

John Shipp 1784 – 1834



A full-length portrait by Wageman, representing him leading his troop into the fort of Huttrass in 1817, was engraved by Holl, and was reproduced for the 'Memoirs'.

"... we moved on and before I got halfway down to the fort six more of my men were killed. The enemy had doubled their firepower falling one by one. I myself received a matchlock ball, which entered over and passed out over my left, leaving my forehead dangling, and blood pouring from the huge wound."

Memoirs of the extraordinary military career of John Shipp, late a Lieut. in His Majesty's 87th regiment.

John Shipp was born on the 16th March 1784 in North Entrance, Saxmundham, the second son of Thomas and Laetitia Shipp, an honest but poor couple. His mother died while John was still young and while his father was away as a soldier of fortune, possibly in America.

The two young sons were left to fend for themselves and had to rely upon the Parish to support them. At the age of nine, John saw his brother join a man-of-war and he never heard from him again, although it is believed he survived and eventually returned to Saxmundham.

John was so fascinated by soldiers, he lied about his age and signed up for an experimental boy-soldier regiment. Thus began one of the most remarkable stories ever, about a penniless, illiterate child soldier who rose through the ranks to become one of the most influential men of his day.

Shipp's daring exploits and feats of bravery while serving in India are so numerous that many have gone unrecorded officially and are only known because they were repeated by returning soldiers.

He was eventually pensioned out of the army after thirty years, finally leaving India.

His reputation arrived in England well before him, ensuring him 'cult' status. He was much sought after as a speaker and adored by women. His memories live on in the many books and plays that he published in the early Victorian era. His first book of memoirs was published in 1829.

Two years later, he issued *Flogging and its Substitute: a 'Voice from the Ranks'*, in the form of a letter to Sir Francis Burdett, being a powerful indictment of the detestable barbarities of the cat, which, as the author maintained, 'flogged one devil out and fifty devils in.' Burdett sent the writer a sum of £50, and most of his suggestions were adopted by the military authorities.

In 1830, Shipp was offered an inspectorship in the Stepney division of metropolitan police by Sir Charles Rowan; he was shortly afterwards appointed superintendent of the night watch at Liverpool, and in 1833 was elected master of the workhouse at Liverpool, where he was highly esteemed.

Shipp died at Liverpool, in easy circumstances, on 27 February 1834. He twice married, and left a widow with children.

As recently as 1980 his books were still being reprinted. The popular television series of the 1990's, 'Sharpe', was inspired by the life and adventures of this extraordinary man.

