

Quirky to its Corps

Miranda Clow worked with David Churchill on an AHRC-funded project, 'Security for Sale in Modern Britain: Security Provision, Ensembles and Cultures, 1785-1995'. One of the external partner organisations on this project was Corps Security, a security company founded in the 1850s as the Corps of Commissionaires. As part of the project, Miranda worked on the history and heritage of Corps Security, and (with David) produced a report for the company on the value and significance of its corporate heritage. In this blog, Miranda details her experience of and reflections on this work.

How do you make a group of people trustworthy?

Captain Edward Walter believed he held the answer.

In 1859 he founded an organisation which aimed to match the soldiers returning from the Crimean War to businesses in need of men to carry messages and valuables around London and to perform guarding roles in the metropolis. The Corps of Commissionaires was born. Two observations underpinned it: with a reputation for drunkenness and disorder, ex-servicemen struggled to find employment, leading to further social problems. Meanwhile, the burgeoning banks, offices and storehouses in the City of London were crying out for a pool of reliable men to hire for tasks whose menial nature belied their importance.

Edward Walter's answer combined an employment agency with a membership organisation, in the form of a trust. He endowed the Corps of Commissionaires with a strong organisational identity. A uniform, a coat of arms, a flag, badges, parades and musical performances were wrapped around high expectations of members' deportment and behaviour, as set out in the organisation's exhaustive lists of 'Rules and Regulations'. Persistent breaches were not tolerated. As a result, prospective employers held the men – styled 'Commissionaires' – in high repute. The trouble was that the organisation struggled to admit and retain men who could live up to its exacting standards. Demand for its services always outstripped supply. Walter's scheme for trustworthiness undercut itself.

I delved into this once-iconic organisation as part of a research project on the history of security and the security industry in modern Britain. For Walter's observation of the employment opportunities in London made the Corps of Commissionaires the first known provider of commercial guarding services in this country. I learnt about a curious hybrid enterprise – one designed to serve the worthy cause of ex-servicemen, but only on the uncompromising terms of its purposeful founder. It was led for fifty years by Walter, and then by members of his family. During that time, it stuck to its Victorian mould, while the world changed drastically around it.

All the more unusual for an idiosyncratic Victorian organisation, the Corps of Commissionaires lasts to this day, making it the oldest private guarding company

in Britain. Its descendant, Corps Security, is a modern, commercial security company. It abandoned the membership structure in the 1980s, but it remains a trust; with no shareholders, a portion of the profits goes to military charities. In recent years, Corps Security has rediscovered its past and invested considerable time and money into looking after (and digging into) its extensive corporate archive. With the archive only recently fully catalogued, my task was to survey its use and value to researchers, and the Corps' place in history generally.

The driver of Corps Security's journey into its past has been Diz Sollesse, the company's Executive Assistant and Archive Custodian. Diz is a beacon for raising the profile of heritage in the security industry – an industry that does not generally make enough of its past. She has built a strong relationship with the London Metropolitan Archives (where most of the Corps' records are held), supported academic research (including a PhD project undertaken at Leeds by Nick Bailey), participated in heritage days at Brookwood Cemetery (where the Corps keeps a plot), and shared information with descendants of Commissionaires. Diz is motivated by curiosity in the company's past, in the names that fill its log books, and in the artefacts, documents and newspaper cuttings it has left behind. She wants to see the Corps assume its place in social, military and security history. Her endeavours will help shape Corps Security's identity today, setting it apart from its competitors and strengthening relationships inside and outside the business.

Due to Edward Walter's far-sighted financial acumen, the Corps of Commissionaires once owned property dotted around central London. These days Corps Security is housed in an unassuming building on the charming Cowcross Street off Smithfield. There I met Captain Walter, who keeps watch in the hallowed boardroom with a Corps uniform, a cabinet of silver and old photographs for company. I also met other enthusiasts for the Corps' heritage, including one of the Corps' 'full-shout' Commissionaires who, on request, wears the old uniform at special functions, and carries with him a stash of stories of his guarding prowess. Stored not far away at the London Metropolitan Archives, Corps' records are rich in material on Walter's principles and the everyday administration of the organisation. The archive is refreshing in that speaks for those who breached the rules – by drunkenness or uniform infringement – as much as for those who were rewarded for their excellent work – for wrestling thieves and rescuing people.

The Corps of Commissionaires was pioneering in fostering a close association between military service and careers in private security. It also made a cultural impact disproportionate to its modest size – some 30,000 members passed through its rolls in total. The Corps uniform and the reputation for professionalism that accompanied it for many decades made the Commissionaire a recognised figure in British culture. They featured in literature and film, and they were hired for prestige security jobs. They were well known for fronting cinemas, such that 'commissionaire' became a generic term for a uniformed (cinema) door attendant. The old soldier had a new image. The Corps of Commissionaires could not solve the problem of unreliable staff nor that of

vulnerable military veterans. But it left its mark on how we consider those matters to this day.