

How Old Was Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne at Rorke's Drift? A Cautionary Tale

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To the casual reader of military history, events may be of more interest than exact biographical details, such as the precise age of personalities. However, these details do assume more significance if they are reported in order to make a point. This is often true in the case of Frank Bourne, Colour Sergeant, B Company 2/24th at Rorke's Drift on 22nd/23rd January 1879.

Firstly, comparison is often made by way of correction between the real Frank Bourne and his portrayal by Nigel Green in the film "Zulu". which often features in lists of the film's historical inaccuracies(1). Secondly, authors often wish to emphasise his rise through the ranks and having achieved the rank of Colour Sergeant at what would appear to be quite a young age.

Being a "year or two out" from a real age might not make a lot of difference for most purposes, except for the purist, although it does mean that mistakes get passed "down the line" and can be perpetuated by successive authors.

For the genealogist as opposed to the historian, accuracy of dates is a different matter and detail of dates and ages can be fundamental in locating records and confirming identity. A wrong date can lead to finding the wrong ancestor and a whole family tree can "go up in smoke", as the line of ancestors or descendants can be derived from the wrong person. This is often a bigger problem for people with common surnames.

My interest in the issue of Frank Bourne's age has not arisen because of researching Frank Bourne *per se*. In fact, in conjunction with my brother-in-law, we are researching another colour sergeant in the 2/24th altogether. This is James Gittins of H Company 2/24th. Our research interest began when researching his family tree, my brother-in-law was excited to discover that James Gittins was his great, great grandfather on his mother's side(2).

This research is a work in progress and has already thrown up some interesting documentary discoveries, but I thought that one "angle" of our research might be to compare the military career of James Gittins with that of his more famous, fellow colour sergeant, Frank Bourne (3). Hence the interest in Bourne's age.

Given Bourne's fame I expected that checking for an accurate record of his date of birth and age in January 1879 would be straightforward. I was wrong. I started with Norman Holme's excellent labour of love, "The Noble 24th" (4), which gives Bourne's year of birth as 1853, but as I then checked other sources to validate the information, I was surprised at just how much inconsistency there was in the year given for Frank Bourne's birth and / or his age at Rorke's Drift.

Of 30 published, online and other sources consulted, the year of his birth varied from 1852 to 1855 and his age at Rorke's Drift from 23 to 26. Some sources quote *either* his year of birth or his age at Rorke's Drift, but it is then easy to extrapolate one from the other by simple calculation, although in some cases there is inconsistency even in the same

source.

I will not identify all 30 sources consulted, and this will save embarrassment for those who are incorrect, but any serious student of the Anglo-Zulu War would only need to check their own book collections or online resources and I'm sure they will see what I mean about the variations.

Of the 30 sources consulted, Holme gives Bourne's year of birth as 1853. He also stated that the Army List gives 1852, but that this was inaccurate (5). Of the other 28 sources:

- ⤴ Eighteen give his year of birth and / or age at Rorke's Drift as 1854 /24,
- ⤴ Six as 1855 / 23
- ⤴ One, following Holme, gives 1853 / 25
- ⤴ One gives 1853/26
- ⤴ One gives a birth year of 1855 but age at Rorke's Drift as 25 (This looks like "hedging the bets" as both can't be right !)
- ⤴ One gives a birth year of 1855 but age at Rorke's Drift as 24

As we shall see, Holme, the first source I consulted, was actually wrong. However, what all sources do seem to agree on, where mentioned at all, was that his day and month of birth was 27th April.

Given this variation, is it possible to determine Frank Bourne's year of birth and his age at Rorke's Drift beyond a reasonable doubt and to give absolute clarity for future authors and researchers?

The answer is yes. To do this we have to resort to the tools of the genealogist rather than the military historian, for whom attention to detail and validation might not always be considered so important in the overall scheme of things.

The tools in question are of course, certificates of birth, marriage and death, baptismal records and census returns. Even some of these have to be treated with some caution, as not all of the information recorded might be accurate. This is especially true of older census returns, where information was often inaccurately transcribed by the enumerator. Indeed, any perusal of Victorian source documents will show that the accurate spelling of proper nouns such as personal or geographical names was not a strong point !

One source of information which is unlikely to be wrong is the year of birth on a registered birth certificate, and the information on marriage and death certificates and census returns can either help to corroborate this or call their own accuracy into question.

With the above in mind, what can we learn about Frank Bourne from the genealogical source material ? (6).

Starting with his birth, if you look for a record of a birth for a Frank Bourne on 27th April in any year between 1852 and 1855 you won't find it. This is because he was actually born as Frank Bourn, without the "e". (and a few sources have made this observation about the spelling of his surname at birth). His birth record then does become easy to trace.

His birth is recorded in the June Quarter for 1855, which covers the period April-June for

that year. He was actually born on **27th April 1855** and his birth is registered for the registration district of Cuckfield, in Sussex (7), which included the parish of Balcombe. He was baptised in Balcombe on 5th August 1855.

It would appear that both Bourne and Bourn are not uncommon names in that part of Sussex at the time. It also appears that even different members of his own family used different spellings, but all the “whens and whys” for this are not clear.

The alternative spelling of Frank Bourne's surname was also an issue when he died. His death, on **9th May 1945** (8), is actually registered twice, once in the name of Bourne and yet again with Bourn (9). This was presumably by family members wanting to cover both bases. Similarly, probate was issued from the Llandudno Office on 21st September 1945 in the name of “Bourne or Bourn”.

In the 1861 census, taken on 7th April of that year, the entry for the family is:

1861 Bourn James (47) & Harriett, (47) Children Elizabeth (22), William (20), Mary A (10) & Frank (5) Grandchild Peter (10 months) Address: 2 Brook House, Balcombe.

James Bourn's occupation is described as Ag Lab, i.e. agricultural labourer.

For the 1871 census, the year before he enlisted, Frank Bourn(e) is no longer at the family address and he would appear to be a bit more elusive. Frank's parents, James and Harriet are still living at the same address but with only their grandson and a lodger living with them. The surname is still spelt Bourn without the “e.”

But, there is this intriguing entry in the 1871 census:

1871 Brown (sic) Frank. 5 & 6 Victoria Terrace Brighton. Age 15 born Balcome (sic)

Relationship to head of the household: Servant

Profession: Page / Domestic Servant

The head of the household was Henry Fyffe, a 56 year old clergyman and schoolmaster and the premises at 5 & 6 Victoria Terrace was Clifton House School, a boarding school for boys (10).

Frank Brown was quite a common name but no birth records have been found for a Frank Brown who was born in Balcom(b)e in 1856 +/- 2 years. There are other Sussex born Frank Browns of similar age but these are accounted for in other parts of the census.

Is this Frank Brown “our man” but with his surname wrongly recorded by the enumerator ? It is of course far from conclusive, but the age and place of birth match. It is also not impossible for an enumerator's ear to have heard and recorded “Brown” for “Bourn”.

In addition, note the Brighton address. This could be very significant. According to Adrian Greaves, it was to the Brighton recruiting office that Frank Bourn first reported to enlist on 17th December 1872, before formally enlisting and attesting in Reigate the next day, 18th December (11).

Another possible pointer to Frank (Brown) being Frank Bourne, but somewhat speculative,

is that at the time of Bourne's early promotions, a third class army certificate of education was required for promotion to corporal and a second class certificate for promotion to sergeant (12). Bourne may have achieved the level of education required through local schooling or army education but if Frank (Brown) was indeed Frank Bourne, although he is identified as an employee of the schoolmaster rather than a pupil at the school, he may well have still gained an education sufficient to give him a "head start" in achieving the certificates required for his quick promotions after a relatively short period of service and at a relatively young age.

Although it cannot be said conclusively that the 15 year old Frank Brown in Brighton in 1871 was Frank Bourn(e), there is a very strong possibility that it was in fact him. If this is the case, It means that he did not go straight into the army from a rural, agricultural background (13).

At any event, taking his birth certificate as definitive, we can say categorically and beyond any doubt, that the factual position is that:

- (1) Frank Bourn (without the "e") was born on 27th April 1855. (At 2 Brook House, Balcombe, Cuckfield, Sussex).
- (2) He enlisted and attested as Frank Bourne on 18th December 1872 aged 17 years and 7 months
- (3) He was promoted to Colour Sergeant on his 23rd birthday, 27th April, 1878 (14).
- (4) **At the time of Rorke's Drift on 22nd/23rd January 1879 Frank Bourne was 23 years (and eight months) old.**
- (5) He died on 9th May 1945, aged 90.

This begs the question of where 1853 or 1854 come from in sources as being his year of birth and/or 24 as being his age at Rorke's Drift ?

There are likely to be four reasons for this, each of which will be examined in turn. The first, somewhat ironically, is Frank Bourne himself. The second is indifferent or, shall we say, "non-fussy" army record keeping. The third is simply error in calendar calculation and the fourth is inaccuracy being repeated by successive researchers and authors.

Bourne's army records in two different sections of his army service record (15) give his year of birth as 1853. However, his age on enlistment is given as being 20. Given that his date of enlistment was incontrovertibly the 18th December 1872, neither of these can be correct as the maths simply does not add up. Only one or the other could be correct. (But as has now been established, both are actually incorrect). Interestingly, Bourne himself has signed the army service record as being "correct and true" ! Although unlikely, there is the possibility that the entries relating to age were entered after Bourne had signed off the form.

It is this part of the record which probably gave Norman Holme 1853 as being the year of Bourne's birth and it could possibly be the reference to his age of twenty as being the source of the army list giving his year of birth as 1852. At any event, on the basis of this record, as far as the army was concerned, Bourne would have been aged either 25 or 26

both at the time of his promotion to colour sergeant and at Rorke's Drift.

What the above doesn't explain, is why so many sources incorrectly give Bourne's age at Rorke's Drift as being 24 (and / or his year of birth as being 1854) ?

Still with army records, Bourne's attestation tells a different story. He gave his age at the time of attestation as being 18 years and 8 months, which would make his year of birth 1854. (ie he added exactly a year to his real age). It was of course not unusual for many young recruits to lie about their age, and for good reason (16).

In 1936 Bourne gave a radio interview for the BBC as part of a series, "I Was There". Unfortunately the interview doesn't survive, but the transcript does and it was published in "The Listener" on 30th December 1936 (17). In this, Bourne begins his account by stating that he enlisted aged 18. He is thereby maintaining the fiction rather than the facts.

This is aligned to his age as given at time of attestation but is at odds with the army service record. However when you read on, he does say that he was made colour sergeant at the age of 23, and this is factually correct, so Bourne himself, like his army service records, is inconsistent and adding to the confusion !

If his age at enlistment in December 1872 had been 18 years and 8 months, this would have made his year of birth 1854 and his age at Rorke's Drift as being 24. The combination of Bourne's attestation record and the claim in his interview to have been 18 when he enlisted would therefore appear to be the most likely origin of the "age 24 at Rorke's Drift" error.

What is clear is that apart from being inconsistent, not a single reference to Frank Bourne's age or year of birth in his army records is factually correct and the only factually correct age reference from Bourne himself is that he was made a colour sergeant at the age of 23.

Less likely, but there is another possibility in some cases. Researchers may have identified his year of birth quite correctly as 1855, but have then assessed his age at Rorke's Drift by counting only whole years and not taking months into consideration. ie From 1855 to 1879 = 24 years. But, Bourne was born in April 1855 and Rorke's Drift was fought in the January of 1879, so Bourne had not actually reached his 24th birthday at the time of the battle.

Of the thirty sources looked at, no less than twenty four, ie 80%, are factually incorrect and this is a significant number.

An error only has to appear in print once and it is in danger of "going viral". Although it is in a different context altogether, Ron Lock gives the very apt quote that "History repeats itself. Historians repeat each other" (18). This would seem to be the case here, whereby many researchers have simply copied earlier, incorrect secondary sources. The added danger is that future researchers might be tempted to go with the "majority opinion" even if it is incorrect.

The lesson is clearly to always seek evidence by way of corroboration, preferably through definitive, primary sources and not to exclusively trust young soldiers, old soldiers, army records or secondary sources !

Having established Frank Bourne's year of birth and age at Rorke's Drift hopefully once and for all, the interesting question arises as to whether his rise to the rank of colour sergeant at such a young age was exceptional ?

The implication from Bourne himself would be that it was, and he refers to having been nicknamed "The Kid" (19). As already identified, and indeed as in the case of Frank Bourne, Norman Holme is not always accurate. But, let us look at both Holme's and Dutton's South Africa medal roll for the 2/24th (20). Excluding Frank Bourne, both Holme and Dutton give 11 names in the roll of those who had the rank of colour sergeant (although not all had this rank as at 22nd/23rd January 1879).

Holme gives scant biographical detail for nearly all entries and as we have seen, army records can be very unreliable as to ages but from a review of genealogical and army records combined it would appear that:

- * One name mentioned earlier and included in Holme, but without sufficient dates quoted, is (2131) James Gittins (of H Company 2/24th). I have had it confirmed that Gittins was 24 when he was promoted to colour sergeant on 1st November 1876(21).
- * (25b/605) Henry Cuthbert was either 23 or 24 when he was promoted to colour sergeant on 23rd January 1879 (22).
- * (1677) William Hamelin (Or Hamlin) was born in Liverpool in 1844 and enlisted in February 1865. He was appointed colour sergeant on 12th June 1871 aged approximately 27. He was appointed hospital sergeant on 14.3.1873 and transferred to the Army Hospital Corps 30.6.1873 but he was back as a colour sergeant in the 2/24th from 1st June 1875 until 29th December 1879, after which he was appointed quartermaster sergeant from 30th December 1879 to 30th February 1888. However, Hamelin was not in South Africa in January 1879 as he was on home service, and he was only awarded the 1878 clasp to the South Africa medal (23).
- * (1504) Thomas Scott, who enlisted in Birmingham on 6th July 1864 with age given as 18 was appointed colour sergeant on 24th March 1871. If and only if, his age at enlistment is accurate he would have been 24 at the time of this promotion (24).
- * In contrast, there are at least two colour sergeants of the 2/24th who would appear to have been in their thirties when they were promoted to that rank, at least in the 2/24th, but not necessarily in their army careers. These are (430) Alexander Ross (25) and (847) William Taylor. Interestingly, promotion for both had been something of "snakes and ladders" following their enlistment. They had both achieved promotions quite early in their military careers but had also seen demotions, either as a result of disciplinary proceedings or voluntary demotion (26). Ross was appointed Colour Sergeant in the 2/24th on 4th August 1877, and would have been aged around 36 and Taylor was appointed Colour Sergeant in the 2/24th on 23rd October 1878, aged around 38 (27).
- * We can also consider (1873) John Tigar. His army records are inconsistent but he was born in York on 1st September 1849. According to Holme he was appointed colour sergeant on 23rd October 1878, which would make him 29. However, a

different record altogether identifies him as having been a colour sergeant as early as 1871, when he would have been only 22 or 23 (28). Interestingly, both Holme and Dutton identify Tigar as being a sergeant and not a colour sergeant as far as the medal roll is concerned. It is quite possible therefore, that like Ross and Taylor above, he may have had something of a chequered army career.

Admittedly not a full analysis for the 2/24th colour sergeants but for seven out of twelve names for which there is some biographical information identified, three are 24 or under when promoted to colour sergeant, one is possibly under 24; one is in his late twenties and two are in their thirties (at least at the time of their promotion to colour sergeant in the 2/24th).

Further work would be required to look at the ages of the other names of colour sergeants given in Holme's and Dutton's rolls for the 2/24th, as insufficient information has been located to safely include them in an analysis. These are:

(1480)	Byrne G
(2001)	Essex J
(2336)	Lockyer G
(2408)	Roper Charles

There is another comparison, but not in the 2/24th, in that there was another colour sergeant other than Frank Bourne who was at Rorke's Drift on 22nd / 23rd January 1879. This was Staff Clerk Colour Sergeant George Mabin, of the Rifle Brigade. Mabin often gets overlooked in accounts of the battle, probably because the focus is more often on members of the 24th Foot or those awarded medals. It appears that Mabin was born on 5th October 1848 and was promoted to colour sergeant on 20th May 1875, aged 26 (29) .

Based on the sample, it would appear that Bourne may indeed have been young to achieve the rank of colour sergeant but perhaps not exceptional. It seems that any young recruit with a period of good conduct and the required degree of education could have gone up the promotion ladder to being a colour-sergeant in their early to mid twenties.

Of the sample alone, Bourne was the youngest colour sergeant in the 2/24th as at January 1879. He also had the shortest army service, having enlisted in 1872. In this respect, Bourne is unique among the sample in that he is the only one to have enlisted after the introduction of the Army Enlistment Act of 1870. This was one of the "Cardwell Reforms" and which gave new recruits to the infantry the opportunity to enlist for a minimum of six years with the colours and six years on the reserve. All of the others in the sample enlisted prior to the Act and would have been committed to a minimum of twelve years service with the colours. But, as is well documented and the Army Enlistment Act aside, Frank Bourne DCM went on to have a long military career, eventually retiring with the honorary rank of Lt. Colonel in 1918.

In conclusion, what is clear is that there was no "typical age" for a soldier to reach the rank of colour sergeant but Frank Bourne was not exceptional being in his early twenties. However, the age of colour sergeants in the 2/24th at any given point in time varied considerably.

Whereas the mature "grizzled veteran" as portrayed by a 39 year old Nigel Green in the

film, "Zulu" may have been a close depiction in age to some colour sergeants who had enlisted for the "long haul" of twelve years service prior to 1870 (or who had re-engaged), he most certainly wasn't close to being like a 23 year old Frank Bourne (30) .

Having cleared up the question of Frank Bourne's age, there are also discrepancies and disagreement in sources as to his height (31).....but that's for another day perhaps !

Acknowledgement

My appreciation goes to my sister, Daphne Claringbold, who patiently trawled the online genealogical sources and without whose work this article would not have been possible.

Notes

- (1) See for example article: *Colour Sergeant Frank Bourne* by Best B. in AZWHS Journal No. 4 Nov 25th 1998. This article also gives an informative summary of Bourne's career and his involvement at Rorke's Drift.
- (2) James Gittins was colour sergeant of H company 2/24th, which escorted Lt. Colonel Harness's four guns as part of Lord Chelmsford's force which set off from Isandlwana in fruitless pursuit of the Zulus just before dawn on 22nd January 1879.
- (3) The two men would certainly have known each other well and, in *The Sphere* of 14th July 1934 both are credited with identifying officers of the 2/24th in a photograph taken in India in 1871. (Ref: post by Stevenson L on WWW.1879ZULUWAR.COM made on 02/02/2019). As a point of interest, at the museum of the Royal Welsh Regiment in Brecon, James Gittins's medals are displayed immediately above those of Frank Bourne.
- (4) Holme N. *The Noble 24th* (London 1999).
- (5) According to Holme, the army list entry gives his date of birth as 18/12/52. This would appear to be a confused mis-transcription or misreading by the army list compilers, as 18/12/72 is actually the date of his enlistment.
- (6) Genealogical and army records information kindly provided or confirmed by Daphne and Robert Claringbold, the information having been taken from online genealogical sources. ("Findmypast" and "Ancestry").
- (7) Register of Births June 1855 Vol 2b Page 114. Some sources, including his army service record as stated by Holme, give the district with the erroneous spelling of "Cookfield".
- (8) Some sources incorrectly give the date of his death as the 8th May or his age at death as 91. One source which has both his years of birth and death correct is the blue plaque put by London Borough of Bromley Council on his former home at 16 Kings Hall Road, Beckenham, Kent. However, the "blue plaque" biographical information about Bourne on the Council's website is incorrect, giving his year of birth as 1854 !
- (9) Registered as Surrey South East District Vol 2A Page 643 and 643a respectively
- (10) The school was apparently a feature of Victoria Terrace for a number of years during the Victorian age and Henry Fyfe was headmaster from approximately 1866 to 1874. There is a record of the premises being auctioned in 1875 and in 1971 Victoria Terrace was awarded Grade II listed building status. (Ref: <http://hovehistory.blogspot.com/2020/06/victoria-terrace-hove.html>)
- (11) Greaves A. *Rorke's Drift* (London 2002).
- (12) See Introduction in Spiers Edward M. *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester 2004)
- (13) There is no extant record of Bourne's motivation for enlisting in the army and he gave no reasons himself. Some sources speculate that lack of any prospects in an agricultural life may have been his incentive. This may well have been a contributory factor but, and it is equally speculative, if Frank Bourne was indeed in Brighton in 1871, other factors may have been at play. For example, he may have been lured into joining the army by a persuasive recruiting sergeant ! Some sources also add that Bourne's father unsuccessfully tried

- twice tried to prevent his enlistment. I understand this comes from family “oral tradition” but it may well be true, as soldiers were seen as the “lowest of the low” in Victorian Society. (See Spiers Edward M. *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester 1992).
- (14) Date of promotion to Colour Sergeant as per Holme, *The Noble 24th* note (4) above.
- (15) See National Archive Records: WO/76/356, WO/76/220 and WO/76/234.
- (16) Attestation Record WO 67/30 -31. Many young recruits would have added to their age either to meet the minimum age for enlistment prevailing at the time or possibly to avoid being taken on as “boy soldiers” which only attracted half pay. At the time Frank Bourne enlisted in 1872, the minimum age for enlistment was 18, so Bourne had good reason to lie about his real age. Incidentally, James Gittins of H Company, as referred to in the text and note (2) above, also lied about his age when he joined up. He gave his age on enlistment as 17 when in fact he was only 16 and he was still three months short of his 17th Birthday.
- (17) This is quoted in many sources but I have taken it from Holme N, *The Silver Wreath* (London 1979). Apparently the actual interview was either unrecorded (according to Holme and also Bancroft J in *The Rorke's Drift Men* (Stroud 2010) or, wiped by the BBC in the 1950s because they thought it wouldn't be of sufficient interest (Ref. Best B. *Journal of the AZWHS* No. 4 Nov 25th 1998 Note (1) above). If recorded and wiped, I think this is perhaps understandable insofar as they couldn't reasonably be expected to have had the foresight to know that in 1964 an Epic film would be released that was to generate an explosion of interest in the Anglo-Zulu War !
- (18) Adage as quoted by Lock R. in *Isandlwana The Revelation of a Disaster* (Barnsley 2017).
- (19) Bourne F, as quoted in Holme N, *The Silver Wreath*. (As note (17) above).
- (20) Holme N “The Noble 24th” (As (4) above) and Dutton R. *Forgotten Heroes: Zulu & Basuto Wars* (Prenton 2010).
- (21) Unpublished information provided by Robert Claringbold, great, great grandson of James Gittins.
- (22) Cuthbert was with A Co. 2/24th, which was with Chelmsford when he left Isandlwana early in the morning of 22nd January Sadly he didn't get to enjoy his promotion for long as he died of disease at Rorke's Drift on 12th March 1879 (Ref: Holme).
- (23) Compare Holme, *The Noble 24th* (4 above) with Find My Past British Army Worldwide Index 1871 Regimental Service Records NA ref WO 12/4152.
- (24) Chelsea Pensioner Records Series WO 116 / WO 117.
- (25) Alexander Ross was a very lucky man. He was colour sergeant in Lt. Charles Pope's “G” company 2/24th, the only company of the second battalion to have been in the camp at Isandlwana when the Zulus attacked. As Ross explained in a letter to his wife and which was subsequently published in the *Essex Herald* of 11th March 1879, because G company was allocated for picquet duty on the 22nd January, he had previously applied for a change of duty. As a result, he had accompanied Lord Chelmsford's column which left the camp in the early hours of 22nd January and he therefore survived the annihilation of his company.
- (26) Voluntary reversion in rank for various reasons for NCOs was not at all unusual in the Victorian army. For further exploration of this see Spiers Edward M. *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester 1992).
- (27) Information from “Find My Past” Regimental Service Records.
- (28) *Ibid*
- (29) Bancroft J *The Rorke's Drift Men* (Stroud 2010).
- (30) For more more information about Nigel Green and the portrayal generally of the main characters in the film, “Zulu” see Hall S. *Zulu - With Some Guts Behind It* (Sheffield 2005).
- (31) Suffice to say on the matter that the height given on enlistment by a teenage recruit is not their full adult height, as they are still growing. This is a material factor even today for the Joint Casualty and Compassion Centre of the Ministry of Defence when they try to identify human remains of soldiers killed in the First World War.