

GEORGE (WILLIAM) BRENDISH AND THE INDIAN MUTINY OF 1857

Steve Brendish

A painting of George Brendish was commissioned for the Conference "Who are the Anglo-Indians". The conference was an attempt to inform Anglo-Indians and the wider community about "who" the Anglo-Indians are and as such a painting of an act of bravery by an Anglo-Indian that was pivotal to Indian history was commissioned. Steve Brendish "discovered" the painting on the net and has written the piece below about his discovery - Editor's note.



"The Last Post"

Oil on canvas 61cm x 61cm unframed painted by John Graham (2002)

This historic portrait depicts the 18-year old Anglo-Indian Telegraph Operator, George Brendish, sending the final message from his post to Ambala, while the Indian Mutiny was surging around him. His telegram warned the Punjab of the outbreak of the mutiny, crucially preventing it spreading to that region. Indeed Punjab regiments and Sikh cavalry in particular, played a significant part in its suppression.

With his superior officer killed, Brendish stayed at his post until it was no longer tenable. Narrowly escaping capture by the mutineers, he joined the Meerut Light Horse and subsequently the Bengal Yeomanry Cavalry. In 1902, at the unveiling of the Telegraph Memorial obelisk by the Viceroy, Lord Curzon, he was honoured with the investiture of the Medal of the Victorian Order. He died in Calcutta in 1907. [Text by Michael Ludgrove]

I have always known that my great great grandfather, William Brendish was famous, but it wasn't until recently that I found out just how revered he is, or that a painting had been commissioned to capture his brave feat. *[Brendish is known as William by his family but many of the historical texts refer to him as George - Editor's note]*

My father and grandfather had told me the story of my great great grandfather, William Brendish, at an early age, but even then I didn't realise the historical importance of the event, or that people outside of my family knew anything about it.

This is the story I was told: A mutiny within the English East India Company (EEIC) started as a result of the way the greased cartridges were prepared. The cartridges had to be greased to increase loading speed and were supposed to be greased with cow fat or swine fat. Cows are sacred to Hindus while Muslims are not permitted to eat pig flesh, so both groups were offended.

The British Army acted quickly after realising their carelessness and instructed the Sepoys to prepare their own lubricants for the cartridges. Unfortunately the rumours had spread throughout the EEIC and the damage had been done. On 10th May 1857 the Mutiny began in Meerut and quickly spread to Delhi. Shortly after the Mutiny had begun, the telegraph wires between Meerut and Delhi were cut by the Sepoys and on the same day William Brendish, a telegraph signaller, was sent out on foot to find the fault with the Meerut telegraph line. Delhi was seized by the Sepoys later on that day and William Brendish, under his own initiative, returned to his telegraph office, which was by now under siege, and sent the following message to Ambala:

'We must leave office. All the bungalows are being burnt down by the Sepoys from Meerut. They came in this morning... Mr Todd is dead I think. He went out this morning and has not returned... We are off'.

This telegram was extremely crucial for the EEIC as it gave the British officers stationed in Ambala a chance to disarm the Sepoys and therefore stop the mutiny

spreading any further than it already had.

William Brendish, along with four other Anglo-Indians was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery and a stone monument was been erected outside the main Post Office in Delhi.

I can remember proudly boasting to my school friends that 'My great great grandfather had saved the EEIC'. Most of my friends couldn't believe I had any Indian heritage as I have blue eyes and blonde hair, let alone that one of my relatives had done anything worthy of a mention in a history book!!

Just before I got married in 1997, I started getting interested in my family tree, and after questioning my father and grandfather I was shown a book called 'The Red Fort', which detailed the Indian Mutiny of 1857. I quickly became interested (and extremely proud) of my ancestor's amazing bravery.

I moved to Melbourne Australia from England in 2000 and continued in my chosen profession of web designer. It was whilst I was on the web at work one day, when I was looking for a picture of a playing card, I typed in 'queen of hearts' in Google images (a search engine) and was interested to see pictures of people with 'queen' or 'heart' in their name. I then wondered what would happen if I typed my surname in and was absolutely amazed to see pictures of people with my surname, and a picture entitled Brendish_painting.jpeg.

I immediately knew who and what the painting was, but I had to find out more. I followed the link and found out that it had been recently commissioned by Adrian Gilbert and was in an auction approximately six months before. Then I realised that not only was the painting in Australia, it was in Melbourne!

I emailed Adrian and found out that the painting was still for sale. A few weeks later I met up with Adrian, John Graham (the painter) and Anglo-Indian historian Gloria Moore at the Tajmahal, an Indian restaurant, where I saw the painting for the first time.

The painting is amazing as it captures a moment in history which is not only very important, but one with which I feel a connection. I intend to buy the painting in the

very near future. Unfortunately, no one within my family knows the whereabouts of the Victoria Cross awarded to William Brendish. And although I have not yet been to Delhi, I fully intend to go and see the monument and the place where my great great grandfather created history.

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