

Early History of the Army School of Musketry in Hythe, Kent

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Concept

The creation of this establishment in 1853 was brought about by two major developments in the design of the military rifle and the bullet, introduced two years before. The Minie Bullet with expanding base and the switch from the smooth bore Brown Bess to the rifled barrel Minie and later the famous .577 Enfield for the majority of the regiments of the line. Although credit has always been awarded to the Frenchman M. Minie for his invention of the expanding bullet, it is on record that the military paid £1000 to the founder of the Birmingham gun makers William Greener, for his work on the expanding ball in 1835 that produced good results. It was never introduced into Ordnance, being rejected for the old reason it was considered a 'compound' bullet.

Although, the Brunswick rifles had been issued to the 95th (later the Rifle Brigade) offering percussion ignition and rifling earlier, they had not found favour with the rest of the infantry due to the time taken in reloading. So this regiment had different rifle drill, favouring 'skirmishing' and 'sniping'. Ordnance considered they were not very accurate over 300 yards and not suitable for volley fire. So they were never issued for general use.

In this uncertain time, one Viscount Harding was appointed Master-General of Ordnance and he made an autocratic decision that the future long arm for the Army had to be "rifled using a conical bullet" and was instrumental in trying to improve on the performance of the 1855 Enfield and the Minie Rifle. He wanted the best for the Army and organised the tests of various manufacturers at Hythe School of Musketry. The .450 Whitworth rifle won the day for accuracy and grouped much tighter at all distances than the others. Although the Whitworth was never adopted by the British Army, as it was marked down as being prone to foul jamming when reloading, it moved the military "thinking" in the right direction. However, the Whitworth rifle

soon became the favourite with target shooters and enjoyed popularity at Wimbledon for NRA competition for years to come.

To return to 1853 and the formation of the school. The Army now had the Minie bullet and Rifle that shot further, more accurately than previous weapons, soon to be superseded by the popular 1855 .577 Enfield. Now shooting became a personal skill rather than a Drill movement. The decision was made to create an "establishment for the instruction of the Army in rifle and target practice". Staffed by a corps of experts that was able to train up regimental instructors in shooting skills. They returned to their regiments to train the troops in marksmanship. The wild and pebbled beaches of Hythe were decided as the most appropriate area as all shooting could be directed safely out to sea. They did not consider "butts", as we know them today, necessary.



Hythe

For powder burners who live north of the "divide" a little bit about the Hythe area will be of value to fully understand why the school was located there. Being on the edge of Romney Marsh, consisting of seven hundred square miles of flat landscape bordering the sea to the east, it has always been, since Roman times, an invasion hot spot; since 1800 it became a formal garrison town with building of the Royal Military Canal. The Naval presence has been very strong all along this coast since Henry VIII designated the Cinque Ports as the major ports for the defence of the realm. Authorised by Sir John Moore who built small defensive forts called Martello Towers all along the Romney Marsh coast which were garrisoned by the 95th (see photograph) and others. Built to be in sight of each other, they could pour down cross fire onto French invaders from the sea.

The School

The area established for the new school of musketry was actually outside the town along the coast road now known as the B259 being the beach between this road and the sea. This is a vast expanse of sand and pebbles used currently by regiments billeted at Shorncliffe barracks, occupied presently by the Ghurkhas and one time home to the Junior Leaders Rgt of the RA, now short-sightedly defunct. All personnel attending courses at the musketry school through the ages were billeted there or in guest houses in the town. The barracks in Hythe itself were used by the school staff, having been built to house "military lunatics" in 1842 (seems they had them in those days as well!), but no mention is made what happened to them. One can only surmise.....

Apart from the old Napoleonic buildings that were knocked down years ago, the ranges themselves are in essence almost in the same position as they were, firing points backing on to the road, butts now silhouetting against the seascape.

Unlike before, when shot spent themselves out to sea, if they managed to miss the 6x3ft mild steel plate targets “that will stop a bullet”.



*Major-General Charles Crawford Hay,
Inspector General of Musketry and
Commandant 1853-1867*

The first Commandant was a Colonel Hay from the Green Howards who with a small cadre of officers arrived on the first of June 1852. The success of the school is mainly due to his leadership and effort and he eventually retired a Major General. He was known as a good shot himself and enjoyed long range stuff. His ‘party piece’ was to snap shoot from the hip at 100 yards, always scoring ‘within 3 foot of the bull’ according to a comment from a contemporary at the time. Perhaps, a future event at Bisley?

The first Staff Instructors to be appointed arrived in August and September being C/Sgt MacKay of the 19th Foot, later commissioned, Sgt Rushton 3 Gren Gds, Sgt Lobes 2 Gren Gds, and Sgt Morris 97 Rgt. Also they appointed an armourer named John Aston who also had a gun shop in the town. The only civilian employed at the school at that time. They also had twelve privates as well, to carry out fatigue duties, being moaning old sweats coming up to retirement, wanting a soft billet.

Within two years of experimentation, study and practise, they were considered sufficiently ‘expert’ to be able to instruct and accredit other Army personnel as shooting instructors. In 1854 the school appeared officially on the Army lists of

‘establishments’ so a Corps of potential Instructors was added to the school to be trained. Consisting of some 200 personnel who were awarded 1st or 2nd class passes and sent to Depot Battalions and Regiments to teach and improve marksmanship of the troops. Three out of this corps were retained by the school and kept at Hythe, as staff instructors to carry on the good work as things were expanding.

The first results were soon seen when the Enfield replaced the Minie at the battle of Balaclava in 1854. The .577 bullet had a hollow base that expanded to fit the rifling and four inch groups at 100 yards could be achieved. A Lt. Godfrey of the 1st Bat. Rifle Brigade took out a Russian gun battery at six hundred yards with a small platoon of men who handed him loaded Enfields to he could keep up a rate of fire on the Russian gunners. He said after “...we got the credit of silencing them.” This was also accredited to his instruction at the school and recognised by Lord Raglan. A Major Clifford VC laughingly reported that his men had great sport with the Russians taking pot shots at those who unwisely scurried to the rear to execute bowel movements some four hundred yards away. The sergeant in charge on being questioned as to this unauthorised sniping activity replied, “Oh, to be sure sir, we heard they were suffering a bit so we thought it would not hurt to loosen them up”! This was the start of the Hythe tradition, not the latrines, the sniping.

The next milestone was in 1859 when a spontaneous volunteer movement sprang up in the middle classes to meet the shortage of soldiers in the UK, due to our India commitment, Napoleon II had been assassinated and war loomed again. The scare soon blew over but the volunteers remained in being. The school of musketry soon became involved in running courses for these volunteers who had a variety of weapons privately purchased. It was from one such volunteer group that the NRA was formed.

The course involved a considerable amount of ballistic theory going back into history including the origins and composition of gunpowder. Other useful stuff was gun handling, judging distances, windage and dry firing drill. The drill manual was the ‘bible’ and tests demanded a word for word knowledge. Not to everyone’s taste and one student who ultimately became an Admiral of the Fleet was heard to say “...utter balderdash and

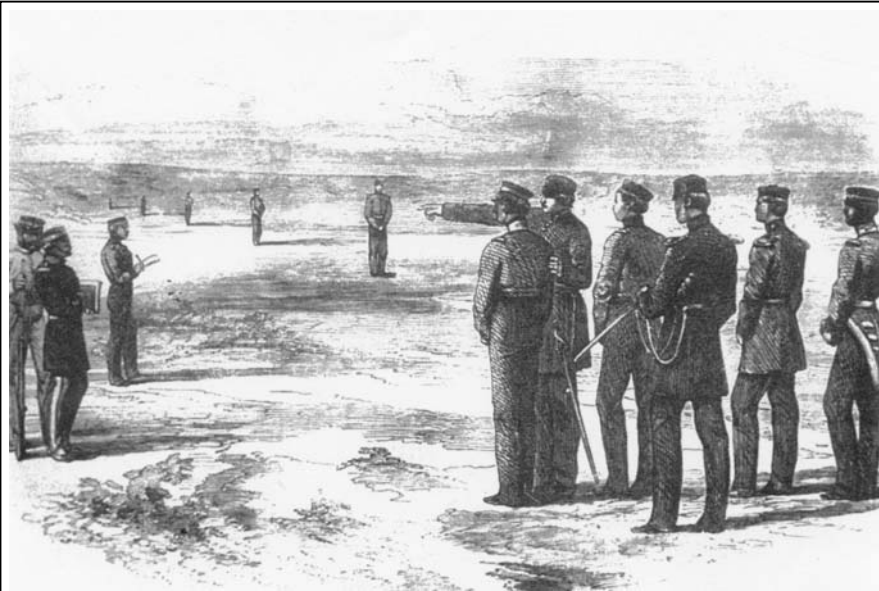
rubbish, the best weapon for the infantry is the bayonet.”

Even high ranking critics could not stop the forward movement of marksmanship. Live firing was only allowed when the student had passed the tests and restricted to 40 rounds at each distance. Apart from training students the school staff devoted considerable time to testing new ideas and the trap door breech loader and other innovations were first examined and tested here at the Hythe School of Musketry. The school soon developed a good reputation that spread and ‘Hythe trained’ was a sure guarantee of competence. So good were the NCO instructors that officer students were guilty of ‘back handing’ them for extra tuition. Colonel Hay was not in favour of this practise and threatened to dismiss any instructor taking tips. He then had second thoughts and allowed extra tuition on subscription to the benevolent fund for deserving Ex-NCOs, at his discretion.

The next major event was the adoption of the breech loader in 1863 combined with the complete cartridge. The first system that was examined was the Dreyse needle rifle that used a paper cartridge with the ignition in the base of the bullet. The firing pin pierced the paper and charge to strike the base of the round that fired the main charge.



*Sergeant-Major, Corps of Instructors, 1853
(with a Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle)*



Judging Distances 1855



Sergeant-Major Instructors with students, 1860

It was discounted as it suffered badly from escape of gases around the breech also the long firing pin was prone to misalignment, corrosion and would break off. This, combined with the reluctance to accept the 'enclosed' cartridge as it was, quite incorrectly, judged at the time, as to be dangerous in the ammo wagon. There was concern that the bullet from the enemy could send the whole lot up if it struck the cap of a bullet in an ammo box. The American civil war soon discounted this theory and tests soon started on the 'Snider Breech Block' conversion of the Enfield. In 1866 exhaustive tests started on this weapon at Hythe and the problems of the bullet was soon overcome by the one invented by Colonel Boxer. The new weapon was much

faster to load and fire so it was adopted, giving good service until 1874 when the famous Martini Henry .450, using the first bottle shaped round, was accepted for general use by the British Army.

By 1880 over a thousand personnel a year were passing through the school so they became more selective and decided that no one below the rank of sergeant would be selected. Things went through a bad patch in 1881 and it is interesting to note that the comments from Sergeant William Robertson who became a Field Marshall, who said,

"I was sent to Hythe to qualify as an assistant instructor and spent two wearisome months in repeating parrot fashion the words in the drill manual. Little

or no attention was given to the art of shooting in the field; even then it was only the regulation forty rounds per person."

It was not until some years later under new commandants like Ian Hamilton and Munro that the syllabus changed to meet the demands of modern warfare and in 1883 the school carried out tests on the first manually operated machine guns.

In conclusion, the first badge of the school, the crossed rifles surmounted by a crown, was adopted by the 'Corps of Instructors of Musketry' in 1854. Unfortunately, the badge was fine but the title was wrong, it was a misnomer as muskets had all been withdrawn by then. They bore his name, in typical Army fashion, until 1919 when somebody noticed the mistake and changed the name to the 'Small Arms School'. The school left Hythe in 1969 and relocated to Warminster where it is now named 'Small Arms School Corps'. The current badge is a Vickers machine gun, superimposed by two crossed rifles, surmounted by a crown and surrounded by a wreath.

A comment in The Times appeared in 1952 that sums it all up:

"Our infantry soldiers have always shown a rare and peculiar mastery of their weapons in action, from the time of the long bow, even when these weapons were not up to date. Brown Bess, the Baker, the Minie, the Martini Henry, the long Lee Enfield and the SMLE (and its modifications) have all in turn been good enough in their time, in the capable hands of the British Infantry, to bear a mighty share in winning most of Britain's wars. As witnessed in particular, the achievements of the BEF in 1914 against vastly superior numbers."

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Present memorial to men of the Rifle Brigade