

A Limerick Silversmith in Afghanistan 1839-42

In 1834 John Purdon enlisted into the British Army and became a private in the 13th Regiment of Foot. He was born in St Mary's parish in 1815 and his occupation was listed as silversmith.¹ At the time the 13th was stationed in India under the command of Colonel Sir Robert Sale. It had gone there in 1822 and almost immediately was involved in the First Burmese War. In 1838 the 13th was chosen as part of the Army of the Indus which was to invade Afghanistan to restore Shah Shuja the deposed King. Britain was worried by Russian expansion into central Asia and determined to replace Dost Mohammed, who, incorrectly, was felt to be friendly towards the Russians. Shah Shuja was an unpopular ruler who had been dethroned in 1809 and had made several abortive attempts to regain power before the British adopted him as its puppet.²

The invasion of Afghanistan was an amazing undertaking because at the time there was no mutual border between British India and Afghanistan, so the British had first to arrange to cross the territory of several princely states to reach the road up through the mountains. The most obvious route would have been through the Khyber Pass, but that would have meant crossing the Punjab which at the time was ruled by the Sikh Ranjit Singh who had a European trained army, the only native one on the subcontinent, which was thought to be a match for the British forces. Relations between Ranjit and the British were cordial but Ranjit, who even promised forces to aid the invasion, would not allow the British Army to march across his territory. So the army was forced to take the long route to Kabul, via Kandahar. Units of both the Queen's Army and the East India Company's Army in the Bombay Presidency were sent by boat to the mouth of the River Indus in Sind, from where they marched eastwards up river to meet similar units, including the 13th, marching westwards from the



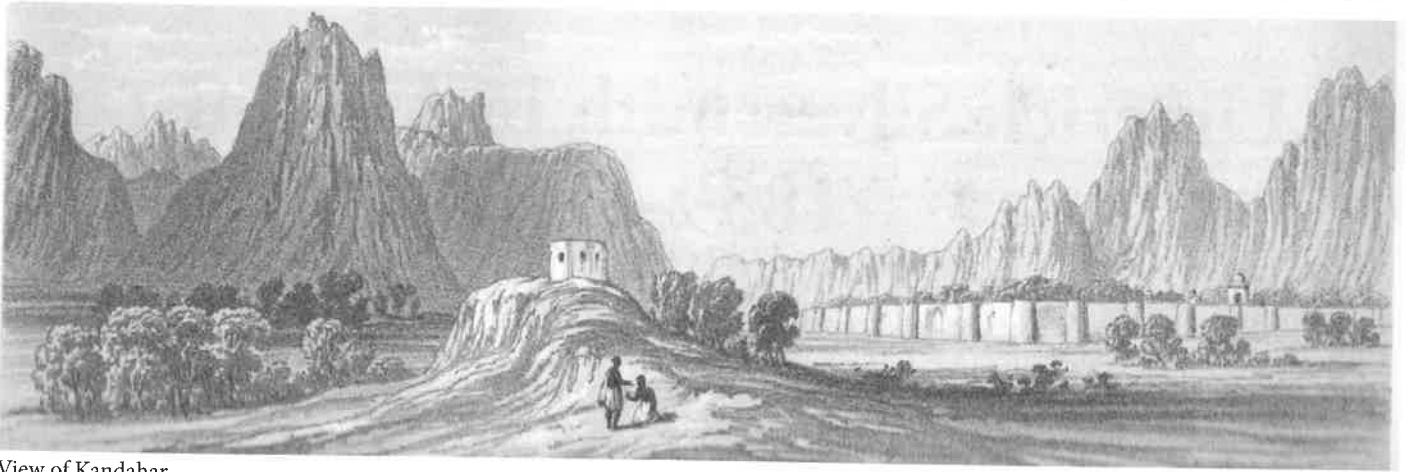
Map of Afghanistan

Bengal Presidency. A third rag tag army was put together for Shah Shuja from volunteers and seconded members of the British forces, so he could be seen to enter Afghanistan at the head of his own army. These forces, numbering about 21,000 fighting men, 38,000 camp followers and over 30,000 camels marched northwards for Kandahar from Sukkur on the Indus. It was not easy going. First they had to cross desert to reach the mountains and then they had to go through the high passes of Bolan and Kojak. Scarcity of water along parts of the journey caused major problems while food supplies which the armies expected to pick up in the hills did not materialise forcing the advancing forces onto half rations. Pack animals³ died in their thousands with their loads left to be picked over by locals, and the stench from rotting carcasses along the route was terrible. By the time the army reached the Kojak pass, the last one before Kandahar the army was in dire straits and it was fortunate that the rulers of Kandahar could not put together a force to defend the pass otherwise the whole expedition could have ended in failure.

In the event it took two months for the British forces to regain their strength at Kandahar before they could advance on Kabul.

At Kandahar, on 24 June 1839, Purdon was court martialled for 'disgraceful and unsoldierly conduct for being surprised on sentry duty and not offering resistance, whereby five of his unarmed comrades were killed and wounded and the regimental camels carried off.' He was sentenced to 100 lashes for the loss of the camels but acquitted of the other charges. This incident is described in several of the reminiscences of the war published in the 1840s. According to Hough:

20th June 1839. Today about 150 camels belonging to one of H.M.'s Regts. were carried off, while grazing close to camp; one of five unarmed Europeans in charge killed, and the rest severely wounded. (One died that night, and another the next day) A guard of a Sgt. and eight men was sent out as protection to the camels, but they went into a village to escape the



View of Kandahar

heat of the sun; and knew nothing of the camels being carried off till too late. The five unarmed men went down to the rivulet to water the camels; a gang of mounted Afghan robbers, rushed from concealment, and drove off the camels. The Europeans behaved as well as men could do, without arms, in defending the camels. The Brigr. of the day went out immediately, with the picquets, but the camels were off to the hills, and could not be traced.”⁴

Outram’s description tallies with Hough, while Holdsworth adds that the men defended themselves with their shoes and one pulled a mounted Ghiljee off his horse but “had his arm cut through before he could get the fellow’s sword from him.”⁵ Low, editing Abbott’s papers, records two soldiers, acting as drivers, killed and as many as eighteen asleep.⁶ Taylor tells a slightly different story of a sergeant and six privates falling asleep at their posts and only fifteen to eighteen camels stolen. He adds that shortly afterwards two of the attackers were apprehended and after a court martial both were sentenced to be blown from the mouth of a cannon, the sentence being carried out on one the second being granted a pardon by Shah Shuja.⁷

It is not clear from Purdon’s record if the punishment was carried out immediately, but if it was then Purdon must have been remarkably resilient, because the army began its march towards Kabul on the 27 June and by the 21 July Purdon and the 13th were outside Ghuznee, a seemingly impregnable fortress city about two thirds of the way to Kabul. Rather foolishly the Commander of the Army, John Keane, had left his heavy artillery at Kandahar in the belief it would not be needed.

However he managed to pull off a coup by a surprise attack on the Kabul gate which, spies told him had not been sealed up with the approach of the army. Once the gate was blown open, the Queen’s 2nd, 13th and 17th Regiments together with the East India Company’s Bengal European Regiment successfully stormed the town.⁸

The taking of Ghuznee demoralised Afghan resistance which melted away and the army moved on to Kabul, which was taken without any major fighting. The 13th was then chosen to remain in Afghanistan as the only Queen’s Regiment to garrison the country. In 1841 the 44th Regiment arrived in Kabul to relieve the 13th and in October 1841, the regiment set off for India via the Koord Kabul and Khyber Passes. At around the same time, the country, never quiet, rose in outright rebellion, so the 13th together with the 35th Bengal Native Infantry, a body of pioneers and some artillery, had to fight their way along the Koord Kabul pass, while British forces in Kabul were besieged and the situation became dire. The 13th and 35th were ordered to return to Kabul but General Sale had suffered too many casualties and decided to fight his way through to Jellalabad, where he entrenched to await events. By December 1841, Kabul surrendered and in January the retreat of the garrison started towards India. The army of about 5,000 soldiers with 10,000 camp followers was cut to pieces in the passes. Dr Brydon was the only European to make it through, while others were taken prisoner; many sepoy and camp followers eventually made it back to British India, but the majority were either killed or enslaved.

Jellalabad now came under siege, with the

13th and other units completely cut off at the northern end of the Khyber Pass. The defences were in poor condition and had to be rebuilt by the defenders, whereupon there was a massive earthquake, which reduced them to rubble again. Despite this the defenders held on to await relief. News of the disaster had reached India and an “Army of Retribution” under General Pollock, was formed to relieve Jellalabad, recover European prisoners and to punish the Afghans. When this army finally forced its way through the Khyber Pass, it found that the garrison was no longer under siege. The Afghans knowing that Pollock was on his way had tightened the noose around Jellalabad, whereupon the garrison had sortied out and completely routed the besiegers.

The 13th then joined with the “Army of Retribution” and marched northwards again to Kabul, literally over the bodies of the Kabul garrison. In Kabul the army met up with the brigade that had held Kandahar under General Nott. Orders had been given that Afghanistan was to be evacuated and Nott had been given permission to retreat via Kabul rather than down the Bolan Pass route. Once the European prisoners had been released and several punitive exhibitions had taken place, the British in a major act of vandalism blew up the Grand Bazaar in Kabul and marched back down to British India. The army of the reserve was drawn up at Ferozepur to meet and greet the returning army and it was the ‘Illustrious Garrison’ of Jellalabad which first crossed the Sutlej back into British India.

Purdon, with the rest of the 13th received medals for the storming of Ghuznee, the defence of Jellalabad and the return to Kabul. About ten years later he would

have received five shillings prize money for the capture of Ghuznee. He was pensioned in 1856, after which he worked in Woolwich Arsenal. He died in 1882.⁹

Acknowledgement:

My thanks to Des Ryan for finding the detail of his life after the army.

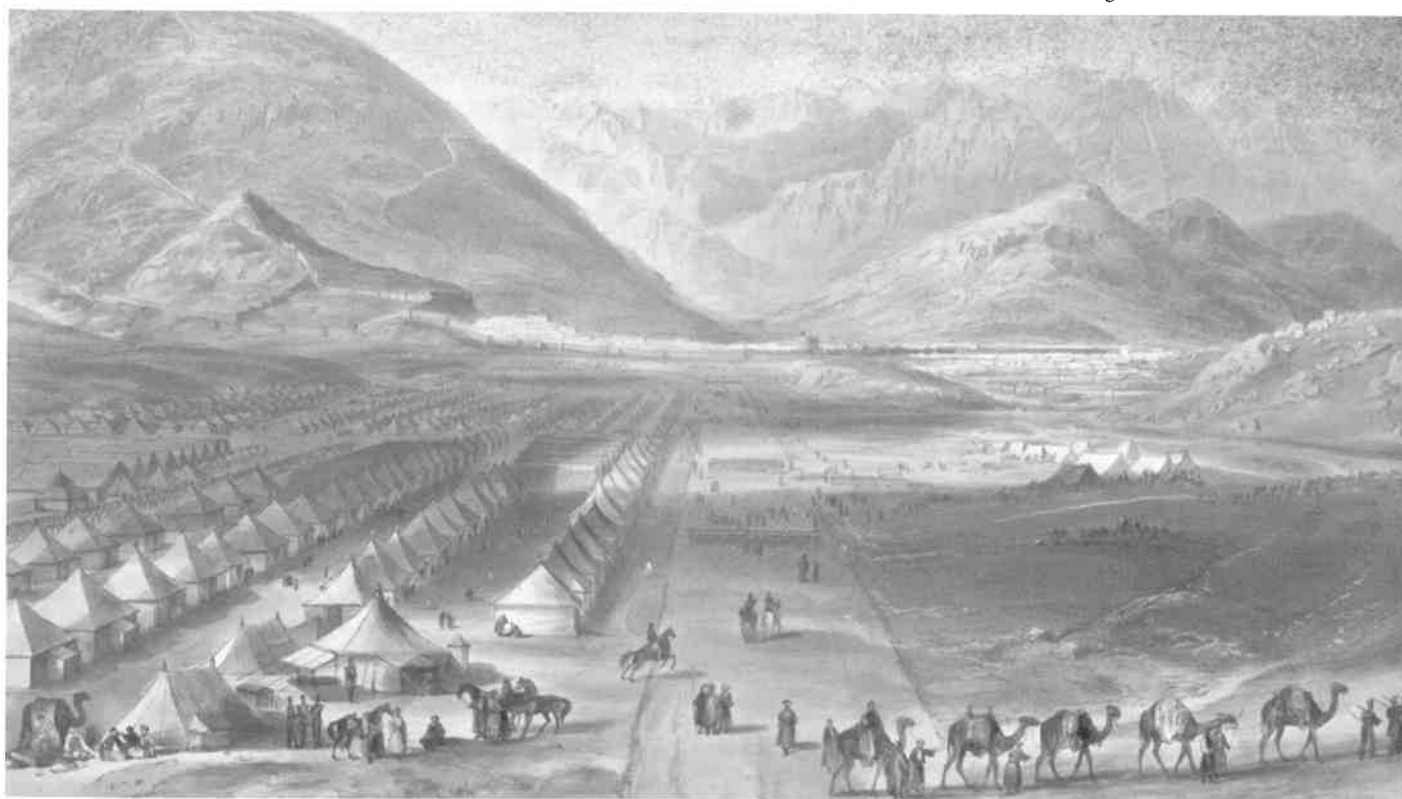
Endnotes:

1. He was probably a close relative of Samuel Purdon, a noted silversmith of the time.
2. See William Dalrymple, *Return of a King, the Battle for Afghanistan*, (London, 2013) for an excellent history of the whole invasion.
3. The number of animals was huge because nobody travelled light; one brigadier claimed he needed 50 camels, General Cotton 260, while one regiment needed two camels just to carry its cigars. The 16th Lancers even brought its pack of hounds.
4. Major W. Hough, *A Narrative of the March and Operation of the Army of the Indus*, p. 124 (London, 1841).
5. Captain James Outram, *Rough Notes on the Campaign in Sindh and Afghanistan*, p. 83 (Bombay, 1840) and A. H. Holdsworth, *Campaign of the Indus*, p. 77 (privately printed 1840).
6. Charles Rathbone Low, *The Afghan War 1838-1842 from the Journal and Correspondence of the late Major-General Augustus Abbott, C.B. Royal (Bengal) Artillery*, p.93 (London, 1879).
7. William Taylor, *Scenes and Adventures in Afghanistan*, p.97 (London, 1842).

8. The 17th was led by Lt.-Colonel Croker of Ballinagarde, Co. Limerick, whose son and nephew were also present. The Bengal European Regiment evolved into the Royal Munster Fusiliers, which regiment carried Ghuznee among its battle honours. A member of the regiment, Private Patrick Leo of St. John's parish Limerick, died at Ghuznee, some two and a half weeks after the battle. He was presumably one of the 51 wounded.
9. British Army service records, the UK 1871 and 1881 censuses (which give the name of his wife Catherine and son John), and England & Wales Deaths 1837-2007, all through findmypast.ie.



Ghuznee Jellalabad and Cabul 1842 medals awarded to the 13th reg



British and Indian troops outside Kabul 1842

Brian Hodkinson has recently retired as acting curator of Limerick Museum. His background is in archaeology which he studied at London and Belfast. His book *Aspects of Medieval North Munster*, a collection of essays on the Limerick region in medieval times was published in 2012. He is currently researching the involvement of Limerick in the 1st Afghan War.