

Late 19th century military archaeology In Sutton Park's Longmoor Valley

By Roy Billingham

The Heathland Clearance Programme, part of English Nature's High Level Stewardship Scheme, undertaken at the start of 2011 in the Longmoor Valley area of Sutton Park has revealed a large number of bell tent drainage circles that were dug in the late 19th century by local militias when they held their annual training camps in this area of the Park. The history of these militias has been extensively researched by Mike Hinson of the Sutton Coldfield Local History Research Group and copies of his research work are held by Sutton Coldfield Reference Library.

The presence of tent-rings in this area has been known for some time and a map of the distribution of some of those known in the early 1980s was drawn by Norman Evans many years ago. This map is also deposited in the Library's collection. Over time these rings have been covered by the relentless creeping growth of gorse and brambles but the heathland has now been extensively cleared. It has been a surprise to discover that the total number of drainage channels far exceeds that previously thought to exist. Below is a map (Diagram 1) of the tent sites I surveyed during 2011.

The total number of sites shown on the map is one hundred and five but it could be vary slightly more or less from this number. The reason for my uncertainty about the actual number is that some of the tent rings are either touching or very close to each other and as a result their individual positions are beyond the accuracy of my Garmin GPS system to distinguish.

This map is interesting in the way it shows the distribution of tent sites straddling some of the paths (shown by green dashes). I always wonder about the age of some of these heathland paths, particularly those in the heather which resemble sheep tracks; we know that that is fanciful since sheep were never kept in the Park and the tracks are more likely to have been created by rabbits. I think that many of the paths probably have some antiquity. There is a large cluster of tent sites to the east of the map and another one to the north of the map. The other area in Sutton Park frequently used as a military campsite from the 1880s was at Streetly and in the Sutton archives there is a map that shows the tent sites laid out in military precision unlike the disarray exhibited in the Longmoor Valley.

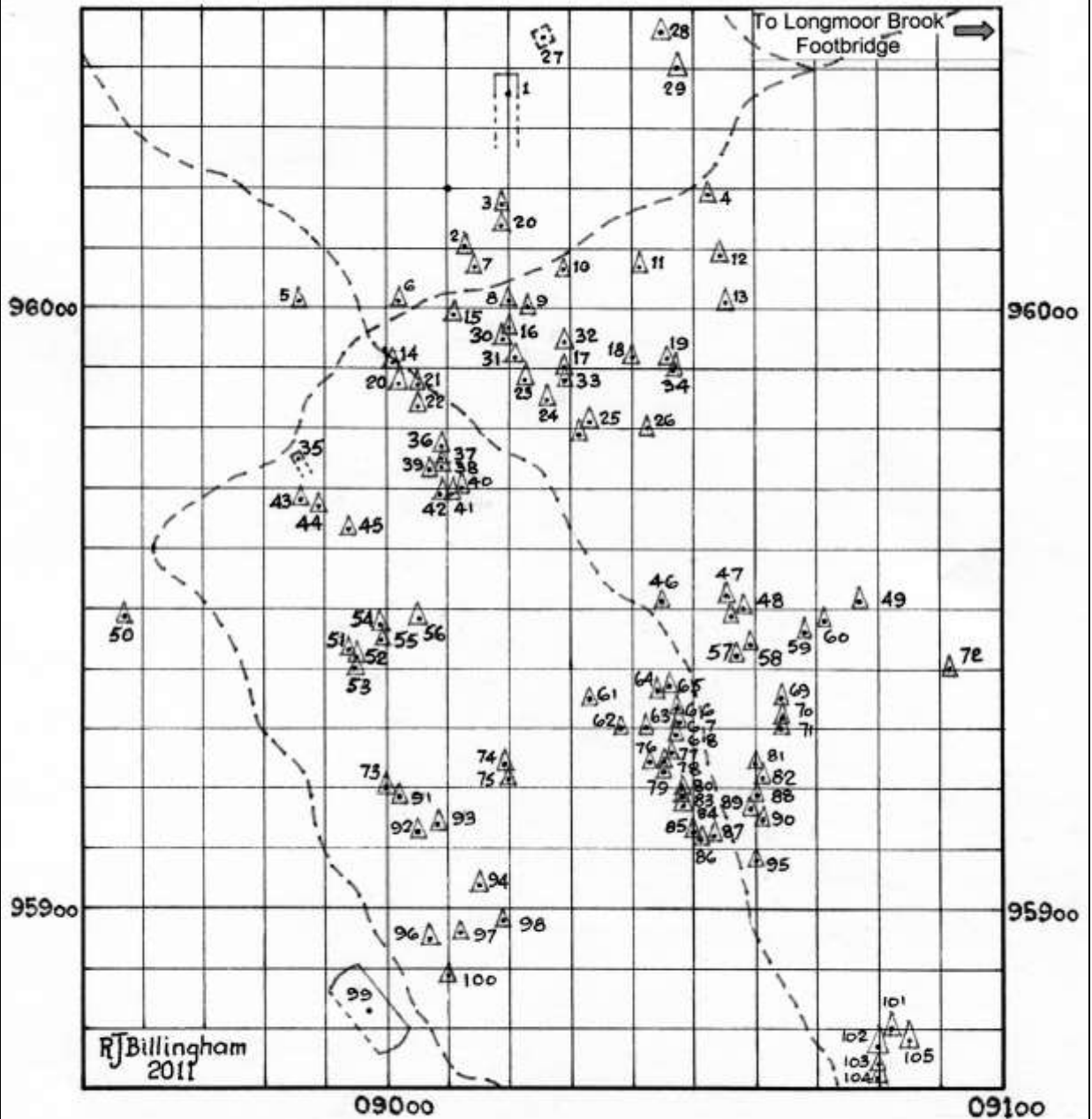
Looking at the Longmoor Valley area today it is difficult to imagine that this was the site of a racecourse that opened in 1868. Some described it as '*the finest flat race track in England*' and others as '*the morass*', which is more identifiable to those of us who know this area well after heavy rain.¹ The racecourse closed in August 1879 following a lot of local opposition.

The eager local militias started using this area for their training camps in the early 1880s when in 1881 a rifle range was constructed and Hinson informs us² that the

¹ *Racecourses in Sutton Park*, Hinson, M., quoted in the Proceedings of the S.C.L.H.R.G., Vol. 6: Autumn 2001, p. 21

² *Great Grandad's Army – The Loss of the Rifle Range*, Hinson, M., quoted in the Proceedings of the S.C.L.H.R.G., Vol. 7: Summer 2004, p. 42

SUTTON PARK MILITARY ARCHAEOLOGY
Location of late 19th and early 20th century
army bell tent drainage rings in Sutton Park's Longmoor Valley



This map utilises the Ordnance Survey grid square convention with each smaller fine line square representing an area of 10m x 10m while thicker grid lines represent an area of 100m x 100m with bold figures indicating the relevant O.S. coordinates. For individual details of tent ring O.S. eastings and northings, plus tent ring dimensions, refer to separate spreadsheets.

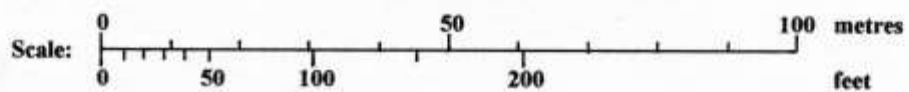


Diagram 1 – A map showing the distribution of tent and marquee sites

range was ready for use by the end of October. The purpose for building a rifle range was due to the experience of the First Boer War (1880-1) that proved conclusively that such a facility was the only way of ensuring that volunteers could gain the necessary practice in firing the modern breech-loading rifle accurately at long range. An 1887 map of Sutton Park shows the 1,200 yards (1,097m) firing range with marker posts at 1,000, 900, 800, 500, 300 and 200 yards. It lay immediately to the east of the campsite at an angle of 350° with its southern extremity being at the start of the military roadway that runs from the south-eastern edge of Westwood Coppice to the footbridge across the Longmoor Brook and beyond to a path below Rowton Bank. The firing points were serviced from this military roadway that is waterlogged for most of the year and must have been so in the late 19th century. I could find no evidence of the range on the ground when I recently tried to trace it from its Westwood Coppice base although there are earth banks near to the Butts.

The bell tent was standard army issue in Victorian times and was manufactured from 'duck' canvas. It was circular, and had a central pole 8ft-6ins (2.6m) high, from which the canvas hung down to be secured in place by hemp fibre rope guy lines and wooden pegs that were hammered into the ground. The sidewall curtain was 2ft (0.6m) high from the ground, hung vertically, and could be rolled up to provide natural ventilation if necessary. The diameters of the tents varied from 13ft to 16ft (4m to 5m) and were designed to accommodate eight men sleeping with their feet towards the central pole but with no room for more than their marching equipment. In practice they were normally used with six men to a tent but this would vary according to rank.

Most of the circular tent-rings, which would have been dug a spade's width and a spade's depth around the circumference of each tent, are well preserved and vary in diameter from 14ft up to 17ft (4.27m to 5.2m). It would be interesting to know if these drainage rings were used year on year or if new ones were dug each time a camp was held. Some are almost touching which might have a bearing on the answer.

Also uncovered in this recent heathland clearance is the drainage channel for a large marquee (No. 99) having dimensions of forty-five feet (13.7m) in length and twenty-two feet (6.7m) in width with the ends slightly curved. This marquee was probably used either for messing or for administration of the firing range facility. I have found drainage channels for three other much smaller marquees to the north of the larger one. These smaller marquees (Nos. 35, 1 and 27) may have been used for control or storage accommodation.

Many of the tent-rings have well preserved soakaways (Fig.1) where a channel has been dug from the tent-ring to connect either to a circular or square soakaway pit. The soakaway channels tend to be from 3ft to 6ft (1m to 2m) in length. These were undoubtedly dug to prevent the drainage ring being overwhelmed by torrential rain and thereby flooding the floor of the tent. In prolonged wet weather this area of Sutton Park can become waterlogged and slow to drain. So I imagine that the militias from time to time experienced difficulties in keeping their tent floors dry, hence the need to dig soakaways.



Fig. 1 – A section of a tent ring showing the soakaway channel in the centre of the picture. Rowton Bank can be seen in the distance.
[Photo by the author]



Fig. 2 – The remains of the Butts in 2012 looking east towards Rowton Bank.
[Photo by the author]

The site of the Butts is situated just to the west of the bridge over the Longmoor Brook alongside Lord Donegal's Ride, which runs from the Royal Oak Gate to Blackroot Glade, and was constructed in 1881 as part of the rifle range. The concrete lined trench of the Butts (Fig. 2) is all that remains today of the target range. When it was constructed the trench was much deeper housing several targets that could be raised and lowered, besides providing safe shelter for the scorers. Behind the Butts was a man-made bank of earth 20 ft (6m) high that was designed to act as a barrier to stray shots. Whilst the firing range was in use, men responsible for marking the targets took shelter in the Butts. A 'look out boy' blew a bugle or a whistle and raised a flag to warn other people in the Park that firing was about to commence.

This obviously was not enough to ensure the safety of passers-by and in April 1893 a letter was received by the Corporation from a local resident who complained that a stray shot had passed close to him while he was accompanying a group of friends along Lord Donegal's Ride near the Butts. Amendments to safety procedures were introduced but there was a growing unease at regimental level regarding the safety of the range and in 1894 the army's Inspector of Musketry initiated an inspection of the Sutton Park Rifle Range. The inspecting officer reported that the range came under the heading of 'A Range on a Plain' and regretfully condemned it as unsafe on three counts.

Firstly, the bank behind the Butts did not comply with regulations and should have been 45 ft (14m) high. Secondly, there were no arrangements in place for ensuring that a space of at least 1,300 yards (1,189m) behind the Butts was kept clear of members of the public. This was especially important because of the proximity of Sutton Park Golf Course which was opened in 1893. Finally, the inspector said that the gravel path, Lord Donegal's Ride, in front of the targets was likely to cause bullets to ricochet to an unknown distance.

To remedy all these faults would have proved extremely costly and there was little prospect that local funding could have been obtained and therefore it was recommended with some considerable regret that the firing range and the butts be closed. So no more rifle training camps were held in the Longmoor Valley after May 1895. As a result of its closure, the Borough Surveyor became responsible for levelling the Butts and firing points.

The photograph (Fig. 3) illustrates military bell tents in Sutton Park and shows Territorial soldiers alongside Sutton Park's Streetly Wood prior to the First World War. This two acre campsite could accommodate up to 750 soldiers and was in use certainly from 1881. Hinson informs us that the annual camps lasted a week and an advanced party would arrive a week early to pitch the bell tents lent by the government. So this arrangement would have applied to the Longmoor Valley campsite too. Looking at the original photograph, it is possible to make out the woodland boundary ditch and earthbank on which the woodland fence is mounted. I think that the date of this photograph was probably between 1890 and 1910.



Fig. 3 – Militia posing outside one of the bell tents by Streetly Wood.
[Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library]



Fig. 4 – Militia lying on groundsheets and carrying out target practice at Blackroot Mill.
Note the trench in front of the men and the timber carriage in the middle distance.
[Photograph by courtesy of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library]

Fig. 4 illustrates the location in the Park where the militia carried out firing practice after the Longmoor Valley firing range was closed. Blackroot Mill is the site of the quarry that was dug to provide material for the construction of the dam across Blackroot Pool. They appear to be aiming their rifles at the quarry bank – the land rises quite dramatically around the site and modern visitors will recognise that The Blackroot Bistro now occupies the high ground to the right of this scene.

This photograph contains an item of significance to local historians, namely the horse-drawn timber wagon that was owned by the Corporation and used to transport felled tree trunks to the sawmill, probably at Wyndley. It would have played a major part in the woodland management in Sutton Park. There is photographic evidence that this

timber wagon was certainly in use as late as 1937. In front of the wagon can be seen a pile of tree trunks and substantial branches.

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