



Devon Family History Society  
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Devon Record Office



**DEVON RECORD OFFICE**

## **EAST INDIA COMPANY - SOLDIERS ENLISTED**

**1789-1793**

**DRO Reference – ECA Misc Box 2**

**DFHS Book Reference - D093**

The British East India Company was founded at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by merchants who were trying to establish trade links in the east, where Portugal already had a strong hold. In 1600, Queen Elizabeth granted the Company a charter which gave it the monopoly on British trade with India and the Far East. The Company grew during the 17<sup>th</sup> century and King Charles II gave it the right to use military force to protect its interests overseas. It used this power to establish fortified trading posts throughout India and to defend its trading ships against pirates. The Company commissioned fast sailing ships known as East Indiamen, which were merchant vessels armed like warships, and manned them with the best sailors and gunners by paying them more than servicemen in the Royal Navy. The ships carried goods produced in Britain and traded them for tea, coffee, spices, cotton and silk.

In 1659, the Company acquired St Helena, which was used as a victualling point for ships voyaging to India and as a meeting place for ships on the journey home, so that they could travel in convoy across the Atlantic. There was a military garrison on the island from 1672.

In 1858, during the Indian Mutiny, the Government of India Act was passed which transferred the administration of the British possessions in India and the East to the Crown and soldiers in the East India Company Armies were given the choice of transfer to the British Army or discharge without pension but with a bounty.

Many of the infantry troops in the East India Company army were for native and Anglo-Indian soldiers. However, the Company did recruit in Britain just as the regular army did. Recruits had to be aged 19 or more, meet the minimum height requirement, and they had to swear that they were not apprentices or deserters from the army, navy or militia.

These attestation papers record the names of men who signed up to serve for five years with the United East India Company on St Helena or in any other of the Company's settlements in the East Indies. The forms were completed between 1789 and 1793. There is a separate form for each man, which records his name, place of birth, height in feet and inches and the place where he signed up. The men were all engaged in Devon, mostly in Exeter, but they were not all Devonians. Of the 150 attestations in this period, 56 men were from Exeter and Devon, 61 were from other English counties, including London, 28 were from Ireland, 4 from Scotland and 1

from Wales. No matter where in Devon the men were engaged, all the attestations were made before, and countersigned by, the mayor of Exeter, and this, presumably, is how the papers come to have survived accidentally among the city archives instead of being taken by the recruiting serjeant and filed with other army records.

Other records of soldiers in the East India Company's army can be found among the India Office records in The National Archives.