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The Life of a Madras Artilleryman: The William Porter Letters

Peter Bailey

But what was life like for them? What was their daily routine? Where were they stationed? Just like so many others, I have spent hours in the India Office Library poring over the old books - and latterly the microfilms - gleaning the details of the career of my great-great grandfather, Edward Evans (1811-1872). In time I was able to get a fine but outline picture of the career of this ancestor.

He was born in Lewisham, Kent in 1811 and joined the Company's Army in October 1828 claiming, of course, to be 19 years old. After a five month induction at the Depot at Chatham he embarked in the *Thames* and sailed the three month voyage to Madras where he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, Madras Artillery. After eight years as a Gunner he was promoted to 'Corporal & Laboratory Man'. Following three years in this position he was made up to 'Sergeant Instructor' and twelve years later to 'Sub-Conductor'. After six years in this rank, followed by five as a full Conductor, he retired. Remaining in India on pension for the final eight years of his life Edward then died in Madras on 20th August 1872. Supplementary information on his marriage, the baptism of his nine, or possibly ten children and his burial in St. Patrick's Cemetery in Bodyguard Road, was obtained from the Church records.

A glance at the service records of others who survived to progress through to the rank of Conductor indicated that their career patterns were quite similar.

But, what was life like for them? What was their daily routine? Indeed, particularly during the early part of their service careers, where did they serve? Did they participate in any particular action? Were they wounded at all? The records do not reveal this for enlisted men as they do for officers. If only my ancestor had kept a diary which had survived, or had sent letters home!

Imagine, then, my excitement to learn of the existence in the British Library's Oriental & India Office Collection of *The Private Letters of William Porter, Gunner, 3rd Batt., Madras Artillery (1826-1857)* (Mss Eur. G128)

This is a series of letters written by William Porter to his father in London throughout his career in India. Naturally, much of the content is family related and it would be inappropriate to intrude by reproducing this here. However, there are passages, which cover aspects of his life and experiences in India which must also reflect those of his colleagues such as Edward Evans. It is these passages which I record below for the wider benefit of those whose ancestors may have had similar career patterns. In doing so, I have supplemented William Porter's own information with a minimum of data on him taken from the official records in the OIOC. They offer highly fascinating glimpses of his life - although annoyingly little about his daily routine.

The official records show that William Porter was born in Twickenham, Middlesex in 1807 and attested for the Company's Army on 16th February 1826. After three months induction at the Depot at Chatham he embarked in the *Prince Regent* and sailed the three month voyage to Madras where he was assigned to the 3rd Battalion, Madras Artillery. After six years as a Gunner he was promoted to 'Laboratory Corporal'. Following only a very short time in this position he was made up to 'Sergeant Instructor' and thirteen years later, to Sub-Conductor. After six years in this rank, followed by five as a full Conductor, he retired to pension prior to dying six years later at St. Thomas' Mount on 29th July 1864 at the age of 57 years.

Readers will note the very close parallel with the career of Edward Evans recorded above, and that William preceded him by about three years.

Comments on the Madras Artillery

The first letter in the series is written from Prince of Wales Island (Penang) where William was serving as a Gunner with 'B' Company of the 3rd Battalion of the Madras Artillery. It was written on 13th March 1828, close to a year after his arrival there from Madras which he had left on 8th February 1827. He remarks that he has been low in spirits for his first two or three months in India "... due to fatigue of drill and change of diet." However, he quotes a rhyme - or possibly a song:

"For why should soldiers be dismayed
And give away to senseless tears
Come sieze your cup and drink success
To the Madrass Cannoniers!"

It is thought unlikely that this was of his own composition since he shows no disposition as a balladeer in any other of his letters. My supposition is that it was a ditty designed to raise the spirits and morale of newly recruited soldiers. Perhaps some needed this since William wrote at the same time that the "... burning wrays of the sun has proved fatal to many of my shipmates."

Early in his career he implies homesickness and that he would like to return to London. He even comments that "It would cost £20" which he realizes that he would never be able to afford, and wonders if his father and friends "... could club together to raise this." However, although over the years he continues to count down the time to the end of his 'unlimited' service of 21 years, by the time he is promoted to Sergeant Instructor, he comments that he is "... feeling much better about India." In fact he wrote:

"If you could but have the pleasure of seeing me and my family you would join me and say happy happy day was that when I embarked for India."

Following some fifteen years at St. Thomas' Mount - seemingly uneventful years as far as his military career was concerned - his letter dated 14th January 1849 is from Tavoy in Burma. He admits that it is four years since he last wrote but confides:

"In November 1846 I fell into trouble in consequence of disobeying an order given by my Superior Officer and as a punishment for the offence I was suspended from my situation for the space of six months, during which time I supported my family by my Lithographic Press. When the time of suspension was completed, viz. 29th July 1847, I joined the Arsenal at Fort St. George... I remained till Feb^y 1848 when I was ordered on command to Bellary about 600 miles inland with a convoy of military stores. On my return in May I found Mary Ann (his wife) confined to her bed having been sick almost since my departure to Bellary. I was only six days returned to Madras when I was posted to fill up a vacancy in Tavoy."

Fortunately Mary Ann had recovered by the time that the regiment had landed at Moulmein in Burma where they waited for 25 days before taking a steamer for the 3-day trip up river to Tavoy.

"On our landing I was obliged to purchase a house, as none are rented here, which cost me £25..." Unfortunately the Army was withdrawn in December 1848 and William feared that he would be withdrawn too and that he would need to sell his house only getting half what he paid. His fear was not realized and in his next letter (15th March 1850) he stated that "I am placed in charge of myself without any executive officer in the same place and from which all military except 100 men has been removed." In this town, 30 miles up river from the sea, there were no communications apart from the steamer, which came once every month. He "... cannot pay postage since there is no post office ..." and he "... cannot procure mutton nor

beef but are obliged to depend on deer etc., shot by the natives." His chief food was rice and fowl.

The Local Peoples

William makes no comment on the local people that he meets in India. However, in Penang, while still as a young man, he does comment upon the Malays, possibly echoing the feelings of others:

"There are a great many Malays about and some parts are not frequented by Europeans and never by us soldiers. Some Malays can be very treacherous especially to us if they can catch one alone and so therefore we never are allowed to go beyond the hill."

In his second letter in August 1828, he writes:

"A very hot war is breaking out in Rangoon between the Company and the Burmees and I do not know how soon I shall be summoned to go there to face the horrid race of people who have neither pity nor humanity for instance when they catch any European alone they will put them to most horrid tortures."

Here he describes the tortures which must have been explained to him by his older colleagues. I refrain from repeating them. The natives people:

"... will never attack 2 or 3 men together ...The British don't mind any of their stockades for the Madras Artillery with their 6 pound field pieces and batry guns will make them fly like chaff before the wind ... Now their arms for infantry is matchlocks peaces that is let off by a match. The King's Troops will fire three rounds to their one."

Actual or potential war with Burma is a recurring theme throughout William's letters. On 28th November 1841, and unaware of his future posting to that country, he explains what he must have learned from his colleagues:

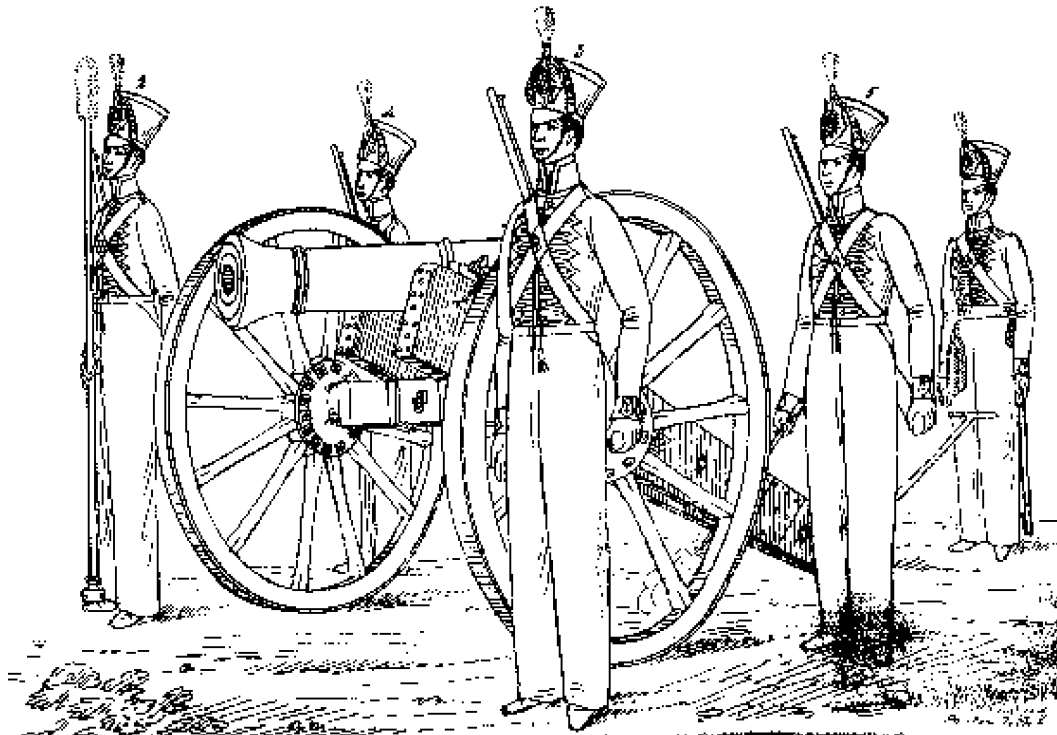
"I must now say something of this land of sin and idolatry, we are about being engaged in another (war) with the golden footed Monarch of Burmah we have been very busy some time back packing stores and making up cartridges for this service and I have no doubt if the war takes place it will be a protracted one as the Burmees are much more prepared for our reception this time than he was in the last. Burmah is a beautiful part of India and the produce of it is valuable. In this country is many wells which have a valuable oil and (and?) fat swimming on their surface which only have to be skimmed off and it is fit for use. They are a brave and warlike nation and have a religion peculiar to themselves their priests being the sole instructors of the people and when one of them die are buried or burnt in a particular manner they are called Poongies and are placed in a valuable Pagoda composed of the most costly materials and laid in state while the natives are preparing enormous large rockets filled with all kinds of combustibles which are placed some distance in front of the Pongee which is to be blown up or burnt or set fire to and made to run towards the Pagoda which after a few, sometimes three or four it strikes the object and the poor Pongee is destroyed."

Later in his career, having been posted to Tavoy in Burma as a Sub-Conductor, he wrote on 13th October 1853:

"The war in Burmah is over, so says the Governor General, as far as fighting. But the place is very very unsettled and it is my opinion that it is only a lull of false security as a Robber Chief is going about plundering and murdering in every village where there is no British troops and even their presence does not keep him away. It is rumoured that he has an army of 10,000 men and that the King of Burma is sending him a powerful re-inforcement to commence the war again as soon as the fine weather comes again."

Duty

Apart from the fatiguing training period right at the start of his career, William makes annoyingly little reference to his duties as a soldier. By implication these are rather light. Specifically, as a Sergeant Instructor in 1837 he states "For days and weeks I have nothing to do but superintend working parties at the Depot."



From the beginning the authorities appear to take a very relaxed attitude to duty and even to encourage a degree of private enterprise. In his very first letter, William asks his father to send a range of tools, which he specifies, since by using them he could "... earn a great deal more money in Arsenal." In his second letter he is "... excused all duty for working in the Company as a tailor ...", a skill which he had learned since leaving home. He first began working for the Company on 10th May 1828 and "... can earn 15 to 20 Rupees a month which from one pound seventeen and six pence to two pounds ten shillings is very acceptable."

Later, in 1833 as a Sergeant Instructor, then at the headquarters in St. Thomas' Mount, he writes:

"I am working at the Lithographic press at the Depot. I have every prospect before me of doing well. I have nothing to do as a soldier and will not as long as I behave myself and keep from drunkenness. My pay is good which enables me to procure a small allowance of comfort in this far distant land'. 'My (spirit) allowance from the Company is 1/20 of a gallon daily and my wife 1/40 but I can assure you that I seldom make use of any of it."

William continues his interest in printing following his change of duty to that of Store Sergeant. In November 1841 it appears that his press is becoming worn out and he requests his father to send him prices of lithographic presses from England for use in India since he wants "... to make a little money to return to live in England in comfort after my final five years of service." Then, having received a reply, he does not like the design of the presses that his father sent. He will draw his brass Indian press and include suggested modifications for his father to have made in England - in iron.

In his letter of 29th May 1839, a poignant but interesting story is given of one William Harrison:

“... who tried to get employed in the Artillery Depot as a clerk which is the first step in the department to other preferment.’ (He got it and) ‘was shortly promoted to Corporal and appointed Laboratory Man and was placed under me to learn Lithography but in consequence of the anticipated war with his Golden footed majesty Tharawadie King of Burma we were making up stores. Poor William was driving fuses and portfires (long wooden tubes filled with a combustible composition and are used to fire bomb shells) and as it was usual in the work drove a fuse, cut it to see if it was properly driven, before he went on with his days work. His fellow workmen was in the act of burning theirs at the time Harrison was putting priming powder on the end of the fuse from a copper mealed powder dredging box when dreadful to relate a spark accidentally ignited the mealed powder in the dredging box which exploded with a great noise bursting the box in a number of pieces one of which entered poor William’s groin making a wound I could put my double fist in...He ran out of the work shop crying in a most piteous manner but in a short time he was quiet his left hand and face were burnt very much the hand which held the fuse quite drawn up. A surgeon was immediately sent for and was quickly in attendance and poor William was conveyed to hospital. He soon became weak from loss of blood and the only words he was heard to utter was “Lord have mercy on me”.

This accident happened at ½ past 8 o’clock on the morning of 4th December 1838 and at 10 minutes past nine he resigned his soul into the hands of him who gave it and was buried the same evening.”

Harrison left a wife with two small children plus a third on the way. She would have been “... destitute but for the kind interference of friends who rose a subscription and purchased 4 houses the rent of which brings her in a small sum monthly.” Later, the unfortunate Mrs Harrison took to the bottle and her children were sent to the Military Orphanage.

I note soberly that, at the same time, December 1837 to December 1840, my ancestor, Edward Evans was also ‘Corporal & Laboratory Man’ at St. Thomas’ Mount. The records for Jan 1st 1838 make no mention of Harrison but those for 1839 class him as a Casualty by Death! A search for any official report into this incident has proved unfruitful.

Compensation, at least for a Store Sergeant, was seemingly fully satisfactory particularly when compared with the uncertainties of employment back at ‘home’. In April 1842, William wrote:

“For whether in sickness or health, work or play I receive my five pounds per month with other small allowances so that I have no need to be sorry that I came to India, only on account of my absence from my friends and family. And after having served them faithfully for 21 years, 16 of which is past, they will reward me with a pension of 3s a day for life, which I think might go far in maintaining me in England, altho’ articles are far more expensive there than here. For instance, I can purchase a full grown fowl for 6d and a duck for 8d a grouse for 2s and so on in every article.”

Further, seemingly in answer to a comment in a letter from his father, on 12th October 1855 as a Conductor he replies:

“I think you must be mistaken about the 100£ a year for my salary would only be 75£ in England or a pension for life of 60£.”

The Postal Services

Early in William’s career sending letters home was seemingly not easy, at least from Penang. On 14th August 1828 he is:

“... sending this letter by a faithfull comrade who inlisted with me in England and has been a messmate ever since we embarked for India but is since discharged from the

Service ... I send a letter home by evry ship that comes to England but never receive a reply."

In about 1842 postal communications between England & India were greatly improved with the adoption of the 'Overland Dispatch'. At the same time, April 1842, William wrote:

"Answer this by the next Overland and do not pay but the penny for all letters come to me free if they are directed in a proper manner..."

and on 31st October that year he wrote:

"I hope you will not be offended in my not answering your kind letter last month as I wrote one to Mary Ann and I am not allowed to send more than one a month to England ...The news we generally receive is not more than 6 weeks old, a great alteration since I arrived in India which generally was five or six months."

On 24th March 1843 he notes that "Government allows me to send home £10 annually to my friends" followed by a request for copies of *The Illustrated London News*, which he felt would be "useful because of the copies of the drawings that it contains." However, on January 17th 1844, he requests his father to stop sending it because he was then able to obtain it in Madras. In 1844 he wrote:

"I must now conclude as my Commanding Officer and I must get this signed to free it from postage."

and later:

"I see on all your letters post paid. You have no right to pay above one penny let me know what you have been in the habit of paying as all letters to me come free and to you the same. It is for this reason the letters are all signed by an officer."

It is apparent that the postal service to remoter stations from Madras was reliant upon friends and acquaintances. Certainly when he was in Tavoy, William requests his father to send his reply to "... the Arsenal in Fort St. George and friends will forward it." Later in 1856 and 1857, whilst stationed in Bangalore, he wrote to his father about how to send the family bible to him in India:

"Put it up in a tin box, and that in a deal box and take it to the post office. You can direct it to me at Madras as follows: For Mr. Conductor W. Porter, Ordnance Department, Care of Mr. H. Fox, Shop Keeper, Madras, East Indies."

Towards the end of William's career, communication with his now ageing father became much more rapid. A letter from Madras dated 25th March 1856 arrived in London on 24th May of that year. His father wrote back that same day and William, in Madras, received his reply on 10th July. By this stage William had been sending money orders back to London to help support his father. In March 1856 he wrote:

"I am glad you received the money alright. I now send you a £5 Bank of England note and will send more as soon as I can procure the regular Government remittance."

There is a money order included with the letter of 10th July 1856 confirming that William had paid 73 Rupees, 7 anna and 6 pice which at a conversion rate of 2s ½d per Rupee amounted to £7.10.0. He instructs his father:

"The paper I now send, you will take yourself to the East India House and you will receive the amount, viz. £7.10s...."

Women and Children in India

Following some strain in the early years between him and his father, William announced in a letter dated 10th January 1836 that he had married a Mary Ann Johnston at St. Thomas' Mount Church on 15th May 1833! He explains nothing at all of her background. He continues by explaining that they have a son, William Henry who had been born on 29th September 1834 and christened on 1st January 1835.

William then mentions that:

"As ladies are continually leaving this country for Europe and do take with them European women as servants ... Mrs Porter will as soon as convenient pay you a visit ... She is an utter stranger to Europe."

Mary Ann made about four journeys of this type to England, although one was abandoned in Cape Town when she discovered that she was pregnant and preferred to return to India for her labour. On one occasion, in 1838, William explains to his father that Mary Ann will accompany the lady to Shropshire with the child in her charge and that that Lady has undertaken to find another lady whom Mary Ann may accompany on her return to India:

"Mary Ann will receive £25 and other perquisites for going to England (*and that he expects*) that she will get near the same for the journey back."

In 1837, William wrote suggesting that his younger sister might like to come to live in India as a ladies maid explaining that there are good opportunities and that maids are always needed. He adds "I have seen such numbers of young women arrive in this country since Madras became a free settlement, and are doing remarkably well." He promises that Mary Ann would be able to help her.

On one occasion when Mary Ann was in London he wrote to her in a letter which he started on 20th February 1841 and finished on 18th April of that year:

"All orphan children are to get pay from 1st November 1840 which has caused another great stir at several stations."

Mary Ann presented William with four children but, unfortunately only William Henry, the first, and probably Ellen Louisa, the last survived. Regrettably, baby Adeline Eliza, born in early 1843 had a small black spot on her navel. The Indian midwife picked it but too late found that it covered an artery and the baby bled to death. On 22nd April 1842, William wrote to inform his father that:

"Yr grandson is getting on finely with his education. He can read as well as myself is in arithmetic and writing."

William Henry was 8 years old at that time. The Company had established Regimental schools in 1830 and, no doubt William Henry benefited from this. Ellen Louisa would not be able to whilst she was in Burma.

Declining Years

It appears to have been during his time in Burma that William's health started to decline. On 29th September 1851 he states:

"I expect to be promoted to Conductor and to return to Madras at the end of the year. And it will be no difficulty to obtain leave for two years to England as I have not enjoyed very good health since I have been in Burmah and have been much troubled with a disease of the skin which Europeans are subject to in this part of the country."

On 25th March 1856 he writes from Madras to say "The reason this is so short is my eyes being very weak through inflammation." In September of the same year he had been transferred to the more benign climate of Bangalore and confided:

“...as long as health lasts monthly pay is sure. And after being worn out, a pension follows which I expect will be my case soon. For my eye sight is so defective that I can not see to perform my duty, and it is with much difficulty that I write this. And what is worse, I can not get a good pair of pebble spectacles in this place to enable me to see.’ ‘I am now on two years sick leave at this place.”

By December 1857, still in Bangalore, William wrote the last letter which has survived, to his father. He wrote:

“ ... I am afraid mine is a hopeless case and if I am not better by the time my sick leave is up I will have to take my pension as I shall find it difficult to do my duty in a General Arsenal. I have another year before me ere that time come ...”

Allowing for some clerical error in its recording, the official records show that William retired to pension on 27th April 1858. He died at St. Thomas’ Mount on 29th July 1864, perhaps surprisingly of ‘fever and leprosy’ and was buried there that same day. Sadly he was never to return to the England which he sorely missed, and to his father that he had left 38 years before. His estate of 500 Rupees was given to Mary Ann.

As well as Mary Ann, William left his son, William Henry who at 14 years of age, had become a schoolmaster at Tavoy. On 11th June 1855 William Henry married Miss Sophia Seagram after which he obtained a position at the court of the Commissioner in Rangoon. The indications are that William’s daughter, Ellen Louisa, was also alive.

Further Reading

For people interested in the development of the HEIC’s armies, read:

The East India Company and Army Reform, 1783-1798, Raymond Callahan, Harvard Historical Manuscripts, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass., 1972.

The White Mutiny: British Military Culture in India, 1825-1875, Peter Stanley, Hurst and Company, London, 1998.

Acknowledgement

The Porter Letters are available in the European Manuscript Collection of the Oriental & India Office Collection at the British Library in London. They have been transcribed (1996) by Mr Edward Lawrence Finley and Mrs Barbara Diana Finley from the originals provided by Mr Geoffrey R Beirens, the son of Elizabeth Eliza Beirens (née Porter) who died in 1993.

Gratitude is expressed to the British Library for authority to publish this article, together with the sketch from the ‘Madras Artillery Gunners’ Handbook’. Gratitude is also expressed to Mr and Mrs Finley and, in particular to Mr Beirens for making public this most interesting set of private letters.

Anglo-Indian Research Correspondence Part 2, E to M

Tony Fuller and Michael Gandy

In the last Journal, we produced the first part of the index of records at the Society of Genealogists in London relating to the work that SoG did for people in 1948 who were seeking to establish their nationality under the Nationality Act of 1948.

The Society has recently released three boxes of correspondence and information, containing over 400 files of what they refer to as Anglo-Indian research. The lists of all the files, which contain varying amounts of material for the researcher, some being quite thick and other containing just one sheet of paper, are reproduced below, together with their box locations.

Since the original information was given to FIBIS, the Library staff at SoG has re-ordered the material, which has changed the references to the individual files. We have decided to complete the list in this Journal and the next but anybody with a query about the files should go to the help desk at SoG.

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McGill	215	Mills	390 (missing)
McGuire	142	Minos	169
McKay	032, 180	Montgomery	138 (missing)
McLaughlin	227	Moore	388 (missing), 403, 470 (missing)
McLean	231	Moorhouse	027
McMahon	061	Moreau	482 (missing)
McMullen	141	Moreton	080
McReddie	028	Morgan	031 (missing), 159 (missing)
McSweeney	058	Morris	405, 460 446 (missing)
McSweeny	058	Morrow	145 (missing)
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Meares	321 (missing)	Mullins	337 (missing)
Melvill	114	Mungavin	154
Melville	114	Munro	191 (missing), 207
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The last part of this series will appear in the next edition of the Journal.

The Isaacsons of Suffolk, Persia and India

Jenny Law and Tony Fuller

John Isaacson was born in Exning, Suffolk on the 21 March 1840, the twelfth of thirteen children, into a family, which had lived in Exning for at least six generations. He was baptised on 12 April 1840 at St Martin's Church, where his parents James Charles ISAACSON and Sophia CORLEY had been married 17 years earlier. At the time his father's occupation was recorded as 'Labourer' although he went on to be the Parish Clerk between 1838 and 1856, a position that two of John's sisters also held. John appears in his family's census return for 1841 at Mill Hill in Exning. Although he married again after Sophia's death in 1863, James Charles and Sophia Isaacson were buried together in St Martin's churchyard with another son, also called John, who died in 1838 two years before the second John Isaacson was born. Their gravestone still stands in the Exning churchyard.

Sometime before 25 October 1859 John Isaacson joined the 23rd Company, Royal Engineers and was given the Regimental Number 4935. During 1891 and towards the end of his life, John wrote an autograph testimony of his military service, which is still in his personnel file at the OIOC. From the testimony he is known to have attended the Telegraph School at the Royal Engineers Depot at Chatham and whilst he was there, he volunteered to go to Simla in India as a 'competent telegraphist'. Extensive enquiries of both the Royal Engineer's Museum and their Library have failed to show any record of his training, date of joining the service or his service record other than on medal rolls. However, this is not unusual as following the criteria of that time, only officer's records were kept. The various Royal Engineer Corps histories do, however, confirm the details contained in the manuscript service record.

In 1860 he embarked for Lucknow to join his Company. Whilst *en route* from Calcutta to Lucknow, he took part in the demolition of the Caravanserai near Kalpi, which was essentially a village used by trader's caravans to rest, after which he was made NCO in charge of the Depot although apparently still only being a private. After joining the 23rd Company of Royal Engineers at Lucknow, he elected to stay with it when it moved to China rather than join the Military Telegraph. On 14 November, after 21 days at sea the ship arrived at Canton at which time he was appointed NCO in charge of the East Gate Telegraph Office.

On 30 April John Isaacson embarked for Hong Kong on the SS *Arracan*, in which he subsequently sailed for Kowloon, arriving there on 31 May 1860. At some stage between 1 and 28 June 1860 he was stationed on board ship at Odin Bay for 16 days. Whilst in China, John Isaacson was appointed to HQ staff, where he worked under Lt Col Garnet Wolsley (later General Lord Wolsley) and Lt Col Harrison RE (later Major General Sir Richard Harrison). Under these officers he took part in the surveying of the road and river from Tien Tsien to Peking. He was present at the capture of Peking at which time he took a small trinket box as a souvenir, now in the possession of one of his descendants.

On 11 September 1860 he was promoted to Second or Lance Corporal, whilst back on board ship (PRO WO 11/184) before returning to Hong Kong in January 1861. In common with other soldiers who took part in the China Campaign, the medal rolls confirm that he was awarded the China War Medal with clasps for Takue Forts and Peking.

Shortly after his promotion, he embarked for England arriving at Woolwich on 24 May, after which he moved back to the Royal Engineers Depot at Chatham. He was stationed at Thorncliffe where he appears on the muster rolls, until 31 December of that year. Whilst at Thorncliffe he was appointed company clerk under Lt Col (later Lt General Sir) Gerald Graham, VC.

On 1 November 1861 he transferred to 18th Company at Cliff End Fort on the Isle of Wight and almost immediately transferred again from the 18th to 38th Company. He was posted to the Military Telegraph Department at Portsmouth where he worked on the construction of the cable link across Portsmouth Harbour from Government House to the Gosport Barracks. After completion of the line John Isaacson remained as NCO in charge of the Portsmouth Telegraph Office.

The American Civil War, which started in 1861, caused friction between the British government and that of the United States. To protect British interests in Canada, which was being embroiled in the war, the War Office decided to send troops to Canada. John again volunteered for overseas service and embarked on the SS *Victoria*. After encountering bad weather his ship had to put in to the Azores for repairs. A second attempt to reach Newfoundland was hit by equally bad weather which, along with improvements in the relationship between England and America eventually made the journey unnecessary. On 18 March 1862 John's detachment returned to Woolwich after 83 days on board ship.

He subsequently returned to Chatham where on 1 June 1862 he was promoted to full Corporal, subsequently appearing on the muster rolls for each quarter-end from December 1862 to June 1863 during which time he served in both Chatham and Portsmouth. John Isaacson appears in the Royal Engineers' muster rolls for the last time in June 1863. Whilst at Portsmouth he had volunteered for the recently established Indo-European Telegraph Department (IETD) in Persia, which he joined in London on 12 August as a Sergeant and Overseer.

In what was an exciting period for anybody to have lived through, John Isaacson had shown himself to be a good soldier. Throughout his military service his muster entries show him to be of good conduct and without any adverse disciplinary record. He received both full pay and good conduct pay for the whole of his service of just over three years during which time he can really be said to have seen the world. He was, in fact, an ideal candidate for an adventure in a part of the world that was still regarded as being mysterious, the land of the 'Great Sophy' and strategic part of the British-Indian defence network.

According to his IETD service record, John Isaacson, who at the time was described as a "Sergeant, RE", arrived in Persia on 11 November 1863 and was posted to the Persian section of the IETD.

Sometime between 1864-1868 he married Mary Edwards, the daughter of the Assistant Political Resident at Bushire. There are no records for the marriage in either civil registration or diplomatic records held at Kew or the OIOL files. The whole of the PRO index for Persia (Iran) has been examined and there is little information about the Isaacson family contained in the files. Similarly there is little information about John Isaacson or his family at the OIOL other than IETD personnel records. However, there are records of the Edwards family going back to 1808, with the first 'event', a marriage, taking place in 1825. Interestingly, the Edwards family had already started to marry into the Christian Armenian community in Persia, a practice which has continued until the present time.

On 1 August 1869 he was promoted to Colour Sergeant in the Indian Army, his promotion following the convention of having both an army rank and a civilian rank within the Telegraph Service. A good example of this is the entry in PRO FO 560/1, which is the record of the birth of John's first son, James John Isaacson, at which time (8 December 1869) John is described as "Sergeant, Royal Engineers and Inspector, Persian Telegraph."

It is John's records from his service with the IETD and family records that detail the rest of his life. In the *IETD Quarterly Report* dated 1 June 1871 his commanding officer stated:

"Previous to his appointment to charge (sic) of Bushire Office, Sgt. Isaacson was distinguished for his skill and energy in construction and maintenance. The Bushire office has, since he took charge of it, been the best-managed in Persia. He is well qualified for the post of Assistant Superintendent."

Following this he was appointed Assistant Superintendent, 3rd Grade and Acting Superintendent, 6th Division. On the 13 September 1871 his commanding officer wrote a confidential staff report, saying John Isaacson was:

"In charge of Shiraz. A most trustworthy and intelligent man. In case of Mr Preece getting any promotion, I should like to have Isaacson at Shiraz in charge of office but

he will not leave South Persia having married a daughter of the Assistant Resident, Bushire." (OIOL File Z/L/PWD/7/656A)

On 9 August 1871 his second son, Charles Isaacson was born. Although his birth does not appear in the Bushire consular returns (FO 923/3 at Kew) an original hand written birth certificate from the officiating vicar was found among Keith Isaacson's papers. It is now in the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum at Bristol. According to the *IETD Quarterly Return* John was promoted on 5 December 1871 to be in charge of the Second Division, Shiraz, earning 250 rupees per month.

However, over the next few years his health deteriorated as, according to the IETD's medical files did that of many other IETD personnel and it was his health problems that were to define the last third of John's life.

On 1 February 1872 following a three-month furlough because of continued ill-health, which is believed to have been hepatitis, John Isaacson resigned from the IETD. He cited ill health, which, he believed, was being made worse by being stationed at Shiraz. He received a gratuity of nine months pay.

Nothing is known of his working life for the next three years. But, as his next two children were born during that period in Bushire, it is likely that the family stayed in the area, probably with his wife's family. His next two children, the third and fourth sons, George and Edward William were born on 21 March 1874 and 21 June 1875 respectively.

Whilst away from the IETD in early 1875, John Isaacson was offered the post of Inspector General of Persian (Local) Telegraphs, which was by that time a branch of the Persian Government. He refused the offer on health grounds.

However by 1 April 1875 he was fit enough to rejoin the IETD as Assistant Superintendent and Quarter-Master Sergeant in the "Indian Army", as an Inspector, Third Grade. He was based at Konar Kazheran, superintending the service between Kazheran and Bushire, 116 miles of line, 363 miles of wire, plus ten miles of additional equipment from Bushire to the IETD depot at Reshire, five miles from Bushire town. The IETD itself was situated in a large compound with offices, transmission buildings and residences at Reshire. It was effectively an enclave that was linked to, but separate from, Bushire itself. All the records of the Reshire station, including the plans of the house in which the Isaacson family lived, are still in the OIOL archives.

On 1 September 1877 he moved to the Bushire station when the headquarters of the section he was superintending were transferred there. There followed a number of promotions and by 1 April 1879 he had been promoted to Inspector, First Grade, earning 250 rupees per month plus expenses for his horse and servants. At this time his brother-in-law, William Edward EDWARDS, was working under him as a probationary signaller at the Konar Takhteh station.

From the records available, John seems to have maintained his commitment to his work. In 1880 he was: "Highly commended for zeal shown in maintaining communication with SS *Machilla* during a flood which followed a hurricane" by his commanding officer, Colonel Henry Wells, RE.

According to the IETD records and John's file, his life seems to have progressed satisfactorily, as he continued to draw his pay and allowances throughout his service, indicating that he was maintaining good health. On 23 February 1887 John James Isaacson, John's eldest son, was appointed as a Probationer in the Persian Gulf Section of the IETD. He was stationed at Bushire where he worked for his father and with his uncle, William Edwards. All of John's sons were to join the IETD at some stage in their lives, as was one of his grandsons, who served with the department and its successor commercial operation until 1942. In addition, a number of Edwards and a vast number of Armenian relatives also joined the Department.

However, by mid 1890, John's health appears to have been failing. On 4 June 1890 he submitted a report indicating his intention to apply for a furlough and then retire from the IETD on medical grounds at the end of the furlough. According to his service record, he started a one-year furlough in November 1890 shortly after which his fifth and final child, another son, Herbert Newcome Isaacson was born on 18 January 1891. He is Jenny's grand-father, her mother Mary being Herbert's youngest child.

On 31 August 1891 John Isaacson was discharged from the IETD on medical grounds. After examination by Dr Ross, the Surgeon at the Residency in Bushire, he was declared medically unfit:

"In consequence of hepatitis, not irregular or intemperate habits"

thereby preventing the circulation of rumours about alcoholism which, as other records show, was rife in the ex-patriate community at that time.

The medical certificate goes on to say:

"I have carefully examined Mr Isaacson and find him in a very debilitated state of health, inflammation of the liver and general derangement of the digestive system. He is in my opinion not fit for further service in this department."

One of the final entries in his personal record describes his character as being "Excellent - very zealous - clever and painstaking." At the time of his discharge John Isaacson petitioned his senior officers for an enhanced pension. In a letter from his long-time commanding officer, Lt Col Wells dated 4 June 1890, to the Director of the IETD, Wells supported John Isaacson's petition. He described John Isaacson as completing "long and good services" and he used "the fact of his (John Isaacson) being one of the pioneers of this department" to support John's request.

Because of his long and exemplary service record he was subsequently awarded a full pension at an enhanced rate with no reduction for his three-year break. According to IETD records and Wells' letter of the 4 June, John had been stationed at Bushire for thirteen years at the time of his retirement.

On 1 September 1891 John's second son, Edward (Teddy) Isaacson, was appointed Probationer, Fifth Grade Signaller, Persian Gulf Section. He was stationed at Bushire, working with his brother James and his uncle, William Edwards. Mary Isaacson has fond memories of her Uncle Teddy who effectively took over as head of the family after the IETD closed in 1931, when some of the staff transferred to what became the Cable and Wireless Company. There are a number of photographs of this large and genial looking man and his wife, another Edwards, who was also his first cousin. They never had children of their own but seemed willing to take on the responsibility of everybody else's children for many years afterwards.

On 2 March 1892 John Isaacson died after what can only be described as an eventful and exciting life. He was relatively young however, being only 52 years of age. The fact that he had survived for over thirty years in such a hostile climate which had claimed the lives of so many of his younger colleagues was remarkable in itself.

There are no ecclesiastical records of either his death or his burial nor is there any record in the Residency records. He is likely to have been buried in the churchyard of St George's Armenian Church in Bushire, which was used by the Anglo-Indian ex-patriate community at that time. After his death his family were awarded an ex-gratia pension because of his good service record, which was paid to his widow until her death some ten years later.