

## CONTEXT CORNER: THE MILITIA COMES TO MERYTON QUARTERING IN JANE AUSTEN'S TIME



*Lydia surrounded by her officers. From Hugh Thomson's illustrated *Pride & Prejudice*.*

### KEY TERMS

**QUARTERING:** The housing of soldiers. Local militia regiments in Britain (like Wickham's in *P&P*) were housed by local businesses and shared buildings. Following mutinies in the late eighteenth century, militias could no longer rely on public housing, and instead lived in hastily built camps and barracks.

**MILITIA:** Local military forces, funded by the central government and organized at the county level. Militias were intended to defend the home country in wartime, freeing up regular soldiers to defend Britain abroad. They were supplemental to the professional fighting branches of the British Military. These forces were only embodied (active) during wartime. These smaller forces were often a first step towards a career in the army, just as Wickham advances from the “—shires” to the Regular Army in *P&P*.

**REGULAR ARMY:** The nationally-organized military. Travelled outside of Great Britain to participate in conflicts abroad. This army accepted paid commissions, like when Mr. Darcy pays for Mr. Wickham's promotion in *P&P*.

**ROYAL MARINES:** An “amphibious” fighting force, as Royal Marines fought on land and at sea. Serving alongside sailors on Royal Navy ships, marines protected the ship's officers, maintained order aboard vessels, and assisted in battle.

**ROYAL NAVY:** The oldest and strongest branch of the British military in Austen's time. For centuries, Britain was home to the largest and most powerful navy in the world. Members of the Royal Navy commanded the sea from their technologically-advanced battleships. Rather than being quartered in their stationed locations, sailors lived on board their ships.

**REDCOATS:** Term used to colloquially refer to the Regular Army, popularized especially during the American Revolution. This refers, of course, to the scarlet uniforms worn by the British military and copied by many local militias in Austen's time.

## MILITIA AND QUARTERING BASICS

1. **ORGANIZATION:** Regiments were organized by county. Officers were drawn from the local gentry class, and men were “balloted” or selected for service. Rather than paying for a commission, militias required that those serving possessed a landed fortune or income of at least £50. With the option to pay for substitutes, however, many landowning men deferred their service to lower-income residents. Once a regiment was embodied, they were relocated to a different county, as removal from family and friends would hopefully limit distractions.
2. **HOUSING:** Up until the late 1790s, militias were housed in public spaces; inns, stables, ale, wine, coffee, and public houses were required by law to provide for soldiers. The relationship between innkeeper and militia was often tense—they were paid little and expected to provide for many. Soldiers complained they received poor treatment because of this, often sleeping in cold, dirty stables with barely passable food to eat. This tension was part of the reason the military transitioned to building barracks and camps for its militias in the late 1790s.
3. **GOVERNANCE:** Quartering soldiers were overseen by local officials—in *P&P*, Sir William Lucas and Uncle Phillips fulfill this role. They secured housing, managed the regiment, and weighed in on discipline issues—of which there were many. These regiments were notorious for wild and indecorous behavior. Where there were troops, gambling, prostitution, and drinking followed. Brighton was especially known for the wild behavior of troops quartered there.

### “The Task” William Cowper

Cowper, a favorite poet of Austen’s, described the misbehavior of militia soldiers in part of his 1785 poem.

’Twere well if his exterior change were all—  
But with his clumsy port the wretch has lost  
His ignorance and harmless manners too.  
To swear, to game, to drink, to show at home  
By lewdness, idleness, and Sabbath-breach,  
The great proficiency he made abroad,  
To astonish and to grieve his gazing friends,  
To break some maiden’s and his mother’s heart,  
To be a pest where he was useful once,  
Are his sole aim, and all his glory now!

(Book IV, Line 632)

### COMMISSION PRICING (Regular Army)

Rank	1797 Price/Modern GBP Price/USD Price
Lieutenant-Colonel	£3500 £432,000 \$548,700
Major	£2600 £320,900 \$407,600
Captain	£1500 £185,100 \$235,100
Lieutenant	£550 £67,900 \$86,200
Ensign	£400 £49,400 \$62,700

### MILITIAS BY THE NUMBERS

400,000: Number of soldiers at the peak of participation in 1804.

4,600: Number of volunteer corps organized to support local militias.

£50: Income required to enlist in the militia.

45: Maximum enlistment age.

18%: Percentage of military-age men enlisted in 1804.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Scholar Clive Caplan calls *Pride & Prejudice* Austen's "militia novel," yet the details of military life are often missing in adaptations. Consider how *Unmarriageable*, *Pride, Prejudice, and Other Flavors*, and *Ayesha at Last* adapt (or do not adapt) the militia storyline for their retellings of *Pride & Prejudice*. Why might they have made this decision? How might it change the adaptation if this detail was included? What is the impact (if any) on the adaptation's faithfulness to the spirit of Austen's text?
2. Likewise, film adaptations of *Pride & Prejudice* vary in their emphasis on the militia—Joe Wright's 2005 adaptation and the 2016 film *Pride & Prejudice & Zombies* focus on these details perhaps more than other screen adaptations. How is the militia depicted (or not depicted) in these films? Positively? Negatively? What is the effect of this depiction? How do other films adapt or alter the story? Is it effective?
3. During Jane Austen's lifetime, Great Britain was involved in the American Revolution, the French Revolutionary Wars, the Napoleonic Wars, and the War of 1812, among others. Critic Henry Seidel Canby remarked that "the greatest novels written in wartime are unquestionably Jane Austen's." Austen's novels (especially *Pride & Prejudice* and *Persuasion*) are full of militias, soldiers, and sailors, but devoid of war. Why do you think she made the choice to write about the military, but not about military conflict? How might her novels be different if she included more references to contemporary events?
4. Three of Austen's six brothers served in the military—two in the Royal Navy and one in the Oxfordshire Militia. Considering her close connection to the military and her relationship with her brothers (Henry, of the militia, was her favorite), think about how the military is portrayed in *Pride & Prejudice* and her other novels. What might the military represent? Do her books take a stance on military life or politics? How does it compare to the other careers/lifestyles available to Austen's men (ordination and landowning)?
5. The militias of Austen's time were known for their wild, indecorous comportment. How do the film and novel adaptations recreate the glamour and sex appeal of badly-behaving officers like Wickham?

## FURTHER READING

Breihan, John. "Jane Austen and the Militia." *Persuasions*. 14 (1992): 16–26. Web. 23 May 2019.

Caplan, Clive. "Jane Austen's Soldier Brother: Captain Henry Thomas Austen of the Oxfordshire Regiment of Militia, 1793-1801." *Persuasions*. 18 (1996): 122–143. Web. 23 May 2019.

Fulford, Tim. "Sighing for a Soldier: Jane Austen and Military Pride and Prejudice." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 57.2 (2002): 153–178. Web. 20 May 2019.

Holmes, Richard. *Redcoat: The British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket*. London: HarperCollins, 2001. Print.

Knight, Roger. *Britain Against Napoleon: The Organisation of Victory, 1793-1815*. London: Allen Lane, 2013. Print.

Western, JR. *The English Militia in the Eighteenth Century: The Story of a Political Issue, 1660-1802*. Routledge & K. Paul, 1965. Print.

## HELPFUL PASSAGES

“At present, indeed, they were well supplied both with news and happiness by the recent arrival of a militia regiment in the neighbourhood; it was to remain the whole winter, and Meryton was the headquarters.

‘Their visits to Mrs. Phillips were now productive of the most interesting intelligence. Every day added something to their knowledge of the officers' names and connections. Their lodgings were not long a secret, and at length they began to know the officers themselves. Mr. Phillips visited them all, and this opened to his nieces a store of felicity unknown before. They could talk of nothing but officers; and Mr. Bingley's large fortune, the mention of which gave animation to their mother, was worthless in their eyes when opposed to the regimentals of an ensign.” (pp. 29-30)

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“I remember the time when I liked a red coat myself very well--and, indeed, so I do still at my heart; and if a smart young colonel, with five or six thousand a year, should want one of my girls I shall not say nay to him; and I thought Colonel Forster looked very becoming the other night at Sir William's in his regimentals.” -Mrs. Bennett (p. 30)

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“...and then, what do you think we did? We dressed up Chamberlayne in woman's clothes on purpose to pass for a lady, only think what fun! Not a soul knew of it, but Colonel and Mrs. Forster, and Kitty and me, except my aunt, for we were forced to borrow one of her gowns; and you cannot imagine how well he looked! When Denny, and Wickham, and Pratt, and two or three more of the men came in, they did not know him in the least. Lord! how I laughed! and so did Mrs. Forster. I thought I should have died. And THAT made the men suspect something, and then they soon found out what was the matter.” -Lydia (p. 213)

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It was the last of the regiment's stay in Meryton, and all the young ladies in the neighbourhood were drooping apace. The dejection was almost universal. The elder Miss Bennets alone were still able to eat, drink, and sleep, and pursue the usual course of their employments. Very frequently were they reproached for this insensibility by Kitty and Lydia, whose own misery was extreme, and who could not comprehend such hard-heartedness in any of the family.

‘Good Heaven! what is to become of us? What are we to do?’ would they often exclaim the bitterness of woe. “How can you be smiling so, Lizzy?” Their affectionate mother shared all their grief; she remembered what she had herself endured on a similar occasion, five-and-twenty years ago.

‘I am sure,’ said she, ‘I cried for two days together when Colonel Miller's regiment went away. I thought I should have broken my heart.’

‘I am sure I shall break MINE,’ said Lydia.

‘If one could but go to Brighton!’ observed Mrs. Bennet.” (p. 221)