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Colonel JAC Gibbs and the Mons Drum

Paul Wilcock

“It will all be over by Christmas”

Only last year, those with the last personal memories of the horrors of trench warfare, Henry Allingham and Harry Patch, passed away. As the First World War passes from living memory we rely to some degree on our regimental traditions and museums to maintain an understanding of the human cost.

The museum of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in Halifax, recently benefiting from a significant refurbishment, provides a home to a small gallery housing images and artefacts from the conflict that they said “would be over by Christmas.”

War was declared on 4 August 1914 and the British Expeditionary Force began to embark for France. The BEF was a small army comprising 80,000 men formed into two corps. The 2nd Battalion the Duke of Wellington's Regiment formed part of the 13th Brigade and arrived in France on 16th August and crossed the Belgian frontier to arrive in St. Ghislain on 22nd August. The Battle of Mons was the first engagement of the war with the BEF, outnumbered three to one attempting, as it transpired successfully, to halt the German

advance long enough to prevent the French 5th Army from being outflanked.

The 2nd Battalion played a significant part in the initial phase of the conflict at Mons, which is recorded in vivid detail in the diary of Lt Col JAC Gibbs who was wounded and taken prisoner. During the battle and indeed later at Hill 60, many officers and men gave their lives, some of whom are now commemorated in the Regimental museum; their names listed on the Reninghelst Cross, which is displayed with a group photograph of the Battalion's officers, taken in Dublin in 1914, alongside an unusual exhibit bearing the scars of war, the Mons Drum.

Lt Col James Gibbs commanded the 2nd Battalion, The Duke of Wellington's Regiment at the outbreak of the 1st World War. He was a veteran soldier joining the 2nd Battalion in 1887, serving in Africa where he was twice wounded, and becoming Lt Col in 1912. After the war in 1920 he was awarded the CB. While his diary is a brief account lasting only until November 16th 1914, it gives a colourful and poignant account of those first few months of the war. On the morning of the 23rd August 1914 Gibbs records:

“A lovely morning broke and we hoped for a peaceful day”

He could not have been more wrong. By mid morning he could hear gun fire and by 1pm his men were able to see German soldiers in the hedgerows only 400 yards away and by 3pm Private Shellabear had been killed, recorded as the first to die in the Regiment. By now shrapnel was bursting overhead and the 1st Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment had suffered heavy losses. At 21.55 Gibbs received orders from Brigade to retire to positions at Wasmes.

The firefight proceeded and in the darkness, Gibbs withdrew his troops as best he could. He records that by 11.30am the enemy fire was increasing and the capacity for the British artillery to reply was diminishing. A few minutes later Lt Col Gibbs' active part in the war came to an abrupt end. It is best described in his own words:

“The fire although hellish had up to date done practically no damage to the reserve company thanks to the concealed position of the trenches etc. but at 12.15 pm three shells burst in quick succession, the first

The Mons Drum.



getting into the advanced trench on the east side of 'Bosquet' killing and wounding several; the second burst close to where Strafford and I were talking. He fell dead with a piece of shrapnel through his temple and at the same I got three pieces in my left side and a small piece through my left wrist. A small trench in front of us had several casualties also Taylor who was near me, tied me up and with the help of another man got me into the shade behind a trench from where I could more or less see what was going on. I sent word back to Macleod I was hit and to carry on."

Gibbs dragged himself through a nearby garden and was eventually helped to an ambulance by the Belgian Red Cross. The remainder of his diary describes his time in hospital, poignantly detailing the deaths of fellow officers and men as the German onslaught continued.

And so, what of the Mons Drum? The drum, which was made by Henry Potter & Co in 1885 and was itself a veteran, seeing action in South Africa, was being

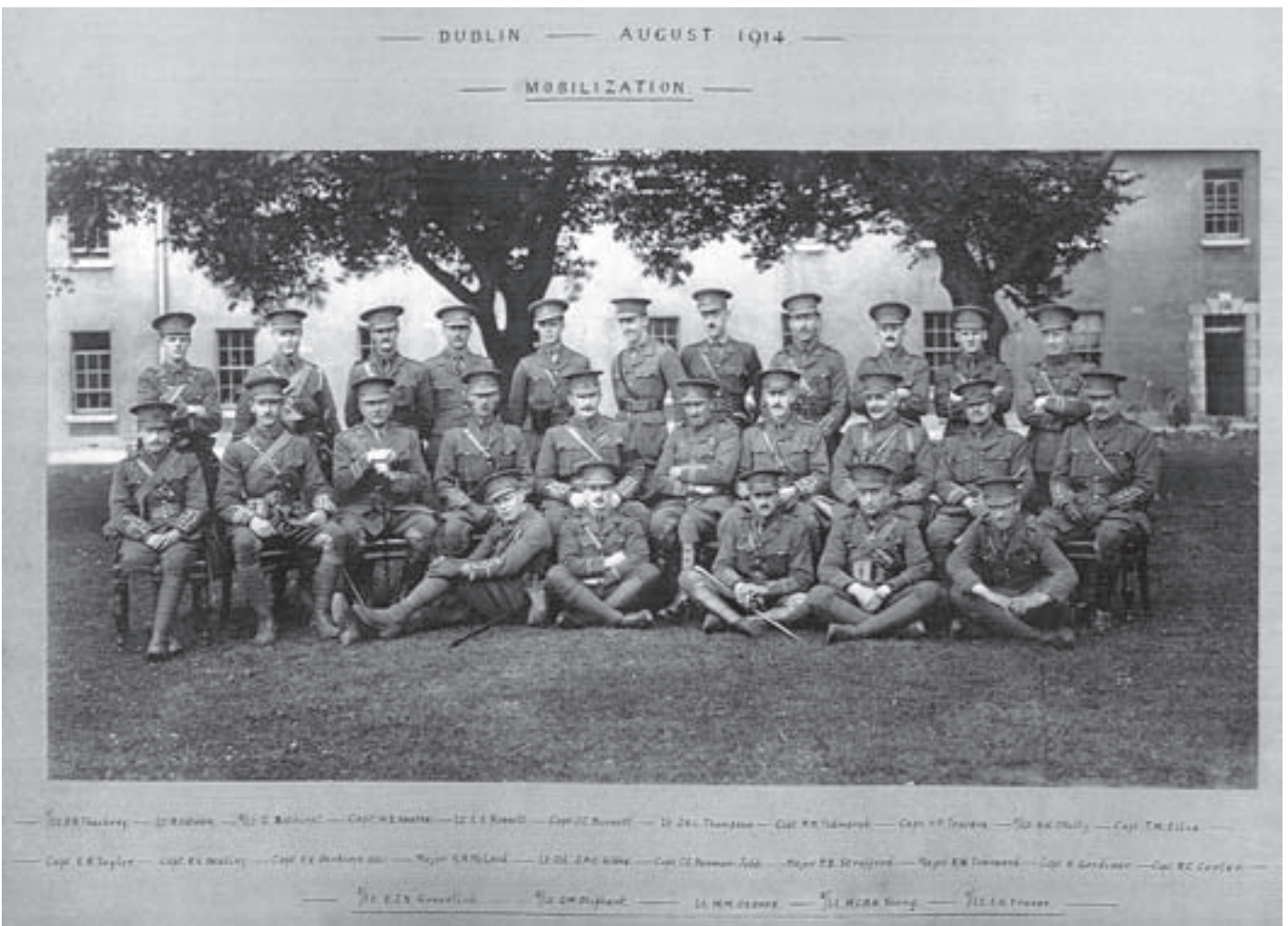
carried by Drummer Mellish of the 2nd Battalion. The Regimental legend tells of the drum being left in St Ghislain as the Battalion withdrew and for safety being buried by a Belgian woman to prevent it falling into the hands of the Germans. It seems the drum was then returned to the Regiment after the war. However from 1936 onwards there are various insights recorded in editions of 'The Iron Duke'.

The first account comes from Mr O Ramsbottom ex-RQMS in 1936. He describes the events of the 23rd August with the Battalion being rapidly deployed from their billets to join the West Kent's who were under severe pressure. He accounts for the drum being left by the fact that the men were deployed in "battle order without packs" meaning that while the drummers may have taken bugles, the drums were left behind. The Battalion subsequently withdrew to Wasmes and never returned to those billets.

In 1937 a letter was received from a Colonel Goldthorpe, late of the 4th

Battalion. It transpired that he was billeted in St. Ghislain in 1919. While there he notes that the local Belgian population were engaged in 'digging up' valued articles they had buried to save them from falling into German hands. One of Goldthorpe's officers was billeted with a woman, who, while he was there, dug up a drum and gave it to him. The initial assumption was that it belonged to the West Kent's but on closer examination was recognised as belonging to the Duke of Wellington's Regiment at which point, it was returned to the 2nd Battalion who were billeted in a nearby town. One mystery is of course, the name of the lady who saved this artefact. Colonel Goldthorpe is clear in his letter in 1937 that the name of the woman who buried and recovered it and an account of its story was passed to the Regiment.

In The Iron Duke 1958, further detail is revealed in an article entitled 'The 2nd Battalion Drum'. This however conflicts with the account of the drum simply being left in the billet. According to this account,



which adds further detail to Colonel Goldthorpe's, the lady came across a British soldier "haring" down the road towards her who thrust the drum into her hands and ran on. The soldier is thought to have been Drummer Mellish. It seems that when confronted by advancing Germans the lady is alleged to have stood effectively in the drum concealing it in her long skirts. The drum having been buried was exhumed and the Regimental identity revealed.

The penultimate account appears in 1964 where most details remain the same with the exception of the fact that in this letter it is suggested that Mellish was billeted at the lady's house and asked her the night before to look after it until the Battalion returned, which of course it did not, and according to Colonel Goldthorpe's account, Mellish was invalided home during the war.

The final account appears briefly in The Iron Duke 2008 celebrating the reopening

of the 'Duke's' museum where the drum is pictured with a later model but still bearing the scars of its remarkable experiences on the war.

Sadly none of the participants in this account are still alive to reveal the secrets of the drum. Drummer Mellish according to Col Goldthorpe's letter died soon after the war, in fact Colonel Goldthorpe had a chance meeting with Mellish while visiting friends after the war. Lt Col Gibbs served the Regiment valiantly and retired, having been awarded the CB for his services, dying in 1930 aged 63. However he leaves a wonderful account, albeit it brief, of his experiences. His sword has been preserved and is being placed in a wooden glazed case as a permanent memory of his service in the CO's office of the 3rd Battalion The Yorkshire Regiment, the successor unit to the 'Dukes'.

Visitors to the museum may choose to spend a few quiet moments in the room

commemorating the Regiment's valour in that war that everyone said, would be over by Christmas. There can be found the Reninghelst Cross, once commemorating the fallen of the Battalion in Reninghelst churchyard and now preserved in the museum. Upon it are the names of those who gave their lives including Maj PB Strafford who died as he was talking to Lt Col Gibbs.

In the room is the Mons Drum standing beside the picture (reproduced below) of Lt Col Gibbs and his officers before they went to war. They are all now long gone, some valiantly fighting and dying for their country, some, in later life thankful that they had been spared.

Peacefully and in quiet contemplation however, the Mons Drum still reminds us of that day in August 1914, and it now silently sounds a beat that echoes in the hearts of all those who take time to remember fallen comrades.

Charitable Donations to the Regiment 2009/2010

The Regiment has had a very successful year fundraising and this has led to significant grants being awarded to Battalion PRIs and money being reinvested for future benevolence needs. The donations are listed below and you are encouraged to continue to raise funds for the Regimental Charities. Well done to everyone involved in these events, please keep it up.

Amount:	Raised by:	Method:	Beneficiary:
£50,000	Hesco Bastion	Donation	Charitable Trust
£31,000	HQ King's Div	Boxing Event	Charitable Trust
£3,660	Cropton Brewery	Warrior Beer	Benevolent Trust
£2,950	Sgt Stow, ACIO Hull	Wristband Sales	Charitable Trust
£2,534	Maj Dodds, 4 YORKS	Benevolent Dinner	Benevolent Trust
£2,250	YRRT	Donation	Benevolent Trust
£1,500	Scarborough Council	Dinner	Benevolent Trust
£1,200	Grimethorpe WMC	Show and Raffle	Benevolent Trust
£1,170	Anston WMC	Show and Raffle	Benevolent Trust
£1,000	PB Foundation	Donation	Charitable Trust
£842	B Coy, 4 YORKS	Sponsored Event	Benevolent Trust
£735	Scarborough AFD	Donation	Benevolent Trust
£563	R & A Health	Donation	Benevolent Trust
£510	Family Donation	Wristband Sales	Benevolent Trust
£500	Family Trust Donation	Donation	Benevolent Trust
£500	Family Donation	Donation	Charitable Trust
£450	HQ Coy, 4 YORKS	Sponsored Event	Benevolent Trust
£400	Erimus Club	Donation	Benevolent Trust
£200	Plaxton Coachbuilders	Works Raffle	Benevolent Trust
£150	Sgt Muscroft	Pub Night	Benevolent Trust
Various	Private Donations	Donations	Benevolent Trust
Total £106,327			