

The Soldier's Tale

1825.

The lives of Shadrach Lindo Snell and his older brother John could not have been more different. While Shadrach was a skilled artisan, John chose a life given over mainly to serving the King – the only Snell in the family line known to have served full time in the armed forces during peacetime.

John Snell was the second child of John and Rebecca, and was born in Colchester in 1789. His life remains skeletal in detail but the one outstanding feature was his service with the East Essex Disembodied Militia.

John Snell and his Georgian duty

In times of national emergency, the Government has recognised the imperative of forming, in addition to the regular armed forces, a military capability dedicated to the defence of the realm. By ancient practice dating back to Saxon times, all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were liable to perform military service within their counties. Under the Tudors and Stuarts statute law augmented the militia ranks. From 1640, however, the militias reduced in importance until 1757, when the militia was effectively reformed by the Government in response to the dangerous military situation arising on the Continent in the form of the Seven Years War.

Conscription

Recruitment to the militia was by means of a sort of conscription, by which the “principal” or “drawn men” were chosen by ballot from the list of adult men that each county parish was required to draw up. The “drawn man” could delegate his militia obligation to a substitute. The Essex Militia – divided into the East and West county contingents – was formed in 1793. It played a part in the almost comic repelling of 1,400 French troops at Fishguard, Wales, in February 1797 – the last attempt at foreign invasion of British shores.

The late 18th Century and early days of the 19th Century saw troubled times for England, with the American and French revolutionary wars followed by Napoleon Bonaparte’s ambitious charge around Europe. It was a time of great uncertainty, and of some excitement, for a young John Snell growing up in Colchester – home of the Essex Regiment.

Total Amount of Pay and Allowances

Sent from the Corps on

Received at the War Office on

This Account to be sent to the War Office, under a Cover, thus addressed.

The Secy

Disembodied Militia Account

9 Jun. 1826.

John was not a “drawn man”. His entry into the militia was his own choice as a commissioned officer, and the first reference to his name in the East Essex Militia’s pay and accounts records¹ comes in 1815. In the following three month period Ensign (2nd Lieutenant) John Snell was paid £19 13s. 9d.

At this time the East Essex Militia was an industrious organisation with the commanding officer, Colonel J H Rigby, overseeing eight captains, 10 lieutenants and six ensigns, as well as a hundred and more NCOs and privates. There were also regular batches of balloted recruits to train and assimilate. These young men were often less than enthusiastic and desertions were common.



All Saints Parish Church, Colchester, where John Snell married Mary Ann Bell in 1817.

Five shillings

Young John Snell, now aged 26, was quick to impress, and was soon signing off the accounts for payment to innkeepers and others who catered for the militia men obliged to march between barracks and depots. This was a common practice, with records showing that officers and other ranks marching, for example, between Liverpool and Colchester – their progress monitored by the signatures of the parish constables in the towns they stayed in each night. John Snell himself undertook such a march soon after joining up – from Chatham to Colchester between the first and fourth of January 1816. As an officer he was paid an additional five shillings for each day he marched.

At this time the East Essex Militia was headquartered in Colchester, but in earlier times (1805/06, for example) the militia was based in Glasgow. On 8 January 1816 the East Essex Militia became “disembodied” – not disbanded or demobilised, but placed in a state that recognised that it was not prepared for immediate action.

John’s career continued, with his second lieutenant’s pay in 1817 and 1818 earning him £36 10s. a year. The total annual pay and allowances for the whole of the East Essex Militia in these years was more than £2,500 a year. This remuneration

became important to John at this time as, in October 1817, he married Westminster, London, born Mary Ann Bell at All Saints Parish Church, Colchester.

In 1819 John’s hard work paid off and he was appointed Quartermaster of the East Essex Militia³, succeeding Samuel Bland. His role was to be responsible for the weapons, clothing and general stores of the militia, and he was now one of a handful of senior officers administering the militia; these also included the adjutant, the paymaster and the surgeon. He continued to serve throughout the 1820’s, and his new position meant a substantial increase in pay – to more than £90 a year.

Thus far, records had showed that John lived in Colchester, but by 1829 he was recorded as “non-resident” quartermaster. The last record we find of John in the East Essex Disembodied Militia is October 1831. After this there is also no mention in the militia’s records of the role of quartermaster, and in 1832 the overall pay bill for the East Essex Militia had fallen to just £733 13s. 2d. Perhaps by this time the role of quartermaster had been dispensed with?

What became of John Snell? In fact he had moved home from Colchester to London. The officers’ residency record in the 1829 accounts for the Militia⁴ show John’s address as 10 Dears Place, Somers Town, London. There is no such address today, but Somers Town is part of modern day St Pancras.

The signature of Lieutenant John Snell, Quartermaster of the East Essex Disembodied Militia².

Certificate of the Quarter Master.

I do hereby certify upon Honor, that the Arms, Accoutrements, Great Coats, Clothing, and Necessaries, or other Stores belonging to the East Essex Militia have been frequently Inspected by me, and that they have been kept in proper order during the period of this Account

Dated this

5th

Day of

Jan^y 1826

Lieut John Snell

{ Signature of the
Quarter Master.

If there should be no Quarter-Master, this Certificate is to be Signed by the Pay-Master.

A Colchester electoral roll⁵ of 1850/1851 tells us that John was a registered voter, by means of his owning “freehold houses” in Military Road, Colchester. More interestingly, his home address is given by the electoral roll as 77 Little Britain, London. The Census of 30 March 1851 records John and Mary Snell living at the School Room, Little Britain. Residing with them is a 14-year-old local girl, Jemima Gilkes, who is their servant. Indeed, John and Mary Ann are also found on the 1841 Census living at Little Britain. A number of their neighbours at that time were also schoolmasters – two of them, Henry Bowker and Frederick Goldsmith, were teachers at the prestigious public school at Christ’s Hospital, which was just around the corner from Little Britain.

Teacher

John had clearly turned to a second career as a teacher soon after moving to London. The Post Office Directory for London records him as being Master of the National School at 77 Little Britain in 1841. Wife Mary was noted as Mistress of the school, which catered for both boys and girls. Ten years later, John is still recorded as Master of the school, but a Miss Catherine Gardner is now Mistress.

A building still stands today which is thought to have been the school in which John lived and worked some time between 1832 and 1860. The building – which is now part of the sprawling St. Bartholomew’s Hospital complex – is clearly marked as “School Rooms” on an 1873 Ordnance Survey map⁶ of the area.

By the spring of 1861 John and Mary had retired to Minerva House in Paine Street (today known as Paines Hill) Steeple Aston, Oxfordshire. They had a servant, 22-year-old Berkshire

girl, Emma Walters. The couple’s retirement together was short though, as Mary died of pneumonia on 12 July 1861. Her death was formally recorded by widow Hannah Elmore, who lived in the village.

Few records have been discovered to chart the progress of the latter years of John’s life. However, by 1871 he was back in Essex living as a “boarder” with his brother and sister-in-law, Shadrach Lindo Snell and Tabitha, at Little Coggeshall. By then he was frail and described in the Census of that year as being deaf. He had been a man of note for his time; a property owner and voter. He was a thoroughly respectable man who had been both military officer and schoolmaster. He left no will and in his retirement lived on a pension of half pay from his days in the Army; and any sizeable wealth accumulated throughout his lifetime appears to have dissipated by the time of his death.

John Snell died in Little Coggeshall on 30 August 1878 at the age of 89 and, by all of the flimsy accounts we have, he had led a colourful life.

References

- 1 The annual accounts and pay lists of the East Essex Militia, Public Records Office, WO13/692.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 The annual accounts and pay lists of the East Essex Militia, Public Records Office, WO13/692 and 693.
- 4 1851 Census. The Family Records Centre. HO107 1525 Folio 617.
- 5 Essex Record Office: Q/RPr 1/10.
- 6 Surveyed in 1873. Engraved and published at the Ordnance Survey Office, Southampton, in 1876.

The peaceful village of Steeple Aston in Oxfordshire where John and Mary retired to.

