

NEWS FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

Waterloo and the West Midlands Press

Andrew Watts

Newspapers enabled West Midlanders to read of Wellington's victory at Waterloo, in the words of the Duke himself. Throughout the nineteenth century, the local press continued to print stories and anecdotes relating to the battle, as well as encouraging the public to commemorate this historic event. Today, Waterloo is still making news.



© The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Despatch, 1822 (oil on wood), Wilkie, Sir David (1785 - 1841) [Apsley House, The Wellington Museum, London, UK/Bridgeman Images.

'The enemy ... fled in the utmost confusion.' Soldiers pore over the Waterloo Despatch, reprinted in a special edition of *The London Gazette* and later in Midlands papers. *The Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Waterloo Despatch*, 1822 by Sir David Wilkie.

Caked in dirt from the battlefield, the Duke of Wellington sat at his desk in the early hours of 19 June 1815 to prepare his account of the allied victory at Waterloo. In his report to Lord Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Wellington described how his army had stood firm in the face of numerous cavalry charges and repeated bombardment from French artillery.

He praised the bravery of his men as they fought to defend the farms of Hougoumont and La Haye Sainte, two of the key strategic positions in the battle. And with factual simplicity, he recalled the moment when Napoleon's resistance was finally broken. 'The enemy was forced from his positions on the heights', wrote the Duke, 'and fled in the utmost confusion.'

Wellington's despatch reached Britain on 21 June, and over the days that followed appeared in newspapers throughout the country. First to break the news of the victory was *The London Gazette Extraordinary*, which published the Waterloo Despatch – as this document subsequently became known – on 22 June. As copies of London newspapers began to arrive in Birmingham, a large crowd gathered outside the Hen and Chickens Hotel in New Street – the arrival and departure point for the town's mail coaches – to hear of Napoleon's final defeat.

Since no daily newspapers were printed in Birmingham at this time, it was not until Monday 26 June that *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* featured the Waterloo Despatch. Across the wider region, the *Staffordshire Advertiser* and the *Warwick and Warwickshire General Advertiser* – two newspapers that in this instance had the good fortune to appear



With no daily newspapers printed in Birmingham at the time of Waterloo, The Hen and Chickens Hotel in New Street saw large crowds gather for the arrival of the London papers by mail coach. *Hen and Chickens, New Street from Old and New Birmingham*, Robert Dent, 1880.

on Saturdays – were able to publish Wellington's historic statement even sooner, on 24 June. Newspapers enabled the British public to hear and read for themselves the first official account of the battle, sparking joyous celebrations, but also plunging many families into mourning.

Battlefield legends

For the press, Waterloo provided much more than a single newflash moment. It was an event that spawned countless stories and legends which journalists would delight in recounting for years afterwards. This was certainly true in the West Midlands, where newspapers and periodicals continued to publish Waterloo-related anecdotes – some more truthful than others – throughout the nineteenth century.

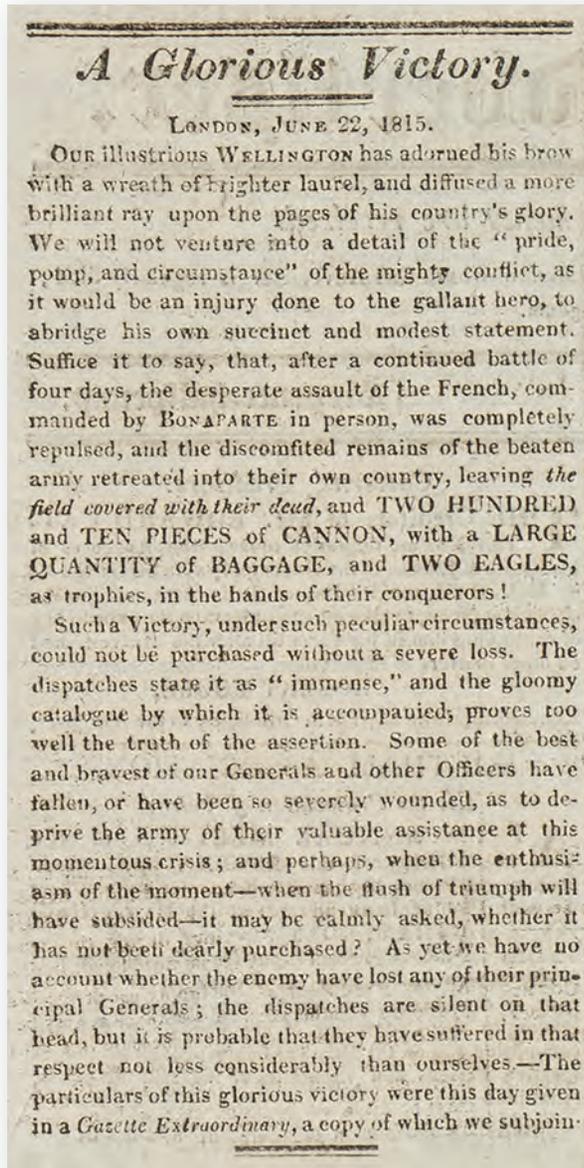
One of the more unusual, and indeed macabre, of these stories appeared in the *Coventry Herald* in 1824 and concerned the death of a Sergeant Weir, who served with the Scots Greys. As pay-sergeant for his regiment, Weir collected money from the men for clothes and supplies, a responsibility that normally would have excused him from active combat. At Waterloo, however, he requested permission to charge with his fellow cavalry officers. Weir's sense of comradeship cost him his life, yet according to the *Herald*, he did not succumb to his injuries without first writing his name on his forehead in his own blood, thus proving to those who found his body that he had not simply disappeared with the regiment's money.

While the story of Sergeant Weir retained the attention of the local press only briefly, there were other tales of Waterloo that West Midlands newspapers never tired of retelling.

One of the most intriguing of these stories centred on a Birmingham button seller who reportedly strayed onto the battlefield during the midst of the fighting. In 1892, the *Lichfield Mercury* claimed that Wellington had seen this stranger riding between the fires, and beckoned him over to ask what he was doing there. The button seller replied that he had been on business in Brussels but was curious to witness a battle first-hand.

Impressed by the succinctness of the man's answers, and running short of aides-de-camp, Wellington asked whether he would be willing to take a message across the field to Marshal Kempt, commander of the 8th British Brigade. In the version of the tale published by the *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1872, the Duke told his senior officers to 'have faith in Brummagem' before settling down to doze under a copy of the *Sun* newspaper. When he awoke a few minutes later and saw that Kempt had changed his tactics, Wellington realised that the button seller's mission had been a success, prompting him to exclaim 'Well done, Buttons!'

Whether the story of the Birmingham button seller has any basis in truth is open to question. In what is generally considered an improbable epilogue to the tale, the *Lichfield Mercury* reported that Wellington later summoned the button seller to his home in London, and that in recognition of his good service, the man was



Across the region, people heard about Wellington's famous victory through reports in local newspapers. *Warwick and Warwickshire General Advertiser*, 24 June, 1815.

rewarded with a post in the Royal Mint at £800 per year. The Duke would have been well placed to secure such a favourable appointment, not least because his older brother, William Wellesley, was Master of the Royal Mint from 1814-1823.

At £800 per year, however, the button seller would have been paid more than even the Chief Engraver, who during the same period received an annual salary of £500. A legend that the West Midlands press did much to popularise, the story of the Birmingham button seller has long proved impossible to substantiate, and the identity of the man himself – if he ever existed at all – remains a mystery.

Commemorating Waterloo

As well as seeking to entertain readers with tales of bravery and daring, local newspapers gave

extensive coverage during the nineteenth century to the commemoration of Waterloo. In June 1830, *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* reported on a dinner held in Warwick to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the battle and attended by dignitaries from the surrounding area. In a separate event in the town, members of the Royal Veteran Society also marched to St Nicholas's Church, accompanied by a band of the 5th Dragoon Guards from Coventry which attracted 'an immense crowd'.



“‘Would you take a message of importance for me?’”

‘Well done, Buttons!’ Whether fact or fiction, the legend of the Birmingham button seller who carried a message for Wellington found its way into a number of Midlands papers.

As newspapers from this period illustrate, remembrance of Waterloo was by no means a purely solemn activity. Wellington’s victory was also an event to be celebrated, and the regional press encouraged readers to enjoy reliving the famous battle in a variety of ways. In March 1835, *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette* carried an advertisement for a play based on the Battle of Waterloo at the Theatre Royal in New Street, promising ‘new and superb scenery’.

In 1834, the *Birmingham Daily Press* also drew the attention of readers to the Waterloo re-enactment staged by Ryan’s Royal Circus in Bradford Street, Digbeth, where the performance included a cavalry charge by the circus’s equestrian company and a final ceremony in which the actors dressed as British soldiers were crowned with laurel wreaths. And for those who preferred to remember Waterloo in a less dramatic setting, the *Birmingham Journal* advised the public of the opportunity to visit – for the admission price of one shilling – Captain William Siborne’s scale model of the battle, which was displayed in the town in 1840.

The last veterans

As the nineteenth century entered its final two decades, some newspapers in the West Midlands showed a keen interest in the lives and gradual disappearance of the last Waterloo veterans. As the local press clearly recognised, living memories were fading rapidly into history, and risked being lost forever.

The desire to capture such recollections appears to have been the primary motivation behind a long article published by the *Birmingham Daily Post* in October 1887, which focused on the experiences of former soldier John Tyrer (also known as John Taylor). By then aged 96, Tyrer had returned to his native Birmingham after the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Still in robust health, he was described by the newspaper as living ‘in peaceful enjoyment of that small pension which, by way of ending the scandal of these old fellows dying in work houses, the War Office granted in 1870’.

Casting his mind back to Waterloo, Tyrer admitted that his company had landed at Ostend on 21 June, three days after the fighting had ended. However, he and his comrades were able to join Marshal Blücher’s troops on their victorious march to Paris, and were billeted for a night in the country home of one of Napoleon’s generals, Marshal Soult, only to find that it had already been ransacked. The company eventually reached the British camp at Saint-Denis, on the outskirts of Paris, where Tyrer saw Wellington ride daily through the seven-mile stretch of tents to check on his men.

While this eye-witness account of the immediate aftermath of Waterloo was undoubtedly precious, the newspaper was no less eager to record Tyrer's 'reminiscences of old Birmingham'. The veteran duly shared his childhood memories of riots at the Bull Ring over the price of bread, and of witnessing a public hanging at Washwood Heath. He also recalled with sadness the economic slump that gripped the town after the Napoleonic Wars, when 'there were no guns or swords to be made, and hundreds of people had to face starvation'.

The old soldier had lived through a tumultuous period in history, and the decision to interview him for the press ultimately proved to have been timely. John Tyrer would not reach his ninety-seventh birthday, and died on 27 May 1888.

The centenary of Waterloo

By the time of the centenary of Waterloo in 1915, Britain was once again at war. The First World War had broken out in July 1914, and as the country became increasingly preoccupied with events in Belgium and France, marking the anniversary of Waterloo was hardly a national priority.

In the West Midlands, press coverage of the centenary was muted. In Birmingham, the *Evening Despatch* reminded readers of the anniversary of the ball held in Brussels by the Duchess of Richmond on 15 June 1815, at which Wellington received word of Napoleon's advance on Quatre Bras. In more sombre terms, the same newspaper used the example of Waterloo to highlight the terrible carnage of the First World War.

A short, poignant paragraph under the heading 'historic anniversaries' observed that 'contemporary accounts of the Battle of Waterloo read strangely, with their 6,932 British killed and wounded, in the week in which we have learned that our casualties in the present war are already over 258,000. All our standards of comparison are shattered'.

Even in this dark hour of conflict, however, the local press showed that it had not lost its sense of humour entirely. On 12 May 1915, the *Evening Despatch* carried an advertisement for an indigestion remedy called Mother Seigel's Syrup, which stretched the credulity of the most gullible reader by attributing Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo to the fact that he was a dyspeptic. 'At a time when the fate of an empire hung on his initiative and

energy,' read the advertisement, 'they failed him. In your own case good health is just as necessary. Indigestion should not be allowed to undermine your strength.'

Still making news

As we approach the bicentenary of Waterloo, local media interest in the battle shows no signs of diminishing. In 2009, the *Birmingham Mail* reported on the auction of a pistol that had belonged to John Waters, a Royal Marine from Shenstone who served on the HMS *Bellerophon*, the ship which took Napoleon into British captivity following his surrender in July 1815. The 16cm pistol was authenticated by the Armouries at the Tower of London and its value estimated at £600. Ahead of the auction, a spokesman for Hansons Auctioneers told the *Mail*: 'Such historical context of the pistol adds romance and mystery to an item which witnessed a great battle.'

More recently still, West Midlands newspapers have helped to reveal some of the personal stories which lead back to Waterloo. In February 2011, the *Birmingham Post* conducted an interview with Linda Atterbury, a grandmother from Erdington whose burgeoning interest in family history – inspired partly by the television series 'Who Do You Think You Are?' – enabled her to discover that her great-great-grandfather, John Fletcher, was present at Waterloo with the 79th Regiment of Foot. 'To go back generations past and find out you had ancestors who were in the military and who fought in battles, like Waterloo – it's absolutely fascinating,' Mrs Atterbury told the newspaper. 'I really feel as though I haven't done anything with my life compared with what my ancestors have done.'

As stories such as these show, the battle continues to fascinate both the local press and its readers. Waterloo is still making news today, just as it did in the wake of Wellington's famous despatch in 1815.

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Further reading:

David Chandler, *Waterloo and the Hundred Days* (Osprey, 1980).

Paul O'Keefe, *Waterloo: The Aftermath* (Bodley Head, 2014).

The British Newspaper Archive at www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. This is a subscription service.

A small selection of regional newspapers from 1815, including the *Staffordshire Advertiser* and the *Warwick and Warwickshire General Advertiser*, are held in Archives & Heritage at the Library of Birmingham and can be consulted by appointment.