

John Le Marchant! Army genius.

9 February 1766 - 22 July 1812

The year 2022 marked 210 years since the death of Major General Gaspard John Le Marchant. The Major gained military distinction in a number of ways and was linked to Guernsey through his Father, also John Le Marchant. Fort Le Marchant is named after the family and the island celebrated his contribution to the army by organising a 13 gun salute in his honour on July 22nd in 2022, after his death at the Battle of Salamanca.

The gun salute was fired at noon and afterwards ex Constable, Dennis Le Moignan read a dedication to Le Marchant to tell the full story of his life and achievements.

The Le Marchants were an extremely distinguished family in Guernsey, formerly part of the Duchy of Normandy, with many of his ancestors holding the positions of Bailiff or Lieutenant-Bailiff of Guernsey. Le Marchant was born at his maternal grandfather's house in Amiens, Capital of the Somme, as it was fairly common for Ladies to return home for a birth in those days.



He went to school in Bath and was characterised as "one of the two greatest dunces that had ever been there."

Le Marchant, however reformed his character, pulled his socks up, and was commissioned in a regiment of the Wiltshire Militia.

In 1783 he transferred to the regular army where he was responsible for a considerable improvement in the practical abilities of the British army on campaign. He also introduced the idea that officers should be formally trained in their duties rather than having to pick up the rudiments of their profession on active service.

He married, on 29 October 1789, Mary, daughter of John Carey of Guernsey. All accounts suggest that Le Marchant was a devoted husband and father,



Mary Le Marchant died in childbirth in 1811. Le Marchant had four sons and six daughters. The children were left orphans at the death of their father and a yearly public pension of £1200 was awarded to them. The younger children were placed in the care of an aunt.

In 1795-6 he had designed, in collaboration with the Birmingham sword cutler Henry Osborn, a new cavalry sabre, which was adopted for the light cavalry. In 1796 his recommendation of instruction in mounted swordsmanship was adopted by the army as part of its official regulations. The sword exercise became quite celebrated and the elderly king, George III, became familiar with it, and country lanes abounded with small boys practising the cuts with sticks. Le Marchant toured Britain teaching his system of swordsmanship; his methods were practical and painstaking and he was himself a superb mounted swordsman.

Le Marchant attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel in 1797. His promotion was at the direct behest of the King with whom Le Marchant had developed a friendly relationship.

With the exception of the specialist instruction school for artillery and engineer officers at Woolwich no institution for the education of military officers existed in Britain. In 1801, after overcoming considerable opposition on the grounds of cost, Le Marchant's scheme for establishing the High Wycombe and Great Marlow schools for the military instruction of officers was sanctioned by

Parliament, and a grant of £30,000 was voted for the foundation of a Royal Military College, the two original departments being afterwards combined and removed to a purpose-built Royal Military College at Sandhurst created in 1947.

Le Marchant was the first lieutenant-governor of the college, and during the nine years that he held this appointment he trained many officers who served with distinction under Wellington in the Peninsular War.

In 1804 Le Marchant received the personal thanks of King George III, who said "The country is greatly indebted to you".

Le Marchant was liked and admired by many in his profession, soldier and officer alike. The Duke of York, the commander-in-chief of the British Army, is said to have wept when he was told of Le Marchant's death. The Duke of York may have felt a certain amount of guilt as it was he who insisted that as a major-general Le Marchant was too senior to continue as lieutenant-governor of the Military College. York was also instrumental in having Le Marchant appointed to the command of a cavalry brigade on active service.

He gained his greatest success as a cavalry commander at the Battle of Salamanca on 22 July 1812, where he was killed.

Le Marchant, knowing he had achieved a magnificent success, was leading a squadron against the last of the formed French infantry when he was shot and his spine broken.

Wellington's dispatch after the battle stated: "the cavalry under Lieutenant-General Sir Stapleton Cotton made a most gallant and successful charge against a body of the enemy's infantry, which they overthrew and cut to pieces. In this charge Major-General Le Marchant was killed at the head of his brigade, and I have to lament the loss of a most able officer".

John Le Marchant was buried on the field of battle. A monument to his memory was erected in St Paul's Cathedral, London in 1816.

Diane Mitchell, Douzenier, St Peter Port.

Photos attributed to Wikipedia