

Local History - The Maiwand Lion - By Linda Serck

On 27 July 1880 hundreds of soldiers out of the 800-strong Berkshire regiment were killed in one of the bloodiest battles in history. The Battle of Maiwand is commemorated by the lion in the Forbury Gardens.



Maiwand lion

The magnificent lion statue in the Forbury Gardens in Reading stands amid a scene of tranquillity, with the newly refurbished park a place of relaxation and picnic lunches. But what the lion represents couldn't paint a more different picture. The statue was erected to commemorate the Battle of Maiwand on 27 July 1880 during the Second Afghan War, where 800 soldiers from the Berkshire foot regiment didn't stand a chance against 40,000 Afghan troops fighting in West Kandahar, Afghanistan.



66th Berkshire regiment

The 66th (Berkshire) Regiment of Foot suffered 286 dead and 32 wounded (reports of the number vary) in what has been dubbed one of the bloodiest battles in history.

"The British forces had about 1500 infantry, 800 cavalry and six guns facing 40,000," says Reading historian John Chapman.

The Battle of Maiwand, named after a village in Afghanistan, was part of a British campaign to stop Russian influence in Afghanistan, as this threatened British control of India.

"The British were in India and very concerned that they protect India and the trade that was very profitable," says John, who has written a book on the battle.

"Russians were also very keen to get to India and in 1879 the Russians were making overtures to the Afghan government to cosy up with them and get a route through to the Khyber Pass."

In 1880 British and Indian troops stationed in Kandahar were sent to oppose an army led by Ayoub Khan, the brother of Afghanistan's deposed ruler.

The British force, led by General Burrows, had to secure the Maiwand Pass in order to stop Ayoub's advance on Kabul.

The Battle of Maiwand was one of the main battles of the Second Anglo-Afghan War and ended in heavy defeat for the British.

Despite hundreds from the Berkshire regiment falling in battle, 11 of the men made such a brave stand protecting the regiment's colours before their deaths that the Afghans who fought them reported it with great respect.

An Afghanistan officer described their end:

"These men charged from the shelter of a garden and died with their faces to the enemy, fighting to the death.

"So fierce was their charge, and so brave their actions, no Afghan dared to approach to cut them down.

"So, standing in the open, back to back, firing steadily, every shot counting, surrounded by thousands, these British soldiers died. It was not until the last man was shot down that the Afghans dared to advance on them.

"The behaviour of those last eleven was the wonder of all who saw it."

However, as a result of losing the Berkshire colours, a sacred symbol, the British Government banned other regiments from taking their colours into battle in future.

The soldiers from Berkshire who were killed hailed from all over the county, including Reading, Maidenhead, Wokingham, Mapledurham, Basildon and Cookham.

The 31-foot lion was sculpted by George Blackall Simonds, and unveiled in December 1886. The inscription reads:

"This monument commemorates the names and records the valour and devotion of XI (11) officers and CCCXVIII (318) non-commissioned officers and men of the LXVI (66th) Berkshire Regiment who gave their lives for their country at Girishk Maiwand and Kandahar during the Afghan Campaign MDCCCLXXIX (1878) - MDCCCLXXX (1880).

History does not afford any grander or finer instance of gallantry and devotion to Queen and country than that displayed by the LXVI Regiment at the Battle of Maiwand on the XXVII (27th) July MDCCCLXXX (1880) Despatch of General Primrose."

The pedestal was originally faced with terra cotta but was refaced with stone in 1910.

As well as the Maiwand Lion, the Reading FC logo (which features a lion) and The Bugle pub in Friar Street, Reading, also commemorates the battle of Maiwand. - Last updated: 27/07/2009