

PRISONERS OF WAR AT WINCHESTER.

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In 1776 the American Colonists revolted against the British Government. Soon they were joined by the French and the Spaniards—England's old enemies, who were burning to be revenged for the disasters and humiliations of the Seven Years' War. The Dutch, too, assumed an attitude of unfriendly neutrality, which speedily developed into open war, and Britain found herself involved in a world-wide struggle. Although in the end she emerged from the conflict beaten and shorn of her empire, yet during its continuance she gained not a few victories in minor engagements, and took no inconsiderable number of prisoners. It is of the fates and fortunes of some of these that the present paper treats.

Between the years 1778 and 1784 many prisoners of war found their way to Winchester, where they were lodged in the King's House, used since 1796 as barracks, which were burnt down in 1894, and have been replaced by buildings devoted to the same purpose. By the courtesy of Alderman Jacob of Winchester various interesting details of the sojourn by the Itchenside of these strangers have come to the writer's hand. "Winchester in 1778 had certainly not more than 5,000 inhabitants, no public lamps, and only two constables who, being tradesmen, kept themselves and their truncheons at home. The King's House was literally crammed with French and Spanish prisoners, and to guard these poor victims of a great war regiments of Militia were quartered in the city and suburbs. Small-pox and other diseases assumed the dimensions of a

plague, as may be seen from the parish books. In St. Peter's, Cheesehill, in 1761, out of 40 deaths, 32 were soldiers, and in 1753, in St. Maurice's, 23 soldiers out of a record of 74 died of small-pox." On July 4th, 1778, orders were received to prepare the King's House, Winchester, to receive the French prisoners, 500 strong, who had been taken by Admiral Keppel in the Pallas and Licorne. Attempted escapes were frequent, and on October 10th, 1778, we read that Elisha Gumison, John Lamoine, and John Meote, were tried at the Quarter Sessions for breaking out of the French prison, and were discharged. On September 15th of the same year, the Commissioners for sick and hurt seamen asked for contracts for "Centry Boxes and Hospital Cradles. — Apply to Mr. Pollard, King's House, Winchester." A grim comment on the glories of war! On September 18th—"Last week it was ordered that French prisoners escaping are 'to be treated as felons, fettered, and sent to other prisons. Officers breaking parole to be immediately locked up with their men, without the advantage of an exchange till the war is at an end.'" A French prisoner tried to break bounds. The sentries fixed bayonets, and he threw stones at one of them, who shot him dead. The Coroner's Inquest "sat the whole day following upon the body," and brought in a verdict of "justifiable homicide." In September, 1778, there was an alarm of a French attack upon Portsmouth:—"We hear it is now determined by the French to invade Portsmouth, and the same hath been signified by a noble lord, who has gained by proper means the important intelligence." About three months later, we are told on December 12th, "The French prisoners are not expected till next Tuesday, against whose reception the contracting bakers are hard at work, and a great number of oxen are depastured, to be ready for their support. The several regulations regarding prisoners of war, and adopted by the Commissioners, will soon be made public." Just a week later the journalist writes:—"The unavoidable delay in fitting up the King's House has retarded the arrival of the French prisoners; however, everything being now ready for their reception, 300 are expected this day, and 1,200 on Monday and Tuesday, under a strong guard of Militia." They had been locked up at Forton Prison with some Americans since July 27th. On February 27th,

1779, there was an attempt to escape. "On Monday night eleven of the French prisoners got out of their place of confinement at the King's House by undermining the wall. They were all taken and brought back next day, as was also one who had formerly made his escape." On January 9th of the same year :—"On Wednesday last, a party of French prisoners was conducted under a strong guard of the Lincolnshire Militia to the King's House, which begins to be very full. Many of them were barefooted and came sick and weak ; but such care has been taken of them with regard to proper food and clothing that they soon recovered, and only one has died out of near a thousand." Their lot was far from being enviable. April 3rd, 1779 :—"This week one of the prisoners in the King's House threw himself into a well, where, notwithstanding he was soon taken up, and proper means used to recover him, he was drowned. A distemper which carries off many of these unfortunate men at present rages in this prison." On the same date :—"The King's House, where the French prisoners are confined, is not going to be enlarged, as reported, but some of the apartments which were never yet completed farther than the brickwork (it was an old palace left unfinished by Charles the Second), are immediately to be put in order to receive an additional number of captives from other prisons." The garrison and the number of prisoners were alike large. May 15th, 1779 :—"Two more regiments of Militia are ordered on duty for this city on account of the daily increase of the French prisoners in the King's House. The King's House, in which the French prisoners are now confined, is one of the most convenient places for the purpose of any in the Kingdom. It was originally intended for a royal palace, begun by Charles the First (*sic*), and, if carried on according to the plan first laid, would have been one of the most commodious palaces in Europe. It now consists of one complete set of rooms of three stories in height, and will hold 3,000 people on an emergency. The airing ground now consists, since its enlargement, of four acres." Any chance of escape was good enough, however unsavoury. July 3rd, 1779 :—"Yesterday four of the French prisoners attempted to make their escape by getting into the drain, but were prevented by one of the guard." Still they came. August 21st :—"There have been no less than 1,000

French prisoners brought here under strong guard in the course of ten days past, in order to be lodged in the apartments in the King's House, lately fitted up for their reception, and many more are expected in a short time. There are now near 3,000 here." Sensational rumours are not a modern monopoly. August 28th, 1779:—"It is a fact that one of the French officers here, who was captain of a Dunkirk privateer, declared to one of his acquaintance in this city, that the combined fleets of France and Spain at present consist of 123 sail, 66 of the line, the rest frigates. That it is settled that the Dutch are to assist France with 14 sail of the line, and the French monarch's brother invited to be King of Ireland." Where did all the prisoners find room? The packing of the proverbial herring cannot compare with the crowding at the King's House, Winchester. "On Tuesday and Thursday last, nearly 500 more French prisoners were brought to the King's House here." Pass another week, and "we hear that there are in the course of a few weeks no less than 1,500 more French prisoners coming to the King's House from Plymouth and other places." On September 11th there was grave anxiety in Winchester:—"On Tuesday last there was a very numerous meeting of the inhabitants of this city and suburbs, to take into consideration the proper means of having the French prisoners guarded in case the two regiments quartered here for that purpose are called away on more immediate service for the defence of the country, they having received an order to hold themselves in readiness to march at an hour's notice. The business was opened by a sensible speech by the Mayor, followed by several pertinent harangues from many of the gentlemen present, when, after a very patient hearing, it was the unanimous opinion of all who were present that the inhabitants were totally unable to do that duty at a time when the prisoners behave in a very riotous manner, and are likely to commit the greatest acts of violence on an almost defenceless set of people. It was, therefore, resolved to petition His Grace the Duke of Chandos and the Secretary at War to have a sufficient force left to guard them, as there are near 4,000 prisoners here, and it is thought that there will be full 6,000 in a short time. The several petitions were at once drawn up, signed, and duly sent off by express." On October 2nd, 1779, we find that there

was difficulty in keeping order:—"On Tuesday last near on 200 more prisoners were brought to the King's House, and many more are expected, although they already amount to near 5,000. Since one of the prisoners, on account of his insolent behaviour, was shot dead by a centinel of the Bedfordshire Militia a fortnight ago, the rest have behaved in a more becoming manner." October 23rd:—"Notwithstanding that the number of French prisoners amounts to upwards of 5,000, we are informed that several thousands more are on their march for this place." But not yet were the numbers complete. "On October 30th:—"Thursday, 200 more French prisoners were escorted by a party of Light Horse from Salisbury Camp to the King's House prison here, and many more are daily expected." Gambling was very rife. November 13th, 1779:—"Early on Monday morning last all the gaming tables were burnt on the airing ground belonging to the French prisoners, owing to some of the prisoners having been found to secrete themselves under some of these tables in order to effect their escape." January 15th, 1780:—"Only three prisoners have escaped from the King's House since they have been confined here, although some of the poor wretches have been in prison more than two years." Duels were only too frequent. February 12th:—"Yesterday two Frenchmen in our prison fought a duel, when one of them was run through the body, and killed on the spot." Spanish prisoners joined the Frenchmen. March 11th, 1780:—"Orders are come express to the Agent for prisoners of War here to prepare sufficient apartments for the Spanish prisoners in Admiral Digby's fleet." On April 8th:—"There have been near 2,000 French, Spanish, and American prisoners brought to the King's House here within the Fortnight, and many more are expected from Forton and other places." Deadly sickness broke out. April 22nd, 1780:—"Many of the Spanish prisoners sent to this prison were ill of a ship fever occasioned by their close confinement and natural laziness. They are unwilling to get into the fresh air, on account of the great difference of the climate. There is no infection, however in the air, for Portsmouth, Portsmouth Common; and Gosport are in a similar predicament, having sickly ships in the harbour, particularly H.M. ship Marlborough, which has at present one-third of her complement in the hospitals at Haslar and Forton,

and sick quarters at Gosport, without having spread the least degree of fever amongst the three towns. This, we are credibly informed, is the opinion of Dr. Lind, physician to Haslar Hospital, who has been sent here to investigate the nature of the fever." Frenchmen and Spaniards did not always agree, and informers, who were plentiful, received scant mercy when detected. May 6th, 1780:—"Yesterday morning two of the Spaniards who are prisoners in the King's House here were found dead, and, as their bodies appeared shockingly mangled, it is supposed that they were murdered, but we cannot hear whether it is owing to any quarrel between them and the French which often happens, or to any dispute among themselves." Still more hapless captives arrived, and sickness was rife. May 20th, 1780. "On Wednesday last upwards of 200 Spanish prisoners were brought from Forton to the King's House here under a strong guard. More are expected in a few days. We have the pleasure to assure our readers that the fever here amongst the prisoners is greatly abated." On June 3rd an attempt at combined escape was partially successful. "This week upwards of 30 Spanish prisoners made their escape out of the King's House, the greatest part of whom have been brought back, and diligent search is making after those who have not been taken. About 20 were taken up near Southampton from whence it is supposed they intended to take a vessel and carry her to France." Before the 8th of July many a poor prisoner was tossing on a fever-stricken bed. "The Committee appointed to report on the state of health of the French prisoners state that the disease originated with the Spanish prisoners from an infection brought on shore with them, and the result of their indolence and filthiness. It was a contagious malignant gaol fever. The disorder was dangerous, yet never spread to the inhabitants. Dr. James Carmichael Smith, physician of the Middlesex Hospital examined into the matter. The burials during the last two weeks averaged five each week. All through the heat of summer the disease lasted." August 26th, 1780. "The fevers that prevailed among the prisoners in the King's House are at length abated, and at this time very few are sick. As there is great room here, we daily expect prisoners over to make up the complement now that the disorders are ceased,

which was the sole reason that no fresh men have been sent here for some weeks past, on which account other prisons are loaded." By November 4th the West Kent Militia had marched into winter quarters at Winchester to do duty over the prisoners in the King's House, and on December 16th there were still French prisoners at Forton near Gosport. The Dutchmen came with the beginning of 1781. On January 19th "200 Dutch sailors, prisoners of war, were conducted to the King's House under a strong guard," and on February 3rd we are told "Last week several hundred more of Dutch prisoners arrived at the King's House here, and many more are soon expected." The allies of France were not always over zealous in her cause. Just three weeks later, on February 24th, 1780, we are told of a wholesale transfer of allegiance. "Last week upwards of 70 of the Dutch prisoners confined in the King's House, entered into our Marine service, and immediately marched off for Plymouth." There was a brave and generous Dutchman among the prisoners. March 24th, 1781 :—"Lieut. Jansens, of the Marines, late of the Dutch ship of war Rotterdam, who came to this place with Mr. Diggons, of Chichester, appointed by the Duke of Richmond to supply the necessities of the Dutch prisoners in the King's House, has received a genteel present from the States for his gallant behaviour during the several engagements sustained by that ship, which reward he generously distributed towards the wants of his fellow countrymen in this and other prisons. On April 17th 200 more Dutch prisoners reached Winchester under a strong guard, and on the same day there was a serious affray in the prison. "On Monday last three Spanish prisoners in the King's House drew out large knives which they had each of them concealed, and attacked one of the sentinels on guard in the daytime, and attempted to stab him several times, but he man defended himself against them with his bayonet. The centinels nearest to him, perceiving their comrade's danger, one of them immediately discharged his piece at the Spaniards, without effect, but as they did not think proper to desist, another centinel discharged his piece, and killed one of them dead on the spot. The others were immediately seized, their knives taken from them, and they were put under close confinement." Release came at last to some of the captives whom

death and hardships had spared. May 5th, 1781 :—On Tuesday last a number of French prisoners went off from the prison here to Poole to go on board a cartel ship lying at that port." The 3rd Battalion Gloucestershire Militia with five or six other Battalions guarded the prisoners until, in 1783, blessed peace came again. There are entries in the Corporation records, giving leave to the prisoners to hold "room court martials" for the settlement of disputes amongst themselves, and for the trial of minor offenders. "Farmer George" reviewed the troops then on guard at Winchester in 1778, when the Light Infantry lined the road from Mr. Penton's house (which stood opposite the Russian Gun in the Lawn) to the camp. Dean Kitchin says in his History of Winchester: "Hessian mercenaries were brought over, and 7,000 of them encamped on the downs above the city. Winchester was then seen to be a proper military centre, lying as it does between London and the great seaports and arsenals of the South of England. From that time onwards the military settlement, at first temporary and occasional, in later years permanent, with the King's House as a Barrack and Depôt, has formed a large element in the life of the city."

The Gloucestershire Militia, when guarding the prisoners, left a lasting memento of their sojourn at pleasant Winchester. The well-known clump of trees upon St. Catherine's Hill, visible from afar, was planted in a single day by a company of this regiment. In October, 1782, ninety-four Dutch prisoners were brought under strong guard from Forton prison to the King's House, and many 3-lb. loaves of bread for the prison hospital were required. In the previous April another strong guard from Forton had marched in with no fewer than 313 French, Spanish, and Dutch prisoners. By the middle of April, 1783, all the French and Spanish prisoners at Winchester had been, or were being, sent home. A number of Frenchmen sailed from Southampton in a cartel on June 2nd. There were still 341 Dutchmen at Winchester, out of more than 1,000 left in England, who were to be paid for by their own Government during the continuance of the truce between the two countries, which lasted for eight months before the preliminaries of peace were signed. All Dutch prisoners were to be massed at Winchester by the end of April, 1783, and

other prisons were to be closed. May 1st brought all the captives from Forton. Two days later 178 Dutchmen marched in from Stapleton, and on May 5th, 100 Dutchmen and Frenchmen came from the same place. ; 156 Dutch prisoners under a strong guard from Plymouth seem to have closed Millbay Prison. 140 of the Dutchmen were speedily exchanged, leaving 685 at Winchester, and Captain Raidt, the Dutch agent, said that he was satisfied with their treatment. The Hollanders departed by degrees, and on Feb. 16th, 1784, there were bargains to be had at the King's House. Very cheaply were sold "the stores of H.M. Prison of War, Winchester, including 8,000 hammock posts and rails, 4 by 4 inches and nine feet long, 160 hospital cradles (for fractures), with sacking bottoms, about 1,200 old hammocks and coverlets, and the paling round the airing ground." This four-acre airing ground was on the west side of the King's House, beyond the ancient castle moat, through which the railway now runs. During the construction of the railway, the bones of numerous prisoners were disinterred. The site of the airing ground and of the powder magazine are now covered with villas, waterworks, schools, cottages, and other buildings, the ancient Roman Catholic cemetery of St. James being the only time-honoured landmark. These facts modify the remarks of Dean Kitchin in his History, where he says, "From the close of the Seven Years' War, when the prisoners were set free, we have no trace of a foreign element in Winchester till in the Reign of Terror a new class of refugees made their appearance. There had been Huguenots, court soldiers, and peasant soldiers, and now came priests. As many as eight or nine hundred of them, sometimes even more, were lodged in the King's House and formed a very characteristic element in the society of the city. They were received very kindly, and the citizens, as well as the authorities, did their best for their support. We find notice of their educated interest in the publication in 1796 at Oxford, at cost of the University, of an edition of the Vulgate New Testament, "*in usum cleri Gallicani in Anglia exulantis*," edited "by the care and zeal of some of the said clergy now sojourning at Winchester," and we have a record on the walls of their chapel at

Winchester of their gratitude, when, at the end of their four years of exile, the English Government, deeming it necessary to place a large force in garrison at the King's House, transferred the exiles to other spots." They were so grateful that they actually offered to make flannel clothing for the English soldiers. On June 12th, 1793 :—"A report is very current here that some French prisoners are coming to the King's House, and that the priests are to be moved in consequence." But the troops were at first quartered in the Soke Barracks, beneath St. Giles' Hill, and the priests were left in peace for a time. Dec. 26th, 1794 :—"The Barracks which are preparing in the Soke and the Riding House in Southgate Street are in great forwardness ; they will, when completed, be very comfortable, and able to accommodate 500 men." In April of that year, three battalions of the German Legion, 3,500 strong, were in quarters at Winchester. With the end of the war, French and other prisoners, taken in strife, passed away from Winchester, let us hope, for ever.
