

British Light Infantry Caps, 1770-1799

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Paintings by RICHARD HOOK

Officer, Light Company, 67th Regt., c.1771. The cap appears to be of the first regulation pattern, approved in that year, but with more extensive feathers than the men's. (National Army Museum)

The early decades of organised Light Infantry within the British Army have always attracted interest: in the popular imagination these troops are seen as an example of refreshing tactical innovation against a background of rigid orthodoxy. Their uniforms are seen as attractively pragmatic modifications; and their varied headgear, acquired at unit level and classifiable today only by research into individual examples, are a challenge to the historian.

Light Infantry was first introduced in the British Army on an 'ad hoc' basis during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), chiefly as a result of conditions encountered in North America. After that war, however, all light infantrymen reverted to their normal role in their battalions. Then, in November 1770, a tenth (Light Infantry) company was authorised for every Regiment of Foot, to be clothed and accoutred in a distinctive and suitable manner. The American War of Independence (1775-83), with fighting not only in North America but in the West Indies and Europe as well, gave a fresh impetus to the use of Light Infantry.

Thereafter the Light Companies remained on the establishment but, with the Army at peace except in India, their special training was neglected. The outbreak of the French Revolutionary War in 1793, and the use of massed skirmishers by the French citizen armies, showed up this neglect and recalled an earlier observation of Lord Townshend that 'it is not a Short Coat or Half-Garters (sic) that makes a Light infantry man'⁽¹⁾. The whole science of light infantry tactics had to be relearned under pressure of war — ultimately with great success, as demonstrated in the Peninsular campaign.

The shortened coat and half-gaiters had indeed been the outward sign of a light

infantryman since the formation of the Light Companies in 1770. So too had been his distinctive cap, instead of the universal hat or the bearskin caps of the Grenadier Companies. But whereas the clothing of Light Companies achieved a measure of uniformity within the Infantry as a whole, their headdress manifested a variety of different styles, some of which will be examined here.

'1771 PATTERN' CAPS

A Board of General Officers was convened in March 1771 to consider 'what kind of clothing and accoutrements may be best adapted for the use of the Light Company belonging to each of the marching Regiments of Foot'⁽²⁾. A scaled pattern of cap seems to have been decided upon, described by Thomas Simes in his *Military Guide for Young Officers* (1772) as 'black leather caps, with 3 chains round them, and a piece of plate upon the centre of the crown; in the front, G.R., a crown, and the number of the Regiment'.

This description apparently accords with an inspection report in 1775 of the 32nd's Light Company sergeants in 'chain-caps'; and with an officer's existing cap in the collection of the Scottish United Services Museum, except for a thistle in place of the number and the missing plate⁽³⁾. This cap was also observed by the artist, P.J. de Louthembourg,



worn by the Light Company of the 6th Foot at the Camp of Exercise at Warley in October 1778, and illustrated by him in drawings and his painting *The Mock Attack*, now in the Royal Collection. This cap is shown at colour plate Ie.

If this was the regulation pattern, it clearly was not uniformly worn as the 69th's Light Company, which was also at Warley, was shown by de Louthembourg in the cap at plate Ib, which appears to have been adapted from the regulation hat. (Though outside the scope of this article, a further lack of uniformity is evident in *The Mock Attack* in the 69th's accoutrements; these differ from those of the 6th, which accord with the Light Infantry Regulations of 1771). How long the 69th's Light Company wore this headdress is not known, although ten years later they

were reported as having felt caps and 'not according to order'; by that time, however, the regulation cap had changed, as will be seen.

The 69th were not alone in this departure from regulations, as the 19th's and 24th's Light Companies were likewise reported on in 1777 and 1775 respectively. Whilst at Warley de Louthembourg also recorded another cap — of the Glamorgan Militia — the front and black feather of which were similar to the 69th's, but with a crest on top from which emerged a red mane.

The 'Minorca' caps

Although the regulation cap was approved in 1771 its specifications obviously took time to reach regiments, particularly those stationed abroad, who devised their own. Three such caps were recorded in the garrison of Minorca, probably by a local

artist, worn in the 11th, 13th and 25th Regiments of Foot. These units styled their new, tenth companies the 'Picquet Company' in the case of the first two, and the 'Highland Company' in the third which, though not a Highland regiment, had a Scottish connection with the city of Edinburgh. These caps are shown respectively at plates Ic, Id and Ia, based on the Minorcan artist's paintings (of which one set is in the Royal Collection, another in the Scottish United Services Museum, and a third, predominantly of the 25th and possibly by another hand and at a slightly later date, in the National Army Museum).

The 11th and 25th caps were chiefly made of black fur or bearskin, probably from cut-down Grenadier caps; the former had in front a crown, 'G.R.' and 'XI', the latter a red and white plate bearing the motto 'Nemo Me Impune Lacessit' and a thistle. In the NAM paintings the 25th headdresses have a sprig of green leaves, the 'field sign' in common use by many European armies in the earlier part of the 18th century. The 13th cap, though similarly bagged to the 11th's, was otherwise quite different, being apparently a cut-down hat with a brown fur piece, considered by C.C.P. Lawson to be a fox's brush⁽⁴⁾, fixed laterally across the top.

The 'Herd cap', 5th Foot

The next cap to be considered, that of the 5th Foot's Light Company (plate If), resembled, in its essentials, that mentioned above for the Glamorgan Militia, having a peak, a turned-up frontal, a turban, and a crest holding a red mane. All its parts were of black leather except the turban of red cloth and the crest, which was of a brass framework with a lion's head and forepart in front. Also in brass were the reinforcing bars laterally across the crown, and the insignia on the frontal: St. George and the Dragon, above a circle enclosing a bugle-horn above the figure '5', placed centrally on a scroll inscribed 'Light Infantry'.

The badge of St. George had been granted by the 1747 Clothing Regulations, and confirmed by the 1751 Royal Warrant, to the 5th as one of the 'Six Old Corps'⁽⁵⁾ who, together with seven Royal regiments, were permitted special badges for use on their

Grenadier caps, Colours and drums, instead of the Royal Cypher and Crown.

An example of this cap, once belonging to Pte. William Herd, who fought in a number of engagements in North America and the West Indies, is now in the Wallis & Wallis Military Heritage Museum collection at Lewes, Sussex, but the turban has been lost⁽⁶⁾.

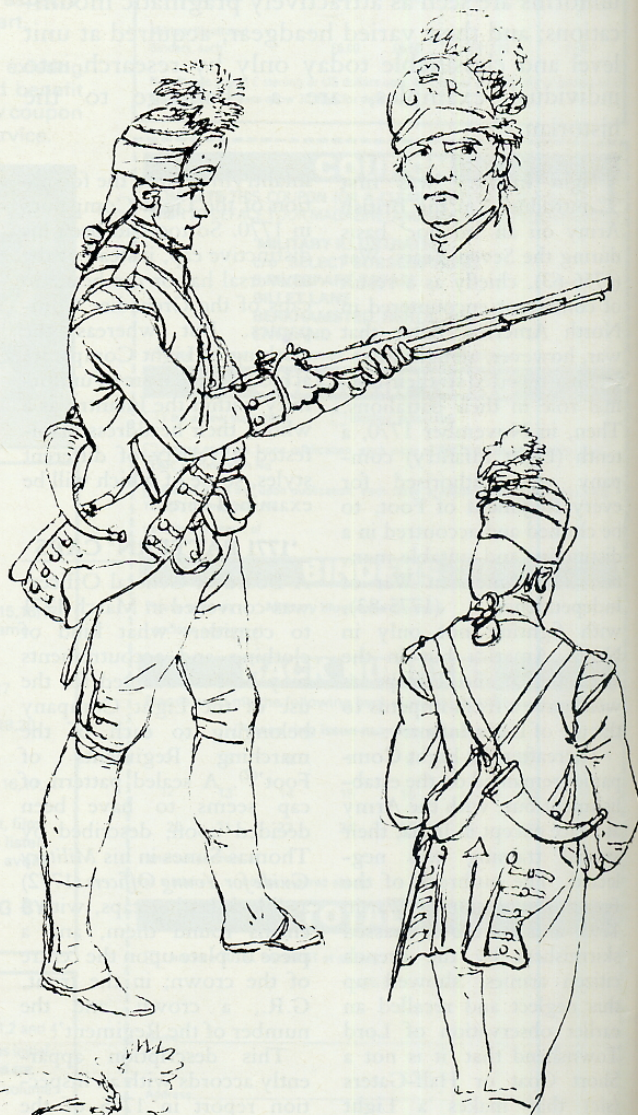
The 'Lambton cap', 68th Foot

The 1747 Regulations had expressly forbidden any further display of a regimental colonel's arms or crest, as had been common practice earlier in the century. Yet nearly 30 years later such a device appeared on a cap thought to have been worn by the 68th's Light Company (plate Ig). This regiment was



Above: Cap of Private William Herd, 5th Foot, c.1775; the red turban is missing. (Wallis & Wallis Military Heritage Museum)

De Louterbourg's drawings showing the 'chain-cap' as worn by the 6th Foot's Light Company in 1778 with, below, probably that of the Glamorgan Militia. (Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection)



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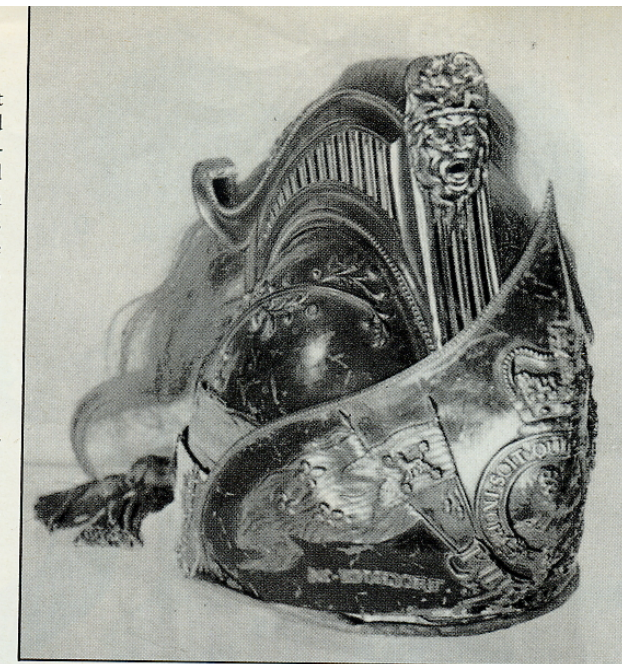
in the West Indies when Light Companies were authorised and so remote from regulations issued in London. It had been raised in 1758 by John Lambton, who remained its colonel until 1794, and whose crest was a ram's head. This device, together with Lambton's monogram surrounded by sprays of foliage, above the motto 'Faithful' on a scroll, all in brass, were placed on the frontal of this cap. The skull was made of brown leather, having a hardened comb or crest and with two semi-circular patches of red leather on either side.

According to regimental tradition the motto had been awarded for service at the Battle of St. Vincent in the West Indies in 1772. The regiment returned home in 1773, when the Lambton crest may have had to be removed; but the cap itself seems to have continued, as three years later a clothing bill specifies 'caps and combs'⁽⁷⁾

The Von Germann drawing

A black cap, somewhat similar in design to the 5th's pattern but without the peak, was worn by the 62nd Foot when forming part of General Burgoyne's expedition from Canada in 1777-78, according to a drawing by the Hessian officer Captain Friedrich von Germann, whose regiment served in the expedition. This cap had a black crest with a white mane, and a white button and loop at the left side (plate II).

Similar caps were apparently worn by the other regiments — 20th, 21st, 24th and 27th — as well as by the Royal Artillery, but with differently coloured manes; the 24th's was red. Their use was not confined to the Light Companies, for Lieutenant Thomas Anburey of the 24th recorded that 'commanding officers of the different regiments have received orders to reduce the men's coats into jackets, and their hats into caps as it will be more convenient for wood service, that when the army take the field, they will in a manner be all light infantry'⁽⁸⁾. That the caps were converted from



Metal helmet as worn by the 15th Light Dragoons until 1789; compare its design with the 5th Foot's leather cap. (National Army Museum)

Below centre:

Light Company men, 1779, in headdress similar to the 69th's (Scottish United Services Museum)



dragoons'⁽¹⁰⁾. Most Light Dragoons at this date wore what was officially described as a helmet and which, subject to minor regimental variations, consisted of a leather or metal skull, a metal crest on top with a mane, a turned-up metal frontal, and a turban round the base of the skull — in effect, similar to plate II but without the peak. The 45th's Light Company, therefore, may have been wearing something on these lines.

However, in the 1780s the Light Dragoons (except the 15th) began to adopt a 'helmet-cap' of a type often called after Colonel Banastre Tarleton, formerly of the 16th Light Dragoons, who had commanded the British Legion, a Loyalist force, in the southern American colonies from 1780. In its basic form the so-called Tarleton helmet consisted of a leather skull with a pleated turban enclosed by chains around the base, a peak, a feather or plume at the left side, and a black bearskin crest passing over the crown from front to rear. Tarleton himself was painted in this helmet by Sir Joshua Reynolds in January 1782 shortly after returning from America. Whether he was its inventor is uncertain, as there is evidence of its being worn in England as early as 1780. A Militia light infantryman of that date was drawn by an unknown artist in a helmet apparently of that type with a leopard-skin turban⁽¹¹⁾; and Paul Sandby's drawings of the Gordon Riots in that year show it worn by some Light Dragoons, for all of whom it was officially authorised eight years later. Thus it is possible that the Light Dragoon type of helmet worn in 1780-81 by the 45th's Light Company,

hats suggests that they were of felt, not leather as in the 5th.

Gibraltar 1781

During this war the garrison of Gibraltar⁽⁹⁾ was besieged by the Spaniards from 1779 to 1782. J.S. Copley's painting of the sortie made on 26-27 November 1781 by the combined Grenadier and Light Companies of the garrison includes a man whose short coat and half-gaiters suggest he is a light infantryman,

wearing a cap similar to plate II. Another picture of the sortie, an engraving after A.C. de Poggi, includes a complete Light Company from the left rear, with caps not unlike plate II but with the back flap vertical.

'Light Dragoon' caps

In 1780 and 1781 the 45th Foot was adversely reported on for its Light Company caps being 'not according to regulation, but more like the caps of the Light Dra-

which had left America in 1778, may also have been of this design.

'1784 PATTERN' CAPS

In 1782 a Board of General Officers expressed the view that 'the leathern caps, directed by His Majesty's regulations, to be provided for and worn by the Light Infantry companies, are very inconvenient, burthensome, fatiguing to the soldier, and have been found totally useless, upon all service'⁽¹²⁾. This presumably was the 'chain-cap' at plate I E. In March 1784 another Board was convened to decide upon a more suitable pattern from a number submitted for approval, and on 11 June one was approved.

There is no record of what was examined, although the Board commented that 'a leathern cap, worn by some Light Infantry in the last war, had not been shown to the Board, and is induced, from the report of officers who have tried it to strongly recommend it, as most comfortable to the soldier and considerably less expensive than the cap approved of'⁽¹³⁾. The unseen cap may have been something like plate I H, but no details were given; nor were any for the new regulation cap, finally approved by Royal Warrant dated 21 July 1784, other than its material — 'of black leather'.

In default of any documentary or pictorial evidence of this new official Light Company cap, and since such evidence as exists of light infantrymen post-1784 seems to indicate a continuance of the variety of such caps that pertained pre-1784, it is difficult to speculate upon its design. However, in view of the Tarleton cap's then increasing popularity among the Light Dragoons; the affection in which it was held by King George III as the only military headgear of purely British origin; its adoption in the Militia; and doubtless the authorities' wish to minimise, on grounds of cost, the different headdress worn in the Army, it is not unlikely that the new



Richard Hook's reconstructions show:

Plate I:

- (A) Highland Company, 25th (Edinburgh) Regt., c.1771, Minorca.
- (B) Light Company, 69th Regt., 1778.
- (C) Picquet Company, 11th Regt., c.1771, Minorca.
- (D) Picquet Company, 13th Regt., c.1771, Minorca.
- (E) Light Company, 6th Regt., 1778.
- (F) Light Company, 5th Regt., 1775, North America.
- (G) Light Company, 68th Regt., c.1775, West Indies.
- (H) Light Company, 62nd Regt., 1778, North America.

Plate II:

- (I) Light Company, 71st (Highland) Regt., 1791, India.
- (J) Light Company, Coldstream Guards, 1796.
- (K) Left Flank Company, 7th Royal Fusiliers, 1796, Canada.
- (L) Light Company, 52nd (Oxfordshire) or 72nd (Highland) Regts., 1791, India.
- (M) Light Company, 36th (Herefordshire) Regt., 1791, India.
- (N) Light Infantryman, 1791 (after H. Bunbury).
- (O) 90th (Perthshire Volunteers) Regt., 1795.
- (P) 5th (Rifle) Battalion, 60th (Royal American) Regt., 1798.

For detailed commentary and sources see body text.

Light Infantry cap was a version of the Tarleton helmet.

It was shown on a Light Company officer in a series of plates illustrating officers' methods of saluting in *The New Royal Encyclopaedia* published in 1790. It was certainly worn, with a green plume and turban, by the Light Companies of the 1st (Royal) and 32nd Regiments of Foot, at least towards the end of the century, according, respectively, to a portrait of Lieutenant John Ainslie by John Hayter and a drawing by Captain William Loftie. When the 90th (Perthshire Volunteers) Regiment was raised in 1794 it was clothed entirely as light infantry and with this helmet, which had a green feather and turban, and a large brass bugle-horn on the front above the peak (plate IIo). The 90th were still wearing this helmet in the Egyptian campaign of 1801, despite special light infantry



Plate II

Light Company officer of the 87th Foot (disbanded 1783); his cap, though unclear, appears to be of the Tarleton type. (Army Museums Ogilby Trust)

caps having by then been abolished, as will be seen.

Whether or not the Tarleton helmet became the official cap for Light Companies, there is evidence that regiments displayed their usual indifference to regulations. In 1789 the 50th's Light Infantry caps were 'not according to regulations'. Two years later the 3rd Buffs' were 'very inconvenient for want of shade over the eyes — the whole tied on with string'. In the same year this also applied to the 30th's, while the 14th's, 31st's and 34th's were all noted as being too small and the 17th Light Company had 'plain hats'⁽¹⁴⁾. An example of lack of shade for the eyes appears in a watercolour by H. Bunbury of 1791 of a light infantryman of an unnamed regiment with blue facings (plate II*n*). Bunbury also shows what appears to be a 'chain-cap' still being worn as late as 1794 in an engraving titled *A Camp Scene*.

INDIA

Different styles prevailed in India, and three Light Company headdresses worn during the Third Mysore War (1790-92) appear in the engravings *Collection of Views in the Mysore Country* after Captain Alexander Allan of the Madras Army. Plate II*i*, which seems to be no more than a cut-down hat, features in the print *Sawendroog*, the wearer being of the Light Company of either the 52nd (Oxfordshire) or the 72nd (Highland) Regiment, which were both present at the capture of that place in December 1791.

Allan's original watercolour for his *Nundydroog* (captured October 1791) shows more clearly than the engraving the Light Company caps of the 71st (Highland) Regiment — plate III — and the 36th (Herefordshire) Regiment — plate II*m*; the latter also features in Robert Home's painting *The Death of Colonel Moorhouse at Banga-*



lore in the National Army Museum. Both caps have a pale brown crest or comb, probably of feathers rather than fur, but whereas the 36th cap is on the lines of the Tarleton helmet, the 71st's is more in the earlier Light Dragoon style⁽¹⁵⁾. It may be noted, incidentally, that although both the 71st and 72nd were designated 'Highland', neither wore Highland clothing in India at this period.

The commonest headdress in India in the last decade of the 18th century was the white or black 'round hat', similar to a top hat but with a broader brim. Captain Elers of the 12th (East Suffolk)

recorded that his Light Company in 1796 wore the black version, covered over the crown by a crest of black ostrich feathers and with an upright red and black feather at the left side.

The Royal Fusiliers Cap, 1790s

Between 1789 and 1799 the Colonel of the 7th Royal Fusiliers was HRH Prince Edward (later Duke of Kent), who had very definite ideas on his regiment's clothing. He instructed that, as Fusiliers, its flank companies were not to be known as Grenadiers and Light Infantry, but rather as Right Flank and Left Flank Companies. Extracts from orders he

issued in 1790, when the regiment was at Gibraltar, mention the Left Flank's 'helmet', with references to its blue serge turban being replaced by one of 'black, unvarnished leather in very small folds or pleats', ornamented at the back with a small leather bow with two white tassels, and enclosed by chains, a white feather at the left side, and the 'fur over the crest as black as can be got'⁽¹⁶⁾; all suggesting a Tarleton helmet. However, orders issued in Canada in 1798 refer to the Left Flank Company's 'black leather dress cap and hackle crest feather'⁽¹⁷⁾. A series of very detailed watercolours of the 7th's uniforms made between



Light Company man of the 36th in India, 1791. Detail from *R. Home's Death of Colonel Moorhouse at Bangalore*. (National Army Museum)

Left Flank Company officer, 7th Royal Fusiliers, c.1795, by Lt. James Peachey; the badge and lace were gilt for officers. (Royal Fusiliers)

Regiments, according to drawings by Captain William Loftie. Both had peaks and an upright green feather at the left side; but whereas the 31st had a white fur or feather crest curling over the top of the cap from the base of the green plume, similar to the 7th's, the 34th had an upright white fur crest running from side to side, with the regimental number on the black front above a white lace strip.

Foot Guards 'round hat', 1790s

The composite battalion of Foot Guards in America in 1776 had had a Light Company; but such companies were not a regular feature of Guards battalions until the outbreak of the French Revolutionary War in 1793, when four were authorised for the 1st Guards and two each for the Coldstream and 3rd Guards. An engraving published in 1793 and a plate from Edmund Scott's *Manual Exercise and Costumes* published in 1797 show the dress of these companies. Their headdress was a black round hat with the sides turned up and held in place by stays, and a black bearskin stee-



from front to rear with a green feather at the left side curling over the crest; it was worn tilted to the right (plate IIj).

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The concept of distinguishing Light Companies was, by the end of the century, coming to an end. By a General Order of 24 February

1800 all such caps and the hats of the Infantry, Guards and Line gave way to the so-called 'stove-pipe' shako. Henceforth the Light Companies would be distinguished only by a green feather or tuft.

The first move towards this change in fashion had occurred in 1797 when a battalion of Riflemen, the most

recent type of light troops, was added to the four red-coated battalions of the 60th (Royal American) Regiment. This 5/60th (composed entirely of foreigners, mostly Germans), besides being the first battalion in the Infantry to be uniformed in green, was also the first to adopt the shako: slightly wider at the top than the 1800 pattern, with a green lace band round the top, in the centre of which was a red cockade with a green tuft behind it, and a silver buglehorn on the front⁽¹⁸⁾.

Its officers, in contrast, adopted the Tarleton helmet; as, from 1800, did those of the Experimental Corps of Riflemen (later 95th and subsequently the Rifle Brigade). These Rifles officers continued the use of this helmet into the first decade of the new century, at least for full dress wear, thus being the last in the Infantry to wear a headdress which for much of the period under review had distinguished Light troops, horse and foot⁽¹⁹⁾. M

Notes:

- (1) In 1775. Quoted in David Gates, *The British Light Infantry Arm, 1790-1815* (1987) p.18.
- (2) 6 March 1771, WO 26/28, pp.377-8, quoted Hew Strachan, *British Military Uniforms, 1768-96* (1975), p.187.
- (3) Illustrated in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* (JSAHR), Vol. XXIX, p.87.
- (4) C.C.P. Lawson, *History of Uniforms of the British Army*, Vol. III (1961), p.72.
- (5) 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th, 27th and 41st.
- (6) See also JSAHR, Vol. XXXII, pp.119-122.
- (7) See also JSAHR, Vol. XXXIV, p.80.
- (8) Quoted JSAHR, Vol. LIV, p.135 with illustration.
- (9) 12th, 39th, 56th and 58th.
- (10) Inspection Returns, 25 Sept. 1780 and 14 Sept. 1781, quoted Strachan, op. cit., p.234.
- (11) See JSAHR, Vol. XXXVI, p.108.
- (12) Quoted in Adjutant-General's letter to Secretary-at-War, 7 March 1784, Strachan, p.192.
- (13) Adjutant-General to Secretary-at-War, 5 July 1784, Strachan, p.194.
- (14) Various inspection returns for 1791, Strachan, pp.204, 210, 212, 221, 222, 224.
- (15) See also JSAHR, Vol. LXVIII, No. 275 (Autumn, 1990).
- (16) JSAHR, Vol. XXVI, pp.17-18.
- (17) JSAHR, Vol. XXVII, p.121.
- (18) From Hamilton Smith drawings in Victoria & Albert Museum.
- (19) It continued until 1812 and by the Royal Horse Artillery until 1827.