

Why Red?

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6 explores why the colour red has been so closely associated with British history and royalty

In writing 'Footnotes to History,' I am drawn to subjects that are unusual, little understood, or, as in this case, never even questioned.

For years the British Army bore the sobriquet 'Redcoats.' Even today, we expect to see red-uniformed Guards parading in London – and usually do. The colour red stirs our emotions, and occupies a particularly prominent place in our lives. We roll out the red carpet, catch crooks red-handed, despise red tape, obey red lights, and ignore red herrings. Women delight in red lipstick and paint their fingernails red. Men wishing to make a statement sport 'power red' neckties. It's a colour like no other.

The origins of red as an English Royal colour date back to the reign of King Canute (1016-1035), who had his bodyguard clothed in red uniforms. The Normans made red a part of their Royal coat of arms. Richard I (the

Lionheart) wore a red cross on his white tunic during the Third Crusade to the Holy Land. The red cross symbolized Saint George, England's patron saint.

But it was not until 1645 when Oliver Cromwell raised the 'New Model Army,' that the red coat became firmly established. In 1660, when Charles II left Holland to return to England and reclaim the throne, his musketeers were dressed in red. In 1669, ten companies of his Foot Guards wore red uniforms.

The uniforms of enlisted men were made of cheap woolen broadcloth dyed red using madder, an inexpensive dyestuff obtained from the roots of the madder plant (genus *Rubia*). The results were inconsistent, however. The roots varied in quality and the dye was sensitive to alkalinity and temperature, and the resulting hues ranged from orange-red to dull russet.



Left to right, field service tunic or Number 2 dress, patrol service tunic or Number 1 dress, ceremonial dress – Brigade of Guards



Musketeer
Footguards
1705

This was unacceptable to the wealthy nobility who sought brilliant scarlet and crimson. Further, it was unacceptable to the military, which wanted its officers dressed in nothing less than fashionable – and uniform – scarlet. Searching for an answer, the dyers looked to cochineal, which was available in the great marketplaces of Mexico.

Mexico at that time was owned by Spain, which jealously guarded its resource of cochineal. Moreover, Spain enveloped cochineal in a veil of mystery and secrecy such that it was not known whether the dyestuff was animal, vegetable, or mineral in origin. The answer: cochineal is an insect one-third the size of a ladybug. Six would fit along the length of a paperclip. The female cochineal produces carminic acid, which protects her from natural predators such as ants. Another property of carminic acid is its red dye. Pinch a female cochineal and blood-red dye pours out. The insect feeds on a cactus commonly known as nopal or prickly pear and is susceptible to frost, sustained heat wave, rain and high humidity. Thus, attempts to cultivate the insect in other climes were largely unsuccessful. In Mexico, processing the harvest was tedious – it took as many as 70,000 insects to make one pound of dye. Because of its rarity, it was highly prized and a symbol of royal status.

It was not until the 19th century that synthetic dyes came to replace cochineal. Thus it became cost-effective in 1872 to clothe the entire army, regardless of rank, in scarlet.



The Red Box of Nigel Birch
(author's collection)

Rank was still differentiated, however, by the quality of the uniform's cloth. Officers' tunics were of 'superfine cloth,' NCOs wore 'First Quality' tunics and enlisted men wore coarser broadcloth tunics.

The period after World War I might be referred to as 'The Twilight of the Full Dress.' Khaki was the standard colour; full dress scarlet was abolished. This was modified at the Coronation of George VI in 1937, when an all-blue walking-out patrol dress was introduced to complement

SUGGESTED READING

A Perfect Red by Amy Butler Greenfield

British Military Uniforms by W.Y. Carman

The Thin Red Line by D.S.V. & B.K. Fosten

A special thank-you to sculptor/painter Ken Osen for his valued information



The Royal Family during the Second World War. Note the boxes on the King's right.

the grand occasion. This was further refined in 1947, when a Special Army Order gave it the name 'No. 1 Dress.' Exception was made for the five regiments of Foot Guards who continue to wear scarlet tunics on ceremonial occasions.

As the renowned military author W.Y. Carman put it, "the traditionalist must wait and hope for the day when the centuries-old red coat receives its reprieve from the unknown dictators of fashion." ■

RED REGALIA – MORE ON THE COLOUR RED

A prime example of the association of the colour red with the Royal Establishment is the 'Red Box.' The Red Box owes its origin to Lord Cornwallis (1800), but came into prominence during William Gladstone's tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1859 – 1866). The wooden box (11" x 16"), lined in black and covered in scarlet leather, was traditionally used to carry the Budget speech from Number 11 Downing Street to the House of Commons.

The symbolism of the Red Box as a conveyance for important papers spread to the point that papers of all the ministries of the UK government are transported in 'Red Boxes.' Moreover, it is in a Red Box that, nightly, the Queen receives significant Cabinet papers and selected correspondence from her Private Secretary. Even when traveling outside the United Kingdom, the boxes go by Queen's Messenger in the diplomatic bag. The phrase 'doing the boxes' reflects the daily obligation of the Crown and Ministries to keep informed.

SOURCES

- House of Commons Library, London
- House of Lords Record Office, London
- The Royal Archives, Windsor Castle
- The National Archives, Kew Richmond Surrey

Jim Hillestad operates under the name "The Toy Soldier." His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227 or visit his website at www.the-toy-soldier.com

Grenadier Guards Colour Party

