

A letter to the Editor. 1.

Rorke's Drift; who found the Queen's Colour?
Lt. Harbour and the Queen's Colour in Brecon Cathedral

Good Morning Dr Adrian Greaves

I am the Great Granddaughter of Lieutenant Stephen Smith Harber who found the Queen's Colours at Rorke's Drift - please see attached letter from Major General David Peel Yates of the South Wales Borderers dated 3 January 1963.

This letter was written to my Grandfather's brother Stephen Gordon Harber, the original is currently in the possession of his son Stephen Harber and I am writing on behalf of the Harber family.

Letter from Major General David Peel Yates of the South Wales Borderers to the Harbour family, dated 3 January 1963.

Our regimental history and other records of the regiment show that it was your father, Lieutenant S.S. Harbour of the Natal Native Contingent, who was responsible for the recovery of the Queen's Colour of our 1st Battalion from the Buffalo River after Lieutenants Melvill and Coghill had been killed in saving it from falling into the hands of the Zulus after the Battle of Isandlwana on 22nd January 1879.

It has recently been brought to my notice that not only did your father recover the Colour from the flooded river under threat of enemy interference but that he never received any official recognition for this selfless act.

Although 64 years have elapsed I should like to place on record the sincere gratitude of my Regiment for your father's action in recovering this most treasured possession of my Regiment. This action led in the following years to a unique event, when Queen Victoria placed a wreath of immortelles around the same staff of the same Colour in recognition of the bravery of members of my Regiment in the successful defence of Rorke's drift and of Lieutenant Melvill and Coghill who gave their lives to save the Colour from falling into the hands of the enemy.

I appreciate that many years have passed, however, as I am busy compiling the family history and doing research it has come to my attention that according to the Society's Journal 12 'Zulu War Colours Saved Again' published June 2002, there is a Silver plaque in the Brecon Cathedral which states that Lieutenant Colonel Black found the colours. Lt Black in fact was handed the colours by Lieut. S.S. Harber who retrieved the colours from the River.

We, as the Harber family, obviously feel very passionate about this and would kindly request that our Great Great Grandfather Lieutenant Stephen Smith Harber be acknowledged accordingly, as per the attached letter, in any future historical tours undertaken at the Cathedral and any future journals published.

My sister and I are undertaking a visit to the Battlefields next week and will be handing a copy of this letter to the Rattray's at Fugitives Drift Lodge to display in their museum as well as to Pam MacFadden at the Talana Museum, who both cover the wars extensively.

I thank you for your time,

Kind regards

Belinda
On behalf of the Harber family
Thursday, 21 July, 2022

Dr Adrian Greaves replied....

Dear Belinda,

I hope I can throw some light on this matter; George Chadwick (1923 – 2000) was a South African academic historian who spent much of his life researching Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. Post WWII, where he had fought at El Alamein, he was the battlefield curator across KwaZulu Natal, his interest was equally divided between the battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu War and the Boer Wars. He spent many years working for the National Monuments Council and was on the Board of Trustees of the Voortrekker Museum, but his main interest was guiding, especially at Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana. Without doubt, George was the undisputed leader in this field and nobody could rival his breath of knowledge gained over many years 'on the ground'.

I was recently reading through a pamphlet George prepared for the very first Holts' Tour of Zululand in 1988, a tour which George and I accompanied, and noted that he was very specific about the dates Fugitives' Drift was visited following Isandlwana. Reports from the military vary by a few days either way but George was specific ...

He wrote...

Fugitives' Drift was visited on 1 February when the bodies of Melvill and Coghill were found. Two days later the Reverend Smith buried them under a common cairn. On the same day a patrol commanded by Major Black searched for the colours. Descending to the river, they erected a sanger to give cover should the Zulus reappear. Lieutenant Harford saw the colour case near the bend of the river and Lieutenant Harber retrieved it. The pole with the colour still attached was found 50 meters upstream wedged in the rocky island.

Dr Adrian Greaves added....

I have just remembered this extract from the letters of Lt. Harford (a full account of these letters is in the Harford book; there is a presentation copy at Fugitives' Drift Lodge). It is self explanatory....

Maj. Black now decided Captain Harber and Lt Wainwright should accompany me to the river bed and carry out the search operation. After a tremendous climb down and on getting to the bottom of the kranz we found ourselves at the corner of a delta formed by the river, which was now dry shingle,.....(he describes the scene) Scarcely had we taken a few steps than I stumbled on the Colour case mixed up with a heap of other things, and on picking it up, I said to Harber, who was closest to me, 'Look, here's the case, the Colour can't be far off', we all three then had a look at it then, as Harber was returning to his position, we saw a straight pole..... (further description of scene) He (Harber) waded straight in, up to his middle, and got hold of it. On lifting it out he brought out the Colour still adhering to it, and on getting out of the water handed the standard to me, and as he did so the gold-embroidered centre scroll dropped out..... our cheers very soon brought Major Black tearing down the kranz'.

The rest is well known.

I came across the above in a pile of unseen Harford letters which I found in Harford's long-lost suitcase in 2008 - since published as '**HARFORD The writings, photographs and Sketches**'

I hope this adds to the evidence!
Adrian

Letter to the Editor 2.

My ancestor was Not at RD

You must receive many letters from people saying 'My ancestor fought at Rorke's Drift'. Well, this letter is from someone ... who is saying my ancestor wasn't at Rorke's Drift (as far as I know) but he may have been a survivor and fugitive from Isandlwana and may also have been at the Battle of Ulundi.

My ancestor is my great great uncle John Baxter.
The only verifiable facts that I know of him are;

He was born in Gortreagh near Cookstown, Ireland on 29th April 1855 and was buried at Birtley, County Durham, England 20th February 1947.

An article dated 1933 in the Chester le Street newspaper claims he served right through the Zulu War where he had his horse shot from under him.

Family sources suggest he served in the Enniskillen Fusiliers,
Had been a trooper in the 1st Dragoon Guards

He fought in the Zulu War.

He had a scar on his hand allegedly from a Zulu spear.

Baxter claimed he was present when Cetshwayo was captured and that the King was forced to walk between two mounted troopers as he was too heavy to mount a horse.

Is it possible that someone, perhaps from an Irish regiment, could have fought with the Warwickshire Regiment?

Can anyone in the Society can verify or disprove any of the above story?

V. Lockhart.

Adrian Greaves replied....

Hello Valerie,

Thank you for your letter about J. Baxter and the Anglo Zulu War.

Your letter was indeed rather unique coming from someone saying their relative was not at Rorke's Drift!

I have carefully looked at your query and after consulting the medal rolls of the war from 1877 to 1879 my conclusion is a mixture of probable good news - but which then leaves some uncertainty.

I have discovered that a small section of his unit was sent to assist with the burial of the bodies at Isandlwana as part of the later_burial expedition in April/May; and while there they camped at nearby Rorke's Drift. As you will guess, no names are recorded so we just don't know if he had any involvement or was telling an oft repeated tale. All I can add is that his claim to have been at Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana - although it would have been months later - cannot be ruled out - or substantiated.

I've recorded your query and should anything fresh pop up I'll let you know.

Dr Adrian Greaves

Further from Adrian Greaves

Hello Valerie,

Having had a quiet hour or two escaping the heat today I have delved into some of the more obscure reports and came up with something I was not aware of.

First of all, I have traced John Baxter joining the 1st Dragoon Guards as a Private soldier with the regimental number 1455. As this record has to be correct.... then your relative has to be this soldier as there is no other J. Baxter recorded as serving at this time with the regiment in the Zulu War .

As for Rorke's Drift and Isandlwana - you are right to discount these actions as participants are well documented and his unit was not there.

However, it is possible/probable that he took part in two other major engagements of the war, namely the battles of Khambula and the final battle of Ulundi. It is also possible he was present, or nearby, when King Cetshwayo was captured but I cannot confirm this as there is no substantive written evidence of those involved, other than the patrol officer and interpreter.

Likewise, unless he had been seriously injured or decorated for bravery during the war, then he would have remained anonymous, as were most soldiers. His account of the injury to his hand may well, or not, be true! Evidence from numerous but false 'I was there' accounts merely shows the ingenuity of some soldiers to return home with a plausible war story. Such an account gained respect from families and neighbours (and free beer in the local hostelryes!). Likewise, the account of the king and the horse don't fit the recorded accounts of escorting the king - the king and his wives were correctly treated according to establish protocol and moved by wagon.

I have not been able to trace this name with Irish units at this time.

So, I hope my reply is helpful. Sadly, without surviving documentation I really can't help you further but I am positive that you have correctly identified J. Baxter as your Zulu War relative. If you have his medal..... but that's another story as it will be worth a lot of money!

Yours,

Adrian

Dear Dr Adrian Greaves

Thank you so much for your very prompt reply to my query relating to my Great Great Uncle John Baxter.

Although you were unable to substantiate any of the story passed down through the family, you have confirmed that John Baxter was in the 1st Dragoon Guards, with his service number, which is a step further than we had managed.

I did say that the Irish branch of the family are very good story tellers, and this may well be the case here!

Your assistance in this matter is much appreciated.

Valerie Lockhart
