
Camden Museum's 133 Year Old Uniform

By Julie Wrigley

At the Camden Museum there is a very unusual Officer's Mess Uniform consisting of five items: a blue mess jacket with silver lacing, braiding and five plaited decorative frogs, pale buff cuffs and collar; a red mess waistcoat with silver lacing, braiding and buttons; navy blue trousers with silver lace stripes; a beige cummerbund; and a red and silver forage cap. This week we found out from labels, which have not been seen for 45 years, that the uniform dates to November 1882!



1882 Madras Cavalry uniform
on the new mannequin.
Photo by Janice Johnson

Thanks to some recent research by Janice Johnson and Margaret Wheeler, the Historical Society now knows quite a lot about the uniform. It belonged to and was worn by Francis Montgomery Onslow of the Second Madras Cavalry. Francis Onslow was born on 9 November 1843 in Tiruchchirappalli, India, and died on 30 January 1932 in Larchfield House, Surrey, England. He had an interesting career with the British Army. On the recommendation of his father, Francis was nominated as a cadet for the Madras Cavalry. His father, Arthur Pooley Onslow, had recently retired from the Madras Civil Service. His mother, Rosa Roberta (nee Macleay) had died at Ganjam, India in 1852. (She was daughter of Alexander Macleay, the first owner of the property 'Brownlow Hill'.) Francis served in the Abyssinian war in 1867-68 with the Land Transport Train (being awarded a medal for this service) and as a Captain in the Second Anglo-Afghan War between the British forces and the Afghan forces. In that war he fought in the Battle of Ali Masjid at the western end of the Khyber Pass on the border between Afghanistan and India on 21st November 1878. The aim of that war was to protect British interests and keep Russia out of India.

Francis Montgomery Onslow was promoted Major and Squadron Commander of the 2nd Madras Cavalry on 4 September 1880. At the time of the April 1881 English census he was living with his father at Send Grove, Ripley, Surrey, England. Francis was married on 1 June 1881 at St. John the Evangelist, Westminster, London. He was promoted Lieutenant Colonel on 7th May 1886 and retired the same day. He retired on 7 May 1886. The Onslow uniform dates from 1882 after Francis had been promoted to Major. It was manufactured by J. B. Johnstone, Military Tailor, of 34 Sackville Street London & 59 Dawson Street Dublin.

Francis Onslow was the younger brother of Arthur Alexander Walton Onslow. It was Captain Arthur Onslow who married the Camden Macarthur family heiress, Miss Elizabeth Macarthur, from whom all the Macarthur-Onslows are descended. It is not known when the uniform came to Camden Park, but Brigadier (Richard) Quentin Macarthur Stanham donated the uniform to the Museum at the time of the Museum opening in June 1970.

The donor, Quentin Macarthur-Stanham, was born and raised in England. When his mother, Lady Stanham, born Helen Macarthur-Onslow, who owned and lived at Send Grove, unexpectedly inherited Camden Park in 1947, his parents and Quentin sold Send Grove and moved to live in Camden Park. They took on the role of being the heads of the Camden family and continued in those roles until their deaths. Quentin was always very community-minded and supported the Camden Museum at various times and made several donations to the collection.

Miss Annette Macarthur-Onslow recalled that a Camden News article on Wednesday June 24, 1970 had the catchy heading "*It's the uniform that gets 'em*". It showed a photo of her looking at the uniform with the caption "*Miss Annette Macarthur-Onslow inspects the colourful uniform of the Madras Cavalry displayed at the Camden Historical Society's museum which was opened last Saturday by her uncle, Sir Denzil Macarthur-Onslow. The uniform, once the property of the Onslow family of Camden Park, was donated to the museum by the Macarthur-Stanham family, the present owners of Camden Park.*"

In the collection at Camden Park House there is a related object, an Afghan War Medal, which belonged to Francis Montgomery Onslow. The medal is labeled: Afghanistan Medal 1878-79-80 with a bar 'Ali Musjid'. Engraved on the edge is: CAPT. FRA. MONTGOMERY ONSLOW 2nd MAD. CAV. [Madras Cavalry]. The medal itself is in silver depicting Queen Victoria (head in profile) on one side and an elephant carrying a gun accompanied by cavalry on the reverse. After the Afghan War, Francis was ADC to the Lt-General Sir Neville Bowles Chamberlain of the Madras Cavalry from 24 February 1876 to 2 February 1881 when the Lt-General retired. On the occasion of his retirement Sir Neville Bowles Chamberlain presented Francis with an engraved watch which is also in the Camden Park House collection.

The Onslow uniform has historic significance because it dates from 1882 and is memorabilia from the Second Anglo-Afghan War between the British forces and the Afghan forces. It is part of the history of the British Empire and the colonies. It is unusual and colourful, and a good example of the 2nd Madras Light Cavalry uniform. This may be the only version of this type of uniform to have survived, and therefore is internationally significant, in terms of the history of uniforms worn by the officers of the Madras armies.

The Onslow uniform is also significant in the Camden museum as it came from a prominent local donor, Quentin Macarthur-Stanham, who is a family descendant of the wearer of the uniform. The uniform is part of the connection between the Onslow, Macarthur and Stanham families and their long historical military tradition.

The uniform was dressed on a plaster model for the opening of the Museum in 1970, and has not been moved until this week, when the Historical Society purchased a new wire mannequin to display it. The uniform can be seen at 40 John Street in the Research Room at the Camden Museum, which is open from Thursdays to Sundays, 11 am to 4 pm.