

‘A moth-eaten rag’: Regimental Colours in Cirencester Parish Church

by David Viner

Introduction – why Colours?

In the British Army Colours and standards (or more colloquially ‘flags’ and less correctly ‘banners’) have a deeply symbolic significance in that they are the focal point around which all those in a corps or regiment direct their loyalty and commitment to that corps or regiment. They are a physical, visible and symbolic manifestation of its corporate life and therefore of the lives of those associated with it.

The Colours display the battle honours of the corps or regiment, with place names and dates; in battle, the Colours assume an even greater significance in that they are the rallying point for troops, and the stimulus to acts of courage and bravery in combat.

This deep level of significance remains throughout the ‘working’ life of the Colours, from the point at which they are formally received in an appropriate ceremony to the point at which they are laid up in equally formal ceremonial circumstances, to be replaced by new colours reflecting any changes in the organisation of the regiment or corps within the British army.

Nor does significance end there. The process of laying up, undertaken in a religious ceremony within a church closely associated with the particular regiment or corps, consigns that responsibility in perpetuity - that is ‘dust to dust’ - to the recipient church or other authorities as a permanent reminder of regimental or corps achievement. This is why Colours can be seen permanently preserved in most cathedrals and many churches and other institutions today.

Regimental Context

Regiments of ‘more workmanlike’ Militia were formed or augmented in the mid 18th century onwards by a series of Militia Acts, to provide a reserve force for use as required at home and also as necessary in emergency abroad in support of the regular forces. They were but one part of a complexity of militia, volunteer battalions and yeomanry which survived until the reforms of the British Army in the early 20th century, consequent largely upon the experiences of the Boer War and as part of a general readiness for what became the First World War.

As with so much of this pattern of activity, a sense of local association was of primary significance, in that local people made up the force as both officers and men, and this association with place remained a key part of the overall esprit de corps. The focus of the Regiment of Militia under review here, and their two sets of Colours, was Cirencester.

In Gloucestershire, Regiments of Militia were formed in 1750¹. By 1763 these had been divided into South and North Battalions, the latter called *The North Gloucestershire Regiment of Militia*, with its headquarters at Cirencester. In 1795, in consequence of a decision by King George III, it was renamed *The Royal North Gloucestershire Militia*, a name it retained until the widespread reforms of the British Army in 1881 (the Cadell reforms) when it became the 4th Battalion of *The Gloucestershire Regiment (Royal North Gloucestershire Militia)*. Its period as such was relatively short-lived as further widespread re-organisation early in the 20th century (the Haldane reforms, referred to above) brought its 145 years or so of history to an end in 1908².

Meanwhile the companion force in South Gloucestershire had followed a similar path, becoming *The South Gloucestershire Regiment of Militia* in 1763, and likewise *The Royal South Gloucestershire Militia* in 1795. In turn it too became part of the Gloucestershire Regiment in 1881, as the 3rd Battalion (*Royal South Gloucestershire Militia*).

When the Territorial Force and Reserves Act came into effect on 1 April 1908, this 3rd Battalion became the 3rd (*Special Reserve*) Battalion, based in Bristol, and it remained in existence until 1953.



Fig 1: A well-known view of the Armory or Barracks in Cecily Hill, Cirencester (Valentines series)

The Cirencester context

So the 4th Battalion disappeared in 1908 and with it the link with Cirencester. In terms of buildings, the most obvious manifestation of that link was and remains the former Barracks in Cecily Hill, (in recent years and for a new use somewhat erroneously renamed *The Castle*). This imposing structure dates from 1854-6, the work of the then county surveyor's practice of Fulljames & Waller³. It was built in response to a report of 1854 on the inadequacies of existing provision for the militia in Cirencester (and also in Gloucester), and remained the focus of militia activity until the 1908 disbandment. A number of historical photographs and postcards depict militia activity outside the building and along Cecily Hill (Figs One to Three)⁴.

The group of four Regimental Colours were hung in Cirencester parish church from 1908 until 1998, when they were removed into safe keeping. Various reasons were cited, including a response to concerns about the safety of the supporting poles, at least one of which had bowed. A study undertaken by the late Fred Petrie, published by Cirencester Archaeological & Historical Society (CAHS) in September 2001⁵, provided the general historical background, the author also remaining active until his death in that same year by campaigning for their return to display in the church.



Fig 2: The Armory and the gates to Cirencester Park (Wrench series, no 4539)

The PCC determined in principle on 12 January 2004 that the Colours should be returned to the church to be duly re-hung. Over a decade or more, the Society has maintained its interest in this subject in a positive

dialogue with the church authorities before measurable progress began to be made as part of the wider, substantial and phased refurbishment programme for the parish church, which continues.

4th Batt. Gloucester Regiment Recruits Church Parade



Fig 3: A view from the roof of the Barracks in Cecily Hill showing a returning church parade. Photograph by W. Dennis Moss of Cirencester (undated)

on 7 May 2002 and again, accompanied by a number of members of Cirencester area NADFAS, on 6 August 2009. A summary photographic record was compiled. Additional digital images were taken in the church on 1 March 2010 as part of assembling a visual record. Even so, opportunities for further record photography ought not to be missed.

Description of the Colours

The four Colours are grouped here into two pairs, respectively (and chronologically) numbered as 1 and 2 (as one pair) and 3 and 4 (as the second pair). It follows from the above summary that the date range of all four must fall within the period 1763 and 1908. The Inventory entries define that range further.

A long-standing reference in church guides sets the scene for the second or later pair and their laying-up. Archdeacon Sinclair⁷ records: ‘The two flags in the north aisle, outside the Trinity Chapel, are the Colours of the 4th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. They were laid up in the church after a solemn service on 27 February 1908 when the regiment was disbanded.’

This laying up ceremony of the second pair of Colours is well recorded, not only in the surviving Order of Service booklet (Fig Four)⁸, but in detailed press reports in the *Wilts & Glos Standard* and especially in the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*. The latter included a number of illustrations of the

Commitment to care

This study has its origins in a report prepared on behalf of Cirencester Archaeological & Historical Society as part of its contribution to the campaign to restore the Colours to their rightful place in Cirencester parish church⁶. In so doing it brought much information together, providing historical background on the Colours and their significance, specifically to inform the options under consideration for the preservation and presentation of all the various Colours previously hanging in the building.

Through the good offices of one individual (to whom all must be grateful), dry storage off-site was made available, which has undoubtedly assisted the survival of the Colours. Although their individual conservation condition is generally outside this study (given the basic concept of ‘dust to dust’ which drives it forward), the evidence is clear of general deterioration in all cases, as is to be expected. This particularly affects Nos 2 and 4 as listed below.

The Colours have been kept rolled up, but the process of un-rolling and re-rolling has also taken its toll. Largely for this reason, access has been restricted. However, with the permission of Cirencester PCC and through the good offices of Peter Bontoft, Ruth Iliffe and David Viner from CAHS were given access to the Colours in storage

occasion including the crowd outside the church. *The Standard* report called the ceremony ‘both picturesque and touching’⁹.

In the formal handover inside the church, Colonel of the Regiment Earl Bathurst set the scene, in what the paper called an ‘earnest and soldierly address’, having “come here today to hand over our colours to the safe keeping of the Church. These colours, which were presented by Lady Emily Kingscote in 1863, have been loved and revered by all. We have looked on them as representing the sacred person of our beloved Sovereign, and we should have died to protect them in the same way in which we should have cheerfully laid down our lives for our King and country. We ask you to place these colours in the church to which this Battalion has been accustomed for so many years to come for Holy worship, and we trust that they will remain in your safe keeping for many generations, and that those who come after us will look on them as an incentive to do their duty to their King and country.”

The Colours were then solemnly paraded into the North Aisle, where they were handed over, “and in the presence of the vast congregation they were placed in their permanent position there, depending from the arcade dividing the Trinity Chapel from the North Aisle.” Interestingly, the W. Dennis Moss photograph which embellished the front cover of the Order of Service shows both Colours in position, and so must have been specifically taken in advance, perhaps as part of a rehearsal of the hanging arrangements. Other images, particularly in the *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*, show the parade in preparation and progress.

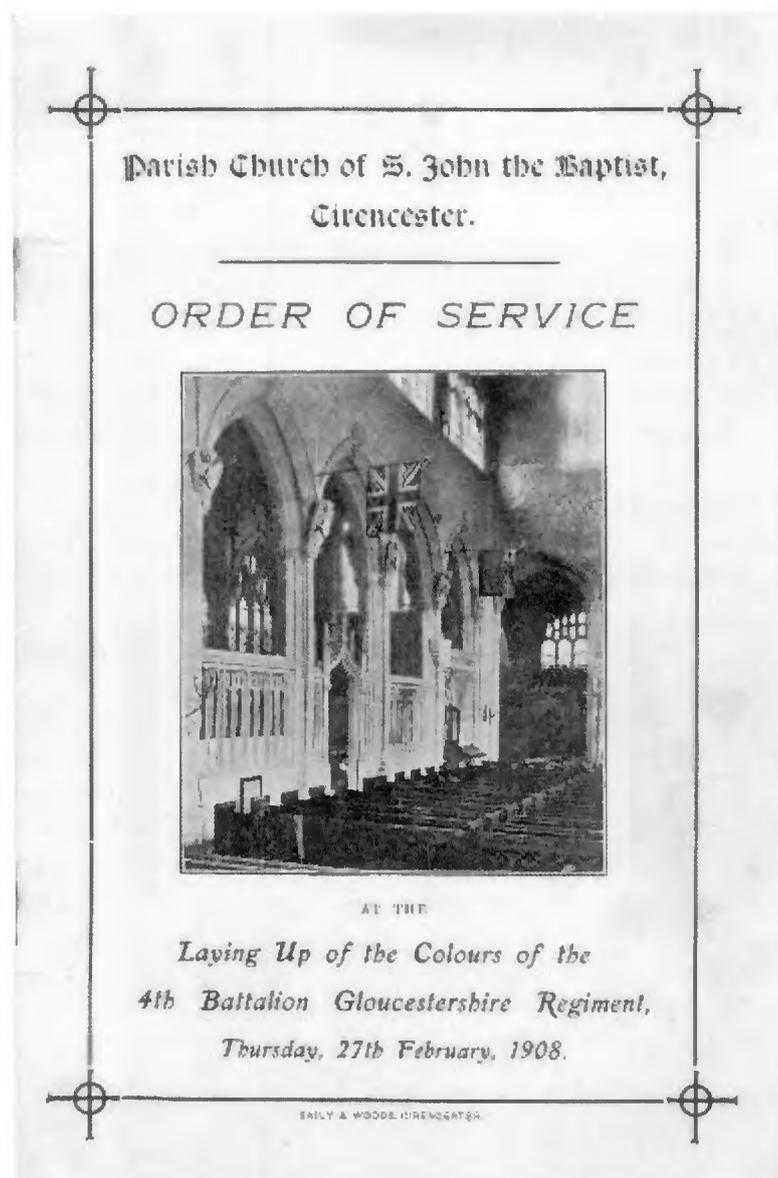


Fig 4: Order of Service, 27 February 1908. The photograph (reproduced from a postcard by W. Dennis Moss of Cirencester) shows Colours hanging on the arcade wall of the Trinity Chapel

To summarise the historical sequence for both pairs of Colours, which are further itemised in the Inventory entries below:

- The earlier group (nos. 1 and 2) belongs to the period from 1763 onwards, but must post-date 1795 when the Royal prefix was added. They were given in 1799. Prior to their replacement in 1863 (and presumably at the same time), they were laid up in the village church at Kingscote where they remained (hanging obliquely in the dark recesses of the Kingscote chapel) until being transferred to Cirencester parish church, and duly laid up there in July 1959. Here they hung until 1998. A note records that they were ‘repaired at the expense of the Regiment’ at the Royal United Service Institution in 1934.
- The links with Kingscote village relate directly to the long-standing involvement of the Kingscote family in the Militia, from early days right through until the end, when Sir R. N. F. Kingscote was

Hon. Col. at the time of disbandment in 1908. Until the Army Department began to be responsible for Colours, it was the 'privilege and duty' of the Hon Col of the day to do so, hence the gift by his wife Lady Emily Kingscote in 1863.

- The later group (nos. 3 and 4) was presented new in 1863 and were laid up in Cirencester Parish Church in 1908. Here they remained until 1998. A note records that they were 'repaired at the expense of the Regiment' in 1934.
- The two W. Dennis Moss postcard views (Figs Four & Five) show, in one, the hanging of the later group on and from 1908; and in the other the same pair (with the Regimental Colour re-sited) hanging together with two other Colours, which seem not to be the earlier group but instead some others – see Other Colours below. If this is the case, the assumption must be that these 'other' Colours were removed in or around 1959 (but where to? - see below) and were replaced by the earlier group, themselves removed from Kingscote, which then remained until 1998.

Laying-up of other Colours elsewhere is also relevant. Colours of *The Royal South Gloucestershire Militia/ 3rd Battalion (Royal South Gloucestershire Militia)* may now be seen hanging amongst the considerable group laid up in Gloucester Cathedral where they were placed in 1863 and 1913.



Fig 5: Another undated photograph by W. Dennis Moss of Cirencester shows four Colours hanging on the arcade wall of the Trinity Chapel Cirencester Parish Church

Other Colours

Cirencester Parish Church also has other Colours in its care, which although largely outside the immediate focus of this study do offer potential for a wider look at the links between the Church at the heart of Cirencester life and those military associations with which the town has been connected over the centuries. Such links continue to be maintained in the life of the town today.

One specific link with the Gloucestershire Regiment should be recorded here, to avoid confusion. The *Daily Graphic* of 19 June 1908 under a headline *Five Guineas for Regimental Colours* recorded that "A pair of old English regimental colours, bearing part of the regimental honours for Barrosa, Peninsula, Waterloo, possibly of the 28th Gloucester Regiment, sold at Messrs Glendinings auction rooms yesterday for five guineas. The Gloucester Regiment appears to be the only line regiment entitled to bear the honours. The colours are mounted on their original staves'.

A clipping of this press cutting is pasted into one of the 'Vicarage Scrapbooks', wherein written alongside the press cutting is 'Bought afterwards by Archdeacon Sinclair and hung up in Cirencester Church'. Identifying their location and presentation history in the Church is a task for another day (but should be attempted) but sufficient here to say that these should not be confused with the four Colours

under review, although they may well be one of the two pairs shown in W. Dennis Moss' undated postcard view of the Colours hanging above the Trinity Chapel arcade (Fig Five).

In addition, a further Banner of local significance, from the *Cirencester & District Branch (no 96) of the Normandy Veterans Association (NVA Normandy 1944)* was presented to 29 Regiment at South Cerney in November 2009¹².

Outcomes

In the early autumn of 2011, at the time of submission of this study for *Gloucestershire History*, a Faculty application was in final preparation to re-order the east end of the north aisle in Cirencester parish church and so accommodate the return of the Colours discussed in this study. When achieved, this will be a fitting conclusion to a story of respect, and in particular the retention and presentation of the physical emblems of that respect, which date back to a significant ceremony held in the church over a century ago.

Acknowledgements

The author undertook this study as Chairman of Cirencester Archaeological & Historical Society, with input from a number of Society members, in particular Ruth Iliffe and Linda Viner, who are thanked for their contributions. The late Fred Petrie's earlier study provided an initial stimulus and a reminder of significance; he also created (in a watercolour and in a pastel drawing, the latter dated March 1992) a valuable record of the Colours hanging in the church. Both versions remain in safe hands in private possession in Cirencester.

Archive files held at the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum in Custom House, Gloucester were consulted and thanks are due to the staff for their help, especially George Streatfeild and David Read. The museum's archive holdings are substantial and important, and the work of Col R.M. Glazebrook and in more recent years Major Claud Rebbeck in compiling and ordering them is acknowledged with appreciation.

The 'Vicarage Scrapbooks' now in the possession of the churchwardens of Cirencester Parish Church were also made available for study (via Linda Viner); this is another fine source of information and an invaluable archive, and the churchwardens, in particular Elizabeth Gledhill, are thanked for providing access.

All photographs in this article are from the author's collection. Those taken in the church on 7 May 2002 and 6 Aug 2007 are by kind permission of Cirencester Parochial Church Council.



Fig 7: The Regimental Colour 1799-1863. Inventory No 1 (7 May 2002)

The Regimental Colour 1799-1863 Inventory No 1 (Figs 7 and 8)

Description

- a light blue flag with a Union Flag in top left hand corner which contains the emblem *G III*.
- the central design is in the form of a shield/crest, being the coat of arms of Gloucestershire, with on either side white roses and foliage underneath,
- below which is a text scroll *ROYAL NORTH GLOUCESTER MILITIA*, below which is a floral emblem (rose, thistle and shamrock)

Dimensions

- Total flag area: width 74½ ins x depth

58½ ins; within this the Union flag dimensions are width 25 ins x depth 20 ins

- Length & detail of pole: 106³/₄ ins in total, with one joint; the pole head is brass, length 7³/₄ ins – see also No 2 below.
- Weight: Colour = 2lbs, but including pole this becomes 5¹/₂ lbs

Context

- One in the first pair of Colours. The *Royal* reference dates these from post-1795, with a desire to have new colours reflecting this enhanced status. They were “a gift of the Worshipful Corporation of the City of Gloucester in remembrance of the Regiment serving in Ireland at the moment of a French invasion, AD 1799”. They were laid up in 1863 in Kingscote and transferred to Cirencester in 1959.



Fig 8: Regimental Colour 1799-1863. Inventory No 2 (source: Soldiers of Glos Museum archives)



Fig 9: King's or Queen's Colour 1799-1863. Inventory No 2 (7 May 2002)

The King or Queen's Colour 1799-1863

Inventory No 2 (Figs 9 and 10)

Description

- A Union Flag with a central Crown and *G III R*. No other text

Dimensions

- Total flag area: width 69 ins x depth 56¹/₂ ins
- Length & detail of pole: 106 ins length, jointed; the brass pole head (Fig Eleven) is 8ins length
- Weight; (too fragile to establish)

Context

- One in the first pair of Colours. Dating comments apply as for No 01 above, assuming that this Union Flag is of the same date, as seems likely (the City of Gloucester gave “a handsome pair of colours”). *The G III R* gives a date range from 1760-1820. It too was laid up in 1863.



Fig 11: brass pole head to Inventory No 2 (1 March 2002)



Fig 10: King's or Queen's Colour 1799-1863. Inventory No 2 (source: Soldiers of Glos Museum archives)

The Regimental Colour 1863-1908
Inventory No 3 (Figs 12 and 13)



Fig 12: Regimental Colour 1863-1908. Inventory No 3 (7 May 2002)

Description

- A dark blue flag, with a Union flag in top left hand corner, plain and without lettering
- The central design is in the form of a shield/crest, in a garland of flowers (thistles and roses plus leaves), surrounding a central red circle, within which is the lettering *ROYAL NORTH GLOUCESTER MILITIA*,
- below all of which is a legend *ST.HELENA, 1900-01*

Dimensions

- Total flag area: width 44¾ ins x depth 35¼ ins; within this the Union flag dimensions are c. 12 ins square
- Length & detail of pole: 96 ins length, jointed; the brass pole head is 2 ins long
- Weight: Colour 1lb but including pole this becomes 3 lbs

Context

- One of the second pair of Colours (and the best preserved of the four)
- Presented in 1863 and laid up in 1908. The St Helena legend, in the form of 'battle honours', has been added post-1901, i.e. between 1901 and 1908.



Fig 13: Regimental Colour 1863-1908. Inventory No 3 (source: Soldiers of Glos Museum archives)

The Queen's or King's Colour 1863-1908

Inventory No 4 (Figs 14 and 15)



Fig 14: Queen's or King's Colour 1863-1908. Inventory No 4 (7 May 2002)

Description

- A Union Flag, with Crown and the emblem *ROYAL NORTH GLOUCESTER MILITIA* within the horizontal central band.

Dimensions

- Total flag area: width 44 ins x depth 34½ ins
- Length & detail of pole: 83¾ ins; the brass pole head is 2 ins length
- The style of the pole is as No 3
- Weight: [not recorded]

Context

- One of the second pair of Colours (see No 3 above)

MEMENTO MORI

*"A moth-eaten rag
On a worm-eaten pole
It doesn't seem much
To stir a man's soul
'Tis the deeds that were done
'Neath the moth-eaten rag
When the pole was a staff
And the rag was a flag"*

Accompanying the Dorset Regiment 'stand of colours' in Sherborne Abbey



Fig 15: Queen's or King's Colour 1863-1908. Inventory No 4 (source: Soldiers of Glos Museum archives)

References

- ¹ Jonathan S. Day, 'The Gloucestershire Militia and Volunteer Movement: a concise history between 1756 and 1908' in Glos Community Council *Local History Bulletin*, No 24, Autumn 1971, pp.3-6.
- ² See Wilfrid Joseph Cripps, *The Royal North Gloucester Militia*, Cirencester 1875, reprinted 1914 (copy kindly made available for study from the archives of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum). See also David Scott Daniell, *Cap of Honour: The 300 Years of the Gloucestershire Regiment*, 1951 (later revised editions 1975 and 2005).
- ³ Brian Carne, 'Thomas Fulljames 1808-74: surveyor, architect and civil. engineer', *Trans. Bristol Gloucestershire Archaeol. Soc.*, 113, 1995, 7-20.
- ⁴ A wider study, still awaited, would include the history of the Militia in Cirencester, its various bases over the years up to and including in Cecily Hill, together with an appreciation of its role and those who served its cause.
- ⁵ Fred Petrie, 'The Corps of Militia in the County of Gloucester –The Royal North Gloucestershire Regiment and the Militia Flags' in *Newsletter* of Cirencester Archaeological & Historical Society, No 42, September 2001, pp.19-20. Although some dates and nomenclature have since been modified, the text remains substantially correct.
- ⁶ David Viner, *The Regimental Colours of the Royal North Gloucester [shire] Militia, aka 4th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment (1763-1908), previously hanging in Cirencester Parish Church: a summary assessment of historical significance*, April 2010, 22pp.
- ⁷ Archdeacon J.S Sinclair, *The story of Cirencester Parish Church* (Gloucester, 3rd edition 1934); many subsequent revisions including by W.I. Croome from 1945 onwards; the 1959 edition was used in this study, 28pp.
- ⁸ A copy of the 'Order of Service at the Laying Up of the Colours of the 4th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, Thursday 27th February 1908' in the Parish Church of St John the Baptist, Cirencester was generously presented to the author by Brian Gane of Trowden, Lancashire (previously of Cirencester) on the dispersal of his local history collection.
- ⁹ *Wilts & Glos Standard*, 27 February 1908; *Cheltenham Chronicle and Gloucestershire Graphic*, no 374, 29 February 1908 and no 375, 07 March 1908.
- ¹⁰ Sinclair 1934, op.cit, p.22.
- ¹¹ Canon Rowland E Hill, *Cirencester Parish Church – An account of its history and architecture*, 1981, p.26 and subsequent editions.
- ¹² *Wilts & Glos Standard*, 19 November 2009: 'Veterans hand baton to the new generation' (Normandy Veterans Association presentation to 29 Regiment Royal Logistics Corps).