

CHAPTER 12

MILITARY MANOEUVRES IN BINGLEY HALL

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the late 1850s Britain's defensive condition was alarmingly weak. Much of the army had been despatched to suppress what is known in British history books as the Indian Mutiny. On the sub-continent it is described as the First Indian War of Independence. At this time there was a disturbing rumour from across the Channel. To take advantage of Britain's weakness the French, it was said, were secretly preparing an invasion force. Although it seems that this was nothing more than a rumour, it was taken quite seriously in official circles and the government responded accordingly.

In 1859, at the government's instigation, Volunteer Corps were formed in some forty districts across the kingdom. Fear of insurrection in Ireland as well as India was ever present so this new movement was banned across the Irish Sea. After a rather hesitant start recruitment gathered pace, reaching a very respectable level by the middle of 1860.

On 23 June 1860, 21,000 members of the newly-created Volunteer Force were present in Hyde Park to be reviewed by the Queen . . . by the end of the summer there were well over one hundred thousand Volunteers. (1)

In some respects these formations were not dissimilar to those of the Local Defence Volunteers raised in mid-1940, subsequently reorganised as the Home Guard. One enormous difference – and there were several – was, of course, that after the fall of France to Hitler that year the threat of invasion was no mere rumour. Another major difference was that, despite military trappings, membership of the nineteenth-century Volunteer Corps was for many years little more than an energetic and patriotic social pastime. For instance, membership could be abandoned at whim, simply by giving fourteen days notice. This actually happened on a massive scale. For example, although 3,340 men were recruited to Birmingham's Corps during the first ten years, no less than 2,221 resigned during the same period. (2)

Many of these resignations were related to class prejudice. In the early years the cost of membership, buying one's own uniform and equipment, etcetera, excluded working class men completely. But later on, arising from the pressing need for more recruits, financial assistance was arranged, enabling many artisans to be recruited. Quite naturally, with only a small number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers being required, the vast majority of the early Volunteers, all middle-class, had to serve in the ranks and, originally, did not find it at all objectionable to do so. But to their horror they now found themselves, whilst in uniform, on the same level as these socially inferior artisans. In the context of Victorian society with its rigid class barriers many found the situation totally unacceptable and resigned. The authorities, unable

to acknowledge this prejudice directly, put a different spin on the resignations.

In the late 1870s some were to claim that the middle-class had been “elbowed out” of the Force by what were then thought of as the lower standards of the artisan Volunteers . . . but the authoritative voice of the Volunteer Gazette argued that the middle-class had simply “melted away” . . . [due] “to the spontaneous extinction of the enthusiasm which had led them to join”. (3)

As was admitted in the Corps’ own national publication there were even serious social problems attached to holding commissioned rank in the Volunteers. Here again the rigid class barriers of the time were the cause.

Those who argued against the admission of tradesmen [i.e. shopkeepers and their like] to the commissioned ranks were recognising that the Volunteer officer would only enjoy high status in society if he was, and was seen to be, a gentleman . . . By 1873 the Volunteer Service Gazette was sadly recognising that “in ordinary middle-class society – particularly in towns – it is a distinct disadvantage to a young gentleman to be known as a subaltern or captain of Volunteers”. (4)

BIRMINGHAM'S VOLUNTEER CORPS

As Showell's *Dictionary of Birmingham* records, it was "*not until the little parish of Handsworth had raised its Corps*" that Birmingham came into the picture. After several abortive attempts the first effectual gathering of volunteers in the town was convened in the Town Hall. One of the leading figures in this venture was Thomas Henry Gem, a local solicitor, all-round sportsman and athlete, later to become Major Gem. The following pages owe a great debt to his memoirs.

These first volunteers met in the Town Hall on 21 September 1859. Some seventy men turned up and a unit was formally established under the title "Birmingham Division of the Warwickshire Rifle Corps". James Oliver Mason, a merchant, the only one present with even a modicum of military experience, was elected Lieutenant. (Later in his career he would be gazetted as battalion commander with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel.) (5)

At first almost half the membership of the Corps was comprised of solicitors, bankers, doctors, architects and other professional men. The remainder consisted of business people, shopkeepers and others in "trade". As indicated above, this was brought about primarily by the considerable expense entailed. Annual subscriptions alone were more than even the best paid artisans would have received then for a week's

work. As a consequence the number of volunteers was completely inadequate. At this time there was no financial support available from the government. Therefore, at a meeting convened by the Mayor, a group of local people of civic standing formed themselves into the Rifle Corps Association with the aim of creating a fund for defraying the expenses of selected artisans and finding other ways of boosting recruitment.

As earnest of the work proposed, the Mayor offered to equip 20 men at his own expense; Sir John Ratcliff, 20; Mr A Dixon, 20; Mr James Lloyd, 20; Messrs C & J Shaw, 20; Messrs Schofield, 10; Messrs Goodman and Cooper, Mr Councillor Phillips and Mr George Dixon, 5 each; and Dr Birt Davies, 1. (6)

Employers were canvassed and asked to encourage suitable men to volunteer, to help pay for their equipment and to allow them time off for their duties when necessary. The gun-makers of the town subscribed £1,000 towards the equipment of their own separate company and Mr Charles Ratcliff offered to equip one hundred men on condition that they contributed to the cost of their own uniforms. By means of these and other methods recruitment was rapidly increased.

Non-commissioned officers from the 1st Warwickshire Militia were engaged to drill the volunteers and to instil military discipline. After a short spell of drilling in Beardsworth's Horse Repository, membership increased to the point

where larger premises were required. The use of Bingley Hall was offered, free of charge, by the Cattle Show Committee, which, naturally, was gladly accepted. However, it turned out that there was a problem to be overcome.

The competent authorities who surveyed the hall discovered that to drill there would be impossible owing to the dusty character of the floor. The Staffordshire Gas Company gave the Corps as much gas-tar as they liked to fetch away, and this substance, mixed with gravel, formed a smooth durable pavement, and was laid down to a considerable extent at the upper end of the first bay on the left of the hall. This gas-tarring might have been continued ad infinitum if it had not been discovered . . . that it was not wanted, as by the addition of a small quantity of tan and a sprinkling of water, the floor of the hall was rendered sufficiently firm. (8)

Now the military-style performance could go ahead in earnest, as Gem relates with gusto. The French invasion troops must have been shaking in their shoes!

Drill began and drill went on; drill ended at night and began again in the morning, drill, drill, drill. Seven in the morning, four in the afternoon, and half-past seven at night. The same men came over and over again, and drilled as Volunteers have never drilled since. (9)

Not everything went so smoothly. In fact a serious row blew up concerning the choice of uniform and almost wrecked the whole project.

One memorable garment had been made by a member of the Corps, fitted on a well-shaped dummy and placed in his shop window for the admiration of the passers by . . . It was of Prussian green faced with scarlet . . . and produced raptures in the breasts of many . . . but the professional soldier, that creature of prejudice, no sooner saw it, through the eyes of Colonel Scott, than he pronounced it the wrong sort of thing altogether . . . fierce was the invective of the tailor's friends . . . and a handbill was circulated, the tenor and intent of which was to knock the new-born child on the head and leave the British empire to its fate . . . At length Colonel Scott arrived with samples of the cloth . . . grey and a dirty grey too . . . and, in order that the men might look as if they belonged to the same regiment, all the clothes were to be made by the same London tailor . . . the town and trade of Birmingham were imperilled by this wanton outrage. (10)

Colonel the Honourable Charles Scott of Baginton, late Scots Fusiliers, had recently been appointed battalion commander by Lord Leigh, the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, and, therefore, could not be over-ruled by the local volunteers.

However, a degree of compromise was reached eventually. Birmingham tailors would be allowed to take orders but only with the strict proviso that the cloth and the cut would be exactly as specified by the Colonel. Even so, no less than eighty men, a third of the membership, resigned in protest. (11) Perhaps those who stayed on were mollified by the “Christmas cake” headgear that Colonel Scott conceded!

As for the cap, a dear little round thing, like a small twelfth cake with a poke to shade the eyes and some cock’s feathers to flutter in the breeze – it was indeed the crowning piece of ornamentation. (12)

Nevertheless, by February 1860 the ranks had swollen to some 1,000 men, and by July, when the first annual general meeting of the Corps was held in Bingley Hall, the roll carried no less than 1,250 names, although not all attended parades regularly. (13)

The first inspection . . . took place on Saturday, July 21st, when 747 men assembled at Bingley Hall and marched to Calthorpe Park. The review was conducted by Lord Leigh. (14)

In September the unit was renamed by the War Office, becoming “The First Warwickshire (Birmingham) Rifle Volunteer Corps”. From the same source a supply of Enfield rifles was provided. It then became routine for the men to

parade in the hall in full dress uniform before journeying to Bournbrook, via the canal, for shooting practice. Butts had been erected there especially for the Volunteers. (15) They mustered at the hall for other purposes too, such as church parades. One such muster, a very sombre national occasion, was on 19 December 1861.

The following regimental order was issued by Lieutenant-Colonel Mason, commanding: "The Battalion will parade in Full Dress Uniform, without arms, at Bingley Hall, at two o'clock, for the purpose of attending Divine Service . . . at the Parish Church of St Martin, on the occasion of the interment of HRH the Prince Consort. (16)

The Volunteers were led by their own band for the first time on this occasion. Recently formed, it had been provided with instruments bought from funds contributed by a group of enthusiastic lady supporters. The music played on this occasion, inevitably, was the Dead March from Handel's "Saul". Crowds of spectators lined the route of the parade and there was a great crush in the Bull Ring, near the church. (17)

The year 1863 was particularly eventful for the Corps. In March they took part in celebrations to mark the marriage of the Prince of Wales, the future Edward VII, parading with the Royal Dragoons in Calthorpe Park. (18) However, before they left headquarters for the march to the park there was a short but rather special ceremony.

Prior to starting from Bingley Hall, a Drum-Major's Staff and Belt was presented to the regiment. This Staff, made by Messrs Elkington, is a beautiful piece of work. (19)

By the time of their next parade, in July, the unpopular grey uniforms had been discarded in favour of something distinctly more resplendent.

A change of uniform was deemed advisable, the novelty of volunteering for its own sake having somewhat abated; the grey, which was certainly of dingy appearance, was not considered to be sufficiently attractive . . . scarlet was the favourite colour but the decision . . . was in favour of green as being more economical and better suited to the circumstances of the Volunteers . . . the trousers were to be disfigured by a broad red stripe, with the two-fold object of enlivening the uniform and preventing the men using them except on parade. (20)

As mentioned earlier, there had been no financial support forthcoming from the government for the first three years, so the cost of uniforms and equipment together with all other expenses had to be met by the volunteers themselves. Bingley Hall, the use of which was provided free of charge in the first wave of euphoria, was now costing £300 per annum, several thousands of pounds in today's terms. (21) Although the government finally introduced a capitation grant in 1863, it was far less than the amount required. Consequently, in the

autumn of that year, in an attempt to defray at least some of the mounting debt, it was decided to hold a bazaar in the Town Hall.

Instead of the usual arrangement of stalls, there was a series of fifteen military tents . . . with two double tents at the Paradise Street entrance for the reception of goods, which were liberally presented by the manufacturers of the town and neighbourhood . . . the tents were of the regimental colours – green and scarlet . . . The principal feature, however, was the orchestra, which was converted into a fortress, and from the battlements of which were pointed a number of cannon. (22)

The bazaar was an outstanding success. Profits were sufficient not only to clear their substantial debts but to put them a massive £1,282 in credit. No doubt this was a tremendous relief to the officers for they were legally responsible for the battalion's debts. One of their number, Captain Thomas Lloyd, would surely have been particularly relieved for an extra reason. It was only due to his influence at the family's bank – the battalion's major creditor – that the Corps had not already been declared bankrupt. (23)

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, this happy financial situation did not last. Ten years later, at a meeting of the membership in the Town Hall it was again resolved that steps would be taken to make up the deficiency in their finances. (24)

Some of the King Edward's School pupils had become interested in the activities of the Volunteers. Consequently, at the instigation of Colonel Mason, a Cadet Corps was formed at the school, linked to the Birmingham battalion.

In June 1864, when the Volunteers assembled at Bingley Hall to march from thence to Calthorpe Park for battalion drill, they were joined by a Cadet Corps from the Grammar School, numbering about 80, under the command of Captain Collins, one of the masters. Instead of marching down Suffolk Street as usual, Colonel Mason ordered that the battalion should go down New Street, past the school. (25)

Later that year, in October, there was for a few days the slight possibility – the only time in all their years at Bingley Hall – that their rifles might be fired in earnest, albeit not at invading Frenchmen. This was because the Staffordshire colliers had come out on strike against their starvation wages.

A rumour got afloat that they intended to march on Birmingham, where they were reported to have many sympathisers . . . Accordingly the Lancers, who were in barracks in Birmingham, were kept "saddled up" ready to ride into the Black Country at a moment's notice, and a number of Volunteers were on duty at Bingley Hall . . . in consequence of a

communication from the Police, suggesting that he [Colonel Mason] mounted a guard in Bingley Hall with closed doors. (26)

In the event there was no march on Birmingham and it also transpired that Mason had acted illegally in mounting an armed guard. But, no matter, a simple change in the law soon absolved the gallant colonel.

In May 1865 one of the company commanders organised an athletics display and competition in the hall. It was so popular and successful that in October the battalion followed suit. Entitled “*Assault of Arms*” this second event was very well organised and comprehensive. The prizes on offer were extraordinarily generous. None of the winners would receive less than one guinea, a good week’s wage for an artisan then. Several prizes exceeded even that munificent sum. For example, the winner of the half-mile hurdles received a very handsome three guineas, while the victor over 220 yards and also the winner of the one-mile race both won no less than five guineas, a princely sum. No professional sportsmen were allowed to compete. (27)

As the years went by the Corps was given more generous governmental support and began to shape itself into something more like the twentieth-century Territorial Army battalion that it would eventually become. It was now, perhaps, the beginning of the end of the “chocolate soldier” era in their history because the social composition of the Corps had changed completely.

And now, as to the rank and file, who, in 1859, were well-to-do and of good social standing . . . in the early days they had to buy their own uniform . . . a little later they paid 20s towards the cost and about 1870 even this was abolished . . . In 1875 the rank and file had become almost entirely artisan. There is always great difficulty in maintaining numbers in the so-called class battalions; men who are qualified, and able to pay the subscription demanded, have many other engagements, sport or otherwise, and gradually drop out. The artisan has less chance of outdoor amusement and looks forward to the annual camp, therefore he becomes the better volunteer . . . he is more to be depended upon to turn up at every drill. (28)

It was at about this time that the red trouser stripe was dispensed with as was the silly little round cap and feathers, which was replaced with the busby. (29) But these were mere details for there was something of much greater importance on the agenda. By the late 1870s the battalion had used Bingley Hall as headquarters for almost twenty years. However, there had always been a major inconvenience attached to their tenancy, one that was now becoming intolerable. This was the requirement to relinquish the use of the building entirely when it was required for a cattle show, an exhibition or for some other purpose.

The hall . . . afforded ample room for mustering the battalion and for close order drill, and there was an armoury and one small room used as an orderly room . . . [but] the battalion was liable at any time to be turned out and their drills interrupted for any cattle sale. It was indeed owing to the hall being let for some circus or similar entertainment for several months in the middle of the drill season that induced the battalion to undertake the building of headquarters of their own. (30)

This comment refers to a letting in 1876 when a circus occupied the hall for three months in the autumn, followed by the annual cattle show. This lengthy exclusion was simply the last straw for the Corps and it was decided that they must have a drill hall of their own. After considering a number of possibilities a site in Thorpe Street was selected and work went ahead. Two decades of Volunteer activity in Bingley Hall came to an end when the new headquarters was completed in November 1881. (31)