

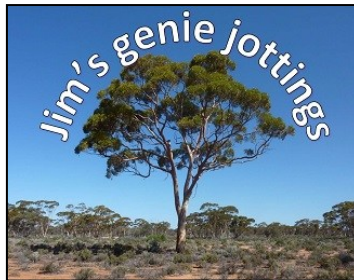
A life of service

A Life of Service

by James Michael Fleming

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This story was entered in the
2024 Croker Prize
essay competition run by the
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The topic was “A special family connection”



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Researching: Bowen, Flowerdew, Gardner, Gordon, Grady, Hanrahan, Jolliffe, Kemp, Kessey, Murphy, Poulton, Press and so many more!

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A life of service

Benjamin Heazle was a career soldier who fought against Napoleon's forces in Europe and served in Malta with his wife and family before retiring to the peaceful life of a lockkeeper in rural Ireland.

Born in Bandon (County Cork, Ireland) in 1791, he was baptised an Anglican, thus emulating several earlier Heazle generations.¹ Given the surname's English origin, this suggests that his antecedents had likely immigrated in the early 17th century along with Bandon's founder, the prominent Plantation settler Richard Boyle, 1st Earl of Cork.ⁱ

On joining the 55th Regiment of the British army, 18-year-old Benjamin was described as "well made", 5 feet 9 inches tall, with dark brown hair above a full face, grey eyes and a fresh complexion.² The army was recruiting keenly because Britain was engaged in war with France and its allies on several fronts.

Previously occupied as a weaver (indicating a poor background), his abilities were soon recognised with promotion to Sergeant after just 13 months service and the regimental colonel also granted him the rare privilege of marrying "on the strength".³ This meant that his wife Elizabeth Wilson (whose origins are obscure) lived for free inside the barracks and their children could enrol in regimental schools. Their marriage and birthing beds were in communal barrack rooms where privacy comprised a blanket strung up around the bunk! This was, however, better than the itinerant life of a camp follower that unluckier wives endured.

Late in 1813 the Regiment was posted to Europe where General Graham's force was charged with driving the French out of Belgium and Holland. Benjamin participated in the capture of the village of Merksem near Antwerp.³ This facilitated a three-day bombardment of the French fleet which was observed from a church steeple by the future King William IV, who soon came under fire, a bullet piercing his coat.ⁱⁱ Graham later withdrew his forces to await the arrival of a better siege train, instead ordering an attack against the fortress of Bergen-op-Zoom, where he employed three genuine attacking raids and a feint. It was a disaster.

After a 9-mile march, Benjamin and 250 regimental comrades participated in the Centre Attack. They advanced and "*got well up to the works when suddenly a most tremendous fire was opened on us from the walls*".⁴ A retreat was ordered but soon "*the enemy opened from the guns which scoured that part and did some harm, but the firing on the whole must have been very wild or a man of our column should not have remained alive*".

This well-managed counterattack inflicted heavy losses, with several senior officers killed and Benjamin's commander (Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Morrice) wounded before the survivors surrendered. The 55th's two Ensigns nevertheless managed to hide the Regimental Colours under their jackets, ensuring that those sacred emblems were not captured. When the soldiers were later released in a prisoner exchange, these flags flew proudly from makeshift poles.

Despite having acquitted itself admirably, Benjamin's 55th returned home in June 1814 so that regimental witnesses could appear at the impending court martial of Lieutenant Blake.⁵ This pompous and unbalanced character had ambushed a senior officer, Captain Clune, striking him

ⁱ Wikipedia, s.v. "Richard Boyle, 1st Earl of Cork", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Boyle,_1st_Earl_of_Cork

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia, s.v. "George IV", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_IV

A life of service

several heavy blows with a lump of wood before Clune regained his feet and drew a sword. Blake was found guilty and cashiered.

Because of the court-martial's unfortunate timing, Benjamin and his colleagues were deprived of inclusion in Wellington's army that finally defeated Napoleon's forces at the Battle of Waterloo.

*it does seem likely that it was owing to Blake's twisted conception of his own personal honour that the 55th missed out on the greatest battle honour of all.*⁶

During the next two years Benjamin regularly performed recruitment duties.⁷ In October 1817 he gained a discharge from the 55th in order to re-enlist as a Sergeant in the 80th Regiment that had recently returned understrength from India³. There followed many brief postings across England, Scotland and Ireland requiring the men and their families to march the full length of the United Kingdom and back.⁸ By 1821 they were stationed at Gibraltar for several months before sailing to Malta for four years of garrison duty.

In Malta the soldiers suffered greatly from tropical diseases, including typhoid in 1822 and a deadly outbreak of sandfly fever in 1824.⁹ Unfortunately, the Heazle's two-year old son James died during this epidemic,¹⁰ adding to the heartache experienced five years earlier with the death of his older brother, Benjamin.¹¹ Benjamin's wife Elizabeth and daughter Eliza may have also died in Malta because further records of them are elusive.¹²



Special family connection: Badge of the 80th Regiment

The surviving members of the family returned to England in 1825 where Sergeant Heazle's experience was utilised in training new recruits at Sunderland Barracks.¹³ The 80th regiment thus provided a special family connection when one of these, Private James Reed, soon developed an attachment to Benjamin's daughter Frances. They married in nearby St Peters church on 28 June 1830,¹⁴ thus initiating a marriage partnership of 65 years that would produce a large Reed clan, including the author (Benjamin's 4G-grandchild).¹⁵

After obtaining his discharge in January 1832 and being admitted to a daily pension of 1 shilling and 8 pence,³ 40-year-old Benjamin stated an intention to reside at Clonmel, Ireland. Sixteen years later he occupied a house and garden at Ballynadeige (41 kilometres south of Clonmel), premises owned by the Duke of Devonshire who provided them rent free in return for his services as lockkeeper on the adjacent canal.¹⁶ This was a typical arrangement whereby military men with excellent service records were rewarded by the local aristocracy. Eighty years earlier, parts of Bandon parish had passed into the duke's family through marriage to Charlotte Boyle.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱⁱ Wikipedia, s.v. "Charlotte Cavendish, Marchioness of Hartington", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Cavendish,_Marchioness_of_Hartington

A life of service

This welcome sinecure enabled Benjamin to enjoy some declining years in security, dignity and comfort before his death on 28 December 1850, aged 59. He had lived a life of service to the local aristocratic family, including through a military career of 22 years.³ Sergeant Benjamin Heazle was survived by his daughter Frances, son Benjamin¹⁷ and both parents, George¹⁸ and Frances.¹⁹

¹ FindMyPast.com, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Irish Parish Register Baptisms & Confirmations, Ffolliott Collection, Ballymodan Parish Baptisms, 1723-1812, 30 Jun 1791, Benjamin Heazle, of George. <https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=IRE%2FFFOLLIOTT%2FREG%2F026885>.

² Ancestry.com, The National Archives, Kew, UK Regimental Registers of Service 1756-1900, 55th Foot Soldiers, WO25, piece 421, 55 Foot. <https://www.ancestry.com.au/discoveryui-content/view/409718:3253>

³ Fold3.com, UK War Office, Length of Service Pensions, Admission Books, WO117, piece 03: 1832-1839; WO97, 1809-1832, piece 901. <https://www.fold3.com/file/585264309>

⁴ HM McCance, *How the Colours of the 55th Foot Were Saved at Bergen-Op-Zoom, in March 1814*. Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 7, no. 30 (October 1928), 201-4. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44227707>

⁵ Cumbria's Museum of Military Life, Carlisle, Cumbria, 55th Foot Regiment, <https://www.cumbriasmuseumofmilitarylife.org/museum/55th-foot-regiment/>

⁶ Andrew Bamford, *Dastardly and Atrocious: Lieutenant Blake, Captain Clune and the Recall of the 55th Foot from the Netherlands, 1814*. Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 92, no. 371 (Autumn 2014), 210-22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44233001>

⁷ Ancestry.com, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey, England, British Army Muster Books and Pay Lists, 1812-1817, Muster Rolls and Pay Lists, 55th Regiment of Foot 1815-1816, WO12, piece 06485.

⁸ National Library of Australia. Trove. 80th Regiment, Record of Stations 1793-1905, AJCP. (<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1379847382>).

⁹ Royal Army Medical Corps, Medical records Malta Garrison 1799-1979 (London: Royal Army Medical Corps), 80th Regiment 1821-1830, <https://www.maltaramc.com/regmltgar/80th.html>.

¹⁰ Ancestry.com, The National Archives, London, England, UK, Military Records of Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages and Burials, 1813-1957, WO 156/111, War Office, UK and Overseas Garrisons, Registers of Baptisms, Confirmations, Deaths/Burials, and Marriage, 1808-2013, Bur: James Heazle, 21 June 1824 at Malta, son of Benj Heazle, Sergeant 80th Reg. <https://www.ancestry.com.au/discoveryui-content/view/1592:62113>

¹¹ FindMyPast.com, East Riding Archives & Local Studies Centre, Hull, Yorkshire Burials, St Andrew, Drypool, Hull, PE109/67, page 75, Benjamin Heazle, aged 1, 26 Jan 1819, resident of Citadel. <https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=GBPRS%2FYORKSHIRE%2FBUR%2F500324737>.

¹² FindMyPast.com, General Record Office, London, GRO Regimental Birth Indices, British Armed Forces 1761-1924, REG1, Volume 1088, page 5, line 56, Eliza Heazle, 1814, 55th Regiment of Foot <https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=BMD%2FOVS%2FREG1%2F001383%2F046>.

¹³ National Library of Australia. Trove. 80th Regiment, Digest 1793-1899, AJCP, 1825, citing image 14. (<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1379847349>).

¹⁴ FindMyPast.com, Bishop's Transcripts, James Reed and Frances Heazle marriage, 28 June 1830, DDR/EA/PBT/2/182 number 587, St Peters church, Sunderland (Monkwearmouth), Durham.

¹⁵ Death Certificate, *Frances Reed*, Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, NSW, 1895/4274.

¹⁶ FindMyPast.com, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland Valuation Office Books, OL/4/3352, MFGS/54/136, Duke of Devonshire Estate Papers, Duke of Devonshire Tenure Book, Township of Ballynadeige, Parish of Lismore & Mocollop, Barony of Coshmore & Coshbride, County of Waterford, 11 Nov 1848, page 23. Number 3b. <https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=IRE%2FCENSUS%2FVALUEBOOKS%2F19281>

A life of service

- ¹⁷ Findagrave.com, Appleton City Cemetery, Appleton City, St Clair County, Missouri, USA, Benjamin Heazle, Ward 3, Lot 20, 27 Jun 1875, aged 55, born 24 Jun 1820, Edinburgh, Scotland.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/42307959/benjamin-heazle>
- ¹⁸ FindMyPast.com, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Griffiths Valuation 1847-1864, Cloghmacsimon, Carberry East ED, Ballymodan, Cork, Parish of Ballymodan, Bandon, Act 1846 (9 & 10) Victoria, pages xii, 158, No 2, Boyle Street, George Heazle lessee, George Bennett lessor, house and yard, 2 pounds, 15 shillings. <https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=IRE%2FGRIFF%2F043%2F043028%2F056%2F1>.
- ¹⁹ FindMyPast.com, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Irish Parish Register Burials, 1812-1878, Bandon, Cork, 21 Sep 1865, Fanny Heazle, aged 99.
<https://www.findmypast.com/transcript?id=IRE%2FFFOLLIOTT%2FREG%2F308420>.