



TAKING THE KING'S SHILLING

A shilling whose acceptance by a recruit from a recruiting officer constituted until 1879 a binding enlistment in the British army —used when the British monarch is a king



A shilling of George III, King of Great Britain and of Ireland from 25 October 1760 until the union of the two kingdoms on 1 January 1801, after which he was King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland until his death in 1820.

The King's shilling, sometimes called the Queen's shilling when the Sovereign is female,[1] is a historical slang term referring to the earnest payment of one shilling given to recruits to the Armed forces of the United Kingdom in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, although the practice dates back to the end of the English Civil War.[2][3] To "take the King's shilling" was to agree to serve as a sailor or soldier in the Royal Navy or the British Army.[3] It is closely related to the act of impressment.[4] The practice officially stopped in 1879, although the term is still used informally and there are some cases of it being used still in the early 20th century, albeit largely symbolically.[5][6]

"He's taken the king's shilling..."

British Army

A recruit was still entitled to return the shilling until becoming subject to military law upon formal attestation before a Justice of the Peace. [3][7] At this point, a more substantial bounty was paid to the new recruit, which fluctuated from two guineas to a high of £23/17/6d in 1812. [5][8][9] However, this payment generally was quickly lost to various duties and dues, such as uniform. The monetary amount of this bounty, which might be equivalent to half a year's wages for the average unskilled worker, [9] was enough to persuade most potential recruits to join. [7] Those who hesitated were often won over by making them intoxicated with strong drink. [7] The bounty was lucrative enough for some to repeatedly desert, then re-enlist. One man was hanged in 1787 for 47 repeat offences. [5]

In the 18th century, a shilling was 1/20th of an English Pound, which contained 240 pence (pennies). This was enough at the time to pay for either 1/2 week's rent for a furnished room, 6 pints of beer, or a nice roast beef dinner. [13]



The pay for a private in the English Army was originally one shilling a day. [10] A soldier was expected to pay for food and clothing out of their wages after using the initial sign-up bounty to purchase their initial equipment. It was not until 1847 that a limit was placed on deductions, ensuring that each soldier was paid at least one penny (a twelfth of a shilling) a day, after deductions. [3]

Novel incentives were sometimes used to persuade soldiers to enlist in the army. Jane Gordon, Duchess of Gordon was known to tour Scotland with a shilling in her lips for anyone wishing to join up to take. [5][11]

The 1914 song "I'll Make a Man of You" posits a "new recruiting scheme" in which the female singer states: "On Saturday I'm willing, if you'll only take the shilling, to make a man of any one of you." [12]

References

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