

## **AN UNSUNG HERO OF RORKES DRIFT BURIED IN BLAENAU GWENT**

**Wayne Morris**

The remains of an unsung hero of Rorke's Drift lie in an unmarked grave in Ebbw Vale Cemetery. He was Drummer James Keefe 2381 'B' Com. 2<sup>nd</sup> Btn., 24 Regt of Foot, who served in South Africa from Feb 1878 to Jan 1880.



**Drummer James Keefe 1856-1893**

The 1879 Battle of Rorke's Drift was a battle in the Anglo-Zulu War, immediately following the British Army's defeat at the Battle of Isandlwana. Just over 150 British and colonial troops successfully defended the garrison against an intense assault by 3,000 to 4,000 Zulu warriors. The massive but piecemeal Zulu attacks on Rorke's Drift came very close to defeating the much smaller garrison, but were ultimately repelled. Eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded to the defenders, along with a number of other decorations and honours.

One of the Rorke's Drift defenders was James Keefe where he was slightly wounded in the forehead. In May 1856 he had enlisted at the age of 14 years 10 months as a Boy Soldier in St. Clement, London. His description taken when

he enlisted into the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot was: height 4ft 7½ inches, fresh-complexioned, with grey eyes, brown hair and a scar on his forehead. At the age of 15 he became a ‘Lad’ and progressed to the status of Private when he attained the age of eighteen, following which he was appointed a Drummer.

At the age of nineteen in May 1875 he received his first good conduct pay but by the September this was forfeited for drunkenness and his army career was to be periodically marred by drink. Whilst serving in the Mediterranean in 1880 he was fined five shillings for drunkenness and subsequently whilst in India in April 1883 he lost his Lance Corporal rank and was demoted to Private. He regained Lance Corporal status in August 1883 but lost it again in the September. The same happened yet again in April 1886, when after promotion two years previously he was again reduced to Private. However, after arriving back in the UK in 1887 he settled down and went on to attain the rank of Colour Sergeant.

James married Margaret Bury Ellis on the 17<sup>th</sup> April 1889 at the Brecon Register Office.



Wedding Photo of James Keefe and Margaret Ellis

He didn't 'hang about' for Margaret gave birth to a daughter Eileen Margaret on 15th November 1889. Then the first of three sons James Hardy was born on the 4th April 1891, followed by William George in 1892 and Ellis John in 1894, six months after James Keefe's death. All three brothers grew-up to become Drummers in the South Wales Borderers. Sons William and Ellis of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were killed in action in the Gallipoli Campaign of 1915-16. It is believed that James together with his wife and children moved from the Llanfaes area of Brecon to the Ebbw Vale area in search of employment just prior to his death in 1893. At the time of James death, it is said he had saved £100, which he left to his widow Margaret, a sum which in 2018 would be worth £12,211. Margaret after his death married a Private Arthur Flower in 1895. And with whom she had eight more children!



*Dmr J Keefe 2/24th*

Both James Keefe's South African Campaign Medal and Clasp, and his son Ellis John's World War One Memorial Plaque (Dead Man's Penny) are both on display at the South Wales Borderers Museum in Brecon together with photos of the Keefe family.



Commemorative stones at Ebbw Vale Cemetery to those who lie in unmarked graves.

James Keefe and another soldier from Rorke's Drift, a Private Thomas Driscoll of 'B' Comp 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion who died on 20<sup>th</sup> June 1931, were buried in Ebbw Vale Cemetery. Sadly both graves lay in a now levelled part of the cemetery and are indicated by Commemorative stones.