



The Bugle



Royton Local History Society's Newsletter

A few weeks before Christmas I received a telephone call from a lady. She told me that she was very concerned about the condition of a chair in the library. The chair had been positioned in a rear corner of the children's library out of sight of staff and most users of the service. But she had witnessed children jumping up and down on the seat causing considerable damage to the upholstery and springing.

The chair in question is a very special one. I knew of its existence but have never actually seen it. The chair dates from the earliest beginnings of the Royton Board in 1880 and was a Board members chair. The backrest is a solid piece intricately carved with the Royton Coat of Arms. Apart from the Town Hall building itself this could be one of the only remaining relics of that period of time.

I asked the lady that if she could to mention her concerns to the library staff and ask them to remove the chair to prevent further misuse. I also went to the library the following day to do the same but she had beaten me to it. The chair had been removed.

Councillor Bashforth has also been informed about the situation and I understand that the chair is awaiting renovation before being put back on display in a place where it will not suffer any damage. Society Vice Chairman Doug Ashmore is monitoring the progress of the project.

On the subject of Coats of Arms, Doug and I attended a meeting between the 7 Townships History Forum and the Council in the Civic Centre in Oldham. While we were there our attention was drawn to a new display mounted on the wall of the half landing of the stairs running up from the reception area.

This display consists of a huge central Coat of Arms of Oldham surrounded by smaller ones for each of the 7 towns that make up the borough. Naturally Royton has its place amongst them. I have to say that we were really impressed with the whole effect. Obviously a great deal of care and attention has gone in to producing this and I would recommend that if you are in Oldham, and you have the time, pop in and have a look. The display is in the Rochdale Road building, not the tower on Cheapside.

Geoff Oliver, Chairman



The Railway Inn Well

Whilst consolidating all my references to Royton Hall I returned to the archives to check one I had made years ago concerning the discovery of an old well in 1879. The Railway Inn (or Hotel) was originally built as the Park Inn around 1800, at the end of the new turnpike road from Oldham which was projected to continue through Royton Hall Park. The site was once a garden nursery belonging to the Radcliffe's of Royton Hall. Here is the story as reported in the Oldham Chronicle of 4th January that year:-

"SUBSIDENCE OF EARTH Owing to the thaw that took place on Monday, a great subsidence of earth occurred in the top part of the yard belonging to the Railway Hotel. When Mr Wild, the proprietor, got up on Tuesday morning he was greatly surprised to find that during the night a large dispersion of earth had taken place near to the gate leading to his back yard. Singular to say the disruption had disclosed the existence of a well, sixty feet in depth at the least, and of which up to that hour he had no knowledge.

The well was in a perfect state of repair, and on him making enquiries of 'the oldest inhabitant', he ascertained that many years ago, when the side of the present inn and adjoining railway station was a portion of Sir Percival Radcliffe's ground, the well was regularly used and was considered a favourite spring. There was also another well somewhat nearer to the local board offices, and underneath the present road, and which was also used as a bath; this would be about 40 years ago.

It is a fortunate circumstance that the subsidence took place during the night, for had it taken place in the day time, it is possible loss of life may have occurred, as the yard is extensively used by carters and other persons."

Michael Higgins

A Royton Soldier in the Zulu War

While I was checking local newspaper references to Royton Hall and Royton which I had jotted down years ago I revisited the first reports coming in from the Zulu War of 1879. The reports are weeks late of course, the stirring tale of the defence of Rorke's Drift and the massacre at Isandhlwana not hitting the newspapers in Oldham until late February and early March.

The following extracts, from a letter written by William Sweeney to his family living in Union Street, Royton, took 3 months to arrive and appeared in the Oldham Chronicle on 26 April of that year. William was in the 2nd Battalion 24th Regiment (2nd Warwickshires) and narrowly missed the massacre of 1300 men by the Zulus at Isandhlwana Hill. He recalls the event and recounts the relief of Rorke's Drift. Both battles were made into films variously starring Michael Caine and Peter O'Toole, (Zulu and Zulu Dawn), though William's account is as harrowing to read as any modern film script.

William was in the advance section of the column which had left camp before dawn on 22 January. Before the rest of the camp could strike tents and follow later in the day the main Zulu army of around 20,000 men surrounded the camp and killed everyone who stood to fight. Later the same day a wing of the Zulu army broke away to attack B company 2nd battalion's depot at Rake's Drift, and was repulsed with heavy losses.

William mentions men left in the camp at Isandhlwana who were known to his father, particularly Lt. Pope who died with his company on the part of the field the returning advance column had to march over to regain the camp. Pope's company had been the only 2nd battalion unit officially left in camp, the other white troops were from the 1st battalion, but each 2nd battalion company had also left a few men behind to assist packing or as officer's servants. William ignores the allied black regiments in his casualty figures.

"...We dressed at once and marched about 1,800 strong to meet the enemy, leaving about 500 Europeans in camp to guard it. Our company was Mr Pope's, your master for a short time in Sheffield; and I must mention one man in particular, as you knew him very well indeed. His name was M'Cracken, and he married a Blackpool woman. He was left in camp because he was a servant, while the remains of our regiment was out looking for the enemy. The Zulus attacked our camp while half of our men were washing their clothing, as any good soldier does when he had the chance. The enemy sent 150 in front of our camp in skirmishing order to attract the attention of all our spies; and of course our chaps formed to attack the coming skirmishers, and then the Zulus crept round the back in the thousands. There were half of our men without arms at all, on account of having been cooking. The number of our regiment left there was 181 men (2nd battalion men), captains and sergeants, and five officers, and not one escaped, so far as we know at present. Thanks be to God for being alive to write, as it was a godsend I was not there...."

William recounts the order for the advance force to return to camp when they were 12 miles out and heard Isandhlwana was under attack. They arrived in pitch darkness around 9:pm:

"...To my sorrow the first dead man I came to I fell over. Of course I could not see him at the time, but I struck a match, and it was of my own company, named Watkins. He had his brains knocked in by some blunt instrument, and the whole of his bowels ripped open. We kept going on, stumbling over one and another until we got the order to halt at the top of the hill and rest till morning, as the whole of the men were awfully fatigued from their hard march the day before. When we did lie down there were hardly any of us chaps who could go to sleep, thinking of the poor fellows who were lying dead around. I was laid down beside a dead chap of the 1st battalion, who was dreadfully mutilated. We marched from that place at daybreak..."

The place William marched to was Rorke's Drift where he writes of the heroic defence Lt. Bromhead and the 80 men of B company, 2nd battalion, had made in fighting off at least 3,000 Zulus, 'mowing them down' as they stormed the storehouse and hospital time and time again, firing off 150 rounds each and killing 'more than three times their number' in the process. At the end of the letter he informs his father that they were re-fortifying Rorke's Drift against a renewed enemy attack. They had lost all their spare clothing and food at Isandhlwana, were weak and ill, and were being relieved by the 4th Regiment. He gives the casualty list of 24th Regiment men lost at Isandhlwana as 21 officers 31 sergeants, 29 corporals, 12 drummers, 649 other ranks. He does not mention it but nearly the same number of black native allied troops also fell in the battle. He then explains why he was not among the slain:

"Dear father, now I must tell you how it is I am safe. I was very ill with the dysentery and when we had to march (out of Isandhlwana with the advance column) I had to fall out. The regiment would be about two miles in front when I got up to make the attempt to come up with them. But I fell down with fatigue and sickness. They put me in the ambulance to take me back to camp. The doctor gave me some medicine, which relieved me so much that I got out and ran after my regiment."

If William Sweeney had gone back in the ambulance he would have been slaughtered in the Zulu attack. So ends a remarkable letter, which William's father shared with local newspaper readers all those years ago. It still affected me 134 years later.

Michael Higgins



