

Brevet Major Littleton Albert Powys 1840-1879

83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment - 59th (2nd Nottinghamshire) Regiment
Anglo-Afghan War 1878-1880



Captain L A Powys - circa 1876

Littleton Albert Powys was born 27th July 1840 at West Bromwich, Staffordshire, the eldest son of the Reverend Littleton Charles Powys 1790-1872 and Amelia Powys (nee Moilliet) 1802-1890.

Littleton's father was a Fellow of Corpus Christi Cambridge, and for thirty years the Rector of Stalbridge in Dorset. Littleton had one brother, the Reverend Charles Francis Powys (1843-1923) who followed his father into the church and became the Vicar of Montacute in Somerset, a position he held for thirty-two years.

Growing up in Dorset, Littleton attended Sherborne School 1855-57, where he excelled in sports. Upon hearing that Littleton was intending to join the army, his headmaster Mr H D Harper, wrote to Littleton's father in May 1857. In the letter he wrote:

"My dear Sir, I am always at home of sheer necessity, and it is part and parcel of my daily work to talk over such matters as those now concerning your boy. I am very sorry that he has chosen the army. I am always sorry for every boy who does so, not only because it is no profession in reality but also because of the temptations into which he is so thrust. However, in many points your lad is fit for a soldier and will be a straightforward brave fellow under any circumstances..."

Despite the concerns of his headmaster, in October 1858 Littleton was gazetted as Ensign by purchase, vice Ensign Karslake promoted, in the 83rd (County of Dublin) Regiment of Foot, and proceeded shortly afterwards to Bombay, where he joined the headquarters of the regiment. He served with the 83rd Regiment at various stations throughout India, being promoted to Lieutenant by purchase 21st December 1860.

In 1862, the regiment returned to England where it assumed garrison duties for the next five years. The Headquarters of the regiment, with over 400 officers and men aboard the troopship "King Lear",

arrived at Plymouth 16th May 1862, having left Bombay 10 weeks earlier. On a second transport ship, the “Cospatrick”, 7 officers including Littleton, and a further 200 rank and file from the 83rd and other regiments, invalids, and 8 soldiers described as “insane”, arrived back in England in the same month. It was reported that 11 soldiers had died on the voyage.

The health of the British Army at this time faced significant challenges. In India the harsh climate, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Tropical diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.

Having spent four years in England, the regiment embarked at Liverpool in January 1866 and returned to Ireland. The following month Littleton was promoted to Captain by purchase 20th February 1866. During its stay in Ireland the regiment was distributed Headquarters at the Curragh Barracks, Kildare, three companies in Armagh, one company in Monaghan, two companies in Sligo and two companies in Boyle.



Hand painted 83rd Regiment emblem
Painted by Ensign Cartwright circa 1867



Captain L A Powys Newry Ireland 1866

In December 1866, perhaps seeking a more exotic posting, Littleton exchanged into the 59th (2nd Nottinghamshire) Regiment of Foot, also garrisoned in Ireland at this time. Four months later, the 83rd Regiment left Ireland, taking up garrison duties at Gibraltar, where it would spend the next three years.

At this time, it was customary practice for officers to exchange into different regiments when opportunities arose. This allowed officers to transfer between regiments, often with the mutual agreement of both parties and usually approved by higher command. The reasons for exchange could be strategic, social, financial, or personal.

On completing its tour of home service, the 59th Regiment embarked Kingstown, Ireland, in September 1867, bound for Colombo in Ceylon. An enthusiastic sportsman, Littleton would make many expeditions against the larger game of the country. While elephant hunting in Ceylon during the summer of 1868, he narrowly escaped being killed, and with the last bullet in his pouch succeeded in saving the life of one of his fellow officers.

In March 1869, the Troopship “Malabar” arrived at Bombay carrying over one thousand officers, men and families of the 59th Regiment from Ceylon. It was reported that three deaths occurred on the voyage. The journey from Ceylon to Bombay typically took around 5 to 7 days, depending on

weather conditions, and the route taken. The distance between the two ports was 1,200 miles and travel times could vary due to factors like wind, currents, and any stops along the way.

In 1870, Littleton Powys was granted 15 months leave to return to England on what the newspapers described as “private matters”. The term “private matters” was often used as a euphemism for sick leave, hiding the fact that many officers needed to return home for treatment or to recover from illness.



It was during this leave that Littleton was photographed with the The Old Shirburnian XI in July 1871, outside the Pavilion on the Upper. Littleton (with a full beard) is seated in the middle row on the left-hand side. (Sherborne School Archives).

In September 1871, Littleton was on board the sail ship "Poonah" leaving Southampton for Bombay, to rejoin his regiment.

In the 1870s, the health of the British Army in India faced significant challenges. The subcontinent's harsh climate, coupled with unsanitary living conditions, led to widespread health issues among the troops. Tropical diseases such as malaria, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid were rampant, posing a constant threat to the soldiers.

Having spent almost ten years in Ceylon and then India, Littleton's health had suffered, such that in May 1877 he was ordered back to England. Granted six months sick leave, on this occasion he was required to appear before an army medical board, who would assess his fitness for duty.

It seems, however, that upon hearing the first rumour of the impending war with Afghanistan, Littleton hurried back to India. The troopship “Serapis” with Littleton onboard, sailed from Portsmouth 24th February 1878 arriving in Bombay 5th April. From there, Littleton travelled to Dagshai, a cantonment (permanent army camp) in the far north of India 6,000 ft above sea level and rejoined his regiment the 59th.

In September 1878, Lord Lytton the Viceroy of India ordered a diplomatic mission to set out for the Afghan capital Kabul, where he hoped to establish a political resident. By establishing a British political mission in the Afghan capital, it was hoped that British India could control the foreign relations of this 'buffer' state and reduce Russian influence in the region. When however, the

mission was turned back at the eastern end of the Khyber Pass, the British decided to replace the Afghan leader Sher Ali by force.

In November 1878, three British columns, consisting of 40,000 men, prepared to invade Afghanistan. One column was to march through the Bolan Pass and seize the city of Kandahar, a second to occupy the Ali Masjid fortress and secure the Khyber Pass before advancing to Jalalabad, while the third would advance along the Kurram Valley towards Kabul.

The column for the Bolan pass, comprised of a force of 8,000 British and Indian troops under the command of Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart. Included in the force were the 17th and 59th Regiments, the 60th Rifles, the 23rd Pioneers, and the 10th Hussars, who were all assembled at Mooltan in northwest India. From Mooltan, the plan was to secure the Bolan pass crossing into Afghanistan, and to capture the city of Kandahar.

Littleton was promoted in the field to Brevet Major 30th December 1878.

Kandahar, in south-east Afghanistan, was captured by Lieutenant-General Donald Stewart's force without a struggle 8th January 1879. In the months that followed, the occupation of the city was



uneventful, allowing the garrison to partake in social activities and even some sporting contests. In one such contest, the officers and men of the 59th Regiment, played a football match, most likely the first to ever be played in Afghanistan. The match was watched by General Stewart and most of his staff.

Left Kandahar Afghanistan
1880

During the occupation of Kandahar, Littleton played

an active role in providing for the health, comfort, and efficiency of his regiment, objects which he always had greatly at heart. From January to February 1879, he commanded the wing of the battalion left in Kandahar, while the other wing was stationed at Khelat-I-Gilzai.

In July 1879, the Lahore Paper carried a chilling report:

"CHOLERA AT CANDAHA

Virulent cholera has broken out. In the citadel, 5 cases occurred in the 59th Regiment, all of which were fatal; D 2 Royal Horse Artillery one case only, the man recovered; in the 5-11 R. A. there were 3 cases all died. In cantonments D 2 R. H. A. one case which proved fatal; 2 60 Regiment 10 cases of which 7 died; 6 11 R. A. one man was attacked, he recovered. Among the native soldiers 88 cases, of which 50 died; among the followers 110 cases, of which 53 died. The Europeans who died were unmarried."

In the last days of July, Littleton took command of a cholera camp, hurriedly set up to deal with an outbreak of the disease. Within only days though, he too was stricken down with the disease his camp was trying to contain. After the first seizure he rallied, but again losing strength, he died 6th

August 1879. Littleton was buried that evening in Kandahar cemetery by the Eidgah Gate. It is estimated that over 400 men died from Cholera during the outbreak in Kandahar in 1879.

A monument in the Kandahar cemetery, erected by the regiment, stands as evidence of the high regard in which he was held by its members. It read:

"Genial, generous, gentle, and kind" - to quote the words of the little Journal published at Kandahar "the heart and soul of his regiment, his loss will be felt not more by his brother officers than by the non-commissioned officers and men, whose welfare and happiness were equally his own".

The following notice appeared under 'Military Notes' in the Times of India 16th August 1879:

"The recent telegram from Kandahar, announcing the death from cholera of Major Powys, H.M. 59th Foot, will have been read with great sorrow by his many friends in this Presidency, where he served for some years. He was an indefatigable and daring sportsman, a most gallant soldier, and a man whose kindly and generous nature endeared him to everyone who knew him. What a terrible part disease has played in this Afghan business."

Researched and written by Gary Hynard 2025