William Turner – the Kildwick Tiger-man

William Turner was born in Glusburn, in 1771, and was baptised at St. Andrew's church the following year.

As a young adult, certainly before 1790, he joined the private army of the British East India Company and it is probable that later, as the Crown started to take control of the army, he transferred to the 33rd (Yorkshire West Riding) Regiment of Foot, led by Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington.

It is certain that he was part of the British forces that participated in the Siege of Seringapatam that took place in 1799. This was one of a number of unedifying actions by which the East India Company brought sizeable parts of India under British control. This action ended the Fourth Anglo-Mysore war, and resulted in the defeat and death of the ruler of Mysore, Sultan Tipu – known as the Tyger of Mysore.

Turner left the army shortly after and started a grocery business in Kildwick. In 1802 he married a local woman, Margaret Barker. The St. Andrew's register records her as being a minor and it is likely that she was only 16; he was over 30.

By this time, details of Turner's time in India were becoming known; particularly the incident that had given him his nick-name of "Tiger". The story of Turner's encounter with a tiger first appeared in print in a monthly magazine called the National Register, in August 1808.

The following singular act of heroism has been communicated to us as a fact, on the authenticity of which our readers may rely:—While Mr. Turner, now resident at Kildwick in the West Riding of Yorkshire, was in India, in the Company's service, he and five of his comrades in arms, when tracing one of the extensive wilds in that country, were menaced with an attack from a Royal Bengal Tyger. The animal was making towards them with full speed, and his companions, intimidated by the ferocious aspect of the enemy, sought their safety in flight, and in order to disencumber themselves from every thing that might retard their escape, left their muskets on the field. In the midst of this general panic, Mr. Turner stood undismayed, and before the animal reached him, had discharged his musket and lodged several shots in his body. Rendered furious by the torture, the tyger now came to close quarters, when the intrepid soldier received him with a fixed bayonet, which by some accident came from the muzzle of the firelock, and lodged in the animal's body. The tyger's eyes flashed fire and making a second spring at his adversary, seized him by the loins, and had it not been for his cartouch box and side arms, which broke the force of the ravenous gripe, certain death must have ensued. In this dreadful dilemma, vibrating as it were betwixt life and death, Mr. Turner had the good fortune to fix his hands in one of the wounds of his furious assailant, and by a preternatural effort of strength derived from his perilous situation, tore open the wound and laid his enemy lifeless at his feet. From this daring and heroic action he obtained the name of the Man-tyger, and the East India Company settled a pension for life.

In 1837 a fuller account of the incident appeared in Rev. William Tyler's book "Natural History of Beasts, Birds and Fishes". This account is much less lurid and is clearly taken directly from Turner himself; nevertheless, it does have a certain "Boys' Own" adventure feel to it.

The full account is given on the following pages.

There is now living in the village of Kildwick, in Craven, Yorkshire, a Mr. Turner, who, at an early period of his life, was in the East Indies, as a soldier in one of the regiments stationed there. When encamped at Ganjam, on the Malabar coast, he had a dreadful personal conflict with a huge tiger. With the particulars of the affray, Mr. Turner himself has obligingly furnished us for this work. He is, probably, the only living instance of an individual encountering a tiger, under such circumstances, and remaining, as he certainly did do, by the retreat of the enemy, master of the field.

On the day the regiment arrived at Ganjam, two men belonging to it, named Bateman and Murray, had gone upon a contiguous mountain without firearms, and had been put into considerable consternation by a large black bear. The next morning they invited Mr. Turner to accompany them to the same place; and took with them two muskets and bayonets, with six rounds of ammunition, as a prudential defence against the dangers they might probably encounter. Having ascended the summit of the mountain, Mr. Turner perceived a small, loose rock, upon the edge of a lofty precipice, and tumbled it down, for the purpose of disturbing, from their lurking places, the wild and savage tenantry of the place. The result was immediately seen; for one of the party shouted out "a tiger! a tiger!" and fired upon it, when they all immediately recognised a large royal tiger, that turned his eyes upon his enemies, and paralyzed them with a dreadful roar, as he doubled the angle of the mountain, in proceeding to his lair. This, unfortunately, lay directly upon the path by which they had as-

ended the mountain; and being the only safe road by which they could descend the eminence, the tiger's position cut off their retreat. Recovering a little from their consternation, Bateman and Murray proposed to attempt their escape in another direction; while Turner, more courageous, was for facing the foe, and offered to fire upon the tiger if his companions would load their pieces. Mr. Turner had barely secured a favourable position for the attack, as his eye met that of the tiger, who, with an amazing bound and dreadful roar, sprang up the cliff to meet him. The assailant fired, and the tiger fell, tumbling down the rock he had ascended with so much agility; but, recovering himself, the monster made a second spring, with a roar of agonized fury, when he received Mr. Turner's second ball, which tumbled him again backwards. Thrice again the tiger returned to the charge, more infuriated from the effects of each successive shot; when Mr. Turner's companions called out, that the ammunition was expended, and advised their escape by the back of the mountain. Against this he remonstrated, from his own perilous position, and urged them to stand by him, but they were deaf to all remonstrance, and disgracefully left him to the fury of the tiger, whose near approach was announced by a roar more terrific than any he had previously uttered. Mr. Turner had but a moment to place himself in a posture of defence, when the infuriated animal sprung at him, and received the bayonet into his chest, up to the muzzle of the musket. In the attempt to disengage the bayonet from the tiger's chest, however, it unfortunately became separated from the musket, which Mr. Turner instantly clubbed, and with every energy that fear and courage could supply, he struck the

tiger with such force as slightly to fracture his skull, whilst the firelock was broken, by the blow, into three pieces.

Up to that moment, the hardy soldier had not received a single scratch, though he had inflicted many severe wounds upon his adversary; but his present position was the extreme of peril, being unarmed and completely defenceless before an enraged tiger, whose wounds appeared to make him the more dreadfully infuriate. The tiger sprung at the head of his victim, and immediately brought him to the ground, and, seizing Mr. Turner by the right shoulder, he lifted him from the ground with a furious shake, tearing his body, across the loins, from side to side. In a very short period thirty-three wounds were inflicted upon the body of Mr. Turner, whilst his garments, which were a sort of undress of light calico, were torn to shreds and drenched in blood; indeed, all that remained of his dress upon the mangled body, were the waistband of the pantaloons and the collar of his shirt. Though thus dreadfully mutilated, shaken, and torn, by the savage beast, Mr. Turner had the presence of mind to fix his grasp in a wound, which one of the musket balls had made in the neck of the tiger, and tore out a quantity of ragged flesh from the interior of the wound. From the pain thus inflicted upon the tiger, he uttered a tremendous roar, which was distinctly heard into the camp, a mile distant, and then took his departure.

For some moments, Mr. Turner lay upon the rock insensible; but a voice from two Europeans, exclaiming, "Turner's killed!" roused him, and, jumping up on his feet, he cried out, "I'm worth twenty dead men yet!" Being taken into the camp, his wounds were carefully examined and

dressed; and happily pronounced not mortal. The result justified the decision; for, by careful treatment, Mr. Turner so far recovered as to be able to re-visit the scene of the battle, in about a month from the period when it took place. The dead body of the tiger was found, the morning after the affray, upon the bank of a small rivulet, whither he had gone to quench his thirst. Mr. Turner very naturally observes, that the recollection of this perilous conflict, though more than thirty years have now rolled over since its occurrence, is still frequently attended with mingled emotions of wonder and terror.

… and perhaps just a touch of over exaggeration ?

The story must have impressed Rev. Tyler, as he included an engraving of the encounter as a frontispiece to his book.



William Turner lived the rest of his life in Kildwick.

- He appears in the 1841 census as a Grocer.
- In the 1847 tithe commutation document he is recorded as living in a house on the west side of Kildwick Main Street (presumably this was where he ran the grocery shop), and the tenant 15 acres of farm land owned by the Lady of the Manor, Frances Mary Richardson Currer.
- By the time of the 1851 census he had retired and was living on his pension from the East India Company. The grocery business and farm had been taken over by his son.

William Turned, the Kildwick tiger-man, died on August 31st 1856 and was buried in the graveyard of St Andrew's church.

The following gravestone was photographed some years ago, probably in the late 1950s. It has since disappeared - removed or overgrown.



The full inscription reads:

IN MEMORY OF
Margaret Wife of
William Turner of Kildwick, and
Daughter of Thomas and Sarah Barker
of the same place, who died October 7th
1842, aged 57 years.
ALSO of the above-named
WILLIAM TURNER,
who died August 31st 1856, aged 86 Years.

Engaged in the Service of his Country as an
ARTILLERYMAN
at the Siege and Capture of
SERINGAPATAM E.I.
He survived that Event
Upwards of half a Century.