

# Tiverton Civic Society Newsletter

## L<sup>T</sup> COL. WILLIAM HARDING — A TIVERTON WORTHY

The name of Lieutenant-Colonel W. Harding, F.G.S., is well-known to local historians for his two volume *History of Tiverton*, published 1845/1847. This continued the record of the town's history through the fifty five years following the publication of Martin Dunsford's *Historical Memoirs*, as well as using some documents to which Dunsford did not have access, such as those of the Greenway Charity. Both works of local history are indispensable. Whilst Dunsford's life is known in some detail, not least from his own pen, that of Harding is shrouded in mystery, thereby exerting a fascination. Where was he born? What was he doing in Tiverton? Where did he live? When and where did he die? In this attempt to learn a little more about him and his association with Tiverton, we now have many advantages: Google means there is no longer any excuse for ignorance.

Born into gentry on 16 August 1792, William was the third son of Robert Harding and his wife Dionisia, daughter of Sir Bouchier Wrey of Tawstock near Barnstaple. His childhood home was the family seat of Upcott, in the parish of Pilton to the north of Barnstaple, where a new mansion had been built forty years before, dated 1752 on a rainhead. At just nine years of age, on 21 August 1801, young William was sent away to Blundell's School to join his elder brother Robert, where he stayed for the next six years until 29 September 1807. His father died in the meantime. Thus Tiverton became a part of his life at a formative stage. Perhaps his master, the Rev William Page Richards, instilled in him a love of geology and history. As the third son, a

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career in the army was fore-ordained. On 11 July 1811 he received his first commission as ensign when in the Peninsular War with the 5<sup>th</sup> Foot, later re-named the 5<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers, rising to lieutenant in 1813. He was present at the siege of Burgos, capture of Madras, and battles of Vitoria, Pyrenees, Nivelle, Nive, Orthez and finally Toulouse in April 1814. For his service he received the Peninsular medal and six clasps. He was then placed on half-pay and not brought back until January 1818 when he was posted to the Rifle Brigade for a year. He saw irregular service until March 1823 when he obtained his own company, becoming captain of the 58<sup>th</sup> Yeomanry of Foot, and was posted to serve at the newly-built Royal Military Depot at Weedon Bec in Northamptonshire. It was here, on 20 January 1824, that he married Ann Elizabeth Jones, the ceremony witnessed by four of her relatives but none of his. At the end of the year his wife bore him a son, baptised Robert William on 13 December. Two years later, on 1 June 1826, still at Weedon, a second son was baptised Thomas Henry. In November he left the service as a major on half-pay. A daughter, Maria Elizabeth, was born in about 1830, her birthplace untraced but perhaps in Ireland where the *Western Times*' obituary says he served for a time.

As well as being an antiquarian, Harding was a gentleman geologist. In December 1831 he donated fossils from the Rock of Gibraltar to the Geological Society of London. Perhaps he had previously met the curator, William Lonsdale, who had also served in the Peninsular War. Then, in December 1834, from his home in Ilfracombe, he sent local fossils to the

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Society. It was a time when leading geologists were working on the sequence of strata and the Devon rocks presented problems. One of these geologists was Adam Sedgwick and it seems likely that Lonsdale drew his attention to the Ilfracombe fossils. Sedgwick asked Harding about some other local rocks and Harding sent more fossils in November 1835. In an attempt to resolve the problems, Sedgwick, together with another leading geologist, Roderick Murchison, undertook four weeks of intensive fieldwork in Devon in July 1836. Early in the month they were in Ilfracombe where they dined with Harding, studied nearby cliff sections with him and no doubt gleaned information on the best local rock exposures. Harding and Murchison were exact contemporaries, Murchison having also served in the Peninsular War in the early period so their paths had not crossed there, but they evidently got on well and in a joint paper 'The Physical Structure of Devonshire', read to the Society, they refer to 'our friend Major Harding'. In November 1836, doubtless as a personal thanks, Murchison proposed William Harding 'as a proper person to become a Fellow' of the Geological Society. The admission form was also signed by Sedgwick and another Fellow. In December Harding was duly elected as a life member of what was a select gentleman's club. Meanwhile the debate raged on for the next two or three years, with Henry de la Beche and Phillips taking their parts, Murchison and Sedgwick disagreeing and having to recant some of their views. Plant fossils found at Marwood by Harding became a major stumbling block for the sequence put forward by Murchison. In the words of Rudwick, 'fossils found by amateur collectors such

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as Harding repeatedly forced elite geologists on both sides of the controversy to reassess their interpretations.<sup>2</sup>

In early 1837 Harding moved to Tiverton and so was less able to collect fossils in North Devon. This was because he wanted his sons to attend Blundell's. The school had tightened its regulations, requiring pupils to live in the town if they were to be eligible for the free classical education offered. His second son, Thomas, attended from 10 February 1837, aged nearly eleven. He was joined by Robert six months later, perhaps held back by sickness. Harding continued his interest in geology, writing on 21 May 1839 to inform the Geological Society that he had not received any reports of meetings of the Society and asking for parcels to be re-directed to Messrs Whittaker & Co, Ave Maria Lane, London, to await collection when he was up in town. However, in a subsequent letter of 25 February 1841 he wrote to Lonsdale: 'Much to [my] regret circumstances have hitherto prevented my visiting London since I have had the honour of being a Member of the Geological Society.' He went on to offer, in the course of the summer, to send 'specimens of Goniatite, Posidonia and other organic remains which surround Tiverton, also some of the volcanic remains which is [sic] so abundant in the neighbourhood'.

On 23 November 1841 Harding was gazetted as brevet lieutenant-colonel and retired from military service by the sale of his commissions. His address in Tiverton's 1841 census is St Peter Street, perhaps the most prestigious street

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<sup>2</sup> For a full account of the geological debate in which Harding played a not insignificant part, see M. J. S. Rudwick *The Great Devonian Controversy, the Shaping of Scientific Knowledge among Gentlemanly Specialists* (1985).

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in the town at the time. He was in residence with his wife, son Robert (still a pupil at Blundell's until April 1843), daughter Maria and two servants. Thomas had left Blundell's in December 1840. Harding lived at the north end of the street, perhaps in the very same house occupied in 1817-1832 by John Heathcoat. Here he immersed himself in the town's affairs, in 1841 becoming secretary of the body forming the new National School in St Andrew Street. It was there that he embarked on his *History of Tiverton*, delving into new finds of records and current affairs. Mike Sampson (*History of Tiverton*, ~~vol. 1~~ 2) summarises Harding's ringside view of the notorious Chancery case brought against Blundell's for the mismanagement of funds in 1837.

When volume one of the *History of Tiverton* was published, Harding included a long preface, dated 3 February 1845, explaining his objectives and regretting the low number of subscribers received, which 'has fallen far short of my hopes or expectations'. He must have been bitterly disappointed in the lack of interest in the town's history. Volume two had merely a short preface of thanks dated 30 January 1847. His publishers were F. Boyce, bookseller, Fore St, Tiverton, and Whittaker & Co, Ave Maria Lane, London. Between the two publication dates, tragedy struck: his daughter, Maria Elizabeth, died on 19 October 1846, aged only sixteen. There is a poignant memorial in St Peter's church, on the wall of the Memorial Chapel and in the floor below, to 'the beloved and only daughter of L<sup>t</sup>. Col Harding'. This is the only place where his name appears in the town which owes him so much. Was this the trigger which induced him to move? Or, having exhausted Tiverton's history, did he

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crave pastures new and a more stimulating environment? Late in 1849 he and his wife moved to Exeter. In 1851 they were living at West Park Villa, Magdalen Road, St Leonard's, with three servants. Their son Robert was lodging in King Street, Westminster, although he died soon after in Exeter, buried on 1 June 1851. The younger son Thomas had perhaps married but also died young, buried at Barnstaple on 19 May 1856. In 1856 and 1861 Harding's address was 10 Higher Terrace, Mount Radford, St. Leonard's. Concerned with the present and the past, he was appointed a magistrate and soon set about accumulating information on Exeter's history. Although a strong Protestant, he was a great friend of Dr George Oliver, Exeter's Roman Catholic priest and one of the leading lights of the city's local history. When Dr Oliver died in March 1861, Harding purchased his *History of Exeter* (published 1821) and all his copious notes, to add to his own growing collection.

The year 1861 was busy as the British Archaeological Association held its annual week-long conference in Exeter in August. It fell to Harding, a member of the local committee, to fill the void left by the death of Dr Oliver. The Association reported: 'Col. Harding whose knowledge of this locality and deep acquaintance also with subjects of antiquity were well known, had kindly volunteered to be their guide to the principal antiquities of Exeter.' The tour covered two days. A full account is given in the Journal of the British Archaeological Association for 1862. As was usual at such conferences, a temporary museum was set up and 'most kindly and effectively promoted by Col. Harding and Mr Gendall.' Harding exhibited a range of material such as

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Roman pottery, several silver coins minted at Exeter, drawings and various seals including a lead cloth seal with the name of George Dunsford, the brother of Martin Dunsford, merchant and historian, who took over the family cloth business in 1802 after Martin went bankrupt (how apposite that Harding should have acquired this Dunsford seal). On one of the conference days the party visited Tiverton, where Harding took no part in the proceedings, leaving it to the newly-appointed head master of Blundell's, Rev<sup>d</sup> J. B. Hughes, to guide the party around St Peter's church and Dr G. A. Paterson to do likewise around Tiverton Castle. Dr Paterson was a retired physician and it looks, from the 1861 census, very much as though he was occupying the same house where Harding had resided twenty years earlier. One evening Harding delivered a talk on 'The Coinage of Exeter', published in the same volume of the Journal which included the inaugural address of the President of the British Archaeological Association, Sir Stafford Northcote. Prompted by the display assembled by Harding and Mr Gendall, he declared that Exeter should have a museum. This germ of an idea took root and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) was the outcome, opening in 1868. By this time Harding had moved from Exeter, otherwise no doubt he would have become involved. As it was, he gave some fossils from the Pilton Beds and crinoid stems from the Marwood Beds to RAMM in 1873.

Although Harding was a member of several local societies, he seems to have published little. An exception was a wide-ranging paper on Morwenstow Church read to the Exeter Diocesan Architectural and Archaeological Society

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on 16 December 1863, published in their Transactions for 1867. Then, on 21 November 1866, Thomas Wrey Harding, William's elder brother, died at Upcott, whereupon Harding inherited the ancestral home and moved to North Devon with his wife and huge collection. In the 1871 census the couple had five servants, growing to six in 1881, probably because one was too old by then to do much work. For twenty years the Lieutenant-Colonel was lord of the manor, 'during which time he had earned the gratitude of the poor and the esteem and respect of all other classes'. He staunchly adhered to Conservative principles and when Sir Robert Carden was returned as MP for Barnstaple in 1880, he opened Upcott for a fete. But he had lived for a considerable period in comparative, and latterly in absolute, retirement. His days were spent sorting out his papers, 'antiquarian matters of all sorts' representing over sixty years of labour and industry, numbering thirty to forty thousand items, mostly on churches, memorials and families, intending to publish but not doing so.

At the great age of 93 L<sup>t</sup>. Col. William Harding passed away on 13 January 1886. The *North Devon Herald* and *Devon & Exeter Daily Gazette* described the progress of his funeral procession in a blinding snowstorm, taking over half an hour to travel from the house to Pilton church, led by the tenantry on horseback, then the workmen from the estate, then the bearers. The fifth carriage was the deceased's empty carriage. He was laid to rest in Pilton churchyard. A wall memorial inside the church records his military career, adding: 'He lived deservedly respected and left a widow and many friends to

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mourn his loss.' No portrait or photograph has yet been traced, only a written description, that he 'was a man of excellent physique and, beneath a commanding appearance and a military brusqueness of exterior, he was distinguished for his great kindness of heart.'

Two years after his death, the Devonshire Association, which Harding had joined in 1870, published a 'Report on the Harding Collection' which was lodged in Barnstaple's newly-opened Athenaeum Library, now part of the North Devon Record Office. In 1886 Upcott descended to another branch of the Harding family, Capt. Stafford Goldie Harding of Dawlish. A century later, in about 1980, the house was converted into luxury apartments for rent. On the hill nearby, visible from the A361, is a triumphal arch, erected by Harding as a personal memorial to commemorate his military exploits when fighting in the Peninsular War. Listed Grade 2, it is described as an 'eyecatcher' in Historic England's list number 1164017. Could Tiverton offer a Blue Plaque?

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