

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Peter Driver, Suffolk Connections to the Battle of Waterloo**

Peter Driver displayed his extensive research into the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars when he identified some of the many Suffolk links to the Battle of Waterloo at the September meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. It is a difficult area to research because there is little recorded testimony from the lower ranks of the army. Peter has used paintings, tomb stones, local newspapers and official records to explore the period.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century concerns grew in Britain about the extension of French revolutionary power and ideas across Europe. The country had a powerful navy but only a very small standing army. It became apparent that there was a need to raise a larger professional army. Part of a painting of a celebration of the golden jubilee of George III in Worlingworth Church indicates one way in which this was done. The picture shows a village fete but in one corner there is a recruitment sergeant with a drummer and fifer who is offering a man the King's shilling to enlist him but his wife is trying to pull him away. This is not surprising as the life of soldiers was very hard. Across Suffolk there were encampments for soldiers being prepared for campaigns in Europe or to resist a possible invasion by the French. There were few permanent barracks to house soldiers in the early Napoleonic period. Troops were often billeted in the stables of pubs or local barns. They lived in dirty, cramped conditions which encouraged epidemics, and they faced harsh discipline. Records of discharged soldiers contain comments like 'chronic rheumatism' and 'plain worn out.' There was a barracks at Woodbridge for up to 4,000 soldiers where there were 575 recorded deaths between 1803 and 1823.

In 1814 Napoleon was defeated by a coalition of European armies. He was exiled to the island of Elba in the Mediterranean but escaped in 1815 and returned to France where he raised an army to reassert French influence and power in Europe. His short campaign was ended by defeat at Waterloo by an allied army. Many Suffolk men were involved in the battle. One of the most senior was Sir Edward Kerrison who was born at Hoxne. He commanded the 7<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons who fought at Quatre Bras on the eve of the main battle where French forces were slowed, allowing the Duke of Wellington to set up defensive positions at Waterloo. Kerrison has a memorial in the centre of Eye as he was the town's MP from 1824-1852. Ipswich Mansion Museum contains the uniform of Trooper Robert Smith who was involved in 12 charges during the battle and was fortunate to survive as his regiment suffered very heavy casualties. He was born in Melton and after he left the army he became a successful butcher in Woodbridge. Marlesford Church contains a memorial to the less fortunate Lemuel Shuldham. He was involved in the famous charge of the Royal Scots Guards during the battle but was killed. Another tombstone, found in the churchyard at Yaxley, tells of Robert Bond who fought at Waterloo. He had been born in that village in 1790. Two brothers, Edmund and John Barber of Wickhambrook fought in a unit containing many soldiers from Brunswick in modern Germany. It shows the multicultural nature of the British army and its willingness to recruit mercenaries.

The talk concluded with a summary of how the battle was very closely fought. Wellington had occupied two strategically placed farm houses, Hougemont and La Haye Sainte, which prevented a frontal assault on the allied army by the French. There was fierce fighting around both which ground down the French army. The allies also adopted the use of squares where infantry was organised into four ranks of men, two of whom fired on opposing cavalry while the other two lines reloaded the muskets. Napoleon's army was eventually defeated and he was exiled to the island of St Helena in the south Atlantic where he died in 1821.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on 25 October when Frances Hart will give a talk about Mozart as told by his wife. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

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