



RICHARD HOLBECHÉ LETTERS FROM INDIA

by Janet Jordan



When Lieutenant Colonel Richard Holbeche wrote his diary in 1892, he was 42 years of age and had recently retired from the Army on full pay. Even then he had a charming way of describing the people and places with whom he was involved as a child growing up in Sutton Coldfield and 'The Holbeche Diary' in Sutton Coldfield Local Studies Library is a joy to read.

However, this gift of writing emerged many years before that. Early letters of his have recently come to light (written mainly to his widowed mother, Emma) recounting his daily life as an Army officer, stationed with the 104th Bengal Fusiliers in India and other parts of the world.

His first assignment in 1870, as an Ensign, brought the following delightful batch of letters from the Punjab. As a Gentlemen Cadet Officer, a Probationer for the Indian Staff Corps, he enjoyed a sumptuous and exhilarating lifestyle, at the same time enduring some of the real discomforts suffered by the men under his command, particularly the unbearable heat.

The North-West Frontier, although relatively peaceful in those days, was the main line of invasion into India. The Army had to be ready for battle at any time and we learn from his letters not only of the soldiers' long marches between camps but of the interesting places they were able to visit en route. We see the splendour of the British Army, but also the way they treated their Indian servants. Also apparent, is his aptitude for musketry - a skill which was later to earn him medals in the Third Burmese War(1885-1887).

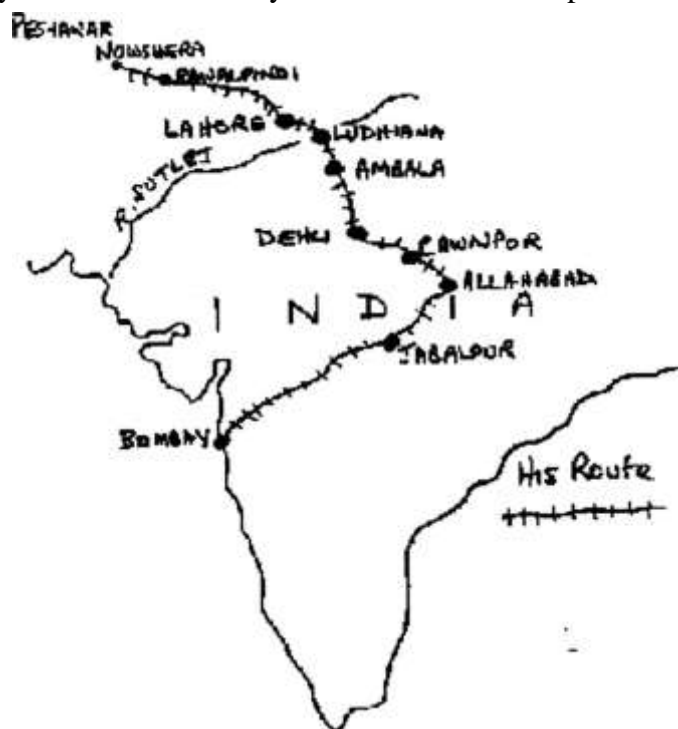
These letters kept flowing even after his return to England in late 1871, but, sadly, only a very few are available to us at present and are all the more reason to savour.

(N.B. In the following translations, the spellings are his, the italics are mine, both of which are open to debate!)

Nowshera July 5th 1870

You will see from above that I have arrived safely here. The place is very hot. There is no town only the barracks on a sandy plan. I will tell you of our journey up from Bombay. We left it on Wednesday June 22nd midday and reached Jubbalpore (Jabalpore) on the night of Thursday.

Going up the Ghant mountains the scenery is very beautiful and the line is a magnificent piece of engineering. The railway carriages in Bombay are very comfortable, with beds, etc. We stopped occasionally at stations at which we could get meals, but we had to pay tremendously for it. At Jubbalpor we stayed at Relner Hotel and called for orders the next day. In the evening we started again and reached Alahabad (Allahabad) on the following day and came on through Delhi and Cawnpore up to Umballa (Ambala), where we had to get further orders. We stayed a day there and started for Londiana (Ludhiana) where we had to cross the Sutlej. The river was so flooded that we had to stay a day there, and we crossed the



next. The carriage was put into a ferry boat and rowed across. In the middle of the river the current was so strong that our boat was carried down. The carriage was upset with us sitting in it. My luggage was on the top and in falling my uniform case was broken to slivers, but luckily the tin case kept the things together. The Hindoos all fell down and prayed and could not be made to work. A boat put off, helped the boat in, and took us off, but another ferry boat 5 minutes afterwards sunk in the same place and a civilian only just escaped with his life and lost all his baggage. Just fancy, we were from ½ past 12 to ½ past 7 in crossing the river alone.

Lahore on the 30th. We then took to the Dak Garrie a kind of carriage with two horses. They are changed every six miles. They go at a gallop the whole way up and down hill. I am obliged to have servants. A bearer, to dress and do everything for you. A sice (syce) for the horse. A doby (dhobi) to wash your things, two punkah coolies to pull the



punkah and a beastie (bhisti) to see to your tub. It is necessary to have three as one will not do another's work on account of their caste.

Nowshera – July 20th 1870

We have lost two more men by heat apoplexy, well in the evening dead the next morning. We received a telegram yesterday saying that Prussia & France had declared war, but I am afraid it will not affect us. I shot a jackall the day before yesterday. There are a great number about here and, as I lay awake in the barrack square on Monday, four trotted by within a yard of my bed. We all sleep out at night with nothing but a pair of pyjamas and a night shirt on. This heat is very great. The thermometer in the mess room (where a Punkha is kept going all day) has been varying between 108^o and 112^o for the last week. We have dust storms every two or three days and then it becomes as dark as night and we have to shut ourselves up, and although our doors are all closed the dust comes in through the cracks and nearly suffocates us. We shall have plenty of shooting down at Alahabad & Jabulpore - tigers, bears and wolves - so that I hope I shall be able to bring you back some skins.

Nowshera – August 8th (1870?)

We mess at ½ past 8 now. Soup first, then fish, four entrées, generally two or three joints, two curries, sweets, cheese, after that coffee is handed round & cigars and then we go to the billiard-room. I never smoke the mess cigars as they are too expensive. Our mess is certainly very good, but it ought to be, for it is the most expensive mess in India. I generally breakfast at about 8 and then have cold meat and fruit, and I have sandwiches sent over to my quarters for tiffin.

Nowshera 1870/1 – September 23rd

I hope the Prussians will spare Paris, but by the time you get this everything will of course be known. I have just changed my quarters as Hudleston has gone off with a detachment of 110 men to Clerat (*Cherat*). They started on Saturday morning at 3 o'clock on 30 elephants and more than 50 camels. It was quite a sight to see them march,



I am drawing nearly £250 a year.

We get up every morning at 5.00 and even then, before parade is over, it gets very hot. You will see that the ink is very bad. It dries up so soon. Mail every fortnight to the Punjab.

Nowshera October 10th 1870

Our pay is £20 per month, my messing generally comes to about £140. This includes hospitality, band and mess subscription, hound subscription etc and house rent

Messing etc., say	140
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Servants:

Bearer - indoor servant	8
Kitmutgar (<i>Khitmutgar/Khidmutgar</i>) waits at table	8
Syce - groom	6
grass-cutter (<i>ghaskata - collects grass for horses</i>)	4
2 Punka (<i>Punkha</i>) coolies, about ..	7
Matur (<i>Mater</i>) - sweeper	4
Beastie (<i>Bhisti/Bheesty</i>) - he waters your horse, servants, etc	5
Dhobie - washing	5
Horse, corn etc sho-ing costs	6
	<u>194</u>

So you see, there is not much left for extra expenses.



Nowshera – December 17th 1870

The Governor's camp looked very nice, scores of elephants. He drives about in great pomp. A carriage with four camels, a rider on each, the camels covered with scarlet cloth. Then his outriders and escort of cavalry look very well. I suppose all this barbarous splendour is intended to awe the niggers. At the races in Peshawar, there were a great many nigger grandees, dressed most splendidly with such tremendous turbans and with



gold and silver all over them. I assure you parroquets are the most noisy, quarrelsome, cruel little birds possible - they are always killing each other. It will take us a month to get to Lahore. I will do all I can to get feathers for Gertie's and Edith's (*his sisters*) hats.

Camp Allahabad, February 2nd 1871.

I will tell you of our march or rather of my doings since I last wrote (a month). We marched on the 20th of December at 5 am. The Vth band played us out for more than 2 miles and all the officers and most of the men turned out to bid us goodbye. It was very

sad crossing the Indus, under the Fort at Attock. The Regt. crossed it just 15 months before going to Peshawar and we have left 150 men the other side, nearly all of which were carried off by the cholera of '69. We reached Hussan. ab. dal (*Hasan Abdal*) on Xmas day and halted two days. Hussan (*Hasan*) is a beautiful place, with a nice river and a hill looking over the camp with the tomb of Lalla Rokh (*Lalla Rookh - Thomas Moore's poem*) at the top. I shot seven brace of quail there and two duck. I went to see the tanks (lakes) with the sacred fish, we reached Pindee (*Rawalpindi*) about 10 days after. Most of our marches were from 10 to 16 miles and as far as Pindee I walked the whole way reserving my horse for hunting. I got seedy with ophthalmia. I was obliged to have my eyes continually poulticed and poppies and hot water put on them, and afterwards caustic put in. I was obliged to be carried in a dhoolie (*doolie*) as far as Jhelum.



Before getting to Pindee we passed through a pass called the Gates of the Punjab. On one of the hills there is a splendid monument to John Nicholson (*British Commander*). At Googeranwallah (*Gujranwala*), we went to visit

the tomb of Runjed (*Ranjit*) Singh. It was very fine but nothing to the one of Johangir the Emperor of Delhi at Shadra (*Shahdara*). That was all white marble, four pinacles of great height at the corners with a dome in the centre. The working of the marble and the precious stones inlaid was beautiful. At the palace of Lahore is another tomb of Runjed Singh the son of the above "the lion of the Punjab" (*they stayed at Lahore for 4 days*) The next morning we got to Toondla (*Tundla*). I with 4 or 5 others went by rail to Agra returning at night to see the Taj (*Taj Mahal*). I cannot in the least describe to you the magnificence of this place. It is beyond what one can possibly imagine. You can

scarcely believe that Paradise can be more beautiful. The flowers, the fountains, the trees, the walks, and gateway all white marble, and then the building itself is superb. The whole of the inside walls and the tomb are of marble with turquoise, malahite, agates and all sorts of gems let in. The inside is quite dark, but they light it up with a blue light, and you can see the stones beautifully.



The band played on the platform of the station at Toondla and crowds of people came to hear it. The hunting here is very good. My little dogs are getting on very well and are getting very fond of me, but it is getting rather hot for all three of us to sleep on one bed so they take it in turns.

Allahabad – April 5th 1871

It is now nearly a month since I heard (*from you?*) and I expected to by this mail, but to my great disgust we have got a telegram to say that the mail steamer has come to grief in the Red Sea, but I suppose they will send on the mails at once. We have just finished



our Sky Races. I pulled off the half mile and the $\frac{3}{4}$ handicap. The sergeants (*Sikhs*) gave a ball last Friday. It was beautifully managed and went off very well. The Col and Mrs Harris were there. The adjutant Genl Brigade Major, Hon Judge Spankie and all of us; the room was beautifully decorated and lighted and the supper was excellent. The Sergeants are such a superior body of men and look so nice and gentlemanly in their mess jackets, for they dress nearly the same as us. The Governor General is coming tomorrow, as a legislative council is being held here, and all the swells in India are congregating here. I have to carry the color to the station with the guard of honour tomorrow at 5 am to meet him. Sir William Muir gives a grand ball next week to the Viceroy and Lord Napier and we have all invitations. I must say the people of Allahabad are most hospitable, and make a great deal of us. I suppose it is because they have not had a European regiment quartered here for so long. The 72nd Highlanders passed

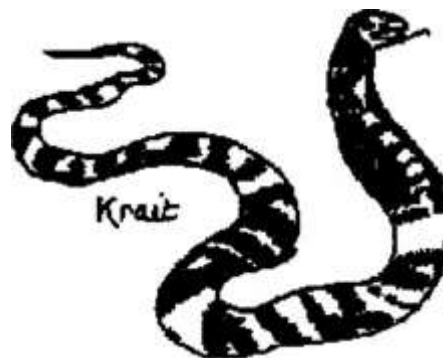
through here in three detachments on Saturday, Sunday and Monday and we entertained them. They have only just come from home. It was very nice to see their healthy looking faces, rather a contrast to our yellow bilious ones. I am very glad that Cambridge has won the boat race again. And so Paris has really fallen at last. You evidently do - but I really cannot feel sympathy for them and think they have had their deserts. Just fancy an army of Englishmen giving themselves up in the way the French have in several instances. I see that the Emperor is coming over to England, where he will be certain to be treated well. I suppose he will fight very shy of London Bridge during his stay.

April 6th

We had a very hot march of about 5 miles to the station this morning. Just fancy full dress in this weather. The Viceroy looked very fagged and very dusty and dirty. I will now give you my opinion about the abolition of the purchase system. If it is done away with, it will be a great thing for me in more ways than one. It would be quite impossible for me to purchase even by our own system and that would be very awkward. Our system corresponds to the over regulation system in the other part of the line and is recognised as such and it would be very uncomfortable for me to reap all the benefits of promotion without paying for it as everyone else would do. Again, I shall be able to exchange into any regiment of the line without paying a large sum. According to the present system if I wanted to exchange into a purchase regiment, I should perhaps be obliged to pay £300 or £400. Then, if purchase is done away with, this will be particularly useful to me as there are rumours of our going home soon. In that case, I should certainly get my

lieutenancy directly after landing. I do not think the Colonel would be up to his work at home as he is gouty.

I have cured the skin, skull and horns of the Black buck I shot. There are a great quantity of snakes here. A charmer was here this morning he stood just in front of my quarters and blew on a reed, which sounds like a bagpipe and two came out of holes in the verandah and let him take them up without attempting to bite him. Murphy, an assistance surgeon who is attached to us (we have four doctors now, as the authorities are expecting an epidemic) was unpacking his clothes yesterday when a krait came out and he killed it.



It is the most dangerous snake in India, worse than the cobra. There are also quantities of musk rats. It is strange that, if one runs over a case of wine, the whole case is undrinkable as it tastes so strongly of musk.

Allahabad, May 3rd 1871.

You will be sorry to hear that I have been very seedy with fever again, it is the regular Peshawar Valley fever which we must have brought down with us, and from which a great many of our men are suffering now. We are a very sickly lot just now we have only twelve officers at head quarters and out of them 5 are on the sick list. The captains have to do subalterns' work and they do not like it at all and consider it very undignified. Did I tell you that the box has arrived in Bombay. I have not sent for it yet as there is a difficulty in getting money orders for Bombay here, and they will not take Bengal Bank Notes. It has cost 20 rupees coming out. We have had dust storms, with a good deal of thunder and lightening every evening and they cool the air very much. I am going to send this letter by Southampton. Look at the date I want to see how much slower it is in reaching England than by sending it by Brindisi. I see that those rascally Frenchmen are still fighting among themselves and committing all sorts of atrocities. What a pity they were not exterminated.

Allahabad – June 11th, 1871 (received July 17th)

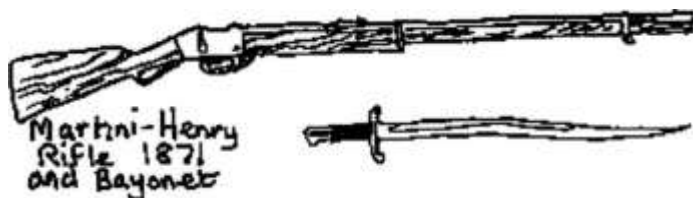
We are to go up to the fort on the 14th, I believe it is rather a good place to be in during the rains. I suppose you are in London now. What do you think of the Exhibition? The papers say it is a very second-rate affair. The rains are just commencing and it is very hot. There is no breeze and there is a hot steamy feeling that is very unpleasant.

We hear that the 68th are to relieve us. They are to embark from England in February in which case we shall be home about May. I shall send this letter by Southampton. Please tell me the day you get it on. I shall post it today. I hear from Kashmir that they are

having very good sport. Roberts has shot a panther and an ibex and Parker has shot two bears, and a quantity of smaller deer. I wish I was up there with them and my rifle. I hope to get some good shooting in the winter and the quail come in again during the rains. The Ganges and the Jumna are already beginning to rise. I will send you a kind of plan of the Fort sometime that will give you a notion of its shape etc. It was built by the Emperior Akbas (Akbar) but has been modernised by us. There is a large arsenal in it and a Palace for state prisoners but that is not used now. We have had several severe earthquakes lately.

The Ford, Allahabad, July 1st 1871

The Jumna has been rising for some time, as we are in the middle of the rains and it is a splendid stream now, rushing along at a fearful pace and roaring. Unfortunately, just under our window there is a back current and we get dead cattle and occasionally dead niggers deposited there and no-one can get there to take them away. The Ganges is now more than two miles wide and the Fort is surrounded except on one side. There is some talk about a dam or bund, called Akban bund, giving way, in which case there will be an immense loss of life and property and although we shall be quite safe we shall be isolated and unable to get away. The Ganges is changing its course and washing away everything. It has already taken away a tremendous piece of land and also the artillery butts.



We amuse ourselves with playing battledore and shuttlecock with rackets. I went round the arsenal yesterday and saw the Martini Henry rifle for the first time. We are to be armed with it when we get home. We still lose men every now and then from cholera but it is not an epidemic. The floods up country must have done a great deal of damage as we see the roofs of houses and quantities of bodies coming down, and fish, very much larger than a man, quite dead. My bearer came in one day with a cast mark over his nose. I kicked him down the steps very sharply.



bearer

Ford Allahbad, July 22nd 1871.

I am not by any means well. I have given up beer, by O'Neill's advice, and drink brandy and water for dinner and two or three glasses of Port afterwards. The rain is so perverse

and always comes on just as we are starting for our ride, so that we rarely get any exercise at all. The river is very high still. A telegram came down last night from Agra telling the



authorities at the new bridge to look out, as there is a tremendous flood coming down. It is very nice having a balcony over the river and at night it looks quite romantic with the moon on the water. The Calcutta steamer came up last week with crowds of niggers on board (to shovel the coal)). We received the Maharajah of Scindia with a salute of 19 guns last Monday week. He came to bathe in the

Ganges and rub himself over with mud. He is, I suppose, the greatest swell in India and the Viceroy is very careful to keep on good terms with him. I see by this morning's telegraph that the Queen has decided to do away with Purchase. I am glad of it, as it gives a poor man a better chance, but I doubt if it is a good thing for the army in general as I am afraid there will be a very different stamp of man creeping in by competitions. I see they talk of giving us, who passed out of Sandhurst on the A list, £450 for our Ensigncy.

Allahabad – Sept 2nd 1871

We were inspected last week by General Tyler who complimented us very much. He has just been relieved by Sir Harry Tombs, a KCB and a VC man very high and mighty and thinks a great deal of his position. He held a levy yesterday to which all the garrison had to go. I get on very well with my musketry work. It is rather hard just now, as I have to put 38 men, the 3rd class shots, through a separate course. Our Padre fainted this morning, during his sermon. He was just preaching about pride, and had just said that a fall usually followed it, when down he went. I am very sorry, he is a good little man. He cut his head against the Reading desk.



Despite what he says in his letter of June 11 1871, he was soon to be on his way home to Gosport, where his Regiment were currently stationed, and, back in England, on 1 November 1871 he was promoted to Lieutenant Richard Holbeche.

Sources:

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