

PIMPERNE AND THE MILITARY

The present Blandford Camp stands on the hill above Pimperne and has had an important influence on the village for nearly 200 years. It is thought that the area has been used by military forces for many centuries, but the first definite use of the site was in the 18th century when local volunteer units used it as a training ground. Troops were stationed in the area in the early 1720's, the earliest recorded regiment being the 7th Hussars.

18th Century

There were two basic reasons for troops being stationed in the Blandford area in the 18th century, these being to assist customs officers in the campaign against smuggling and the necessity to quarter cavalry regiments in a suitable area for the winter months where adequate cover and forage could be obtained, permanent barracks not being constructed until the late 18th, early 19th centuries. The 7th Hussars arrived in the area in January 1724 remaining until April 1725. Troops of Hussars were stationed at various locations in the county with one being based at Blandford, but more properly referred to as Pimperne. A troop of the 7th Hussars was located in the area known as Camp Down within the parish of Pimperne to the West of the Salisbury/Blandford Road. Camp Down was an ideal location for a winter camp, with fresh water being available in the area now known as France Firs. The 7th Hussars departed the area in April 1725 but within three years it was to return with 2 troops stationed in the vicinity of Camp Down. Sometime after May 1729 only one troop was stationed in the area where it remained until June 1731. The next unit based in the area arrived in 1738 when the Royal Regiment of North British Dragoons (later the 2nd Dragoons) were stationed in Wiltshire and Dorset with one troop in the Blandford area.



Trooper 2nd Dragoons (Left) & Trooper Royal Horse Guards circa 1745

In addition to anti-smuggling duties there was a requirement for troops to assist in maintaining law and order. During the 18th century there were numerous 'hunger' riots throughout various parts of England with troops being called upon to help protect mills, granaries, wagons, barges and markets. In 1738 there was rioting in Melksham and Chippenham brought about by unrest in the weaving trade.

During 1756, to counter the threat of a French invasion along the south coast, an army of some 10,000 men (Two regiments of Dragoons and Six of Foot) was formed at Shroton, adjacent to the buildings now known as Shroton Lines with major exercises being held on Race Down (on the site of the present day Blandford Camp). The summer of 1757 saw the French making extensive preparations for an invasion of England and there was a concentration of cavalry in the South and the camp at Pimperne would have been in frequent use.

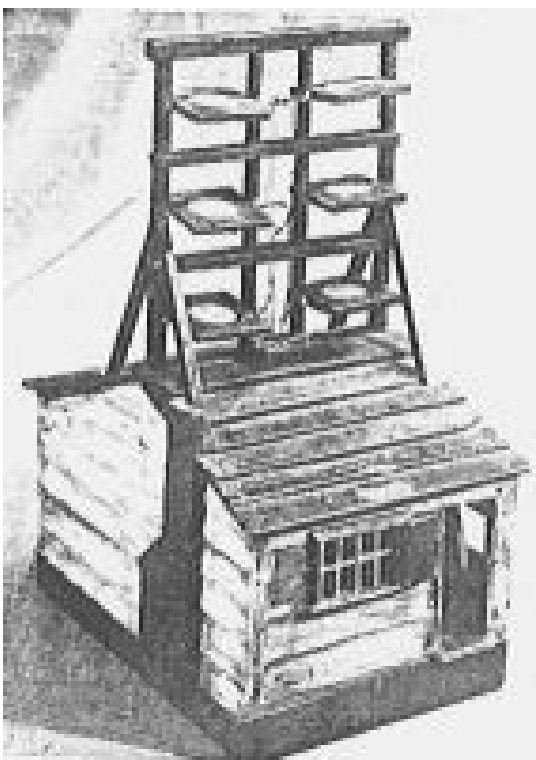


Light Dragoons in pre-1812 uniform

Little is known of the disposition of troops in the Pimperne and Blandford area during the early 1760s although the 10th Dragoons were briefly stationed at Dorchester and Blandford in 1762. By 1768 smuggling in Hampshire and Dorset had become a major problem for the authorities and units such as the 7th Dragoons, 3rd Dragoons and in 1782 the 2nd Queens Dragoon Guards continued to be stationed in the area to assist in the prevention of smuggling. In 1792 the post of Barrackmaster-General was created and during the Napoleonic Wars large numbers of barracks were built all over the country, chiefly so troops could be concentrated in order to repel any invasion. There were barracks at Dorchester, Bridport, Weymouth and Christchurch. This led to the concentration of cavalry in these areas where troops could be used for coast watching, anti-invasion and anti-smuggling duties thus doing away with the need for temporary winter quarters and the Pimperne Cavalry Camp was no longer needed there being no accurate record of any troops permanently based at Camp Down at the turn of the 18th century.

19th Century

In 1806, an Admiralty Shutter Telegraph station was built near the racecourse on the site now known as Telegraph Clump. This station was a link in the chain used to convey messages from the Admiralty in London to the Naval Dockyard at Plymouth. The signal station was closed in 1816 after the end of the Napoleonic Wars but was retained on a care and maintenance basis for some time after this. The station was maintained against the necessity of being taken into use again until 1825. During Napoleons One Hundred Days there wasn't enough time to reinstate the shutter telegraphs and by August 1816 the Admiralty was experimenting with a Semaphore Telegraph which was approved for installation but not on existing shutter station sites. As it turned out progress on the new system was slow and the Semaphore system was itself overtaken by the new 'electric' telegraph, thus Blandford Racecourse Station fell into disuse.



Admiralty Shutter Telegraph Station

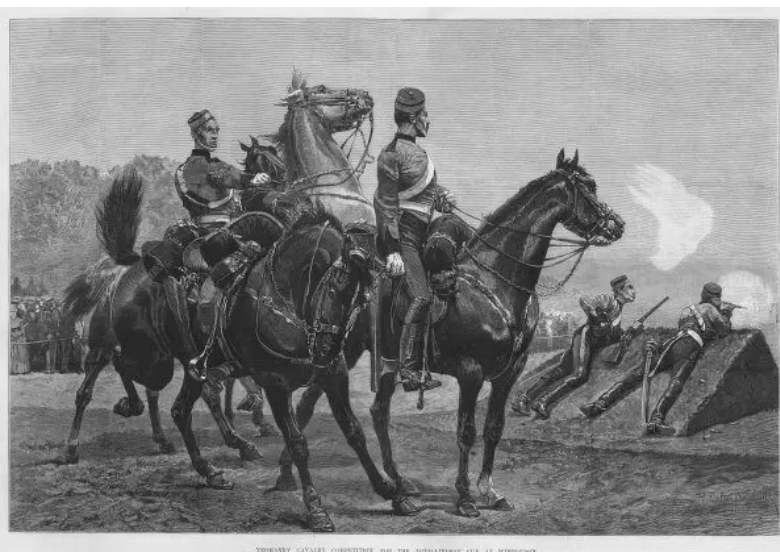
Race Down continued to be used during the 19th century as a training ground for the Yeomanry and Volunteer units of Dorset and a rifle range was constructed in the area of what is now Racedown Road. The construction of barracks reduced the necessity to use Camp Down for winter quarters and Race Down provided space for large concentrations of troops and allowed them to manoeuvre, exercise and hold reviews with room to spare. Whilst providing a racecourse and cricket ground for recreation until the 19th century Race Down was periodically used by local militias and yeomanry for training. The first recorded 'Field Day' of the Dorset Volunteer Rangers was 19th June 1799 on Race Down. The Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry were formed in 1803 and the first recorded assembly of the regiment at Race Down was on the 7th February 1804.



Period Dress, Queens Own Dorset Yeomanry

Use of Race Down by the Yeomanry and other regular units continued until 1842. The next seventeen years saw little or no military activity in the Blandford area and it was not until 1860 that there was a revival of military activity. The 8th Corps Dorsetshire Rifle Volunteers was formed at Blandford in February 1860. This corps frequently used Race Down, which was also being used by the Yeomanry Cavalry by now re-titled the Queens Own Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry.

In 1870 'C' Telegraph Troop Royal Engineers was formed to provide communications for the Field Army. In August 1872 this troop was stationed at Blandford to provide communications for a major army exercise lasting until the 10th September. This is the first recorded visit of any communication unit of the army and C Telegraph Troop RE was a forbear of the Royal Corps of Signals who took over Blandford in 1967. Race Down continued to be used as a training area and little of note is recorded other than usual training and numerous shooting competitions at which the Queens Own Dorset Yeomanry Cavalry excelled, winning the Loyd-Lindsay shooting competition in 1876, 1878, 1886 and 1892.



The South African War saw an increase in volunteer soldiering and a number of Blandford men volunteered for service with a company of Imperial Yeomanry from Dorset. The rifle range on Race Down continued to be used for practice shooting and competitions. During the summer of 1900 the Western Counties Volunteer

Brigade held a training camp and exercise on Salisbury Plain. This was the beginning of a trend towards using the Plain for training instead of Race Down, and ad hoc camps for large concentrations of troops were no longer made on the down. The rifle range and the downland at Race Down continued to be used by local volunteer units in the period leading up to the First World War. The Queens Own Dorset Yeomanry held annual camps there in 1911 and 1912.

World War 1 - Royal Naval Division

With the outbreak of the First World War a large number of Naval Reservists were called for full-time service, in excess of the numbers required to man ships. It was therefore decided that a Royal Naval Division would be formed to augment the army divisions. After its initial action in the defence of Antwerp the Division returned to the UK and established a base depot and training camp at Blandford.



Benbow Lines, Blandford Camp 1917

A German POW camp was also set up alongside it and later a second POW camp was built on the Milldown. POWs were hired out to local farmers and paid 4d an hour. Instruction on trench construction and trench warfare was carried out within the camp area and traces of the Royal Naval Division trenches can still be seen in the area beyond Drake East Lines. The men of the Division left Blandford Camp in February 1915 for Gallipoli and the camp became the RND Depot. A memorial now stands at Collingwood Corner, on the Blandford to Salisbury road, dedicated to the men of the Collingwood Battalion and the RND who lost their lives at Gallipoli.

World War 1 - Royal Flying Corps/Royal Air Force

During 1918, the camp changed from being the depot for the Royal Naval Division to being an 'Intake Camp' for the Royal Flying Corps, which was at that time being reformed as the Royal Air Force, and a branch railway line was built to bring materials and personnel to the camp. The railway was linked with the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway line immediately south of Blandford Forum railway station and there was a daily passenger service to bring civilian staff to the camp from Bournemouth and the villages in between. At the end of 1919, the camp was closed and the wooden huts built for the RN Division and the camp's railway line were

removed. By the end of 1920 the site had been returned to agricultural use.

World War II

With the build up of tension leading up to the Second World War, the camp was reactivated in 1939 as a mobilization and training centre for reservists, with a new wooden hatted camp being built on the sites of the Royal Naval Division encampments. There are still a few huts from the 1939 camp remaining, these being in Drake East Lines and in the Benbow Lines. After the fall of France the British Army went through a period of reorganisation and anti-aircraft units of the Royal Artillery trained on the site, as well as a reconnaissance battalion of the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. The camp then became a Battle Training Camp, staffed by a cadre of officers and NCOs who organised the training of the units who passed through the camp. Each unit spent a month carrying out intensive training prior to being sent to a combat area such as North Africa, or preparing for the planned invasion of Normandy in 1944.

World War II - US Army hospital complex

Once the invasion of Europe was underway, Blandford Camp was no longer required as a training camp. It was decided to convert the camp into a US Army hospital complex and in April 1944, the first of five US Army general hospitals was established. The hospitals started receiving patients about two weeks after D-Day and many were brought from the combat area via the wartime airfield at Tarrant Rushton. The hospitals were often working at full capacity and receiving as many as 500 casualties during one night. The hospital complex closed after VE Day and the majority of the staff returned to the United States during October 1945. The Roosevelt Garden and Memorial were dedicated in the camp on 30th May, 1945 and a memorial service is held there annually in November in remembrance of those who died.

Post-war years

After the closure of the hospitals the camp was reconverted to a training camp, and from 1946 until 1962 it was used by the Royal Army Service Corps (as a National Service driver training camp), the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the Army Catering Corps and the Army Physical Training Corps. In 1948, the 3 mile, 247 yard, 6.75 inch perimeter road was used for the first 'real road' racing circuit and motorcycle racing continued for over a decade. For two years (1949-1950), the circuit was also used for Formula Two and other motorcar racing, but after several serious accidents, including the curious accident when the Cooper of Major Braid ended up on the roof of the Guardroom, and several fatalities it was considered too dangerous to continue.



Royal Signals

In 1960, 30 Signal Regiment moved into the camp from Middle Wallop. Blandford was then selected to be the future home of the School of Signals (then at Catterick) and the present-day camp was planned with construction beginning in 1964. The School of Signals began occupation in 1967, to be responsible for all management and technical courses for Royal Signals Officers and NCOs. In the early 1990s, under the Government's 'Options for Change' initiatives, 30 Signal Regiment moved to Bramcote to make way in 1995 for Royal Signals soldier training which was being moved from Catterick Camp. The Headquarters of the Corps also came to the site from London. All special-to-arm training is now carried out with 11 Signal Regiment at Blandford.

Martin Willoughby