

The Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteers 1794-1805.

During the closing years of the 18th century and into the beginning of the 19th century the whole country was in *fear of an invasion by the French Republic under Napoleon Bonaparte. The East Anglian coast near the Debden Estuary² was considered to be a very likely invasion area with Hollesley Bay offering good anchorage close to the shore for ships and barges ferrying troops.

*The only reasonable comparison we can make to this would have to be the potential invasion by German forces in 1940.

'IN THE EVENT OF INVASION'.

The Suffolk coastal area was said to be 'the most dangerous place in the country'. Coastal defences were built and the area patrolled by the volunteer 'sea fencibles' mainly because the navy was heavily occupied at sea, and the army, dispersed throughout the country, had significantly fewer men than the navy. Defence of routes which the invaders could take inland was a major priority and the importance of the countryman's local knowledge was seen as vital.

Parliamentary Acts.

Parliament passed the Defence of the Realm Act in 1794 by which local defence volunteer corps could be formed. The 1798 Defence of the Realm Act then required Lord Lieutenants of English counties to provide lists (returns) of all males between 15-60 who '*were not already engaged in any military capacity*' and 42 companies were formed in that year in Suffolk alone². This later was 'increased to 56 companies with a total complement of 5867 infantrymen and 756 cavalry'¹. Fears of invasion coupled with appeals to loyalty and patriotism were everywhere.

Defence was based on the denial of anything useful to the invaders so in the event of the invasion the countryside was to be 'emptied' of anything of use to the enemy. Crops and livestock, stocks of corn and hay were to be moved away from danger areas or destroyed, as were cart horses, pack horses and carts and rivers, bridges, roads and tracks which might form defensive barriers were to be identified. Inhabitants of villages in the line of march were to be compulsorily moved away: demolition of identified bridges and some buildings were also envisaged.

In 1798 Henry Dundas, Secretary for War wrote to Lord Euston, Lord Lieutenant of Suffolk³. His lengthy letter made very clear the situation facing the country and set out precise principles and requirements on which the defence of the 'kingdom' by volunteer corps and other inhabitants was to be based.

Extracts from the Dundas letter. ³ Edited quotes are in italics.

The letter expressed confidence that '*men of every description*' would take an active part in the defence of their country'.... *Husbandmen and labourers, inhabitants of the country, a very valuable class of men, must be appraised of their duties in case of an actual invasion*'. This was so that

'a general confusion and alarm, highly prejudicial to their own interests and to the general safety of the country' would be avoided by prior training.

A count of men aged between the ages of 15-60 was to be carried out in each parish and parishes were to give an account of *cattle, horses, waggons, carts, corn mills, ovens, dead stock, flour or other Mills, malt, etc and the number of boats, barges and small craft on the rivers*. Further, the number of men from 16-60 willing to serve either on horseback or on foot, how they could be armed, who were willing to serve as '*pioneers*' or *labourers, or to act as 'servants with cattle, teams or guides'* should be recorded.

A PLAN FOR ACTION.

A plan was prepared in five forms (parts).

'A plan for driving off the livestock of such parts of the country as may become exposed to the inroads of the enemy in case of invasion etc.' ³

1st form.

Each parish was to identify a place of assembly where cattle, waggons and carts could be collected in the event of an order to *'drive them from the country'*. Routes were to be planned and villagers chosen to *'drive and attend'* to cattle being removed under the direction of a leader/s who were to be chosen by the owners of the cattle. Places were to be selected by the leaders which could provide pasture and water. Such places were to be pointed out to the civil authorities turnpike roads were to be left free for the use of marching troops and artillery.

2nd form.

'Bulky articles of property, such as grain, hay and straw' must not fall into enemy hands. *'It is recommended that persons be appointed to remain in the parish as long as it is not in the possession of the enemy or entirely cut off from the army'*. This was to aid provisioning of the army rather than fodder be destroyed. Receipts for fodder taken would be given by the troops.

3rd form.

'Care should be taken by the inhabitants of such parishes as may be in imminent danger of falling into the hands of the enemy, that all mills and ovens be rendered useless to him, by carrying away or destroying some essential part of the machinery of the former, which cannot easily be replaced, and by breaking the lath (ed. lathe?)'

4th form.

'A corps of Guides, on horseback and on foot, consisting of those who are best acquainted with the roads, lanes, footpaths, bridges, creeks, rivers, fording places and other communications in the several parts of the country should be selected and their names and places of abode be communicated to the General commanding in the district.'

5th form.

This dealt with unarmed inhabitants who might have an opportunity to form companies of pioneers. Ideally, they were to come equipped as follows:

For every twenty-five men – 6 pick axes, 6 spades, 6 shovels, 3 bill hooks, and 4 felling axes. They were to repair roads, bridges and communications. Each pioneer would be paid 1s and 6 d per day and be allowed a bread ration.

Instructions to Officers Commanding Volunteer Corps. October 28th 1803. ³

Issued by H M Gordon, Lieutenant Colonel, Assistant Adjutant General and H M'Le Roth, Lieutenant Colonel Inspecting Field Officer.

The duties of the Commanding Officers were clearly detailed and included what each volunteer should provide for himself: a shirt, a pair of shoes and stockings, brushes and the *'necessary apparatus for cleaning himself done up in as small a size as possible and a blanket or great coat'*.

A knife, spoon and water canteen were provided together with a haversack and a number of camp kettles for each troop.

Volunteers had to be prepared to move to areas away from their district. *'No Privations will be esteemed a hardship, no murmur will even be heard, nor will any difficulty for a moment cause the slightest hesitation'.'Utmost discipline will be expected..... implicit obedience will be looked for.'... 'Every occasion that can present itself by using the bayonet.....'. 'An unremitting fire must be poured upon every part of enemy columns; his flanking parties must be instantly attacked and destroyed.'*

**'No women or children can be allowed to accompany the Volunteers'.*

** It was common for women and children to be near their husbands and lovers in the regular army campaigns at this time.*

Officers were to give *'strict attention to orders.....the men are to cover themselves with trees, stones, hedges and whatever may present itself'* It was made clear that the volunteers were not involved with the duties of *'driving the country'*.

A lot was expected and it was anticipated that considerable hardship was likely and *'must be endured... they must be prepared for anything required of them.'* The men were to be prepared to expect great fatigue.

Pioneers near the coast were to assemble at the first alarm and to go where ever they were needed to within six miles of the enemy. Inland, pioneers had to remain in their parishes, but be ready to move at the shortest notice. They were to expect to be engaged for several days.

Guides were to assemble and move to join the nearest body of troops.

RECRUITING THE VOLUNTEERS. The Parish Ballot.

*'Gentlemen of weight and substance'*¹, most often major land owners and Justices of the Peace, were called up on to support the Lords Lieutenant of each county by raising of a 'quota' of volunteers. These 'country gentlemen' exercised their very considerable local influence in districts, then known as 'Hundreds'* , to raise a compulsory number of men (their quota) who generally came from individual parishes. This was achieved by compulsory parish ballots. ²

**An ancient term describing an administrative area made up of a number of parishes. Lakenheath was in the Lackford Hundred which held 17 parishes. It stretched from the parish of Thetford St. Mary at Thetford to just north of Lackford itself which was actually in the Thingoe Hundred!*

Men were divided into five categories (below) and parish constables drew up lists of eligible males and a ballot was held. (A lucky dip)?

1. Those under 30 with no children
2. Those over 30 with no children.
3. All men over with no living children under 14.
4. All men with one child under 14.
5. All other men.

The ballot was deemed complete when the required number was reached, otherwise the process continued through the groups until it was. Substitutes could be arranged on the payment of a £10 fine but there were other exemptions; for example, peers of the realm, clergymen, those working in the royal dockyard or arsenals. Others, those of small stature or the feeble minded or the very poor, were also exempted.

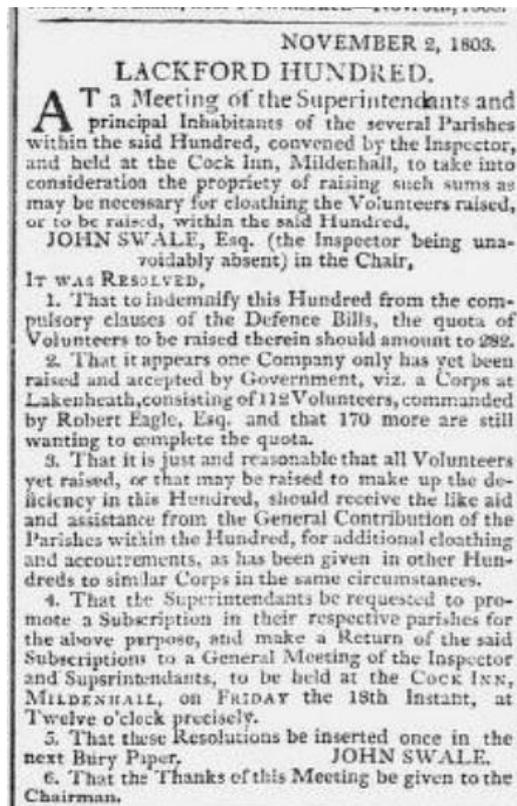
- Volunteers were not liable to normal military discipline unless actively participating in an exercise. By 1803 they were expected to serve for 85 days per year in their district but after this time volunteers were expected to serve as required.
- They were paid to train on Sundays and were exempt from other military service.
- Each man had to provide himself with a shirt, shoes and blanket and a fork and spoon. (But no knife)!
- Unlike the regular army 'camp followers', women and children, were not allowed to accompany their men. In the event of invasion rigorous discipline was to be enforced.

There was perhaps an advantage to being selected by the ballot because volunteers were exempt from other forms of military service such as the militia, and in coastal regions, from service in the navy. It's important to note that volunteer companies were not liable to military orders or discipline unless in training or in battle.

Fund Raising.

A 'General Subscription Fund, was established in each county organised by committee of *'Leading Men'* which was intended to fund any 'measures adopted'. County leaders, like JP's and MPs were involved and some individual parishes made donations. It has been estimated that in Suffolk there were 600 people subscribing giving an indication of the urgency of the situation.²

By 1803 the County of Suffolk had 56 Volunteer Companies, with 5867 infantry and 756 cavalry.



The Lackford Hundred meeting at the Cock Inn, Mildenhall Nov. 2nd 1803.

Bury and Norwich Post. Wed 9th Nov 1803.

The newspaper report (above) of the Lackford Hundred meeting shows that the Lakenheath Volunteers was the only volunteer company raised at that time in the Lackford Hundred. It's interesting to note that the Hundred was only required to raise 282 volunteers in total and Lakenheath had already raised 112. (The population of Lakenheath in 1801 is given as 745 in the parish history pages of the Suffolk History Explorer)! The meeting was concerned that companies yet to be formed should receive equal funding to cover costs of equipment and clothing. (As Lakenheath)?

The urgency of the situation is clear; from the date of the meeting on 2nd November 1803 the parishes were expected to: *'Make a return of the said Subscription by Friday 18th November Instant, at Twelve o'clock precisely'*

THE LAKENHEATH AND WANGFORD VOLUNTEER CORPS.

'The invasion may be expected every day and almost every hour. Information has been received from France by a most respectable source'. Bury and Norwich Post. 29th February 1802

This was an infantry company. We don't know the exact date of the formation of the Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteers but at the height of the crisis in 1803 there were over 100 infantrymen, excepting officers, in the Lakenheath and Wangford Company which it's thought, like other companies, was finally disbanded about 1805 when the Battle of Trafalgar forced in a change of French strategy. However, a small number of companies continued for some time after the danger was passed.

The officers of volunteer companies came almost entirely from the landowning class and the Eagle family of Lakenheath played the leading role in the establishment of the Company.

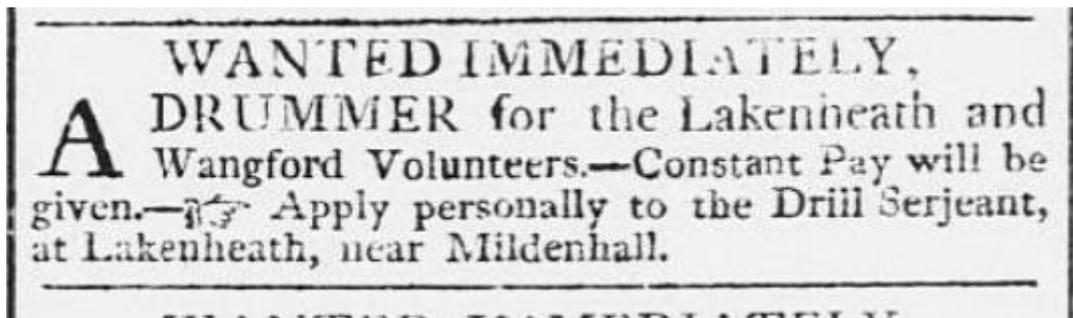
Its officers were:

Robert Eagle- Captain and commanding officer. Justice of the Peace, owner of Northlawn Cottage, (later known as The Retreat and Lakenheath Hall). The other recorded officers were his sons, Lieutenant Robert Eagle (jnr.), who died in 1804, possibly as a result of an accident, Francis King Eagle who much later became the first mayor of Bury St. Edmunds, and Ensign William Eagle who eventually became the main landowner in the area and a prominent barrister. He was the owner of the Lakenheath Hall Estate.



*Photo of the miniature painting of Captain Robert Eagle by English artist Thomas Bishop RA (1753-1853).
By Kind permission of Guido Smoglian, Melbourne, Australia*

And, most importantly a drummer boy was sought!



Bury and Norwich Post Wed 16th Nov 1804

The majority of the volunteers would have been parish tradesmen, farmers and farm labourers and particularly those with specific skills such as gamekeepers. Non-commissioned officers are likely to have been villagers with some status/influence such as village constables or church wardens, or they might be elected by the men. A prominent villager of the time was Robert Kitchener. Thirty years old at the time of the crisis, grandson of *Thomas Kitchener (b1666, d1731), it is very likely that he was a volunteer, possibly holding senior NCO rank. It may be relevant to note that in 1811 a Robert Kitchener of Lakenheath, was paid £1.18 s for 'marshalling the militia'. (*Bury Free Press 10th Dec 1811*).

*Thomas Kitchener- land agent of Lakenheath Manor to Sir Nicholas Stewart MP and a churchwarden of St. Mary's Church. He was an ancestor of Lord Kitchener of World War 1 fame.

The London Weekly Dispatch announced the appointment of the Earl of Albermarle as the Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment on Sunday 18th March 1798. As a young man (26) he was unlikely to have much military experience and his appointment was probably ceremonial rather than practical! His seat was Elveden Hall.



"Guard-room tactics: Bugs in danger, or a Volunteer Corps in Action." 1798.

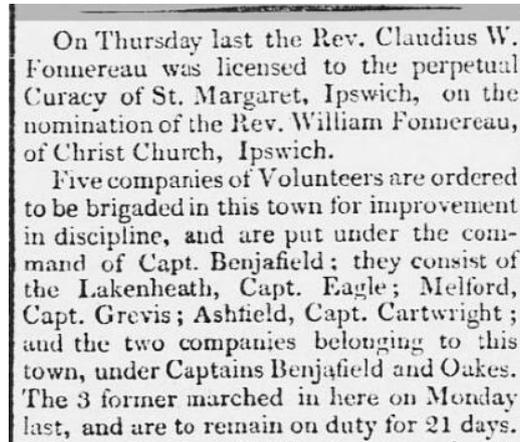
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For some, the formation of Volunteers Corps was the source of amusement (not unlike early attitudes to the 'Dad's Army of WWII), but by the time of the cartoon, as the fear of invasion grew, *340,000 men had enrolled in volunteer corps nationally.

*Wikipedia

More can be read about the Eagle family here. [Butt v Eagle: The Church Rate and Tithe Dispute.](#)

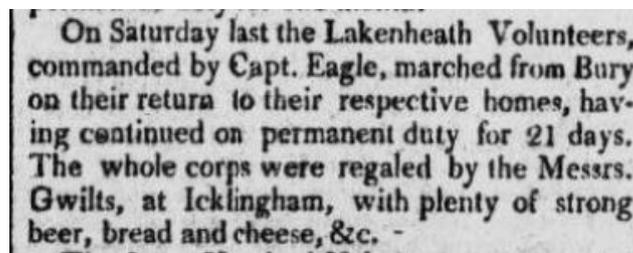
Lakenheath Volunteers in the Press. Research by Michael Tuffs.



On Thursday last the Rev. Claudius W. Fonnereau was licensed to the perpetual Curacy of St. Margaret, Ipswich, on the nomination of the Rev. William Fonnereau, of Christ Church, Ipswich.
Five companies of Volunteers are ordered to be brigaded in this town for improvement in discipline, and are put under the command of Capt. Benjafield; they consist of the Lakenheath, Capt. Eagle; Melford, Capt. Grevis; Ashfield, Capt. Cartwright; and the two companies belonging to this town, under Captains Benjafield and Oakes. The 3 former marched in here on Monday last, and are to remain on duty for 21 days.

Lakenheath Volunteers in Ipswich for improvement
Bury and Norwich Post 18th April 1804.

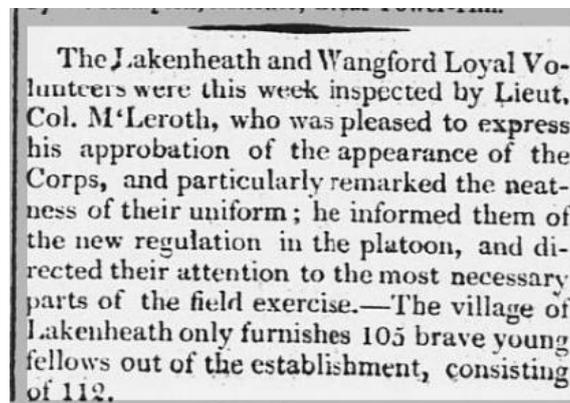
Lakenheath was one of five companies ordered to parade (brigaded) in Ipswich for 'improvements in discipline'. They were to remain for 21 days.



On Saturday last the Lakenheath Volunteers, commanded by Capt. Eagle, marched from Bury on their return to their respective homes, having continued on permanent duty for 21 days. The whole corps were regaled by the Messrs. Gwilts, at Icklingham, with plenty of strong beer, bread and cheese, &c.

Company marched from Bury
Ipswich Journal 12th May 1804

A just reward after 21 days service? Well done to the Gwilts at Icklingham!



The Lakenheath and Wangford Loyal Volunteers were this week inspected by Lieut. Col. M'Leroth, who was pleased to express his approbation of the appearance of the Corps, and particularly remarked the neatness of their uniform; he informed them of the new regulation in the platoon, and directed their attention to the most necessary parts of the field exercise.—The village of Lakenheath only furnishes 105 brave young fellows out of the establishment, consisting of 112.

Lieutenant Col M'Leroth inspects the corps.
Bury and Norwich Post 24th Oct 1804

A great improvement in turnout and performance. But don't forget.....!

A button from the uniform of the Lakenheath Volunteers was found by Ron Morley on the old Cattle Fair on the Undley Road which has been dated to between 1799-1813. The Company was described as being an,

“A1 Company affair with a strong family complement”.



A button from the uniform of the Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteers.

British Military Buttons.

We don't know the actual date of the disbanding of the Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteers. The majority of volunteer corps nationally were disbanded in 1805 when the threat of invasion was greatly reduced by the victory at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Michael Tuffs has supplied evidence of this as follows:

“In the Overseer's books, under the date 1811, it is stated that one Thomas Kitchener received £1. 18s for marshalling 'the militia'”.

Bury Free Press. Dec. 10th 1898.

This could well have been referring to the Lakenheath and Wangford Volunteers.

Sources:

¹ Austin Gee. The British Volunteer Movement, 1793-1807. PhD thesis. Oxford University 1989. ora.ox.ac.uk.

² Dr Margaret Thomas: 'Patriotism or Protest. Suffolk under threat during the French Wars'. Talk given to Suffolk Local History Council. Sat. 15th October 2022.

³ Letter from Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for War addressed to Lord Euston, Lord Lieutenant of Suffolk and Instructions to 'Officers Commanding'. We are grateful to Dr Margaret Thomas for her help with our research.