

Barber Beaumont

By
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IT IS GIVEN to few men to leave behind them such permanent and diverse memorials as a great commercial enterprise, a university college and a famous infantry battalion, yet Barber Beaumont achieved this singular distinction. It is therefore all the more strange that his name is practically unknown to the general public today. Many lesser men, whose names are household words, accomplished far less in their lives than this great English gentleman.

Even now very little is known about his private life, yet this vital and versatile man was one of the most interesting and outstanding characters of his time and age. He was principally an artist and a writer, but devoted the best part of his life to his fellow men. Not for nothing was he known as the 'poor man's friend'.

John Thomas Barber was born in Marylebone on 21st December 1774. He did not add the name 'Beaumont' to his surname until 1812. From all accounts his boyhood was not spent in very affluent circumstances. From an early age he evinced artistic tendencies, and he determined to become an artist. He entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1791, where he gained several medals for his work, and between 1794 and 1804 he exhibited some fifty works of art. Although he painted several portraits, mostly of members of the theatrical profession including Mrs Jordan and Charles Incledon, he specialized in miniature painting. Having attracted the patronage of the Royal Family, he was appointed miniaturist to both Their Royal Highnesses the Duke of Kent and the Duke of York, and there are several examples of his exquisite work in the Victoria and Albert Museum. During his early years he also wrote and illustrated *A Tour through South Wales* which he dedicated to Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and which is today a collector's piece.

Having achieved his ambition as a painter Beaumont suddenly turned his attention to finance and philanthropy. He was always a public spirited man; And Aubrey Noakes says he 'regarded Poor Law Measures and the like as mere palliatives and tinkering expedients which left fundamentally unsolved the problems of want and insecurity among the lower and middle classes'.* By means of pamphlets and propaganda he launched a campaign urging people to help themselves and he himself established the first savings bank in his own parish of St Paul's, Covent Garden, which he later abandoned for the Provident Life Office. In 1807 he founded the County Fire Office, and the first meeting was held at his residence, 25 Southampton Street, Covent Garden, on 28th April. This ambitious project came into being through the agency of 'an association of noblemen and gentlemen' in the counties of Bedford, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertford, Leicester, Lincoln, Middlesex, Northampton, Nottingham, Oxford, Warwick and York for the benefit of country residents, with a subscribed capital of £300,000. Beaumont himself was appointed Managing Director at £500 per annum. His house was the office, the Fire Office occupying the front room on the ground floor and the Provident Life Office the back room. (The house itself no

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* "The County Fire Office, 1805-1957" by A Noakes, London, 1957.

longer exists, while No. 25 Southampton Street is a branch of Lloyds Bank.) In 1819 the business was transferred to its present imposing site at the Piccadilly end of The Quadrant in Regent Street; it is today part of the Alliance Group of companies. Beaumont retained the Managing Directorship until his death.

During his tenure of this appointment he became concerned with a murder case that was a *cause célèbre* of the last century, and which today is included in many works of criminology. The chief character was the unpleasant John Thurtell, who it may be recalled murdered William Weare, the cardsharp, at Gill's Hill Lane, near Radlett in 1823. The year before Beaumont refused to pay a claim on a fire at 93 Watling Street on a policy taken out in the name of Thurtell's Brother, when judgement was given in favour of the Thurtells by Mr Justice Park, mainly it was believed as a result of some acrimonious exchanges in Court between the judge and Serjeant Toddy who represented the Fire Office. Beaumont still refused to pay and a great deal of litigation resulted. John Thurtell recognised that Beaumont's intransigent attitude was the chief obstacle to any payment and his intense hatred of Beaumont led him to prowl about Regent Street armed with a specially constructed air gun in the shape of a walking stick with the object of shooting Beaumont. However, Beaumont came to no harm, and after the execution of Thurtell for the murder of Weare, he acquired the gun and the handcuffs used in the arrest and they are now exhibited in the Board Room of the County Fire Office. So intense was his hatred for Beaumont that Thurtell in his speech for his defence at the murder trial referred to him as 'the pretended corrector of abuses, the specious assertor of liberty, who has dared to hoist the standard of rebellion in front of the palace of his Sovereign'. The latter was an illusion to Barber Beaumont's and his family's fanatical espousal of the cause of the ill-fated Queen Caroline.

Barber Beaumont in time became a rich man and acquired property in Stepney. It is not within the province of this sketch to trace the history of Queen Mary College. No doubt its story will be told elsewhere during the present celebration of the anniversary of the grant of this Chapter. About a year before his death in 1841 Beaumont fulfilled another of his life's ambitions by building and endowing at the cost of about £20,000 in the square named after him in Mile End, the New Philosophical Institute or Beaumont Institute as it was sometimes called, where working men might meet in order to 'facilitate the knowledge of scientific truths and for encouraging the disposition to cheerful recreation, as well as afford some of the usual advantages of a literary society'. The building itself comprised a hall in which was installed a fine organ, a library containing upwards of 4,000 books, a museum, committee rooms and classrooms.

After his death his trustees became associated with the Drapers' Company and with their assistance established in 1887 the People's Palace Technical Schools, which were opened by Queen Victoria, and later became known as the East London Technical College. In 1907 University recognition was granted, and instruction was provided for the study for degrees in Art, Science and Engineering. In 1915 the college was recognized as a School of London University, and in 1934 it was granted a Royal Charter and received the name of Queen Mary College. The People's Palace itself was rebuilt and was reopened by the late King George VI in 1936.

The Duke of Cumberland's Corps of Sharpshooters

It was as a soldier, however, that Barber Beaumont probably showed his most remarkable qualities. Without any previous military training, he proved to have powers of leadership, a steadfastness of purpose and a flexibility of mind. He quickly appreciated that the art of war was fast changing and he carried out in his own small way training in accordance with the doctrine recently introduced by Sir John Moore. It may be regretted therefore that he was never able to put his precepts into practice in the field.

Like many other people he was fully alive to the dangers to his country caused by the threat of invasion by Napoleon. But he was not content to stand aside and leave other people to do the work. He was a man of action, and by his zeal and forcefulness a meeting was held in the Vestry Room of St Paul's, Covent Garden, in August 1803, under the patronage of HRH the Duke of Cumberland (later King of Hanover) when it was resolved that 'a corps of sharpshooters would be eminently useful in and about the Metropolis'. Words were quickly translated into deeds and a newspaper record of the time records that on 5th September a meeting of the 'gentlemen of the Duke of Cumberland's Sharpshooters' was held at the Shakespeare Tavern when a letter was read from the Marquis of Titchfield, Lord-Lieutenant of the County of Middlesex, signifying HM King George III's approbation and acceptance of the Corps'. The report goes on to say a 'very condescending and flattering letter was then read from HRH the Duke of Cumberland - in which after paying several deserved encomiums to the zeal and exertions of J T Barber Esq (a gentleman well known to the circles of literature and the arts) in forming this Corps, His Royal Highness nominated him "as a very fit and proper person to have the honour of commanding the Duke of Cumberland's Corps of Sharpshooters"'.

The Government laid down an establishment of three companies of seventy men each with the usual complement of officers, NCOs and buglers. Notice was published that recruiting was open to men between 6 feet and 5 feet 3 inches in height with a personal reference of 'two respectable householders'. Beaumont was himself gazetted Major-Commandant. The men received no pay allowances of any kind but as they were all of financial standing, they at once fitted themselves out with rifle green uniforms and with the 'new rifles'. Training was on the lines laid down by Sir John Moore for his riflemen and light infantry, and we are indebted to the *Sunday Review* of 23rd October 1803 for an account of the first inspection of the Corps, just seven weeks after its formation. The following excerpt taken from that newspaper shows how Beaumont was ahead of his times, and whereas most of the Army, regular and volunteers, were trained in the accepted close of tactics of the day, the Sharpshooters practised the new open order type of field training:

After passing twice before the General and his suite, in ordinary and in quick time, they went through their skirmishing manoeuvres to the satisfaction and surprise of every person present, military or otherwise. They formed into an extended line, the front rank discharging their rifles, and giving way for the rear to advance, who, having fired, remained firm at their post, the front rank again advancing in the same order, keeping up an alternate discharge and advance of the most rapid kind. All was silent, not a word could be heard from the Corps, the command being given by a whistle, so that an enemy must be unconscious of their approach in everything but the effects of their guns. Having advanced in this way to a considerable distance, they retreated in the same order, at the sound of the bugle, firing and falling back. Another mode of annoyance was then practised, as singular in appearance as expertly performed; the

Corps advanced to certain positions, laid themselves on their bellies, took aim, and discharged their rifles, rolling again upon their backs, at full length to load, and by this means keeping up an incessant and well-directed annoyance. After some time spent in this way, the whole Corps, at the sound of the whistle, leaped up and fled with the utmost precipitancy. Then rallied, took a fresh position and repeated their former movements.

In 1804 Beaumont compiled and published a training booklet entitled *Instructions for the Formation & Exercise of Volunteer Sharpshooters*. It laid down the principles of the firing of the rifle and of the training and exercise of a company, together with '12 Bugle horn calls for use in the field and 10 whistle signals'. Beaumont also had special sights made for the men's rifles, which were later adopted in some form or other by all match-shooting riflemen. He arranged for firing practices up to 300 yards at a moving target, quite unheard of in those days of Brown Bess; those men who qualified at this particular practice were entitled to wear a green silk cockade in their caps.

Another publication by Beaumont was *Considerations on the Best Means of Ensuring the International Defence of Great Britain*, in which he advocated general training between the ages of eighteen and forty-five under certain regulations without expense to the Government, as well as the use of sportsmen and gamekeepers as snipers.

The Duke of Cumberland's Sharpshooters under Barber Beaumont soon acquired a reputation for skill and efficiency with the rifle quite unsurpassed by other corps and references to newspapers of the day show that the Corps vanquished teams from all regiments and challenged them. Beaumont himself was one of the best shots and had the greatest confidence in his men. It is recorded that on one occasion in Hyde Park he was so satisfied with the efficiency of his men that he held the target while the entire Corps fired into it consecutively at a distance of 150 yards. It is indeed difficult to believe that such a feat could be attempted 150 years ago while Brown Bess was still in general use, but the story is not apocryphal. Noakes says that only a dozen men actually fired, but traditions has it that it was the entire corps. Angelo, the famous *maître d'armes*, at whose *salle* many of the Corps fenced, refers to it in his *Reminiscences* and says the stone from which the firing took place 'with DCSS chiselled thereon still remains in Hyde Park opposite the spot where the butt stood'. Beaumont himself thought nothing of this feat, which was in fact rehearsed for an inspection to take place the next day by General the Earl of Banbury. Beaumont breakfasted with Banbury the next morning and told him what had happened and that he intended to repeat the performance for the benefit of the General. Banbury was horrified and gave peremptory orders the shoots was not take place, and as Angelo records, 'It was fortunate that he did so, for on the firing Mr Rice of the Alien Office, at that time deemed the best shot in the Corps, and who had the previous hit the bull's eye when the major held the target, became nervous, and actually missed the target altogether in two shots out of three.' It is to be wondered how many Commanding Officers would repeat this performance today even with the accurate weapons now issued to the British Army!

Beaumont appears to have disappeared from the Active List after a few years because the Earl of Yarmouth was later shown to be in command. But he obviously retained some connection with the Corps because there is a somewhat spiteful allusion to him in *The Times* of 22nd April 1826 in an account of a ball at the King's Theatre when 'a notorious Director of an Assurance Company (*Mr Barber Beaumont*) managed his sword so clumsily

that the hilt got entangled in the sweeping train of the Widow Coutts, and but that he is married, might have given rise to a report that he was endeavouring to form a union which would have ruined the hopes of the Duke of St Albans’.

Queen Victoria’s Rifles

The connection of Barber Beaumont’s Sharpshooters with the present Queen Victoria’s Rifles may shortly be told. At the close of the war in 1814 a General Order for the disbandment of all volunteers was promulgated, but the Duke of Cumberland’s Sharpshooters were very averse to sharing this fate and great efforts were made to gain exemption. After the expenditure of a great deal of work and influence, Mr Ryder, the then Secretary of State, intimated that although the Government could not afford any official recognition, it would put no obstruction in the way of their continuing their association so long as they ‘did not obtrude themselves upon the public notice’. The Corps then became a rifle club, retaining the old name, wearing the old uniforms and meeting for rifle practice. Official records now cease, although it is worthy of note that in the last few years certain records relating to the old Corps have been discovered in the family archives of the House of Hanover, and it is possible that some light may be shed on this period. What is known is that the survivors in 1835 wishing to bring themselves into line with more modern conditions obtained permission from HRH the Duchess of Kent, mother of the then Princess Victoria, for the Club to be called the Royal Victoria Rifle Club (later Corps) and to receive the patronage of the Heir-Apparent. They built themselves a new HQ in Kilburn (on the site of the present Victoria Road) with a 400-yards rifle range. In 1849 when the political situation was delicate the Corps received the authority of the Magistrates of Middlesex to assemble for drill and practice in the use of arms.

In 1853, owing to the rise of Napoleon III, the Regiment was officially gazetted as the Victoria Rifles under command of the second Duke of Wellington. Since then the Regiment has never looked back. It became Queen Victoria’s Rifles in 1908 and was one of the first London battalions to sail to France in November 1914, where it took part in all the major battles of the first world war. One of its officers, 2nd Lieutenant Geoffrey Harold Woolley, was the first Territorial to be awarded the Victoria Cross. As part of the Greenjacket Brigade (since 1937 it had the added title of 7th Bn KRRC) it took part in the epic defence of Calais in 1940. Today its members never forget the debt the Regiment owes to its founder Barber Beaumont and they are proud of the traditions handed down by their predecessors, who took up arms for the defence of their country under him.

In 1903 to celebrate the centenary of the Regiment, HM King Edward VII did it the signal honour of inspecting it privately in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. The Regiment has also always been proud of its connection with the People’s Palace and Queen Mary College. When the Palace was opened by Queen Victoria in 1887 it was suggested that the Regiment should mount a Guard of Honour for her; but the proposal was rejected by the GOC Home District on the grounds that such guards were the prerogative of the Brigade of Guards. However Barber Beaumont’s grandson, Captain W Spencer Beaumont (late 14th Hussars), was a friend of HRH the Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief, and a direct order was received from Buckingham Palace that the Victoria’s Rifles should provide the Guard of Honour, which on the day received a very warm welcome from the East Enders. This served as a precedent in 1936 on the occasion of the reopening of the Palace by His late Majesty King George VI when a Guard of Honour with the band and

bugles of the Regiment again mounted a Guard. In the same year a detachment of the Regiment marched in the Lord Mayor's procession dressed in the old uniform of the Duke of Cumberland's Sharpshooters. Barber Beaumont's own green jacket and plumes are now preserved in the Officers Mess of Queen Victoria's Rifles, having been presented by his grandson, together with a number of handsome silver medallion shooting trophies shot for by the old Sharpshooters.

Barber Beaumont was active up to the time of his death. He was at his beloved institute three days before he died and attended a meeting of the Directors of the County Fire Office only two days before. He died in his chair on 15th May 1841 in his sixty-seventh year. The clerks in his office were directed to wear mourning for three months and each of them received £10 to buy the appropriate clothing and 'mourning rings'. He was buried in his own cemetery, the East London, but later his remains were moved to Kensal Green.

Note:

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