

The South African War Memorial



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The Memorial

The War memorial in Truro Cathedral is dedicated to those who gave their lives fighting in the South Africa Wars, also known as the Second Boer War. Fought between the British Empire and the Transvaal and Orange Free State, the war played out over three years at the turn of the century, and had a major impact on many aspects of British military organisation, as well as the lives of the individuals involved. The names written here are those of native Cornishmen who were killed as part of the military, volunteer or militia forces who saw action during the war, and also the members of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, the County regiment.

What was happening? Why?

The Second Boer War broke out on the 12th October 1899. The origins of the war are complex, arising from many years of conflict between the British Empire and the Boers – the Dutch settlers in Africa.

Dating back to when the British took control of the Cape region of South Africa after the Napoleonic wars, the Boer people were unhappy with British rule, rejecting the ideologies of racial equality, and protesting against their growing political marginalisation. Around 15,000 Boers moved out of the British Cape Colony, and established their own independent states – the Transvaal Republic and the Orange Free State. A growing political instability, and the discovery of diamonds in the Orange Free State, prompted the British to attempt an annexation of the region, which was met initially with passive resistance by the Boers. This swiftly turned to violent resistance in December 1880, instigating the First Boer War.

This war was a considerable challenge for the British Army, which was used to minor colonial wars against inferior opposition. The Boer forces, employing guerrilla warfare and modern weapons, proved a major rival, and the British were forced to adapt. One of the more obvious changes was that of the time honoured Redcoat being replaced by the less obvious khaki uniforms which then became standard in overseas warfare. Despite this, major defeats and heavy losses were incurred. The British were forced to withdraw and their attempt to take control of Transvaal ended, only maintaining supervisory authority over the state. Later, the London Convention of 27 February 1884 gave full internal independence to the Transvaal. Peace was, however, uneasy, and relations between the Boers and the British continued to be strained.

When gold was discovered in the Witwatersrand region of Transvaal in 1886, hostilities once again began to rise between the British Empire and the Boers. The influx of foreign miners, or 'Uitlanders, did not help matters, and this proved to be one of the catalysts in the road to the Second Boer War. The British high commissioner in South Africa, Sir Alfred Milner, believed that war was the only way to reform the Transvaal republic, eliminating the potential threat to British supremacy and helping the mining industry develop. In order to stir political malcontent, he pressed that the Uitlanders should

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get the vote, but the President of the Transvaal State, Paul Kruger, refused. The Transvaal ultimatum demanded that the dispute be settled by arbitration and that British troops on the borders had to withdraw. Britain refused, and The Second Boer War broke out on 11 October 1899.

The War commenced when the Boers laid siege to the towns of Ladysmith and Mafeking in late 1899, with the British forces struggling to rescue these garrisons whilst suffering defeats to Boer forces at Stormberg, Magersfontein, Colenso and Spioenkop. The second phase of the war however saw the British counter offensive achieve more success, liberating Kimberly and Ladysmith from Boer sieges. The Battle of Paardeberg in February 1900 was one of the most significant set-piece battles of the Campaign, where the British defeated a large force of Boers and threw the opposition into disarray. Mafeking was finally relieved in May 1900 (making the garrison commander, Colonel Robert Baden Powell, a hero in Britain). The final major battle of the war took place at Bergendal in August 1900, where the Transvaal forces were defeated by the British. The Boers however continued to fight using Guerrilla tactics, and this style of warfare continued for another two years, before a peace agreement was reached and the Union of South Africa became part of the commonwealth under the British Empire.

How was Cornwall specifically involved/affected?

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Cornwall's mining economy was beginning to struggle. The decline of tin and copper mining in the region caused a lack of jobs, and as such skilled Cornish miners began to search for work abroad. It is estimated that around 250,000 people left Cornwall in the latter half of the 19th century, both miners and farmers looking to find work in foreign countries. It was around this time that the mining industry in South Africa boomed, and the discovery of gold in the region prompted a large number of Cornish miners to migrate to the Transvaal. Although it isn't certain how many went to South Africa, it is estimated at several thousand.¹ It is argued that this mining industry was heavily responsible for the increase of friction in the state because of the large number of Cornish miners sending wealth back to Britain; by the end of the 19th Century it is estimated that around £1 million a year was being sent back to Cornwall from the Transvaal. The Cornishmen formed a large number of the 'Uitlanders' who caused so much political tension in the build-up to the Second Boer War, protesting over having to pay heavy taxes without getting the vote. Subsequently, when the war broke out many of the Cornish miners were caught up in the conflict, and some were drawn into militia groups to defend settlements and mines. The war also caused many of the Cornish miners to return home; extracts from the newspaper *The West Briton* reveal how scores of 'Afrikanders' came back to Cornwall despite the lack of work and comparatively poor conditions. An article from the paper on 7 December 1899 explains 'I find but little employment at hand for them, and the wages are

¹ G.B. Dickason, *Cornish immigrants to South Africa: The Cousin Jack's contribution to the development of mining and commerce, 1820-1920*, pg. 13.

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beggarly after Africa'.² Although their work in Africa and subsequent return would have brought wealth to the region, the sudden influx of miners would have put a strain on the county's already troubled mining economy.

The significant Cornish presence in South Africa is noticeable through several cultural features, for example the country's strong tradition in Rugby is thought to be a remnant of the Cornish Settlers. Cornish Surnames are not uncommon in the region, and some places still bear Cornish names.

Another aspect of Cornish involvement in the war was through its soldiers; Cornishmen who served in the British Army during the South Africa campaign, and particularly those serving in the county regiment, the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. It is the names of these men who appear on the cathedral's memorial.

The Regiment and its involvement in events

The regiment of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry was first raised in 1702, and saw action in the American wars, the Peninsular and Waterloo Campaigns, the Crimean war, the Indian wars and The Egyptian Wars. In their 300 years of action they have numerous battle honours, from 'Gibraltar 1704-5' to 'Italy 1944-45'. In the 1950's the regiment was amalgamated with the Somerset Light infantry to form the Somerset and Cornwall Light Infantry, whose colours now hang above the memorial in Truro Cathedral.

DCLI 2nd Battalion was heavily involved in the campaign, with many men from both Cornwall and England serving. This included the battle of Paardeberg which was one of the major battles of the war, for which the regiment received Battle honours. It was during this battle that the regiment made a name for itself, with the successful advance towards the enemy lines despite heavy losses. War diaries from the event suggest that 14 men and 3 officers were killed with a further 74 wounded; which were large figures in that period. The Battalion also helped capture Johannesburg on 31 May 1900, and later Pretoria, the capital of Transvaal, on 5 June. This was a decisive part of the second phase of the War during the British offensive.

The volunteer Battalions of the DCLI, although not liable for service outside the UK, also sent 'Active Service Parties' to reinforce the under-strength regiment. This set a precedent for territorials to fight overseas, which was another significant change to the methods of the British Army made during the Boer War.

Life during and after war

War Diaries and letters home reveal a lot about the attitudes of the soldiers during the war, and the conditions they lived in. Before the World War experiences of, and attitudes towards war were very different. Both commanders and soldiers, being used to

² From 'Cornish Afrikanders in Redruth', *The West Briton*, 7 December 1899, in *Life in Cornwall at the end of the nineteenth century*, pg.168.

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small scale colonial warfare, initially believed that it would be a simple and swift campaign. In a letter home, Lance-Corporal M. Macdonald from Penzance, a soldier from the 2nd Devons regiment, wrote:

“I hope you will not worry yourselves about me, as I don’t think I run much risk of being shot. There are very few of our side killed as yet, about twelve or so... We expect to get home about next May”.³

This was written a matter of weeks before Macdonald was killed at the Battle of Colenso. This highlights how unprepared the British military was to fight the Boer War; they underestimated the strength and resilience of the Boer commandoes, and as such the war was longer and bloodier than anyone at first predicted.

In many cases the soldiers discuss war and death in an almost offhand manner; possibly a reflection of the outlook of the period. The Diaries of Pte R Leverton and L/Cpl. A. W. Rose, both of 2nd battalion DCLI, provide a fascinating insight into the lives of the soldiers during the campaign. Pte. Leverton’s diary entry on the Battle of Paardeberg is an excellent firsthand account on the nature of the warfare:

“Just before moving off our colonel gave us a little speech saying we will make the name of the Cornwall’s ring in the ears of the world and offered £5 to the first man that got his bayonet home in a Boer. Little did the brave Colonel think this would be his last day on earth. Then we moved down to the river, it was running very fast, we put rope across and after some trouble and the Boers firing at us all the time, we got across safe and opened out into our skirmishing order. We were about 100 yards from their position, we were all wet through as the river was 4 feet deep and then we advanced to about 200 yards from their trenches, our men falling every yard as we advanced... we could hear the poor fellows groaning that had been hit they were falling in dozens. Our colonel gave us word to charge but we had not gone far when he received his death wound saying with his last breath ‘go on finish it my lads’. With that we gave a cheer and charged them...”⁴

Even away from the conflict and fighting, the life of the soldiers during the campaign was harsh. Conditions were hostile and disease and sickness common; far more soldiers died of disease than from battle. They had to march long distances across the plains, and there were often problems with supply convoys that delayed rations. L. Cpl A.W. Rose wrote in his diary:

“May 31st. Marched to Johannesburg this morning and camped about two miles out of the Town. Still starving this is worse than Paardeberg, we don’t even get a biscuit a day.

³ From ‘Last Letter Home’, *The West Briton*, 25 December 1899, in *Life in Cornwall at the end of the nineteenth century*, pg.169.

⁴ *The Diary of 380 Pte R Leverton, 2nd Battalion DCLI*, produced by the DCLI regimental museum, Bodmin.

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June 1st. Still in camp, on pigs meal. The people at home little know what we are going through. Nothing to eat and perished with cold at night. It is enough to kill anyone – but keep on smiling.”⁵

This provides only a small insight into the difficult and dangerous conditions the soldiers had to live and fight in for years.

Individuals

On the Memorial

Lt. Col. W. Aldworth, 2nd bat. DCLI

The first name on the memorial is that of Lieutenant Colonel William Aldworth, DSO. Originally from Ireland but put in command in the DCLI, he led the 2nd Battalion DCLI at the Battle of Paardeberg on the 18th February 1900, during the ‘Charge of the Cornwalls’. Three companies of the Battalion had to cross about 400 yards of open ground under heavy fire. Aldworth led them with the words “We will make the name of the Cornwalls ring in the ears of the World today”. The advance was successful, but not without heavy losses, including Aldworth himself, who cried “go on finish it my lads” after being fatally wounded. He was later mentioned in despatches by Field Marshal Roberts in the London Gazette, Feb. 8th 1901, as having “rendered conspicuously valuable services”.

Cpt. George Bickford-Smith

Originally from Trevarno, Bickford-Smith joined the 1st Volunteer battalion DCLI. He joined the Imperial Yeomanry in March 1901 and served in South Africa in Cape and Orange River Colonies. He was fatally wounded at Heilbron after conflict on 30th May 1901.

Lt. H.W. Fife

Born December 1870, Hugh Wharton Fife gained his commission as a 2nd Lieutenant April 1893, and was promoted to Lieutenant in 1896. He first served in the Kimberly Relief Force and was wounded at Graspan. He later took part in several actions, including Paardeberg, but was killed in Action at Johannesburg on 30th May 1900.

Lt. A.T. Libby

Arthur Treleven Libby, son of Capt. Libby from Falmouth, joined the regiment in 1898, and went to South Africa in 1899 at the beginning of the war. He took part in many actions with the regiment, including the advance on Johannesburg and Pretoria. In October 1901, he contracted malarial fever and was sent to Johannesburg, where he later died and was buried. A Cornish granite cross was erected above his grave.⁶

⁵ *The Diary of L/Cpl. A.W. Rose, 2nd D.C.L.I.*, produced by the DCLI regimental museum, Bodmin.

⁶ All DCLI officer’s histories from ‘Officers who died in the Boer War’, http://www.britisharmedforces.org/li_pages/regiments/dcli/duke_boerwar.htm. Accessed 26/08/11.

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Other

Sergeant Charles Glasson George, 2nd Battalion DCLI

At the Battle of Paardeberg in February 1900, Charles Glasson George, originally from Mylor, carried a fatally wounded officer of the Norfolk regiment to cover and, under fire, stayed with him until he died. The harrowing letter in which he recounts this event is reproduced in the DCLI regimental museum in Bodmin.

Emily Hobhouse

Born in St Ive, near Liskeard, Emily Hobhouse was a welfare campaigner during the Boer War, whose life can provide a different viewpoint on the war. She worked to improve the conditions of the concentration camps that the British military set up for Boer women and children to live in. As the British military fought to control the Boers, those they captured were forced to live in camps that were poorly supplied and run, and consequently great numbers of Boer prisoners died. She became secretary of the women's branch of the South African Conciliation Committee, and set up a Distress Fund to help the South African women and children. Hobhouse later visited many of the concentration camps and delivered aid. Upon witnessing the horrific overcrowding and unhygienic conditions, Hobhouse campaigned to the government and despite opposition from both politicians and the media, the Fawcett commission was set up to investigate the conditions in the camps. After the war, she returned to South Africa to help with the rehabilitation of the Boer families, and was later made an honorary citizen of South Africa for her humanitarian work.

Conclusion on the War

The Second Boer War was significant for both Cornwall as a county and for the nation as a whole. The conflict saw many changes made to British military organisation, in terms of both structure and strategy. The use of the volunteer battalions to reinforce regulars was unprecedented, and the adaption to new tactics to fight the Boer commandoes and their guerrilla warfare was hugely influential; it is argued that the Boer war prepared Britain for the Continental warfare of the First World War. The war, although initially supported, became quickly unpopular with the British public because of its length and because of British policies towards the treatment of Boer prisoners.

In Cornwall, the war had its effects on the economy and the population; as war erupted many Cornish miners began to return home, bringing back their wealth but also pressuring the job market. With many Cornishmen living in South Africa, and many more sent over to fight in the Army, the Boer War had a particular resonance among the Cornish population.

