

Woodbridge Barracks During the War With Napoleon

by Vic Harrup

Linda Colley, in her book *Britons* wondered what effect the stationing of men from all over the British Isles had on the population of a small market town like Woodbridge. She went on to say that the impact has never been investigated in detail. I decided to see what documents were available to try and measure the impact, starting with the Registers for the House of Correction, built in the town a year after the completion of the Barracks in 1803.

Troops were under canvas on Bromeswell Heath during the war with Revolutionary France before 1803, but such accommodation was not suited to long time stay by regiments. Even when hut accommodation was provided, units did not stay long in Woodbridge. Both Militia, who for most of the war were not required to serve abroad, and regular troops moved around regularly. Fear of an invasion from France was at its height in 1803, and men to the age of 55 were liable to be conscripted by ballot. It was possible to find a substitute by payment of at least £10, often much more, but this means of escape was not available for the poor, causing great resentment. Single men were under pressure to volunteer.

Census records for the first three decades of the nineteenth century reveal that Woodbridge was 'swamped' by the military.

Year	Woodbridge	Men at Barracks	Women and children at Barracks
1801	3020		
1811	4332	4889	459
1821	4060		

Clearly there were married quarters at the Barracks, but it is likely that senior officers, accommodated in the town, were included in the Woodbridge census records in 1811.

Before the House of Correction was built in Theatre Street in 1804, prisoners were held at the Bridewell in New Street, and the earliest surviving register of inmates dates from 1802 and another was started in April 1813. The former begins at page 34, and records earnings by prisoners, totalling £200 19s 0d from 1788 to 1802. The first entry concerning the military involved William Nottridge, a driver in the Royal Horse Artillery. In January 1803 he was charged with 'begetting' Susan Aldrich of Woodbridge with child. Being single, she and the child would become a charge on the parish poor rates, and recompense was sought from the father. The Royal Horse Artillery was at Woodbridge the whole time from 1803 to 1814. Another regular entry in the Register concerned deserters, and the first here was John Crowford, from the East Suffolk Militia. He was handed over the next day to a corporal in the militia.

Two types of offence took place during the next few months, which did not recur. William Howard and his wife Mary were charged with being riotous and disorderly in the Coach and Horses, Saxmundham, where they 'endeavoured to alienate the minds of some soldiers from the service of their King and Country'. The two were held for two months, during which time they spun wool. In September 1803 a carpenter Thomas Moor, aged 40, was charged on the oath of Thomas Moon, Superintendent of the Works at the new Barracks with 'combining and conspiring with others not to work unless they had greater wages'. Moor was committed to Ipswich Gaol for one month. The Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 had made all forms of Trades Unionism illegal.