

Private Ashley Goatham. Letters from the Zulu War.

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Ashley Goatham, a young soldier who died thousands of miles from home, is remembered in Bredgar churchyard, Kent, by a striking memorial, a needle monument. On one side is written:

‘This monument is erected to the memory of Ashley Thomas son of George and Roseanne Goatham who was killed in action 22nd January 1879 aged 24 in the battle of Isandula’

They stood their ground cool and bold
In that disastrous day
And fought like warriors we are told
Till all were cut away
In memory we shall sacred keep
The men that fell that day
Though far in Zululand they sleep
Their souls have soared away
Upon the golden crowd gazing with eager breath
He fought as one who fain would die
And dying conquered death

It is not surprising that the local mason mis-spelt Isandlwana; it was not a place that had been in the British headlines before. This terrible battle, of the Zulu Wars, took place on the same day as the more famous Rorke's Drift, and this day of his death was also Ashley's twenty-fourth birthday. Ashley's father, George, was one of several Goathams who were carpenters in the village during the second half of the nineteenth century. Ashley's mother Roseanne's actual name was Rose Hannah as the Borden baptismal entry for Ashley shows. The family lived in Borden for a few years before returning to George's birthplace of Bredgar. Ashley was then an unusual Christian name and it may be that Ashley was named after Ashley Ruck, the Bredgar landowner who died in 1870 and has a window in his memory in Bredgar church.

At the time of the war Zululand was ruled by King Cetshwayo (often spelt Cetewayo) who kept a well-disciplined army of nearly 40,000 warriors. Sir Bartle Frere, the new British High Commissioner in South Africa, saw the Zulus as a military threat to the borders of the Transvaal which had been annexed by Britain in 1877. And so it was that, against the advice of the British government, he ordered Lord Chelmsford to march into Zululand on the 12th January 1879. The ability of the government to control the situation was much hampered by the slowness of communication between the countries, for letters took nearly three weeks to arrive. The 24th Regiment, later to become the South Wales Borderers, marched with Lord Chelmsford and amongst their ranks was Private Ashley Goatham.

The curator of the regimental museum of the South Wales Borderers was able to confirm that Ashley Goatham was one of their men killed at Isandlwana. By good fortune the museum also possessed a copy of a South African newspaper article that quoted at length from the letters which Ashley wrote to his parents and sister from South Africa; someone sent it to the museum in the 1980s. The article is entitled 'Soldier's Tale of Zulu battlefield 100 years ago' and was written by Irving Steyn.(1) The article explains that Ashley's letters were carefully preserved in an album belonging to a Goatham descendant who was then elderly and living in South Africa. All attempts on my part to trace the letters, the origin of the article, and the South African Goatham descendants were fruitless for a long time but eventually I discovered that the album had been purchased by the Killie Campbell Library of the University of Natal. (2) The librarian was able to send me photocopies of several more of Ashley's letters. The earliest of those which survive was written to his parents when the regiment was stationed at Gibraltar in May 1872. Ashley was then just seventeen and had joined the colours a few months earlier. There is a gap in the letters between 1872-1876, the rest, over twenty, were written in South Africa.

They show that Ashley keenly missed his family, friends and the Bredgar countryside. In May 1877 he wrote affectionately to his seventeen-year-old sister Ada who was working as a servant:

My dear sister I hope that you like your situation. I shall be pleased to hear that you are on the road to Matrimony but mind what kind of bird you catch. My dear sister would you be good enough to send me a Newspaper as I am dull very much and very miserable and shall be very pleased to come home and have a walk out with you in old Bredgar once more.

My dear sister I think I can remember Mr Payne that used to preach in the Wesleyan chapel but who is that Jane Goodhew that you speak of so much in your letters? I am thankful to you for those primroses, you asked me to send you some Cape flowers there are no flowers as it is winter out here

and well we feel it under canvas. We are patrolling the country to and thro' what is going to be done to us we don't know as everybody is getting ill wither dysentery or low fever. Thank God I am quite well at present no one could be in better health than I am at present. (3)

The pressed primroses Ada had sent were treasured and made him long to be home again walking in the lanes. In a letter to his father from Fort Wellington (last of the Border wars) in February 1878, he complains that his father does not answer his letters:

Dear Father I can't find out the reason that you do not write me an answer to my letter that I wrote a long time ago. You must write to me as I wish to hear from you if it is only your signature on a sheet of paper I think that we won't be long before we come home if England has not declared war with Russia. We heard here at the Cape that England has done the same. Write and tell me the truth about the same as I have a doubt on it.

Dear Father the miserable Colonial won't grant us Field Pay...so the General had to give us four bullocks each man. We might get 35 shillings a head for them as there are thousands to be sold. The Kaffirs are completely done up they cannot get any food as we have taken all their cattle...Dear Father this is not like old England tramping about all day after these black skin devils. Can assure you that we have put the fear of God in their hearts for they won't come within mile of you. Fancy 40 white men driving back 100 of them and killing 60 of them same as the 40 of the 88th Regiment did at a little Hill called Draiborch, they were escorting the mail away from the Front. The 88th rifles has lost 3 men at the sad affair one man shot through the head and another in the stomach another has had his arm taken off but since died. Fortunately we have not had a casualty in our Regiment. The 88th are a raw lot of Irish young fellows and don't care what their officers say to them and their Colonel is like an old woman. Colonel Glyn is the man (Ashley's colonel) he knows how to handle a Battalion. When we are firing we lie down and when the 88th fire they kneel that is how they have lost them 3 men...I should like to see poor old Grandfather I suppose he is getting pretty feeble...I did not think of my birthday until one of our chaps said it is a nice day to get a fight on...so I have pulled through 23 years I hope to pull through many more...We captured a gun the same day and what do you think it was loaded with, Bits of Click, Wheels Broke up. They are properly run out of ammunition...

At this stage he is optimistic that the war will easily be settled, and that he will soon land in England again. He goes on to state that he has never been wounded but has had a bullet through his helmet. His fiancée, Susan Seal, is mentioned as 'my intended' it is she who has supplied him with the hard-to-come-by writing paper. All his letters from now on show the difficulty he had in obtaining enough paper as they are all fully written and then written over cross ways to fit two pages of letter on to one. Each letter concludes by sending his love to many individually mentioned relatives including aunts, uncles and cousins as well as brother and sisters.

A few months later, in October, events in Ashley's life had moved rapidly; he was now married and his son had been born. On the 6th he wrote a painfully anxious letter to Susan (who was now in Durban) from Fort Glamorgan, East London.

My dear wife I now take the trouble to write another letter without an answer. You will not write and tell me whether you are better or worse, do try and write one answer to this my anxious note. I do hope that you are better. I am still on the works and did Smith the Colonel's Groom come and tell you anything about me as I sent him. I am glad to state that I am at present quite well only anxious to see you and the little chap. Has not Mann been to see and I sent him to enquire after you but no one seems to care whether I get an answer or not. I intend to write to Mr Jones if I do not get an answer from this letter here I am quite broken hearted and do not know what to do. My dear wife I have an awful dream about home and I expect to have a letter of death. So now I must conclude with hopes that you are better and accept my kind love and sweet kisses from you affectionate husband.

Ashley wrote in an educated style; he was a credit to his Bredgar schooling. He was by now a seasoned, experienced soldier, who was content with army life; we can see that he was still optimistic as to the outcome of any battle even though the British were so outnumbered. His sister Henrietta was only twelve in 1878 and it is to her that the next letter is addressed.

My darling sister,

I am once more on the warpath and another Christmas in the field. We do not know when we cross the upper Tugela into Zululand. We are encamped 6 miles from it.

We hear that he (that is Cetewayo) has 15 days to consider what he is going to do – either give up all claims to the disputed territory, surrender up two chief's sons guilty of wholesale murder and

outrage and give up all his tribe's arms and disband his army. But the talk is to pay a fine of 6,000 head of cattle also.

Now they have made us (24th Regiment) into the main attacking column. Our strength is 2,600 first 24th and second 24th; artillery six guns; Natal Mounted Police; Natal Carbineers; Newcastle Mounted Rifles and a native contingent of 1,000 of a tribe called Swazis. So you see our column is pretty strong.

There are columns around him (Cetewayo) on all points. So we are only waiting to strike the blow for the revenge of the poor unfortunate women that his black devils outraged and massacred.

I think, according to talk, we will get some stiff work settling him as he has on reliable source, 47,000 armed men. They might stand well a couple of hours.

I can tell, although large and powerful, they have not the pluck and martial spirit of an Englishman.

Ashley was well informed as to the facts of the situation, and may have been in one of the escort companies of the 24th when the ultimatum was read to Cetewayo's messengers. (4) Two days later Ashley wrote a letter to Susan full of worry at the absence of news from her:

My dear wife

I cannot make it out why you have not answered my 3 letters that I have sent to you wither they much be mislaid somewhere, what can be the matter? I really cannot make it out either. I am in good health and am messing and sleeping with the Sergeants. I do no duty only go to a parade now and again. I have got no news from home. We hear that Mrs Mears youngest child is ill. I hope and trust that our little chap is all right and yourself too...So now my dear girl I must conclude with lots of sweet kisses for you and the dear little chap. Good night. Believe me to remain your affectionate husband Ashley.

How difficult communications must have been. On November 12th 1878 he took up his pen again, in happier mood, to write to his parents, he was at Camp Helpmekaar near the Tugela River in Natal and gave a vivid insight into regimental life there:

Dear Mother and Father,

I now take the pleasure to drop a few lines to you to let you know that we have arrived on the Zulu border. There is not a single house within 50 miles of this place.

I am sorry to state we have had to see a very painful sight – that is corporal punishment to one of our men for gross insubordination. Colonel Glyn could not help it as he was not in command at the time. The Colonel said that only for the good character of the regiment he could certainly make an example of some more and hopes that no such thing will occur in the regiment again. We will leave this bad subject.

It will not be long before the affair is over as the General (Lord Chelmsford) has him (King Cetewayo) blocked on all points. But there is no doubt there will be some hard fighting.

We have the strongest column under the command of Colonel C B Glyn. The whole force on our side is estimated at 16,000 men while that of the enemy is, according to the most reliable source 47,000.

They are taught by deserters along with old Ceteswayo, but all the drilling in the world is no good to them. They are all very well until they begin to see a few fall and then off they go in disorder. Their arms are good we all know. But they don't know how to use them.

I don't suppose any of you would really know me now as I have grown so much stouter and whiskers as well

He kept his worries about the military situation from Susan. On Christmas day, Ashley wrote to Bredgar again this time to Arthur who was then sixteen years of age.

I have got a shocking Christmas dinner of stew and bread of my own baking. What do you think of that for hard times?

Here we are going into Zululand on January 2nd and the stakes are 10-to-one that we will all come out alive.

But still, I am happy and contented with my lot. If ever I live to reach old England, I will make up for this.

Ashley was a young man of calm and sensible disposition but obviously he was starting to consider whether he would ever see his home and family again. The situation had become yet more serious when he next wrote to his parents on January 4th, although the invasion force had as yet not moved into Zululand.

Things are looking very crooked out here at present. A dispatch came in last night from Captain Shepstone at Rorke's Drift and it said the scouts came in and said that the Zulus were assembling in great force the other side of the river.

My dear parents, I am so longing to get this affair over, and when I once get home they don't get me out of England again

How homesick, worried and full of foreboding he sounds. Only two days passed before he wrote home once more, for the process of explaining the situation to his family must have made them seem nearer and alleviated his anxieties a little, and he had much to tell for he had moved forward again and was now at Rorke's Drift himself.

Rorke's Drift
Nr Helpmakaar
Natal
6th January 1879

My dear Brother

I now take the opportunity to drop a few lines to let you know that I am still alive and kicking hoping that you are quite well.

My dear brother we have moved on further we are encamped on the Banks of the Buffalo River, a duty of 200 of us best shots and picked men. The reason we were stationed here is that the Zulus were expected to cross the river in force so we are to stop here till the columns come over. The pontoons are expected to come today. General Lord Chelmsford arrived in Helpmakaar last night. Ketchwayo sent word that he would come to no terms whatever and he would eat us up every white skin in the country and has formed his army up at Ondine his stronghold and sent 4 different Divisions out to stop the English force from invading his country...little does he think what we can do we have sufficient artillery to blow him and his country up. There is a rumour that he has got lots of his passes undermined. He has been taught all these moves by these deserters so numerous that have been living in his country and been teaching them how to handle firearms. We have several who have given themselves up and they are released from imprisonment and employed as guides and interpreters as they can all speak the kaffir language fluently. The general says we shall have him...quite subdued and annihilated in 15 days...If you can get one of Anthony Trollope's books on South Africa you will read for yourself the difficulties of a white man much more a soldier...If you ever see that Johnson the Bobby at Sittingbourne that was on the rock in the 31st Regiment, I know home he was a sergeant and has a Roman nose a regular duke of Wellington tell him his brother is up here along with me and give my best respects to him and also give my best respects to Dick Wildeye and all enquiring friends...

So Ashley enjoyed reading and spent some of his off duty hours reading Trollope's 'South Africa'. (5) His parents must by now have been deeply anxious on his behalf as his last letter shows. The British forces had crossed into Zululand, on the 11th January. Ashley was in the centre column that was under Colonel Glyn and accompanied Lord Chelmsford the overall commander. This centre column comprised some 4,000 men made up as Ashley described and by the 20th January they were encamped at the ill-fated Isandlwana hill. They had left B Company of the 2nd 24th to guard stores at Rorke's Drift. Ashley's final and most poignant letter was written to his parents on the 20th, just two days before the battle and in it he tried to cheer his family.

I received your kind and welcome letter which came to hand yesterday, but I am sorry to see you so distressed and cut up about me.

Never mind about me. I hope to pull through all safe by the help of God

...Think of it yourself – miles and miles away from old England's shores tramping and tearing over tracts of wild wastes in search of them black skin beggars.

You don't know what troubles and trials a poor British soldier has to put up with. Colonel Pearson's column was attacked fourteen miles from us and the enemy attacked him on all points almost numberless.

He compelled the enemy to retreat with a very great loss as they could bring the Naval Brigade's Gatling guns into action. This Gatling is equal to two companies of soldiers firing volleys.

We do not know the minute that we will have another engagement. There will be any amount of cattle to be captured.

So, my dear mother, cheer up. Time might come when I shall come home and surprise the lot

It is moving for us even after all these years to read these brave and loving words in the knowledge of Ashley's imminent death; how heartrending his family must have found the letter when they at last knew that they would never see him again.

The shocking news of Isandlwana did not reach England until the 11th of February. Ashley's effects were later returned to his father who also received his service medal and clasp. His widow Susan would have received the terrible news much sooner and knew that she would never see Ashley again and must bring up baby Ashley without his help. A touching letter survives from Susan to Ashley's sister Henrietta, it was written in March 1880 and describes baby Ashley's delight at the photograph of his aunt.

...I must tell you how he dances for the picture and the likeness is he knows it is his auntie and many thanks for it. He knows Ada very well and he also shows his papa's likeness. He will sometimes ask me to let him see his papa. I must tell you baby was not born in the castle but that he was born in King Williams town at the magistrates place. Dear mother I don't know if Ashley had any things in the Zululand but when he came from the Kaffir war he had some things and he sold them...

With the letter Susan enclosed a lock of Ashley's hair for his mother 'with sweet love and kisses and tears' and she spoke of her hopes that baby Ashley would go to England when he grew up;

if it please god to spear us all till he is big I dose say he would like to come for when ever I go out he say to my mother he is going to England.

Susan's spelling was not as good as her husband had been but her letter speaks to us as immediately over the years.

It is a puzzle how the letters Ashley wrote to his family in England arrived in South Africa. It would seem most likely that these treasured letters were given to Ashley's son on a visit to England in later life. Young Ashley grew up to fight in the Boer War and to survive it. His grandson fought in the South African army in the Second World War and also survived.

We are lucky that Ashley's evocative letters have survived and act as a fitting memorial to an intelligent, affectionate and courageous man who was a credit to his family and his regiment.

References.

1. *Cape Town Argus* Supplement 10 Sep 1983
2. My thanks are due to the librarian Mrs J Simpson for all her kind help
3. I have quoted the letters verbatim but added occasional full stops for ease of reading and have left out a few less interesting passages
4. Giese T, *The Men of the 24th*
5. Trollope A, *South Africa*, 1878. Trollope held enlightened views and did not believe that Britain should interfere in Zululand.