

# EARLY VICTORIAN DEVON 1830-1860

## An Age of Optimism and Opulence

David Parker

*Early Victorian Devon* examines the tumultuous early decades of young Victoria's reign when the country was on the threshold of the modern world and besieged with radical new ideas and emerging technologies. It uses numerous contemporary prints to illustrate its stories.

It describes Devon's great estates and their glittering receptions, liveried servants, and deferential tenants, and also the unrest across the county bred of poverty and hunger, and social and political inequality. Reverberating across Devon were the national controversies over the problems of the poor, mass education, and the franchise, and the equally contentious Acts of Parliament that sought solutions.

And technology was changing the world. Horse power was being overtaken by steam power, and the steel rails gouging their way across Devon were transforming countless lives. And the steam boats, telegraph and newspapers were bringing back horrifying stories of the Crimean War and Indian Mutiny in which so many Devon men served.

This remarkable book is a riveting history and visual feast, offering fresh insights into the story of Devon and its people.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

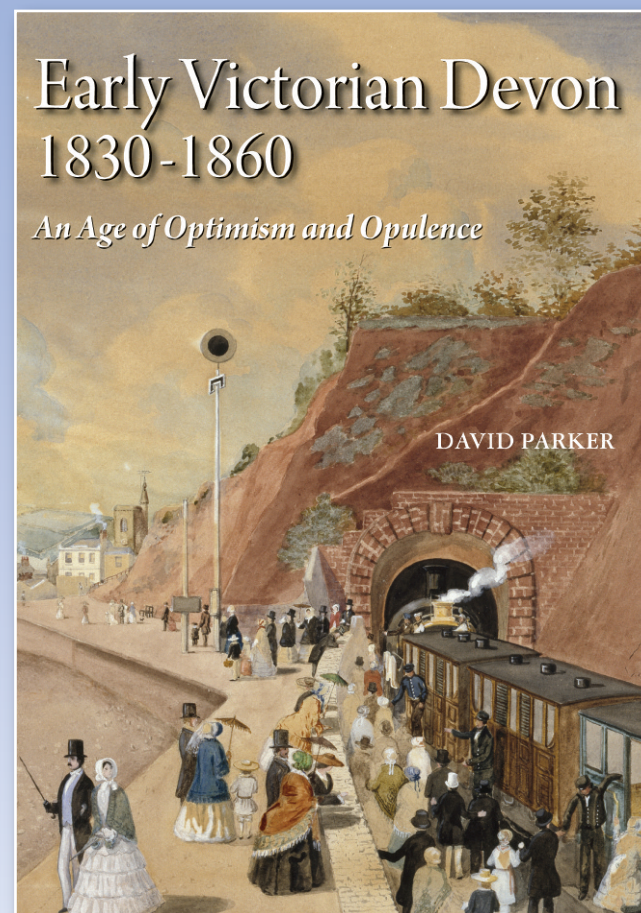


Dr David Parker was a headteacher and then UK and European Masters Programme Director in the University of Plymouth's Faculty of Arts & Education. He has written several books and many articles on educational and local history. His *The People of Devon in the First World War* was awarded Devon History Society's W. G. Hoskins Prize for 2013. He has contributed to BBC TV and Radio Devon programmes on World War One themes, and given many talks to local societies. David Parker and his wife live in Exeter and have two grown up children.

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The *Illustrated London News* representation of the moment the Light Brigade reached the Russian guns during its famous charge at the battle of Balaklava. (*ILN* 23 December 1854)

Example of a double page spread

CHAPTER 4

## Glittering Uniforms: County Conflicts & Overseas Wars

**Fears of invasion and civil unrest: the early activities of Devon's volunteer yeomanry cavalry**

For much of the nineteenth century the threat of violent civil disturbances throughout Great Britain lay just beneath the veneer of an orderly and hierarchical society. Devon was far from immune to such deeply disturbing fears, and witnessed numerous outbreaks of popular unrest.

It was in 1790s when the war against revolutionary France kept Britain's small professional army fully occupied overseas, and largely unresponsive to disease or extraneous risk from untenable positions, that an understandingly worried government sought an array of volunteer cavalry units to quell signs of local discontent and provide some opposition to possible French landings. In the event, it was domestic discontent that caused the local units most trouble throughout the inestimable war, and indeed long after the final victory at Waterloo in 1815. There was not only the widespread distress and cannot by abnormally low wages and high food prices in the unsettled wartime economy but also the influx of badly disciplined ideas from the new French Republic fresh from recasting its king and queen. They were an explosive mix.

In 1794 Sir Stafford Northcote of Pynes set the pattern for the future protection and policing of Devon by armed cavalrymen drawn from respectable 'yeoman' families with a farm or other business stake in society and led by officers from notable estates such as himself. The government provided the curved sword, pistol, carbine and ammunition, the volunteers provided their own horses and impetuous uniforms. After a trial with blue and buff, the dragoon uniforms settled down to a red jacket with light blue buff collar and cuffs, three rows of silver buttons and trimmings, white breeches, black boots and black helmet with ornate crest. In some troops the wealthy commander paid for everything. The Pynes troop in common with later ones comprised about 50 men and 3 officers and by 1801 there were 17 troops across southern Devon within the new 1<sup>st</sup> Devon Yeomanry Cavalry Regiment. Lord Rolle of Bicton became the Colonel, and a routine of 14 days annual training was established with immediate mobilization when required.

Two troops first saw action in 1795 when the Pynes and Downes troops under James Buller of Downes cowed and dispersed foot rioters in Crediton and paraded the town for a couple of days and nights. In March 1801 angry mobs in and around Exeter forced farmers in local markets to reduce their prices and troops were called in to subdue the crowds, arrest the ringleaders and patrol the city and its environs. The cavalry also was called out to quell rioters in Plymouth who had stopped wagons of prisoners going out of the city and forced their sale at low prices. A few days later rioters there destroyed the market stalls and attacked houses and other food shops. On this occasion the 1<sup>st</sup> Devon Yeomanry Cavalry charged into the crowd, arrests were made but no-one was seriously hurt.

In 1798 the first north Devon troop was created, and by 1801 the region was covered with 8 troops based in pairs at Stevenage and Torrington, Shepperton and Hatherleigh, Fremington and Buntingford, Bideford and Monkleigh, and a ninth stationed at Holworthy. These were united in the North Devon Yeomanry Cavalry and equipped with uniform jackets with yellow facings and silver lace, and white breeches.

**Peace abroad but not at home: continuing troubles across Devon**

In 1816, during the politically volatile post-war depression, an armed crowd tried to stop a cargo of potatoes leaving Bideford. A force of local constables intervened and arrested three ringleaders but the shipwrights joined the mob in turning on the constables and releasing the prisoners. The cavalry arrived to subdue the riot and to disarm the ringleaders. In nearby Appleheare another riot was brewing but the cavalry arrived in time to calm things down, although the ringleaders escaped to a boat in Brixham.

During 1850 violent discontent surfaced again across Devon as rural families faced higher food prices together with wages firmly held down by farmers. Some farmers tried to divert popular anger by blaming the age-old tribes they had to pay to patch dells, but no property owner felt safe from attack. That December cavalry troops visited Tiverton and Callington where their presence prevented the seething discontent erupting into riots. However, costly threshing machines that could

do the work of several labourers were badly damaged at South Molton and Bideford, and gatherings of angry crowds were reported at Swimbridge and Landissey. By chance Lord Eberington on riding one day came across a crowd at Kennerly Hill, remonstrated with them and soon afterwards ensured infantry from Exeter and cavalry from Swimbridge and Fremington were stationed around South Molton, Caste Hill and the bridge at Barnstaple. *The North Devon Journal* enthused that his firm action ensured 'the deluded labourers did not again expose themselves to legal infliction'. A riot and arson attacks at Chivichampton were nipped in the bud by the Torrington yeomanry troop, and four men arrested.

At Tiverton that year reduced wages at John Hubbard's mill during the economic downturn incited workers to destroy the home of an unpopular foreman and burn his effigy. The Tiverton troop arrived too late to prevent it, but paraded the town with the Exeter troop all night to prevent further trouble. The story goes that the disturbance ended as quickly as it had begun when the men discovered that wages in other Devon mills were, in fact, lower than theirs. Local troops occupied Exeter in October 1851 to ensure the riots elsewhere in the country, notably in Bristol, over the failure of the parliamentary reform bill were not repeated in the city.

In 1856 harvest of the new Poor Law incited new outbreaks. In February a mob assembled at Aitford and Brixham were set alight at Kennerly, Watland Pound and North Molton. The Fremington troop was called out to disperse the mob, but a few days later

Right: Orlando Hutchinson's painting of a Blackdown Hill whetstone miner by the mine entrance shaping a stone for sharpening scythes, 1854. Hutchinson said the mine stretched for 300 yards into the hill. (DHC)



Pedestrians and travellers by wagon on the rough-surfaced Launceston Road in Tavistock. c1830 (DEI)

Left: The new purpose-built Devon & Exeter Central Boys' and Girls' Schools under construction: a drawing sold at a Fancy Fair in aid of funds. c1850 (DHC)

Below: Brixham and its harbour. c1837 (DEI)

