

THE OLDEST DUKE OF LANCASTER OWN YEOMENARY GRAVE IN WIGAN

No. 197 JAMES BEEGAN

5th Dragoon Guards / Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry Cavalry

Some years ago, a friend of mine Lawrence (Loll) Ward, an ex member of Wigan's Territorial Regiment, 'A' Sqn Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry, who worked for the Cemeteries Dept in Lower Ince Cemetery in Wigan, found the grave of an old soldier, James Beegan who had served in the DLOY.



The grave was in poor condition and in a part of the cemetery that was badly overgrown and waterlogged. The headstone had fallen over and tree roots were growing out of the base. Fresh from the successful installation of a memorial stone to VC winner John Elisha Grimshaw at Abram, myself, Loll and the late SSM of A Sqn Cal Jones decided to take on the project of restoring it to its former glory as it is the oldest grave of a Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry soldier in the Borough.

Varty's Stone Masons located near to the Cemetery agreed to undertake the work if we could get permission for them to do the work from Wigan Council. This is where bureaucracy got in the way, the work could only go ahead if we could contact the next of kin of James and get their written permission. Unfortunately, up to date I have been unable to find any living relatives, so any restoration cannot commence. This search for relatives obviously meant researching the life of James as well. He turned out to be an interesting character, a rogue with an eye for the women.

James the son of Martin Began was born in 1806 in the Parish of Kiltartan in the town of Gort, County Galway, Ireland.



On 28 June 1824 at the age of 18 he enlisted into the 5th (Princess Charlotte of Wales) Dragoon Guards heavy cavalry Regiment at Ballinrobe in County Mayo and given the service number of 197. The 5th Dragoons were to later become famous in the Charge of the Heavy Brigade in the Battle of Balaclava in the Crimea.

His trade on attestation was labourer. His service records show that he was 6 feet and a half inch tall with light brown hair and a fresh complexion.

On 26 Jan 1827 James married Jane Perry, a native of Newcastle at St. Mary's CE Church, Gateshead with whom he had a child.

James was promoted to Lance Corporal on 4 March 1828 and then five years later on 26 June 1833 was promoted to Sergeant.

On 6 March 1834 he was tried by Regimental Courts Marshall for un-soldierly conduct in that he was absent from morning Stables Parade. This sounds trivial nowadays but was a very serious offence back then as it meant he was neglecting the welfare of his mount. His sentence was reduction to the rank and pay of Private Soldier. The next day 7 March he was promoted to Corporal again and two years later on 12 Nov 1836 he was promoted back up to the rank of Sergeant.

In 1837 James was stationed at the Cavalry Barracks in Barrack Rd, Chapeltown Leeds. The Parish records of St. Marks CE Church in Woodhouse, Leeds show that on the 12th, 19th and 26th of March 1837 (three months before Queen Victoria came to the throne) marriage banns were read between James Beegan and Julia Thompson. James stated that he was on lodgings with William Heeson of Woodhouse in Leeds at the time. The Parish register contains a note against the entry asking 'has this man a wife living?'

Obviously, the vicar had received word somehow that James was already married and was about to commit adultery. The Banns expired on the 26 of June and the marriage between him and Julia didn't take place.

From 23 May 1840 the 5th Dragoons were stationed in Manchester. On 11 July 1840 James married Jane Nash at St. Alkmund's CE Church in Derby. The following year, in May 1841, James embarked with the 5th Dragoons at Liverpool for the Cavalry Barracks at Kilcommon near Cahir in County Tipperary, Ireland.

On Wed 5 August 1846 the Derby Mercury published an article showing that James had been charged with bigamy in that he married Jane Nash on 11 July 1840 in Derby while his former wife Jane Perry was still alive in Gateshead. Jane Perry's mother testified that a few months after she married James Beegan in Gateshead her daughter had returned home to Newcastle where she gave birth to a child. She or her daughter never saw Beegan again. In his defence he produced a letter supposedly from his first wife's father (even though there was no post mark on it) saying that she had died. He therefore believed that he was free to marry again. The judge ruled that he may have been misled by this letter and the jury subsequently acquitted him.

James was discharged from the Army at Chatham in Kent on 12 Sept 1848. The surgeon's report at

Chatham General Hospital states that he was unfit for further service in consequence of ulceration of both legs caused by extensive varicose veins which were not the result of vice or misconduct of any kind.

His character and conduct report by the Regimental Board stated that he was a good and efficient soldier, seldom in hospital, trustworthy and sober. His record prevents him being entitled to a good conduct badge as he was tried by Regimental Courts Marshall in 1834. Since which his conduct has merited the good character he now receives.

James had served a total of 24 years and 231 days in the colours, seven years as a mounted Dragoon and 17 years as a Recruiting and Drill Sgt. Apart from Ireland he did not serve abroad. His postings were in Home Garrisons and Depots.

He was admitted as a Chelsea Pensioner on 12 Sept 1848 but he opted to be an Out- Pensioner who lived in the community (as opposed to an In-Pensioner who surrendered his pension and became resident at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea).

After his discharge James settled in Wigan and received an Army pension of 2 shillings per week from an agent in Preston. About this time he joined the Duke of Lancaster's Own Yeomanry Cavalry in Wigan, he served for eleven years and eventually became Squadron Sgt. Major

On 24 March 1849 the Preston Chronicle and Lancashire Advertiser published an article showing that James Beegan had been called as a witness at Liverpool Assizes in the murder trial of Bernard Kaye, charged with the murder of his wife Rebecca, who was found hanged at New Year in Wigan.

At the time James was lodging with the Kaye's and he stated that on arriving back home about 2am after the New Years Eve festivities he noticed a light on in the cellar. The accused woke him about 3.15am and told him he had found his wife's body hanging in the cellar and he had taken her down. Neighbours said that they had heard loud screams in the night which appeared to be coming from the accused's house. After hearing further evidence the judge deemed the evidence contradictory and inconclusive and therefore directed an acquittal and that Kaye was to be released.

On the 30 March 1851 the census shows James living on lodgings with John Livesey, a blacksmith, in Church St, Standish adjacent to St. Wilfrid's church. James states his occupation was Chelsea pensioner and that he was a widower. Even though his military records show his birth place as Ireland the census records state he was born in Kendal, Westmorland.

James married for a third time when he married Mary Topping (nee Kenyon) a widow on 5 July 1855 at Manchester Cathedral.

The census on 7 April 1861 finds James living at 1 Coopers Row, Market Place, Wigan. Again the census record shows his birthplace as Kendal, Westmorland. His occupation is shown as Pensioner & Inn keeper at the Kings Head public house (now the present day Grade 2 listed John Bull Chop House, reputedly the second oldest building in Wigan town centre). Also residing at the Kings Head are his wife Mary, two nephews, two nieces and four lodgers.

James Beegan died on 2 Aug 1862 at Crewe railway station. He was buried three days later on the 5 Aug, at Wigan Cemetery, Lower Ince, grave number M316 CE.

A headstone memorial was placed on his grave with the following epitaph

IN MEMORY OF
SERGT JAMES BEEGAN
WHO DIED AT CREWE ON THE 2nd DAY OF AUGUST 1862 AGED 52 YEARS
HE SERVED 24 YEARS IN THE 5th DRAGOON GUARDS 17 YEARS AS DRILL SERGT
ALSO 11 YEARS AS SERGT MAJOR OF
THE DUKE OF LANCASTERS OWN YEOMANRY CAVALRY



On 19 Sept 1862 at Liverpool Probate Court a Letter of Administration was granted to his wife Mary and she was awarded his personal estate and effects which totalled a sum not exceeding £300.

Mary moved to Birkdale near Southport where the 1871 census found her working as a housekeeper for John Shearson, a retired solicitor. She died in 1891 in Ormskirk Workhouse, aged 81, and was buried in the nearby St. Peter & St. Paul church yard.

Graham Taylor
Nov 2020

Abbreviations

*DLOY – Duke of Lancaster’s Own Yeomanry Sgt –
Sergeant
Sqn – Squadron
SSM – Squadron Sergeant Major
VC – Victoria Cross*

Sources

1840 Army List

1851 England Census

1861 England Census

Ancestry.co.uk findmypast.co.uk

British Army Records 1760-1915

Derbyshire CE Parish Registers

Derby Mercury Newspaper

England & Wales Select Marriages 1538-1973

England & Wales National Probate Calendar 1858-1966 General

Register Office Marriages & Deaths Index 1837-1915 Preston

Chronicle & Lancashire Advertiser Newspaper

West Yorkshire CE Marriages & Banns 1813-1935 Wigan

CE Burials 1813-1979

Wigan World website burial records