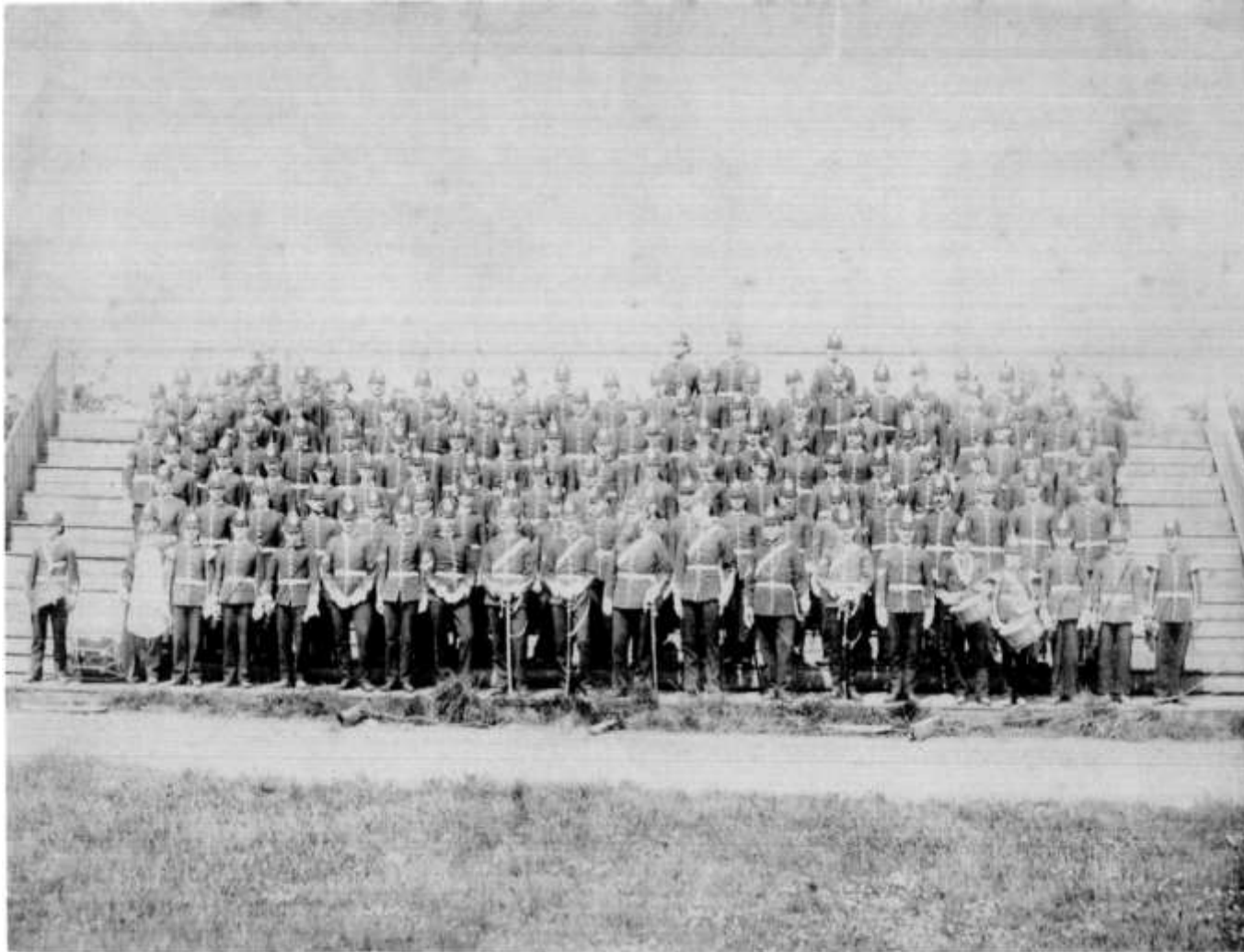


Great Granddad's Army — The Loss of the Rifle Range

By Mike Hinson



'F' Company, 1st Volunteer Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment (The Sutton Rifle Volunteers)

Queen Victoria's Part-time Army

Military historian John Pimlott¹ reminds us that, between the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the beginning of World War I in 1914, the British army faced rapidly expanding military commitments on both domestic and imperial fronts:

This growth took place in the familiar context of voluntary enlistment and a society which, if not actively hostile, was decidedly indifferent to soldiers.

In Victorian times, the British army was not well regarded at home, except at moments of crisis or victory when 'the soldiers of the Queen' became, albeit briefly, objects of patriotic pride.

Between 1815 and 1852 the British and Indian armies fought 17 major campaigns, but this made little impression on the British public who expected the army to be financed on a shoestring. After the ending of the Crimean War in 1856, the size of the regular army was allowed to fall steadily. Figures for 1870 show that the numerical strength of the British army was:

Numerical Strength of British Army in 1870

Regulars and others available for all services, both home and abroad	109,225
Second army of reserve	20,000
Militia	63,000
Yeomanry	15,300
Volunteers	168,447
Total:	376,002

The part-time element of Queen Victoria's loyal army was comprised of three main groups:

- The **Militia** which largely consisted of former regular soldiers, reservists and labourers eager to earn a little extra money. They were paid a small sum for attending annual camps;
- The **Yeomanry** whose recruits had to provide their own horses. Its members were mainly farmers and local gentry;
- Sixty-five per cent of the part-time army was comprised of Volunteers. They had to pay for their own kit and, as an inducement, there was an important social element to their activities.

The Cardwell Reforms, 1868—1872

Edward, Viscount Cardwell was appointed Secretary of State for War in Gladstone's government of 1868—1874. He introduced some radical reforms that helped to shape the late-Victorian army:

- The *Army Enlistment Act, 1870* introduced a system of short-term enlistment whereby soldiers served for 12 years: six years in the regular army; followed by six years in the reserve.
- The purchase of commissions by officers was abolished in 1871.
- The *Regulation of Forces Act, 1871* linked battalions of existing regiments together under a policy intended to provide one at home and one abroad.
- In 1872 a 'localisation' scheme was devised whereby two regular battalions of infantry were linked with yeomanry and volunteer battalions.

Formation of the Sutton Volunteer Rifle Corps

In some respects, the Volunteers can be compared with the Home Guard established in World War II. Recruits were men between the ages 18 and 40. The majority were either skilled artisans or from the lower echelons of white collar workers. Employers served as officers: foremen became non-commissioned officers.

After a public debate, held through the columns of the *Sutton Coldfield and Erdington News*, an inaugural public meeting was held at Sutton Town Hall (now the Masonic Hall) in Mill Street on 17 November 1880. It was chaired by the Warden (Mr E. W. Simkin) who regarded support for the volunteer movement as being 'an act of patriotism'. Dr James Johnston, a local GP, also spoke in favour, especially on health grounds.²

...nothing tends more to develop manly feelings, activity, energy, courage, patience, endurance, and the greatest lesson of all — obedience to one another.

The Chairman called for names and, charged with enthusiasm, 60 men came forward to enrol, this being the minimum number required by the War Office for granting permission to form a company. The process of linking the new company with a local infantry battalion had run less smoothly. The Warwickshire Volunteer Battalions were already up to strength, therefore Sutton's application to join was rejected. The Birmingham Volunteers (formed in 1879 by Major Harry Gem) were also fully manned. In desperation, application was then made to the South Staffordshire Regiment. Despite the fact that Sutton Coldfield's volunteers came from a Warwickshire town and its surrounding districts, the new recruits were warmly welcomed.

'F' Company, 1st Volunteer Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment

At full strength, there were about 140 Officers and men in Sutton's F Company of the South Staffordshire Rifles. The company was part of the Handsworth Battalion

Public Notices.

V.



R.

SUTTON COLDFIELD
VOLUNTEER RIFLE CORPS.

The Formation of this Corps having now been sanctioned,

A PUBLIC MEETING

Will be held at the

TOWN HALL, SUTTON COLDFIELD,

On WEDNESDAY, the 17th inst.,

TO ENROL MEMBERS,

when the personal attendance of every man willing to join
is earnestly requested.

The WARDEN (E. W. SIMKIN, ESQ.,)

IS EXPECTED TO PRESIDE.

Sutton Coldfield and Erdington News, 13th November 1880

whose headquarters was at the barracks in Soho Road, Handsworth. There were two companies from the locality, other companies in the Battalion hailing from Brierley Hill, Seisdon, Kingswinford, West Bromwich, Patshill, Smethwick and Kinver.

Volunteers paid 30 shillings for their uniforms; 15 shillings on enrolment and a further 15 shillings on receipt of their kit. Private soldiers and NCOs wore a red serge tunic, dark blue serge trousers with vertical red stripes on the outside seams and pointed helmet, similar to a policeman's dress helmet. On its front was a gun metal badge emblazoned with the Staffordshire Knot. Officers wore dark blue uniforms.

Who Were the Recruits?

The Muster Roll for 'F' Company³ is an important archive in the possession of the Local History Department of Sutton Coldfield Reference Library. It records the personal details of all the men recruited between 1880 and the Company's final disbandment in 1908. To analyse all of that information was too daunting a task, therefore a random sample of four consecutive pages was taken, listing recruits who had joined during the early 1880s, a total of 121 men.

Trades and Professions

Professional	15
Skilled Artisans — General	25
Skilled Artisans — Metal Trades	28
Shop and Distributive*	32
Clerks	12
Labourers	7
Unemployed	2
Total	121

*These figures are somewhat skewed due to the fact that they include 24 postmen, all from the Birmingham Post Office. 'F' Company was desirous of having its own band and, somehow, managed to persuade members of the Birmingham Post Office Band to join 'F' Company in November 1885⁴.

Home Addresses

Sutton Coldfield (Town)	31
Sutton Coldfield (Districts)*	12
Birmingham (Central)	33
Other Districts*	46

*These included: Aston, Erdington, Nechells, Birchfields, Great Barr, Edgbaston, Harborne, Acocks Green and Moseley.

Height

Forty-nine men in the sample were between *5 feet 9 inches* and *six feet two inches* in height.

Drill Parades

On Wednesday 15 December 1880, at 7.55 pm sharp, members of the new company attended the Crystal Palace (now the site of Clifton Sports Centre) to be sworn in and to receive their first instruction in drill. The local newspaper reported⁵ that the attendance was encouraging, with upwards of 40 men being present. Lt. Howell (later promoted to the rank of Captain), the officer in command, announced that there would be three drills per week, and he hoped

that members would attend at least two of them. Two drill sergeants from HQ travelled to Sutton by train in order to put the men through their paces:

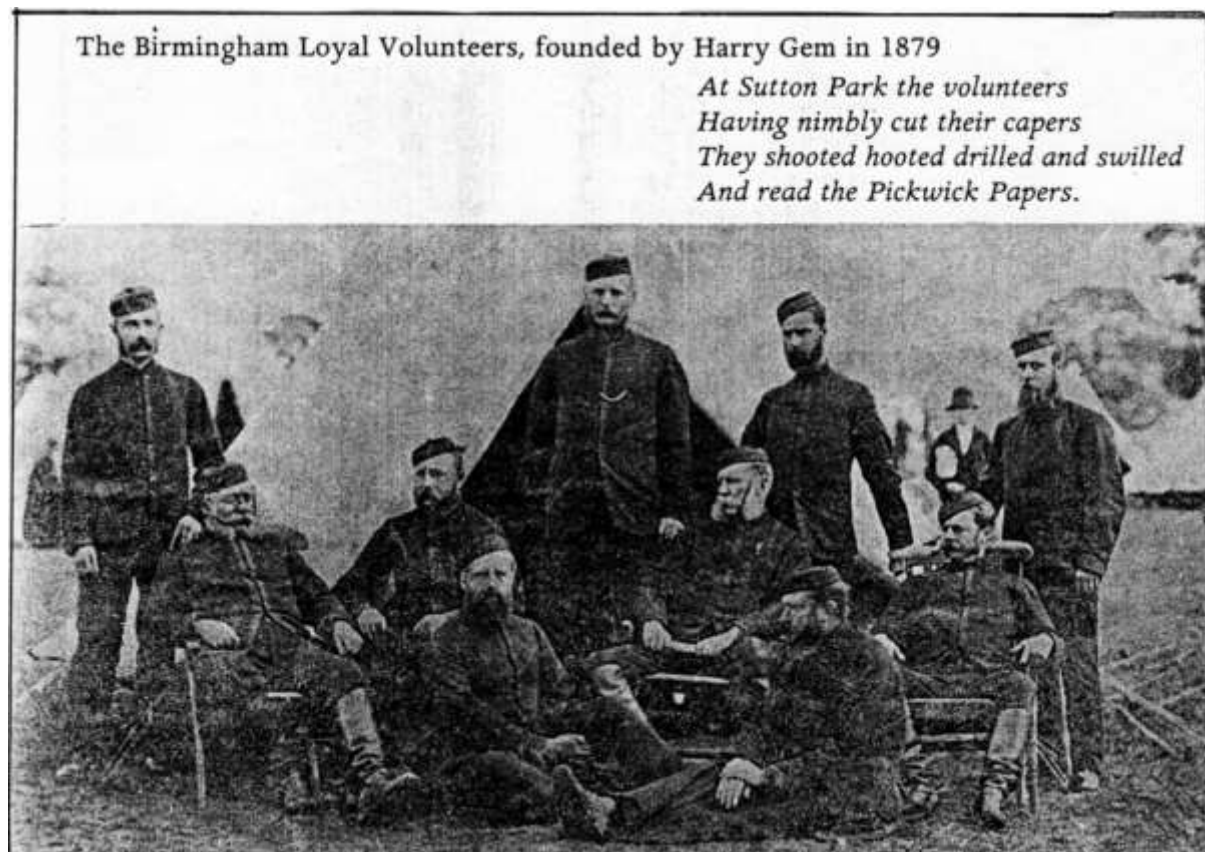
. . . it is satisfactory to note that the men seemed animated with a desire to learn, and a determination to master those elementary principles of drill, upon which their efficiency so much depends.

Government regulations required rifle volunteers to attend 60 drills in their first two years, not necessarily 30 in each year, and a minimum of eight drills in subsequent years. For this, the Government paid the Company an allowance of thirty shillings per year for each man who was 'efficient'. Company funds were dependent upon this sum, other money coming from local fund-raising events.

Military Exercises

The Birmingham Rifle Volunteers (who wore dark green tunics and black busbies) held their annual camps in Sutton Park. These lasted for a week, a camp site of about two acres being situated near Streetly Wood. An advance party arrived a week early in order to pitch the bell tents lent by the Government.

The week was occupied with drill parades and inspections, but its highlight was a sham fight. In 1881, this was staged on Thursday June in the presence of almost 7,000 spectators⁶. The Birmingham volunteers successfully defended their camp against an attacking force, including F Company, which advanced along Rowton Ridge, not far from Longmoor Pool.



On 24 July, 74 officers and men from F Company paraded at the Town Hall in order to march via Birmingham Road, Jockey Lane and Perry Barr to Sandwell Park for their week's encampment with other companies from the Staffordshire battalion. It seems that Sutton Coldfield's volunteers were quick to settled in, a West Bromwich newspaper⁷ reporting:

The Sutton men, a smart corps with an eye to comfort and as 'lively as crickets', got up to some sports in the evening, the tug of war evidently being the favourite. This is the crack corps of the battalion, the members indulging in such luxuries as camp chairs and stools of the most comforting and accommodating character, smoking caps and a variety of accessories to ease and enjoyment. They are generally looked upon in the camp as a fine lot of fellows' and their free and easy geniality has gained the goodwill of all.

The Local Rifle Range

The commitment and enthusiasm of F Company were not in doubt. Nevertheless, further grumbles were voiced in the local press⁸. A 'Volunteer' reminded the administration of its promise to construct a rifle range in Sutton Park. On the strength of such an inducement, many men eager for rifle practice had joined the ranks.

Eventually plans were drawn up and approved, but funding remained a problem. Dr Johnston spoke up again at a meeting held on 15th September 1881, reminding everyone that the latest war with the Boers had proved conclusively that a modern rifle range was the only way of ensuring that volunteers could gain the necessary practice in firing the modern breach-loading rifle accurately at long range⁹

Every effort was made to collect the £150 still required. The range was then completed and ready for use by the end of October.

The Butts

This important historical site in Sutton Park is situated in a small plantation of pine trees to the left of the path, known as Lord Donegal's Ride, from Royal Oak Gate. The concrete-lined trench is all that remains of the target area which was part of the rifle range constructed in 1881. In those days, the trench was much deeper, housing several targets that could be raised and lowered, besides providing safe shelter for the scorers. Behind it was a bank of earth 20 feet high.

The rifle range was 1,200 yards in length, its furthest point being located in what is now the car park at Banners Gate. Marker posts were erected at the 100, 150, 250, 300, 400, 500, 600 and 700 yards firing points. In 1882, sheds were erected by the Sutton Volunteers for shelter. The Birmingham Volunteers, who used the range during their annual camps, erected a storage shed. By 1887, the 500 and 600 yard firing points had been fenced in and provided with seats.

The firing points lined up across Longmoor Valley and were serviced by a road, part of which still exists. (It begins at the lone metal security gate near the public toilets and can be followed as far as Longmoor Brook. Nowadays, the road is often waterlogged in winter, but there is a good grassy path on the left for most of the way.)

Whilst the 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.

Shooting Competitions

Regular shooting competitions and field exercises with and between other companies and battalions were part of the volunteers' annual calendar. Members whose accuracy of shooting reached a sufficiently high standard were classified as marksmen and represented F Company in the annual championships at Bisley. Regular reports of competitions appeared in the local press, for example¹⁰.

The second competition among the members of F Company, 1st Volunteer Battalion, South Staffordshire Regiment for the selection of men for Wimbledon, was shot on the Park Range on Saturday [2nd May 1885] at ranges of 200, 500 and 600 yards. There were 19 competitors. There was a moderate wind and changeable light. The following men made scores of 70 and upwards:

Scores

	200 yds	500 yds	600 yds	Total
Sergeant Fenby	27	30	31	88
Private Greener	28		32	87
Corporal Edwards	26		22	78
Pte C E Tisdale		22	23	72
Lt Tisdale	28	29	15	72
Sgt Rock	23	26	22	71
Sgt Shaw	27	28	15	70

On 30 May 1885¹¹, the final competition in the series was held at which Corporal Edwards won the cup. Private Greener, Corporal Crisp, Sgt. Fenby, Sgt. Shaw, Cpl. Edwards and Sgt. Rock were chosen to represent F Company at the Staffordshire County Meeting, the first four also to be entered for competitions at Wimbledon.

A Dangerous Incident

Frequent use was made of the rifle range until April 1893 when the Sutton Corporation received a letter of complaint from a local resident¹². A stray shot had passed very close to him when he was accompanying a group of friends along the road near The Butts. The Sergeant Instructor admitted that, owing to a high wind at the time, the group of friends had not heard the look-out boy's whistle. The Corporation's Parks and Estates Committee which was responsible for Sutton Park, took the complaint very seriously and asked that the commanding officer of F Company, Captain Barnwell, to find ways of preventing any possible recurrence of the incident. In an apologetic reply, the Captain suggested that a bell should be installed in The Butts. This would be rung at the same time as the whistle was blown, thereby signalling that the targets were to be lowered because 'when the targets are dropped it is impossible to shoot at any object'.



The remains of the Butts in Sutton Park

This resolved matters to some extent, but there appears to have been growing unease at regimental level. Twelve months later the army's Inspector of Musketry (North-Western District) initiated an inspection of the Sutton Park Rifle Range. A copy of the inspecting officer's report was sent to the Committee¹³. He explained that the range in Longmoor Valley came under the heading of 'a Range on a Plain' and regretfully condemned it as unsafe because:

- In accordance with Musketry Regulations 1894, paragraph 222, the bank behind the Butts should be 45 feet high (more than double its present height).
- There were no arrangements in place for ensuring that a space of at least 1300 yards behind the Butts was kept clear of members of the public. This was especially important due to the closeness of Streetly Golf Course, opened in 1893.
- There was a stone path just in front of the targets which was likely to cause bullets to ricochet to an unknown distance.

In his covering letter, the Deputy Inspector of Musketry opined that, even if all of the suggested improvements were carried out, he doubted that the Major General commanding the North West District would feel disposed to re-open the range, 'owing to two fatal accidents that had taken place this summer in the Staffordshire District.' Captain Barnwell and his fellow officers from F Company considered the report. They agreed that, unless the military authorities could *guarantee* that the range would re-open once the costly improvements had been completed, there was little prospect of their being able to obtain local financial support to pay for

them¹⁴. Sadly, no such assurances were forthcoming. At a meeting in May 1895, the Park and Estates Committee resolved:

that an arrangement be made with the Volunteers by which they give up to the Corporation their shed and magazine with the fencing round the Butts and firing points and the materials of the mantlets, the Corporation to relieve them from any liability in reference to levelling the Butts and firing points, and that the agreement with the corps be terminated. ¹⁵

The Borough Surveyor became responsible for levelling the Butts and firing points. The magazine was let to Sutton Golf Club as a tool store for £1 per annum.

Where Did the Shot Come From?

in January 1975, it was reported¹⁶ that a father and his son from Great Barr had discovered a quantity of spent ammunition in the middle of the old firing range. It had been fired from two patterns of rifle issued to soldiers in Victorian times:

Enfield-Snider Rifle, 0.577 bore

The Enfield was a muzzle-loading rifle used in the Crimean War (1857—58). Powder and shot had to be rammed home. Faced with the necessity of improving its weaponry, the British government sought an easy means of converting its surplus stock of Enfields into breech-loading rifles. In 1869, BSA won one of the contracts to carry out the conversions using a breech-block conversion mechanism invented by the American, Jacob Snider. The Enfield-Snider was the first breech-loading service rifle and such was its quality that it remained in use up to 1914.

Martini-Henry 0.45

Introduced in 1866, this rifle combined the Swiss American Martini breech-loading mechanism with a Henry-pattern barrel. It was capable of firing 40 rounds per minute — when it didn't jam. Its efficiency was later improved with a modified form of brass cartridge case for ammunition. The Martini-Henry was phased out by the regular army in 1888 and replaced by the *Lee-Metford 0.303*. However, this pattern appears to have been the one issued to Sutton's rifle volunteers.

In Conclusion

The loss of their rifle range rankled with F Company, most especially because its members had to travel elsewhere for rifle practice. Efforts were made to find alternative sites in the Park, even as late as 1905¹⁷. The Butts were never again used for the purpose for which they were built. However, adjacent areas in Longmoor Valley were used for a variety of military training in both World Wars. Today, the Butts remain as part of Sutton Park's rich historical heritage and as a reminder of the exploits of Great-Grandad's Army.

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- ¹³ Park and Estates Committee Minutes, 24. 08. 1894
- ¹⁴ Park and Estates Committee Minutes, 29. 08. 1894
- ¹⁵ Park and Estates Committee Minutes, 29. 05. 1895 (Minutes 1143/4)
- ¹⁶ *Sutton Coldfield News*, 17. 01. 1975
- ¹⁷ Park and Estates Committee Minutes, 21. 10. 1905 (Minute 3342)