

THE ARMED FORCES ON DARTMOOR

A BRIEF HISTORY

Defence is essential to every community so that it has the security needed to feed and breed. Huts built by Bronze Age communities, 6,000 years ago, were sited on high ground that gave observation over the surrounding area and were defensible.

Later, because the wilds of Dartmoor channelled marauding tribes and travellers, the towns on its periphery gained strategic importance. The Iron Age hill fort, the Roman Fort and, later, the Norman Castle at Okehampton remind of the presence of military forces that were deployed over the centuries to defend communities, to control routes and to wield power. Hunting within the Forests of Devon would also have provided practice in manoeuvring, communication and control. In the 17th Century, the Civil War mobilised forces in nearly every town. Although few written records exist, Dartmoor was undoubtedly used throughout the Centuries for the training of those soldiers defending the interests of their communities.

Although the regiment and companies that had been formed under the Militia Act 1779 and Volunteer Act 1782 had mostly been disbanded, there was a great rush to volunteer in 1794 to counter the French threat of invasion and revolution. Even small towns raised a company of around 100 men. The drills required to manoeuvre men on the battlefield were carried out and firing ranges built to practice musketry skills. The Okehampton Militia used two musketry ranges; one on the west side of the Castle and the other in the Skaigh Valley and there were also ranges at Moretonhampstead and Tavistock. Prisoners of war from the Napoleonic Wars 1803 to 1815 were held in hulks in Plymouth Harbour, while officers, who gave their parole that they would not try to escape if given limited freedom, lodged in the parole towns of Ashburton, Moretonhampstead, North Tawton, Okehampton and Tavistock. Their culture, style and wealth often made them popular members of the communities.

The prison hulks were crowded and unhealthy, and the need for an alternative was spotted by Mr (later Sir) Thomas Tyrwhitt, friend of the Prince Regent and the Duchy of Cornwall's Secretary, who proposed in 1805 that a prison be built on Dartmoor. His suggestion was accepted and construction of the prison started in 1806, the first

prisoners arriving in 1809 thus providing a use for the land and an income for the Duchy. Over 5,000 prisoners were secured in the prison guarded by a battalion of soldiers, about 600 men, who, in addition to their guarding duties, would have maintained their military skills on Dartmoor and practised musketry on the Hart Tor Range (SX.581721)

Plymouth's garrison grew during the first half of the 19th Century, providing security for the fleet against an invasion by the French. The ten fortresses and many batteries and emplacements that Prime Minister Palmerston had built around Plymouth between 1853 and 1880 provided the Ring of Fire; artillery to bombard the invader, cavalry to cut them off and the infantry to decimate them. These troops would have trained on Dartmoor but the only record known at present is of a large exercise held on the south moor in 1853.

The Militia were also maintained at a high state of readiness to guard against the revolutions and wars that fermented across Europe during this unsettled time. Initially, the volunteers trained close to the towns where they were formed but by the 1850s they carried out their annual training centrally, often at Haytor. The thousands of Militia men arriving by horse or cart with their equipment and muskets would have presented an impressive sight as well as a welcome opportunity for the locals to sell their produce. The playing of the bands, pipes and drums would have given a festive air to the assembly and their manoeuvres provided a talking point for the observers.

In 1869 trials were ordered of a new nature of artillery munition; one that would explode on impact sending out hundreds of lead balls that would kill or maim the enemy. The ammunition designed by an artillery officer, Captain Shrapnel, was trialled in the area of Postbridge and was obviously found to be effective as the shrapnel round is still in use today.

A major exercise, recorded by the Illustrated London News, took place in August 1873 when the First and Second Divisions consisting of over 12,000 men and 2,100 horses carried out formation training in the Ringmoor, Roborough SX 5064 and Yennadon Downs area. The exercise had to be called off early because of atrocious weather; a medal being struck to celebrate surviving the rainstorms.

The main artillery training location in the latter part of the 19th Century was at Shoeburyness, on the southern shore of the Thames estuary, where the guns could be fired safely out to sea. However, as more powerful propellant and longer barrels increased the distance that the guns could fire, the sea ranges no longer represented the ground over which they might have to fire or a realistic array of targets. The War Department sought a barren, desolate, uninhabited area and, perhaps recalling the 1873 Divisional exercise, chose north Dartmoor. In 1875, with the agreement of the Duchy of Cornwall and the encouragement of the Okehampton Town Council, both of which saw a useful income from land that had no other use, the first artillery camp was pitched on Halstock Down just south of Okehampton and three weeks of artillery firing took place on the northern part of the Moor between the East Okement and Taw Rivers. Flags indicating which area was in use were hoisted on Halstock Hill near Belstone, the main entry onto the moor. So successful was this exercise that the quantity of field and horse artillery that travelled to train on Dartmoor increased each year until there was firing throughout the summer months. The railway line to Okehampton, opened in 1871

,made travel comparatively easy using special trains and carriages. The construction of the military siding, in the 1890's, just below Okehampton Camp made travel even more convenient although the inn keepers on the roads to the southwest must have felt the loss in trade.

For the first fifteen years the artillerymen and their horses lived under canvas erected each year by the first battery deployed to Okehampton. Although bell tents and temporary horse lines provided some shelter from the wind and rain, the War Office made arrangements to build a permanent camp in the area and took out a 999 year lease on 93 acres of land from the Okehampton Park Estate.

Okehampton Artillery Practice Camp was built between 1892 and 1894 at a cost, as the design drawing shows, of £13,469. Probably laid out in the same form as the tented camp, it provided accommodation for the officers on the high ground to the south of the Camp with rooms for their servants in the rear, mess halls for the men, who slept on straw filled palliasses in tents erected on terraces cut into the north facing slopes of the Park. In addition to their battery mess halls, in which they ate, socialised and, with the tables folded up and stacked to one side, received instructions

and lectures, the soldiers had a canteen for games, reading, writing and tea. As an alternative, just outside the camp entrance, one of the many benevolent societies, provided char and wads (tea and sandwiches) with the backing of an occasional prayer session. This building remains today as a private house, Gunnery Lodge. Up to 760 horses were stabled in permanent buildings, with a greater straw allowance than the men! The officers' horses, which they had to provide for themselves, had individual loose boxes in two substantial granite and stone building that survive today as soldier's accommodation. The soldier's horse lines consisted of curved corrugated iron roofed brick buildings with stabling for 30 horses each. The stables had a north facing open front that could be closed off with a canvas screen and a row of rings to take a taut rope to which the horses could be tethered in good weather or during mucking out. Each group of stables had a tack room, feed store and to provide for the shoeing, a farrier's shop. Sick horses were removed to a horse infirmary, well separated from the other horses to prevent the spread of infection. A Guard House was built overlooking the gun lines where the artillery pieces were parked when not in use. Unusually, the guard house lies inside the Camp, instead of alongside the main entrance where it could control access and egress to the Camp. The Royal Artillery look after their guns with pride and salute them in the same way as the infantry salute their colours, hence the importance given to guarding the guns rather than controlling entry to a forsaken camp on the edge of Dartmoor. The Camp was administered by 2 non commissioned officers, known as the Barracky Bills, who lived in the Camp with their families. Their married quarters, constructed of corrugated iron, still survive as do their stores and workshops at the Camp entrance. The Barracky Bills used local builders to maintain the camp, local laundries and local food suppliers. Training was organised and run by a small permanent staff supplemented, during the training season, by a gun battery. Their principal task was to run the ranges for the visiting units carrying out artillery practice.

The Camp accommodated, at any one time, two brigades, each of which contained 4 batteries of 6 guns. Each brigade, consisting of approximately 170 men and 90 horses, usually trained at Okehampton for a fortnight.

An additional 10,000 acres of High Moorland were leased from the Duchy of Cornwall in 1895 and used almost continuously from May to September each year.

The batteries were presented with an imaginative firing programme that used an elaborate system of static and moving targets. These could be made to represent advancing infantry, cavalry, guns and indeed almost anything that might appear on the battlefield. Life was given to this complex system of targets by some 30 miles of rope and pulleys, activated by teams of horses from the permanent staff gun battery.

Remains of the targetry system can still be found on Dartmoor. The earth and granite covered concrete bunkers were used for both safety, observing artillery fire and for pulling up targets. One OP22 on the Loop Road near East Okement Farm, is still used for controlling live firing on Okehampton Field Firing Area. Others, OP15 at the southern end of the Loop Road, and 3, 6, 7, 16 and 17 are used as training features, shelter and command posts. There were several moving target systems using various gauges of rail. The longest, down the eastern slopes of East Mill Tor from OP7 into Skit Bottom was constructed before the eastern side of the Loop Road. It is thought that the guns were positioned at East Okement Farm or along the Oke Tor Ridge. Targets were positioned on perhaps ten trolleys that had been pulled to the top of the gradient and were then released to represent a cavalry attack. There is no indication of an engine to hoist the trolleys back so it is thought that ponies would have been used to tow them back up the hill. The rails from the East Mill target training were lifted in 1982 for use elsewhere but most were found to be unserviceable. Not all of the moving target systems used rails, that south of Blackdown still to be found as a long groove in the ground, consisted of a sledge made of corrugated iron carrying the targets that was pulled by horses using a long rope that kept them out of the impact area. Static and individual targets, together with their pulley system, can still be found amongst the heather. The men shaped silhouette targets mounted horizontally in frames that, when pulled, rose to the vertical. Ropes attached to a counter balanced arm provided the leverage to raise the targets and to maintain surprise and safety the ropes ran in gulleys around pivot wheels back to the operator's safe position. Initially communication with the target operators would have been by flag, the operator perhaps using a periscope to observe it from a position of safety. Later, an extensive telephone system was laid to the bunkers and the target operators. The range control telephone exchange that controlled the target array was on Winter Tor SX 609195. It is said that the men who dug in the lead covered telephone lines were paid by the yard

and they weren't allowed to deviate from the straight route even if they had to dig through a granite boulder.

Access to the target area was along the existing tin miners' and peat cutters' tracks. The main track going west of East Mill Tor and south to Okement Hill SX 603878 is today the western leg of the Loop Road. The eastern side was probably constructed around 1900 or possibly later.

Other remains point to the way in which the artillery training was carried out. Either side of the sand pit SX 595924 are the slight indentations of castellated and zig zag trenches. As the sand pit first appears on the 18[xx] map edition, it is probable that the trenches were dug in about [xxxx]. At this time, Britain was suffering losses at the hands of the Boers, in South Africa, who made extensive use of trench systems. It is surmised that the trenches at Okehampton were dug to find the best way of destroying them with artillery. And it is not, perhaps, too fanciful to make the leap to the vast trench systems of the First World War. When, in 1875, artillery had first fired from Halstock Hill SX 599924 gun ranges were short and each individual gun was fired directly at the target by the master gunner. As propellant developed, barrels strengthened and ammunition improved, it became possible to fire at longer ranges over hills onto the enemy position giving both surprise and cover from the enemy's fire. To control the gun fire, an observer was required and he needed to be able to communicate with the gun line. Although later, radio and telephone line would be used, in the 1800s, the observer communicated by flag signal and semaphore, a system of arm signals used to spell out a message. The granite base of one of the semaphore sites is still to be seen on Black Down SX 582923. Earth works were also dug to create enemy positions that could be bombarded. The redoubt SX 599893 south of East Mill Tor, is the largest example, while others are to be found on Black Down SX 579921.

Then, as now, public safety was a prime consideration. Red flags were hoisted on prominent tors to indicate when firing was in progress and the danger area was cleared of livestock before firing started. This duty was even part of the tenancy agreement for East Okement Farm. In addition to moving his stock out of the danger area, the tenant farmer and his family were required to move out of the farmhouse

when artillery was firing overhead. It is said that the Commandant took pity on the family camped on the side of Winter Tor and provided them with a stove to cook on. Later a bunker was constructed attached to the farmhouse for the family to shelter in when firing was in progress.

While the citizens of Okehampton were delighted at the additional trade, the graziers, whose stock was driven out of the danger area, protested. Agreement with the commoners was reached the following year and compensation was paid to them from 1882.

On the western side of the Moor, 3,448 acres of Willsworthy Manor and the commoners' rights were purchased by the War Office in the early 1900s. This land was developed in the 1920s to provide rifle, grenade and field firing ranges as well as some permanent buildings which formed the nucleus of a tented camp to house the units using those ranges. The field firing complex was served by numerous bunkers that protected the men who pulled up targets on the receipt of telephoned orders.

Although there is no known evidence of training on Dartmoor during the First World War (men volunteered, received a short training and were sent straight to the front), artillery training on Okehampton continued through the 1920s and 1930s. Batteries rotated through the training cycle, spending two weeks improving their accuracy and speed of reaction. Inevitably there was conflict between the Commandant and his small team of Instructors of Gunnery, who wore a white band around their hats, and the battery commanders, who would be responsible for taking their guns to war. Such rivalry between theory and practice, between instructor and student and between the experienced and the young enthusiast continues to this day.

Observation of the enemy beyond the next hill became vitally important as gun ranges increased. Forward observation parties could move forward to overlook the enemy, often at considerable risk to themselves. Balloons offered an alternative in comparative safety if enemy aircraft were not operating. Sightings and corrections were either signalled down to the ground crew or written and dropped in a canister. Providing a telephone line from the balloon to the ground not only improved

communication, but probably prevented a headache or two when the canister was dropped too accurately.

The prospect of another war with Germany led to an intensification of training and a building programme at Okehampton Camp. Remembering the horrors of the First World War's gas attacks, two decontamination centres were built (a third was constructed in Castle Road, Okehampton). Other builds included a small Non Commissioned Officers Mess, used today as Headquarters Dartmoor Training Area, the garage and workshop, the NAAFI and row upon row of Nissen Hut accommodation.

As War approached, Territorial Army units were mobilized. Amongst others, the Devonshire Yeomanry gathered at Okehampton Camp to finalise their training. At an Officers' formal dinner night, the young subalterns brought in a horse to the playing of their regimental march, Widecombe Fair about Tom Pearce and Tom Copley. Unfortunately, the horse's legs went through the floor and it was left stranded on the joists. The Commanding Officer gave the inevitable order to 'get it out', a task that took the subalterns a considerable amount of ingenuity and time.

Shortly after the outbreak of the Second World War, virtually the whole Moor was requisitioned for military training of every description though artillery firing predominated. Another large area of 4,451 hectares (11,000 acres) to the south and south east of Hexworthy, commonly referred to as Scorrison, was also taken over for rifle, machine gun and anti-tank firing. A new rifle range was built near Rippon Tor SX 7475 , an airfield constructed on Roborough Down SX 5064 and a new hutted camp built at Plasterdown SX 9172. This was later used as a hospital by the American Forces.

With the threat of invasion, the 13th Moorland battalion of the Home Guard was formed with its headquarters at Parke, Bovey Tracey. Volunteer members at Home Guard units formed in nearly every village or town, patrolled the Moor and constructed obstacles to prevent gliders landing. Pill boxes were constructed, one of which remains alongside the entrance to Okehampton's Simmons Park. One of the main stop lines for the invading German Forces was to be along the ridge at Whiddon

Down SX 6992. Plans for mobile defence, using bicycles, were prepared and practised. At Widecome one of the carefully prepared exercises fell into disarray because no-one had bothered to tell the village telephone operator that she was to be the communications' hub and she fell asleep.

An 18 inch calibre railway gun was brought to Devon and fired onto Dartmoor from Halwill Junction and North Tawton. Whether this was done for training, to boost morale or to confuse German air reconnaissance is not known. Locals recall the deafening sound of it firing and the sound like a dustbin rumbling as the shell passed overhead. The gun was constructed from a barrel removed from HMS Furious when she was converted into an aircraft carrier in 1917 and remounted onto a railway flat by Elswick Ordnance Company.

During the Plymouth blitz, bonfires were lit on the Moor to decoy German bombers into dropping their bombs away from the vital factories and dockyards. Prisoner of war camps were built at Bridestowe, South Zeal and in other villages. Farm production was often heavily dependent on the prisoners, some of whom remained after the War. Storage depots were constructed under the trees at Abbeyford Woods SX 5997 near Okehampton and bombs lined the road approaching Bridestowe SX 523870.

During the year before the invasion of Europe, the 4th and the 29th United States Divisions trained intensively on Dartmoor. Thousands of troops were billeted in tented camps alongside the roads crossing the Moor and the tors reverberated constantly to the sound of battle, some shells even being fired by the Navy from Plymouth Sound.

As the invasion forces prepared, heavy tracked artillery drove to Folly Gate, north of Okehampton, flames belching from their red hot exhausts, steel tracks tearing the tarmac and narrow lane banks pushed aside. The guns fired bombardments over Okehampton onto the moor. While the guns were there, the exhausts were exchanged for higher pipes, so that they could wade ashore. And then as quickly as they arrived they moved out to be loaded on the landing craft destined for France.

At the end of the War, the War Office, as the Ministry of Defence was then known, owned, leased, licensed or had requisitioned some 31,617 hectares (78,000 acres) of the Moor. The public were permanently denied access to 19,862 hectares (49,000 acres). By 1948, largely as a result of the 1947 Public Inquiry, land holdings had reduced to 15,160 hectares (37,400 acres) of which 3,648 hectares (9,000 acres) were permanently closed to the public, 8,452 hectares (20,850 acres) were open to the public except when training was in progress and on only 3,060 hectares (7,550 acres) were there access at all times.

In July 1947, the Government published the report of the Hobhouse Committee on National Parks (Command 7121). The Report recognised the special significance and beauty of Dartmoor, and the various forms of development and land use, including military training and Service uses.

The Dartmoor National Park was designated in 1951 under the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

Although the Royal Artillery continued to train on Dartmoor after the Second World War, the Royal Marines based in the South West and their training centre at Lypstone became a major user particularly of Merrivale, which was run by the Royal Navy.

Both Mons and Eaton Hall Officer Cadet Training Units set up battle schools at Okehampton Camp where trainee officers could be tested against Dartmoor's terrain and climate.

Units that were mobilised for operations in Suez in 1956 trained on Dartmoor, including some tanks. These operated briefly in the Yes Tor area (SX581901), their movement limited by the mires. Later, they were driven down to Okehampton to be loaded on tank transporters but one fell off the ramps blocking the road for several hours until it could be loaded.

As a result of the 1973 Defence Lands' Review by Lord Nugent, the War Department's land holdings were further reduced to today's total of 13,198 hectares

(32,559 acres). As part of this reduction in military requirements, most of the additional temporary buildings in Okehampton and Willsworthy Camps were removed, the camp at Plasterdown was demolished and the site restored to moorland, and the Rippon Tor range closed.

In 1975/6 Lady Sharp GBE conducted a public local inquiry into the continued use of Dartmoor by the MOD for training purposes. Alternative sites were investigated without success. Additional emphasis was placed on arrangements made to increase public access. Regular consultation between the MOD, the National Park Authority and other bodies was recommended and resulted in the setting up of the Dartmoor Steering Group which, meeting annually under an independent chairman, reports to the Secretaries of State for Defence and Environment.

Willsworthy Camp was rebuilt in a less intrusive location off the open moor after a public inquiry into the planning decision. The new camp opened in 1995, provides simple, spartan accommodation for 100.

The Willsworthy Ranges were modernised and slightly reorientated in 1983/1984 to provide an Electric Target Range and a Mechanised Moving Target Trainer in addition to one of the gallery ranges being retained. This provides the facilities necessary to train progressively both recruit and marksman.

The licence with the National Trust for the military use for the area south of Ringmoor ended in

(19) and the Roborough licence ended in (19). Both these areas were replaced, after a search for alternatives, by a licence from South West Water for the use of 849 hectares (2,094 acres) around Cramber Tor and contiguous with the existing southern dry training area of Ringmoor. As training started on Cramber after Town and Country Planning legislation was introduced the Ministry of Defence is required to obtain planning consent, the next of which is due in 2012.

With the passing of the Environment Act in 1995, which slightly amended the National Park's purposes and added the responsibility of caring for the local community, the Secretary of State for Environment confirmed, as had previous

Governments, that they accepted that military training would have to continue in National Parks and that any difficulties should be resolved locally.

Today Okehampton and Willsworthy Camps still provide accommodation for units using the Training Area, though the users now come from all three Armed Forces, both regular and volunteer, and cadet organisations. The three live firing areas, Okehampton, Merrivale and Willsworthy, account for 9,187 hectares (22,664) acres of the total training area and these are used for live firing on average up to 120 days per year, although usage varies between ranges. At all other times the public has access over the range danger areas even though other forms of military training may be taking place.