

Lindow Moss and the Wilmslow Rifle Volunteers



“Form, Form, Riflemen Form

Ready be ready against the Storm

Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form! “

Tennyson.

Introduction

There are stories and myths surrounding the Lindow Landscape and these include a Crimean War era rifle range and rifle volunteers. This article has been prepared to look into the stories and produce a historical account which can inform possible interpretation for Wilmslow Town Council's Lindow Partnership Project and inform future Wilmslow Historical Society Town History Tours. If you have any information or evidence about Wilmslow's volunteers, then please contact the Wilmslow Historical Society via wilmslowhistoricalsociety@gmail.com or 01625 536909.

This is not to say the myths are not interesting in themselves including veterans from war (but not the Crimean) returning from some conflict with disease and taking up residence in the on the range butts and living separately from the Wilmslow Community.

Tennyson's full poem is included in Appendix 3,

Thank you

Cllr Jon Kelly.

Crimean War

The Crimean War 1854-56 was fought between an alliance of Britain, France and Turkey against Russia. It was symbolised by military and logistical incompetence alongside bravery and the endurance of its soldiers. Poor medical care and conditions lead to scandal and the work by Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole to improve things.

After the Crimean War, with fears of a French invasion, the Volunteer Force was established as a citizen army of part-time rifle, artillery and engineer corps, created as a popular movement throughout the British Empire and formalised in 1859. This included a Government bill to arm the volunteers with an issue of 25 Enfield rifles per 100 volunteers on condition that the corps provide a secure armoury, a safe range, adopt approved rules and be subject to military inspection.

The rifle corp in East Cheshire was raised in 1859. In Chester there is a printed report and poster for a public meeting on 28 November 1859 and a newspaper account of a meeting of members of the Chester Volunteer Rifle Corps for the adoption of rules and regulations.

In Wilmslow and Alderley Edge, the 27th Company of Wilmslow was formed by Captain Edward Hyde Greg (of Styal Mill) on the 5th March 1860 as part of the 5th Administrative Battalion of the 22nd Cheshire Regiment of foot (please see appendix 2). Captain Hyde's notebook from 1861 to 1866 including muster lists with names survives in the National Trust Quarry Bank Archive.

Although the non-military business of the volunteer corps was conducted by a committee of members, these corps were subject to the overall supervision of the War Office in London and the local Lord Lieutenant. The emphasis was on locally raised units and encouraged the social side of things with dances, shooting competitions and other events all adding to

the camaraderie and cohesion of the units. By December 1884 the unit had 100 Volunteers.

Among the conditions attached to the formation of these Corps were:

‘That a corps be formed under officers bearing the commission of the Lord Lieutenant and that its formation be recommended by him: that its members undertake to provide their own arms and equipment and to defray all expenses attending to the Corps except in the event of it being assembled for actual service.’

‘The uniform and equipment may be settled by the members, subject to the Lord Lieutenant’s approval, but arms though provided at the expense of members must be furnished under the superintendence of the War Department in order to secure a uniformity of gauge’

In 1871 Macclesfield Drill Hall opened as the headquarters of the 8th Cheshire Rifle Volunteers. In 1881 the regular Cheshire Regiment had formed from the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment of Foot integrating two militia battalions and the five Volunteer (administrative) battalions. In 1883 the volunteers evolved to become the 5th Volunteer Battalion, the Cheshire Regiment in 1883. Captain Greg had served as 27th Company officer in charge until resigning his commission in January 1881 continuing as 5th Battalion President of the Mess Committee.

The local attitudes to the corps and other competing distractions are wonderfully illustrated in a letter to the Volunteer Service Gazette of 20 November 1875, whereby:

“the sons of the well to do look down on us with something akin to pity if not contempt... a feeling which is universal.”

(The full article is reproduced in Appendix 1.)

Drills and Camps

Regular practice produced marksmen and sharpshooters. There were regular shooting competitions between companies. Indeed Captain Greg had won a competition in 1860 at Altcar shooting over 800, 900 and 1000 yards. The magnificent trophy he won became known as the Greg Cup and is in the Cheshire Regiment Museum in Chester.



photo by kind permission of the Cheshire Military Museum Chester.

There is a report from the Wilmslow Advertiser of a local shooting match against 19th Cheshire Corp of Stockport over 200, 400 and 500 yards dated 14th October 1865.

The Corps attended Battalion Drills, Field Days, shooting competitions and there was an annual camp at Somerford Park midway between Congleton and Holmes Chapel in Cheshire. An 1872 report of one "Annual Drill and Sham Fight" said:

"This was the last of these parades; they were a source of great inconvenience and vast expense, and the benefit derived from them was very trifling. In addition to a heavy charge for railway fares, the men's rations cost from £40 to £50; and for this, two hours' hurried drill was obtained."

The 1878 Battalion annual shooting competition comprised seven Shots each, at 200, 500, and 600 yards.

"Snider Rifles only. Government pattern, and regularly used on parade, are allowed. Minimum pull of 6 lbs. Each man to provide his own Government Ammunition."

Volunteers could shoot for the annual Battalion Challenge Cup which if the same Volunteer won for two consecutive years, or three times altogether, it became his private property. The Sergeant-Instructors' Match carried a first Prize, £3 given by Lieut.-Colonel Sir Charles Shakerley, Bart and the Second prize was £2 from the Battalion Fund.

An officers' Match for the Gold Challenge Medal, presented by Sir Charles Shakerley, took place at Crewe, on Saturday, September 28th, 1878, at 3-45 p.m.

"All Officers of the Battalion are invited to compete. Seven Shots each, at 400, 500, and 600 yards, Officers to provide their own Ammunition, any position allowed (prone, kneeling or standing)."

The Range at Lindow

Part V of the Volunteer Act 1863 dealt with the process of acquiring land for shooting ranges. Apart from the corps taking ownership of the land, a municipal corporation or private company could grant a licence to the volunteers to use their land for the purpose. Justices of the peace were given the power to close rights of way adjacent to ranges.

Lindow rifle range was established at a cost of £200 for the volunteers and by 1872 it appears on the Crown Ordnance Survey Map - but local deeds which show it suggest that at Lindow, the land remains as private land, in this case belonging to the Earl of Stamford.

There was a double range of 500 yards and another of 1000 yds both backed by double facing butts with mantles (bullet proof shelters or screens) and a tower accessed from Battery Lane. The butt was an earth bank behind the targets made of sand and turf thirty feet high and seventy feet long to stop the bullets.





On the larger scale map Moor Lane runs across the bottom and Battery Lane (now Rotherwood Road) runs from it towards the top and off to the mid-left.

Generally, all ranges used iron targets for military musketry training and classification shooting. These were originally supplied from Woolwich military foundries. Iron target plates were 6ft tall and 2 ft wide with a pre- cast or incised grid of 6in

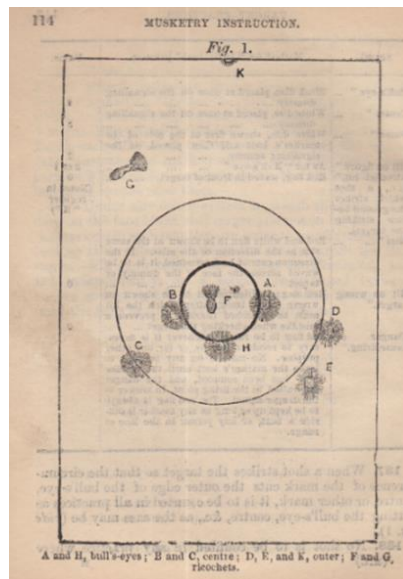
squares and concentric circles to mark out the scoring rings and bull's eye. The targets were usually standing in an almost vertical position on a stone platform, intended to prevent them from sinking into the ground. They were held up in that position by support rods, resembling pitchforks, which were simply hooked into the back of a target and rammed into the ground. Each single plate weighed between 150-250 kg and accidentally falling targets caused many injuries and deaths among markers and civilians.

The marker would whitewash the whole target, and paint the bull's eye and scoring rings only in black. The effect of a bullet hitting the target was visible, as the lead bullet, while disintegrating into splinters or splash, would leave a distinct grey lead smudge on the target.

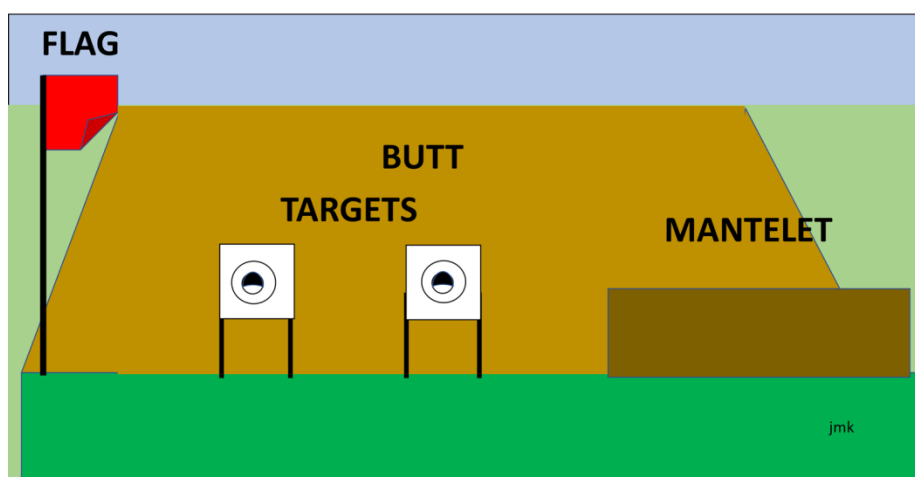
Here are original targets surviving in a remote location on Blea Moss, Great Langdale and a 'stylised' target face with such smudge marks, as illustrated in the 1887 Musketry Regulations.



.Photograph and diagram kindly provided by Bill Flentje



The soldiers tending the targets sheltered behind the mantelets during firing. Accounts report an armoury being located on the ground with a person in charge (possibly near the 400 yard firing point on the map above), a sergeant instructor attending daily during the shooting season. At that time Lindow Moss was clear of trees and there were long views right across. Soldiers in the butts would communicate to the firing points by flags. At another volunteer range at Altcar the target was also a solid iron plate. A red flag flying from the flagpole showed firing is underway. In 1862 there were apparently ten two-foot targets on the North side and six six-foot by two foot presumably on the South side range.



Diagrammatic view of the butts.

The mantelet, designed to protect those at the target end of the range, was constructed of stone or iron (not wood) and often reinforced by an earth bank



A surviving metal mantelet from elsewhere.

Photograph kindly provided by Bill Flentje



A picture of a butts earth bank circa 1900.

The Southern 300 and 400 yard firing points seem to have had rectangular structures, possibly like the following photograph of dragoons firing somewhere on a Cheshire Bog in 1892.

Currently no structures appear to have survived on Lindow Moss. Present land levels in some areas have fallen and there has been dumping that has raised the level of the field on the land north of the butts.



This picture shows Cheshire Dragoons firing on Sealand range in west Cheshire in 1898. The Lindow ranges have similar rectangular firing points.

The next picture of 2nd Battalion Cheshire regulars musketry staff and a dog was taken at Valleta in Malta in 1858 and shows signal flags, telescopes, a home-made rifle rest and pots of glue for target patching, presumably paper targets were used there. The flags allowed safe communication from the butts to the firing point to allow for adjustment of sights and correction of aim.



Pictures by kind permission of the Cheshire Military Museum Chester.

The Uniforms.

A range of uniforms were worn by the different Cheshire companies. The Birkenhead company wore grey tunics, the Wilmslow Corps wore dark grey and others wore scarlet or dark blue. The hats also varied over time from the policeman helmet style, a bucket shaped shako, a cap or a Glengarry.

For the uniform in 1878 The 5th Battalion adopted a grey helmet for full-dress, fittings to be silver in place of bronze, and the Prince of Wales Plume was authorized to be worn in the centre of the plate.



Illustration of a Cheshire Rifle Volunteer from **“Redington’s New Twelves of Rifle Volunteer Corps”**, a coloured print of 12 different Rifle Volunteer figures. Published by J. Redington of London, c.1860.

The following pictures are of the 1st Cheshire Rifle volunteers from Birkenhead at a camp and lined up for a photo 1860. Most are wearing shakos of a type similar (though seemingly not the same) as the museum example below. Other companies had helmets.





Picture by kind permission of the Cheshire Military Museum Chester.

At the time of the Childers reforms of the army in 1881 the badge was the eight-pointed star with the Prince of Wales plumes. The headdress changed in 1898 the eight-point star remained but now with an acorn and two leaves instead of the feathers.



Shako of the 1st Cheshire RVC,



Helmet of the 2nd Cheshire RVC



A 22nd foot cap badge



A Cheshire Regiment cap badge 1898 to the end of WW1, acorn and two leaves

The Rifles

In the 19th Century military technology developed a pace. Prior to 1853 muskets only had an effective range of about 200 yards. In that year the Enfield rifle-musket was put into production and it saw extensive action in the Crimean War. It had a grooved barrel allowing the .577 inch bullet to spin making for greater accuracy and producing greater effective distance - but it needed longer practice ranges.



The 1853 Pattern Enfield rifle – note the three metal bands on the barrel

There are records of Cheshire Corps being equipped with Snider rifles in 1870 which the British Army had adopted in 1866 as a conversion system for its Pattern 1853 Enfield muzzle-loading rifles, and used until 1874 when the Martini–Henry rifle began to supersede it.

Regular service

Rifle volunteers were sufficiently motivated and enthused to volunteer for regular service. A report in 1878 reads;

“The critical state of affairs in the East at this time, and the probability of England being engaged in a great war, rendering it advisable to adopt every means of strengthening the hands of Her Majesty's Government, Sir Charles Shakerley offered the services of his Battalion. Over 600 Officers and men volunteered for service abroad, the 33rd Corps giving their names almost to a man, and the 8th Corps furnishing 263 out of 400 enrolled members.”

Boer War

Between 1899 and 1902, the British Army fought a bitter colonial war against the Boers in South Africa. After initial setbacks and a long period of guerrilla warfare, the British eventually prevailed but not without adopting controversial and internationally condemned tactics against the civilian population. The 2nd Battalion Cheshire Regiment fought in the Boer War sailing on the *Britannic* in January 1900 and forming part of 15th Brigade under General Wavell. 376 officers and men returned home in October 1902.



Inspection of the 2nd Cheshire Regiment Regulars at Johannesburg, 1900

Picture by kind permission of the Cheshire Military Museum Chester.

The Cheshire 3rd (Militia) battalion was also embodied for active duty in South Africa, with 450 men reported as returning home after the end of the war in September 1902.

War technology had moved on a pace in the 19th Century and as an example the Boer war troops used the .303 Lee-Metford Mark II Rifle still with black powder ammunition. This had replaced the Martini Henry rifle from 1888 with a rear locking bolt action and detachable magazine with a maximum range of 1,800 yards. Some years later it was itself replaced by the Lee-Enfield (Long Lee) .303 with smokeless powder ammunition.



The Lee-Metford mark 11 rifle, breech loading.



No bullets have been recently recovered from Lindow other than a single unused musket ball.

As calibres and shapes changed in this period of rapidly changing technology any would help with dating. Pictured from elsewhere are some examples. (From left to right), .577 Snider cartridge, a Zulu War-era rolled brass foil .577/450 Martini–Henry Cartridge, a later drawn brass .577/450 Martini–Henry cartridge and a .303 British Mk VII SAA Ball cartridge



The End of the Riflemen and the Range:

The Wilmslow Advertiser has correspondence in 1902 reporting Wilmslow Urban District Council moaning about the rifle range and the volunteers spending time in the public houses.

A petition was made to the War Office in 1902 on behalf of the riflemen. It claimed the Wilmslow company had a nominal establishment of 232 with two captains and 5 subalterns but an actual complement of 140. It claimed they had been unable to fire locally with the introduction of the new rifle since 1893. It said a new site had been found and called for the permission for a new 350 yards range and that the hope of a new range would prevent disbandment.

Across the country the introduction of the .303" cal magazine rifle with its jacketed bullets led to a new safety appraisal of existing rifle ranges and the rapid demise of iron target ranges. The new Lee Metford bullets were faster and flew further than the bullets of the previous Martini-Henry rifle, which had already caused some unease, as its bullets were harder than those of the even earlier Enfield and Snider bullets.

Jacketed bullets of .303" cal have a greater tendency to ricochet or to behave more erratically when hitting a hard stony or metal surface. It is generally thought Martini-Henry's muzzle velocity was c. 1300 feet per sec with bullet extreme reach of about 3000 yards and for Lee Metford its was 2200 ft per sec and 3700 yards. As the Wilmslow Volunteers did not receive the Lee Metford until the new 1898 season commenced in 1898 Bill Flentje has concluded that Lindow range possibly closed in about 1893 and that the immediate reason for its demise may be due to safety reasons.

An article in the Manchester Evening News of 17th June 1903 recorded "The Wilmslow Volunteer authorities have decided to adopt the new safety range patented by Colonel Ralston of

Glasgow and a convenient site has been acquired on Lindow Common. It is expected the new range will be ready for use early next year.” It is not clear it was ever built.

Rifle range technology evolved from the first butts to ranges with below ground machinery with raising frames for the targets and eventually to electronic ranges. No new range has been traced though there is a suggestion from a find of a metal shoulder flash from the South Lancashire Regiment based in Warrington that it was west of Rotherwood Road.



The Volunteer Rifle Corps became part of the new territorial army organised under the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907

.Another newspaper article of 26 August 1952 records;

“ Volunteer Relic Includes the sale of lands at Wilmslow last night was the site of the old rifle range butts on the common at Wilmslow.”

This brought to an end to an almost one hundred years association with the rifleman in Lindow.

Our Local Volunteer Connections:

Though the Cheshire Regiment did not serve in the Crimean War the Battle of Alma River is commemorated in the name Alma Cottage and Alma Lane in Wilmslow both built soon after the battle. The road across the Moss by the butts was named Battery Lane but is now called Rotherwood Road. On Moor Lane in the 19th Century a pub was built called the Rifleman Arms.



It was the centre of the local community until a new pub called the Rifleman's Arms was built next door in the 1920's.



The second Riflemans Arm survived until 2017 when in turn it was demolished and houses built on the site.

A new cul-de-sac called Riflemans Close is now on Moor Lane close by and provides a reminder of both the Wilmslow Rifle Volunteers and the pubs.



Conclusion and recommendations:

- The 27th Company of volunteer rifleman of Wilmslow and Alderley Edge were formed in 1860 and practised on the two ranges on Lindow Moss east of the current Rotherwood Road.
- Further research could be undertaken for instance for evidence of local public meetings, newspaper accounts and minutes of meeting of the 27th Company.
- Although a cursory initial search has not identified any structures above ground of the ranges it may be worth

undertaking searches for any traces of the ranges including metal detecting and archaeological investigation for fired bullets, the armoury and for a potential third range west of Rotherwood Road.

- The riflemen could provide interesting material for an interpretation board and for activities for the Lindow Landscape Partnership.
- 2024 is the 40th anniversary of the finding of Lindow Man and events are planned for Lindow. The Historical Society might consider participation in these for aspects including the Crimean War Rifle Range and other aspects and encourage our members to join in.

With many thanks to the Cheshire Military Museum Chester, Michael Gorman of the Historical Society, Bill Flentje for range technology, Peter and Julie for a site visit and for Ray Acton for their very kind assistance with this article.

Cllr Jon Kelly

Wilmslow Historical Society

15th March 2023.

Appendix 1

Extract from the Volunteer Service Gazette 20 November 1875

Capt. Towers, who commands the 27th Cheshire **Wilmslow** Rifles, has addressed the following letter to the **Wilmslow Advertiser** :—

Sir,—Permit me through the medium of your columns to make it more generally known than it seems to be at present, that there does not exist in the neighbourhood that sympathy with the great Volunteer movement which, as a thorough patriot, one could desire. It is true that a fair proportion of the upper classes subscribe to the funds of the local corps, but beyond this nothing very favourable can be said. The sons of the well-to-do look down upon us with something akin to pity, if not contempt, a feeling which, it is to be feared, is so general as to be almost universal. Out of a population of something like 12,000 there is the greatest difficulty in keeping the corps up to the required strength of 60. Why this is so I am at a loss to imagine.

I am quite aware that a great deal of misunderstanding prevails in the district, as to the requirements of members of the corps. Briefly these really are—every recruit must

be recommended by a member of the corps. If his character will bear investigation he is at once admitted into membership. He then goes through a series of preliminary drills, under the sergeant-instructor, which drills are given, both as to time and place, to suit his convenience. When duly certified he is transferred to the ranks. All that is then required of him is that he attend nine drills in the succeeding twelve months. In June each year the corps goes into camp for a week, in Sir Charles Shakerly's Park at Somerford. If the men can attend the whole week, all the better, if not, it is sufficient that they come in on the Thursday night and remain until Saturday. Whilst in camp the men are not only well-fed and cared for, but each receives 1s. 3d. daily, besides having all expenses paid. 25^{l.} are given every year in prizes, and every man who is regular at drill has a chance of carrying off a prize varying from 5^{l.} to 5s. There is also an annual shooting for good things at Christmas time, when every man takes a prize. Moreover, as an experiment this winter, a gymnastic-instructor is coming over every Wednesday night to teach the members of the corps

boxing, fencing, bayonet drill, and free gymnastics. It is hoped that by this means the men will have every week a pleasant evening's entertainment, which—if it serve no other purpose—will at least keep them out of the many temptations to drink and rowdyism by which, unfortunately, they are so thickly surrounded.

What I want, and intend to have, so long as I am in command, is a corps of men banded together for a noble purpose, who are not only Volunteers, but gentlemen in the best sense of that word; men who will willingly submit to all necessary discipline, and who, in the hour of danger to their grand old Fatherland, will step forward to offer their services to the Government, not as an off-scouring of society, to be sneered at; not as an undisciplined mob, who will be in the way; but as a well-trained, efficient, and fearless brotherhood of Englishmen, ready, if need be, to cement with their blood the struggles of their glorious ancestors, which have made England something of which to be justly proud, and the wonder of the world.—Yours, &c.,

September 5, 1875.

JOHN TOWERS, Captain.

Appendix 2

The 5^{thA} Administrative Battalion

The following 6 corps became part of the 5th Administrative Battalion:

5th Cheshire (Congleton) Rifle Volunteer Corps in 1859

8th Cheshire (Macclesfield) R.V.C in 1860

16th Cheshire (Sandbach) R.V.C. in 1860

27th Cheshire (Wilmslow) R.V.C. in 1860

33rd Cheshire (Nantwich) R.V.C. in 1860

36th Cheshire (Crewe) R.V.C. in 1865 (disb. 1880)

Another East Cheshire town saw the formation of the 15th Cheshire (Knutsford) R.V.C., which, together with corps at Northwich, Winsford and others, the 15th was part of the 3rd Adm. Bat.

Appendix 3

The poem : Riflemen form!

THERE is a sound of thunder afar,
Storm in the South that darkens the day!
Storm of battle and thunder of war!
Well if it do not roll our way.
Storm, Storm, Riflemen form!
Ready, be ready against the storm!
Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form!

Be not deaf to the sound that warns,
Be not gull'd by a despot's plea!
Are figs of thistles? or grapes of thorns?
How can a despot feel with the Free?
Form, Form, Riflemen Form!
Ready, be ready to meet the storm!
Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form!

Let your reforms for a moment go!
Look to your butts, and take good aims!
Better a rotten borough or so
Than a rotten fleet and a city in flames!
Storm, Storm, Riflemen form!
Ready, be ready against the storm!
Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form!

Form, be ready to do or die!
Form in Freedom's name and the Queen's
True we have got—*such* a faithful ally
That only the Devil can tell what he means.
Form, Form, Riflemen Form
Ready, be ready to meet the storm!
Riflemen, Riflemen, Riflemen form!¹

Alfred Lord Tennyson