WINFORD'S "OLD MILITIA BARRACKS" – AN EXPLANATION

Arthur Wellesley – soon to be promoted to Duke of Wellington – was known in military circles to be a meticulous planner of any military campaign. He had been instructed to fight and win a war (1809-1814), intended to drive out Napoleon's invading French armies from Portugal and Spain. Hence the need for a constant supply of reliable gunpowder, some of which was to be manufactured at Winford's powder mill.

Hence a string of strong wooden carts, each pulled by two sturdy shire-horses, would be needed to ferry barrels of that gunpowder, under escort the twelve miles down to the quayside at Bristol's busy harbour. Such horses needed to be re-shoed from time to time, requiring the service of a skilled Blacksmith and his assistants. In the middle of Winford there was already in existence a long stone-built Forge and close by a two-storey stone cottage to house the Smith, his assistants and any family members.

Gunpowder was a dangerous product and needed to be guarded; hence the decision to build a Barracks on the north side of Winford Brook to house two dozen or so militia soldiers. Their responsibilities would be to escort each cartload of powder on the journey to Bristol, and then help to bring the carts back again – five or six days a week, all the year round, whatever the weather!

Those Militia

The militia were local, part-time volunteer solders – if you like the "Dad's Army" of the 19th Century. They would have been trained enough to look after their muskets, and kitted out with basic military uniforms and footwear. Since England's professional army – 22,000 strong – was fighting a tough campaign against the French, it made sense to have a local force to do all the escorting of gunpowder barrels.

The Gunpowder

Wellesley's tactics in the difficult terrain of Portugal and Spain required him always to have a well-equipped "artillery train" working alongside each unit of his army; there would be siege-cannon needed against any French-held fortress or town, and field cannon for use in more open countryside.

One of the sources of gunpowder was a mile further down the Chew Valley. Here there was a leat installed to maintain a supply of water from our brook, driving three wooden waterwheels which produced the power. In Littleton Lane two old buildings are still called "Powder Mill Farm" and "Powder Mill Cottage"; they each have an unusual number of outbuildings for the needs of nowadays.

Barrels of powder were loaded onto sturdy wooden carts, which then set off via a trackway alongside the stream – heading towards Winford Village. Through the cobbled yard of Manor Farm went each load, past the front of Winford Manor, and the village church, and so to the front of the newly built Militia Barracks. Here there had to be a pause while four soldiers, say, wandered down the grass slope from their building clutching their muskets; then they must clamber on to the cart and perch themselves on a barrel.

Off creaked each cart, up what used to be the village main road, past the village pub, and then splashed a path through the ford created in Winford Brook (hence the village's name Win-ford). Then on up what is now named Felton Lane as far as the "George and Dragon" hostelry. In those days this was a busy, well-known coaching inn on the main road from Bristol to Exeter. Here each carter would have swung his two shire-horses to the right to pass along and up the slope of what is now known as Stanshall's Lane – and heading now towards Bristol in the distance.

The Voyage down to Spain

Around 1800 Bristol was one of the busiest, wealthiest ports in England; it was trading with Ireland, South Africa, new and growing markets in North America, and importing a growing quantity of port, sherry and wines from Portugal and Spain. Moreover it was the port nearest to Spain if an English army was about to fight a war in Spain.

Sea-captains would have been very familiar with the route for their cargo-vessels: at a high tide on the River Avon they would make the ten-mile journey out to the open sea, then down the Bristol Channel to the Atlantic, across the Bay of Biscay, and so to the Spanish port of Corunna.

Wellesley's Staff Officers would have taken charge of the Winford barrels once they had been unloaded. They would need to be carted slowly along the English army's Supply Lines, often through difficult mountainous countryside, leading eventually to the positions held by the English forces. Presumably Winford's gunpowder must have proved a reliable product.

THE BARRACKS BUILDING

Ground Floor

Entrance doorways were all low in height, as they were at "Forge Cottage"; this was because back in that century people were generally stockier and shorter in build (1.75m).

The floor along the length of the building was of large, thick flagstones. The outer walls of the building were thick (.75m), but had no damp-courses in those days to protect against "rising damp". The militia would have had wooden benches or bales of straw to sit on, and the only light available would have been candlelight.

For warmth in colder weather there were open fireplaces at either end of the building; the militia must have spent much of their time cleaning their muskets and checking the supply of flints to be used with them.

Bakehouse and Pigsty

At the back of the main structure is a small stone annexe which contains two blackened bread-ovens set into two of the walls. Further back on the rising ground there is still a stone-built double pigsty with traditional cobblestone floor. These facilities give us a clue about the basic food available to the militia: salted pork and home-made bread loaves. In those days it was a routine for any family keeping pigs to slaughter most of them every autumn, and then salt the pork to preserve it through the winter months. The meat would have been stored in wooden barrels in those days.

The Upper Floor

Three narrow wooden staircases led upwards from the main room downstairs. Here was again one long room with wooden floor planks, forming a dormitory for the militia. Soldiers would have had straw palliasses to sleep on, and woollen blankets to keep themselves warm.

The only lighting would have again been candles carried upstairs in candleholders for safety. Along the front of the barracks would have been six or more very small windows with glass panes; they would have let in some sunlight, being on the southern side of the building. There is no evidence of windows on the north side.

In more modern buildings we are used to bedrooms with proper ceilings – not so in 1808! Had a militiaman glanced upwards, he would have seen five sets of massive oak beams (still in place), angled upwards on a slant, and holding up that long stretch of roofing. Back in those days it would have been normal to thatch a roof in order to keep in the heat in the winter months, and act as a waterproof rooftop.