



MIDLAND (G.B.) POSTAL HISTORY SOCIETY 1975



Please reply to:

Chairman
Elizabeth Lewis
021/429/1222

Treasurer
Peter Baxter

Secretary
Richard Farman
0283/66515

BULLETIN NO. 18 SEPT. 1980

NEW SESSION REMARKS BY CHAIRMAN

How quickly the summer has flown, holidays are over and the nights draw in. An excellent excuse to come in from the garden and start sorting out those covers accumulated over the Spring and Summer months. Each 'not to be touched' until it has been properly examined, sorted and put carefully away only to be taken out for re-examination and resorting perhaps several times before resting securely in its allotted album or box. Woe betide any members of the family who dares to help in our 'sorting' to hasten the clearance of the table in order that a meal can be taken.

Congratulations to our member Mr. Denis Salt on winning the Postal History Cup at the Midland Philatelic Federation Convention in April. Mr. Salt submitted, on behalf of the Society, his 'Shrewsbury' entry that won him the Society's Award in February. This is the first time that our Annual Award has won the Federation Postal History Cup. Well done Mr. Salt.

During the Summer many will have attended the ten yearly event of the philatelic world, namely 'London 1980' held at Earls Court and congratulations are due to at least one of our members in winning a medal. It was nice to see that much more interest is shown in postal history since the previous event in 1970; both in the exhibits and in the requests at the dealers stands.

We are now entering our sixth year and look forward to many more years of fellowship together as we meet to view the excellent displays we have become accustomed to and to chat amongst ourselves in the common interest of Postal History. Please ensure that the Society goes from strength to strength by your support whenever possible.

Elizabeth Lewis (Chairman)

FIRST MEETING

SATURDAY 4th OCTOBER 2pm until 4pm
St. John Ambulance Hall Brunel Road HINCKLEY
(Tenth Anniversary Exhibition and Fair by
Hinckley & District Philatelic Society)
Nine Sheets maximum by members - or recent
aquisitions by members. Why not have a 'day out'
with the family and visit the Stamp Fair.
Refreshments available. Plenty of Car Parking.

SEASONS PROGRAMME

up to Jan 1981
all starting
at 2 pm.

NOVEMBER 8th Society Meeting at the
COVENTRY SOCIETY EXHIBITION
DECEMBER 6th Special Display at
BASS MUSEUM Burton on Trent
JANUARY 17th Meeting in WOLVERHAMPTON

AN INCIDENT IN THE PENINSULAR WAR
(THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER NIVELLE)

by S. Stobbs.

This account is really a tribute to the beloved Sydney Raine (the doyen of Postal Historians in the Midlands) for when he died, some ten years ago, it was found that he had left "souvenirs" to half a dozen of his postal historian friends. To me, knowing my weakness for Forces Postal History, he gave his "Burgess Folder". This file contained letters and documents of an "Ensign Burgess", the only son of a Lutterworth lawyer, dated between July 1813 and January 1815. These trace the short military career of this young gentleman from his march to Portsmouth, where he embarked for Spain, to where he returned home, wounded in February 1814 and then one or two letters from various home stations when he had recovered and returned to duty.

But let us begin at the beginning !! No one appreciates more than the writer, the difficulty in dealing with material which is interesting not only from the postal history side but also from the contents of the letters, starting with a Tailor's bill for £72, dated 27th March 1813 for 'kitting out' the young man --- what would be the equivalent of this sum today ? A letter written from Petersfield, Wants dated 11th July 1813:- "I arrived here this morning--- and expect to embark in the course of next week, our destination is now fixed and we are to land at Santander in the province of Biscaye" - In all extracts the actual spelling in the original letters has been copied - The 8d postage on the letter has been cancelled and that of 10d substituted.

Another letter written, 27th July 1813, from Portsmouth to Lutterworth just prior to his setting sail for Spain. The cover bears the large circular Portsmouth Mileage mark.

The next letter dated 21st August 1813, is written from "Portogalete in the province of Biscaye". "We arrived here last Tuesday....The French Army are only 25 miles from here....Direct letters to Ensign Burgess, 2nd Batt: 83rd Regt. 3rd Division British Army in Spain. You must pay the postage to the water's edge or I shall not receive them". This letter carries the smaller circular Portsmouth Mileage mark of 5th September 1813 and again the 8d postage has been cancelled and 10d substituted.

This is followed by a letter written on 7th September 1813 from "in camp at the Pass of Maya". I landed on 24th August at a small town called Passage from which place I had a distant view of the siege of San Sebastian for two days. Our loss was 2000 men killed and wounded. Our Regt. was slightly engaged on 3rd; the 7th and 10th Divisions were in action at Lazaca, 10 miles away. We are now only 15 miles from France. The country agrees with me and I like the Army better than anything else". There is no port of arrival postmark on the letter but the postage of 2s/2d has been amended to 2s/3d and there is the usual Foreign Office mark (Willcocks No.657) of 8th October 1813 thereon.

From the same address, but bearing the date 1st Oct. 1813, and having the same Foreign Office mark of 14th Oct. 1813 thereon - postage this time 2s/2d - our young friend wrote:- "I have been very unfortunate in loosing both my Mules, which cost me £50. A Spanish servant boy run away from me and took them with him. I have therefore, been obliged to purchase another mule and a horse from Lt.Swinbourne (83rd Regt.) £30 each; we are still on our old position close to the French lines and no one knows the hour when we may be called into Battle. Whenever it arrives I hope God will spare me to return home, in a different way of thinking than when I left, for now I see with much regret the impropriety of my former conduct. Ld.Wellington reviewed us yesterday and said he preferred the 83rd to any in the Division. I took the colours for the first time; 10,000 troops assembled; the sight was beautiful.

A month passes before the next letter is written on 3rd Nov. 1813 from "Camp Zagamurdi" asking for clotheing (socks and shoes) and giving a very good description of the very hearty fighting at the Passage of the Bidassoa and the inhuman conduct of the Spaniards - the cover bears the "Falmouth Pack't - Lre" mark (Willcocks No.730) in green and the postage is once again 2s/2d.

The following letter bears identical markings and postage as the previous one but it's contents are outstanding ! It is written on 20th Nov. 1813 from "Zagamurdi, Spain":- "I suppose before the arrival of this the newspapers have informed you of the advance on the 10th ins. of the British Army into France and, of course, you saw my name in the list of the wounded. We were not informed that we were to attack the French lines until 12 o'clock at night on the 9th when the order arrived for the 3rd Division to march at half past two o'clock in the morning into a wood in front of the French and we waited there until daybreak when the Action commenced. The whole Army was engaged to the amount of 70,000 men. The enemy made great resistance on the Hill allotted to the 3rd Division and we advanced up it under a most dreadful fire of Cannon and Musketry and just as we had gained the top I received a Musket-ball in the inside of the calf of my right leg and it entered about three inches below the joint of my knee. For three days the pain was very great and my leg swelled as large as two but the swelling is now gone down and I feel very little pain. The Surgeons say the wound is going on quite as well as they can expect but I must keep my bed some time longer which I am very sorry for, as I am quite tired of being in bed already. It is impossible for anyone to form an idea of the Battle except those who have been in it; the horrid sights; the miserable places the wounded are put into; is enough to make anyone wish not to see another. After I was wounded I was carried into an old house and before I had been there ten minutes Colonel Lloyd of the 94th and an Ensign of the 87th Regt. were brought in, both dreadfully wounded and laid one on each side of me but they did not remain for long for they were dead in less than an hour after they first came in and I was obliged to lie in the blanket Colonel Lloyd died in or I think I should have starved to death. The day after I, with great difficulty, rode my mule to this place and the inhabitants are extremely kind to me and get me everything I ask for, if possible, but I believe I shall be removed as soon as I am well enough either to Pamplona or Passage...."

It is very interesting to read this young Ensign's account of the Battle as compared with the way history books record it, especially bearing in mind that in the two armies well over 100,000 men were involved:-

Extract from the "Peninsular War" by Roger Parkinson:-

"Pamplona capitulated at the end of October 1813 and Wellington waited a few days for the arrival of Hill's troops from Roncesvalles. These units prepared to move on 10th November. Down the sides of the Great Rhine crept the British files and by 8 a.m. the Lower Rhine had been taken. Nine Allied Divisions immediately advanced to the east; The Nivelle was crossed; village after village fell as the Allies surged daily forward and the French retreated to the Nive. By 16th November Bayonne had been uncovered".

Extract from "Outline of British Military History 1660-1939"

by Cole & Prestley:-

"The fortress of San Sebastian did not fall without heavy losses as it was desperately defended by General Rey, but the garrison were first driven to the citadel and finally surrendered on 8th September 1813. On 7th October the Duke of Wellington forced the passage of the frontier stream, the Bidassoa, taking the French General Soult by surprise and thus a victorious foreign force set foot in France - the first time for 20 years.

The French fell back on the Nivelle, within their own territory, to avoid being outflanked. On 31st October Pamplona surrendered and Wellington being now secure in Spain advanced on 10th November and drove Soult from Nivelle with heavy loss. The line of the Nive, the next stream, was carried on 9th December and Soult now made his last offensive, attaining both wings of the British in succession, but in vain."

Extract from "The Great Duke" by Arthur Bryant:-

"On November 10th 1813 a month after the battle of Bidassoa he put it to the test as the two gamecocks of England and France grappled all day on the hills to the south of Nivelle (a river in S.W. France). The British columns which had moved up to their statins overnight, waded the river in the half light of dawn and scaling the heights, broke through the redoubts of (Marshall) Soult's centre like a screen of reeds. "Nor did they ever meet a check" wrote Harry Smith "but carried the enemy's work by one fell swoop of irresistible vicotry". There is a lyrical quality in all the eye witness accounts of the day; in no engagement of war was the supremacy of Wellington's army shown more clearly than in that of the Nivelle. "The fierce and continued charge of the British was irresistible," recalled one who, wounded in the heather, watched his comrades storm the incredible crags of the Petite Rheine; onwards they bore nor stopped to breathe, rushing forward through glen, dale and forest....." The star of the three united nations (Britain, Spain and Portugal) shone victorious on the summits of the lofty Pyrenees, gilding the tall pines which capped their heads and foreboding downfall to Imperial France". By sundown the British spearheads were many miles behind the French lines, pressing after the fugitives with a running fire till nature could do no more, when the tired men stretched their limbs on the sod, pulled out their captured rations of cheese and onions and went to roost.

Once the chain of Soult's line was broken, no link could hold. Units in almost impregnable fortresses, finding themselves surrounded, surrendered without a shot; others fearful for their flanks, fell back leaving their comrades isolated. The morale of France's southern army could no longer withstrand the attack of the British infantry. Only the shortness of the November day saved Soult's right between the hills and the sea. It fled from encirclement towards Bayonne, leaving the port of St. Jean de Luz, over 50 guns and 1200 prisoners in the attacker's hands. The latter's casualties, which Soult had expected to number 25,000 were less than half the defenders"

On 14th Dec. 1813 a further letter was written from Zagamurdi:- "My wound has continued mending. I have got a pair of crutches made, and hop up and down like an old ballad singer...There is not a glass window in the Town; they are all like the one over the stable door. The Colonel has been to see me and was uncommonly kind". This cover has a bright red oval "Ship Lre, Plymouth Dock (Willcock's M.4) and the postage is now 1s/3d.

A month later on 19th January 1814 a letter sent from "Renteria, Spain" and bearing similar marks to those written on 8th and 20th Nov. 1813 states "I arrived here from Zagamurdi on Sunday last and have appeared before a Medical Board this morning who have recommended me to go to England for my recovery."

An ornate "Leave of Absence" from his Royal Highness the Commander in Chief" gave him leave from 17th March to 24th May 1814.

Letter from Army Pay Officer dated 29th March 1814 stated that a warrant had been sent to his Bankers for £95 : 16 : 3d "being a year's pay as Ensign in consequence of a wound you received near St. Jean de Luz".

This was followed by a letter of the following day from the said Bankers, requesting his signature to the Warrant.

On reporting from leave he wrote on 25th May 1814 from Malden Essex, (postage paid thereon 9d) "I arrived here last Saturday...I am likely to obtain a pension of £50 for my wound and am just in good health as when at home."

He re-joined his Regiment, when fully recovered in Ireland, where it was then stationed. A letter (bearing straight-line mileage mark of "Craig") dated 20th Nov. 1814 stated that his 1st Battalion was to sail to America but that his 2nd Battalion was to remain, for the time being in Ireland.

Finally the last letter, written from Kilkenny Ireland and which also bears a straight-line "KILKENNY" mileage mark) was sent just before he embarked for England and was sent on 27th Jan. 1815.

On leaving the Army Ensign Frances Burges, who was only 18 at the time of his short spell of duty in Spain and France, returned to his native town of Lutterworth where he later built Lutterworth House which is still standing for his own occupation. There is in the Parish Church a tablet which records his death in 1825, at the early age of 30.

Note : Right of Copyright of this article is vested with the
Midland (G.B.) Postal History Society.

Secretary's Note

Well, the decorating and gardening season is drawing hopefully to a close and I trust that they have been fruitful. One in keeping the wife happy and the other in reaping a good crop.

Matters Arising from the AGM

Meetings had been better attended owing to the weather being more friendly. It was decided to include a meeting at Wolverhampton on 17th January 1981, venue to be announced later.

Views were expressed that the Society was not reaching its full potential and members are asked to help by passing the Bulletin around at their local Society meetings. Dates and venues of the meeting could also be broadcast with an open invitation to guests. It was noted at the AGM that, due to the variety of venues, over 50% of members now bring their wives on "shopping" trips whilst the meetings are held.

The Committee once again (we hope) has arranged an interesting programme for the forthcoming season and I hope you will participate either by attending a meeting or by receiving the Bulletin and perhaps a small contribution in terms of an article or just a letter of complaint.

Sorry the subscription has had to be increased to £2 but it is due to postal and printing increases. Room hire costs have been reduced by the use of Dr. Johnson House at Birmingham.

Looking forward to seeing some familiar faces and some new ones during the coming season.

Richard Farman.
Secretary.