

Sir Francis Worgan FESTING, KCMG, CB. – forgotten local hero

In the graveyard behind High Littleton Church is a stone inscribed to the memory of Mary Morton FESTING, who died on 3rd April 1833, aged 2 years & 2 months, and her infant brother Morton, who died in January 1835 only 2 days after he was born. Whilst they made little mark on this earth, their brother Francis was a national hero in his day.

Their parents, Capt. Benjamin Morton FESTING, RN, of Andover and Caroline Jane WRIGHT of Hinton Blewett, married in the latter parish on 24th July 1827 and had 5 children, Mary Morton (1831), Henry Blathwayt (1832), Francis Worgan (1833), Morton (1835) and Augustus Morton (1837). The FESTINGs lived in High Littleton from 1832 until 1837 and Benjamin was a respected member of the Vestry.

Francis Worgan FESTING, the second son, was born at High Littleton on 24th July 1833, educated at the Royal Naval College, New Cross, entered the Royal Marines as a cadet and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Marine Artillery three weeks before his 17th birthday. In 1854 he served with the Baltic expedition and was awarded a medal. Francis commanded a mortar in the flotilla employed against Sebastopol from June 1855 until its fall and was also at the bombardment and surrender of Kinburn. For his part in this campaign he received a medal and clasp, was made a Knight of the Legion of Honour and awarded the Turkish medal.

Francis' next war service was as adjutant of the artillery with the China expedition of 1857-9, when he assisted in the blockade of the Canton river and storming of the city, for which he was awarded a medal and clasp and was promoted to major.

It was however in the Ashanti war of 1873-4 that Francis most distinguished himself. He was selected to command a detachment of Royal Marines, which was sent to the Gold Coast in May 1873, to help repel the Ashanti army, which was threatening Cape Coast castle. In the following month Francis commanded the forces, which defeated the Ashanti army in two engagements on the same day. He was subsequently placed in command of the regular troops and made responsible for the defence of the Gold Coast. In another engagement with the Ashanti in October 1873 he was slightly wounded and a week later was seriously wounded, whilst attempting to rescue a fellow officer, who lay dying. Francis recovered and was promoted to colonel in 1874 and appointed a member of the executive council of the government of the Gold Coast. For his efforts he received the thanks of both Houses of Parliament on 30th March 1874 and soon after was made a Companion of the Bath and Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George.

Sir Francis FESTING was appointed adjutant general of the Royal Marines in August 1876, an aide-de-camp to Queen Victoria in July 1879 and colonel commandant of the Royal Marine artillery in September 1886. He married three times but his first two wives sadly died within two years of marriage. Francis died at Donnington Lodge, Newbury on 21st November 1886, aged 53 and was buried with full military honours at Eastney cemetery, Portsmouth. He is remembered today by a road near the Royal Marine establishment at Eastney, which bears his name. A picture of Francis FESTING appeared in the Illustrated London News of 25th April 1874.

Michael L. Browning