

GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S
HISTORY**

by

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The Handasyds, father and son

Considering that Thomas Handasyd enjoyed an illustrious career, with a lifetime of service to three monarchs, rising to the rank of Major-General, and achieving the honour of being appointed Governor of Jamaica, biographical details of the man are frustratingly scant. This is in marked contrast to the splendour of the Handasyd memorial which can be seen in the Gaynes Chapel in St Andrew's Church.

Thomas Handasyd was born c. 1645 in Elsdon, Northumberland, and followed his father, Colonel Roger Handasyd, into a military career. Following the Civil Wars which led to a general mistrust of powerful standing armies, it was not uncommon for those wishing to pursue a military career to serve in foreign armies and it was not surprising that Thomas Handasyd's baptism of fire seems to have been during the Franco-Dutch war of 1672–78. There is however no record of his achievements during that war, but he remained in Holland for the next decade; two of his five children were born there between 1687 and 1689.

Handasyd is next heard of following the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 when the Catholic James II was deposed in favour of the joint rule of the Protestant Mary and Prince William of Orange who ascended the throne as William III and Mary. The brutal removal of the Catholic king of England did not escape the attention of the Catholic kings of France and Spain and a bitter 'Nine Years' War' broke out between the two nations, but there was danger much closer to home when Jacobite supporters of James II rose up in rebellion against the new king. William III took immediate action, landing in Ireland with a substantial army which included Thomas Handasyd. In 1690 forces of William of Orange crushed the Jacobite rebels at the Battle of the Boyne, allowing William to turn his attention to the worsening situation overseas. Handasyd was transferred to Flanders but there is no account of his brief service there. He had married, in 1686, Anna Catharina Morel and had five children. He returned to Ireland in 1692 where two of his children were born. Anna died on 13 September 1704.

History next hears of Handasyd in March 1694 when he was appointed Major in the 28th (North Gloucestershire) Regiment of Foot raised by Colonel John Gibson, a tribute presumably to his diligent record in the service of the Crown in Ireland and Flanders. Colonel Gibson's regiment was ordered to Newfoundland to recapture the fort of St John's, in Canada, taken by the French in June 1696. The fort was of strategic importance as it was close to the cod fishing areas of the Grand Banks. The regiment arrived at the fort in 1697 to discover that it had been destroyed and completely abandoned by the French. So complete was the destruction that neither food nor provisions were left. Gibson ordered his men to set to work rebuilding and strengthening the fort but without provisions it was impossible to maintain a garrison of several hundred soldiers. Gibson therefore took the decision to withdraw the bulk of his forces, leaving the work of rebuilding in the hands of Handasyd and the 300 soldiers that remained of the regiment. Gibson paid fulsome tribute to his comrade-in-arms 'a good, worthy man, of courage and conduct, who has served the King 24 years'. Handasyd successfully accomplished his mission to rebuild the fort, but 'worthy man' though he might have been, he did have to report, on his return to England in 1698, that in the course of the work no fewer than 214 of his men out of a total of 300 had succumbed to illness and malnutrition.

The experience seemed to have done Handasyd's reputation no lasting harm. On 20 June 1702, he was commissioned Colonel of the 22nd Regiment of Foot and we next hear of him in

Jamaica where his regiment had been posted. Jamaica's importance to the empire was both strategic and economic; it was a provisioning point for the Royal Navy and its sugar plantations brought immense revenues to the Crown. Hardly had the regiment arrived on the island when the commanding officer, Colonel William Selwyn, died and Handasyd took over command, and as a function of his rank, he also became de facto Governor of the island. During the reign of Queen Anne (1702–1707), the 16th Regiment remained on the island, to thwart any hostile attempt by the French or Spanish to secure this strategic outpost. Handasyd was described by the Earl of Peterborough as 'one of the best infantry officers we have'.

Handasyd also demonstrated a humane side to his character during his governorship. The British navy was engaged in what turned out to be an ill-fated expedition against the French-held port of Plaisance (the bay of Placentia) in Newfoundland. A naval squadron was despatched under Vice-Admiral Grayson to capture the port and the fleet put in to the harbour in Jamaica to take on men and provisions. Handasyd made every effort to accommodate Grayson's increasingly unreasonable demands, ensuring that sufficient provisions were efficiently loaded and assisting the Vice-Admiral with the embarkation of the men, but at this point Handasyd grew increasingly angry at Grayson's arrogance and his brutal methods in press ganging men as soldiers. Handasyd was not alone in his disgust; ship masters and merchants were moved to write to the authorities in London to protest at Grayson's high-handed attitude. Handasyd immediately wrote directly to Grayson to express his displeasure and when this had no effect, he passed on all the complaints in a despatch to the Council of Trade and Plantations in London. Grayson was duly censured.

Handasyd's reputation continued to grow; in December 1705, he rose to the rank of Brigadier-General, but a fraught relationship with the sugar planters in 1710 led to him requesting to be relieved of his position. In 1711, now promoted to the rank of Major-General, he returned to England; he passed the colonelcy of the regiment to his son Roger. He retired to Great Staughton and purchased the Gaynes Hall estate where he died on 29 March 1729 at the age of eighty-five. He was buried in the churchyard of St Andrew's Church.

Despite more than six decades in the service of his country, one of the longest records of army service, Roger Handasyd, born c. 1684, saw little action on the battlefield. At the age of eighteen, in 1702, he joined the 22nd Regiment of Foot and a year later was promoted to captain of the regiment. In 1710, whilst his father was still governor of Jamaica, Roger married Elizabeth, daughter of Sir John Thorneycroft of Milcombe, Oxfordshire.

The first decade of the eighteenth century was dominated by 'Queen Anne's War', a struggle between Britain and France for the control of the American colonies, in which France eventually ceded control of her territories to what was, after the Act of Union, the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. In the war, Roger Handasyd served 'with reputation', and his reward was promotion to Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment in 1709 and Colonel in 1712, succeeding his father. Like his father, Roger served overseas, being appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Fort St Philip, Minorca, a position he occupied for the best part of a decade.

In 1730, he was transferred to the 16th Regiment of Foot and on 9 July, was appointed to the rank of Colonel of the regiment by King George II. Further promotions followed; Brigadier-General in 1735, Major-General in 1739, Lieutenant General in 1743. Roger Handasyd saw action in the Jacobite uprising of 1745 when an army under Bonnie Prince Charlie routed the forces of Sir John Cope at the battle of Prestonpans in September of that year. Handasyd, as Commander-in-Chief of English forces in Scotland, led a force that successfully occupied Edinburgh where he assumed the office of Governor. Many of the defeated Royalist army took refuge in the town after

Prestonpan. Handasyd's military prowess was not, however, regarded as impressive; he was described as 'a blundering commander'.

Taking time off from his undemanding military service, Handasyd embarked on a political career. It began on 10 May 1722, in the reign of George I, when, at the instigation of Lord Hinchinbrooke, he was elected unopposed as Member of Parliament of Huntingdon. His time in Parliament was undistinguished; his two contributions to national debate related to army matters, although he may have won popular acclaim when, during a debate on the Mutiny Bill, he opposed the proposal to cut down the daily allowance of beer for the private soldier.

In the reign of George II, he was twice re-elected as member for Huntingdon on 28 November 1727 and 13 June 1734, but he was finally rejected by an unimpressed electorate in the general election held on 25 June 1741 and spent the following six years seeking an alternative seat. He was finally successful in 1747, when, thanks to the influence of Lord Carlisle, he managed to persuade the electors of Scarborough that he was their ideal candidate.

His army career meanwhile languished. In 1752, he lobbied the army powers that be, unsuccessfully, for a 'better regiment'. Similarly, a plea to be appointed Colonel of Horse Grenadier Guards fell on stony ground. Roger Handasyd died at Gaynes Hall, Great Staughton, on 4 January 1763 at the age of seventy-eight.

The military careers of the Handasyds may have been dutiful and diligent if scarcely brilliant but the memorial erected to them in the Gaynes Chapel, for which a Perpendicular window in the east wall had to be removed, had the effect of greatly magnifying their posthumous reputations and to the present day, it is one of the largest memorials in the church.