

Wargrave Local History Society

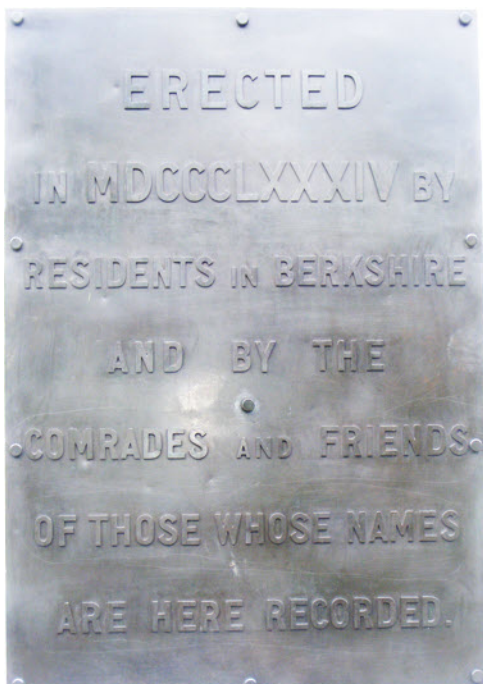
Latest News - April 2024

Maiwand: the battle and the Great Game - Mike Cooper

For the Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting, Mike Cooper gave a presentation about *Maiwand: the battle and the Great Game*.

The Maiwand Lion statue that stands in Reading's Forbury Gardens is well known, and Mike commented that it is now seen as more just a memorial to those of the 66th Berkshire Regiment of foot who died in the Second Afghan War. It has also been part of the local football club away strip, has been a symbol for Reading Library, and became a symbol of unity following the stabbings that took place nearby. The lion itself is hollow, and was made of cast iron in nine pieces by an east London bell foundry. It weighs 16 tons, and stands on a stone plinth - an early 20th century replacement as the original which did not cope well with the weight.

The £1,088 that it cost (about £105,000 in today's values) was raised by public subscription. It was the largest such cast iron structures when it was made, and is still one of the largest in the world. The monument was designed by George Blackall Simonds, a member of the local brewery family. It was criticised for showing the lion in an unnatural pose, but lions can stand in that way. These comments are said to have upset George Blackall Simonds so much that he committed suicide, but he actually died of old age in the 1920s. (a similar myth surrounds a similar statue in Africa).



The event that it relates to was the Battle of Maiwand, fought on 27th July 1880. News of it first appeared in the local newspaper, the Reading Mercury, in September 1880 (although not given that name at the time), and it was one of two memorials that were created in the town, the other being as a window in St Mary's church. Permission for it to be erected in the Forbury Gardens was given by Reading's town council in 1883, with work starting on what was then known as Opus 139 the following year.

The Maiwand Lion is not just a memorial to those who died as a result of the battle that took place on that July day, but has a series of bronze panels on the stone plinth that record the 329 men of the 66th Berkshire Foot regiment who died in the Second Afghan War, whether at Maiwand or elsewhere - and it does not include the other troops who took part at Maiwand either - such as the Royal Artillery, the Royal Engineers or the men of the Indian Army.

Mike then explained some of the background to the encounter that came to be known as the Battle of Maiwand. The region was of particular interest to both the British and the Russians, and Afghan politics were a major factor in what happened. The original Emir of Afghanistan, Ali Khan, had 2 sons. He died in 1879, when, one of the sons was put on the throne by the British, but the other, Ayub Khan, wanted to take his place. The British at Kandahar had been under siege for some time, and Ayub Khan's forces were advancing towards it from the west, aiming to take Kandahar and Kabul. As well as the British, there were a large number of local (what were then called) British Indian troops. The original plan had been for the British (including the 66th Berkshire men) would not take on those of Ayub Khan directly, but would back up local pro-British Afghan forces. There was then a change of plan, so the Afghans would be disarmed, and the British Indian and British forces would be deployed to stop Ayub Khan's advance on Kandahar. Mike commented that making changes during a military campaign did not usually work well! They were under the command of Brigadier General George Burrows, as the one who could be spared from duties at Kandahar to head west with 3 regiments of British infantry, 2 Indian regiments (who included strong artillery capabilities) and a baggage train to take supplies etc. The area they were heading to was not only physically challenging terrain, it was also politically hostile. The 66th Berkshires normally wore scarlet tunics, blue trousers and, in that area, white helmets, but for this task they had uniforms dyed khaki. Only about a third of them came from Berkshire, there being a large contingent from the south east of England, and under a fifth from Ireland (where army recruitment was otherwise strong). About 10% of them came from Reading itself, but it had an increasingly Berkshire feel to it, most being soldiers who had served around 7 years already. They were supported by servants, water carriers, etc, so the 'Berkshire Regiment' needed local people for support. The opposition forces were much larger, probably about 15,000 regular paid troops, some looking for a Holy war, and they had better artillery than the British - some of it having been previously supplied by the British!

Burrows arrived near Maiwand - a small village - with his forces on July 26th, and realised that they would need to start very early the next day - before first light (or even breakfast), to meet the opposition, who they met just south of Maiwand itself. The ensuing conflict was in broadly 3 phases. In the first, the British and Indian troops were able to keep the Afghans at bay, but by early afternoon the firing line started to collapse, which then imploded into a series of last stands before an overnight retreat to Kandahar.

There were many factors that contributed to this. The area is arid and dry, with temperatures over 100°F in July. The smoke from the black powder used in their guns would also tend to dry out the men, for example drawing the moisture from their eyes, whilst the men were becoming very stressed. There was a collapse towards the Indian end of the line, with artillery running out of ammunition, and many of the young Indian soldiers deciding that they would 'prefer to be somewhere else' - they did not know their fellow soldiers, or their British commanders, and barely even knew how to use their rifles, and were suffering from the lack of water. The Berkshires were left as a 'last stand', and over half were killed on the battle field, whilst few of those injured survived the effects of that day.



The background to this situation was a century old conflict between Great Britain and Russia - the Great Game of the former being known as the Tournament of Shadows by the Russians. The British wanted to secure their possessions, whereas the Russians were looking for security from the Balkans and to gain access to the Mediterranean - so both powers expanded into the vast, but remote, area of desert and mountain, stretching from the border with China to Iran, and including several independent Asian states. The 'Game' was played by a variety of players politicians, diplomats, the Viceroy of India, etc, and not just the British and Russians, but the Turks, Tibetans, French, Germans, etc. Their motives were varied - to make money, to ensure international survival, to gain a strategic advantage. By the late Victorian era, the two empires, though very separate in their thinking, were within 100 metres of each other, and the Russian troops within 3 - 5 days of being in British India - the Russians regarding Britain as wanting to destabilise the area. Diplomats would watch movements, and work out where the Russians might be about to put pressure on the British, who would then calculate how long it would take them to get artillery along the route so that they could respond. By the 1860s, the Russians had moved into Afghanistan, and the British had consolidated their position in India. Problems in the Balkans caused the British to send the Royal Navy to the area, and Russia to move towards India to put pressure on Great Britain.

In due course, Britain also took control of Afghanistan, in return for a large financial contribution to the costs, but the tensions continued, with Britain and Russia nearly at war in 1885, although defining exactly where the boundaries were was difficult in that terrain.

By 1907, there was a growing threat from Germany for both Russia and Britain, and so they decided to partition Persia between them, each having control of the part they wanted, and the situation began to stabilise until 1914, when in World War 1 the Germans sent a mission to Afghanistan to try and attack British India. In 1919 Afghanistan did invade British India, then in 1929 Russia invaded Afghanistan - as they did again 5 decades later.

It is said by some that the Maiwand Lion is shown with its snarling head turned to face the north as symbolic of the Russian threat that way towards Afghanistan and India. - the lion being perceived as a patriotic symbol of courage for the British.

The region continues to see such conflicts – as Mike said “at each point we thought we could do this, but forgot that last time we got it wrong”.

For more detailed reports on these meetings, or information about the society, (including our events as part of the Wargrave Village Festival), visit our website at <https://www.wargravehistory.org.uk>

The Maiwand Lion is seen (right) as a symbol of Reading, as on this piece of commemorative china brought to the meeting by one of the members.

