

# You Can't Keep a Good Dog Down: How War Saved Brighton

by Philip Morgan

Brighton is beside the seaside which is both a blessing and a curse. In the sixteen hundreds it had a fishing fleet of 80 boats, 400 fishermen and 10,000 fishing nets. In 1703 The Lower Town, the centre of the fishing industry, was destroyed by The Great Storm and then in 1705 any remnants finally buried under five feet of shingle by another storm. As Daniel Defoe said, 'Brighthelmstone was miserably torn to pieces ... and made the very picture of desolation.' Its population fell to under 1,400, two thirds of whom were so poor they didn't have to pay rates. It had to beg for money from the nation's church pulpits for cash to stop being completely overwhelmed by the sea. Abandonment and despair were in the air.

But like an old dog it emerged from the waves shook itself



*Brighthelmstone, Sussex, - c1824 - Joseph Mallord William Turner, R.A.,*

and took a good look around to try and spot where the next meal was going to come from. It spotted two possibilities. Sea water, which was apparently the cure for all ills and France, which kept on declaring war on England.

Dr Richard Russel, the main supporter of sea bathing for health moved in and by 1759 Sir Edward Wilson observed that Brighton 'was

... much resorted to for the sea water.' And in the same year the French and Germans assembled an invasion force of 48,000 just across the Channel.

Brighton was not only ideally suited for sea bathing it was also perfect for landing an invading force. The government took notice. Two new artillery batteries were built in Brighton: the East and the West.



*French ships, which should land French and Imperial German troops in England, in the port of Brest - 1759 - Jakob Andreas Friedrich*



*Artillery Place and the West Battery at Brighton, with guardhouse on left - 1820 - August Charles Pugin*



*Hussars on Brighton Downs -1788 - Francis Wheatley*

Temporary military camps started to appear round the town.

Training manoeuvres were carried out. Infantry drilled on what would become The Level. Artillery fired salvoes from the hills. Cavalry charges were enacted on the flat land round Whitehawk Hill which became so popular that Brighton Race Course was born.



*Brighton Races - An excursion to Brighton - 1790 - T. Rowlandson and H. Wigstead.*

Over the next thirty years troops became a welcome if intermittent part of Brighton life. They fitted in well with the Prince Regent. They brought a touch of glamour and of course extra cash. Brighton was getting comfortable and relatively well-fed.

Then 1793 happened.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> January, King Louis XVI of France was executed. On the 1<sup>st</sup> February, France declared war on England. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, The National Convention declared that 'Terror is the Order of the Day' and a programme of mass executions began in Paris.



*A View of the Camp at Cox Heath near Maidstone in Kent 1778*

The British government flooded Brighton with troops. In July 1793 preparations began for a military encampment on Belle Vue Field to the immediate east of Brighton including what is now Regency Square. The first troops arrived on 13 August by the end of the month there were over ten thousand of them in residence and Brighton was the front line. The camp lasted until October and was the first of many.

From then on until 1815 there were more soldiers in Brighton than fleas on a dog. They were everywhere, they even set up camp right in the centre of town on the Steine and there were to be 600 in a barracks at the bottom of Church Street.



*The Steine with The Pavilion and Grove House from the North -Spornburg - 1796*

Locals talked about seeing hundreds of camp fires on the Downs and feeling that they were surrounded by a shadow town. The Army carried out regular manoeuvres now and they were enormous affairs. Mock battles took place involving thousands of troops They became a major public entertainment and people trekked from miles away to watch the spectacle.



*Review of the Norfolk Militia - c. 1760 - David Morier*

The combination of sea bathing, the Prince Regent's court and the Army had turned Brighton into a boom town. Speculators rushed to build Georgian terraces, open assembly rooms and start theatres. Dressmakers, portrait painters and pastry cooks flooded in. Brighton had come a long way from the bedraggled mutt of 1705. It was now one of the most fashionable places in England.



*Duchess of Richmond's Ball on the Eve of Waterloo 15 June 1815 - 1870's - Robert Alexander Hillingworth*

*'They are going to be encamped near Brighton; and I do so want papa to take us all there for the summer! It would be such a delicious scheme; and I dare say would hardly cost anything at all. Mamma would like to go too of all things! only think what a miserable summer else we shall have!' J. Austen 'Pride and Prejudice' 1803.*

All very good if you were of the officer class but not so good if you were just an ordinary guy. You could have been having a free pint in a pub in when you were grabbed by a recruiting party and pressed into 'unlimited enlistment' with no hope of ever getting out except through injury or death. And then found yourself locked in the barracks at the bottom of Church Street in case you spread, radical ideas.'



There were 600 other soldiers locked in with you and no latrines just a bucket if you were lucky. Disease was rampant with sometimes two or even three to a bed. To quote the parliamentary record in 1858. '... the long continued excessive mortality of the British army has been mainly caused by the bad sanitary condition of their barrack accommodation.' There was fighting, bullying, occasional murders and suicides. All a far cry from the Royal Pavilion, which would be finished in 1823 at a cost of £500,000 (£100 million today.) One upside in Church Street was that there was a small hole in the perimeter wall of the barracks compound so you could sneak out to the King and Queen pub for a crafty pint. Mind you, if you were caught, you'd get twenty lashes as long as it was your first offence!

Brighton was flush but yet again there was a storm on the horizon. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815. This was obviously good news for England but not for Brighton. The majority of the army left town. The people who had serviced them in whatever way they needed were now unemployed. Building didn't stop but they were building for a market that didn't exist anymore. Then in 1825 there was a nation-wide financial collapse. Three out of the four banks in Brighton went bust. No credit was available, loans were called in and as they were private banks people just lost all their money. People went bankrupt and there was mass unemployment. But Brighton was very different from what it had been one hundred years before. It was as fit as a butcher's dog. It had a confidence and a determination to survive. So, when the railways arrived in 1841 it was ready for them.

You can't keep a good dog down.