

THOMAS HARDING R.N. OF THE REFORM INN, PILTON

Thomas Harding, landlord of the Reform Inn, Pilton from 1892 to 1905, was a man with an adventurous past, which came to light recently when his medals were sold at auction.

He was born in Weymouth in 1847, son of the chief warder at Portland Prison, and joined the Royal Navy at the age of 15 as a Boy 2nd Class, initially on H.M.S. Colossus and then on H.M.S. Black Prince, rising to the rank of Chief Bosun's Mate. After ten years' service he was awarded a Good Conduct Medal, which was a very rare achievement at that time. Life was hard on board ship so it was very difficult to have an exemplary record without a blemish over a ten year period. Later he was on H.M.S. Monarch and served with distinction at the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882 and at the Battle of the Nile in 1884.

However, his most hazardous time was yet to come, as later that year he joined the famous dash to relieve General Gordon and the British subjects at Khartoum, who were under attack from the Dervishes. By this time Harding was a member of the famous Royal Naval Brigade, always welcomed by the British Army, as when they came ashore to fight they were completely self-sufficient with supplies of every sort. They were also so ruthless and tough that no enemy ever surrendered to the Brigade. The incredible journey from Cairo to Khartoum covered 1,650 miles with no roads or railways and with great cataracts on the Nile. Initially eight hundred 30 foot whale boats were used, but the river became increasingly difficult to navigate with huge rocks and cataracts and finally, on the 8th January 1885, the river was abandoned on receipt of a frantic message from General Gordon – 'Come quickly!' A Desert Column of camels set out to cover the 176 miles to Khartoum with 1,600 men, 50 officers and 53 Naval Brigade ratings, including Thomas Harding, the senior N.C.O. present, and a Gardner gun in four pieces mounted on camels. After eight days they had covered 150 miles and arrived at the wells of Abu Klea, where they were attacked by 10,000 Dervishes.

Forming the famous British square, with camels in the middle, they stood to repel the attack of the howling, chanting, spear-waving hordes, led by sheiks waving their scimitars. Lord Beresford, in charge of the Naval Brigade, ordered the square opened in order to fire the Gardner gun, which unfortunately jammed. Before the square could be re-formed the Dervishes flooded into the gap. A savage hand-to-hand battle in the cramped area inside the square resulted in 1,000 Dervish dead with 263 British dead and wounded, before the gap was closed. The remaining Dervishes fled the scene and the British recovered from the attack to continue the remaining 25 miles to Khartoum, where they found that General Gordon and his gallant party were already dead. Rudyard Kipling wrote a famous poem about the battle of Abu Klea called 'Fuzzy Wuzzy'.

Thomas Harding was very lucky not to be counted among the dead or seriously wounded, and he subsequently received three medals from the British Government and one from the Egyptians. In 1892, at the age of 45, he retired on a Naval pension, and with his North Devon wife Emma and daughter May, he came to the newly re-built Reform Inn in Pilton, when he no doubt entertained the drinkers with his tales of adventures in the Sudan and Egypt. He was landlord there for thirteen years, leaving in 1905 to live in Portland Street, Barnstaple, an interesting coincidence when recalling that his father was Chief Warder at Portland Prison. He died a few months later and was buried in Bear Street Cemetery in February 1906. Only his medals survive to record the life of a tough sailor who fought in a famous battle against the Dervishes in the Sudan and lived to tell the tale in the Reform Inn, Pilton.