



## APPLICATION FOR A BLUE PLAQUE for LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD HOLBECHE

by Janet Jordan

In 1999, English Heritage were looking to Birmingham to supply nominations under 'The National Blue Plaque Scheme', whereby local people of historical and national importance are commemorated by having their details displayed on a blue plaque fixed to the outside of their one-time house (provided it is still there).

So, I thought "Why not Richard Holbeche?"

Those of you who read 'Discovering Holbeche' in Volume IV of 'Proceedings' (Spring 1997) will know that it was the childish exploits of Richard Holbeche that made him well-known to Sutton Coldfield's historians. A typed copy of his diary has been in the Local Studies Library for years, giving a wealth of information of town life in Sutton in the mid-1800s and amusing its readers at the same time.

In the year 2000, we now know much more about his life and I felt that he warranted a blue plaque for his services to the public in his later years. As Librarian of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, among his other tasks, he was responsible for the despatch of ambulance material and medical comforts for the sick and wounded troops in South Africa during the Boer War.

St John's were proud of him; they made him a Knight of the Order. His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, who was Grand Prior of the Order, awarded him a special medal 'for conspicuous service'. Perhaps it is time his home town honoured him!

So, I decided to try my luck — and the following is my application to English Heritage. If I am successful in my efforts, a blue plaque may eventually appear outside No.3 Coleshill Street, Sutton Coldfield!

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*If you want to find out more about Richard Holbeche, the following books are available in the Local Studies Library:-*

*The Illustrated Holbeche Diary J & K Jordan(1996), BCOL 0942.496092HOL*

*Lieutenant Colonel Richard Holbeche, JJordan (1998) BCOL 0942.496092HOL*

*In addition, a photocopy of the original manuscript of the diary (called 'My recollections of Sutton Coldfield in the 'Fifties' 1892 and various family papers have now been lodged with the library under 'The Holbeche Family Papers'.*



## LIEUTENANT COLONEL RICHARD HOLBECHÉ

late Royal Munster Fusiliers  
A Knight of the Order of the  
Hospital of St John of Jerusalem in England &  
Librarian of the Order

Third Son of the late Vincent and Emma  
Holbeche  
(Born 6.7.1850 - Died 11.2.1914)

*This is the inscription on Colonel Holbeche 's memorial plaque now erected in Holy Trinity  
Parish Church, Sutton Coldfield.*

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### NOTABLE EVENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

As a member of Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group, I first came across Richard Holbeche when I read 'The Holbeche Diary', an unsigned typed manuscript in Sutton Coldfield Library of memories of a young boy's days spent in Sutton Coldfield in the 1850s. My research confirmed that it was Richard who had written this account in the early 1890s, when he was about 40 years old.

This 'diary' has been used as a source of valuable historical record for many decades, but it is also a delight to read for pleasure. In an effort to reproduce his recollections, with the addition of old photos of the buildings and people he wrote about, I became interested in the man himself and have recently written a 106 page account of his life which is awaiting binding before being made available to the general public in Sutton Coldfield Library.

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### **Prominent Sutton Coldfield Family**

I discovered that the Holbeche Family were prominent citizens of Sutton Coldfield in the 1800s. Richard's father and grandfather had been solicitors in the town and owned a lot of property and land—probably enabling them to afford large families—Richard's father was one of 14 children and Richard himself had 6 siblings. His brother, Thomas Vincent also rose to fame, as Sutton's first Town Clerk, at the turn of the century.

<b>Born 6.7.1850</b>	When Richard was born in 1850, the family lived in what is now known as 3 Coleshill Street, Sutton Coldfield, but adjacent to it was an old Rectory (used as solicitors' offices), a barn and a row of cottages, all owned by the family. Even in those days, the buildings were very old and probably of medieval origin.
<b>Private Schooling</b>	Richard's schooldays were not particularly eventful, although somewhat privileged. Between 1855 and 1859 he went to an 'academy' in the town, followed by a couple of years boarding at a Young Gentleman's Preparatory School in Moseley. Then, as with the rest of the men of the family, he attended the local grammar school, Bishop Veseys.
<b>Sandhurst Military College</b>	<p>From then on, Richard's future career was mapped out. A short course at the exclusive Bromsgrove School prepared him for officer training at Sandhurst Royal Military College, where he began to show his full potential.</p> <p>At that time, gentlemen officers 'bought' and 'sold' their commissions all the way up the ranks, which led to promotion being achieved through wealth rather than merit. At Sandhurst, however, there was a bonus of a free commission to those who did well - and Richard's efforts earned him this award.</p>
<b>1870 Joined the Army as an Officer</b>	<p>At that time, in 1870, he had no choice as to which Regiment he would join. When a vacancy arose he simply filled it, as an Ensign in the 104th Foot Regiment.</p> <p>In time, the 104th Foot Regiment became known as the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Munster Fusiliers, and Richard's progress within that Regiment is well documented in The Army Lists.</p> <p>In 1871, he was posted to Jubbulpore, India, as his Regiment at that time was one of the Bengal Regiments who were maintaining the peace in India following the Indian Mutiny of the 1850s. 'The Holbeche Diary' includes a reference to school friends of his who were posted out there at the same time.</p>
<b>1878 Instructor of Musketry</b>	The Regimental District was in Tralee, Ireland, and it was while he was posted there in 1878 that he became an Instructor of Musketry. By 1883, he had become Major Richard Holbeche and his finest years with the army were about to begin.
<b>1885-87 The Third Burmese War - awarded 'Medal with Clasp'</b>	In 1884, the Battalion was ordered to go to Kamptee, India, and warned to be ready for active service. The Third Burmese War of 1885-87 was about to commence, during which time Richard earned the coveted 'Medal with Clasp'.

On the 28th August 1886, the Battalion, consisting of 17 officers and 864 other ranks, joined the British amphibious force of 9,000 troops and 2,800 native followers, travelling up the Irrawaddy River by steamer and barges. Disembarking at Myingyan, the Battalion deployed some of its troops into the neighbouring areas.

The first battle was with cholera, which claimed 13 lives before they had a chance to fire their guns, but the many detachments were soon to become involved in the war, albeit in fairly minor skirmishes. However, on the 19th March 1887, when they left Myingyan, the Station Order read:-

"The Royal Munster Fusiliers leave the 4th Brigade to-day on transfer to Mandalay. The corps since its arrival in Burma has been scattered about in small detachments in this command, and has done excellent service wherever employed. On expeditions the men have conducted themselves well, and their bearing towards the natives has been good; not a complaint has been made against them. The Battalion has not had many opportunities of meeting the enemy; perhaps the Burmans consider a distant view of this splendid body of men sufficient. The Brigadier wishes Colonel Stokes, the officers, non-commissioned officers and men a hearty farewell, and hopes that good luck may attend them in their future career.

(Sd.) "H. S. ANDERSON, Brig.General  
"4th Brigade, Upper Burma Field Force."

The Battalion had then been ordered to proceed to Mandalay. Continuing up the Irrawaddy and disembarking various detachments on the way, it finally arrived on 23rd March 1887. Richard's whereabouts are not clear at this time, but he must have been involved in engagements with the enemy to enable him to earn his decorations.

On a lighter note, officers had the opportunity of going to dances at the King's Palace, attending parades and gymkhanas, or taking part in competitions such as lime cutting and tent pegging and winning the Turk's head, a game they all played.

On 23rd January, 1888, the Battalion won a prize of 300 rupees in a rifle competition open to all troops in Burma. Perhaps this was an occasion for an Instructor of Musketry to show off his skills!

On 13<sup>th</sup> June, medals and clasps for Burma, 1885-87, were presented to the Battalion on parade by Brigadier-General Sir R. Low, K.C.B., A.D.C. The following observation sums up beautifully the reason for awarding such an honour:-

"The campaign in Burma was not one of great battles, but it was one that called for the best qualities of the soldier—perseverance, endurance, and unremitting attention to duty. The work entailed in dispersing bands of dacoits was a very hard one, particularly during the rains, when a great part of the district was under water."

Little did Richard know that this was to be the first of two medals awarded to him during his lifetime.

No longer needed in Burma, his Battalion was then despatched to Calcutta, India, towards the end of 1888. Half of them 'under Major Holbeche' continued westwards to arrive at Shahjahanpore on 6th December 1888, where they continued in peace keeping manoeuvres.

**1890**  
**Rank of Lieutenant Colonel**

But 1890 was not far om He had been in the army for 20 years and it was time to return to England and retirement, by which time he had become Lieutenant Colonel Richard Holbeche!

**1891-2**  
**Wrote 'The Holbeche Diary'**

His return to the family home prompted his writing of 'The Holbeche Diary', while, at the age of 40, he was probably contemplating his future occupation.

During this time there also occurred the death of his beloved mother, Emma, which meant the winding up of the family estate, his father having already died and there being several children to inherit.

Subsequent events of his life suggest that his next move, to London, was perhaps always intended and only postponed due to his mother's ill health.

His flat in Queen Anne's Gate, near to St James' Park, enabled him, as an Officer, to use the facilities of the Army and Navy Club in nearby Pall Mall. He also later joined The Japan Society, where he eventually became honorary secretary.

Of much more significance, though, was his membership of The Camera Club in Charing Cross Road which he joined in January 1893. He was acquainted with fellow member and lecturer, Rev WKR Bedford (one time Rector of Holy Trinity Parish Church in Sutton Coldfield), whose lectures on 'The Knights Hospitallers'

	<p>may have been instrumental in deciding his future with The Order of St John of Jerusalem at St John's Gate, Clerkenwell.</p>
<p><b>1897</b> <b>Joined The Order of St John of Jerusalem, St John's Gate, Clerkenwell</b></p>	<p>For whatever reason, he joined them on 27 April 1897 and in later years he was to write that his work for them had 'always been a labour of love'.</p> <p>His first appointment could not have been taken up at a more crucial time. It was during the years when the newly formed St John Ambulance Association, as one of the Red Cross Societies, had taken on responsibility for the organisation of personnel and materials in caring for the welfare of the sick and wounded during war time.</p>
<p><b>1899-1902 Involved in supplying troops with clothing, medical effects and comforts in Anglo-Boer War</b></p>	<p>Faced with the imminent Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 Richard's task was to organise the collection, sorting, storage and despatching of parcels of clothing, medical effects and comforts sent out to the troops in South Africa.</p> <p>The situation was summed up later in a Report that he was asked to make:-</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">"A large company lent not only their warehouse, but the services of their staff, whilst a member of the Order (Richard, himself) conducted the correspondence, and generally supervised the proceedings under the advice of the Chief Secretary, Sir Herbert Perrott. Vast quantities of material of all kinds were sent by the 'Castle' line at special rates for the use of the sick and wounded, and distributed for a short time by Colonel Young, and later by Sir John Furley, both of whom at different times acted as Commissioner in South Africa.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">The appeal to the public for warm clothing and comforts of all kinds met with a most generous response, the various centres of the Association more particularly vying with each other in the quantity and excellence of the comforts for the sick and wounded, and the method of packing.</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Not only did members of the Royal Family and numbers of distinguished persons send contributions, but quantities of humble but useful gifts came from the upper classes: e.g., a pair of hand-knitted stockings, a pair of gloves, a pipe, etc. These were often accompanied by pathetic letters."</p> <p>The Castle shipping line that was mentioned was of vital importance in peacetime, transporting mail to South Africa on The Cape Run as the service was called. It eventually became the well known Union-Castle Line. It is quite likely that Richard used 'The</p>

Kildonan Castle', the last mail steamer of Donald Currie's fleet, which was, in fact, completed in 1899 for troop transport duties. She was built by Fairfield and was just under 9,700 gross tonnage. Other mail steamers were converted to hospital ships during wartime, carrying the injured back home and Richard was also involved in equipping these ships as well as the trains that had been commandeered into the War.

**1902  
Presented by Prince of  
Wales with Special  
South African Medal  
to Members of St John  
"awarded for  
conspicuous service  
rendered during the  
South African War  
and with the despatch  
of ambulance material  
and medical comforts  
for the sick and  
wounded at the seat of  
war".**

This work became a vast enterprise for St John's, because the logistics were huge, considering the myriad items required and the seafaring and land transportation risks involved. To show appreciation, a presentation took place on July 14th, 1902, at St James's Palace, by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Grand Prior of the Order, of a special medal "awarded for conspicuous service rendered during the South African War and with the despatch of ambulance material and medical comforts for the sick and wounded at the seat of war".

Among the recipients were: Viscount and Viscountess Knutsford, Chairman of the St John Ambulance Association and of the Special Committee; Col. Sir Herbert Perrott, Chief Secretary of the Ambulance Department; Col. C Bowdler, Chief Commissioner, St. John Ambulance; and Lt. Col. Richard Holbeche and Mr. W G Barnes, Jnr., who both supervised for many months the despatch of material and medical stores for the troops.

No doubt, a proud moment for Richard, who now had a second medal to his name, the Special South African Medal to Members of St John, bearing the insignia of Edward VI.

At the end of the war, one might imagine that peacetime would cause his adrenalin to slow down and the adoption of a more leisurely pace to life, but far from it —another project had already presented itself to him, well suited to his writing abilities, but this workload may have hastened the deterioration in his health some years later.

The Order had approached him with a proposal. They asked if he would assist them in the production of a book—as co-author with his old acquaintance, Rev W K R Bedford, who was also Genealogist to the Order.

**1901  
Librarian of the  
Order**

He was in an ideal position to comply with their request. Having been appointed Librarian of the Order in 1901, he was able to have access to all the necessary material.

**1902**  
**Co-author of 'The Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, being a History of the English Hospitallers of St John, their Rise and Progress'**

Between them they produced a book entitled 'The Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, being a History of the English Hospitallers of St John, their Rise and Progress', which appeared in October 1902 on the Library shelves at St John's Gate, Clerkenwell.

There were already many books written on the history of St John's, but this one was special, as it was first to encapsulate the Order's new identity since the foundation of St John's Ambulance Association and St John's Ambulance Brigade. It was for this aspect that Richard had been chosen and he was ideal for the job. Already involved in the machinations of the Boer War, he could also write well and was fully conversant with the past and present activities of the Ambulance movement in those times.

The book was intended to record the complete history of the Order and therefore much had to be done to collate all the information available. No doubt Richard's and Riland Bedford's research would have been carried on throughout the whole of St John's Gate, and the contents of rooms such as The Old Chancery, Council Chamber, Museum, Library, Coin Room and The Stores Depot which was used by the Ambulance Association, would have been very beneficial to them.

This, then, seems to have marked the last important event of Richard's life with St. John's. His Librarianship duties were to continue until 1912, when he reached 62 years of age.

However, the Order could not let him go without some mark of recognition. In its estimation, Richard had earned its second highest honour for services to humanity—in his case, within the modern ambulance movement.

**1912-1914**  
**Made 'Knight of the Order of St John'**

St John's bestowed its own awards, based on an order of chivalry and so, in an investiture ceremony, probably held at the Grand Priory Church, he was made a 'Knight of Grace', a title redolent of a former age but possessing great dignity and of which Richard could be justly proud.

**1912-1914**  
**Plaque erected at St John's Gate, Clerkenwell**

In addition, the final accolade of St John's was to erect a plaque in his honour in The Council Chamber. The plaque can now be seen ranking alongside those of other Knights and Dames of the Order, not the least of whom is Florence Nightingale!

Superimposed on the plaque was the Holbeche Family Arms, no doubt a source of pride, not only for Richard but also for the rest of



his family. One hopes that they were able to attend the investiture and eventually to see the plaque in situ, particularly as it seems these auspicious events were to mark his swansong with the Order.

**Died  
14 February 1914**

**Obituary in  
'The Times'  
Interred at Sutton  
Coldfield**

Two years later, on 14 February 1914, he died of cerebral haemorrhage and exhaustion at his home in Blenheim Mansions, Westminster. The Obituary in 'The Times' Newspaper recorded his funeral at St John's Priory, Clerkenwell, which was attended by the highest ranking members of St. Johns, Sir Herbert Perrott and Sir John Furley, but his final resting place was to be with his mother and father, and brother Tom, in the small churchyard, overlooking the town where he grew up and loved, at Holy Trinity Parish Church, Sutton Coldfield.

*Application for a Blue Plaque submitted by:*

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