

1859 Melksham Military News

Formation of a Volunteer Rifle Corps at Melksham.



In consequences of a requisition made to the magistrates of the Melksham District, a meeting of the inhabitants of Melksham and the neighbourhood was convened on Tuesday last, at the Townhall, in that place to consider the propriety of establishing a Rifle Corps. There was a good attendance. Amongst those present we noticed the Right Hon. T.S. Estcourt, M.P., R.L. Lopes, Esq., Sir John W. Awdry, Revds, M. Brown, C.J. Down, and E.T. Thomas: Captain H. Stone: C.J.T. Conolly, W. Locke, H.B. Caldwell, J.B. Fuller, H.G. Awdry, A. Yockney, R. Smith, J.R Gwatkin, S. Slyvester, A. Gore, T. Bruges, P. Phelps, Esqs: Messrs. C.T. Moule, J.F. Smith, W. Taylor, James Stratton &c, &c.

On the motion of Sir John Awdry, seconded by W. Locke, Esq., R. L. Lopes, Esq. was unanimously voted to the chair.

The CHAIRMAN, in explaining the object of the meeting, said it had been suggested to him some months back to convene a meeting of that description in Melksham, but he had no idea that the movement would become so general, extending as it did to almost every parish in England. Thinking, then, that Melksham ought not to be behindhand in the movement, he had communicated with the Lord-Lieutenant of the county on the subject, and the result was, that they (the magistrates) had issued a circular convening the present meeting. They were approaching, perhaps, the most important subject that ever came before a meeting, & he felt his own inability in discharging the duties of chairman on this occasion. The position of England at this time was somewhat analogous to that which she occupied in 1804, when there was an hostile army encamped on the other side of the channel. Then every town and village and hamlet in this country poured forth their quota of volunteers, in expectation of an invasion. As regards the present movement, he was impressed with the belief that the Emperor of France had no intentions of invading this country – that was his opinion. There was no doubt the life of that man had been mercifully preserved against the hand of the assassin; but if that life were cut short, something possibly might be attempted against the peace of this realm. When they remembered that the numerical strength of the French Army was 500,000 strong, and that 200,000 of them had been transported to Italy with as great a facility as any gentleman could remove his establishment from Chippenham to Melksham: when they remembered the remark that General Burgoyne had made, that in case of any invasion, England had nothing to depend upon but her navy; when we looked upon the approaching Congress, and contemplated the position that England would occupy there – and no man living could tell how she would come out of it – when we took all these things into our serious consideration, he thought it was the bounden duty of everyone to do all in their power to foster this patriotic feeling which had begun to take root in the minds of the people of this country, (Loud Cheers). He commended the object to their serious consideration, and concluded by reading a letter on the subject from the Lord-Lieutenant, wherein he suggested the propriety of Devizes and Melksham uniting and forming one strong corps, but said he left the question to the judgement of the gentleman interested at both places.

SIR JOHN AWDRY, in moving the first resolution, expressed his belief in the peaceful intentions of the Emperor of the French towards this country, and said that he really entertained the most kindly feelings towards us. The Emperor was well acquainted with the resources of this country, as he carried a constable's staff here at a time when it was really threatened to be taken. He confessed he did not know what purpose the Emperor might have in view; but whatever it might be, he thought that he was influenced, to a great extent, by his position.

No doubt he had saved France from a miserable state of anarchy, by occupying that position. It was true he possessed a large army, who were ready to obey his command when required; and also that he was looking to his defences; still, without the least imputation of hostility towards France, he thought it was essential that England should be put in a position of defence likewise. (Loud Cheers). The art of warfare, too, was far different now from what it was formerly; by the aid of that powerful auxiliary steam, an immense force could now be thrown across the Channel in a very short time, rendering a sudden attack much more feasible than it used to be. It was clear that England did not maintain a military force in proportion to the other branch of the service: still, with a strong navy, manned by sailors possessing stout hearts and stout arms, he thought that we should be in a much better position than we should if we imitated great monarchs in maintaining a vast army. (Cheers). From the nature of our country, he thought that an hostile army would find it most difficult to march inland, the more so if had had a good corps of rifleman harrassing them, and taking them off as they came. (Cheers). Now this rifle volunteer movement, which was purely a defensive one, was peculiarly adapted to the habits of the people, who in times gone by were trained to athletic exercises; and our statute-books contained numerous laws relating to the use of the bow-and-arrow among the people. Although the times are passed away the principal still existed; and he saw no reason why our rifleman now should not be as expert marksmen as the bowmen were in those days. The effect these rifle corps would have would be to show to our Continental neighbours, that invasion is a much more serious matter than they anticipate it to be. (Cheers). He concluded by moving – “That it is expedient to organise a rifle corps for Melksham and the surrounding neighbourhood”.

W. LOCKE, Esq., seconded the resolution, and in doing so, observed that, as a great nation, and a free people, we could be neither great nor free if we could not defend ourselves. (Cheers). He would rather go forth for this movement himself and defend his country, than pay by taxation, other people to do it for him. (Hear, hear). He would cordially support the movement by every way in his power, and promised to put down 5d for a prize in shooting, on condition that he should be allowed to compete for it with the young men. (Laughter and cheers). The resolution was put and carried.

The Right Hon. T.S. ESTCOURT, M.P., moved the next resolution, which was – “That this meeting pledges itself, by every effort in its power to support this patriotic movement.” As he had had the pleasure on former occasions of speaking on this subject at other places, he begged to be allowed to add Melksham to the list in this great national movement; in fact, he should have been surprised if Melksham had not convened a meeting on the subject. The movement was spreading fast, every parish and hamlet seeming to act simultaneously and in one spirit. After referring to the remarks of the previous speakers, the right hon. gentleman said, that as Sir John Awdry had intimated his willingness to become a non-effective member of the corps, he (Mr. Estcourt) did not know why he should not be allowed to join as well. (Laughter and cheers). He considered that by their meeting together today they were, first, discharging a duty, and in the next place, providing themselves with means of defence. With reference to the invasion, he asked, what would be the consequences if England were crushed? Why it would be said tauntingly that those English, who had boasted of their free institutions for a thousand years, when the hour of trial came, had trusted to the support of some foreign power. Great Britain must set an example of liberty to the whole world, and it therefore behoved every Englishman to lend his assistance to the rifle corps movement. (Cheers).

C.J.T. CONOLLY, Esq., seconded the resolution, and pledged himself to support the movement by every possible means in his power.

H.E. CALDWELL, Esq., moved the third resolution, which was – “That the corps shall consist of honorary and enrolled members, the honorary members to contribute to the funds of the corps, but not to be enrolled for service; the honorary members to pay a yearly sum of 10s., being payable by them in addition to any donation they may make, and enrolled members to pay a subscription of 10s.

H.G. AWDRY, Esq., seconded the resolution, and said he was glad to see clergyman present on the occasion, as it was a further proof that this was essentially a peace movement, and no doubt those gentlemen would endeavour by every means in their power to promote peace and goodwill among men. After the Battle of Waterloo, one of the great Napoleonic Marshals said, on visiting London, "What a fine city that would be to sack." However, the present Napoleon, he thought, had no wish to put that into execution; he was the creature of his army. For the last sixty or seventy years England had been an asylum of safety for foreigners; and on that account, this movement ought to be supported, as we excited the jealousy of all our Continental neighbours. The resolution was put and carried.

A. YOCKNEY, Esq., moved the fourth resolution – "That a committee be appointed to consider the best means of carrying the objects of the meeting into effect, to determine the details of accoutrements, &c, and communicate with the Lord-Lieutenant on the subject." He said we ought all to be prepared, as he believed the French wanted to avenge Waterloo.

The Rev. M. BROWN, in seconding the resolution, said he was sorry to see clergyman held themselves aloof from this movement. He cordially supported it, and he did not shrink from coming forward and avowing it, as he had a good sample set him by the Vicar of the parish, who likewise approved of the movement. He (Mr. Brown) supported it on the ground of peace, as it was a defensive movement, and on the ground of economy, as it was almost entirely self-supporting. He also urged, as reasons for supporting it – The defence of their wives, their children and their homes. (Loud Cheers).

J.R. FULLER, Esq., moved – "That a subscription be entered into to defray the necessary expenses."

Capt. STONE seconded the motion, and said he should be glad to support the movement by his purse, and offered his experience if necessary.

Mr. PHELPS expressed his willingness to become a non-effective member, and said that his duties prevented him from becoming an effective member. (Cheers).

After a few remarks from Mr. Gwatkin, a vote of thanks to the chairman, which he duly acknowledged, brought the proceedings to a close.

The following are the committee appointed to carry the objects into effect:- Sir John Awdry, W. Locke, H.B. Caldwell, C.J.T. Conolly, R. Phelps, J. Jeffreys, R.L. Lopes, J.B. Fuller, J.R. Gwatkin, H. Awdry, A. Yockney, H. Stone, S. Sylvester, J. Stratton, and R. Smith Esqrs.

Several persons came forward at the close of the meeting and enrolled their names. The following subscriptions in aid of the corps have already been promised:- R.L. Lopes, Esq. 15/., Sir W. Awdry 15/., H.B. Caldwell, Esq. 15/., Right Hon. Sotherton Estcourt (and accoutrements of 5 men), 10/., J.B. Fuller, Esq. 20/., W. Locke, Esq. (with 5*d.* for a first prize, and 1/ annual sub), 10/., C.J.T. Conolly Esq., 10/., Mrs. Ludlow Bruges, 10/., A. Yockney, Esq. (and equipments for 5 men), 5/., H.G. Awdry, Esq. 10/., W. Spoke, Esq. 5/., P. Phelps, Esq. 5/., H. Stone, Esq. 3/., Thomas Bruges, Esq. 5/., R. Smith, Esq. 5/., C.T. Moule, Esq. 3/., Mr. James Stratton, 5/., William Taylor, Esq. 2/., and several others making a total of 158/.



The Bath Chronicle, Thursday, December 19, 1859

Melksham to the Rescue.

Wiltshire is doing its duty nobly. Another Volunteer Rifle Corps! But last week we recorded the formation of one of these valuable aids to our national defences in the flourishing and patriotic town of Bradford-on-Avon. We have now the pleasure of directing public attention to a meeting held this week at Melksham to forward a similar desirable object. There can be no doubt that the formation of these corps is producing an immensity of good throughout the country. Putting aside for the moment the idea of foreign invasion altogether, these movements do good service if it be only in uniting Englishmen generally in one common bond of brother-hood, giving them one common object to pursue – the maintenance of the liberties of England, her glory, and pre-eminence. It cannot be denied, as has been frequently observed by those who have taken part in these meetings, that the best way to maintain peace is to be prepared for war. These movements, as was well put by Mr. Lopes, the chairman, are not “aggressive;” but they are “for the purpose of keeping this country in a state of peace, and preventing her from retrograding a hundred years; nor,” continued the speaker, “was it a hasty movement: it had been well weighed and duly considered. It was not at the call of any body of patriotic men, that they were asked to come forward and support it: but it was at the call of the Queen herself: and if they thought the movement worthy their support, they should support it, for the sake of their homes, their Queen, and their country.”

Actuated by these sentiments, the inhabitants of Melksham and its neighbourhood have gallantly come forward, and resolved on raising a Rifle Corps. We sincerely trust that the movement will be well supported, and that ere long may we witness a review day in which the young blood of Melksham will sustain the *prestige* of their town and country. We heartily congratulate our Melksham friends on the spirited manner in which their meeting was conducted. The speeches upon the occasion were far above the average of those which have hitherto been made on this subject. We need not, however, impress upon our friends that the matter must not be permitted to end in talk. Let every young man, who can carry a rifle, sign the muster roll, and those who cannot aid the cause by active exertions, let them add their names to the noble list of subscriptions so promptly raised, and which we are happy to add, already amounts to a sum worthy of the occasion

The Bath Chronicle, Thursday, December 29, 1859.

Ralph Ludlow Lopes

Ralph Ludlow Lopes. Born September 9th 1820 & Died February 28th, 1898 aged 77. Buried at Melksham. He was the son of Sir Ralph Lopes, second baronet of Maristowe, Devon, by his marriage with Susan Gibbs, daughter of Abraham Ludlow, of Heywood, Wiltshire. He was educated at Winchester and Christchurch, Oxford. B.A., 1844, M.A. and called to the Bar, 1847. Married 1851, Elizabeth, third daughter of Samuel Trehawk Kekewich, M.P., of Peamore, Devon. His two sons, Ralph Kekewich and Henry Ludlow (*See separate article Funeral of Captain Henry Ludlow Lopes*) predeceased him. His third son, George, & daughter Julia, survive him. He took for many years a very prominent part in county business – J.P. and D.L. He was High Sheriff of Wilts in 1869; Recorder of Devizes, 1877 to 1887; & Chairman of Wilts Quarter Sessions for some eleven years. He, however, retired from public life before the County Council came into existence. He purchased the Sandridge Park Estate, and built the house soon after marriage, and always took the warmest interest in local matters – the revival of the Melksham Agricultural Society and the formation of the Melksham Rifle Corps being very largely due to him.

Devizes Gazette, March 3rd, 1898.