

## James Foster

1793-1856

James Foster was born in 1793 at Darlaston in Staffordshire. There were then many Foster families in the parish, making his family hard to identify with certainty. However, according to the St. Lawrence Parish records, it was his baptism on 21 April 1793, the youngest child of William Foster and Catherine Lawton, who had married at that church on 29 November 1772, and whose four siblings were baptised there too: Mary (16 Jan 1775), Hannah (20 May 1777), William (27 Aug 1776) and Martha (23 Sep 1788).

At the age of fifteen on 30 November 1808 James, described as a labourer, enlisted in the Army's 11<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons, then stationed in England after service in Egypt. Following a spell in Ireland, its strength raised to 725, the 11th were sent to Spain and Portugal to reinforce Wellington's army. They arrived in June 1811, and suffered a French attack between Elvas and the Guadiana. On 25 September they had more success at El Bodon, near Ciudad Rodrigo. By 1812 James Foster and the 11<sup>th</sup> Lt. Dragoons were part of Wellington's great victory at Salamanca on 22 July, for which he received his first medal. However by 3 April 1813 the 11<sup>th</sup> L.D. had to give up their horses and embark for England. The regiment had lost 417 men and 555 horses in those two years.

He was successively stationed first at Hounslow, then Canterbury, where he was promoted Corporal in 1814; and finally at Ramsgate.

On Napoleon's escape from exile in March 1815, the war with France resumed, and the 11th Light Dragoons embarked for service in the Netherlands campaign, arriving at Ostend on 2 April. They came under heavy attack at Quatre Bras on 16 June but did not suffer badly. At the battle of Waterloo on 18 June, Foster served in Captain James Bouchier's Troop, one of six 11<sup>th</sup> LD troops, in Major-General Vandeleur's 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade with the 12th and 16<sup>th</sup> Light Dragoons.

The Battle of Waterloo began after a night of heavy rain, which obliged the cavalry to stand and watch an infantry battle. Against Wellington's wishes the heavy cavalry made a brilliant charge that was spoiled by its failure to reform. The 11<sup>th</sup> under the command of Lt. Col. Money were



Figure 1 Private, 11th Light Dragoons, 1815

sent into action when it looked as if the enemy were breaking up. They broke a French infantry square and carried on with the victorious pursuit of Napoleon's fleeing soldiers. Shortly thereafter, at Neufchatel, James Foster was advanced to the rank of Sergeant.

The 11<sup>th</sup> escorted Wellington's triumphal entry to Paris on 7 July, bivouacked on the Champs Elysees and became part of the army of occupation of France and Belgium. James received his second medal for the battle of Waterloo. The 11<sup>th</sup> returned to Canterbury in early 1818 and, on 25 February, Foster was promoted to be Regimental Sergeant Major.

The regiment next sailed for India, landing at Fort William, Calcutta, in July 1819 and moving to Cawnpore and Meerut. On 14 October 1821, Foster was discharged there from the British Army on completion of his thirteen years of service and joined the Bengal Establishment of the East India Company.

His Indian military service began in the Cuttack Legion in Orissa, which had been created in 1817. Described as '5 feet 11 ins.' in height, with 'light hair' and a 'florid complexion', he was posted Sergeant in what became the Rangpore Local Battalion in 1822. In October 1824 he was appointed Sergeant in the Governor-General's Bodyguard, the Indian equivalent of the Household Cavalry, and took part with that corps in the First Burma War, qualifying for his third medal and the meagre sum of 14 rps. 15 a. 6 p. in prize money for service at the capture of Ava, then the Burmese capital.

He left the Governor-General's Bodyguard in February 1827, while holding the rank of Gun Sergeant, and joined the Commissariat Department. This was the Army department responsible for the procurement of supplies (food, clothing, but not weapons or ammunition), in Bengal, part of the Town-Major's List which recorded Warrant Officers (Conductors and Sub-Conductors) and Non-Commissioned Officers (mostly Serjeants) who were not attached to a regiment. The more senior warrant officers could be promoted to honorary officer rank.

In April 1834 he was Serjeant in the Commissariat Department at Sylhet when he married Lucy Grose, daughter of Robert Grose and also a Sylhet resident. The following year saw his move to Fort William and the birth of their first child, John Robert, on 14 June. In Nov 1837 he and the family were at Chinsurah for the birth of their son William, and his baptism in December. Late in 1838 a third son, Edward, was born, though it is not known where.

In March 1841 his daughter Susan was born at Meerut and he had become a Sub-Conductor in the Commissary Department there.

Months later he took part in the closing stages of the First Afghan War with General Pollock's force which defeated Akbar Khan in the Tazeane Pass on 13 September and laid the way open for the re-occupation of Kabul.

Foster next served with the Commissariat in the Army of the Sutlej and was present at the battles of Aliwal and Sobraon in January and February 1846. Finally, on 5 June 1854, he was promoted Lieutenant on the Veteran's Establishment and was eventually invalided after a remarkable military career spanning forty-seven years and earning him a unique combination of five medals representing two major campaigns in Europe and three wars in the East.



*Figure 2 James Foster's medals*

When Foster received his medals for service in Afghanistan and the Sutlej campaign, he must have by that time lost the medal he had received for Waterloo, some 25 years earlier, and had another made up. Perhaps he even lost it during the campaign in Afghanistan. Those five medals were auctioned by Dix Noonan Webb in London on 17 September 2004 for £4,500.

Lieutenant James Foster, D.A.C. died on 12 Mar 1856, aged 62, and was buried the next day at St. John's Church, Meerut. He died intestate, and the balance of Rs 275 was paid to his widow.



*Figure 3 St John's Church Meerut*



*Figure 4 Interior of St. John's Church, Meerut, which saw the funeral of Lt. James Foster in 1856, the marriages of his sons William (in 1861) and Edward (1863), and the burial of his daughter Susan (1841) and his son John Robert (1867)*

His survivors were his wife Lucy (d 1874, Delhi), his four sons John Robert, William, Edward, and Richard, and one daughter Hannah, all of whom remained in India.

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