

THE SUPPLYING OF WATER TO THE CONSETT DISTRICT IN THE 19TH CENTURY

A CHRONOLOGY BY

TOM REYNOLDS, FORMERLY AN ENGINEER WITH NORTHUMBRIAN WATER

The pioneers of a piped supply into the Consett district were Mr John Gledstone and Mr John Calvert. These two public spirited men fought hard and long, often at their own personal expense, in order to fulfil their cherished ambition for an adequate piped water supply.

Quoting from "The Chronicles of North-West Durham" by Mr George Neasham: "It was to Mr Gledstone's unwearied zeal and unwearied efforts that the district is, in great measure, indebted for a supply of water". Mr Gledstone was to become the Secretary and Mr Calvert the Treasurer of the Consett Waterworks Company when it was formed by them and others in 1860. Prior to the year 1859 the water supply in the Consett district was deplorable, both in quality and quantity. Quoting from Mr Gledstone's diary of 1859: "The best well is rented at more than £50 per year and only supplies eight or ten barrels per day".

Barrels were often filled from water courses or, indeed, from any place where water could be found. The demand for water was so keen and urgent that numbers of women raced a quarter of a mile to be first served at the water carts. Many of them returned with empty carts or buckets with the result that in many cases the menfolk, after a day of hard work, had to await supper until the necessary water was borrowed from some more fortunate and speedy neighbour.

Water was collected from many other questionable sources and delivered and sold to housewives for a penny per two gallon bucket. Two of the known sources of water were Knitsley Burn and Boggle Hole. The former was a pool, freely accessible to cattle and besides being contaminated by them, it was not unusual for the village youth to be bathing in the pool while the cartmen were actually filling the barrels. Indeed, the cartmen themselves often bathed in the pool before filling the barrels.

The latter source mentioned above, ie. Boggle Hole, was equally lethal. Water was pumped from Boggle Hole into a pond which was often the last resting place of cats and dogs.

At Leadgate the women had so long to wait their turn at the barrels that they took with them knitting or sewing to while away a long and dreary wait. Quoting from Mr Calvert's diary of 1860: "There is no water except what is drawn from an old shaft in the town. The women are there by three or four in the morning and there is many a fight among them".

This "old shaft" was, presumably, "the best well rented at more than £50 per year..." referred to by Mr Gledstone in his diary of the same year. The Commercial Hotel, now known as the Braes Hotel, was built near to the shaft which was rediscovered a few years ago when workmen were demolishing an old cottage near to the hotel. An entry in Mr Calvert's diary records: "There is more beer than water in Berry Edge".

Mr Charles Allen, a brewer of Annfield Plain, records that his tenant, Mr John Robson, manager of the only beer house in the town, had sold more than 15,000 half-barrels of beer during twelve months. The house was besieged at 5 o'clock each morning by the thirsty night shift men from the ironworks, and again at night by the equally thirsty day shift men. The unfortunate Mr Robson and his barmen had little time for leisure or sleep.

In the year 1859 Messrs. Gledstone and Calvert called a meeting in Lanchester to discuss the forming of a Company to organise and control an adequate supply of water to domestic consumers and to satisfy the growing demands of the three ironworks in the Consett district. The meagre sum of eight pounds only was promised towards the cost of a necessary preliminary survey. Rather than allow the scheme to fall through, Mr Calvert guaranteed to be responsible for whatever sum might be required. Mr J.F. Tone, Civil Engineer of Newcastle undertook the survey. A series of investigations was carried out on the fells to the west of Consett. Mr Tone's report was a favourable one and Messrs. Gledstone and Calvert decided to go to Parliament for an Act empowering the forming of a Company.

Quoting from Mr Calvert's diary: "We went to London and had no fewer than eleven petitions against our scheme, but we got an Act nevertheless. Mr Philipson was our solicitor and after we came home from London, Mr Gledstone and I went to Newcastle to see him. He told us we would have to pay £300 that day to stop the Dean and Chapter of Durham from opposing us in the House of Lords. As I had only £100 on hand I was obliged to borrow £200".

Apart from the threatened opposition by the Dean and Chapter of Durham there appears to be no reliable information as to why or by whom the scheme was opposed, indeed it is difficult to imagine why such a laudable effort towards public health and hygiene could be reasonably opposed by anyone.

In November 1859 the Consett Waterworks Company was formed and the first Prospectus issued. It might be noted that on the accompanying copy of the Prospectus, Mr Gledstone's name is spelt without the final 'e', but there is no doubt that the 'John Gledston' on this document is

the same 'John Gledstone' referred to in numerous records and the writer, therefore, continues to append the final 'e'.

The Consett Waterworks Acts of 1860 gave powers for the forming of The Consett Waterworks Company under the first Directorship of Messrs. Henry Ritson, David Bellemy, Martin Bell, Matthew Spencer, John Seymour, Thomas Hatherington and Anthony William Ritson with a share capital of £25,000. The Company was empowered to supply the towns and districts of Consett, Shotley Bridge, Blackhill, Berry Edge, Leadgate, Crookhall, Iveston, Castleside and adjoining districts in the parishes of Ebchester and Lanchester.

For several years the water was conveyed by earthenware pipes from the springs beyond Muggleswick to Consett. During the summer months in particular this supply became inadequate to the growing demands made upon it. Mr Tone, the Company's Engineer, submitted a scheme and estimate for the laying of an 8" pipe from Honey Hill to Consett, and pipes and ducts from Honey Hill to various springs, and for the construction of a service reservoir at Berry Edge.

Mr Tone suggested that as an alternative to the above, which was mainly a measure intended to cope with a domestic supply, the Company would be well advised to lay a 12" diameter pipe from Honey Hill to Consett and thus gain an increased flow from 600,000 gallons per day to 1,900,000 gallons per day which would satisfy both domestic and industrial demands. Mr Tone's suggestion was accepted by the Company, and by August 1864 the iron main from Honey Hill to Consett, and from Consett to Leadgate, and from Consett to Blackhill had been completed.

An earthenware pipe was laid from the low end of Honey Hill to Feldon Burn with necessary branches to the various springs at Smiddy Shaw, Hawkburn, Hunterley Block Quarries, Hysehope Quarry and Harehope. The whole of these springs discharged into the Company's mains. A junction had also been effected with the springs at Hunterley Pike but the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company, who claimed a lease on the springs, had diverted the water from them into a channel leading to their stations. Hopes were expressed that some arrangement might be made with the Railway Company whereby the Water Company might get possession of these springs. The springs in question appeared to be less affected than any of the others by continuous dry weather hence their value to the Water Company was considerable. It was however, a year later i.e. 1865 before a satisfactory arrangement was made with the Railway Company regarding the springs. It was agreed that the Water Company should take

possession of the springs on condition that the majority of the expense of making a watertight channel in place of the open aquaduct from Edmundbyers Cross to Waskerley be borne by the Company.

It is recorded that the majority of the expense of construction of the watertight channel was £173.14.3. paid by the Railway Company. The acquisition of these springs by the Water Company increased the supply of water considerably, especially in drought weather when, as already stated, the yield from the other springs became somewhat limited. The Company decided in 1864, to construct the service reservoir at Berry Edge authorised by the Act of 1860 and the work of construction was let to Mr John Robson of Newcastle for the sum of £1,374.6.3. In the same year an Agreement was entered into with the Shotley Bridge Iron Company to supply them with water at the following rates:

For mechanical purposes: 2½d per 1,000 gallons

For the supply to offices, schoolroom, and domestic supply to Company's college at the Agent's house: £20 per annum

At the 1865 August meeting the Directors of the Consett Waterworks Company reported to the shareholders that all the works included in the Parliamentary Scheme were complete and in full working order.

Long protracted negotiation with the Dean and Chapter of Durham relative to wayleave rents and compensation for severance of land was brought to an amicable and advantageous conclusion in 1866. The Company agreed to pay the Dean and Chapter an annual rent of £40 for the purchase of all the springs and streams, and for freedom to lay pipes, make water courses, reservoirs and other works, and erecting engines and machinery on the lands of the Dean and Chapter of Durham in the parish of Muggleswick.

The disputes between the Water Company and the Governors of Sherburn Hospital in respect of the land at Berry Edge required for the service reservoir had been satisfactorily adjusted. The sum of £716 was awarded to the Governors of the Hospital, and £435 to Messrs. Harvey and Thomas, their leases, making a total of £1,151 for approximately 3¼ acres, the area required by the Company, at the rate of one shilling and two pence three farthings per square yard.

The Berry Edge Reservoir, completed in 1865, developed a fault resulting in a daily loss of 50,000 gallons. The defect was repaired and the Reservoir put into full operation supplying the domestic requirements of the consumers in Berry Edge, Blackhill and Shotley Bridge. During the year 1866 to 1867 the Company's mains were extended to Temple Town, Castleside, Brooms Coke Ovens and Carr House Station.

Investigations were made to ascertain the requirements, the possible cost and revenue for a supply of water to Medomsley, Lintz Colliery Burnopfield, Tantobie, White-le-Head, Hill Top, Dipton, Colliery Sykes, Annfield Plain, Oxhill, Cavannagh, Stanley, Derwent Cottages and adjacent villages with a view to extending the Company's Act, but at that time insufficient information was available to warrant the calling of an extraordinary meeting of Shareholders. The requested information was obtained several months later and Mr William Bouch, Civil Engineer of Darlington was consulted. He was instructed to make a survey of the District embraced by the Company's Act for collecting water with a view of securing an increased and more regular supply.

On the 9th August 1867 the Directors of the Company held a meeting with Mr Bouch at Smiddy Shaw. Mr Bouch submitted a scheme and a discussion followed on the site. Mr Bouch subsequently submitted a report of which the following is an extract:

"The district is not favourable for the selection of places, formed by nature, for the construction of large reservoirs at a cheap rate. The site of the present Reservoir at Smiddy Shaw seems most eligible and I therefore recommend its enlargement by throwing an embankment across the valley, enclosing an area of 39 acres, to be covered with water, its greatest depth being 26 feet and its contents about one hundred and twenty millions of gallons, and to cost about £16,000 and it might, under favourable conditions, be completed in two years.

"The geological character of this site, so far as can be ascertained, seems to indicate that a perfectly safe and water tight reservoir may be made here; but of course, this fact will have to be clearly ascertained by sinking a few pits in the line of the embankment before any other expenditure is incurred upon this undertaking.

"The water that is required to be placed in store within the enlarged Reservoir is your own, collected by your pipes and delivered into the Smiddy Shaw Reservoir, but in wet seasons and floods is in much excess of your present means of storage and is allowed to overflow and run to waste.

"What the present quantity that is thus allowed to escape from your possession is not accurately ascertained, but the information I have received from your secretary proved it to be much more than is required to fill the proposed enlarged

Reservoir, and I may add that the meteorological observations conducted by me for another purpose, for the past two years, in this District quite confirms Mr Gledstone's views. The proposed enlargement of the Smiddy Shaw Reservoir will place at your disposal an addition of half a million gallons of water daily".

At this stage there appears to be some confusion in the records in so far as, in Mr Bouch's report of 1868 is his reference to: "The site of this present Reservoir at Smiddy Shaw..."

There is no indication on any of the available plans of a Reservoir at Smiddy Shaw at the date of Mr Bouch's report. There is, however, a record of the existence of a "water tank and valve house" and this water tank is indicated on the deposited plans dated 1868, for the 1869 session in parliament. The writer assumes, therefore, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, that the Reservoir to which Mr Bouch refers is, in fact, the whole tank. The Smiddy Shaw Reservoir was constructed between the years 1869-1877.

Mr Hawksley, Civil Engineer of London, was also consulted and, with Mr Bouch and his directors of the Company, made a personal inspection of the area for the proposed reservoir. He fully concurred in the recommendations of Mr Bouch regarding the construction of the reservoir which he considered to be amply sufficient to supply the district. He also recommended that in applying to parliament it would be desirable to obtain powers to meet possible future demands and suggested the construction of several small reservoirs in the area. The Report was received and adopted and in 1869 an extension of works Act was obtained and sited as "The Consett Waterworks Act 1869".

Notwithstanding severe weather conditions during the winter of 1870 the work of construction of Smiddy Shaw Reservoir made satisfactory progress. The Reservoir embankment had reached a height of 15 feet above ground level by August of 1871. It was estimated that the reservoir area when filled would be about 65 acres; the greatest depth about 40 feet and the embankment about 51 feet. The perimeter at top water level about one and a quarter mile; the greatest width about $\frac{3}{8}$ mile. When filled, it would contain two hundred and twenty five million gallons of water.

In 1872 the embankment was sufficiently high to impound ten million gallons. The progress of construction was greatly impeded in 1873 owing to continuous wet weather, frost and snowstorms coupled with a scarcity of labour; nevertheless the completion of the work was optimistically

predicted for 1874. However, even in 1873 the work had progressed sufficiently to allow its use and the storage was meeting the immediate requirements of the company and enabling supply to keep pace with the progressive increase to consumers. It is interesting to note that such portions of the plant that could be spared were sold at prices far in excess of those originally paid by the Company. The Reservoir was filled with water in 1876 and was in use but the storm wall along the embankment was not completed owing again to severe weather conditions and it was in 1877 that the completion of the reservoir was recorded.

Applications for extensions had been received, in relation to Feldon, Ouston, Birtley, Waldrige, Chester-le-Street and several other places, but before these projects could be carried out it was found necessary to construct a service reservoir at Loud Bank and this work commenced in 1875.

At the half-yearly meeting of the Company on 25th February 1876 a tribute was paid to Mr Bouch, the Company's Engineer, who had died at his home in Weymouth on 19th January 1876.

The Loud Reservoir was completed and water first admitted to it in 1878. During the same year a public drinking fountain was erected in honour of Mr John Gledstone. Inscribed on it in imperishable letters are the words: "Erected by a grateful public in honour of John Gledstone, originator of the Consett Waterworks Company 1878". It was unveiled on 22nd April 1878 by Mr William Jenkins. The monument is 18 feet high and on three of its sides are white marble basins and metal drinking cups. It stood at the junction of Front Street and Middle Street in Consett. Increasing road traffic necessitated its removal in 1923 and it was re-sited in Aynsley Terrace, but as the water supply to it was discontinued it no longer served its original purpose as a drinking fountain. It has since been removed and is now in numbered pieces in the council store at Villa Real. It is hoped that some future local politician endowed with imagination and appreciation of past efforts will, perhaps, resurrect the monument from its undignified grave and site it to perpetuate the gratitude the public professed in 1878. Mr John Gledstone died in 1879 aged 74 years. Mr R. Askwith M.I.C.E. was appointed Engineer to the Company in 1881.

The Loud Reservoir began to give trouble in 1880. The east tank developed a leak, and cracks appeared on the concrete floor of the reservoir. This damage was the result of mining activities in the South Pontop Colliery owned by the Ritson family. Repairs proved unsatisfactory, and in fact futile as, despite all efforts, the fault became progressively worse and strong complaints were being received from

Mr Ritson regarding leakage from the reservoir into the Shield Row seam of the colliery. A steam engine driven pump was installed in the pit to cope with the excessive leakage and it is recorded that the pump was working continually from 1883 to 1886. The Reservoir was abandoned in 1886. The East Stanley Reservoir was constructed in 1887.

Legal action was taken against Mr Ritson by the Water Company with respect to the damage caused to the Loud Reservoir resulting in its abandonment, by subsidence in the ground due to mining activities. The Company claimed £15,000 damages. The suit of the Company versus Ritson was argued early in 1889 in the High Court of Justice before Mr Justice Cave and Mr Justice A.L. Smith. A decision of the Court was given in favour of the Water Company. Later in the year, however, an appeal against the decision was heard by the Court of Appeal and judgement was given against the Company thus reversing the original decision. There is no record available as to whether the Company took the case to the House of Lords or not.

The commissioning of Smiddy Shaw Reservoir had solved the problem, at least for the time being, of quantity of water for distribution, but by 1893 the important problem of quality arrested the attention and concern of the Public Analyst, the Medical Officer of Health and the public. It might have proved somewhat disconcerting to the Shareholders of the company to read in the minutes of half-yearly meetings the repeated claim, eg., "A good supply of pure water has been distributed throughout the Company's mains during the past six months", and then to read the following report in the Consett Guardian dated 6th October 1893. "Consett Local Board - The Water Supply to the Town - Filtration Beds Required". "The following certificate was read by Mr W.F.K. Stock FCS., FIC., Public Analyst of the County of Durham". Here followed a chemical analysis. Observation: "I do not consider this water to be fit and proper water for drinking purposes. Although, after careful experiment, I have come to the conclusion that it is free from sewage matters yet its appearance is so repulsive, owing to the large amount of suspended impurities, and the character of the microscopical organisms it contains is so objectionable, that filtration is absolutely necessary to render it a good and wholesome drinking water". Signed - W.F. Keating Stock.

This outspoken opinion was followed by the equally frank opinion of Dr George Renton, the Medical Officer of Health. Extracts from Dr Renton's report to the Consett Local Board, 9th October 1893. "So many complaints have been made to me (and not without reason) of the

condition of the water supplied by the Consett Water Company that I think it is my duty to say that in the condition it is received from the taps it is not fit for human consumption. If it must be used for drinking purposes it should be first boiled and filtered through animal charcoal".

Dr Renton continued: "In the face of the fact that cholera had appeared in the County, I would suggest that hand bills, similar to those issued last year, be again distributed throughout the District". Any comments or controversy arising from these reports by readers of the Consett Guardian are, unfortunately, not available since the offices and all the records of the Consett Guardian were destroyed by fire in 1939.

Mr John Calvert died on 22nd September 1893. He was one of the originators of the Water Company and had been connected with it for a period of 33 years. Mr J. Burdon, for many years Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Company died in 1893.

Owing to the extreme drought of 1893 the Company's supply of stored water became so diminished by the end of July that it was found necessary to restrict the supply for manufacturing purposes to one half the usual quantity. By the middle of October of that year the situation became so serious the industrial supply was disconnected entirely in order to maintain the supply for domestic use. Under the guidance and advice of Messrs T. & C. Hawksley, Civil Engineers of Westminster, plans were prepared and a Bill drawn up and deposited in Parliament with a view to obtaining powers necessary for the construction of further storage reservoirs and other works to increase the efficiency of the Company, and to cope with the twin problems of quantity and quality, both of which were most urgent and compelling. The Bill received Royal Assent on 17th August 1894 and was cited "The Consett Waterworks Act 1894".

The company started negotiating for the land necessary for the construction of an impounding reservoir on the Hisehope Burn and for the construction of the filter beds at Honey Hill the Company were obliged to meet. With all the preliminary survey work satisfactorily completed the work of construction was started. The work was undertaken by Mr John Scott, Contractor of Newcastle.

The construction of the filter beds was well advanced early in 1896 and by December was sufficiently advanced to allow three of them to be brought into use. The new main pipe was laid and filtered water was supplied through the Company's mains on the last day of 1896. The filter beds at Honey Hill were all in use and the project completed in 1897.

During the years 1896-1897 a duplicate pipe was laid between Annfield Plain and Stanley, and the Company's supply extended to Sunnyside, Streetgate, Hill Heads and Chopwell Colliery.

The Chairman of the Board, Alderman W. Boyd JP., died on 9 March 1897. He had served on the Board of Directors for 22 years.

Delay occurred in the construction of the Hisehope Reservoir owing to difficulties encountered with the foundation of the puddle bench. In 1900 further setbacks occurred owing to the great difficulty in obtaining suitable labour. The progress throughout the whole period of construction of Hisehope Reservoir, was disappointingly slow and it was not completed until the year 1905.

During the construction of the Hisehope Reservoir the licence of the nearby Moorcock Inn was transferred to a temporary building on the side of the reservoir. When the work was completed an application was made at the Brewsters Sessions to have the licence re-transferred to the original premises. The Temperance Party strongly opposed the application and, but for the over-ruling of the Magistrate on the Bench, the licence would not have been returned to the lovely moorland inn.

A tank constructed at Horsegate for the supply of water to the Spennings District in 1899 and the works and goodwill of the Chester-le-Street Water Company was purchased by the Consett Water Company in the same year.

In the year 1901 the water storage in Smiddy Shaw Reservoir was so seriously diminished that it was found necessary to, again, discontinue the water supply for industrial use and to curtail the domestic supply. The Company deposited a Bill in Parliament to obtain powers for further extension of works in order to meet ever increasing demands, and in 1902 an Extension of Works Act was obtained and cited as "The Consett Waterworks Act 1902". In the same year, by an agreement dated 5 April 1902, The Weardale and Shildon District Waterworks Company purchased the Consett Waterworks Company. An Act was obtained which sanctioned the enactment of the Amalgamation and cited as "The Weardale Works Act 1902". From and after the passing of this Act the Company became known as "The Weardale and Consett Water Company".

A LETTER FROM A SOLDIER

36 Ind. Fd. Sqn. I.E.
S.E.A.C.

23rd July, 1945.

Dear Mr Cooper,

Please accept my sincerest sympathies for you and Mrs Cooper on the loss of your son. It was my intention to write a long time ago but I wanted time to tell you something of Steve as I knew him, and of his life in the Sqn.

Steve joined the Sqn. just before I did, and in those days he was just 'Cooper' and I 'Fever', or more rarely 'Sir', for the Subalterns of the Sqn. have never had much respect for their 2 i/c. Steve had just taken over 'A' Tp. and soon settled down. Life was most pleasant in those days, for although we were stationed in Secunderabad, a typical military cantonment, we spent most of our time out in the country, training. For 6 weeks we were camped on a magnificent lake about 15 miles outside Hyderabad and spent all our time exploring the lake, swimming, and of course doing some training. Steve and I elected to teach our Madrassis Battle Drill, and had some great fun playing hide & seek among the rocks and chasing each other in Scout Cars and Armoured Carriers. While we were camping out we found the "Roda Castle", a very nice hotel overlooking Hyderabad. Here was excellent food and an incredible selection of wines and liqueurs, and Steve may have told you of the many pleasant and occasionally hectic parties we had there. As a Mess we always went out together - all six of us - a sure sign that we were a happy crowd, and we certainly enjoyed ourselves and each others company.

Later in that year, 1944, the Sqn. drove down to Cuddalore, a place on the East coast just South of Madras. The 600 mile journey took 8 days including a 2 day halt in Bangalore, and was good fun. The weather was magnificent and we slept out every night. Cuddalore was a life of Bailey bridges and rafts, with sea-bathing and fishing for our pastimes. It was here that Steve and 'A' Tp. founded the Madras Mail - the boat holding the record for rowing up to the Post Office and back. And it was here also that Barry Armstrong took over the Sqn. Our old O.C. - Dick Rothwell - was a grand chap, but under Barry the Mess was even more united.

When we returned from Cuddalore to Secunderabad we found that we were now part of 255 Tank Brigade and were on our way to the War.

I went on leave while the Sqn. drove the 2000 mile journey from Secunderabad to Poona and then right across India to Ranchi, near Calcutta.


The drive through the Monsoon could have been no fun, but when I met the Sqn. again in Ranchi they were full of tales of the fun they had had. In Ranchi we settled down to some serious combined training, and the first item of organisation was that each of the Tps. in the Sqn. be allocated to a particular Tank Regt. Barry told the 3 Tp. Comdrs. to work it out for themselves, but there was no working out to be done. Steve said straight away 'The Deccan Horse', Gerry Hodgson said 'Probyns', and David Orr 'The Gordons'. This was the start of Steve's great association with the 9th Royal Deccan Horse.

Having spent most of our time out of Secunderabad we, as a Unit, knew very few of the Tank Officers. It was clear that our Tp. leaders must know their Regiments well, and Steve achieved this in a startling and most effective way. The Brigadier had ordered experiments to be carried out for cutting tank tracks with explosives. Thus if a tank were bogged in a sticky spot the track could be cut quickly and the tank towed out lying its track as a small road to cover the bad ground. When Steve went round to the Deccan they wanted the top track out but did not tell Steve that the plate over the track was only 1/16" thick. Steve put on a pound of explosive and touched it off with the result that the thin plate was blown in and all the wiring to the instrument panel blown out. There was a Court of Inquiry, of course, but the Brigadier made very light of it all. The rest of the Brigade thought it a marvellous joke, especially the Deccan, and George Carr, then 2 i/c of the Regiment, nicknamed Steve as "Chance-it Cooper". I have never known a nickname catch on so quickly; in no time at all "Chance-it Cooper" was known throughout the Brigade, and the Deccan never tired of telling the tale about their Sapper Officer who destroyed a Sherman with a pound of explosive. The tale, naturally, grew in the telling.

This was all to Steve's advantage; everyone in the Deccan went out of their way to get to know him, and of course in no time at all Steve knew all of them. Because Steve was a very pleasant personality and very capable, a great friendship and respect grew up between him and the Regiment.

Well, we trained throughout that monsoon in Ranchi, and then in September started on our way to Imphal. This was another long convoy. A drive into Calcutta and then on flat cars along the line to Siliguri at the foothills of the Himalayas just below Darjeeling. Steve and I were in charge of a part of our convoy and had a grand run. We had had a new set of vehicles before leaving Ranchi, and so had no troubles. The scenery was really magnificent, for our route lay along the Himalayan

foothills for 3 days. Then we crossed the Bramaputra river and were in the Active Service area. A final day's run from Dimapur through the fantastic hill-road to Imphal, and we were in our Bde. Camp at Kanglatongbi.

As soon as the Bde. was concentrated training started again, but this time in more pleasant conditions. Our Camp site was some 3000 feet up, the Imphal Plain being over 2500, and the weather cold and sunny. We fought again all the battles that had taken place round this Imphal Plain earlier in the year, and worked quite hard. Two incidents come to mind. The first dealt with beehives, which look like this  and are explosive charges for blowing boreholes. For this I can enclose a copy of an entry in the Sqn. War Diary.

NO. 36 (Q.V.O.M.) IND. FD. SQN. I.E.

The peculiar incident of Tuesday 17 Oct. 44 or

Is there something in these beehives

Report by Capt. R.A. Fever, R.E.-

On the morning of Tuesday 17th Oct. '44, Lieut. Cooper was asked to blast some latrines for a nearby unit & decided to use beehive charges. As these have been little used in this unit, he took with him also 5 Havildars to study the effect of these charges. On reaching the lines of the unit he was met by a Capt. Lerwell & the party proceeded to the chosen ground.

These 3 beehives were placed in position and fired simultaneously. On going forward to inspect the damage the party noticed a swarm of large bees circling over the target at a height of some 30 ft. Before the Air Sentry could sound the alarm the bees swooped to the attack. Lieut. Cooper & Hav. 15395 with great presence of mind got away to a very good start but Capt. Lerwell though somewhat slower off the mark, rapidly gained the lead. The remaining four Havildars though undoubtedly running with great zest were not quite fast enough, and sustained excessively uncomfortable injuries to heads and faces. It is thought that the bees objected to what must have appeared to them to be most disconcerting behaviour on the part of the beehives.

Note by O.C. They weren't bees but hornets.

The second incident dealt with a magnificent flock of 20 ducks that we had acquired. One night a jackal killed one, and being Sappers our thoughts flew to booby traps to teach the jackals a lesson. Barry cribbed at large explosive charges and so we compromised with Verey light cartridges, and Steve took charge. The Sqn. was warned but it made no difference. The old Sappers and orderlies insisted on walking round the duck pen accompanied by Verey lights shooting up in the air, and the climax came at tea-time when the last light landed on the thatch roof of our most

imposing office (constructed with great expense and labour of bamboos and reeds). Barry and I were all for letting the place and its contents burn, but the Sappers in an excess of enthusiasm saved half the building and unfortunately most of its contents.

Early in December the Sqn. was detached from the Brigade and we moved into Burma. From Tamu we built bridges and remade the road to the Chindwin over which 19 Divisions were then crossing. I think the idea then was for the rest of 4 Corps to follow them on this route. 19 Div. however went through very fast to the Schwebo Plain, and the great deception plan was started. From this time on our moves and work were very hush-hush, so I am sure Steve told you nothing about them. The Sqn. was now attached to 7 Div. Engineers, and on Dec. 23rd we moved back to Tamu and then South to Kalemyo. Working with 7 Div. Engrs. behind first the Lushai Brigade and then a Bde of East Africans, we built a road to Gangaw and then on to Tilin Paule and Pakkokku. Our route ran through hills and jungle all the way and the road had to be wide enough for two lanes of traffic and good enough for the whole of 4 Corps to move along. Speed, as always, was vital.

It was an awful grind, but so very worth while, for by Feb. 12th we were within reach of the Irrawaddy River. There is no doubt either that the Japs had no idea of the forces moving down. They had seen only the E. Africans, but these were followed by 7 Div., our Bde., and then 17 Div. A Sqn. of the Gordons went into action for the first time between Paule and the river and a Jap Officer that was captured complained bitterly that their I branch had said that it was impossible for tanks to get down that route. Even then they had no idea that there was a Bde. of Shermans coming along.

Frank Messervy, the Corps Comdr. rightly saw that we had not been expected in those parts, and in an Order of the Day said that we must cross the river straight away with no time for fancy organisation. Feb. 14th was D Day, and on the night of the 12/13th, we moved to the river bank S.E. of Pakkokku. The lack of time for organisation was apparent in the fact that our Bridging Equipment did not arrive until 0.300 hrs. on the 14th with H. hour at 0600 - but it did arrive.

Barry had held many discussions in the Sqn. on our work, which was to build 3 tank rafts in the shortest possible time, and I think we were prepared for all eventualities.

Roughly the plan was that 7 Div. make the assault crossing near Pagan, going straight across the river. After the assault wave their engineers were to construct light rafts for ferrying anti-tank guns, mortars and

essential stores. We were given another beach about 2 miles upstream to construct our rafts and ferry our tanks from.

The assault wave ran into about 4 Jap L.M.G's, and gun concentration was put down on the Japs. Meanwhile 2 miles upstream we worked in peace. We had to cross 400 yards of soft sand to the water's edge and all the Bridging Lorries had to be towed across by tractors. This made the off-loading very slow and very soon the bridge-head looked just as a bridge-site should'nt. The Bridging lorries were towed down in twos and threes and the front ones off-loaded first could'nt be moved until all 3 of the train were off-loaded. Then they had to be towed out backwards. We didn't particularly mind the conglomeration of vehicles, for the river in front of us was over 2 miles wide, and behind us was a Sqn. of Shermans just itching to shoot some Japs.

The work did go very well; all three Tp. Leaders knew their jobs and the men had a fair idea. All the three rafts were finished between 13.00 and 14.00 hrs., the difference in times being due to the difficulty of distributing the equipment evenly between the 3 building sites. Well, the rafts were ready and were tested; the assault wave had recrossed successfully, but owing to the confusion of reorganisation the light rafts were not finished. The powers that be decided to let the tanks go, and I think our 3 rafts were the first across. We had a five mile round trip to make but our rafts were marvellously powered with a motor boat and 2 auxiliary propulsion units, and in spite of their bulk made a speed of 9 to 10 knots. Barry and I led the 3 rafts across in a motor-boat, and it was an exciting moment, but the bridgehead was clear. Our landing stage had not been built owing to the delay, so we crash-landed the first tanks and everyone was exceedingly happy. We were lucky, for the rafting equipment generally had suffered from its 600 mile journey over awful roads. 7 Div. Engrs. had innumerable snags to over-come, but our equipment was perfect and our rafts, 40 to 45 tons carriers as they were, were far and away the fastest on the river. A lot of credit for our equipment was due to the Bridge Coy. - fortunately the same people we had worked with in Cuddalore and old friends of ours.

The nicest compliment came from the Adjutant of 7 Div. Engrs. and he said that in the difficulties and seeming chaos on the assault beach he had forgotten all about us. Snags were abounding and tempers getting thin when suddenly down the river came our first raft, followed by another and yet another. He says he felt like cheering and is quite sure most of 7 Div. Sappers felt the same. After all one of our rafts could very nearly carry the loads of all their rafts together. Everybody felt happier

and their rafts were finished very soon after. God! I was proud of the Sqn. that day, and you can imagine Steve, David, and Gerry were pretty pleased with themselves. It must have been a marvellous feeling, the ultimate of achievement, to pilot those rafts that day. They all handled their rafts amazingly well, coming alongside with no fuss or bother in spite of the raft's awkwardness. They knew full well how much those thanks were appreciated in the bridge-head, and quiet smiles of satisfaction were on their faces.

We slept in the sand by the rafts that night, and for six days rafted from dawn 'til after dark. On the 17th we switched to a new beach that had been prepared and here the crossing was just under a mile. The rafts were much photographed, and I enclose 2 shots of Steve's raft - the only ones I have managed to get so far.

At the end of the 6 days we had ferried our Bde. across, and lots of other people besides. Steve and his Tp. crossed first out of the Sqn. and started off with the Deccan Horse on the push to Meiktila. With two regiments very soon deployed we smacked through such opposition as there was. Steve was always well forward with the leading tanks, but had very little work to do. There were few mines and no rivers, in fact water supply was our chief head-ache. Meiktila itself was well defended by some 2000 Japs, and the Deccan particularly had some very tough fights. On the first day a row of suspicious looking pots across a road halted one Sqn. Steve went forward to investigate, and dived into a house for a covered approach. He came across two Japs in one room who slung a grenade at him. Steve retaliated by throwing one of his. Steve got a small piece of the Jap grenade in his leg, and the Japs got several large pieces of Steve's grenade. Steve got out quickly and the tanks demolished the house, and the pots were found to be dummy. Steve walked back to the Bde. harbour and had his leg dressed and was out again next day.

After clearing Meiktila we stayed there waiting for Mandalay to fall, and being astride the Jap lines of communication the Japs flocked in to liquidate us. Just to make sure that they didn't the tanks went out every day hunting them down. This was a pretty trying time for Steve. Anti-tank mines began to appear pretty frequently, and Steve had plenty to do when he was out. The Deccan had several particularly bloody battles at one period, for a lot of Japs came up from the South complete with anti-tank guns and artillery. When Steve had no particular Sapper work to do he helped evacuated casualties from right forward. One or two times I know his work evacuating casualties was most sincerely appreciated by the Deccans, but Steve himself said little about it. Steve was out. I

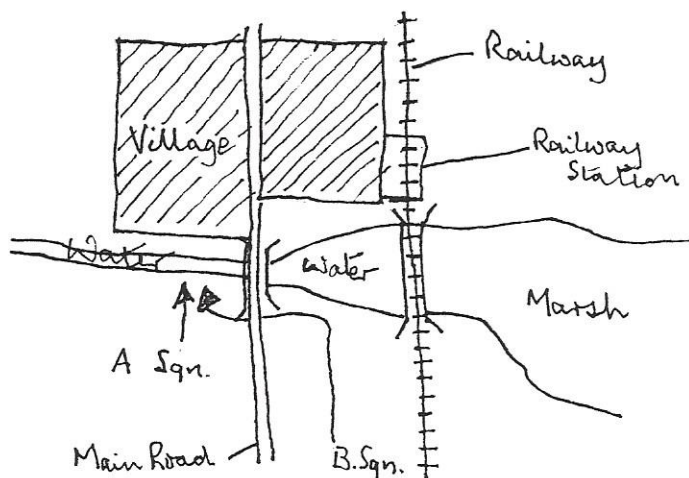
suppose, on an average of 3 or 4 days per week and on the other days spent him time swimming or sailing a little boat we rigged up, and of course preparing for the next show.

Steve had the happy knack of sleeping and really resting whenever possible, so that he was always very fit and cheerful. He was, of course, keyed up like every-one else while a show was on, and this nervous tension is most exhausting. Afterwards, he could completely relax, and so suffered not a bit from nerves.

At the beginning of April, 33 Corps having captured Mandalay, had advanced South to meet up with us. The day after this meeting we set off for Rangoon, the place always in our minds. I feel that there was a wealth of strategy in our month's stay in Meiktila, for the Japs had congregated good and strong just South of us, and the High Command rightly said - let them all come, then we can wipe them up in one go and have an easier passage further down the road. It took 10 days of hard fighting to get to Pyawbwe, only 25 miles South of Meiktila, and we had two tank regiments and three Bdes. of 17 Div. deployed. We did however kill an enormous number of Japs. Steve stayed in Pyawbwe with the Deccan and 17 Div. while 5 Div. and the other tank regiments took over the advance. After about another 5 days of hard going through Yamethin and round the Shwemyo Bluff, things went faster and faster, and we started clocking up 20, 30 and 40 miles a day. On April 22nd we captured Toungoo, 160 miles South of Meiktila, and here Steve and his Tp. rejoined the Sqn. On the 24th we were at the Pyu Chaung, and met our first bad water obstacle since leaving the Irrawaddy. 17 Div. again in the advance started to build a Bailey Bridge, but our Brigadier said we could not wait, and must improvise a crossing so that the Bde. as advance Tps. could push on. Barry and Steve did a recce and promised the Brigadier a crossing by 10 the next morning. The far bank was not cleared until 8 a.m. and the first vehicles were over at 10.5. The bridge, if it may be called such, was an incredible sight. A scissors bridge spanned to a platform resting on a sand-bank in the river, and from this platform another scissors spanned across on to the remains of a partially demolished Jap timber bridge. Steve kept this atrocity going for 24 hours, using vast quantities of spikes and wire to retie it together as it broke apart. During the 24 hours there was a rain-storm and the exit road went to pieces, and this Steve patched with brushwood and rubble. Somehow or the other he kept this bridge going until all but a few of the Bde. vehicles were over; about 750 were across. Then at 3 a.m. on the 26th the Jap bridge finally collapsed. This was not all, for after all that effort he got the Valentine tanks forward and picked up the scissors bridges,

and at 6 a.m. was the first to cross the Bailey on its completion, and had caught up with the Bde. by 7 a.m. Although the day before the Bde. had only advanced 10 miles from Pyu, this 20 miles was a flying start and we made another 40 miles that day.

The next day, the 27th Steve was up with the Deccan in the lead again. They pushed on to Pyinbongyi, a village on the 70th milestone from Rangoon. This village was strongly held and had good natural defences. George Carr, now commanding the Deccan, put in a Sqn. and Coy. of Infantry up



each side of the road. B. Sqn. between the road and railway embankment could not cross the Chaung or the embankment, and had to switch over the road to where the Chaung was narrower. The road bridge over the Chaung had been partially demolished and was blocked by a derelict Jap vehicle. The battle was very fierce meanwhile and the Infantry suffered many casualties. Steve went forward to recce the bridge and decided that a Sherman bulldozer

could push the Jap vehicle clear and then a scissors bridge could be laid across the gap so that additional tanks and Infantry could be pushed through. He called forward the Sgt in charge of the Scissors Bridge and showed him the job. The Sgt. then went back for his tank, and Steve for the bulldozer. He led the bulldozer forward, walking just in front of it, and was within a few feet of the bridge when a Jap in a foxhole near the railway station detonated an electrically wired bomb in the road. The tragedy was that the Jap was not interested in Steve, who had walked all over the bridge on his recce, but in the Sherman bulldozer, the occupants of which were shaken but uninjured, even though the tank was knocked out. Working it out afterwards, it was impossible for Steve to have detected the bomb, for all the 'phone wires were strewn across the road and 2 of these were used to fire the bomb which had been buried deep and covered. Steve was killed outright, and his death hit the Sqn. very hard. It was impossible to realise that he had gone. That evening nearly every Officer of the Deccan came round to say how sorry they were: as Lt/Col. Carr said, "Chance-it was a very great friend of the Regt."

Geoff Trainer of the Deccan got a Padre from 17 Div. the next morning, and Steve was buried near the bridge where he died.

Later as they came up, Officers of every Unit of Bde. and all of Bde. H.Q. staff came round to offer their sympathy. Then, if never before, I realised just how widely known and liked Steve was throughout the Bde. Steve was so much a part of the Sqn. that it can never be the same again. I know - and it is'nt.

It must have been a terrible blow for you both, and, however you felt about your son before he left you, you would have been very much prouder of the man he was when he died. Steve must have been very young when he left you as an Officer Cadet. You would have found him much more mature, quietly self-confident, and very capable, with an amazing number of friends - all strangers to you.

This was not an easy letter to write, but I do hope I have achieved my object. I know that Steve had little time to write, and while we were operating was not allowed to say what he was doing and where he was. Now we can say what we wish of the past operations. I felt that you would like to know more details of Steve's life out here. It is easy to tell you of all the fun we had and the things we did, but it is very difficult to express my sorrow and sympathy for you. I do hope you understand.

Yours very sincerely,

Richard Fever

Lt. Cooper was the brother of Mrs E. Pierce, a member of our Society.

The Bungalow, Front Street, Lancaster, Feb. 6/19
Newbiggen & Lancaster
J. D. THOMPSON,
 Painter, Paperhanger and Decorator
 Paints mixed to order.

Mr. H. Newbiggen
Dr. to GEO. JACKSON,
 Horse Shoer, General Smith and Hardware Dealer,
 RANSOMES' PLOUGH METALS ALWAYS IN STOCK.

FRONT STREET, STANLEY.
 7th 1923
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 FARMERS' IRONMONGER
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 ARMY CORN. COLLIERY CORN.
 GROCERS and PROVISION MERCHANTS,
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WARE, HARDWARE AND OILS, BOOTS, SHOES, &c.
 FRONT STREET, LANCASTER, DURHAM, Feb. 1923

Malton Colliery Office, Esh, Durham, May 11-1923
Newbiggen Farm, Lancaster
SIR S. A. SADLER, Ltd.
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Mr. F. Hamilton
Dr. to BLACK BULL GARAGE,
 TYRES, PETROL, OIL, SPARES, ETC.
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 AND WALLNOOK MILL, LANGLEY PARK,
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G. & H. PARKER,
 Grocers, Corn & Cake Merchants.

on demand.
 E. Lancaster Union Rural District.
 of the undermentioned Rates now due from you, viz.:-
 1927.
 District Council of Lancaster

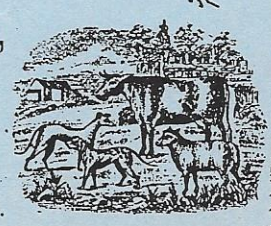
	Amount of Rate		
	£	s.	d.
and other	14.	13	3
with	14.	13	3
of Land	14.	13	10 2
in	14.	13	10 2
sums	14.	13	10 2
and	14.	13	10 2

BREECHES A SPECIALITY.
 OF I. JACKSON,
 Newsagent, Confectioner and General Dealer,
 Front Street LANCASTER.

RECEIPT.
 LANCHESTER PARISH OF LANCHESTER
 The 19 day of 1912.
 RECEIVED of Mr. J. Hamilton
 the sum of 7 pounds 13 shillings and 4 pence
 in respect of the Poor Rate of the above Parish, viz.:-

Lancaster, Co. Durham,

Mr. Hamilton Newbiggen
Dr. to THOMAS WILKINSON & SON,
 Veterinary Surgeons,
 Horse and Cattle Medicines of every description.
 OPERATIONS CAREFULLY PERFORMED.



Thomas Hamilton
 To Lancaster Farmers' Mutual Benefit Society Co., Ltd.
 HIGH BURNHOPESIDE FARM, LANCASTER,
 21st December 1923

No. 921 Harperley and Catchgate Steam and Water Corn Mills,
 TANTOBIE, ANNFIELD PLAIN STATION.
 8th 1922

Mr. J. Hamilton Newbiggen
 Bought of **MICHAEL M. HOBSON,**
 SEEDSMAN, &c.

Mr. J. Hamilton Newbiggen
 To T. Williamson & Son, M.R.C.V.S.
 Veterinary Surgeons.
 Steam Saw Mills, 1912
 Lancaster Jan. 30th 1912
 via Durham.

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: "BUCKHAM LANCASTER."