to Lt Robert James Smee Laurence, who died on 11 April 1856. It might be thought that he was a casualty of the Crimea, but in fact he died near Bombay. He was in the 9th Regiment of the Native Infantry, and a son of Charles Laurence who ran the gunpowder works at Powdermill, and his wife Elmira Susannah.

There too is a plaque to Lt Col Everard Henry Primrose of the Grenadier Guards, who died 'in the heart of Africa' on 8 April 1885. He was the second son of the Earl and Countess of

Rosebery, born at Edinburgh on 8 April 1848;¹³ his elder brother went into history in a different way, becoming Prime Minister after Gladstone in 1894 and being remembered (among one or two other things) for his horses having won the Derby in both of the years he was at Downing Street. Their father had died in 1851, leaving their mother free to marry the man who became the owner of the Battle Abbey estate and also the last Duke of Cleveland. Everard had been military attaché at the British embassy in Vienna.¹⁴ He died of a fever at Abu Fatmeh in the retreat from Khartoum, which had been reached by Garnet Wolseley's army after its fall to the Mahdi and the death of General Gordon there; Primrose commanded the advance party in the retreat. His death prompted a letter of 'heartfelt sympathy' from the board of health to the duke.¹⁵ His kinship to the Duchess appears to have been his only connection with Battle, and after his death she wrote a memoir of him. (The Duchess is much better known for her published work drawing on the Abbey records and for restoring some of the Abbey buildings.)

Even for the South African war of 1899-1902 we are forced to look again to the church and to the scant surviving public records. The church lists nine of those who died, of which only two, or possibly three, can be traced to Battle (the memorial was commissioned and dedicated early in 1902, before the war ended, so some may have been missed.). We also know that ten men served in this war who also served in 1914-18, two of whom were killed in that greater war. (In addition, at least one returned from Africa but did not serve in 1914-18.) Given that some 60% of the 1914-18 military records were destroyed in an air raid in the second world war it is likely that several more men served, perhaps another five to ten. But the effect of the 1899-1902 war on Battle as a whole must have been small.

The church contains a memorial to Arthur Phillips, Lieutenant in the 9th Imperial Yeomanry, who was killed at Kokskraal on Christmas Day 1901. Improbably or otherwise, the stone records his last words as *Never surrender while there is a man unhurt*. A newspaper report¹⁶ states that this remark was the rejoinder to another officer's cry that *We shall have to surrender; we have had so many men hit*. It adds that almost immediately Phillips was shot twice and died about half an hour later.

Unfortunately the surviving public records do not allow us to identify him closely. He was *probably* the son of William, a retired schoolmaster born in Suffolk and living in the town in 1911. He and his wife Amelia had a son Arthur born in 1880, among other children. Kokskraal is near Somerset East in the present Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. At the end of 1901 the Boers were engaged in a guerrilla war against the British, their main towns having been taken from them by 1900.

According to one website account, Phillips first served in the ranks, then four months with the Provisional Transvaal Constabulary before being commissioned.

On 25 December 1901, the waggons which formed the baggage train of Major A.C. Hamilton's column had reached the farm on their way northwards when they were surrounded by some 200 burghers under Asst Chief-Cmdt J.B.M. Hertzog and Asst Chief-Cmdt C.T. Nieuwoudt. The waggons were captured and set on fire and 57 prisoners taken; of the escort, four were killed and five wounded (seven wounded, one fatally). The subsequent enquiry blamed the advance guard comprised of NCOs and other ranks who mistook the Boers for their own men, the main column being only 3.5 miles away.

Phillips was buried in Fauresmith near Koks kraal.¹⁷

But there is no plaque to at least two more who died.

By a contemporary account the first was George White of Jubilee Cottages, Battle Hill, a Private in the 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex. He was a former Metropolitan policeman and had served in India for some years. He does not appear on the official list of war deaths but it is clear that he was wounded at Florida in the Transvaal on 29 May 1900 and soon died. George's birth is registered in Battle in 1869, but nothing else certain about him has come to light. The report says that he left behind a widow and a child.

There is no mystery about Private John Crawley of the 1st Inniskilling Fusiliers, who died at Middelburg on 15 March 1901. The source states that he was a porter at the workhouse and was one of the first reserves to be sent out to South Africa at the beginning of the war (late in 1899). He served all through the Natal campaign under General Redvers Buller, including the battles of Colenso, Spion Kop, Tugela River and Peters Hill, and at the final relief of Ladysmith.¹⁸

Further sources state that his battalion arrived at Cape Town on about 30 November 1899 via SS *Catalonia*. He had been briefly with the Army Medical Corps but had returned to his regiment before he died of enteritis.¹⁹ It is notorious that wounds and disease were the cause of huge numbers of military deaths. The source says that he left a widow and a small child.²⁰

Crawley's name is not on the surviving records of the Volunteers and his name makes his birth difficult to trace. The 1901 census lists Minnie Crawley as a cook at the workhouse, a widow, and her daughter Gladys aged two. Minnie (Harley) came from Kensworth near Luton, and she and John were married in that district late in 1896. She did not remarry and died at Hastings in 1935. Gladys did marry but seems not to have had children.

A number of other men are known to have served:

Charles Bowers, born at Battle in 1873. Like his brother (below) he was a shoemaker, as was their father (oddly their mother's maiden name was Boots). He died unmarried at Battle late in 1915. The newspaper report states that he was at the final relief of Ladysmith in 1900.

Oscar Bowers, brother of Charles, a professional soldier born to a Battle shoemaker in 1866 who is recorded in the 1891 census as a Private in the 10th Hussars, in barracks at Aldershot. He married Jane Butler at Hastings in 1893 and they had four children. He is recorded as a bootmaker at St Leonards in 1911. He died at Battle in 1940.

Private William Thomas Burt, born at Hastings in 1874 and a postman at Battle. He married at Dublin in 1894 and went on to have eight children. One was Pretoria May, born in June 1900, the month in which the Transvaal capital fell to the British. Burt earned the South Africa Medal and Clasp for his service with 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex. In the 1911 census he is listed as a postman and boot repairer at 42 High Street. He served again in the First World War, enlisting in March 1915 and being discharged in April 1919. He died at Hastings in 1956. Pretoria May married and died in Glamorgan in 1989.

Gunner Carter is mentioned in a newspaper report of 1901, which states that he was 'of Netherfield'. A prolonged search of records has failed to identify him; the Carters of Netherfield were a prolific family.

William Coomber was born at Mersham near Ashford in 1871. The source is again the Hastings and St Leonards Observer; from later Chelsea Pensioner records we know that he was in The Royal Sussex. We do not know where he fought. We do know a little more about him, mainly through First World War records: enlisted in 1918, he served with the Road Construction Company of the Royal Engineers. The war records say that he and his wife Rose (Leeves), whom he married at Hailsham in 1903, had six children. Earlier records show that in 1891 he was living in Mount Street (probably at Lewinscroft) and was a painter and by 1911 he was a carriage painter at Hailsham. The war records have him as a coach builder. He died at Hailsham in 1944.

Edward Charles Ellice is reported as a Captain in Lovat's Scouts, about to return in August 1901. He was of Park Dale, where his wife Margaret Georgina was living with their six children. Ellice was a Scot from a moneyed background. and a professional soldier born about 1858. He was commissioned in the Grenadier Guards in 1877 and promoted Captain in 1886. He then retired but in 1900 he joined Lovat's Scouts as a Captain. After the war he chaired the Battle Liberal Party but was elected Liberal MP for St Andrews Burghs in 1903; lost the seat very narrowly in 1906. His wife was the daughter of a local Liberal MP, Freeman Freeman-Thomas, who crowned his career by being Viceroy of India and being created Marquess of Willingdon. Ellice died in Invernesshire, where his family had its estates, in 1934.

Henry McLaren Lambert was the son of Edward, owner of the Telham Court estate to which he was heir. Born in 1879, he joined the army after school (Harrow) and university (Cambridge), being commissioned Second Lieutenant in 1899. He was in the Orange Free State from June to November 1900, the Transvaal from January to August 1901, the Free State again from August to 1901 to March 1902, back to the Transvaal from March to May 1902 and then in Cape Colony. He was promoted Lieutenant in October 1900, and was awarded the King's and the Queen's South Africa Medals. After the South African war finished in 1902 he was posted to India and became ADC to three successive viceroys: Lord Amthill (acting, during a vacancy) in 1904, then Lord Curzon and then the Earl of Minto, and later the Commander-in-Chief Sir O'Moore Creagh. In 1907 he was promoted Captain but retired from the army in the next year, presumably after his father died.

Lambert did not return home to live, and went to Kenya, then dominated by white settlers whose social centre was the Muthaiga Club opened in 1913; he was a member. He came back to join the Royal Dragoons and was killed in the second battle of Ypres in May 1915.

Harry Ralph of Battle Hill was reported in May 1900 to be near Bloemfontein. He was in the Scots Guards. His father James was a boot- and shoemaker living at St Mary's Gardens, and Harry was born at Battle in 1877. He had returned by late 1902, like most of the other soldiers, because he then married Rose Coppins of Tonbridge at Battle. They then moved to Epsom where he became a slot gas meter collector. He died there in 1933.



John Saxby was a Corporal in 1st Battalion, The Royal Sussex, enlisting at Hastings in March 1900, giving his mother's address as Sandpits Farm, Battle. He stated then that he was 23 years and 7 months old, but all official documents suggest that he was born rather later, in 1879. In 1881 the family were living at the end of North Trade Road nearest to the town. He was not in South Africa long, returning for discharge in June 1901. He became a farm bailiff and in 1911 is recorded at Armitage, a village between Rugeley and Lichfield. He married Muriel Helen Freeman in 1927 and they had one son. He died at Oakham in 1961.

Picture of John Saxby, presumably in South Africa, by courtesy of his great-niece Gina Docherty who also provided much of the information about him

William White is reported to have been a member of the fire brigade when he joined the Imperial Yeomanry at the end of 1900. From a search of all the records it appears to have been William Harold, a hoopmaker of Spital Hill, born at Battle in 1860 and dying at Hastings in 1925. He went to South Africa to do hospital and ambulance work for the military and was to receive a medal from the Queen for his efforts. He married Frances Shaw Kirgan of Bury in 1895 and they had at least eight children. We do not know where he served.

The first world war

The military contribution of Battle to the First World War has been recorded elsewhere in considerable detail.²¹

It was in 1914-18 that a war first made an enormous impact on the town itself. More than 500 men who had been born or lived at Battle are recorded as having served in the forces, and 112 of them died in the war.²² With Napoleon across the Channel there had been a real threat of invasion a century earlier, and in 1914 the town prepared again, even if the strength of the Royal Navy was to prove sufficient deterrent to the Germans. Foreigners had to register with the police, and enemy aliens were interned; plans were drawn up and published for a retreat to the Heathfield–Burwash high ground in the event of an enemy landing; in almost every week of the war troops arrived at and left their billets on the way to the western front or on their way back. Newhaven was a major military port, and Battle a convenient staging post for the men. There were, however, no military bases close to the town, and the threat of invasion did not leave behind the tank traps, pillboxes and other

detritus of the Second World War. There was no local bombing but the sound of the artillery on the western front was often evident.

The position of women began to change. Before the war women were rarely in paid employment, though some ran shops or businesses after the deaths of their husbands; most stayed at home to look after their families, sometimes helping their husbands' work and on a few occasions working as dress-makers and laundresses. Sons went out to work as a matter of course; where daughters did they were usually domestic servants. From 1914, though, women were in great demand as nurses and assistants in the military hospitals, the nearest of which was at Normanhurst at the northern edge of Catsfield (demolished in the 1950s). The Church Hall was also used as a hospital early in the war, mainly for Belgian refugees.



Although records are sketchy at best, women moved promptly into some of the vacancies left by men departed for the front: shop assistants, messengers, some parts of agricultural work. They were also in evidence at Newbery's jam factory, reported in 1916 as employing 60 people. Women had always helped out in fields and orchards at harvest time, but now some of them worked throughout the year. Local women could not work in munition factories because there were none in the area. Some records suggest that some 4.5 million women took up work; the National Archives suggests that over one million were formally added to the workforce. When survivors returned the women generally reverted to their former roles (though we shall have no first hand

Joan Ashton, later Whistler (1893-1981)

evidence until the 1921 census returns are available), and it was not until the next major war that the long road to equality began to open up.

Moreover, at least one local woman took an active part in the war. This was Joan Ashton of Vinehall, daughter of Lord Ashton and later the wife of Hugh Whistler of Caldbec Hill. She served throughout the war, starting as a welder with the RNAS (at a time when the supply of effective welders' masks, made in Germany, were no longer available) and then with the ASC, driving empty lorry chassis to coachbuilders in England and then transporting shell supplies from the Rouen area to the front in France. She lived to 1981. Her service is peculiar in that she appears to have been a regular member of the ASC with an MT number at a time when women were confined to their own – generally home – services.²³

Women were important in the war effort not just for filling in where men had been and not just as nurses. From the very beginning, they provided what were known as comforts for the troops. As early as November the first large consignment left Hastings for 2nd Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment: it included, inter alia, 882 pairs of socks, 64 pairs of gloves and 27 of mittens, 183 handkerchiefs, 106 woollen scarves, 109 cakes of soap, 11 vests, 461 shirts and five housewives. This last was not human cargo, though the troops might have preferred

that. A 'housewife' was a kind of universal sewing and mending kit. These comforts were vital to the forces, and not only for their morale: for example, men suffered frostbite in the first winter of the war because army issue clothing was insufficient for the conditions that they had to endure. The efforts went on throughout the war.

Women also ran the billets for troops passing through. There might be 200 extra men at Battle in every week during peak periods, and premises identified as suitable were compelled by law to house them; there was of course a payment for doing so which must have been welcome at a time of rising prices. The local women would have had to deal with cleaning rooms, providing fresh linen and cooking meals; sometimes, no doubt, they would also have had to deal with drunken men.

Women would have been in the domestic front line when it came to prices. German submarine activity made the supply of basic foodstuffs increasingly short until the convoy system was introduced in 1917, which had the effect of ensuring a steady but still meagre supply. The market took the brunt of this pressure: rationing was not introduced until 1918, at first only in the south east. In its absence prices rose alarmingly. The Ministry of Labour retail price index, which had stood at 123 in 1915, rose to 203 in 1918, an increase of two thirds in three years. (Prices continued to soar afterwards.) Wages went up sharply in some areas of work such as shipyards and munitions factories but income tax rose from 1/6d in 1914 to 6s in 1918. Other taxes rose too.

World War II

Evidence of Battle's most recent home defence role is clearly to be seen along the eastern side of the town. From the rear of St Mary's church and past the church hall runs a line of 'dragons' teeth', anti-tank obstacles.



Dragons' Teeth' in front of St Mary's church hall

With as much buried below ground as appears above, these robust features were only subsequently removed where absolutely necessary such as where the High Street narrows near The Almonry or by subsequent development. Battle was designated a 'fortress' area, others being at Mountfield and at Cripps Corner where much survives today. In 1940 the area was defended by 45th Div., XII Corps, and Battle's fortress area lay on the Divisional Stop Line (a line intended to hold the enemy's advance). Occasionally the constructors left their mark in the wet concrete; Wills²⁴ states, 'At Battle, Sussex, the days' scores by the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain were recorded on some obstacles.'

How effective such measures would have been was thankfully never tested in earnest; however, the imperative for them is found in German sources. Plans for invasion 'Operation Sealion' detail for 'Landing Zone C' the 99th Mountain Regiment landing at Winchelsea Beach and making directly for Battle, whilst the 94th Mountain Regiment landing at Pett/Fairlight was to cut off Hastings and send a detachment in support of the 99th, the strategic objective for the 1st Mountain Division being the quick securing of the high ground south-west of Robertsbridge which would serve first to achieve safe landing of succeeding waves, second as a springboard for attack on London. Meanwhile the 34th Division landing, under the cover of smoke, at Cooden in 'Zone D' would broaden out, part securing the ridge from Lunsford's Cross along to Windmill Hill (Herstmonceux) and part turning from Lunsford's Cross to attack Bexhill from the rear and link up with 1st Mountain Division from Zone C.

Later in the war Battle took on the role of a garrison centre, on the edge of the militarised coastal zone, Canadians being predominant and based at Battle Abbey. The town was fortunate in escaping the frequent hit-and-run raids by fighters that plagued Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne. However there were precautions: a public air raid shelter was opened in the garden of 28 Senlac Gardens. There were also anti-aircraft batteries in a number of places.



**WWII Public air raid shelter
(note blast wall to protect the
entrance) in garden of 28
Senlac Gardens**

On 2 February 1943 Battle was visited by one such raid during which three bombs were dropped. Two failed to explode (one behind The George and one dramatically skidding off the Abbey Green and though the gatehouse of Battle Abbey; it broke in two, grazing the leg of a sentry). Had this bomb exploded the drama would have ended in spectacular fashion befitting the town's long history of bonfire celebrations, for the Royal Canadian Engineers had stored two tons of gelignite in the gatehouse – a deliverance for which residents and visitors must be forever thankful. But not so fortunate was the consequence of the third bomb, which exploded killing two residents and destroying two shops, 74 & 75 High Street, where a brass plaque may be seen affixed to the re-built no.75 (Martins Newsagent) in remembrance of Tom and Margery Giles. There were other bombs too: a cluster was dropped near La Rette farm, and incendiaries fell on Caldbec Hill but in neither case were there casualties or serious damage.

There were two days on which serious air crashes occurred in the Battle area, on 27/28 May 1941 and on 6 June 1944. The first involved a Wellington bomber flown by a Polish crew, to whom there is a public memorial at Netherfield, designed and erected by a survivor, close to

Darwell crossroads and immediately next to the crash site.²⁵ The Wellington bomber had been hit while bombing Boulogne.

These airmen were

F/Lt Bronislaw Kuszczynski, pilot
P/Officer Jan Stanislaw Woroczewski, pilot
F/Officer Cezary Wieczorek, navigator

Sgt Josef Drozd, air gunner, had bailed out over the Channel and was drowned.

There were two survivors, who bailed out in England. One of these was the creator of the memorial, Stanislaw Jozefiak, wireless operator and air gunner.

The second incident involved American flyers, and has been fully documented by a local resident.²⁶ There is a plaque to the Americans in the Memorial Halls.

The date of the crash – 6 June 1944 – is significant because there was a greater than usual air traffic on that day, and therefore collisions more likely. At about 6 in the morning two Marauder bombers collided near Battle, at the cost of eleven lives. The results would have been much worse had the crews not jettisoned the bombs the aircraft carried so that they fell harmlessly rather than be caught up in a crash. One came down near Whatlington and the other at Ashburnham Place, seriously damaging the great house there. Had the bombs not been released it may be that the Ashburnham plane would have crashed on Battle itself.

Those who died were

(Ashburnham)
Sgt George J Kyle
Lt Christian Burger
Lt Leroy A Dyer
Sgt James M Long
Sgt George W Williams

(Whatlington)
Lt Thomas Jenkins
Lt Walter Winter
Sgt George S Rogers
Sgt William C Hoeb
Sgt Ralph D Parker
Sgt Edward F Bailey

Lt Tommie Potts of the Ashburnham plane had bailed out and survived.

Less openly than these obvious incidents, it is clear that there must have been hidden bunkers for use if and when the German invasion happened. One was in Powdermill Woods, though its location may now have been overgrown and lost.²⁷ These were installations of a very basic nature in which previously designated men could hide while the German tide passed over them; the men could then organise attacks from within the occupied areas.

Post-1945

The British army has lost men in every year since 1945, with the single exception of 1968. Possibly six men of Battle have died.

The first was John Ommaney Stewart Donald, a Major in the 4th Sikh Regiment, who died in 1946. He had been born in India; his father was Sir John Stewart Donald (1861-1948), a distinguished district commissioner and political officer who was knighted KCSI in 1915. His mother was Henrietta Mary Ommaney of Chester.

The *Daily Mail* reported (25 June 1946):

INDIAN TRIBESMEN
CAPTURE MAJOR

NEW DELHI, Monday – Attempts were being made today to rescue Major John Ommaney Stewart Donald, British political agent in South Waziristan, North-West Frontier, and two of his staff, who were kidnapped in Waziristan by Mahsud tribesmen last Friday. Major Donald has been located and is being well-treated. – *Reuter*

Neither *The Times* nor the *Daily Mail* carried any further report on him. According to Victoria Schofield in *Afghan Frontier: At the Crossroads of Conflict* (Tauris Parke 2010) he was kidnapped because a particular contract had not gone to the tribe concerned, but he was ransomed after ten days' captivity. Shortly afterwards he persuaded the tribe that the ransom money should be returned. The strain on him was apparently too much and he shot himself.

Stewart had married Edith Millicent, who lived at Waverley, Caldbec Hill after her return from India in 1945, and she died there in 1985.

The gates to St Catherine's Chapel in St Mary's church commemorate another man: Lt Col Geoffrey Hildebrand DSO, who died in Palestine very near to the end of British involvement there, on 6 April 1948. On that day the 12th Anti-Tank Regiment of the Royal Artillery were involved in evacuating a large camp near Pardes Hanna near Haifa when they were attacked by irregulars, believed to be from the Zionist Irgun organisation. The sentry and three other members of the guard were held up against the guardhouse wall, shot in the back, and killed. The wireless mast was then destroyed and shots fired into the camp, killing one more soldier and mortally injuring the commanding officer.

Gnr Arnold Bell (19) from Headgate (Co Durham); Gdsmn John Byrne (35) from Gorey, Co Wexford, Irish Guards; Bdr Ronald Cambridge (19) from London; L/Bdr E Crossland; Lt Col Geoffrey Hildebrand DSO (43) from Longfield, Kent; Gnr Clifford Wood (20) from Sheffield; Gnr Cyril Cook (20) from Brigg, Lincs — RA; all killed: "as men of the 12th Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, were withdrawing from a large camp which the Army were evacuating near Pardes Hanna, north of Hadera, when attacked by Jews. The sentry and three other members of the guard were held up against the guardhouse wall, shot in the back, and killed. The wireless mast was then destroyed and shots fired into the camp, killing one more soldier and mortally injuring the commanding officer. The attackers were believed to be part of the Irgun."²⁸

Geoffrey Lancelot Hildebrand had been born in Kent on 25 April 1905, and his home was at the Mill Farm, Higham, Suffolk. His father Arthur had served in the army and had risen to be a Brigadier General in the Royal Engineers. Geoffrey's connection with Battle is unclear. He was unmarried.

The gates were erected when the Dean was the Rev Alfred Thomas Arthur Naylor, DSO OBE, formerly Chaplain to the King and with distinguished records in both world wars in which he served as a chaplain. (A stone commemorating him is inside St Catherine's Chapel.) That he was sympathetic to commemorating a military death must be certain, but there is no known connection. His predecessor, Wilfrid Wadham Youard (1888-1964), however, had retired from the Deanery to Longfield in Kent, which was Hildebrand's home village, and that must be the (perhaps thin) reason why he was commemorated in Battle.

Four other deaths have since been reported, so far without sufficient information for further exploration:

Allcorn, Robin Nicholas

Died on 23.06.2003

He was born in the Hastings/Rother district on 6 November 1978. His father was Colin J Allcorn and his mother Leslie A Willis. They married at Hendon in A1977. He was a Corporal in Royal Marines no. 4 Assault Squadron. He does not appear on the list of those killed in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Dunkerley, John Nigel

Died 10.09.1966

His birth is impossible to establish from the records. Two of his name are recorded in 1939/40: one in 1939 is John Edward, and that in 1940 (a little late for registration) does not bear the father's name. He was in the Buffs (the East Kent Regiment).

Keeley, Peter

Died 14.07.1963

He was born at Battle on 7 April 1940. His father was George Keeley and his mother May Joanna Flynn, b Gravesend 04.07.1902 (she died at Gravesend in September 1994. They married at Battle in 1927.) He died and was buried at Gosport.

Pellatt, Christopher Robin

Died 24.04.1953, in Korea

He was born at Battle on 30 January 1934; his father was Alfred Rowland Pellatt, born at Cranbrook in 1895; he died at Hastings in 1972. His mother was Florence Maud Goddard, also born at Cranbrook, in 1899. She died in the Hastings/Rother district in 1983. Pellatt was in the Buffs (the East Kent Regiment), attached to 1st Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) and served in Korea from August 1952 to July 1953, in the 28th Commonwealth Infantry Brigade. He died on 24 April 1953 and is buried in the United Nations Cemetery, Busan City, South Korea; he is also commemorated on the National Armed Forces Memorial, Alrewas, Staffordshire.

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George Kiloh

with assistance from other members of the BDHS Research Group

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See also articles in Early History section; for World War Two (military) see the World War Two article; the Ticehursts in Families; and for World War one see George Kiloh's book, The brave remembered.

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¹ A mark was a two thirds of a pound, or 13s 4d.

² Old Winchelsea, which stood approximately one mile to the south of today's town of Winchelsea. Old Winchelsea was destroyed by the sea in 1287.

³ Behrens: *Battle Abbey under 39 Kings*, p 144.

⁴ <https://www.rmets.org/sites/default/files/hist16.pdf>

⁵ http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/h_36th_Foot_history.php

⁶ Sussex Weekly Advertiser, 26 July 1802

⁷ Sussex Weekly Advertiser, 19 July 1805

⁸ Hastings Observer, 2 February 1902.

⁹ BDHS archive: *Snippets from the story of Battle*, 25 (November 1972) and 26 (December 1972), by 'D A L'.

¹⁰ From *Wellington on Waterloo* by Peter Hofschroer.

¹¹ Conversation with Ralfe Whistler of Battle, 2015.

¹² On-line records of the Ionian Islands do not confirm these two deaths.

¹³ Other sources claim 9 April: see for example <http://www.geni.com/people/Edward-Primrose/600000003891404294>

¹⁴ Ronald Sutherland Gower: *Old Diaries* (John Murray, 1902).

¹⁵ Minutes of the Battle Board of Health.

¹⁶ Hastings Observer, 25 January 1902.

¹⁷ <http://www.angloboerwar.com/forum/17-memorials-and-monuments/9558-lieutenant-arthur-phillips-9th-battalion-imperial-yeomanry>

¹⁸ Hastings and St Leonards Observer, 15 September 1900, from his own letter.

¹⁹ Hastings and St Leonards Observer 30 March 1901

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²¹ See George Kiloh: *The brave remembered* (BDHS 2015)

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²⁴ Wills, 1985, p.44

²⁵ <http://sussexhistoryforum.co.uk/index.php?topic=4836.0;wap2>

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