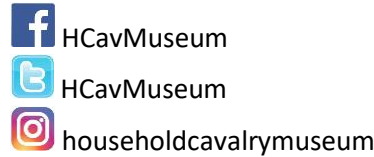




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Horse Guards, Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AX



HOUSEHOLD CAVALRY MUSEUM COLLECTION

No: 2

THE SKULL OF A LIFE GUARD

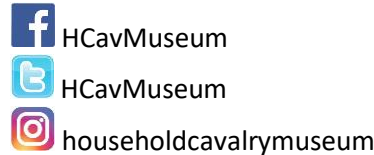
Hello, and welcome back to Household Cavalry Museum's video podcasts. In last week's video I started by dispelling a myth – this week I want to start with a question: what is it that connects Abbotsford, the home of Queen Victoria's favourite novelist, Sir Walter Scott, the Household Cavalry Museum in London, and St Catherine's, the parish church of Cossall in Nottinghamshire? The quick answer is the skull of Corporal of Horse Jack Shaw of the 2nd Life Guards. But that is by no means the whole story...

Born in 1789 into a family of prosperous Nottinghamshire farmers, Shaw was a sickly child – but he grew into a strapping lad of over six foot, who weighed fifteen stone and was handy with his fists, as he proved one afternoon at Nottingham Goose Fair when, at the urging of his friends, he stepped into the ring and aged just fourteen won a bare knuckle prize fight against a much older and heavier man. Nothing more is known of Shaw's boxing career until, four years later in 1793, when he joined the 2nd Life Guards, then stationed at



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Regent's Park Barracks. He hadn't been in uniform long, before he was involved in a brawl with some rowdy civilians, which left three of them out cold on the pavement.

Shaw's prowess with his fists soon came to the attention of his commanding officer, who - instead of disciplining him - sent the young man for professional boxing training at Jackson's Rooms in Bond Street. Under John Jackson's management, Shaw quickly made a name for himself as 'the Milling Life Guardsman' and defeated, amongst others, the African-American champion boxer, Tom 'the Moor' Molyneaux.

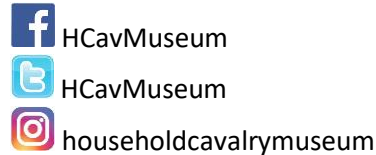
But boxing and soldiering were not Shaw's only skills. Whilst at Jackson's, Shaw's good looks and rippling physique had come to the attention of some of London's leading artists. These included Sir Edwin Landseer, Benjamin Haydon and William Etty – and, through Haydon, he came to the attention of the novelist Sir Walter Scott who idolised him.

In the years that followed, Shaw's bid for the All England boxing crown was interrupted by his regiment's deployment to fight in the Peninsular in 1812 and again in 1815 for the Waterloo campaign.



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Sadly for Shaw, boxing and the world of fine art, he was killed at Waterloo under heroic circumstances, which won't detain us here but are detailed in two books that are available on the Museum's website.

Most unusually for an ordinary soldier, after the battle Shaw was buried in a marked grave by the farmhouse of La Haye Sainte and memorialised in the graveyard of his home church at Cossall in Nottinghamshire. However, Shaw's bones would not be left to rest in peace in Belgium. This was because, some years later and at the instigation of Sir Walter Scott, his skeleton was disinterred. The novelist then had two plaster casts made of Shaw's skull and – so it was believed – took the actual skull to Abbotsford, where it remains in the library to the present day. Except that it doesn't.

The truth is that the skull at Abbotsford is, like the one in the Household Cavalry Museum, a plaster cast and the skull itself was, until 1898, in a display case at the Royal United Services Institute's Museum at the Banqueting House, Whitehall. In that year, the museum's then curator, in a fit of 21st century wokeness at displaying the remains of a British soldier, arranged in secret for the skull to be given a Christian burial in St Catherine's church, Cossall. According to the parish records, the reinternment was in an unmarked spot 'close



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to the pillar near the font'... but no one has successfully identified the exact spot.

I hope you have enjoyed this brief look at one of the Household Cavalry's more iconic relics. Next week I will be talking about a pair of very rare swords. Until then, stay safe...