

The Fleur-de-lys by Brigadier-General H. C. E. Westropp

(Copy of an article that appears in the Official History of the Manchester Regiment by Colonel Wylly, 1925)

The Fleur de Lys has always been a well-known heraldic device, and there has been much dispute in the past as to its origin.

The late Brigadier-General A.C. Lovett, writing in the Magazine of the 8th Battalion Manchester Regiment, summarised many of the theories which had been broached regarding it, as follows:

“Its division into three parts suggests its ancient meaning as the symbol of life, with its host of forms, and variations, which figure in all the great religions of enormous antiquity.

“In the ancient Hindoo shrine at the source of the Ganges, high up on the Himalayas, I have seen this device in iron of rude shape fixed in the ground in great numbers, to remind man of his body, soul and spirit. According to one tradition it was first employed as an Armorial Bearing by Clovis I (1) and represents the lily presented by an angel to that monarch at his baptism, the three Fleur de lys of his shield being the sign of the Trinity.

“Newton considers it to be the design of a reed, or flag, in blossom, used in place of a sceptre at the proclamation of the Frankish kings:

“King Louis VII of France is said to have first adopted it as a device, in allusion to his name, Louis Florus. It was, however, an early ornament of Greek, Roman, German, Spanish, and English Kings, and was a symbol employed by many noble families in various parts of Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Gioja of Amalfi is said to have marked the north end of the needle of the mariners' compass with a Fleur de Lys in honour of the Kings of Naples. Many compass cards of the present day bear this device, which may originally have been an ornamental cross. Since the twelfth century the fleur de lys has been used as a symbol of Royalty in France. After the victory of Agincourt, Henry V married the French Princess Katherine, and in his wooing called her my ‘fair flower-de-luce’ (Shakespeare). The English King's adopted on the Royal arms the device as Kings of France, and this may be seen on the Royal Palace of James I, in York today. The Drummers of the Foot Guards still wear the fleur de lys pattern lace, as a revival of bygone days”. Henry VI granted the arms of Eton College: “On a field sable three lily flowers argent, intending that our newly founded college (1440), lasting for ages to come, whose perpetuity we wish to be signified by the stability of the sable colour, shall bring forth the brightest flowers redolent of every kind of knowledge”.

The history of the 63rd Foot, and the fleur de Lys badge, which has recently been officially restored to the Regiment, are closely connected, although, so far, no document has been found to prove exactly when the Regiment was granted, or adopted, the badge.

The Regimental tradition regarding its origin is plainly stated in the History of the 63rd by the late Major James Slack, who served with the Regiment for many years, and throughout the Crimean War.

“At Helvoetsluis our baggage was taken by the enemy, on which occasion were lost the attestations and other documents belonging to the Regiment, and it is believed the authority to wear the Fleur-de-Lys was among them”.

That documents were lost there is no doubt, as a certificate regarding the loss of attestations, which were sworn before W. Fletcher, and signed by Captain and Paymaster M. N. Johnstone and C. Boyd, Adjutant, 63rd Regiment, is stated by Major Slack to have been as follows:

“We do swear that the attestations were taken with the baggage at Helvoetsluis, and to the best of our knowledge and belief, the date mentioned in the roll is a true date of the attestation which was copied from the regimental books (2).

“It would be a graceful act, and much appreciated by the Corps, if the authorities would renew the sanction and allow the Regiment *to wear the old badge they prize so highly*; at any rate, it would be no undeserved favour to issue an authority to the Regiment to wear the badge as an emblem to commemorate *the three-fold capture of Guadaloupe, viz., in 1759, 1810 and again in 1815* and that of Martinique in 1809, from the French, with their eagles and flags, etc”; and again: “The distinguished services of the Regiment against the French in capturing so repeatedly these islands creates a belief that on one of these occasions the Fleur-de-Lys must have first come as a Badge of Honour into the possession of the Regiment”. And on page 163 (1856): “The uniform of the Regiment was again changed, the old coatee being replaced by a tunic.

“The Fleur-de-Lys, which was worn as an ornament on the coatees of the officers and sergeant-major, and the star which was worn on the buttons were discontinued on the new tunic, as (it was said) written authority sanctioning their wear could not be produced. *There is, however, every probability that sanction to wear the Fleur-de-lys was obtained as a reward for the capture of Guadaloupe from the French in 1759*, when the Regiment suffered heavily in both officers and men.

“There is extant a miniature of an officer of the Regiment (Major Johns), who joined in 1797, which shows the fleur de lys as an ornament, then worn on the epaulette – also the regimental plate (some of it is very old) has the fleur-de-lys engraved on it.

“It seems scarcely credible that these ornaments could, or would, have been taken into wear, by a Regiment having a reputation of so high a character, without first obtaining the sanction of His Majesty the King”.

As stated above by Major Slack, the Fleur de lys badge on this occasion was not then recognised on the grounds that *the Regiment* could produce no written authority for the wearing of the badge. Considering, however, the lapse of time between the date when it was certainly worn (circa 1784) and the date when permission to wear it was refused (1856), and considering the many moves and campaigns of the Regiment in its history, this failure to produce written authority is not to be wondered at; even if the loss of baggage of the Regiment on active service in the year 1795 – which may have contained the written authority – is not taken into account.

Major Slack also understood that the Fleur de Lys was probably obtained as a reward for the capture of Guadaloupe from the French in 1759, but, as will be seen below, it had appeared on the drummers lace in 1758, when the 2nd Battalion 8th “The King’s” was constituted a regiment and numbered “63”, before it was sanctioned, or adopted, as a badge. The late Major A.T.P. Hudson, 63rd Regiment, and 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment, who took great interest in this matter, came to the conclusion also that the badge probably dated from 1759.

The late Mr Milne, the well-known collector and authority on old uniforms, badges, etc, could not trace the actual origin, and in 1895 wrote:

“But it may be that some totally forgotten deed, the taking of a French Standard, or something of the kind, not important enough to be mentioned in despatches, though of sufficient importance to remain in the memory of those present, may have given rise to the adoption of the French badge”.

In 1910 he wrote: “I am very sorry to hear that it has not yet been granted to you, for it was a real genuine old badge, and, no doubt, well earned at the time”.

Although no document has, so far, been discovered to prove the origin of the badge, there is ample evidence to show that the Regiment has a vested right in the fleur de lys from long-continued possession and use.

This evidence may be summarised as follows:

- (a) On the drummers’ lace in 1758, *vide* Mr Milne’s statement

- (b) Portraits of officers
- (c) Specimens of old uniforms, etc
- (d) Extracts from records of Firms who supplied uniforms, badges etc
- (e) Portraits of Major Johns, mentioned above by Major Slack as being in the officers' mess, 1st Manchester Regiment, and a miniature in possession of Colonel J. Parker, of Browsholme Hall, Clitheroe; of Captain A. W. Barcroft, 63rd Foot, who was drowned whilst in command of the troops on the *Piedmont* transport on the 18th November, 1795. The miniature was taken just before he sailed for the West Indies; *on the cross-belt*, over the number 63, is a Fleur de Lys, quite distinct, but not very elaborately designed, and entirely silver.

In 1895 Mr Milne wrote as follows: "*At that time (1759) (and to this day) the drummers of the Foot Guards wear the Fleur de lys pattern lace, so it is pretty well known as a badge.*"

"In 1860, when the universal drummers' lace was introduced, the 8th King's Regiment (N.B., *from which the 63rd was formed*) and some eight others were using the Fleur de lys lace of various hues for their drums, and nobody knew its origin. Still the fact remains *that (originally) the 63rd was the only regiment whose officers wore it at all.*"

"There is no doubt that the Fleur de lys was first displayed upon the officers' strap (of the epaulette) towards the end of the last century. My specimen is quite as old as 1790, *if not a little older (3)* I consider that it was so worn until 1812, when all ornaments were cleared off *epaulette straps* as much as possible, because in that year it was authorised to display field officers' badges of rank, crown or stars, upon the epaulette straps.

"It was then, I believe placed upon the skirt. I enclose photo (which please accept) of the tails of a light company officer's jacket showing the method of wearing the badge, 1812 to 1820. This garment belongs, or did belong, to Nathans, the costumiers. I did not buy it because the wings were missing, but I did purchase a companion, the long-tailed coat (1820) of a lieutenant-colonel; *the silver epaulettes were attached to it*, rendering it, therefore, more perfect.

"When the lace was changed in 1830 from silver to gold, the fleur de lys still remained in the same position, until tails and skirt ornaments disappeared with the introduction of tunics in 1855".

The late Mr Hastings Irwin has stated that in about 1784 the Fleur de Lys appeared in the centre of the epaulette, in silver, edged with dark green, and in 1797 was on the epaulette and cross-belt.

From 1811 the badge was on the 'turn backs' of the coatee, in silver, mounted on dark green cloth, and from 1830 to 1856, in gold, when coatees were done away with.

In 1825, he states, it appeared on the officers' waist-clasp, and in 1848 the lace loops and buttons on the skirts of officers' coatees were abolished, and the gold fleur de lys *was their only ornament.*

In 1871 it was used as a puggaree brooch, and later on the officers Glengarry, field service cap, mess waistcoat buttons, and, more recently, on the lapels of the mess jacket.

Colonel R.W.Studdy, writing in 1913, stated that when he joined in 1867 in Dublin: "The Field Officers had saddle-cloths, Lincoln green, and gold braiding, and, as far as I can remember, a Fleur-de Lys, and crown, in the corner behind the saddle. Mess waistcoats were Lincoln green, with gold cord edging, and gilt buttons, with Fleur de Lys raised on them. I have a set by me".

In addition to the above, the records of certain tailoring firms afford evidence that the 63rd Regiment wore the Fleur de Lys as a badge. Amongst others the following may be quoted, the entries referring to the 63rd Regiment:

Messrs. Webb & Co.

1812 – “Lace, etc. Silver, dark green, and vellum”. “Skirt ornaments, silver Fleur de Lys on dark green”.

Messrs. C Smith & Co.

January 1824 – “Silver passed and spangled Fleur de Lys on dark green, 1823”.

Messrs. Herbert & Co.

1841 – “Skirts, Fleur de Lys on dark green”. (The original drawing and description are in possession of Messrs. Herbert & Co.)

Evidence, therefore, is available from old established firms of tailors, that the Fleur de Lys was in use on the coatees of Officers of the 63rd Regiment in the year 1812 and after.

The records of accoutrement and button-makers have also been searched, and those of Messrs. Jennens & Co. – a firm established since 1760 – may be considered as affording the most conclusive evidence.

This firm have in their possession the plate an officers’ waist-clasp, which, according to their records, was approved in July 1825. This clasp was worn until 1840, when the universal “V.R” clasp was introduced. This clasp has the Fleur de Lys on it as the badge, and one has been reproduced.

Mess livery buttons were also made by this firm about 1830, and gilt buttons (such as was the fashion for gentlemen to wear about the period 1820-50) were also made by them. Specimen plates of these buttons are in possession of Messrs. Jennens.

Neither of these two buttons is official, but it helps to establish the fact that the Fleur de Lys was used by the Regiment. The evidence of the waist-clasp apparently shows that the Fleur-de-Lys was sanctioned in 1825 for use as a badge by the 63rd Regiment.

It has been engraved on the mess plate for a century and more, and is said to have been cut on the gravestones of those who fell in the American War of Independence. The regimental nickname of “Bloodsuckers” originated (such is the tradition) from the numerous small Fleur de Lys cut on the gravestones in America, which resembled that insect.

It has been painted on the drums, and worn as a badge of the bandsmen’s and drummers’ pouches. During the South African War it was worn by all ranks on the khaki helmet in green cloth. It is engraved on the monument at Caesars’ Camp, South Africa, and on the memorial panel in the Royal Military College Chapel, Sandhurst.

The restoration of this ancient heraldic device, and badge of the old 63rd Foot, has given immense pleasure to all ranks, past and present.

The inheritors of the Fleur de Lys (the 1st Battalion) could not have passed on to all battalions of ‘The Manchester Regiment’ any badge they hold in such high honour, which, throughout their War and Peace History, has done as much as a badge can do to keep always in the forefront the traditions, services, and esprit de corps which have made this Regiment famous.

“It is the history of Regiments, it is their pride and traditions, which make a Regiment illustrious, which make it formidable in the field, and when weapons and numbers alone will not avail, give the Regiment its glory and its confidence” (Lord Rosebery)

“I have known many splendid corps in the Army, but not one to beat the 1st Manchesters” (Lieut-General Sir James Willcocks).

Notes:

1. Clovis I, King of the Franks, born 465, chief of the warlike tribe of Salian Franks, who inhabited Northern Gaul.
2. The Inspection Report for 1784 states that all the 63rd Regimental books were lost in America by the Adjutant being killed.
3. The coatee or jacket of the officer of the Light Company, mentioned above, is now in the possession of Brig.-General H.C.E. Westropp, who also acquired the long-tailed coatee of a lieutenant-colonel, and presented it to the Officers 1st Battalion Manchester Regiment. So far, it has not been possible to trace the epaulettes, which Mr Milne states were attached to it.