The Gordon Highlanders

The Gordon Highlanders were raised in 1794 by the 4th Duke of Gordon as a regiment of Highland Foot (infantry). The Duke's wife rode through country fairs to recruit men to fight the French. Having been formed during the French Revolutionary Wars the Gordons saw action against the armies of France, First at Egmont-op-Zee in Holland in 1799, then in the Egypt expedition of 1801, and in the long campaigns and many battles of the Peninsular War in Spain from 1808-14. The Regiment then played a prominent role in the final defeat of Napoleon at Quatre Bras and Waterloo in 1815.

The early recruitment campaign was assisted by the 4th Duke's wife, Jean, Duchess of Gordon. The Duchess is said to have offered a kiss as an incentive for men to join her husband's Regiment.

Originally designated the 100th Regiment of Foot and later the 92nd, The Regiment was officially named "The Gordon Highlanders" in 1881. Many of the original recruits were drawn from the Gordon Estates.

Later in the 19th century, the expanding British Empire saw the Gordons serve on the frontiers of India, Egypt, Sudan and South Africa. One of many extraordinary feats was a march over 320 miles of Afghanistan's unforgiving terrain between Kabul and Kandahar, in 1880, which the Gordons achieved in just 23 days. In 1887, one of their most celebrated achievements was the stunning victory on the Heights of Dargai, on India's North-West Frontier.

_The scene makes me shake with excitement even now. The Gordon's, pipers playing and men cheering, never stopped or wavered although many of them were down. It was one wild continuous rush of men all eager to get to the enemy. The sight was magnificent and the excitement so intense that I for one, although I was shouting at the top of my voice, felt the tears springing up into my eyes and could not keep them back._

During the 1880s, the old 75th (Stirlingshire) Regiment, with its own record of war service in India, was incorporated into the Gordons which had now established a permanent presence in Aberdeen. At the same time, the development of local volunteer and militia units into the Territorial Army gave the Regiment a truly local character.

The Gordon Highlanders had two battalions serving in South Africa and so raised two extra companies. The 1st Service Company Gordon Highlanders consisted of men drawn from the 1st (HQ Aberdeen), 2nd (HQ Oldmeldrum) and 4th (Donside) Volunteer Battalions Gordon Highlanders. It left Aberdeen on 16 February 1900 and sailed from Southampton for the Cape Colony aboard RMS _Guelph_ on 17 February, arriving in Cape Town on 15 March. The company eventually joined the 1st Gordon Highlanders, serving as "M" Company. After completion of its tour of service, the Company departed Cape Town aboard the _Templemore_ on 13 April 1901 and arrived back in Aberdeen on 3 May.
When the Gordon Highlanders entered the Transvaal after the siege of Ladysmith they wore khaki aprons designed to cover the dark coloured kilts and bright sporrans that had been blamed for high stomach casualty figures within Highland regiments at the start of the war.

In World War I, some 50,000 Gordons served in the regular, Territorial and service Battalions. Of these, approximately 27,000 were killed or wounded. Among other major battles, every Gordon Battalion saw action in the Somme in 1916.

The headdress was the Regimental pattern diced Glengarry, with a Black Cockade and the Regimental Badge on the left hand side. The Badge was of white gunmetal, not brass, and consisted of a Stag's head above a Ducal Coronet with a Wreath of Ivy, all above the motto “Bydand”. It was based on the Crest of the Marquis of Huntly, heir to the Duke of Gordon, and was only adopted in 1872. The motto is Scots and means “biding or abiding, in the sense of firm, enduring, lasting or standfast”.

**Castle Hill Barracks and Depot**
The Barracks, that stood on the Castlehill, was erected in 1794-96, and was capable of accommodating 600 men. The situation is airy and healthy, and the design of the building was considered good for the times. It became notoriously a bad slum in the late 1940s and 50s such is the durability of Granite over 200 years. A Castle stood here from the 1100s. The Army Barracks were used as a Depot.
The Infantry Barracks, on the crest of the Castlehill, stands on the site of a Castle erected as early as 1150. The Barracks as built from 1764 and completed in 1796 at a cost of £16,000, formed a plain winged oblong of 3-storeys, but were greatly enlarged by the block added (1880-81) at a further cost of £11,000, with a frontage to Justice Street of 138½ feet. The King Street Militia Barracks were erected in 1863 at a cost of £10,000 in the old Scottish Castellated style: the Rifle and the Artillery Volunteers had drill-halls in Blackfriars and Queen Streets.

The Barracks replaced the Chapel of St. Ninian and an Observatory erected in 1781. The foundation stone was laid on 24 June 1794 by the Marquis of Huntly and it was completed early in 1796, with accommodation for 600 men. The picture is interesting, as it shows the line of Hangman's Brae, which descended from the South-west corner of the Hill to Castle Lane and into Virginia Street. It was partly absorbed into the construction of Castle Terrace in 1864. The houses on the left of the illustration have outside steps. Castle Terrace incorporated the 1st Hospital for Sick Children in 1877.

The Litho dated 1850 indicates the south facing upper level Barracks and upper tier road some four metres below it, indicating a steep natural slope down to Park Lane on the right which was between Castlehill and Heading Hill. Since then a second nether tier was added with a granite rampart defining the new roads of Castle Terrace and Commerce Street and the houses swept away. The corner building of the Barracks would have been where the 1781 Observatory was. This lower tier was perhaps instigated and infilled by Cromwell's forces who made major improvements by way of artillery positions on the upper tier to protect the Harbour.
The real topography of the land is much steeper and this may be better illustrated by the Castle Terrace and Commerce Street Junction which is shown below.

A Military Hospital was built on the adjacent Heading Hill in 1799; a cast-iron bridge, linked the Barracks to the Hospital. Part of the old surrounding wall of the Hanoverian barracks is still to be seen on the south-east side of the Castle Hill, just up from Castle Terrace. A short row of houses ran from the pedestrian Bridge in the top of the hill above Commerce Street Infants School and emerged at the crest of the Hanover Street near Fish Lane. Castlehill Barracks were in occupation from the 1790s until 1935, when new premises were built at the Bridge of Don. The Barracks themselves were demolished in 1965.

The Gordon Highlanders were, for nearly 200 years, North-East Scotland’s own regiment.
Kilts require regular care and maintenance, particularly if they are in daily use. A foot-operated treadle sewing machine is being operated by one of the tailors in the right of the picture.

**Militia Barracks - 389 King Street**

The King Street Militia Barracks were erected in 1863 at a cost of £10,000 in the old Scottish Castellated style: the Rifle and the Artillery Volunteers had drill-halls in Blackfriars and Queen Streets. Designed by William Ramage in 1863 they became home to the Gordon Highlanders 3rd Battalion. A two-storey block, crowstepped baronial, symmetrical rubble-built with a three-storey L-plan and featuring angle Turrets with a Central Pend arch leading to the Drill Court.

In 1861 the Commissioners of Supply for the County of Aberdeen announced plans to build a Depot for the Royal Aberdeenshire Highlanders - a volunteer regiment. It was to lie between Love Lane (later St Peter’s Street) to the North and Advocates’ Road to the South, facing onto the west side of King Street. It contained a large Drill Court - 370 feet long by 140 feet wide, and would be “of plain design but with a couple of towers at the angles giving it a baronial appearance”.

It was to be well landscaped. The design was by William Ramage, formerly assistant to renowned local architect, Archibald Simpson. At first, the Drill Court had sheds and open shelters along its sides as stables, but they were soon converted to Barrack Rooms.

The building was completed and first occupied by the Royal Aberdeenshire Highlanders in 1862. These quarters, which were for permanent staff, consisted of a block of stores, guard room and offices, which surrounded an ample parade ground. In poor weather, the men were provided with adequate shelter within the staff quarter’s basement.
Before long the accommodation was enhanced by converting the ranges of open shelters into Barrack rooms, and then a considerable number of men were quartered in the Barracks. The permanent staff had, however, not long occupied the new quarters when they had to move to other accommodation due to infectious cholera and typhoid which prevailed in Aberdeen in 1864 and it was deemed unsafe to keep the Regiment there. This led to the training of the Regiment being conducted at Fort George.
In the mid-1870s the barracks were to be dispensed with, but in 1880 the regiment was enlarged with an extra 300 men and the accommodation became insufficient therefore additional Barrack rooms were built to house the extra men. In 1882 the Royal Aberdeenshire Highlanders became the 3rd Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders. At this time the staff based at the Barracks consisted of Officers, Warrant Officers and permanent Staff Sergeants. All other ranks lived at home in the local area, and reported to the Depot when drills and training were required. In 1900/1901, during the Boer war, troops were sent from King Street to Cape Town, but in 1902 the Barracks reverted to their peace-time role. In 1905, 21-year-old Pipe Major George Stewart McLennan (the youngest in the British Army) organised the 1st Pipe Band at the Barracks.

To the right of the Pend was the Orderly Room and Officers’ Assembly Room and Quarters, to the left was Guard Room, Non-Commissioned Officers’ Reading Room and Quarters.

Later the Gallow Hill due east of the Depot was partly excavated to create a Gunpowder Magazine for use by the King Street Militia Barracks. The soldiers made a gruesome discovery - piles of human bones, the remains of the condemned who had been buried under the shadow of the Gallows and excluded from sacred ground because of their sins.

The first place actually mentioned as the scene of executions was the grassy Knoll which afterwards became the site of the Powder Magazine of the town. About the middle of last century the Powder Magazine required to be enlarged, which led to excavations for a foundation. Remains of skeletons were found, and this showed that criminals had been buried, as was usually said, "at the foot of the gallows tree." The Powder Magazine was intended to be protected from lightning by a metal rod projecting above it and terminating in two thick chains extending under the surface of the ground for some distance in opposite directions. The Gallows Knoll was sandy and dry, and after some time it was discovered that some damage had been done to the building by lightning. As a further protection two other chains were connected with the conductor. The Magazine was thought to be too near the town when houses were built beyond the railway, so it was removed.

Aberdeen Corporation Tramways bought the property in 1914. There are detailed memories of the King Street Barracks being used for housing families immediately after WWI as there was then a severe housing shortage for returning soldiers. The spartan Militia Barracks would also prove to be equally spartan accommodation for the ex-soldiers families - damp walls, outside water supplies, the four remote latrines for some 16 families and with communal washing facilities. Quite typical of so many 19th century tenements including Castlehill Barracks and the remote Torry Battery at Balnagask. The sought after Officers’ Quarters were above the Entrance Pend on the upper floor and the Drill Court was adapted for drying greens and a playground for the many families. The north end was then employed as the Tram Depot and Administration offices. The long upper loftts also provided space for drying clothes in inclement weather. Gas lighting and cooking were available on ancient lighting brackets and cast iron gas rings. Crystal radio sets were a luxury but for one listener only at a time.
Pittodrie Estate
Pittodrie Estate, Chapel of Garioch Parish, Aberdeenshire, was in the hands of the Erskine family from 1602. It was succeeded by Henry Knight Erskine, Esq. (b 1858) in 1870, and remained in his hands in 1901.

This photograph shows Pittodrie House which stands on the east slopes of Bennachie - the Mither Tap is visible in the background - near the village of Pitcaple about 20 miles from Aberdeen. Although it stands over 680 feet above sea level, it is surrounded by trees which provide shelter from the wind. It is a complex house of several dates and was on the estate of the Knight Erskine family for centuries, before being sold in 1903 to George Smith, a Glasgow shipping magnate who founded the City Line of steamers. The original house probably dated from around 1490, and a wheel stair from that period still survives, although the house was burnt by Montrose during the Covenanting Wars. A date stone commemorates the re-building by the Erskine's in 1675, and in 1841, the architect Archibald Simpson created the large neo-Jacobean extension with 3-storey balustraded tower on the East side - seen here covered in ivy. A billiard room was added in the early 1900s and further extensions took place in 1990. The word 'Pittodrie' is thought to be derived from the Gaelic 'todhar' which can mean either manure or bleach. Aberdeen Football Club's ground is known as Pittodrie Stadium, because the Knight Erskine's also owned the lands where the Stadium was built.

Some of the Gordon Highlander's returning to Kittybrewster Station, Aberdeen, having been hurriedly recalled from camp at Tain.
Gordon's Invade Bedford

In *Students Under Arms*, Alex Rule, MC, MA, a member of 'U' Company, 1/4th Battalion Gordon Highlanders, originally comprised of mainly students and staff of Aberdeen University, wrote:

*During August, 1914, the all-kilted Highland Division streamed into Bedford in trainload after trainload, and the skirl of bagpipes was heard throughout the land.*

*From the wild straths and glens we erupted overnight into a Cowperesque landscape where the sluggish Ouse lazed through flat meadows bounded by thick hedgerows.*

*Age-old churches, with square Saxon towers or graceful spires, dotted the countryside, and around them nestled thatched cottages with white-washed walls. We came, we saw, and we took possession. We found it good.*

![The 1/4th Gordon Highlanders entrain for the rail journey to Bedford.](image)

*The quiet old county town was shaken to its foundations.*

*We doubled the population; sheer weight of numbers alone made us a disturbing factor in its Civic life.*

*Then, in addition to our 12,000 infantry, we had no fewer than 12 Pipe Bands. Our invasion was a peaceful penetration – from the military point of view – but we shattered the calm of 700 years.*

*The modern houses-cum-billets offered creature comforts that many of the soldiers had never experienced before; hot and cold running water and gas to burn.*

*There were many men of most excellent character who came with us from Scotland, who had rarely seen a house like any one of these Bedford residential properties and who had certainly never been inside one.*
To the Officers and Men of the 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders who died in Egypt, 1882-84. This is situated in a shrubbed area beside a pathway near the Winter Gardens, about 85 metres south of the entrance from Polmuir Road. This granite memorial, takes the form of an Celtic Cross supported by a tapered pillar, the base of which is surrounded by rough-hewn boulders. On the front, just below the cross, is depicted a badge similar to that on the Gordon Highlanders' other memorial in Duthie Park with the St. Andrew's Cross, Wreath of thistles and the Sphinx and Royal Tiger.

This is located approximately sixty metres northwards from the west entrance gate of Duthie Park at Great Southern Road. This memorial of 1892 to 1898, consists of a triangular granite pillar and rises to a platform on top of which there is a bronze angel holding on high a laurel wreath. Beneath the angel is depicted in relief the Regimental Badge of the Gordon Highlanders. The Aberdeen Volunteers are also commemorated.
Drill Halls
There were a number of Drill halls throughout Aberdeen, such as the Woolmanhill Drill Hall and Offices, which was home to the 1st Volunteer Battalion Gordon Highlanders, 2nd Volunteer Battalion, Orderly Room, 74 Union Street, 4th Volunteer Battalion, Orderly Rooms, 28 Guild Street and 52 Constitution Street. Also Hardgate, Bucksburn and Culter Drill Halls, Aberdeen Artillery Volunteers, 60 Queen Street, 1st Aberdeen Rifle Volunteers, Orderly Room, Blackfriars Street and Woolmanhill Volunteer Royal Engineers, 50 Hardgate.