

Sunderland barracks

'Naked and defenceless' against privateers, and vulnerable to direct attack on the port in wartime, Sunderland inhabitants repeatedly asked for better military protection during the 18th century.¹ The closest permanent military presence was at Tynemouth, where a regiment of foot was usually stationed to support revenue officers as they patrolled the coast. Though Sunderland had gun emplacements earlier, not until the national alarm during the wars against revolutionary France was a barracks commissioned, after townspeople, hoping that the government would improve on the one company of militia supposed to guard 500 sail of ship, offered land on the town moor.²

Before this, soldiers, sometimes in town for many weeks, were billeted at inns which received fixed sums in compensation. Ensign Storr, one of a large detachment which passed three summer months in Sunderland during 1761, recorded some of the practical difficulties in these arrangements. Innkeepers were compelled to provide accommodation, but most men found and cooked their own food. 'Those soldiers who innholders are not willing to diet are given to understand they may demand the following necessaries viz. salt, small beer five pints *per diem* each man, the use of fire and necessary utensils for dressing and eating their meat.' Many soldiers had no cash, so money was advanced twice a week by the company commander 'that they may furnish themselves with provisions at the cheapest rate'. And Storr noted: 'The men are ordered not to eat too much fish.' Soldiers were required to exercise four times a day, but spent much time among the inhabitants and sailors, leading to quarrels and violence, gaming and dishonesty, for any of which they faced court martial and confinement in 'the Black-Hole' on bread and water.³

The troops had also to be presentable and fit. 'The men to parade for church... with hair well powdered, clean in every other respect'. To mark the king's birthday, 'the men are ordered to be under arms exactly at 12 o'clock to fire three volleys in honour of the day. Three pounds of powder to be delivered to each man in the parade. The men must take particular care to be very clean hair well tied & powdered, cloth[es] well brush'd, hats well cock'd, shoes & gaiters well black'd, clean shirts & black stocks or ribbons...'. Company tailors provided new suits of clothes for all soldiers during their stay in the town, and the men were ordered 'not to sell any of their old clothes or hats on any account but keep them to work in'. Disease was also a concern: 'sergeants of each company to examine their men... whether they have the itch or not; as many as have that filthy disorder must be reported to the commanding officer'. Those infected were ordered to see the regimental surgeon and 'on no account... apply to old women or quack doctors; who will ruin his health'.

The 1st Regiment of the West Riding Militia, around 120 soldiers accompanied by a few wives, posted to Sunderland for six months in 1793, was one of the last groups to be billeted in the town.⁴ By 1795 the national emergency was such that temporary barracks were hired, the largest of them warehouses holding several hundred men, a malthouse at Monkwearmouth which would take 276, and a barn at Fulwell with up to 172.⁵ The Sunderland barracks, including a hospital for 80 patients, was then under construction by a specialist London architect, Thomas Neill, with 'extensive and commodious' premises designed for 1,528 infantrymen. Commissioned in 1795, it covered a seven-acre site on the northern tip of the Coney Warren, between the Black

Cat battery and the town end. Most of this area was open, large enough to march 200 paces in either direction, with buildings running around the perimeter inside a strong wooden palisade. In the interests of rapid construction, soldiers' and officers' quarters were also made of wood. The square plan varied only on the south nearest the sea coast, where the boundary diverted outwards around the hospital, so that the building was within the fence but isolated from other accommodation. Standing where the Gladstone bridge a century later linked to new docks, at that time the hospital was completely exposed to the elements, and had to be demolished when its foundations washed away.⁶

Sunderland became the base for defending miles of shoreline, as the port stood 'immediately on the coast close to Whitburn bay, the most convenient and desirable spot for the enemy to effect a landing as it lies between the mouths of the Tyne and Wear...'⁷ As circumstances changed, additions were made to the barracks, and temporary premises at Fulwell and Whitburn fitted up. Some of this work was carried out in 1803 by James Hogg, a captain in the volunteer artillery and presumably cabinet-maker and freeman of Sunderland of the same name. The three bodies of volunteer militia – 300 artillery, 600 infantry, and 200 sea fencibles – were in being from 1803 until 1813-14.⁸

After the war ended, it was planned to abandon Sunderland barracks. However, new rules limited soldiers to one to a bed, halving the capacity of most army accommodation. As a result of this Sunderland was spared, though in future taking a maximum of 992 men.⁹ Between 1826 and 1828, there was considerable rebuilding. A local mining engineer, John Watson, completed a new well in 1828, boring into limestone below the barracks yard. This replaced four older wells which at 50 feet were not deep enough to keep out sea water.¹⁰ The soldiers' barracks were demolished and replaced with smaller brick buildings, although it seems that the more ornate officers' quarters were retained. The hospital was rebuilt around the northern corner of the quadrangle. On the east, fortified by additional fencing, was the magazine, convenient for the battery and coastguard station. Buildings which had occupied the side nearest the shore were demolished, and the outer wall appears to have been reconstructed in brick.¹¹

While a posting to Sunderland may not have been too welcome to officers – 'nothing can excuse the dullness of this place nor does it improve at all' – the presence of the army brought an injection of social activities. Major Gen. Viscount Feilding's stays were eagerly anticipated in 1797, there were garrison concerts and balls, and the same officers who grumbled that life was dull also dined well, could 'drink like a fish', and suffered cases of gout.¹²

The military served their purpose when the town was threatened by foreign foe or civil disturbance, but soldiers also brought trouble, fought with police, and escaped to the barracks to evade justice. Three soldiers almost killed a policeman who tried to arrest one of them for drunkenness in 1846, beating, kicking and biting him senseless. Before disappearing into the safety of their barracks, they sparked a riot along High Street which was stopped only with the help of the commanding officer and a detachment with fixed bayonets.¹³ In 1848, after two privates were fined for drunkenness and resisting arrest, a large contingent left the barracks in search of revenge, attacking the outnumbered constables before retreating to their base. A visit

by the mayor and police in pursuit of the culprits resulted in more violence, the mayor and his attendants having to be escorted to the gates by an officer with drawn sword, though they 'escaped uninjured'. The colonel of the regiment was expected to 'hand over the ringleaders for justice' but the *Times* reported that 'considerable fear has been occasioned by the affair'.¹⁴ Following a period of bad feeling against the police in 1856, soldiers of the Royal Tyrone Fusiliers militia set off a full-scale battle which terrified inhabitants in the lower part of town. This again started with a drunken clash, after which the militia tried to rescue five 'notorious characters' being escorted to the main police station. The police called reinforcements but were at first no match for the larger number of soldiers. After the militia men attacked the police station, the police used batons to regain the ascendancy, and managed to arrest half the soldiers. The commanding officer at this point had to secure his barracks and double the guard to prevent more soldiers going out to rescue their comrades from police custody.¹⁵ Magistrates later handed back the offending soldiers to face military justice.¹⁶

¹ TNA, T 1/388/101; **cross ref. defences**

² J.R. Breihan, 'Army Barracks in the North East in the Era of the French Revolution', *Arch. Ael.* 5th ser. xviii (1990), 167-9.

³ YAS Leeds, Ms 723; Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 167-9

⁴ WYAS, Bradford, SpSt/10/7/16, 19-21

⁵ Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 171

⁶ E.W. Brayley and J. Britton, *The Beauties of England and Wales*, v (1803), 145; Garbutt 1819, 235, 326; Wood plan 1826; Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 169-72.

⁷ Bucks. RO, D-HV/B/21/15, /18

⁸ Garbutt 1819, app. 65-7; Barfoot & Wilkes, *Universal British Dir.*, iv (1795-8?), 513; Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 172

⁹ Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 173-4

¹⁰ NEIMME, 3410/Wat/1/9

¹¹ Breihan, 'Army Barracks', 174-5; BL, Add 54545 f. 89; Wood plan 1826

¹² Warwicks RO, CR 2017/C244/500; /C309/21; /C314

¹³ *Times*, 7 Aug. 1846

¹⁴ *Times*, 29 Sept. 1848

¹⁵ *Durham Advertiser*, 15 Feb. 1856

¹⁶ *Durham Advertiser*, 22 Feb. 1856