

THE LIFE STORY OF WILLIAM BRAINE RM.

Lord Wellington, in the spring of 1813, was in the last throes of the Peninsula war. Wellington wrote in one of his despatches to Lord Bathurst;

'I shall not be stronger throughout the campaign, or more efficient than I am now. I cannot have a better opportunity for trying the fate of a battle, which if the enemy should be unnecessary, must oblige him to withdraw entirely.'

In a little over two years of that dispatch, Wellington would have driven the French from Spain, won the Battle of Waterloo and seen Napoleon imprisoned on the island of St Helena. The war raging in Spain and France had very little effect on the ordinary British citizen. England at this time had it's own problems. George III was on the throne and in Yorkshire the Luddite riots caused seventeen men to be hung.

During the year of 1813, in a small industrial village called Oakhill which lay in a valley at the eastern end of the Mendip hills, William Braine was born. No mention has been found of this village before 1662, unlike its neighbouring village of Ashwick whose earliest reference was in 1061. Although Oakhill has had a quiet history, a couple of periods do stand out. Firstly, that Monmouth passed through Oakhill on his way to Bristol, but it is in doubt whether any of the villagers joined him. Shortly after the rebellion and during the Bloody Assizes, the infamous Judge Jefferies stayed at Ashwick Court and tried cases there.

Between 1746 and 1749 John Wesley visited Oakhill four times and lodged in Coombe House. On three of these occasions he preached to the villagers on the spot where the Wesleyan Chapel now stands. On the fourth occasion he sought refuge in the village after being attacked by an unruly mob in Shepton Mallet.

William was the third child of seven, six boys and one girl, all born between 1809 and 1823. It would be safe to assume that not all of Shadrach and Honor Braine's children reached their teens. We do know, through parish records, that Thomas the first born only lived for two months after his day of birth. At the time of William's birth it would be unlikely that Oakhill had a resident doctor, so most births would have been attended to by a goodly woman of the village, the forerunner of the modern midwife.

Calling a doctor out from Shepton would cost one guinea per visit, compared with the 1/6d - 2/- the early midwife would charge. The woman would be summoned to the household, she would arrive with a basket containing a white apron, clean cotton rags, a needle and cotton and some Boracic powder, her only other need was hot water.

Shadrach Braine came to Oakhill to seek employment, some time before 1809. As far as we can ascertain he came from Bathford, an area with a number of quarries supplying Bath stone for building. On securing a job in one of the local quarries, he brought his wife Honor to the village. Shadrach rented a two-roomed cottage, south of the High Street, Oakhill at a cost of 30/- to 50/- per year. This cottage would have had a small garden so that the family could grow vegetables to eke out Shadrach's meagre wage, as a labourer he would not have earned more than 8/- a week. Compared with the industrial north, where a labourer's wage was in the region of 14/- for the working week. The reason for this vast gap was the competition in the variety of industries such as coal mining and the cotton mills.

The working day, during the summer, would be from 6 am until 6 pm and for the winter it was daylight to dusk. The work would change throughout the year. During the spring and summer months work would be done in the local quarries, then onto the farms for harvest. Wages at harvest time increased to 9/- to 10/- per week plus dinner and locally brewed beer supplied by the farmer. For the men on harvest work there was 2 gallons for wheat and 1½ gallons for barley. Women were also employed on the farms, but their wages were much lower, for example, 6d a day for weeding and 8d a day for haymaking, without beer. During the winter months the men would work in the maltings. There were many small industries in and around Oakhill. Apart from the brewery and the malthouses, Ashwick, the neighbouring hamlet had three clock makers. Clay pipes were made on Zion Hill and in Dye Lane woolcombing and dyeing were done. The Urch Stocking factory in Nettlebridge used women working from their homes to make the stockings, likewise the straw bonnet makers of the village. The parish also had a lime kiln, a tannery, a timber yard and a wheelwright and blacksmith.

The main highway through Oakhill would have been in a very muddy condition during the winter months and it was said that the waggons used by the Brewery churned the untarred surface into great ruts some two feet deep. Crossing the road without being muddied to the knees was quite a problem, especially for the women in long skirts.

William did not have the benefit of formal schooling, although there was a one-roomed school in the village run by Mrs Page of Coombe House. From the same premises Mr Page was a licensed dealer in coffee, tobacco and snuff. She charged one penny a week to attend her school, so no penny no school. It became

apparent that William was illiterate when in 1833 he came to sign his enlistment documents for the Royal Marines, he made his mark with a cross.

In 1815 the Army and the Navy were greatly reduced at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The poor were now in a state of distress, as many thousands of soldiers and sailors were paid off and returned home, but there were no jobs for them. After the Corn Law was passed later the same year, all British ports were closed to the import of foreign corn. Conditions were made worse in the years immediately following, by a succession of bad harvests. There was a danger of starvation which the rural poor were faced with. The staple diet of a labourer in Somerset during this time became bread and cheese washed down with beer or tea, though many grew potatoes in their cottage gardens. They seldom saw meat.

Civil disobedience was rife, with rick burning and the stealing of root crops from the fields. The 'Times' printed a report of an incident that took place in Somerset in December 1816;

'A banditti of turnip stealers, 40 in number, attacked and cruelly beat, on the 13th inst. the four sons of Mr Symes, a farmer of Yeovil, Somersetshire, who with five others, were stationed to protect a turnip field from their depredations. The Captain of the gang, gave the word, 'Close your files, attack, attack. But although two of the farmer's party were so much beaten that their lives were in danger, they succeeded in repelling the plunderers and securing three of them, who were committed to Ilchester gaol for trial'.

A few months before the introduction of the Reform Bill in 1830, the starving labourers from many of the counties, south of a line between London and Bristol, gathered in riotous mobs and marched into the large towns. They were demanding higher wages, a minimum of 2/6d a day. The Law took a dim view of this behaviour and set out to make examples and punish the rioters. Over 400 were transported to Australia as convicts, and three were hung. These harsh measures taken by the county judges only added to the already widening gap between the rich upper classes and the poor.

Child labour was common in agriculture, and remained so throughout the 19th century, until the Elementary Education Act came into force in 1870. Some of the work done by children was arduous but much of it, such as cattle-watching or bird-scaring, was not in itself too taxing. William would have started work when he was 9 years old, as before this age it was forbidden to employ a child. He would have been employed either on a local farm or in one of the small industries in or around the village. Like his father, William had no trade and we can only assume that he was a farm or general labourer. He would no doubt have attended hiring fairs throughout Somerset

seeking employment. It was at the Christmas Fair of 1833 in Yeovil that he signed on, at the age of twenty, as a private in the Royal Marines. The Recruiting Sergeant would have been looking for strong young men. William, who was 5'10" and of slim stature, had the air of one used to the outdoor life, with his fresh country complexion and steel grey eyes would on the surface make a fine marine.

The journey to Yeovil would not have been easy, the roads being deeply rutted and very muddy. It probably took two days for William to reach his destination. The weather for December of that year was described by Parson Skinner in his journal;

'It had snowed so much during the night that I considered it as sufficient apology for my putting off our visit to Mr Strachey at Ashwick. Heal, who had delivered the letter told us that some of the lanes were impossible for a horse or carriage to pass, so that even if we wished to have fulfilled the engagement, we could not.'

The question he would have asked himself from time to time, as do all serving members of HM Forces, even at the present time was 'Why did I sign on?'. We can only guess why. Was he unable to secure a job at the fair, was it to escape the poverty of his home (a £3 bounty was offered to new recruits)? Could it be that he wished to escape the problems caused by the Tolpuddle Martyrs to the South West farming communities, or was it the persuasive manner of the Recruiting Sergeant? We do know that it was not a family tradition to serve with the Royal Marines, as no trace can be found of any other member of the Braine Family having served in the ranks of the corps.

Having signed on, he would have spent his first night as a Royal Marine sleeping in a barn at the back of a coaching inn at East Coker, with other young men who had signed on at the fair. On the following day they would have started the long trek to Plymouth, via towns and villages, where the Recruiting Sergeant would try and persuade other young men to join the ranks, and pick up the ones who had already signed on earlier. The journey would have taken about 10 to 12 days.

Each man was allowed up to 1/9d a day for bed and board, which would have consisted of; a barn or stable to sleep in, bread and ale and on the odd occasion a couple of slices of 'Rafty bacon', this was normally the last of the previous season's curing. It had a rancid taste and to make it edible pickles or vinegar were taken with it.

On arriving in Plymouth the recruits would have gone to Stonehouse Barracks to be given a cold bath, their civilian clothes taken away and issued with all the necessary kit for their basic training. William would have found his new surroundings palatial compared with the small, overcrowded cottage back in Oakhill.

The first few weeks of basic training would have consisted of how to keep their kit and themselves clean and being taught the rules and regulations of the Royal Marines. Many hours would also have been spent on the main square of the barracks learning foot drill, battle formation on both land and on board ship, plus musket drill. In the mid 1830s the marines were still using the 'Brown Bess', a muzzle loading musket. The 'Baker Rifle' which was still muzzle loading but had a rifled barrel was only issued to the Light Infantry Regiments, for example, the 95th, 96th and the 99th Regiments of Foot.

After completing his training as a Royal Marine Light Infantryman by the July of 1834, William was transferred to the 8th Company of the Woolwich Division which was housed in 'Red' barracks at the Woolwich Arsenal. This division was made up of one battery of Royal Marine Artillery (RMA) and several companies of Royal Marine Light Infantry (RMLI). It is not clear how William made the journey from Plymouth to Woolwich. We can only, at the present moment, guess at one or two possibilities. Firstly that he was transported by a ship of the line to Chatham then marched to the barracks in Woolwich, or secondly that he, with others being transferred to Woolwich, marched across country following the coaching routes. It has been suggested that he would have taken the sea route as this would have been a much swifter journey.

The years in between 1834 and 1845 were comparatively quiet as in times of peace any activity outside ceremonial duties, such as a visit to a foreign shore, was a rare opportunity for a young Marine. In 1837 William would certainly have been involved in the ceremonial parades for the state funeral of King William IV, and also the coronation of Queen Victoria. The same year he would also have had the chance to see action in the Spanish Carlist War and to lay siege to San Sabastian, or to fight in the Battle of Hurnani, side by side with the British Legion Volunteers. In their finest hour, they withstood an attack four times their strength.

The Chinese Opium Wars started in 1840 and many Royal Marine detachments were sent out to the Far East. William could have been with one of these detachments on board a ship of the line in that theatre of war. Life on board ship for a marine was much worse than for a sailor. The detachment, less their officer, would have to sleep and spend their off duty periods down on the orlop deck, where ship's tradesmen worked and where the ships stores were held. The mess area for the Marines was at the stern end of the main gun deck. The main duties on board were sentry duty outside the Captain's quarters, and on all upper decks, main magazine and to guard and escort men awaiting or undergoing punishment. The main task for the Royal Marines in battle was to use their firepower from the yardarms to shoot down on the enemy.

In the May of 1845 William was in a detachment of seven marines commanded by Sgt. David Bryant that went aboard the HMS Erebus, a bomb vessel of 370 tons. The Erebus was to be captained by Sir John Franklin, with Captain Fitzjames as second in command. They were to be accompanied by HMS Terror, a slightly smaller vessel, commanded by a Captain Crozier. In all, the ships would carry 139 officers and men with stores and provisions to last for 3 years. In April of the same year Franklin had placed an order with a Stephen Goldner to supply 8,000 tins of food for the expedition. The lead solder which was used to make the cans was instrumental in causing the deaths of all the 139 men on the expedition. It may be a sad coincidence that the lead in the tins which contributed to the death of William Braine could have been mined at Charterhouse, less than 12 miles from Oakhill, his home. William would never know that in less than 150 years he would become a subject of a TV documentary and an expedition.

After leaving the Thames the two ships sailed north up the east coast of Britain to Stromness in the Orkneys. This part of the journey took three weeks. Four weeks later Franklin was at Disco Bay in Greenland. On the 13th July the expedition set off northward along the coast of Greenland where, in Melville Bay, both the Erebus and Terror were seen by the Prince of Wales, a whaling ship. The log of the whaler noted that all of Franklin's men were well and in good spirits and that they were confident that they would complete, in good time, the task they had set themselves. This was the last reported sighting of both ships and their crews. Not one man was to survive this expedition.

This was the final tour of duty to be performed by Marine Braine, as, on reaching the Arctic, he was among the first to die from lead poisoning. William was buried along with two sailors at Beechy Island on 3rd April 1846. With the combination of the frozen hard ground and the suffering the debilitating effects of lead poisoning the digging of these three graves would have been an arduous task for the crew of the Erebus. Records of service and personal

numbers for the Royal Marines did not start until 1884. Therefore it is very difficult to ascertain what William Braine did between 1834 and 1845 when he embarked on the fateful Franklin Expedition to find the North West Passage. However two more pieces of information have come to light, firstly, that William did not appear in any Defaulters book or at any Courts Martial which would indicate that he had a clean service record, and secondly, in 1844, he was married to a girl from Greenwich.

The Public Records Office at Kew still has a lot to reveal about the service life of William Braine.

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The Age of Reform 1815-1870

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The North West Passage

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Dictionary of British History

The Story of Ashwick & Oakhill

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Public Records Office Kew

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The Letters of John Aitchison

News from the English Countryside 1750-1850

English Social History

Grateful thanks to my darling wife who helped and supported me
in this venture.

APPENDIX ONE

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List of the officers and crew of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* taken from their Muster Books, 1845.
Source: Admiralty Records, Public Record Office.

HMS *Erebus*

CAPTAIN Sir John Franklin
COMMANDER James Fitzjames
LIEUTENANTS Graham Gore, Henry Thomas Dundas Le Vesconte, James Walter Fairholme
MATES Robert Orme Sargent, Charles Frederick Des Voeux, Edward Couch
SECOND MASTER Henry Foster Collins
SURGEON Stephen Samuel Stanley
ASSISTANT-SURGEON Harry D.S. Goodsir
PAYMASTER AND PURSER Charles Hamilton Osmer
ICE-MASTER James Reid
WARRANT OFFICERS John Gregory (engineer), Thomas Terry (boatswain), John Weekes (carpenter)
PETTY OFFICERS Philip Reddington (captain of the fore-castle), Thomas Watson (carpenter's mate), John Murray (sail-maker), James W. Brown (caulker), William Smith (black-

smith), Samuel Brown (boatswain's mate), Richard Wall (cook), James Rigden (captain's coxswain), John Sullivan (captain of the maintop), Robert Sinclair (captain of the foretop), Joseph Andrews (captain of the hold), Edward Hoar (captain's steward), Richard Aylmore (gunroom steward), Daniel Arthur (quartermaster), John Downing (quartermaster), William Bell (quartermaster), Francis Dunn (caulker's mate), William Fowler (paymaster and purser's clerk), John Bridgens (subordinate officers' steward), James Hart (leading stoker), John Cowie (stoker), Thomas Plater (stoker)

ABLE SEAMEN Henry Lloyd, John Stickland, Thomas Hartnell, **John Hartnell**, George Thompson, William Orren, Charles Coombs, William Closson, William Mark, Thomas Work, Charles Best, George Williams, John Morphin, Thomas Tadman, Abraham Seeley, Thomas McConvey, Robert Ferrer, Josephus Geater, Robert Johns, Francis Pocock

ROYAL MARINES David Bryant (sergeant), Alexander Paterson (corporal), Joseph Healey (private), **William Braine** (private), William Reed (private), Robert Hopcraft (private), William Pilkinton (private)

BOYS George Chambers, David Young

HMS *Terror*

CAPTAIN Francis Rawdon Moira Crozier

LIEUTENANTS Edward Little, John Irving, George Henry Hodgson

MATES Robert Thomas, Frederick John Hornby

SECOND MASTER Gillies Alexander Macbean

SURGEON John Smart Peddie

ASSISTANT SURGEON Alexander Macdonald

CLERK Edwin-James Howard Helpman

ICE MASTER Thomas Blanky