

Conigar Point Firing Range

by Trevor Davies

During the 1850s, there was great concern about the vulnerability of Great Britain to invasion by France. The resulting Franco-phobia rumbled on until it exploded in 1858 during the Orsini affair – when an Italian terrorist attempted to assassinate the Emperor Louis Napoleon. France believed that Britain was implicated in the plot. In February 1858, Disraeli went so far as to warn that war was a matter of hours away.

In that same decade, mounting concern had been expressed about the ability of Britain to defend itself. In 1851, Lord Hardinge who commanded the army claimed that after garrisoning Portsmouth and Plymouth he could only put 10,000 men and 40 guns into the field. The subsequent response to the crisis in Crimea and to the Indian Mutiny, reinforced the general awareness that all was not well in the Armed forces.

Eventually, in August 1859 the then Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, set up The Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom. The Commission was formed to enquire into the ability of the United Kingdom to defend itself against an attempted invasion by a foreign power, and to advise the British Government on the remedial action required. The recommendation that a defensive ring of forts around Portsmouth and Plymouth should be constructed, is well known - as is their colloquial name of 'Palmerston's Follies' after the Prime Minister of the day.

Another impact of the public concern was a demand to establish volunteer military regiments to defend the country. The volunteer groups were envisaged as lightly armed skirmishers to support regular troops.

For most of the 1850s the military and the political authorities campaigned against the volunteer militias, thinking that they would waste resources that could be more usefully used to bolster the regular forces.

However, in July 1859, Sidney Herbert then the War Minister, took a different view. He considered that military feeling was largely confined to lower and upper classes of society. He saw the volunteer bands as a way of getting "*the middle classes imbued with an interest in our own defence*" (Rose, 1959).

Against the background of this febrile atmosphere, in 1859 the War Office issued a circular authorising Lords Lieutenant of counties to raise volunteer corps under the Act of 1804. The enabling Act of Parliament used to raise these volunteer corps was the same as that used to raise Volunteer corps during the Napoleonic wars, and had fought at Waterloo. "*Men joined primarily for patriotic reasons, but there were also many social activities which made enlistment attractive, especially rifle shooting*" (Anon., 1982, p.68).

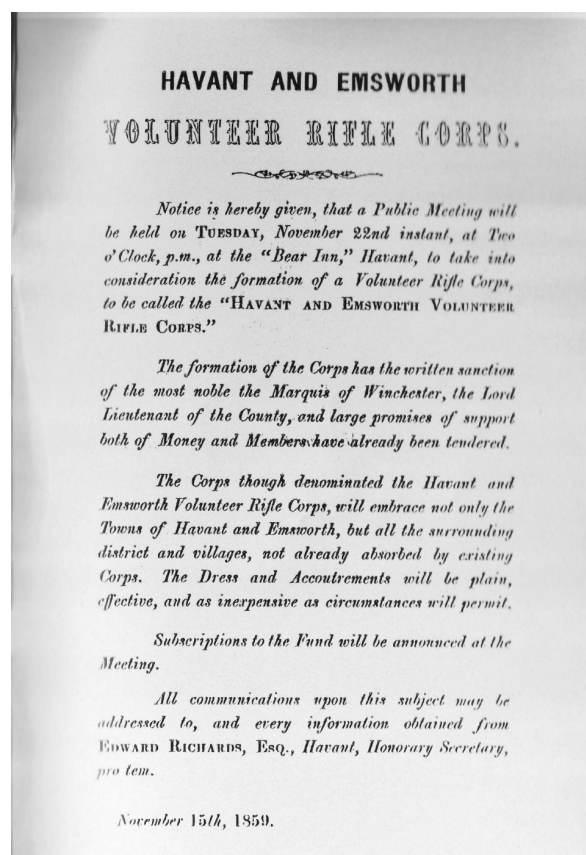


Fig. 1. Announcement of the formation of the Havant and Emsworth Volunteer Rifle Corps dated November 1859

The War Office circular of 1859 had particularly identified the need to instruct volunteers in the handling of the rifle. It recommended that sites for firing at a target should be established.

While initially the recruitment drive was aimed at the middle classes who could fund their own equipment by 1863, upon fulfilling certain conditions, financial aid was given to all. As a result, the enrolment of the middle classes fell away, recruits were drawn from a wider social group. Nevertheless, the middle classes continued to provide the majority of the officers.

The Havant and Emsworth Volunteer Rifle Corps were formed in November 1859 (Fig. 1). The company was given a number of designations becoming the 3rd (Duke of Connaught's Own) Volunteer Battalion, The Hampshire Regiment Territorial Force in the First World War (Anon., 1982, p.69).

Given the focus on rifle handling and marksmanship, once formed, the Havant and Emsworth Volunteer Rifle Corps established a rifle range east of Warblington Church. This is shown in the Ordnance Survey maps of the 1870-80 series, based on surveys 1870-73, so the rifle range must have been established by 1873 at the latest (Fig. 2).

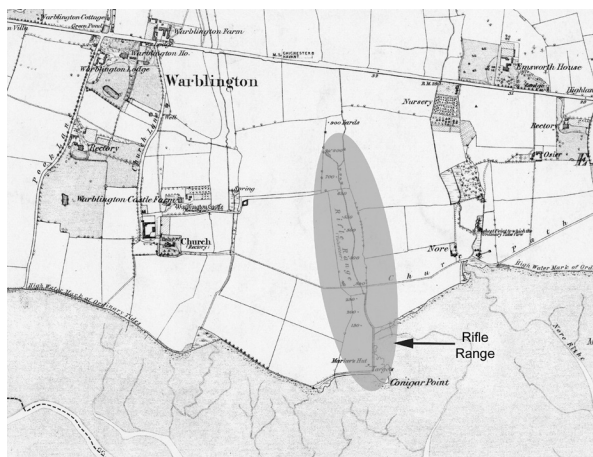


Fig. 2. Section from the 1870-80 OS map showing the rifle range at Conigar Point

The map shows the firing points set at distances of up to 900 yards from the targets set up near the edge of Chichester Harbour. The rifle range was constructed along the line of a stream that ran down into

Chichester Harbour. Clearly, the idea was that stray bullets would fall harmlessly into the harbour. Initially the shooting was done with the Snider Enfield rifle (Fig. 3). As time went by, the Snider rifle was replaced with rifles that had a longer range, and the range at Conigar Point had to be abandoned. In 1911, an indoor brick-built rifle range was erected at Potash Road, Havant (near the site of the present-day Wickes store) (Anon., 1982, p.71).



Fig. 3. Snider Enfield rifle (Infantry pattern). The stock is encircled with three iron bands secured by screws. Brass fore-end cap and brass butt plate. The brass

trigger guard is fitted with a lower sling loop, the upper loop being secured to the top iron retaining band. A slot is cut from fore-end cap to lower band to take a ramrod. The lock is a Snider conversion to convert an Enfield muzzle loading rifle to a breech loader. A hinged block at the breech containing a firing pin opens to the right by means of a knurled thumb piece. The barrel is circular with blade foresight and adjustable elevating rear sight. The calibre is 0.562in.

Credit line: © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

Today, little is visible on the Conigar Point site – some isolated lumps of brickwork are all that is left of a local response to a national panic about the intentions of the French towards the British. Today, it seems a strange period, because as we now know, Britain and France found themselves fighting together as allies in the First World War – barely 50 years later.

Sources:

Anon., 1982. Local Volunteers and Territorials. In: *The Making of Havant*, Publication No 5. s.l.:Havant Local History Group, pp. 4-74.

Rose, B., 1959. The Volunteers of 1859. *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 37(151), pp. 97-110.