

A well-travelled uniform – the life of Captain R. E. Palmer

By Jude O' Gorman



Kerry County Museum regularly receives donations of items to be added to the Museum's collection, the majority are usually from individuals with local connections. However, in 2012 the Museum was offered a donation, comprising multiple items, by the Horsham Museum in West Sussex, England. The items had been found in the attic of a house in Newdigate in Surrey and donated to Horsham in 2011. When research by the Horsham Museum revealed them to be part of a Kerry Militia uniform they were offered to Kerry County Museum and added to the Museum's collection in 2012. The donation comprises eleven items including jackets, trousers, belts, etc which were parts of a mess and levee uniform.

The donation prompted two main questions, how did the uniform find its way from Kerry to Surrey and who had originally worn it? There was a vital clue to these questions when examination of one of the jackets revealed the name label of R.E. Palmer. Research into his life has revealed that the owner (and very possibly his uniform) had a well - travelled life.

Richard Elliott Palmer was born in Tralee in 1852, one of the seven children of John Palmer and Henrietta Jane, nee Stephens. Henrietta was from Blennerville and the couple had married at Annagh church. John was a corn merchant and proprietor of the Bunnow flour mill at Kilgobban on Tralee Bay. The family were minor members of the established merchant class in Tralee, Church of Ireland worshippers and lived on Day Place in the town. John died

in 1860 at the age of forty-nine leaving Henrietta with seven children under the age of ten. The family continued to live at number two Day Place after his death. Unusually for this time Henrietta continued to run the business under the name of H.J. Palmer and Co.

By 1875 Richard had been appointed a Lieutenant in the Kerry Militia, the uniform items date from this period. The 14th Kerry Militia regiment was raised in 1793 to act as a local policing force and a supplement to the regular army. In 1879 Richard was appointed a Captain and was forever after referred to by this appellation even though he resigned from the Militia (now the 4th Battalion the Royal Munster Fusiliers) in 1888. The uniform donated to the Museum became superfluous to requirements in 1879 and was perhaps packed away at this stage. His military commitments did not prevent Captain Palmer from enjoying a full social life, his interests included hunting, shooting and fishing and he kept a yacht at the lock gates in Blennerville. Like other members of his class he was also active on local governing bodies, including Tralee Town Commission and the Tralee Board of Guardians.

An entry in *The Kerry Weekly Reporter* of August 1884 reveals that Captain Palmer was now spending time in the United States where he had become involved in business.

Our respected townsman Captain R. E. Palmer will probably pay Tralee a short visit at Christmas... [he is] at present resident in New York where he has charge of and is conducting the American branch of one of the largest sherry shipping houses of Spain and has also established an importing business for himself in that city. We are pleased to see the success of a Kerryman who for years did business amongst us.

He had been employed as a manager by Messers Gonzales, Byass & Co. at £1000 per year. The importing business referred to above was that of Palmer & Miley. The New York Record newspaper records the firm of “Messers Palmer & Miley, 1129 Broadway, New York. Importers of choice wine and dealers in the best brand of specialities...” Unfortunately Richard’s business dealings did not flourish, the Gonzales business failed in 1885 with debts of £3,000 and the firm of Miley and Palmer failed in 1888.

Despite these setbacks in business Richard seemed to have thrived in New York society and in February 1892 he married Minnie Merrit Pullman at the Rectory of the Transfiguration Church in New York. She was ten years his junior and at 28 years was already a widow of some fortune. Almost immediately the couple left New York and by June were living at Oaklands Park, Newdigate, Surrey. Oaklands Park was a substantial residence and farm. Perhaps this was when the uniform was consigned to the attic. Residence in Surrey did not prevent Richard from standing as the Independent Unionist candidate for West Kerry in June 1892. An election letter from Surrey addressed to his “fellow countrymen, farmers and all workers of the soil in West Kerry” failed to encourage the voters and he came last in the poll, receiving only forty three votes.

Two years later, in February 1894, Richard’s business failings caught up with him as a headline in *The Cheltenham Chronicle* reveals, it proclaimed him to be “A poor man with a rich wife”. Bankruptcy proceedings in Croydon Bankruptcy Court were brought against Captain Palmer by Messers Gonzales who claimed that having set up Richard in New York

that business had failed with a debt of £3,000 of which he had repaid only £1,000. Richard was seeking to have this debt discharged. Rather pointedly the court case made mention of Richard's marriage referring to him as a man who had married "a lady with a large fortune" with an income of £2,000 per year. That would be equivalent to approximately £250,000 per year at today's rate. The counsel for Gonzales made reference to Richard's lifestyle describing how he "went hunting and driving three or four horses about all over Ireland and lived in high style". Richard appears to have done himself no favours by countersuing Gonzales for £10,00 damages. The judge described this as "shameful and scandalous" and suspended Richard's discharge for three years.

This adverse publicity did not seem to affect the couple's high profile social life. Over the years Richard and Minnie travelled back and forth between England and the United States, enjoying the social round when they were abroad. Reports in the American newspapers confirm the impression of Richard as a sociable and clubbable man. In 1904 the couple were in Salt Lake City staying at the upmarket Knutsford Hotel. *The Salt Lake City Tribune* reports that they were entertained during their stay by a Doctor and Mrs McEnery. The paper reports:

Captain Palmer is a well known retired officer of the British Army and is a great lover of sport. His trip to this country is entirely in the pursuit of pleasure and before he returns he will have fished and shot in all sections of the country. Having travelled extensively he is a most entertaining conversationalist and his share of anecdotes of life among the game of all countries proves of rare interest...He will be here several days and will then leave for San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Additionally, Richard continued to maintain his Irish contacts. For many years he leased an estate at Claregalway for the fishing, on these occasions unaccompanied by Minnie. He also appears to have maintained ownership of the Bunnow Mills and visited Kerry regularly. In 1916 the Kerry visit proved to be a more than usually exciting as *The West Sussex Gazette* reports:

Captain R.E. Palmer has had a somewhat exciting time in Ireland. He was on a visit to his estate, which is situated in the neighbourhood of the scene of the arrest of Sir Roger Casement. He was salmon fishing when the police intervened. He was able to establish his identity...The authorities commandeered his motor car and the police and military made good use of it in collecting useful information for the Crown.

Despite the regular absences from their home in Surrey Richard and Minnie became pillars of the local community. Richard served on the local Rural Council and Board of Guardians and became President of the local Conservative and Unionist Association. Minnie was a cycling enthusiast and a patron of the arts and she also concerned herself with "good works", primarily concerning the village school where she was a school governor. Noticing some children appeared to be ill fed she set up a soup kitchen for the school, she purchased coats and hats for the children and paid for a monthly hairdresser to visit the school.

The Palmers lived in some style at Oaklands Park. The 1911 census records that the house had nineteen rooms (one must have been the attic where the uniform was found) and was run

with the help of three live in servants; a cook, a parlour maid and a kitchen maid. According to Lily Monk, who was in service at Oaklands, Derby Day was important in the Palmer household and Minnie used to hire a charabanc and later a double-decker bus to take as many indoor and outdoor staff as could be spared to see the race. The house was set in large landscaped gardens with ornamental ponds and a pheasantry, the latter no doubt for the Captain's pleasure. The property also included a 124 acre farm where Richard oversaw the establishment of a prize winning herd of rare pedigree Kerry cattle. The Oaklands Park herd became renowned and respected world wide.

Richard died in 1931, an obituary in *The West Sussex Gazette* described him as "a man of generous disposition, keen to promote the welfare of the district in which he lived and [he] was held in high regard by all sections of the community". Minnie died in 1934 after suffering a series of strokes. After her first stroke Richard purchased a pony and a bath chair with shafts that had been retired from a circus so that she could enjoy outings in the grounds. Richard and Minnie were buried in St Peter's Church, Newdigate, Surrey.

The couple had one adopted daughter but Oaklands Park passed into the ownership of the Bailey family, relatives of Minnie's, it was members of this family who donated the uniform to Horsham Museum. The house was sold in 1998 and it might have been then that the uniform was found secreted in the attic. The uniform now has a secure future in Kerry County Museum, unfortunately the same cannot be said of the house, which appears to have no future, it is now abandoned and derelict.