

The Fusilier Origins in Tower Hamlets

The Tower was the seat of Royal power, in addition to being the Sovereign's oldest palace, it was the holding prison for competitors and threats, and the custodian of the Sovereign's monopoly of armed force until the consolidation of the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich in 1805. As such, the Tower Hamlets' traditional provision of its citizens as a loyal garrison to the Tower was strategically significant, as its possession and protection influenced national history. Possession of the Tower conserved a foothold in the capital, even for a sovereign who had lost control of the City or Westminster. As such, the loyalty of the Constable and his garrison throughout the medieval, Tudor and Stuart eras was critical to a sovereign's (and from 1642 to 1660, Parliament's) power-base.

The ancient Ossulstone Hundred of the County of Middlesex was that bordering the City to the north and east. With the expansion of the City in the later Medieval period, Ossulstone was divided into four divisions; the Tower Division, also known as Tower Hamlets. The Tower Hamlets were the military jurisdiction of the Constable of the Tower, separate from the lieutenancy powers of the remainder of Middlesex. Accordingly, the Tower Hamlets were sometimes referred to as a county-within-a-county. The Constable, with the ex-officio appointment of Lord Lieutenant of Tower Hamlets, held the right to call upon citizens of the Tower Hamlets to fulfil garrison guard duty at the Tower. Early references of the unique responsibility of the Tower Hamlets during the reign of Bloody Mary show that in 1554 the Privy Council ordered Sir Richard Southwell and Sir Arthur Darcy to muster the men of the Tower Hamlets "*whiche owe their service to the Towre, and to give commaundement that they may be in aredynes for the defence of the same*"¹. This responsibility was not always easy to carry. During Elizabeth's reign in 1587 the citizens of the Tower Hamlets submitted a petition requesting their county muster quota for militia training be reduced from 57 to 20 men in recognition of their providing men for the Tower garrison.

The right of the Constable to exact guard duty from Tower Hamlets was extended in 1605 to the raising of militia, called Trained Bands, by the Privy Council directive: "*to take the view of those able men, their armor and weapons that are inrolled and reduced into the inrolled Bandes within the forsayd hamlets ... in such sort as the other Comisyoners are authorised to doe for the rest of the County*"². In 1633 Stow confirmed that the Tower Hamlets provided "*the standing Militia of the Tower. The Constable or Lieutenant is Lord Lieutenant of the same And this, time out of Mind, hath been the constant Militia and standing Force of the Tower*"³.

During the Civil War London's militia underwent several re-organisations, generating up to 18 regiments of trained bands. In January 1643 Parliament directed that the "*Companies of the Trained Bands belonging to The Tower, were to be a Regiment under the Command of the Lieutenant of The Tower*"⁴. The men of the Tower Hamlets were eventually formed into two regiments of 6 or 7 trained bands, the first containing 2299½ men; the second 1898 men, including officers and drums"⁵. During the war, thanks to its unique origin and duties, the Tower Hamlets Regiment was one of the few trained bands willing to serve outside its home county. It had its own flags reflecting both religious inspiration, with a motto "Jehova Providebit", and an image of the Tower to reflect its responsibilities⁶. The Regiment served under Sir William Waller in his Oxford campaign of 1644 and conducted a stalwart defence of the bridge so stabilising the parliamentary centre at the Battle of Cropredy Bridge on 29th June⁷. The Regiment returned to its Tower guard duties until the New Model Army coup of 1647.

After the Restoration, the City of London Militia Act of 1662 confirmed that the militia organisation of the Tower Hamlets were authorised separately from the county system to provide the Standing Militia of the

¹ PC(1554).

² PC(1605).

³ Stow (1633) Vol I p77.

⁴ Lords (1643).

⁵ Grose, Vol I, p198.

⁶ Peachey & Prince (1990).

⁷ <http://www.traynedbandes.co.uk/regiment-history/>

Tower⁸. It is likely that the Tower Hamlets men were amongst those “*volunteer horse and foot under the command of Sir John Robinson the lieutenant of the Tower*” who accompanied Charles II from the Tower to Westminster for his coronation in 1661⁹. The Tower Hamlets continued to provide two garrison companies for the Tower throughout the remainder of Charles’s reign.

On Charles’s sudden death in February 1685 James II was well aware of the necessity of quickly securing his power base. James was the last British monarch to have been a professional soldier and sailor. In June, as the Monmouth rebellion gathered pace, James appointed George Legge, Lord Dartmouth, Constable of the Tower and Master General of the Ordnance, to form an Ordnance Regiment within the Tower for the protection of the cannon, its soldiers to be equipped with the long ‘fusil’ musket. The two independent Tower Hamlets guard companies of the Tower and one of miners formed the core of the new Regiment, named by the King “*My Royal Regiment of Fusiliers*”. In the following weeks the Fusiliers were augmented by a further 10 companies raised in the Tower Hamlets. In the Tower a Grand Storehouse was planned to house the Royal Arsenal and its protecting Regiment; it took three years to build. The regiment was later titled the 7th Regiment of Foot (Royal Fusiliers) and The Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment). It continued to recruit its soldiers in the East End of London; whilst the Tower Hamlets provided militia, rifle-volunteer, citizen-soldier and reserve units under various Fusilier titles throughout the following centuries.

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⁸ Act of Parliament 14 Car II C 3.

⁹ Bayley p101.