

Social circumstances in the United Kingdom and recruiting into the British army  
immediately prior to the Zulu War of 1879

By Dr Andres Traverse

---

Throughout the reign of Queen Victoria, only a minority of ordinary recruits in the British army enlisted primarily or entirely for reasons related to patriotism, a motive which in any case was often accompanied by equally strong feelings of militarism along with a yearning for adventure. Volunteering was and still is, mainly a function of the prevailing socio-economic conditions, which given the circumstances at any particular time, may influence the quality and quantity of those wishing to take up the profession of soldiering. Enlistments and re-enlistments are usually higher and desertions lower during times of recession and depression than during periods of prosperity, as was typically experienced during the marked recession which many writers consider, was a great depression in Britain, beginning in the 1870s. The decline in agriculture and industry led to unemployment, together with a marked reduction in general prosperity. As a result of the changes in the economy, social conditions were adversely affected too and the army experienced an increase in those wishing to volunteer in the decade leading up to the Anglo-Zulu War. Although these changes enabled the British Army to bring the numbers up to strength, the quantity was not matched by the desired quality of recruits, especially those needed for the organisation of suitable reinforcements for the continued campaign in Zululand in 1879. As the socio-economic circumstances changed, they simply aggravated the existing problems related to the general health and welfare, along with the low living standards of the common people. Added to this problem, major reforms in the organisation of the army which were meant to improve the effectiveness of the force, also had a notable negative influence on the availability of fighting men.

It should be noted that the officer corps did not suffer from a recruiting problem and was not influenced by changes in social conditions, as these soldiers came from the middle and upper classes of society, where military service was often the preferred option in life. They were considered gentlemen and with the privilege of rank and status came a higher standard of living compared to the men in the ranks. Queen Victoria's volunteer British army prided itself on being a professional body at arms unlike other European armies of the day which relied on conscription to fill its ranks. At the conclusion of the Crimean War in 1856, Britain's army employed the services of 236,000 men. By the year 1879, the government considered 165,000 to be sufficient to satisfy the nation's ever growing military needs, both domestically and in policing the British Empire throughout the globe. The British Army was not a popular institution compared to some of the other armies in Europe. The social status of the army remained low as the public attitude was quite simply either disapproving or apathetic except in times of crisis such as during the aftermath of Isandlwana, at which time the popular sentiment would be excited by national pride. Added to this general feeling of euphoria, recruitment would be expected to improve with many young men responding by demonstrating their desire to contribute to the cause. The Government's feelings towards the army somewhat reflected the public sentiment where apart from the Irish Secretary, the least coveted position was that of the War Secretary. The press in Britain rarely devoted space to comment on the army clearly reflecting the public disdain for the service. In his book 'Our Army and the People', the writer John Holms aptly described the attitudes towards Victoria's soldiers:

The Army appears to be the only institution in the kingdom which is outside of the people. They know nothing of it, take no interest in it, and express no opinion on it.

The manner in which the army was employed internally did not improve its popularity. The obligation of the armed forces to come to the aid of civil power still remained even after the organisation of police forces which by the mid 1850s had relieved the army of law enforcement duties. The troops would continue to be used up to the end of the century to deal with strikes and evictions in Ireland. John Fraser wrote in his book, *Sixty Years in Uniform*, that when he joined the army in 1877, his father was enraged by this act to the extent that: To him my step was a blow from which he thought he would never recover, for it meant disgrace of the worst type. His son a soldier! He could not believe his ears. Rather would he have had me out of work for the rest of my life than earning my living in such a manner. More than that, he would rather see me in my grave.

Phipps Onslow writing about the army in 1869, stated in *The Contemporary Review*, issue XII that: Such a system means that every 'reckless, wild, debauched young fellow, the refuse of the beer shop, the sweepings of the gaol, every one who is idle to work, too stupid to hold his place among his fellows, who had come into unwelcome contact with the law, or generally involved his fortunes in some desperate calamity, is considered, by general consent to have a distinct vocation to defend his country'.

Every recruit had his reasons for enlisting in the army, though regardless of this, military service did excite many soldiers. The feeling of comradeship and the discipline with an emphasis in clean living conditions were things that many men could not find in civilian life. This experience was most often not appreciated until after the soldier had completed his service which not infrequently resulted in re-enlistment.

Due to the volunteer makeup of the British Army, it was affected by a continuing recruitment problem where numbers were never quite sufficient to overcome wastage. This had its roots in social status, living conditions, pay and prospects of civil employment. In the 1870s, compared to the shilling per day received by the average soldier, an unskilled labourer such as a dockworker could easily earn in excess of three shillings per day and skilled workers earned on average seven shillings and six pence. While there was plenty of work, army life did not seem attractive to the general male population except mostly the desperate. Prior to the Cardwell Reforms beginning in 1871, the responsibility of recruiting new soldiers fell upon the shoulders of the recruiting sergeants, who frequented public houses and taverns to prey on hungry, unemployed and often desperate men. These recruiters were skilled in the art of delighting young men with stories of adventure and attractions of army life. The potential recruits would get drunk and once the Queen's Shilling was accepted, they were taken to a magistrate to be 'sworn in'. Those who could prove that they been recruited under the influence of alcohol, could escape their responsibility by paying a fee of one pound. New recruits were given a quick or rudimentary medical examination before being assigned to a regiment which would often be under strength and likely ready to send new drafts overseas. Recruits would come from a cross-section of the working class and one common factor was poverty.

In the 1886 publication, *A Voice from the Ranks, The British Army and What We Think on the Subject*, a soldier referring back to his experiences in 1871 remarked:

There is no denying the fact that in the present day army, as a profession, finds small favour in the eyes of steady, intelligent, well-educated young men.....

In theory, the army was discriminating in its requirements, as men of good character and in fit physical condition were preferred. However, often enough, it was the worthless members of the social and economic system that were taken into the army serving as an alternative to prison. Until 1871, the minimum age for adult enlistment was seventeen, but that was changed to eighteen later that year. In 1878, the minimum preferred height was 5 feet 6 inches for the infantry and an inch or two taller for the Cavalry, Guards and Artillery. In reality, the height requirement reflected the recruiting problem and during periods of short supply of volunteers, the

minimum height was dropped to 5 feet 3 inches. Recruits from rural areas were generally considered to be better stock as they were considered to be fitter than their urban counterparts. Army life guaranteed regular food and pay. However, the diet consisted of poor quality meat, bread, hard biscuit and from time to time, vegetables. Pay was set at one shilling and one penny per day, which after mandatory deductions for food, washing, extra articles of clothing and miscellaneous supplies, meant that the soldier was often left with the minimum entitlement in his pocket of only one penny. Some soldiers could supplement their meagre subsistence with up to two shillings per day in a range of positions such as officers' servants and mess waiters plus good conduct pay.

As for the actual living conditions endured by the common soldier, poor accommodation and unhealthy standards were simply a deterrent to enlistment especially at a time during the 1860s and early 1870s. This was particularly so in a period when standards of civilian living and health began to rise with the increase in industrial and agricultural production. Between 1861 and 1868 the average number of recruits joining the British Army annually was approximately 14,000. This number would later rise significantly to an average of 26,000 men annually between 1874 and 1878 with a high of almost 30,000 in 1877.

Recruitment of men into the army throughout the early Victorian period relied upon certain groups to fill the ranks. Ireland had always supplied volunteers due to the almost constant large scale unemployment and social problems in this predominantly agricultural part of the British Isles. This fertile ground for recruitment bolstered the ranks and in the mid nineteenth century, Irish soldiers made up 42% of the army. However, the potato famine beginning in 1846 not only reduced the population of Ireland substantially through death, it resulted in a decline in the birthrate in the ageing population. As a consequence, Ireland lost two million or 32% of its population with one million dying of starvation and related diseases. Added to this misery, large scale emigration occurred to other parts of the world to the detriment of England and Wales where migration fell by 15% in the period between 1861 and 1878. The subsequent effect was the significantly reduced pool of an important source of recruits.

This reliance on a traditional supply of men caused concern to the British Government and by 1859 an editorial in *The Times* regretted that:

Ireland was no longer the great reserve of soldiers that it had been.

By 1862, 30% of recruits were Irish and this figure dropped to an all time low of only 7% in 1872, a year that coincided with another, yet not so severe, potato famine or blight, though by 1878 a resurgence did cause enlistments to rise to one-fifth. This recovery in enlistments was temporary and a permanent decline thereafter was experienced with the problem needing to be solved with many more English and Welsh volunteers. Scottish numbers had held steady and by the 1870s the average was 9.5% annually.

In the post Crimean period, the British Government sought to improve the condition of the army. Changes came in the 1870s as a result of the work carried out by Edward Cardwell, the Secretary of State for War from 1868 to 1874. His far reaching ideas led to reforms in the organisation of the army. He aimed to make military service more attractive to a better class of recruit and this objective could be achieved by the introduction of a new service form of enlistment. Prior to 1847 enlistment had been for twenty one years, which effectively meant a permanent commitment, as the average life expectancy at the time for men was not much greater than forty. In that year, the Limited Service Act was introduced, with the result that enlistment was reduced to ten years, later increased to twelve. On completion of this term, soldiers had the choice between accepting discharge without pension, or signing on for a further ten- or twelve-year term. After many years with no trade other than soldiering, more than half of all discharged soldiers chose to re-enlist immediately. In cases where those men who took a voluntary discharge, at least one in five signed on again within six months. The Army Enlistment Act passed in 1870 required twelve years service, six with the Colours and six in the reserves. It was envisioned that

after the first six years service, soldiers would re-enlist for a further six before entering the reserves. Earlier in 1868 flogging in peacetime and other harsh disciplinary measures were abolished by Cardwell, who saw that bounty money would no longer be part of the recruiting process. In 1871 the Regularisation of the Forces Act was passed, which in effect ensured that each regiment now consisted of two battalions sharing a depot and associated recruiting area. It was expected that one battalion would serve overseas, while the other was stationed at home for training.

The Ashanti expedition of 1874 had been seen as a successful vindication of the Cardwell Reforms, but it had been fought by a force of picked professionals and it was not until the Zulu War of 1879 that the short service was put to the test. Young recruits were unable to bear the strain of the campaign, but the reserves that had been called out the year before could not be called out again. Lord Chelmsford expressed his own concerns regarding the state of the army and was quoted as arguing:

... now-a-days when the home duty is so severe, and when it is so very difficult really to give the soldier an adequate amount of training, he does not develop into a man you can really trust under three years, and the consequence is that if you deprive us his services at six years, it is just when he is at his prime, and just at the time, if he is fit for the work, that you would like to make use of him as a non-commissioned officer... I should like to see a man live and die in the army, so to speak, so long as he conducted himself satisfactorily and was physically fit to do duty either abroad or at home. (Report of the Army Reorganisation Committee 1881).

It was after 1876 that the effects of short-service enlistment began to be felt and although recruitment was increasing in the 1870s, for the most part it was insufficient to make good the wastage through discharge, death, desertion and other causes. Needless to say, experienced soldiers were needed to provide the backbone of the army which was beginning to erode as the percentage of inexperienced troops would continue to increase.

Social conditions in the British Isles during Queen Victoria's reign had always been difficult for the vast majority of the population. It seems that among the working class, one of the most remarkable characteristics of this group was the acceptance of their circumstances, of their presence on earth and work with the sense of resignation to the facts of life, feeling that human existence is a struggle and that survival was an end in itself. This concept of degrading and almost unimaginable conditions, of continuous near poverty and sometimes worse, of overcrowded and inadequate housing accommodation, poor working conditions, restricted opportunities together with a high incidence of disease, disablement and death is sometimes difficult to imagine in today's society. Unlike workers in modern industrialized nations today, the Victorian counterpart who found him or herself unemployed and without immediate prospect of finding new work, could not expect aid from the government. No skill could protect a man from sickness, old age or premature death. Even the wages of a skilled man in full work allowed little margin, so that it was almost impossible to save enough during prosperity against the day of adversity. As Victorian Britain did not protect men, women and children from personal disaster created by unemployment, personal economic disaster was certainly a very real prospect.

There were some charities but these could not offer enough to help the overwhelming demand for assistance especially in times of high unemployment. The perilous condition of working classes and poor has been compared to a shipwrecked sailor struggling to keep his head above water, without help and without hope. The resignation of the working class to their fate in life was in part due to a long history of a deprived existence and suffering, to which for generation after generation, the working poor had been accustomed. In addition to the limited expectations, personal tragedy for these people was too common. They therefore could not be blamed for limited cultural contributions to the progress of the society in the nineteenth century. There was little interest or concern in matters of the nation, politics or labour movements and the

advancement through achievement socially and success in life was generally not thought to be within the grasp of poor families.

The poor working class man was described as being unskilled and without a regular trade, although there were poor tradesmen as well. The dockworkers, factory 'hands', general labourers, or labourers working for craftsmen such as bricklayers all lived on the edge of a trade without ever a hope of getting into it. Then there were those who were dependent upon unorganized casual employments who lived by selling, showing, or simply doing something to make ends meet. In the large cities there were numerous street-sellers, street buyers, street finders, street-performers, street-artisans or working peddlers and general labourers. The one thing in common, their poverty forced them to find a living in the most unlikely and unprofitable ways. Apart from unemployment, under-employment was common even during periods of economic prosperity. Many jobs were seasonal and never brought in regular money. Many men never experienced steady employment in their lives. On poor streets they would spend long hours idly about the street and they made their impressions on walls of buildings where one could see broad dirty marks that would be left where the men and boys stood leaning for long periods day after day. It was from the very poor that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the prisons came.

Some of the worst Victorian poverty was amongst the immigrant Irish, who came in right at the bottom of the labour market to jobs which not even the poorest English, if they could help it, would take on. However, one glimmer of hope that would in future allow the working class to progress was the Education Act passed in 1870, which would increase literacy where the existing rate was low. This law which helped to improve the reading and writing skills of those men enlisting in the British Army in the late 1870s, encouraged them to spend significant time writing letters to their families during the Zulu War. The percentage of literates among recruits increased from 58% in 1861 to 77% at the time of the conflict in 1879. *The Times of Natal's* special war correspondent, Charles Norris-Newman, wrote that corresponding with family and friends back in the British Isles, was the soldiers' principal recreation. The poverty of their backgrounds was obvious, in that they expressed concern that their families might not be able to afford the postage to write them in return.

Most people lived in an environment of ill health and rampant disease, in part associated with the poor diet, and unbearable living and work conditions, compared to today's standards. The young men of the 90% of British Army recruits coming from the working classes had grown up in squalor or wretchedness. As infant mortality was high and general life expectancy low, they were fortunate to have survived childhood diseases. In addition, the working class were not accustomed to comfortable sanitary living conditions or cleanliness especially in the industrial areas with the overcrowded lifestyle. The response to the Industrial Revolution resulted in a mass migration of workers from the rural areas to the cities and towns, where eventually, by the end of the nineteenth century, almost 85% of England's population lived. The demands resulting from the explosive growth in the urban population were not matched by the available housing old and new. The result was that ordinary family homes such as the typical terraced houses in London were turned into rental housing by many unscrupulous landlords who would rent rooms to workers and their families. These tenants would in turn rent space within their own limited and overcrowded accommodation to other workers for 1d or 2d per day and instances of between ten to twenty people living in one room was not uncommon.

In the 1870s lower skilled workers accounted for 46% of the workforce with the agricultural and unskilled workers making up 41%. Only 13% workers were skilled or professionals. Urban and rural labourers had one outstanding common characteristic, which was poverty. While social conditions for city workers were difficult if not challenging, the utmost that a farm labourer could expect on his meagre income, if he had a decent cottage, good health and not too many children, was a frugal comfort which very much depended on support by a skilful wife and her strength of character.

An 1872 engraving and caption printed in *The London Illustrated News* highlighted the conditions in a typical farm labourer's cottage as:

Insufficient sleeping accommodation, defective ventilation, paucity of light, and almost utter absence of drainage render the labourer's cottage a source of demoralisation against which the influence of the clergy cannot contend.

The ordinary farm labourer earned on average 15s weekly and was used to being paid in allowances as part of his earnings, the most important being his cottage for a very low rent or no rent at all and usually on an insecure tenure. He could feed himself with a pig behind his cottage and grow the produce in his garden. As money was his greatest need, harvest time and piecework were extremely important to him in order to buy clothing and other necessities. Wages for farmers also varied from region to region and were generally higher in areas closer to the cities and factories. Cowmen, herders and carters would always earn more than the average labourer, especially where animals of great value were reared.

The average recruit was born into squalor and would be brought up to be foul mouthed, smelly, rough and often criminally inclined. This natural way of life for these products of the slums was soon changed once they were recruited into the army where the emphasis would be cleanliness, discipline and regular food. Although the soldier's diet was not ideal, the Victorian working man faced an uncertain supply of safe food which commonly was primitive in content and lacked adequate nutritional value.

Rural dwellers seemed to fare better than their urban counterparts with regards to diet. Low-earning city or industrial town workers took their chances with rotting, contaminated and disease ridden food, causing such problems as food poisoning and parasitic infections. Esther Copley's *Cottage Cookery* (1849), suggests the poverty of the rural diet, for her recipes were for potato pie, stir about, stewed ox-cheek and mutton chitterlings. If the rural poor ate birds then the urban poor consumed pairings of tripe, slink (prematurely born calves), or broxy (diseased sheep). The writer Edgar Wallace noted that working-class families along the Old Kent Road shopped for 'tainted' pieces of meat and 'those odds and ends of meat, the by-products of the butchery business'. Safe, nutritious and wholesome food was often simply too expensive for the working poor. In the 1850s, 17% of labourers in Coventry and 23% of silk workers in Macclesfield had never tasted meat. Sheep's heads at 3d and American Bacon at 4d and 6d a pound were too expensive for the irregularly-employed casual labourer to afford frequently. Few of the poor had ovens and had to rely on either open-fire pan cooking, buying their food out or making do with cold food.

During the 1870s the difficult and often deplorable social circumstances were aggravated by a decline in agriculture and industry, which led to high unemployment and a further fall in the standard of health of the nation. In other words, unemployment, poverty, malnutrition and disease were all directly associated with one another. Good health was essential for soldiers to endure campaign life, though an improvement in the health of young men occurred during the agricultural and industrial booms, this reversed itself following the marked decline in prosperity and social conditions of the 1870s. The average height of army volunteers in 1870 was 5 foot 8 inches however, under nourishment of the working class and poor, caused it to drop to 5 foot 4 inches. Poor physical condition and chronic ailments including bad teeth, vitamin deficiencies and skin disorders did not help the number and quality of recruits.

Throughout the Victorian period, the causes and patterns of disease were a matter of continuous speculation due to ignorance on the part of healthcare workers. As a result of the great advances in diagnosis and treatment over the past hundred years, society today feels a certain degree of emotional security, even in the face of serious disease and epidemics. The haunting mental image of nineteenth century thinking was that in the face of widespread disease, it was very difficult to ever feel comfortable about one's health. It was widely believed that disease was spontaneously generated by filth or pythogenesis and transmitted by noxious

invisible gas or miasma. Ever pervasive pollution in the cities especially London with the 'Great Stink' of 1858 and 1859 along with hypotheses such as an 'altered electrical state of the atmosphere', certainly propagated this concept. Slow advances in medicine did occur, as a result in improved hygiene, diagnosis and treatment prior to the Zulu War and helped to reduce the number of deaths. The introduction of preventive inoculation for smallpox, new techniques such as general anaesthesia, and antiseptic surgery along with the use of innovative diagnostic aids including the stethoscope, ophthalmoscope and short clinical thermometer all assisting in improving the general state of the nation's health.

The mid-nineteenth century had witnessed the ravages of cholera, typhoid fever and typhus. Cholera, a waterborne disease, alone had taken the lives of over 33,000 people in 1849 alone with nearly 40% succumbing to the disease in London. Until 1854 when the cause of the problem was first identified, about 50 % of those who contracted cholera, died. The relationship between diseases and social conditions was of great concern to the medical profession to the extent that the second half of the nineteenth century would witness great strides in combating diseases in the population. Improvements in the water supply together with advances in the sewage disposal systems, pasteurization of milk and the introduction of sanitary control of food supplies soon helped to control sickness and epidemics. Despite these improvements, many other serious diseases including tuberculosis, diphtheria, whooping cough, scarlet fever, syphilis, tetanus, measles, pneumonia and influenza sought to contribute to the existing high mortality rate in the 1870s. Also, smallpox which was supposed to have declined considerably since Edward Jenner's discovery of the vaccine in 1796, returned with a vengeance in 1871. A severe epidemic took the lives of over 23,000 people in England and Wales that year.

Tuberculosis, commonly known as consumption, affects mainly the lungs along with other organs and can result in a drawn out demise, accounting for over 15% of deaths annually during the 1870s. The cause of this disease is the slow growing bacterium *M. tuberculosis* and so endemic that close to 60% of the population suffered from the effect of the micro organism. This very infectious disease spreads easily in squalid overcrowded conditions in urban areas. Both humans and animal such as cattle, hogs, cats and dogs can host the bacterium which may be spread by coughing, spitting, consuming contaminated milk, water and from contact with animal feed, grass and soil. A form of tuberculosis known as scrofula was also common and caused a severe infection of the skin of the neck. Contamination by spitting or coughing sputum would easily infect children by passing through the skin of their bare feet as most wore no shoes. Many soldiers in the 1870s felt that they had escaped the clutches of tuberculosis only to discover that the army's often poor living conditions were ripe for the bacterium to spread with ease.

Children faced tremendous hazards as sickness among this group was too common from the time they were born. A child born into poverty in the city, living in unhealthy and overcrowded conditions, faced an uncertain future as the infant mortality rate was steady at over 15% annually. Rural children stood a better chance at survival with statistics for the period noting a vast discrepancy in life expectancy of the working classes. Although the average age of a labourer in Rutland, a rural county, was 38 years, his counterparts in Manchester and Liverpool faced a median age of 26 years where the average age of mechanics, labourers and servants at times of death was only fifteen. Further regional variations were clearly obvious with an average life expectancy of 37 years in London compared to 45 years in Surrey. In London, the poorer areas such as Shoreditch, Bermondsey and Whitechapel, had mortality rates up to twice that of the middle-class areas. Whooping cough, respiratory diseases, diphtheria, measles, scarlet fever, influenza and a host of abnormalities, would often either result in an early death or permanent disabilities.

Syphilis, a very infectious sexually transmitted disease, affected 15% of the population and was commonly known as the "merry disease", caused by the spirochetal bacterium *Treponema Pallidum*. This disease had quickly spread throughout Europe following the return of sailors after the discovery of the New World in the fifteenth century. No one was immune, as the bacterium

did not discriminate, resulting in all levels of society falling victim to the ravages of the disease. The stigma attached to the illness made it the centre of moral concern and anguish throughout Europe in part due to the fact that the effects were also hereditary. Childhood deaths from the congenital type of syphilis were also high. The general population affected by the disease would suffer from temporary ugly sores, in the primary stage, which would soon lead to a secondary phase with symptoms that included fever, malaise, weight loss, headache, meningismus, body rashes and enlarged lymph nodes. In a few cases, there were manifestations of hepatitis, renal disease, arthritis, gastritis and ulcerative colitis. Tertiary syphilis would often take many years to develop and result in the development of chronically inflamed areas in any organ and bones. Gross disfigurement and insanity due to neurological involvement was common with the victims suffering a slow death from the disease where the mortality rate was 25%. The rate of syphilitic infections among the soldiers at the time of the Zulu War exceeded 30%, though living with the disease was an acceptable consequence of army life. Soldiers on campaign did not bother with prevention and risked contracting syphilis since the chances of a death on the battlefield was too high.

Generally, patients with influenza survived the illness and deaths were most common among the young and very old. The sufferer would show signs of malaise with headaches, increasing fever, insomnia and very often gastro-intestinal pain, diarrhoea and vomiting over a period of up to a few weeks before recovery occurred. Depending on the severity of the attack and the patient's immune system, the victim might die from exhaustion or secondary infections and complications such as internal haemorrhaging.

Chronic food poisoning was a seriously continuous problem for all classes society of the day especially the poor. Unknowingly, the population consumed mineral poisons, which had been introduced into the food and water together with bottle stoppers, water pipes, paint and food processing equipment. It was common for food to be deliberately adulterated, for example, the demand for white bread was matched by regular use of alum powder by bakers and meat was treated or painted with toxic chemicals to disguise the true condition of the product. The effect of the processing and wholesale distribution of unsafe food led to the first pure-food act in 1860 followed by another in 1872 which considerably strengthened penalties and inspection procedures. The changes however, would not be felt immediately with the result that in the mid to late 1870s, Britons had little protection against unwholesome food and drink. One can only guess at how many tons of rancid butter, polluted meat and contaminated tea were sold regularly throughout the country.

Work related health problems in the cities were also a concern due to the fact that the Industrial Revolution had brought as an unwelcome by-product, the proliferation of occupational diseases and workplace injuries. The heavily polluted environment, hazardous chemical and physical conditions under which people worked caused problems such as "black spittle" among miners, grinders rot and potters asthma. Conditions among milliners and dressmakers caused a much higher than average incidence of anaemia, deteriorating vision and various lung diseases caused by breathing dust and fine particles of fibres. In many places of work, the long hours which commonly lasted twelve hours a day sitting or standing in one spot, often in unnatural positions, damaged the spine, the digestive and circulatory systems. The inability to work long term due to illness did in many cases mean a downward spiral and in extreme cases, a slow death sentence due to starvation, in a time when there was no real social assistance net to protect and assist those in need. Incapacitation of the family breadwinner would have a detrimental effect on the standard of living and subsequently on the general health of their family and dependents. The caption alongside the engraving depicting the landscape of the Black Country around Wolverhampton published by London Illustrated News, 8 December 1866, accurately described the environmental mess resulting from the industrialisation of the West Midlands:

The lurid smoke and flame of the countless furnaces and forges, with the fire of many heaps of burning refuse thrown up at the mouths of the pits, fill the sky with a fierce glare, which throws

out in gigantic shadow the shapes of the buildings, tall chimneys and, machines, or of passing workmen, carts and horses, railway trains and barges on the canals, rendering the scene one of the strangest and most fantastic that can be witnessed.

The Industrial Revolution in Britain beginning in the late 18th century resulted in the change from an agrarian, handicraft economy, to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture, and associated with the development of the service sector. In 1801, the rural population of England and Wales defined by settlements of less than 2500 was 66%. By 1851, the figure fell to 46% and by the end of the 1870s stood at less than one-third. The trend would continue, with permanent long term consequences. Industrial output surged with the available labour and Britain's wealth greatly increased. Despite the boom in the economy, although the working classes did experience an improvement in their living standards with increased employment, the poor remained poor. At the same time, despite the loss of labourers to the cities and industrial regions, wages for farm workers seemed to improve due to the shortage of manpower. Although the relatively comfortable sector of working class that had developed during the height of the Industrial Revolution felt a discernible improvement in living standards, this was a recent phenomenon for working Britain. Only a thin line would divide them from poverty in that old age, sickness, trade depression or some other quirk of fortune would push an individual and his family back into it again. The British economy of the 1870s became recognized as an industrial economy with agriculture, the mainstay of economic life everywhere for centuries now accounting for the smallest sector. With the output of industry and services increasing more rapidly than that of agriculture, the distribution of labour and gross national product between the three main sectors of the economy was transformed. Farming only employed 25% of the workforce and contributed only 17% of the gross domestic product (GDP). The cotton textile industry represented 42% of the GDP and accounted for 36% of exports.

Agriculture in Great Britain, like other human activities, has experienced its periods of confidence and prosperity together with times of distress. The middle decades of the 19th century were relatively prosperous, when British farmers met with good fortune and gloried in the task of providing food for the 'workshop of the world'. The unpopular Corn Law of 1815, which protected the wealthy farmers but had harmed the poor, was finally repealed in 1846, following strong lobbying by the Anti-Corn League, combined with the potato famine in Ireland. Surprisingly, British agriculture did not suffer from the changes. The result was a period of 'high farming' such that the production in the period 1850-70 increased by 70%. This period became referred to as a 'golden age' of farming. As the rapidly expanding urban population produced a huge market, prices of agricultural products increased thereby giving farmers, and landlords' confidence to invest heavily in new buildings and new types of farm tools. Greater use was made of steam power and new machinery, such as harvesting and processing equipment together with more efficient and stronger ploughs. Farmers keen to reduce costs were further encouraged by the farm labourer strikes of 1873-1874, to invest in the technology of the day by way of machinery available. This would lead to the fall in the cost of harvesting from 16s to 7s per acre and the move helped to reduce the likelihood of insolvency when agriculture was faced with a depression. The farmers were also aided by the development of the internal transport system consisting of canals and railways. The production of meat and corn which returned high profits to the farmers coincided with great expenditure on drainage, equipment, fertilisers and feedstuffs for the livestock. New types of cattle feed, notably oilseed cake, were produced, which allowed cattle to be fattened up even in winter.

Problems for the farmers began in 1873 with a series of wet summers that lasted seven years and damaged grain crops with the result that agriculture in Britain would never truly recover. By 1879, the yields of cereals were reported to be no more than between half and three-quarters the average for the years 1873 to 1877. Barley yielded poor crops so too did wheat. Rain sodden, the result was the limited value for milling and which the farmers ended up giving to livestock feed. The sufferings of arable farming as a result of the wet seasons were quite evident, especially since

the main grain-growing counties of the Midlands, central southern England and East Anglia experienced the most abnormal rainfall. Livestock suffered too, as the waterlogged hay pastures yielded a poor return to the detriment of the animals. To make matters worse, wet pastures provided ideal conditions for the outbreak of animal diseases, affecting sheep with foot rot and liver fluke caused by parasites. Entire flocks were wiped out and cattle herds were devastated by pleura-pneumonia and finally foot rot. Wholesale slaughter of livestock was not an official policy in the 1870s causing poor quality meat to be sold to the public.

Misery and despondency set in as many farmers and labourers faced the prospect of bankruptcy and destitution. Many farmers were finding it hard to cope so that by 1879-1880 bankruptcies had increased by 500% compared to years earlier. An increasing number of farms across the country were losing money, many to the tune of hundreds of pounds annually from 1876-1879. Tenant farmers were clamouring for help from landlords, with the result that market factors led to commonplace rent reductions by the mid to late 1870s. On medium to large farms, labour accounted for approximately 20% of total expenses. When times were good during the Golden Age of farming, a farm worker's wages had risen and continued to do so during the 1870s when the average increase across the country was 13.6% between 1871-1876. After 1876 farmers were quick to declare that all should share in carrying farming through difficult times and that wages should be cut. Pressure was greatest from the corn growers of the eastern counties, with the result that in the late 1870s, a downward trend in farm labourer incomes would begin.

In 1879, a Monmouthshire farmer by the name of William Till owned a 500 acre farm in Caerwent. He wrote in his diary on 31st December:

Being the last day of the year, which is very good it is. This year 1879 has been one of the wettest years any living man can remember and a very disastrous one for agriculture. Having a bad yield of corn and rotten sheep and doing very badly.

The continued problems with the weather affecting farming production resulting in the decline in production should have, in theory, driven up the price of principal agricultural commodities. However, by the late 1870s, general deflationary movements in the economy as a whole, sought to push prices down. The prices of principal agricultural products would continue to fall right up to the end of the 19th century, with wheat and wool falling up to 51% and potatoes, barley and oats falling on average 38%. (1871-1875) to (1894-1898). Meat, butter and cheese fell sharply too. Prices were becoming low and so too were profits with the former confidence in agriculture almost non-existent. This resulted in capital becoming hard to come by. Innovation in techniques and equipment there was, but born less from the confidence and prosperity of farming than from a more economic need at best, to make productive investment. Added to the pessimism of the day, prices of different commodities were not falling at the same rate to the extent that there clearly had to be other factors affecting agricultural markets, in addition to the effects of the disastrous yields in produce. Farmers were facing a new problem and the blow would be staggering. The prominent influence was foreign competition, as agriculture had been expanding in new territories overseas.

It was in the market for cereals that this competition first became convincing. During the 1850s, approximately a quarter of the nation's supply of wheat was imported, though by the period 1873-1875, this figure increased to 50%. These imports were significant to depress the price of wheat domestically, with the result that prices in the 1870s were actually lower than they had been in the 1850s. In the late 1870s the poor harvests provided the demand for the enormous increase in wheat importation. Understandably, British farmers not only were disappointed but they felt cheated of their ability to compete in the marketplace since the price of wheat had fallen by over 15% compared to that paid in early 1860s. Imports accounted for 60% of wheat supplies in 1878-1880. Agriculturists in Britain did feel that optimism would return once harvests became normal and that imports would revert back to manageable proportions. Such determination in this belief proved to be unfounded as imports would continue to increase for many years to come.

The competitive producers included North and South America, Australasia and India. A major factor was the improvement in modes of transportation and the routes taken particularly with the opening of the Suez Canal. By the 1870s, there seemed to be emerging the beginnings of a world economy, that very significantly increased the supply of food available to Britain. Abundant harvests resulted in cheap wheat grown on the prairies of North America, that could travel over the continental railroads and in transatlantic steamships so economically that it could be sold in London, for less than the harvest of East Anglia. In Britain, the farmers found it difficult to compete and hold their own in a treacherous climate, on highly rented lands, whose fertility required constant renewal, against produce raised under genial skies on cheaply rented soils whose virgin richness needed no fertilizers.

By 1879 *The Economist's* assessment of the corn trade was:

The home production of corn is not the over-ruling power in the land which it once was.....corn factors are accustomed to look as much as to the "visible supply" in the United States as to the harvest returns here.

At the same time as the produce from North America flooded Britain's markets, large amounts of corned beef started to arrive from Argentina and through the Suez Canal, cheap lamb and wool from Australia and New Zealand. By the end of the century half the meat consumed in Britain came from abroad. British farm finances in many cases became a serious issue to the extent that the Government appointed the Richmond Commission on Agriculture in 1879 to look into the problems affecting the industry. It worked on collecting dozens of sample accounts from around Britain. The report showed a loss ranging from one to three pounds per acre. It was noted that one farm in Warwickshire showed a loss of 640 pounds on a capital of 2000 pounds in 1878-1879.

British farmers aimed to adapt to the changing conditions as wheat, barley and oats declined towards the lowest prices of the century. Increased attention was paid to grazing, dairying and such minor products as vegetables, fruit and poultry. The changes would take time and the threat of increasing numbers of unemployed farm labourers would very quickly become real. The corn area of England and Wales shrank from 8,244,392 acres in 1871 to 5,866,052 acres by the end of the century. Between the same years the areas of permanent pasture increase from 11,367,298 acres to 15,399,025 acres. In this same period 400,000 farm working jobs were lost. In the immediate period prior to the campaign in Zululand many unemployed farm labourers with little or no prospect of re-employment, had few options. In the past, migration from the rural districts to the industrialized areas was common due to the increasing demand for semiskilled and unskilled workers. In the 1870s British industry began to struggle with its own and separate problems which marked what many writers consider, the beginning of a great depression.

One of the longest-lasting and most significant impacts of the Industrial Revolution that took place from the end of the 18th century onwards was the mass migration of the population from rural areas to cities and towns. This process has become characterized as urbanization. Growth was greatest where settlements were located in areas of good natural resources based on communication links, access to water and raw materials. Population growth especially in the Midlands and some seaport cities and towns rapidly outpaced the provision and development of new housing. This resulted in increasing crowding, which itself contributed to more social problems, such as the rapid spread of disease. People had little access to public or private transport and would mainly walk from where they lived to work. Factories were very highly labour intensive requiring thousands of workers to work the machinery. Therefore, people had to live in close proximity to the workplace and the factory would come to symbolise and dominate working life. One effect of this shift in the populace was that the army was forced to react by shifting the basis of its recruitment. With a large pool of available workers, the years 1850-1873 saw the British economy experience, what has been called the 'mid-Victorian boom'. The economy grew, on average, by 3% annually. Railway construction increased from 5900 miles of

track in 1850, to 13750 miles by 1875. In foreign trade, Britain's major export industries that included cotton, textiles and coal, performed well. The value of cotton cloth produced rose from 46 million pounds in 1851 to 105 million pounds in 1875, while coal production increased from 60 million tons in 1855, to 109 million tons by 1870. Britain had become the dominant industrial nation in the world as she produced approximately 65% of the world's coal, half its iron and cotton cloth and 70% of the steel supplied.

From 1873 onwards the British economy began to slow down. Rapid progress in the establishment of textile mills in India led to increasing production of cotton cloth thereby competing with the textile industry in mainly Northern England. Britain's export performance had been aided by the policy of free trade. As many European countries along with the USA began to abandon this business strategy, taxes were imposed on imports from Britain. The onset of this protection made it increasingly difficult to export goods to these countries. In addition, British industry faced increasing competition, in particular, from the mills and factories in the USA and Germany resulting in the decline in world steel production dominance. Nevertheless, while steel and metal manufacturing faced serious competition for global markets, other industries in Britain did continue to prosper, such as coal mining where by the 1880s, output rose by a quarter with much of it exported. It must be noted that Britain was not the only European country to undergo a slow-down in economic growth. Both Germany and the USA faced similar problems which themselves led to the introduction of import tariffs.

In 1872, unemployment in the United Kingdom was a mere 1%. By 1874, it had risen to 3.4% and within two years to 6.2%. By 1879, it peaked at 10.7%, or almost a million of the population. It was clear to many contemporaries at the time that the British economy was dealing with a major depression. Although falling prices for industrial and agricultural goods in the 1870s led to a rise in real wages for the employed working classes, unemployment had become high. The young labourers were the first to be laid off and with limited experience and usually no skills, their prospects seem bleak. Those with families would experience the greatest hardships with little or no money to feed hungry mouths. Following the loss of so many jobs in the 1870s, the desperation on the part of the unemployed poor and their dependants resulted in flocks seeking help from the few available charities. Soups kitchens would be opened by public subscription or boots would be donated and given to poor children who could not otherwise go to school. Death from starvation was a reality in Victorian Britain.

*The London Illustrated News*, 5th January 1878 edition, paid particular attention to the importance of charity for the poor in a printed illustration where the caption read:

Free breakfast in Whitecross Street, London, 1878. 'Five pounds will pay for the charity of a wholesome meal to 400 destitute people, and fifty may be fed once for 12s 6d..... Religious exhortations, with prayers and hymns, accompany or follow these repasts.'

Despite the general attitude towards army life, the prospect of regular pay, improved sustenance and living conditions prior to the Zulu war of 1879, became a more attractive alternative to the monotonous existence of the lower working class, particularly the unemployed and desperate. Even some of those employed individuals with few prospects of improving their lot in life beyond their immediate situation, felt that the unhealthy environment in which they lived could be no worse than the security of an enlistment in Her Majesty's armed forces. Although real general poverty among the working class had been thought to decline from the early nineteenth century to the 1870s, the rapid population growth rate of the United Kingdom simply added to the problems. In 1851 there were 16,760,900 inhabitants though by 1871 this increased to 21,402,000 with the addition of three million more by 1880. During the golden years of agriculture, the Industrial Revolution along with improvements in medicine, there was greater work available and earnings did increase but so did overcrowding in cities. More people also meant more poor. Pauperism would still be a dominant feature of social life and the effects of the existing social conditions would serve to encourage many young men to take their chances in the

army. The same circumstances would push former soldiers to re-enlist since their prospects of reintegration into civilian life seemed bleak with the increasing unemployment. As the downturn in the economy coincided with a fall in agricultural productivity in the 1870s, it succeeded in having the desired effect on the army as enlistments increased dramatically. The forthcoming campaign against the Zulu nation in South Africa would soon be in great need for these recruits, especially since the looming conflict in Afghanistan had thinned Britain's military resources.

Recruitment increased steadily during the period beginning in 1870 up to the commencement of the Zulu War. In 1876 enlistments reached 29,370, almost double that of 1866. In the twelve months preceding the commencement of the Zulu War there were 28,325 recruits. Such were the needs of the army in 1878 that global commitments necessitated the recall of 34,853 army reservists which in turn depleted the pool of soldiers available for duty should more be needed. These factors would quickly have a detrimental effect on the quality of fighting men in South Africa.

Distinct patterns emerged in army recruitment, coinciding with the change in the general socio-economic conditions in the United Kingdom. The recruitment rate annually in Scotland remained steady in the 1870s at under 10% of the total enlistments, though the greatest increase was seen among the Irish who were again feeling the strain of an agrarian disaster and a further deterioration of their social circumstances. In the period 1872-1878 Irish recruitment nearly tripled to over 20% of those examined and passed by the Army Medical Department with English and Welsh recruits making up the balance. The proportion of men enlisting for short service increased from 58% in 1872 to 91% of all recruits in 1878, reflecting the likelihood that these individuals looked to the army for a temporary solution to their problems hoping, if not expecting, that employment and social circumstances would improve in the United Kingdom. The number of men re-engaging for a second period of colour service averaged 5000 annually in the eight years leading up to the Zulu War. After the Zulu War the re-engagements would immediately fall by 60% by the end of 1879 and would continue to decline over the next twenty years. It had been expected that with short service, men of better quality would be more attracted to the army though statistics did not support this. The percentage of ordinary labourers enlisting increased by 13% in the 1870s which corresponded with a similar decline in the recruitment of semi-skilled workmen. Figures compiled for the period regarding the age and physical standards of recruits were most significant as a very clear pattern emerged. The evidence showed that there was a significant increase in the proportion of lighter and shorter men owing in part, to the decline in recruits from rural counties, with a greater reliance on urban areas in the country where malnutrition was more common. As general standards in society declined, so too did those in those young men that volunteered for service in Victoria's army, with the trend in a decline in the quality of recruit continuing to the end of the century.

As for Chelmsford's army at the beginning of the invasion of Zululand, the regular soldiers available were mostly seasoned veterans, having campaigned in the recent Ninth Frontier or 'Kaffir' War. Even with short service enlistments, acclimatisation and baptism under fire was no longer a concern. Lord Chelmsford was confident of success, though the strategic upset following the catastrophe at Isandlwana resulted in an immediate request for reinforcements from Britain. None of the units sent out as reinforcements were ready for combat as all relied on new recruits to fill the ranks. Although most of the units were sent out at full strength, most of the men were young and lacked the necessary training required for colonial warfare. There had been no time for the troops to familiarise themselves with their officers, with the result that without that bond, detrimental effects might result in combat. To aggravate these problems, depot battalions were depleted, as a large number of untrained short-service recruits were transferred from other units. At the battle of Gingindlovu, the 3/60th Rifles, hastily sent out to South Africa as reinforcements, found the ordeal of battle difficult to contend, with the sights of their rifles wrongly set, resulting in inaccurate fire. Only with the solidness of the leadership did the line remain steady. In effect,

the Zulu War had exposed the deficiencies of the Cardwell Reforms with the problems of the short-service enlistment.

Of all the units that fought in the Zulu War, the 24th Regiment of Foot, have held the esteemed position of the most famous regiment, given the heroism in defeat at Isandlwana followed by the courageous stand at Rorke's Drift. A study of the combatants reveals that the vast majority were lower working class recruits. Given that the regiment recruited in the Birmingham area, which was considered a powerhouse in the Industrial Revolution, 'the workshop of the world' or the 'city of a thousand trades' it is not surprising that the majority of recruits were unemployed labourers or assistants to tradesmen due to the change in circumstances and conditions in the 1870s. Of the 122 enlisted men of the 1st and 2nd Battalions that stood at Rorke's Drift, 58% had volunteered in the years 1876 and 1877 with only one-fifth having attested prior to 1873. All were from working class backgrounds with their deemed trade listed mostly as labourers either farm or general labourers or having no trade at all. There were a few former clerks, with the odd shoemaker, gun maker, tailor, frame knitter and a previous acting school master. A few Irishmen among the Company simply sought to escape the poverty and misery of the social problems in Ireland.

Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne DCM, from Cuckfield, Sussex, volunteered in December 1872. Rural life did not appeal to him. As the youngest of a farmer's eight sons, his prospects were not promising at home and despite his father's attempts to prevent Bourne from enlisting, the young man saw a better chance in life in the army. At only 5ft 3in and thin, he typified the trend of a greater number of shorter and underweight enlisted men. Another well known participant at Rorke's Drift, Private Henry Hook VC, enlisted in 1877 as a result of his unhappy circumstances. He was born into an agricultural labouring family in Gloucestershire and with little or no formal education, a life of monotonous hard work and infrequent wages faced him, with little chance of improving his social status. Dissatisfied with his lot in life, including discontentment in marriage, at the age of 27, he volunteered, highlighting that for many recruits, the Army was a way to escape poverty and poor social circumstances which together with the prospect of regular meals offered seemingly better living conditions.

Facing the problems of unemployment and limited opportunities, given that he lived in South Lincolnshire where most of the citizens were working class in this predominantly agricultural area of England, 1514 Trooper William Robertson of the 16th Queen's Lancers took the Queen's shilling. He enlisted in Worcester on 13th November 1877 at the age of 17  $\frac{3}{4}$ . As he was tall, his official age was recorded as 18 years and 2 months. With the ability to read and write, he wrote his account in '*Life as a Recruit*' stating that he was influenced by the Cardwell Reforms offering the twelve years regular service. The men he encountered at the West Cavalry Barracks in Aldershot were old soldiers who had enlisted under the previous system requiring twenty one years service. He wrote:

These rugged veterans exacted full deference from the recruit who was assigned the worst bed, given the smallest amount of food and had to give up or lend items of kit, extra cash and was expected to 'fag' for them.

Despite the treatment, this particular recruit took army life in his stride and made a lifelong career in the service with regular promotions ending in the First World War with the rank of Field Marshal. Sir William Robertson's decision to join the army was partly the result of the socio-economic conditions at home where the prospects of suitable employment in 1877, in the area that he lived, were depressing.

## **Bibliography**

### **Books**

Dintenfass, Michael, *The Decline of Industrial Britain 1870-1980*. Routledge, London 1992.

Edgerton, Robert, *Like Lions they Fought*. Ballantyne Books, New York, 1988.

Farwell, Byron, *Mr Kipling's Army*. Penguin Books, Canada, 1981.  
 Fraser, John, *Sixty Years in Uniform*, UK 1939.  
 Greaves, Adrian, *Crossing the Buffalo the Zulu War of 1879*. Cassell, London 2005.  
 Greaves, Adrian, *Isandlwana*. Cassell, London 2001.  
 Greaves, Adrian, *Rorke's Drift*. Cassell, London, 2002.  
 Knight, Ian, *Go to your God Like a Soldier*. Greenhill Books London, 1996.  
 Knight, Ian, *The National Army Museum Book of the Zulu War*. Pan Books, 2003.  
 Leask, George Alfred, *Sir William Robertson: The Life story of the Chief of the Imperial Staff*. Cassell, London 1917.  
 Monick, S. *An Army in Transition*. Military History Journal Vol 4 No 6. The South African Military History Society.  
 Morris, Donald, *The Washing of the Spears*. Lowe & Brydone Ltd. London 1966.  
 Murphy, D. *Britain 1815-1918*. Collins Educational. London, 2001.  
 Perry P.J. *British Agriculture 1875-1914*. Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1973.  
 Skelley, Alan Ramsey, *The Victorian Army at Home*. McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal, 1977.  
 Strawson, John, *Beggars in Red, The British Army 1789-1889*. Pen & Sword Military Books, 1991.  
 Theodore Hoppen, K. *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998.  
 Reader W.J. *Victorian England*. B.T Batsford Ltd, London, 1974  
 Wood, Anthony, *Nineteenth Century Britain 1815-1914*.  
*A Voice from the Ranks, The British Army and what we think on the Subject. England 1886*, Longman Group UK Ltd, 1982.  
 Author unknown. *Recollections of an Old Soldier 1871*.

#### **Newspapers, periodicals, magazines, diaries.**

*The Contemporary Review*, Issue XII, 1869  
*The Cornhill Magazine*, 1874  
*The Economist*, 1879  
*The London Illustrated News*, 1866, 1872, 1878  
*The Times*, 1859  
 The Diary of William Till (1856-93) of Great House Farm 1880, Caerwent, Monmouthshire.

#### **Internet Website Sources**

Daniels, Barbara, *Poverty and Families in the Victorian Era*  
*The Victorian Web*. Del Col, Laura, Chadwick's Report on Sanitary Conditions  
*The Victorian Web*. Douglas, Laurelyn, Health and Hygiene in the Nineteenth Century  
*The Victorian Web*. Bloy, Marjie, The Corn Laws  
 The Victorian Web. Landow George P. The Hierarchies of Victorian Workers: Craftsmen, Semi-skilled Factory Operatives and Labourers.  
 The Victorian Web. Landow, George P, The Lack of Social Security in Victorian England.  
 The Victorian Web. Burnett, John, Victorian Occupations, Life and Labour in the Victorian Period.  
 The Victorian Web. Wohl, Anthony, What the Poor Ate.  
 Times Higher Education. Burchardt, Jeremy, Which Straw Broke the back of British agriculture?  
 Wikipedia. British Agricultural Revolution.