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Gen. W. H. Asbury  
Memoir / Obituary



MEMOIR.

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GENERAL W. H. ASKWITH,  
COLONEL-COMMANDANT, R.A.

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1898.

# MEMOIR.

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GENERAL W. H. ASKWITH, COL.-COMMANDANT, R.A.

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[BORN 7TH SEPTEMBER, 1811. DIED 25TH NOVEMBER, 1897].

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THE Regiment has every reason to lament the loss of General William Harrison Askwith, the oldest officer on the list of the Royal Artillery and the second senior Colonel-Commandant.

From the date of his earliest connection with the Regiment up to, we may say, the last day of his life, General Askwith took not only a lively interest but a most active part in regimental records and in everything which concerned and affected the efficiency and prosperity of the corps he so dearly loved.

It would be difficult to name any officer on the long and distinguished roll of the Royal Artillery, who so consistently identified himself with it. His memory was good and he loved to recall scenes and episodes which he was a witness of in the earlier years of his regimental life, especially when in the company of his contemporaries or of other regimental friends. General Askwith was a consistent collector of regimental records of all kinds. The writer can remember as far back as the sixties that the General, then the superintendent of the R. Gunpowder Factory, at Waltham Abbey, religiously kept up a huge list of all the officers R.A., in which he even noted amongst other things whether the officer were married or single! He had a collection of Army Lists from the date of his first commission and noted all the promotions, &c.: he kept up his Kane's List, worked out tables of relationship between the officers of the regiment, collected the war services, foreign stations and staff appointments of each officer, besides numerous other matters all of interest to those who prize records, and which must be of value hereafter. He preserved several old uniforms and regimental relics of various kinds, amongst others he still kept the mourning sash which each officer got who was on duty on the day of the funeral of William IV.

In his later years General Askwith devoted all his leisure to one great labour of love; the revision and amplification of "Kane's List." All the mass of records he had kept during his service now came in usefully and it must have been a matter of extreme gratification to him, to know that his labours were appreciated by the regiment and

that the Committee of the R.A. Institution had decided to accept his manuscripts and to bring out a revised edition of Kane's List, which when it appears will be for ever associated with his name.

General Askwith went most carefully over Cleaveland's MSS. which are so valuable as giving records of the Royal Artillery in its earliest days and before it was formed into a regiment. He compared numerous authorities and was able to fill in several gaps in Cleaveland and *vice versa* in Kane. He also (at no small expense) got copies of the records of service of all the officers, almost down to the present day, in order to supply the necessary additions to Kane's List which will make it a unique register when it is completed.

The subject of this memoir was born on 7th September, 1811, his family belonging to Ripon in Yorkshire. He entered the Royal Military Academy in February 1826, and got his commission as 2nd Lieutenant in 1829, 1st Lieutenant, 1830; 2nd Captain in 1841; Brevet-Major for service in the field in 1842; 1st Captain, 1846; Lieut.-Colonel, 1854; Brevet-Colonel, 1857; Colonel, 1858; Major-General, 1868; Lieut.-General, 1877, and General, 1879. He became a Colonel-Commandant in 1877.

After foreign service in Corfu, (whence he travelled in Albania and Greece), he went in January, 1838 to Spain as Military Attaché to the British Embassy, and for nearly 3 years was on constant active service as British Commissioner with the Spanish Army of the centre in Aragon and Valencia, during the long struggle to suppress the Carlist rebellion. During this period he was present at a great number of actions and was constantly under fire—at the action of Muniesa his horse was wounded—and he took part in the operations about, and siege and attack of Morella, the action of Miella, retreat to Caspie, actions near Segura and Utrillos, also at the action of La Scenia where he was wounded. General Askwith once informed the writer with reference to the wound he received, that on an aide-de-camp of the general (on whose staff he was at the time) being sent with some order, he volunteered to accompany him; the aide-de-camp was killed and Askwith was struck, but the bullet fortunately, was partly spent; as the weather was cold, he was wearing a Horse Artillery Pelisse at the time over another jacket and when he felt himself hit, he put his hand inside his jacket to feel the place where the bullet had struck and the bullet came out into his hand. During the period that he served in Spain, he made the acquaintance of all the leading Spanish generals and statesmen of the day, with some of whom he was on the most friendly terms.

As a senior Subaltern, he was appointed to the R.H.A.; but, owing to his employment in Spain lasting almost up to the date of his promotion to 2nd Captain, he never (so far as the writer knows), had an opportunity of joining his troop.

In recognition of his valuable services whilst attached to the headquarters of the Spanish army, Queen Christina conferred upon him the Insignia of a Knight Commander of the Order of Isabella the Catholic, Cross of the Order of Charles the III, and two Crosses of the



First Class of the Order of San Fernando, each of these last decorations being accompanied by a Cross of Drawn Swords for "service in the field", to be worn below the order.

General Askwith was an accomplished draughtsman and made a collection of sepia sketches of many of the scenes of the Civil War in Spain. His sketch books were exhibited at an exhibition of original drawings by officers R.A. and R.E. held in Maclean's gallery, Haymarket, some 25 or so years ago. Several of these sketches were used to illustrate Major Duncan's (R.A.) book *The English in Spain*, towards the compilation of which General Askwith was able to afford much useful and authentic information. He and Duncan were great friends, both having a fondness for regimental history, General Askwith took much interest in the *History of the Royal Artillery* and frequently corresponded with Duncan on regimental matters.

On his return from Spain he performed regimental duties at home, at Malta and Jamaica and soon after the Crimean War commenced he, having just been promoted Lieut.-Colonel, was selected as acting inspector at the Royal Gunpowder Factory, Waltham Abbey and in the following year became Superintendent. The work at that time was naturally very heavy and the new Superintendent brought all his energies to bear on it and never spared himself. He held this important post for no less than 14 years, during which time he was instrumental in doing much towards the improvement of machinery and the development of gunpowder and explosives. He also served on the First Committee on Torpedoes.

Having reached the rank of Major-General before his appointment at Waltham Abbey expired, his active employment in the army ceased, but he did not retire until the age clause in the Royal Warrant placed him on the retired list on 1st July, 1881, after 52 years full pay service. For a short while prior to this date he received the Distinguished Service Reward.

On leaving Waltham Abbey, General Askwith purchased No. 119, St. George's Square, S.W. where he lived until his death.

The deceased officer was a man of particularly genial temperament, hospitable and charitable to a degree; and of a most lovable disposition. Endowed with the highest principles and tried common sense, his advice and opinion were held in great estimation by those who had the advantage of his acquaintance. Except on a few and happily rare occasions, he enjoyed good health up to the last, and probably no other officer (young or old) in the regiment, has been such a regular supporter of the Annual Regimental Dinner. His health prevented him from attending the dinner in 1897, and H.R.H. the Colonel of the Regiment, alluded to him in his speech in feeling and graceful terms. On some of the last occasions when he was present at the dinner, he had to respond to the toast of "The Retired Officers", and always managed in the briefest of speeches to say just the right thing.

He was a man of slight build and below the average height, but very erect, soldierlike and wiry, and just the figure to be able to undergo

more than the ordinary share of hard work and fatigue. He was always fond of walking exercise, and to his active and abstemious habits are no doubt greatly due the good health and unimpaired faculties which he maintained to the last. He married soon after going to Waltham Abbey, Elizabeth, only daughter of George Ranken, Esq. who survives him, and by her had a family of five sons and two daughters. Though especially happy in his family relations he had the great sorrow of losing 3 of his children, viz.: the eldest son, Lieut. W. B. Askwith, R. E., who was killed at Suakim in 1885; his fourth son, Lieut. Charles Hamilton Askwith, R.N., who died of fever on return from Malta in 1887, and his eldest daughter, Mrs. Kennedy, who died some years since. His children who survive him are G. R. Askwith Esq., Barrister-at-Law, Captain J. B. H. Askwith, R.H.A., Captain H. F. Askwith, R.A., and one daughter unmarried. The deceased general was a cousin of the late General Sir William Bell, K.C.B., Colonel-Commandant, R.H.A. (Adjutant R.A. at Waterloo), who was also a native of Ripon, and he inherited the latter's medals and decorations.

General Askwith was laid to rest in Kensal Green Cemetery, on November 30th, 1897, with every token of respect. Major Abdy, R.A. attended and placed two lovely wreaths on the coffin, one from the R.A. Mess, Woolwich and another from the R.A. Institution; a large wreath being also sent from Aldershot.

It is no mere eulogistic formula to say that few men have led better, more useful, or more honoured lives than the subject of this memoir. In point of age he was Father of the Royal Artillery, and we his sons cannot do better than try to emulate his example.

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Some of the above information has been taken from the obituary notice in the *Times*, November 26th, 1897.



## **The Military Superintendent**

**Colonel, later General W.H. Askwith R.A.**

### **Superintendent 1855 – 1868**

From the commencement of Crown ownership in 1787 to 1832 the senior official in charge at the Factory, termed Storekeeper, was a civilian, commencing with James Wright, with overall military command resting with the Comptroller of the Royal Laboratory at Woolwich, at that time the instigator of the Crown purchase Col. Later Lt. Gen. Sir William Congreve. From 1830 the establishment was termed the Royal Gunpowder Manufactory later Factory (RGPF). From 1832 the chief officer of the site was appointed from the Army. Initially this was from the Royal Engineers and from 1845 the Royal Artillery. The term Superintendent was adopted from 1855 and was first applied to Col. Later Gen. W. H. Askwith R.A. Each Superintendent brought with him his own style and outlook. Some presided over periods of quiet others saw great change. Amongst the latter was Col. Askwith.

Col. Askwith's career offers a fascinating glimpse into the varied and even exotic experience open to a successful and dedicated officer in the Victorian Army. After general regimental service he was posted to of all places Corfu. From there he travelled in Greece and Albania to investigate the military situation in these areas. This service must have marked him out as having the ability to deal independently with foreign military authorities as he was then posted as military attaché in the British Embassy in Spain. This was a critical time for Spain which was threatened by a Carlist rebellion. It was not uncommon then for British officers to serve in the armies of foreign allies and Askwith was appointed British Commissioner in one of the Spanish armies. In this capacity he participated in many actions over three years and was wounded. He received the highest Spanish military decoration and was made a member of a Spanish military order. On returning from Spain he resumed regimental duties in Britain, Malta and Jamaica.

In 1854 the Crimean War started. From the outset the war exposed major deficiencies in the Army supply and materiel systems and the need for a strong command in these areas would have been evident. Col. Askwith was initially appointed Acting Inspector of Gunpowder in 1854. A clue as to what was to come lay in his rank. The previous incumbent had been a Captain. Askwith far outranked him and it is probable that his designation with the new title of Superintendent in 1855 was part of the strengthening of command.

A massive programme of investment in new facilities at military establishments was launched and Waltham Abbey figured prominently. Over his long tenure from 1854 to 1868 Askwith energetically presided over and managed this activity. A whole series of developments took the Factory to an advanced state of technology. Major instances were – in 1856 hydraulic press houses utilising water power were built. These produced substantial improvement in pressed material quality and performance. A year later in 1857 a major transition from water in the motive power in the incorporating mills was implemented with the introduction of steam power in the new Group A mills. This was followed successively from 1863 by the impressive range of steam powered incorporating mills on the Queens Mead which form the centrepiece of the site today. These mills were architecturally and technically successful, attracting considerable international attention and became the template for gunpowder mill design in military and civil application in Britain and overseas. In parallel with these important manufacturing developments the transport system of the Factory underwent major improvement with canal extensions and a greatly extended tramway network. Another important innovation promoted by Askwith was the writing by his technical officers of influential treatises on manufacturing practice at Waltham Abbey. Those written by Major Baddeley in 1857 and Capt. Smith in 1870 remain to this day as important source material for historians of Victorian engineering practice in what has been a largely unknown branch of industry. Baddeley's paper was acknowledged as a vital guide by the designer of an advanced powder mill built for the Confederate States in the American Civil War, universally recognised as a major technical achievement.

Askwith's tenure also saw the beginning of the rise of chemical science which was ultimately to supplant gunpowder and he would have given close support to the chief Government scientist Frederick Abel in his

research and manufacturing development work in guncotton at Waltham Abbey. His appointment to the First Committee on Torpedoes reflected his grasp of technical matters.

Askwith was a man of equable temperament well regarded by his brother officers and in addition to his military abilities was an accomplished artist. He was a keen student of the regimental history of the Royal Artillery and single handedly compiled a catalogue of the service history of every officer of the regiment from earliest times, a considerable feat in the days before typing, computers etc. Ultimately he reached the rank of General and was made Colonel Commandant of the regiment, becoming known as the ' Father of the Royal Artillery '

Askwith retired in 1881 after 52 years of distinguished service.

**Les Tucker**



Tel: 020 8502 1500  
e mail lestucker@btinternet.com

Mrs.A.Heath  
Longacre  
Horsleys Green  
High Wycombe  
Bucks HP14 3UX

5<sup>th</sup>. November 2004

Dear Mrs.Heath,

**General W.H. Askwith**

Thank you for your most interesting letter. I am the Archivist at the Mills and Lynne has asked me to reply.

Firstly many thanks for the cheque which you kindly sent us. The memoir of General Askwith was of great interest.. One of our archival projects is to compile a career summary for each of the Superintendents of the Mills and the memoir makes a splendid start. I wish I could think the rest will be as straightforward.

Regarding your question on the house in Highbridge Street.: The then Colonel and his family would have lived in what became known as Government House. This was built on the site of three houses purchased by the Government in 1816. We have the documents relating to the purchase. It was made by the Treasury Solicitor, R.H.Crew, 'In trust for his Majesty' on a 'Lease and Release' basis. This was a mechanism employed in those days for property transactions. Technically therefore it was a Government rather than an Army house.

The Poor Rate lists, i.e. those liable to pay a rate for support of the poor, are a useful source of information. Not surprisingly Government House, described as House with Garden, Pleasure Ground, Stable, Coach House and Paddock, has one of the highest rateable values in the area - £50 in 1860, on which the rate was payable twice yearly. It is interesting to see how what might be regarded as dry statistics begin to come to life when one knows something of the people behind them, and vice versa.

Sadly Government House has recently been demolished and a block of apartments has risen up on the site. So history moves on.

Yours Sincerely

Les Tucker Archivist

Tel/Fax: 01494482355  
Email: alisonh@horsleys.demon.co.uk

Longacre,  
Horsleys Green,  
High Wycombe,  
Bucks HP14 3UX

7 October, 2004

Mr Ian MacFarlane  
Administration Assistant  
Royal Gunpowder Mills  
The Lodge  
Powdermill Lane  
Waltham Abbey  
EN9 1BN

Dear Ian,

**George Ranken Askwith (Lord Askwith) 1861-1942**

Thank you so much for sending me the photographs of General Askwith, father of George Askwith. It is really lovely to have them. The only thing that worries me is that the General's features do not come out very clearly in the scan. I hope I can achieve something a little clearer eventually as it is the only likeness of him that I have found to date.

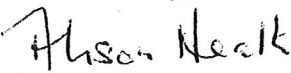
I have one further question to ask - do you know if the house in which the General and his family lived in High Bridge Street belonged to the army? It appears that all his seven children - two girls and five boys were born there. He married Elizabeth Ranken, the sister of a fellow officer, in 1854 in the Parish Church of Abbot's Langley, Hertfordshire.

For your information I enclose a photocopy of his memoir which was among the possessions of his granddaughter, Betty Askwith (later The Hon Mrs Miller Jones). She was my half aunt (my grandmother Ellen Askwith, nee Peel, a great niece of Sir Robert Peel, married a second time in 1908 after her first husband Henry Graham died) and was brought up with my father and his brother. I am afraid the General never knew his granddaughter as she was born in 1909 but Elizabeth Askwith, the General's wife, was able to enjoy her company until she too died in 1914.

Also enclosed is a small cheque for the Gunpowder Mills.

Thank you so much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

  
Alison Heath (Mrs)





W. & D. DOWNEY  
PHOTOGRAPHERS



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