

General Sir George Higginson, GCB GCRVO - Marlow's Crimean veteran



EARLY LIFE

George Wentworth Alexander Higginson was born in Wilton Crescent, Belgravia, London on 21st June 1826. His father was George Powell Higginson and his mother Lady Frances Elizabeth Needham – the 2nd daughter of the Earl of Kilmorey.

The Higginsons were a military family: George's great great grandfather, father and uncle had all been distinguished soldiers. Both his father and his uncle, Alexander Higginson,

had taken part in the Peninsular War as Ensigns (junior officers) in the First Foot Guards (later called the Grenadier Guards after they had defeated the French Grenadiers at Waterloo). During the Peninsular War, George's father had covered himself with glory by carrying the regimental colours throughout the battle of Corunna in 1809.

Alexander Higginson, George's uncle, retired from the army in 1840 and moved to 'Gyldernscroft' on the Henley Road in Marlow – a house which had been left to him by his father's sister who had married a Langley. He died there in 1855 and the house passed to his younger brother George Powell Higginson and subsequently to "our" George.

George was very proud of the Langley connection. The Langleys had owned 'Gyldernscroft', formerly called 'The Croft', since the time of Elizabeth I.

George's early life in London was memorable for his first contacts with royalty. Aged 3, while out one day with his nurse, he was patted on the head by King George IV. A year or two later, whilst picnicking in Kensington Gardens with his sisters, he was similarly treated by King William IV. As an adult he was friendly with Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, King Edward VII and King George V.

SCHOOL LIFE

George went to school first at Carshalton, from where he recalled seeing the fire which destroyed the Houses of Parliament, then at Brighton before being sent to Eton College in 1839, where one of his earliest memories was seeing Victoria and Albert driving through the College on the way to their wedding.

He also remembered seeing the Duke of Wellington, hero of Waterloo, while he was a schoolboy.

He himself admitted that he “gained no special distinction during the five years of my time at Eton” apart from the ability to “compose indifferent verses in Greek and Latin”. However, he did feel that “we gathered and harvested certain principles and rules of life which sent us out into the world fairly equipped”.

MILITARY LIFE

After Eton, George joined the Grenadier Guards in 1845, probably by buying a commission, as was the norm at that time.

By 1854, when Britain, France and Turkey declared war on Russia, he was a Captain and found himself fighting with the French army – which his father had fought against. The Crimean War has become infamous for its privations, and George suffered along with the rest. However, his practical nature came to the fore, and he improvised a bed-warmer for the freezing winter nights by heating up a cannonball in the campfire!

George took part in the Battle of Alma in 1854, where his battalion defended a 2-gun sandbag battery against heavy odds and amidst fierce hand to hand fighting. The battalion lost 104 officers and men, with 103 wounded. At roll call the next day, George reported that barely 200 men responded. Elizabeth Thompson, Lady Butler, painted ‘The Roll Call’ in 1874 depicting this scene. George is shown as the mounted officer in the forefront of this painting.

In the Crimea, George first encountered Florence Nightingale, and developed a great admiration for her work with the sick. This relationship continued for many more years - she was still writing to him in 1897 about the running of the Gordon Boys' Homes which he, along with the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, had established for "homeless and friendless lads".

While in the Crimea, George was promoted, first to Major and then in 1855 to Lt. Colonel.

Although the Crimean War saw the end of his active service, he continued in the army until 1886 serving in various capacities and places: Ireland, Italy, Canada, France, Russia and in America during the Civil War there.

Further promotions also continued during this time:

- to Major General in 1878,
- to Lt. General in 1885
- and finally to full General in 1890.

Because of his service abroad, he held many foreign decorations and honours.

AFTER LIFE

After leaving the army, George's life could hardly be called "retirement" because he was still very active, both nationally and locally.

He returned to living full-time at Gyldernscroft with his wife and family.

He had married in July 1858, his wife being Florence Virginia FitzPatrick, the 3rd daughter of the Rt. Hon. John FitzPatrick who was the Lord Lieutenant and M.P. for Queen's County Ireland. She died in 1912.

They had three children

- Frances George (who also served in the Grenadier Guards)
- Gladys Lucille Beatrice, who was born in about 1877 and who married Viscount Ashbrook. She died in 1968.
- Maud Evelyn, who married Major MacKenzie

George was appointed as Lord Lieutenant of the Tower of London in 1889, at which time he was given the K.C.B. thus becoming General Sir George. This honour was followed by the award of the G.C.B. in 1903 and the G.C.R.V.O. (in the personal gift of the sovereign) in 1922.

While at the Tower, he one day showed around a party of bellringers from All Saints Church in Marlow, at the end of which the Belfry Captain gave a speech of thanks in which he invited Sir George to visit their Tower.

He was made Colonel-in-Chief of The Worcestershire Regiment in 1893, and thereafter took a keen interest in the affairs and men of the regiment.

Locally, his appointments were many and various – all willingly undertaken and performed wholeheartedly with his strongly developed sense of duty and loyalty.

These appointments included

- Sir William Borlase School: Governor and later Chairman of Governors
- Marlow Water Company: Chairman of the Directors
- Marlow Regatta: Vice-President
- Marlow Rowing Club: Vice-President
- Marlow Institute: Vice-President

- Marlow Horticultural Society: Vice-President
- Marlow British Legion: President
- Marlow Cottage Hospital: Vice-President
- Justice of the Peace

His friendship with royalty continued, and George V and Queen Mary were frequent visitors to Gyldernscroft. The Queen planted an oak tree there – which still stands.

Gyldernscroft had a large estate of over 100 acres, stretching from the Henley Road down to the riverbank. In order to drain some marshy land, General Sir George excavated a small canal at the western end of the estate. which ran down to the Thames then joined it opposite Bisham Church via some lock gates. Sir George, a stylish man to the end, was in the habit of going to church via this canal and then along the river, using a gondola! The path of the canal can still be made out, although the lock gates have long since rotted away.

COURT GARDEN & HIGGINSON PARK

The purchase of the Court Garden Estate by the people of Marlow, and its presentation to Sir George to mark his 100th birthday, was a highlight of his life. The grounds are still known as Higginson Park.

Sir George died at Gyldernscroft on 1st February 1927.

THE FUNERAL

This was the grandest funeral Marlow had ever seen – or is ever likely to see.

All shops and businesses were closed, flags were flown at half mast, blinds were drawn and the roads between Gyldernscroft and All Saints Church were packed with citizens paying their last respects to their much loved General Sir George.

The Grenadier Guards led the way, marching with arms reversed. Drummers and bandsmen followed, with a detachment of the Worcestershire Regiment. Then came the hearse, with General Sir George's sword and plumed hat on the coffin. This had an escort of eight Guardsmen in the scarlet tunics of their full dress uniform. The hearse was followed by an almost endless stream of cars and walkers.

West Street was lined on both sides by Borlase boys, who doffed their caps as the coffin went past.

The service was led by no less than 2 Bishops and 5 Vicars, and the list of mourners included many of the great and the good of the day, as well as numerous local worthies.

A Memorial Service was later held in London.

Written by Hazel Malpass and produced by the Local History Group of The Marlow Society, March 2008