

Major General Thomas Colby 1774 - 1852

Thomas Colby was the consummate military surveyor. He improved professional standards, devised new equipment and techniques, and developed innovative training methods. However, he is best remembered for the Survey of Ireland and the raising of 13, 14 and 16 Survey Companies. These three units still exist today as 13, 14 and 16 Geographic Squadrons.



Thomas Colby was born in Rochester on 1st September 1784. He entered the Royal Military Academy, was commissioned into the Royal Engineers on 21st December 1801, and in January 1802 he became the first Royal Engineer officer to be posted to 'The Ordnance Survey'.

He trained under Robert Dawson and even though severely wounded; he lost his left hand and fractured his skull in a pistol accident, he became an outstanding student.

Colby quickly rose to be assistant to William Mudge, the Director of the Ordnance Survey, taking on ever-increasing responsibility for the Survey as Mudge was also responsible for the training of officers.

He was noted for his incredible energy and strong constitution. A typical example was in 1819 when, during a recce to find suitable peaks for trigonometric survey points in Scotland, he walked 513 miles in mountainous terrain in 22 days. On one of those days his party trekked 39 miles.

In 1820, at the tender age of 36 years, he succeeded Major General Mudge as Director of the Ordnance Survey. On appointment he was a captain on a salary of £500 per annum.

His first task, as Director, was to identify and rectify the slovenly work produced over a period of years by civilian contractors who had been paid on a 'piece work' basis. This experience was to convince him of the desirability of employing military personnel on survey work.

- He is particularly renowned for the Survey of Ireland (1825-1838) and the innovations that arose from it:
- Through his initiative the 13th, 14th and 16th Survey Companies were formed to carry out the survey.
- He designed 'Compensation Bars' to more accurately measure the Lough Foyle baseline on which the survey was based.
- He devised the 'System' of work whereby each person did a specific function and passed the work onto another, e.g., one soldier measured a distance with a chain, another plotted the measurement and a third fair-drew the symbol and so on.
- Training was formalised by detailing the 'System' in a manual known as "The Colonel's Blue Book".

He retired, at the rank of Major General, in 1846 as the last map sheet in the Irish Survey was published. For the previous five years, in order to keep down expenditure but maintain the high standards of the Irish Survey, he had not drawn his salary. When he later applied for the arrears they were refused and never paid.

Col Pasley was a friend and together they were instrumental in the merging of the soldier corps (The Royal Sappers and Miners) with the officers (Corps of Engineer), to form the Corps of Royal Engineers. However, this was not officially sanctioned until 1856, four years after Colby's death.

He was a founder member of the Royal Geographical Society and a leading member of many other scientific bodies.

Colby died peacefully at his home in New Brighton on 2nd October 1852.