

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2020

2004 The Unknown Soldier

by Bob Wright

The Unknown Soldier

Positively identifying an ancestor with a very common name in old records is a frustration we are all familiar with, and there are few names quite as common as John Wright. This has made my great great great grandfather my most elusive ancestor.

Ironically, I know quite a lot about John Wright. Born on 26 March 1790,¹ he married Caroline Amos on 16 June 1812, in Olney, Buckinghamshire.² John then served in India for six years as a soldier in the 1st Battalion of the 14th Regiment of Foot, where he took part in military manoeuvres in connection with the Nepal War (1814-1815),³ the siege of Hatras (1817),⁴ and the Pindari War (1817-1818),⁵ though there is no evidence he took part in any of the fighting.

In 1824, after his discharge, he was convicted of burglary in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, and sentenced to transportation for life.⁶ He arrived in the colony of New South Wales as a convict aboard the *Mangles* the same year.⁷

In 1825 he petitioned the Governor to allow his wife to join him in the colony, and thereby grant him the 'greatest blessing this world can afford'.⁸ Caroline arrived on the *Borneo* in 1828.⁹ They settled in the Castlereagh district and raised a family.

John gained his Ticket of Leave in 1833,¹⁰ and a Conditional Pardon in 1840.¹¹ He worked as a sexton for the Reverend Henry Fulton at the Castlereagh Church and cemetery.¹² He died in 1844.¹³

However John's life before he married Caroline is a complete blank. His origins are a mystery, and the names of his parents unknown. His birth date is inscribed in an old family Bible, but no matching baptism entry has been located for him in any relevant Parish registers. His place of birth is also uncertain. There are only a few tantalising, but contradictory clues.

Although John's military records have not survived, his name does appear in the monthly muster returns for the 14th Regiment. They reveal that he arrived in Calcutta in October 1813 to join his Battalion as a 'recruit joined from England'.¹⁴

His date of enlistment is not recorded, but the minimum term of service was seven years. In October 1819 John was described in the muster return for that month as a 'time expired man'.¹⁵ This would mean he probably enlisted in 1812.

In 1820 John got a passage home on an East India Company ship and returned to England.¹⁶ He was discharged from the British Army at Albany Barracks on the Isle of Wight in July.¹⁷ The muster return for that month records that he was a labourer, born in the Parish of Burnham in Buckinghamshire.¹⁸

However, to confuse the issue, when John later arrived in New South Wales as a convict his 'native place' was recorded as County Dublin in Ireland.¹⁹ So did he come from Dublin or Buckinghamshire? There is a clue which points to the latter.

In the 1940s John's grandson bought a house in the Blue Mountains which he named Wendover. There is a village in Buckinghamshire called Wendover, which is not too far away from Burnham, lying just on the other side of the Chiltern Hills.²⁰

Could it be that a family memory was passed down that John came originally from Wendover? In the absence of a matching baptism entry, this cannot be proven. But if John wasn't born there, perhaps his parents came from that village?

Intriguingly, the muster returns for the 14th Regiment reveal that another John Wright served in the 2nd Battalion, having joined as a volunteer from the Buckinghamshire Militia in 1809. This John is recorded as 41 years of age, and born in Wendover.²¹

Could he be my ancestor's father? Might John have followed him into the 14th Regiment? If John's father was also a soldier, then it strengthens the possibility that he was born in County Dublin. The Buckinghamshire Militia did serve in Ireland during the 1798 Rebellion,²² but it's unclear whether it was there in 1790, the year of John's birth.

If this man from Wendover was John's father, perhaps John followed him into the Buckinghamshire Militia first, before also volunteering to join the 14th Regiment. This theory is supported by a discrepancy in the amount of time that John later claimed to have served in the military.

In his 1825 petition, John claimed that 'he has been in His Majesty's Service for 12 years that he served 8 years in the East Indies and was at the taking of the Napaul Country.'²³ It is an exaggeration to say that he was at the taking of that country, since he seems to have gone no further than the border between India and Nepal, and to have taken no part in the fighting.

The muster returns too, show that John served only six years in India, not eight, and seven years in the 14th Regiment, not twelve. Did he also exaggerate his total length of military service?

Perhaps, but if John joined the Buckinghamshire Militia when it was reformed in 1808²⁴ (he would have been just old enough), and then transferred into the 14th Regiment in 1812, this would bring his total length of military service up to twelve years by the time he was discharged from the Army in 1820, exactly as he claimed.

Unfortunately, this cannot be proven either way, as records for the Buckinghamshire Militia during this period are not available. Any connection between the elder John from Wendover and the younger John is, in any event, speculative. They may, after all, be unrelated.

The burglary John was convicted for took place in Great Missenden,²⁵ which lies in the Chiltern Hills, about half way between Burnham and Wendover, so he was obviously familiar with this area. However in the absence of any other records, it cannot be demonstrated with any certainty that his origins lie in either Buckinghamshire or Dublin. John Wright remains my most elusive ancestor – the unknown soldier.

¹ *Wright-Jones Family Bible*.

² Extract of marriage entry, *Olney Parish Register*, issued by Buckinghamshire CRO, County Hall, Aylesbury on 14 July 1993.

³ *Muster Return*, 24 January 1815, PRO, London, WO 12/3133; *Muster Return*, 24 February 1815, PRO, London, WO 12/3133; *Muster Return*, 24 March 1815, PRO, London, WO 12/3133.

⁴ *Muster Return*, 24 February 1817, PRO, London, WO 12/3135.

-
- ⁵ *Muster Return*, 24 November 1817, PRO, London, WO 12/3135; *Muster Return*, 24 December 1817, PRO, London, WO 12/3135; *Muster Return*, 24 January 1818, PRO, London, WO 12/3136.
- ⁶ SRNSW, Trials, Buckinghamshire, 1824, AJCP Reel 2769, 27.
- ⁷ SRNSW, Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Bound Indents 1823-1826, Mangles (3), [4/4009A] Fiche 654, 118.
- ⁸ SRNSW, NRS 906, Colonial Secretary, Applications for free passages for wives and families of convicts, 1825, [4/1112.1A], Reel 697.
- ⁹ SRNSW, Assisted Immigrants Inwards to Sydney 1828-1842, Vol. 1A 1828-1832, [4/4823] Reel 1286.
- ¹⁰ SRNSW, Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Ticket of Leave Butts May-Oct. 1833, No. 33/625 [4/4088-89].
- ¹¹ SRNSW, Registers of Convicts Recommended for Conditional Pardons 6 May 1826 – 30 June 1856, No. 41/147 [4/4478] Fiche 826.
- ¹² SRNSW, Registers of Baptisms, Burials and Marriages 1787-1856, Reel 5003, Vol. 14 1830, No. 304.
- ¹³ *Wright-Jones Family Bible*.
- ¹⁴ *Quarterly Muster Returns, 1st Battalion 14th (Buckinghamshire) Regiment of Foot, 24 October 1813*, PRO, London, WO 12/3131.
- ¹⁵ *Muster Return*, 24 October 1819, PRO, London, WO 12/3137.
- ¹⁶ Information provided from the records of the Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library, London on December 22, 1993.
- ¹⁷ *Muster Return*, 24 June 1820, PRO, London, WO 12/3138.
- ¹⁸ *Muster Return*, 24 July 1820, PRO, London, WO 25/341.
- ¹⁹ SRNSW, *Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Bound Indents 1823-1826, Mangles (3)*, [4/4009A] Fiche 654, 118.
- ²⁰ 'Wendover', *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wendover> accessed on 26 January 2020.
- ²¹ Ancestry.com, *Canada, British Regimental Registers of Service, 1756-1900 results for John Wright*, (database on-line).
- ²² John Beckett, *The Rise and Fall of the Grenvilles, Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, 1710 to 1921*, (Manchester University Press, 1994), p 88.
- ²³ SRNSW, NRS 906, Colonial Secretary, Applications for free passages for wives and families of convicts, 1825, [4/1112.1A], Reel 697.
- ²⁴ Major-General J C Swann, *The Citizen Soldiers of Buckinghamshire, 1795 to 1926*, (Buckinghamshire Territorial Army Association, 1930), p 101.
- ²⁵ SRNSW, Trials, Buckinghamshire, 1824, AJCP Reel 2769, 27.