

CHAPTER II

Preparations for War

CALLED TO THE COLOURS: - Leaving the Boy's Brigade - Volunteer – Attestation – Receiving the Uniform – Kensington Adoption – 4th Middlesex – The Territorial's – Regiment of the Line – Grey Brigade – Social Classes – Corporal.

At home, in 1905, the Kearey family consisted of Alfred - the father, who was a self-employed painter and stainer and Martha - his wife. The eldest child was Alfred who was twenty, and Sidney, the youngest, was five. It was a family of six boys, the four eldest were at work, and two girls. Lillian who was sixteen, the eldest of the two remaining girls, stayed at home to help the mother. [Thomas 1881, the first child, died in his second year, whilst Elsie, the second eldest girl, had died in her third]. The family had moved again... this time to Kensal Green, a suburb of Paddington. The move was a necessity - to find more room to accommodate the eight children...

In 1906, soon after his seventeenth birthday Albert turned up at the Kensington Volunteer Rifle Corps Headquarters by appointment, to fill in the necessary forms and take part in the medical. If these were accepted the recruit had to swear allegiance to The Queen. It had been a bit of a wrench leaving the Boy's Brigade, for he had been a keen member – it had been eight dedicated years - taking part in all the drill competitions, and playing the piano for the Sunday bible readings. He left at the same time a number of friends did having discussed joining the Territorial's. It was an auspicious time, not that Albert and his friends realised the significance.

After the attestation the lads were lead to the Quartermasters Stores to receive their uniforms. This to them was the most exciting part as they all fancied walking down High Street Kensington in their new uniforms. The colour of the cloth was field-grey with shaped cuffs. The buttons tarnished - just waiting for all the hard work to turn them into sparkling brass. The helmet, grey too, looked very similar to a policeman's helmet, plus a spike on the top. All the fittings: spike, badge and chin strap, came separately, also needing much cleaning. The recruits were each handed a kit-bag to carry the boots, socks, shirt and vests, plus the belt, scabbard and bayonet. It was not going to be easy to carry this lot home.

The Kensington Rifles, was now adopted by the Royal Borough of Kensington, and granted permission to take the Borough's Coat of Arms, mounted centrally within an eight pointed star, as a cap badge.

The Kensington Volunteers moved to a purpose built Headquarters at Adam and Eve Mews, Iverna Gardens, Kensington in 1908 under the command of Lieutenant Colonel W H Young. The 4th Middlesex [North] Volunteer Rifle Corps [VRC] [Kensington Rifles], under the reorganization of the Secretary of War, amalgamated with the 2nd. [South] Middlesex VRC, representing the London Boroughs of Kensington and Fulham. This amalgamation joined the north and south army volunteers of Middlesex under one Battalion, to be called the London Regiment, Territorial Force Association. The 13th [County of London] Battalion, The London Regiment [Kensingtons] transferred to become a Territorial Force, with its Headquarters and A-H Companies, at Iverna Gardens, Kensington.

In January 1909 the Army Council declared the Battalion should become a 'line' regiment bearing colours, relieving the battalion of its 'Rifle' designation. Brigaded with the Queen's Westminster's [16th London], Civil Service Rifles [15th London], and the London Scottish [14th London] in the 4th London Infantry Brigade. This became known as the 'Grey Brigade' mobilized for home defence at the start of the war.

The Regiment's Headquarters was positioned close to the home of Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria. King Edward VII was approached by The Regiment to ask if Princess Louise would associate her name with the regiment – he was to give his consent. The Princess took an interest in The Regiment organizing the design and production of the regiment's colours. The colours were duly consecrated and presented to the Regiment by King Edward VII at Windsor on the 19th June 1909. Thereafter the Regiment was referred to as the 13th London Regiment. The Princess Louise, four years later, consented to give her name to the Regiment.

In 1914, the 1st Battalion were billeted in the White City stadium, there preparing to go to France - with The Expeditionary Force. The 2nd Battalion were at Abbots Langley, near Watford – there training at summer camp, for 'Home Service'; the 3rd Battalion wasn't recruited until much later.

If you were to see a film of London's population at the turn of the nineteenth century you would be able to pick out those people who had a lot of money, from those who had little. Their dress would give them away. The rich women wore long dresses made out of silks and satins, wore flamboyant hats and fur stoles, and carried a parasol. They did no work but run their house through the effort of servants and cooks planning the weekly programme and menu in advance. Their husbands, many were absentee landlords, living off the rents of property, stocks and shares, wore: frock coats, bowler hats and astrakhan collared over-coats... Income tax was very low allowing surplus money to be spent on clothes, houses, horses and carriages. It was a very unequal society.

The poor children wore rags, went barefooted, and were frequently undernourished. They lived in tenements and back-to-back houses with no sanitary arrangements except a community lavatory and tap. Many children lived away from home - under bridges and populating derelict houses.

All the different strata of society wore clothes appropriate to that level – not attempting to copy their so-called betters, but maintaining their station in life. The rich looked upon the poor as 'unfortunates' some socially minded did so with embarrassment, others felt guilty - that there wasn't greater equality. The mass of the population were struggling with the day to day survival. Three-quarters of all adults earned less than £160 per year. The gap between paying income-tax or not widened during the Edwardian period. Almost sixty per cent of the population were living in crowded conditions - more than two to a room.

Many of these unfortunates were housed in the workhouse, on a diet of half a pint of milk and five ounces of dry bread for breakfast. Dinner, the main meal of the day, consisted of an ounce and a half of fatty roast beef, four ounces of potatoes or other vegetable, and six ounces of some sort of pudding – usually a concoction of suet and flour. And for supper, a half pint of water and milk mix, of cocoa and a quarter pound of seed-cake. This diet exceeded that of a worker's family whose wage might be twenty-shillings a week... thirty shillings was considered a good wage. Alfred, a self-employed painter, earned about forty-shillings a week. Fortunately these were times of feverish activity industrially and economically. Employment was high for Britain was preparing its defences and the work demanded by the railways and house building kept the labour market busy.

The working week was sometimes more than fifty hours and even though employment was high there was always a fear of being laid off – of being out of work. Trade unions were weak and the law gave very little protection for unfair dismissal. There was no unemployment insurance or social security. A family could be thrown out of their house by the landlord for any trifling excuse.

The Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, held an election just after Christmas – in January 1906. It was a wise move for the result was a landslide victory for the previous Liberal Party gaining eighty-four seat majority over all other parties. The election had been fought on issues

of Education, Chinese slavery and tariff reform - which the Liberals presented as a likely increase in the cost of food.

It was an exciting time for those who left the Boys Brigade witnessing the massive public excitement. They all went to Trafalgar Square to see the huge screens erected there displaying the projected election results.

It was agreed by Parliament on 31st March 1907, 'That a sum of £2,353,000, be granted to His Majesty, to defray the Charge of Barrack Construction; for Works, Buildings, and repairs, at Home and abroad', [including purchase of land]. This was a bill acknowledging that something had to be done about modernising the Army - improving the living arrangements. On the eve of war there were 132,000 private cars on the roads.

During the last few years before the outbreak of the First World War Britain had developed department stores, chain stores and Cooperative stores. It was unusual to buy items direct from the manufacturer or farmer. Costly items such as suiting and shoes might be ordered 'made to measure'... but most goods were made in standard sizes and weights. Harrods and Selfridges were graced by the middle classes; Liptons, Co-op and Grand Universal Stores had been built up on the needs of the working class, catering for volume sales with small margins.

British society had become more tolerant. It was possible to alter ones class – to move up. There was greater understanding for the poor, homeless and handicapped. The Factory Acts did protect workers. Reforms allowing trades unions and the introduction of the Welfare State continue to this day... Britain was becoming more civilized... This improvement in living standards came from invention, new technologies and entrepreneurship.