

RIFLES AT RAYNERS LANE

In the middle of the 19th century the southern tip of the old parish of Pinner, the part that was later chopped off by the Uxbridge branch of the Metropolitan Railway, was almost devoid of features. The track-way which later became Rayners Lane zig-zagged across fields which were divided by hedges and punctuated here and there by ponds. Yet in the extreme south, lying against a hedge which formed the boundary of the parish, and almost masked by it, was a rifle range.

What was it doing there? Who made it and used it, and for how long did it last?

The range was 950 yards long and its relationship to today's street plan is shown on the accompanying map. the butts behind the target were a high and thick mound of earth designed to stop the bullets. By 1896 the range had been shortened to 800 yards and realigned with a new firing point slightly to the north, but with target and butts scarcely altered.

The range was established as the result of a wave of alarm which swept Britain in 1859 after President Louis-Napoleon of France had created himself Emperor and appeared to consider invasion of England to recover certain French refugees. Some sixty years earlier local volunteer militia had been raised when his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte had threatened invasion, but these were disbanded between 1805 and 1815. Now there was again popular pressure to improve the home defences. With seeming reluctance the Government sanctioned the formation of Volunteer Rifle Corps in May 1859 provided there was no cost to the public purse. This was later modified by the issue of rifles, but other equipment, uniforms, drill halls and ranges had to be provided at private expense.

In Harrow, a meeting held on 1st November 1859 sought to arouse support and find a rifle range. Ten days later a general meeting was convened in the Speech Room of Harrow School under the chairmanship of the

Head Master. John Charles Templer explained the organization of a volunteer company to an enthusiastic audience. Firing proficiency was the prime requirement. The Government would provide Long Enfield rifles, but a drill sergeant would cost the company one shilling a day. A government grant would be forthcoming according to the attendance and standard of marksmanship of the volunteers. The local corps would find a 1000 yard firing range. About thirty people enrolled at this meeting and some £200 was raised. On 30th December 1859 the 18th Middlesex Volunteer (Harrow) Rifles were formed and J.C. Templer was commissioned as their Captain.

The Government required a corps to have between sixty and one hundred effective members, officered by a captain, a lieutenant and an ensign. An effective man must attend eight official exercises each four months, and in the event of invasion was liable to serve anywhere in Great Britain. A non-effective man attended fewer exercises, but both types were enrolled members, paying 10s.6d. per annum and one guinea entrance fee, this last being refunded if the man equipped himself (apart from the rifle). Equipment was reckoned to cost about £5 in all, and included a fatigue jacket, waist and shoulder belt, and sliding frog-and-ball bag. Non-enrolled, or honorary, members were encouraged as a source of income for they paid a subscription and were allowed to wear the uniform and to use the range when it was not required by the effectives.

On 7th January 1860 the Volunteers took the oath, and met on 21st to choose a uniform, dark green with black facings. By April of that year the Corps was fully armed and equipped and sent a contingent of fifty-six privates, one N.C.O. and three officers to the Grand Volunteer Review by Queen Victoria at Hyde Park on 23rd June.

In general the main response to the call came, as was expected, from "the numerous, useful and intelligent class

of clerks and shopkeepers", but in some places volunteers were also drawn from among the gentry. Even though twentyfive of its members had been assisted with the initial costs, the Harrow Rifles was regarded as an elite corps in this respect. One of its privates, Thomas Chase Parr, had been a Major-General in the Indian Army. Some recruits came from the staff and senior members of Harrow School until it formed its own Cadet Corps in 1870.

Drill was held near Grange Farm at Roxeth. In June 1860 the *Harrow Gazette* reported that "an excellent ground for . . . rifle practice . . . has been secured upon the farm of Messrs. Hodsdon, upon the Uxbridge Road, Roxeth. It presents 1000 yards range, is level for its entire distance, and, running along the line of a hedge, interferes but little with the enjoyment of the lands. The butts are now being erected . . . but . . . wet weather . . . has retarded the earth-work".

Hodsdon's farm became the Tithe Farm in Eastcote Lane, (referred to in the newspaper as Uxbridge Road). The farm was largely given over to livestock and hay products. Gaining access to the range must have been tedious for many years, involving either a lengthy walk along (the later) Rayners Lane from Pinner Road in the north or from (the later) Eastcote Road in the south, or perhaps more directly across footpaths from the Northolt Road. Such footpaths must have existed because tales of rambles in the area are numerous.

This problem, and even greater ones, did not quench the enthusiasm of the Volunteers. The *Gazette* reported on 1st September 1860, "Every day has seen several members of the Corps hard at work on the new range at Mr. Hodsdon's farm, and this notwithstanding that the lane leading to the spot has been several times more than knee deep in water and that the shooters have been over their ankles in mud". Perhaps they were spurred to emulate their most expert member, William Bail, who was the only one to pass successfully through all the firing



*The cottage which was built at the sewage farm during the 1880s, now known as no. 3 Nursery Cottages.
Photograph by David Bednall.*

classes at the first trial and earn for himself the coveted name of "marksman".

Happily the call to repulse the French never came, and equally happily, one hopes, the Volunteers continued at rifle practice, in mud if necessary, and at drill "near Mr. Chapman's barn". The *Gazette* carried the weekly orders, and some members participated in local and national championships, occasionally with great success.

By 1884 it seems that the Harrow Rifles had more permanent company at the butts. In March Mr. Priest, who was now the farmer at the Tithe Farm, applied for the erection of a new butt adjoining the existing one, for the use of the St. George's Rifles.

Who were these? They had been formed in August 1859 in the faraway parish of St. George, Hanover Square, and mustered "several of the principals of large establishments in the locality, and the sons of some noble families residing in the district". They were closely associated with the Royal Victoria Rifles and shared their shooting ground at Kilburn, just behind the Cock Tavern in the High Road. In 1866 this ground was sold for development and Victoria Road

and Victoria Villas were erected thereon. Although their Headquarters remained in Mayfair the location of the St. George's Rifle Range between 1866 and 1884 is unknown.

Two factors probably influenced their choice of Harrow for a new range. Firstly, this part of Middlesex had become much more easily accessible from London since the Metropolitan Railway had opened its station at Harrow in 1880. Another station was scheduled shortly for Pinner. Secondly one of the chief officers of the St. George's was Stanley George Bird.

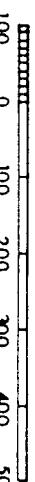
Bird, a lifelong Volunteer, had been a major with the St. George's since 1878 and was their Colonel in Command from 1885 to 1889. Though not himself local to Harrow, his father George Bird, a retired Kensington builder, had bought one of the largest and most elegant estates in Pinner in 1865, namely The Hall, near the junction of Paines Lane and Uxbridge Road. The grounds were several times made available for local events. One Sunday in June 1880 George Bird's widow threw them open for a review of the St. George's Rifles. They arrived at Hatch End Station about four o'clock and marched to The Hall accompanied by their band.

Here they gave displays of infantry and bayonet drill, volley firing and marching past and followed this with their own athletic sports, which included an egg and spoon race that proved so entertaining that it was run twice. The St. George's Band played a month later when the District Flower Show was held in The Hall grounds. Mrs. Bird sold The Hall in 1885 and spent her remaining years in Kensington. Stanley Bird had at least four brothers and one of them, Charles, was his successor in office as commanding Colonel of the St. George's Rifles in 1899. They died within a week of each other in 1905. Charles had lived in Pinner and was the first Captain of the new Pinner Fire Brigade in 1880. The Birds also kept a fire engine of their own and before 1880 it had often charged along Pinner lanes to the rescue of some burning shop or hayrick. What was more natural than that Major Stanley Bird should consider Harrow when a new range was needed.

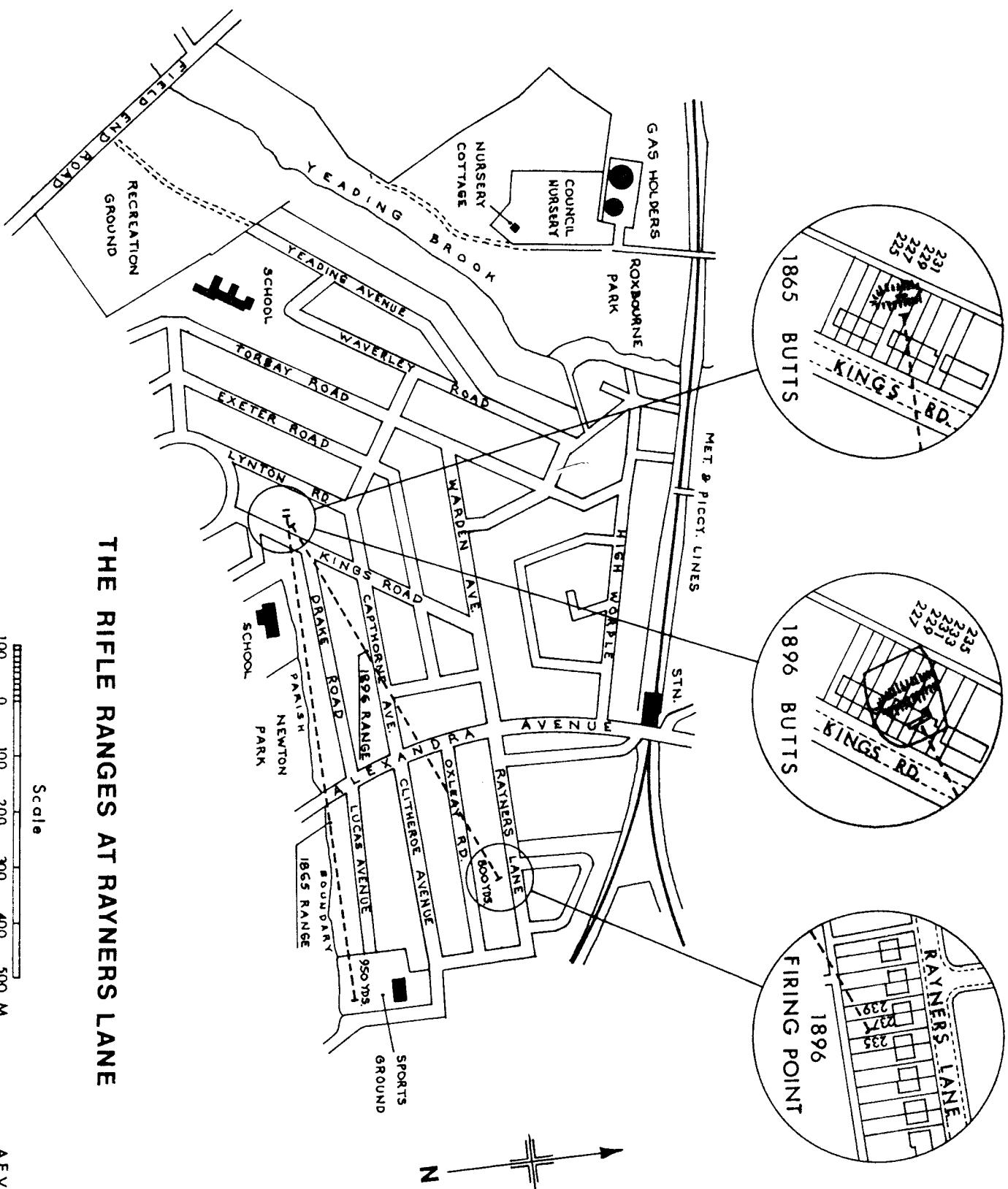
There was, however, a complicating factor. Pinner's first sewage farm had been established in 1880 at the southern tip of Cannon Lane, just south of the present nurseries of the Harrow Parks Department, and a cottage had been built, which still survives, for the sewage workers. The

THE RIFLE RANGES AT RAYNERS LANE

Scale



A.F.V. 1986



Based upon the 1976 O.S. 1:10,000 map with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office. Crown copyright reserved.

Sanitary Board feared that the proposed second range would be in line with this cottage. Major Bird pointed out that the butts were at least five hundred yards away and that he had already engaged to pay compensation for damage to livestock. The Board wondered whether human beings came within this description.

The consequences of these deliberations were not reported. The application was successful however, though whether the St. George's Rifles shared the existing range or had their own range parallel to it is never clear.

In 1888 trouble came. The Board's Surveyor, Mr. Woodbridge, reported in March that stray bullets were reaching the sewage farm from the rifle range. Colonel Bird, now Commanding Officer, was asked to prevent them ricochetting onto the farm. In May Mr. Woodbridge reported again, and although he had heard no bullets himself, he declared that "when Mr. Jones, the Valuer, was at the farm bullets fell in the locality and he considered it so dangerous that he declined to stay". A workman "once hearing a sharp crack and supposing it to be a stone found a bullet in a tree and it had shattered the green wood". The Board considered that any fatality would result in a charge of manslaughter and thought the Colonel's assurances inadequate. Colonel Bird wondered why the Board should only now worry since circumstances had not changed since the arrival of the St. George's Rifles. The Chairman observed darkly that "We happen to know it now".

Once again, the *Harrow Gazette* did not report the solution of the problem. The next O.S. map, dated 1896, shows only one range surviving, realigned, on a course which dropped very slightly downhill. It seems reasonable to assume that this change was the consequence of the dispute. Even if the St. George's aim was uncertain enough to send bullets from the original firing point towards the sewage farm, it could surely not have been so wild as to endanger the house from the new point.

The range does not often feature in the *Gazette* again. Shooting contests are announced between different companies of the Harrow Rifles and also between corps not connected with the 9th Middlesex, though the range is sometimes not named. They may not always have been at the Rayners Lane, or as it was called

then, the Roxeth Range. Early in 1862 Captain Templar had been anticipating an extension of the 1000 yard range to 1200 yards. This appears not to have taken place since on the 1865 map the range is but 950 yards long. During this year another range was established near Wealdstone, probably for the Stanmore Rifles who were established on 13th January 1862. They were merged with the Harrow Rifles in 1865 and the combined companies had access to two ranges.

A sham fight, or mock battle, was arranged near the Roxeth Range on Boxing Day 1888 but attracted only middling attendance.

The Boer War occasioned much excitement in the Volunteer movement. The St. George's Rifles offered to serve overseas though this could not be required of Volunteers. The range at Rayners Lane continued in use. Tom Bartlett, the Roxeth historian, wrote "About 1904, after my friend's three brothers had returned from the Boer War we used to take tea and American cream soda to the volunteers in the Shooting Butts Fields".

The designation "The Shooting Butts Fields" came to be applied to the immediately adjoining area which Bartlett described as "two miles of fields unbroken by roads or houses between Roxeth Marshes and Eastcote Village". The opening of South Harrow Station in 1903, and especially of Rayners Lane Halt after 1904, must have been a great boon to users of the range.

In 1908 the Volunteer movement was reorganized to form the Territorial Army, but it is likely that the rifle range survived the change. Bartlett still seems to have been using the term "The Shooting Butts Fields" in the late 1920s. Certainly the range is still marked out on the O.S. map of 1913-14 and included in the reprint of 1920, though this cannot be taken as proof of use. What is clear is that it vanished beneath the invincible army of bricks and mortar which overran Harrow in the nineteen-twenties and thirties and which continues to occupy the land.

All sorts of questions spring to mind in contemplation of this lost activity. What if Rayners Lane had been called Shooting Butts Lane instead? What might then have been the name of Rayners Lane Station? Why was not Shooting Butts used in some way in

stead of Drake Road and Lucas Avenue? And, to paraphrase a line from the poem "The Highwayman", when was the last time that "St. George's men came marching, marching, marching, St. George's men came marching up to the Roxeth Range"?

Note:

For clarity the terms Harrow Rifles and St. George's Rifles have been used throughout the article although many amalgamations and reorganizations occurred. These were as follows:

Harrow Rifles:

1859 1st Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps — The Harrow Rifles.

1865 renumbered 9th Middlesex R.V.C. with Stanmore Rifles incorporated.

1898 renumbered 5th West Middlesex R.V.C.

St. George's Rifles:

1859 11th Middlesex R.V.C. — The St. George's Rifles.

1880 renumbered 6th Middlesex R.V.C.

1892 renamed 1st Victoria and St. George's R.V.C.

Sources

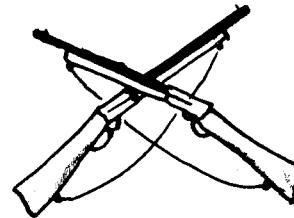
The Harrow Gazette

Col. C.A. Cuthbert Keeson, *Queen Victoria's Rifles 1792-1922*.

R. Westlake, *The Rifle Volunteers*.

T. Bartlett, *The Story of Roxeth*.

Victoria County History of Middlesex, Vol. VII, page 196.



Rifleman's basic uniform.