

Don't believe everything you find on the internet: The story of Thomas William Coventry (1800-82)

I have been aware of a connection between my family and the Coventrys ever since I can remember. My great grandfather was Sir George Francis Coventry Pocock, Baronet, whose mother was Augusta Elinor Coventry, granddaughter of George 6th Earl of Coventry. However, I have only been seriously researching the family for the last four years since I joined Ancestry, the genealogical website. What follows is an example of the kind of genealogical wormhole, facilitated greatly by the resources of the internet, down which it is very easy to disappear. I love it.



This story begins with a portrait, a miniature depicting an army officer in a uniform that appears to date to the early decades of the 19th Century. This was uploaded to *Ancestry* in 2014 against the record for Thomas William Coventry (1800-82), son of Thomas William Coventry (1778-1816) who was the younger son of George, 6th Earl of Coventry by his second wife Barbara St John. There is no provenance given for this picture on *Ancestry*, and late in 2020, I became aware of a thread of correspondence on the website discussing who the picture depicted.

The initial suggestion was that this was Thomas William in the uniform of the 15th Hussars, since the death notice published in the *Illustrated London News* of 4 March 1882 (on *Ancestry*) stated that he was late of this regiment. The first correspondent had carried out an initial check through the regimental Facebook page and had clarified that the uniform was not that of the 15th Hussars. The suggestion had come back that it might be the 17th Lancers. This was when I entered the on-line discussion. I have long had an interest in military history and militaria and the uniform to me did not look quite right for the 17th Lancers¹. It is very similar, but the epaulettes are gold in the portrait, not silver, and the collar has decorative lace that was not normal for a regular regiment. I then carried out a search in the *London Gazette*² for the early decades of the 19th Century and found that Thomas William Coventry, Gentlemen, was commissioned

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Lieutenant in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry on 31 May 1821³. This was my suggestion for the identity of the regiment portrayed in the miniature, if it was indeed Thomas William. However, at this stage, there was no independent evidence for what the uniform of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry actually looked like.

The yeomanry of this period tended to dress very like regular Light Dragoons, with added flourishes and decoration because they were not bound by the dictates of King's Regulations. It was not improbable, therefore, that the Bedfordshire Yeomanry could have looked as similar to the 17th Lancers as seemed to be the case. The 17th Lancers only adopted the lance in 1823, and prior to that they were the 17th Light Dragoons. At this point, your chairman Chris Wynne-Jones enters the story, adding to the correspondence with a photograph of a portrait of an officer in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry from the collection of Bedfordshire County Archives⁴. It was described as a copy of an original oil painting of Captain M Coventry by Alexander Fraser (1786-1865), painted around 1824. Although the photograph is in black and white, the uniform in this picture from the Bedfordshire Archives is identical in all visible detail to the miniature.



Subsequently, I located a picture of the commanding officer of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry, Thomas Potter MacQueen, in the collection of the National Army Museum⁵, which supports the identification of the regiment from the uniform. Chris also highlighted an article from *Country Life* in 1966 held by Nicola Hewitt, who is one of the team at Croome. This covered a query raised by a reader, Lloyd Franklin of Tangier in Morocco, who claimed to hold the original oil painting, which he seems to have bought at Christies in 1958. Christies had identified the picture as Thomas William Coventry of the 10th Hussars with Napoleon's horse Marengo. *Country Life* was able to confirm that the uniform in the picture was in reality that of the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry, (identified from BYC on the officer's cartridge pouch, under his right arm). The horse could be Marengo, but is perhaps more likely to be one made to look like Marengo

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since he was on public display in London around the time the painting was made⁶. *Country Life* was categoric that Thomas William was in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry, as we know from the *London Gazette*, never in the 10th Hussars. On this basis, Chris asked the Bedfordshire Archive to amend its catalogue entry so the picture is now recorded as relating to Captain Thomas William Coventry. He was gazetted Captain on 31 March 1824⁷, which might have been the occasion for the painting being made.

This might seem to be the end of this story, but in fact it isn't. I did a final trawl through the *London Gazette* records for the period 1817-1827 and found two more records for "Thomas Coventry, Gent". These record that on 17 July 1817⁸, Thomas was commissioned Cornet (the lowest rank of cavalry officer) in the 15th Light Dragoons, and then on 9 April 1818⁹, he exchanged with another officer, selling his commission and leaving the army as the system at the time allowed him to do. The 15th Light Dragoons adopted hussar dress in 1807, but only dropped 'Light Dragoons' from their regimental title in 1861, becoming at that point the 15th (The King's) Hussars. So, though he had less than 9 months' service in the regiment, and assuming this Thomas Coventry is indeed Thomas William Coventry, it seems that Thomas William's obituary in the *Illustrated London News* was actually correct. For whatever reason, the caption in the Christies catalogue referred to the wrong regiment of hussars. But *Country Life* was absolutely correct to identify the portrait owned by the reader in Morocco as relating to Thomas William's service in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry.

A tangled story, but out of this it does appear we can now be reasonably confident that the miniature that started this investigation is indeed of Thomas William Coventry, grandson of the 6th Earl of Coventry, in the uniform of an officer in the Bedfordshire Yeomanry Cavalry in which he held a commission certainly between 1821 and 1824, and possibly up to 1827 when the regiment was disbanded¹⁰.

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¹ A contemporary print of an officer of the 17th Light Dragoons around 1820 is available at <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/forces/armyuniforms/17thltdragoons1820.htm>

² The official public record for the UK, accessed at <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/>. As an aside, before I retired, one of my jobs as Finance Director for a professional partnership was to send a notice to the Gazette announcing whenever a partner left or a new one joined the partnership.

³ London Gazette for 26 June 1821, page 1351.

⁴ Bedfordshire Archives reference X468/95

⁵ Also found in the archive of the National Portrait Gallery at <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp123942/thomas-potter-macqueen>

⁶ He was captured at the Battle of Waterloo, and was exhibited in London in 1823-24 as part of the growing public interest at that time in all things Napoleonic. See Jill Hamilton: *Marengo: The myth of Napoleon's horse*, available as a download at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110713105001/http://www.jill-hamilton.com/pdf/marengo-the-myth-of-napoleons-horse.pdf>

⁷ London Gazette for 17 April 1824, page 621. The entry refers only to Lieutenant Coventry, though there can be little doubt this is William Thomas since according to the Gazette no other Coventry had been commissioned into the regiment.

⁸ London Gazette for 2 August 1817, page 1682.

⁹ London Gazette for 28 April 1818, page 758.

¹⁰ <https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/5189/bedfordshire-yeomanry>