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John Cornocks Silver Tankard of 1781 from the Vale of Berkeley

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Note

JOHN CORNOCK'S SILVER TANKARD OF 1781 FROM THE VALE OF BERKELEY

The outbreak of war with revolutionary France early in 1793 found Britain's military forces unprepared for a major global conflict. In order that the regular Army could be deployed overseas, the English militia was embodied and regiments of fencibles raised for home defence. From 1794 numerous companies of Volunteer infantry were raised throughout Britain; those who raised them tended to be merchants and lawyers, in the towns, or landed gentlemen, in the country. Service in one of these corps of Volunteers brought exemption from being balloted for the militia and was consequently popular. The Peace negotiated with France in 1801 resulted in the disbandment of most Volunteer units but the resumption of war in 1803 gave a new impetus to Volunteering, as France was perceived to be preparing for an invasion of Britain.

Although a small number of companies of Volunteers had been raised in Gloucestershire in the 1790s, none of the Cornock family from the Vale of Berkeley had taken part as officers in that early flurry of patriotic activity. In 1803, though, Volunteering in Gloucestershire was far more active and John Cornock was commissioned as captain of one of two companies of Volunteers drawn from the Vale. The company that he commanded was formed of infantry soldiers dressed in scarlet coats with blue collars and cuffs and wearing blue breeches.¹ Cornock's company had two other officers: Thomas Neale, as lieutenant, and Richard Langbridge, as ensign.² The company was probably no more than 100 men strong and may well have been only half that size. In the event, as is known, Napoleonic France never invaded and the Volunteers were never called upon to defend their homes and hearths. They would, though, have mustered regularly for drill, training, musket practice and concomitant conviviality – much as did the Home Guard in the early 1940s.

The Cornocks were a landed family spread throughout the Vale of Berkeley by the late 18th century, their surname occurring in records for the villages of Slimbridge, Breadstone and

1. The National Army Museum, London, has photographs (reference negative numbers 25675–6) of an officer's coatee of the company. The second company of Berkeley Volunteers was an artillery company, dressed in blue with red collar and cuffs. Like the infantry company, the Berkeley Volunteer Artillery was disbanded in 1808. Brigadier H. Bullock, 'Gloucestershire Volunteers 1795–1815' in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 38 (1960), pp. 76–82, refers to the two Berkeley units on p. 77. Other corps included the nearby Frampton Volunteers, formed in 1798, whose archive including Order Book, Surgeon's Commission, Muster Roll and other correspondence is preserved in Gloucestershire Archives (GA: formerly the Gloucestershire Record Office), D 149/X 21 (see Peter Bloomfield, 'Musket, Fife and Drum: Military Records in the Gloucestershire Record Office, an exhibition catalogue', Summer 2004). See also M. Kippin, 'Volunteer Corps in Gloucestershire during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *Bulletin of the Military Historical Society* 55 no. 217 (2004), pp. 10–20.
2. *London Gazette* 1803, p. 1555. Their commissions were issued by the War Office on 12 November 1803 and back-dated to 13 September 1803. The commissions for the officers of the Berkeley Artillery Volunteers bore the same dates.



Fig. 1. Silver tankard, hallmarked 1781, presented to Captain John Cornock by the Berkeley Regiment of Volunteer Infantry, Gloucestershire, 1808 (photograph courtesy Ian Humphrey).

Goldwick as well as in the more substantial settlements of Oldbury-on-Severn and Thornbury. It is probable that John Cornock was from the Slimbridge branch of the family and that he was born there on 16 September 1765, the son of Thomas Cornock (1731–94) and Mary Hardin (born c.1735). He married Hannah Pearce (1767–1839) on 7 December 1788 and the marriage produced seven children, four boys and three girls, born between 1791 and 1810.³

3. Cornock family papers from the branch centred upon Oldbury-on-Severn and Thornbury are in GA, D 1606, D 2078 and D 5944. They are principally deeds for the ownership of land.



Fig. 2. The Trophy of Arms design on the lid of the tankard (photograph courtesy Ian Humphrey).

By 1808 government had investigated ways of bringing the manpower represented by the Volunteers into a more active war role: the creation of the Local Militia was the result. The Local Militia was a body distinct from the militia and formed from the old companies of Volunteers; it was subject to centralised military training and discipline and also to drafting into the regular Army. At a time when the beginning of the Peninsular War was necessitating the formation of large field armies, the Local Militia was created to provide a potential pool from which their ranks could be drawn. In Gloucestershire, in 1808, three battalions of Local Militia were formed, two in the east

of the county and one in the west.⁴ Some of the Volunteer companies chose to volunteer for the new battalions while others elected to disband themselves. The Berkeley Volunteer Infantry chose to be disbanded and so John Cornock ceased to be its captain after five years in command, years in which he had clearly, as his tankard says, exercised 'unremitting attention and liberal zeal' as the company's commanding officer.

It was then that the men of his company would have collected money to buy him the silver tankard which is the subject of this brief study. Gifts of plate, or of swords, were common on such occasions among Volunteer companies, the men of such units being conscious of the social hierarchy that underpinned their positions and of the deference that was due to those whom fate and society had decreed should be their officers and their landlords. The gift of this tankard reflects both the social deference that was the contemporary norm and the very real rapport between officers and men in a military unit that was really just an extension of their lives. The fact that a tankard was chosen for presentation probably reflects the fact that Cornock was a yeoman farmer and not a grandee or sprig of the local gentry. The fact that the tankard was bought ready-made and was 27 years old when engraved for presentation – rather than specially commissioned – probably reflects the small size and relative poverty of Cornock's company.

The tankard (Fig. 1) is hallmarked 1781 and engraved with the following inscription: 'To Captn John Cornock from the Berkeley Volunteer Infantry as a token of their respect and gratitude for the unremitting attention and liberal zeal which he displayed in promoting the interests and dicipline [sic] of the Corps while under his command. 1808.' The lid (Fig. 2) carries a fine Trophy of Arms design representing military insignia and equipment, including a drum and a sword. The tankard is 14 cms (5½") high and weighs 992 gms (35 oz).

In January 2006 the tankard was acquired by the Trustees of the Gloucestershire Regimental Museum on behalf of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum, which presents the military history of the county's regiments in Custom House in Gloucester Docks.⁵ The collections also include other items from the period of Volunteers, Local Militia and militia including belt plates and other accoutrements; paintings and prints; a sword; a drum and several uniform coats including, both fortunately and coincidentally, a coatee worn by John Cornock himself, which is on display. This was donated many years ago by a descendant, Captain W.B. Cornock who served in 12th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment during the First World War.

Although the tankard presumably remained in the Cornock family for some years its subsequent history is unknown until it was acquired by the Museum from Nicholas Shaw Antiques of Petworth in West Sussex.⁶

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4. The officers of the three battalions of Gloucestershire Local Militia were all commissioned in April and May 1809.
5. Accession no. GLRRM: 06891.
6. The research for this note is the work of Stephen Wood, with additional material from David Viner. In its preparation, the authors acknowledge with thanks information provided by George Streatfeild and David Read of the Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum, Custom House, Gloucester Docks, Gloucester GL1 2HE.