

THE OLDBURY VOLUNTEERS (1860 - 1908)

The formation of the Oldbury Volunteers

Volunteer brigades were raised in the late 1700s following the French Revolution to counteract any revolutionary spirit in England. Oldbury was in Shropshire, part of Halesowen parish at this time: although an 'Oldbury' brigade was not formed, there was a 'Halesowen' brigade, and this may have included some Oldbury men. By the time tension had subsided after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, these early volunteer brigades had all been disbanded or integrated into the county militia.

In the 1850s the fear of invasion by the French grew, and volunteer companies were again raised throughout Britain to defend the land. Oldbury had reverted to the county of Worcestershire by this time, and, therefore, the Oldbury company of volunteers, which was raised in 1860, became the 16th Company, 39th Worcestershire Volunteer Rifles. The sole purpose of the volunteer companies was to defend the homeland in the event of invasion. Their members were unpaid part-time soldiers who even had to provide their own uniforms. In 1863 the separate volunteer companies were organised into a national force.

The move to establish a volunteer force in Oldbury was led by three men, Captain William Bennitt, an iron master and Deputy Lieutenant of Worcestershire, James Timmins Chance of Chance's glass-works, a JP and a magistrate for Oldbury, and one of the leading medical men in Oldbury, Dr Thomas Richard Cooper. Handbills were circulated around the town calling on young men who wished to join to give their names in at the 'Big House', the office of the solicitors Hayes and Wright. A meeting at the 'District Rooms' (later Lloyds Bank) showed great enthusiasm for the venture with many 'tradesmen and workmen' giving in their names. No-one was formally enrolled for three months, but the potential recruits met nightly for drill instruction under Sgt Gwinnett, the volunteers' first instructor, who was a machine clerk at Captain Bennitt's furnaces. Every man was required to provide his own uniform at a cost of £5 5s. These were distinctive dark blue-green uniforms, in contrast to the scarlet of the regular soldiers.

On 20th April 1860 the first fifty members were sworn in at a meeting in the Market Hall run by Captain Bennitt and Mr Chance. The Oldbury Company of Volunteers was in existence! Armies need officers as well as men, and the first Captain was Pynson Wilmott Bennitt, the son of William Bennitt, and the proprietor of a brick works in Oldbury. He was supported by Lieutenant J Chambers, and Ensign A Wright, an Oldbury solicitor. Dr Cooper acted as Lieutenant-surgeon, and the Vicar of Oldbury, Revd Henry Bond Bowlby, became their chaplain.

The oath of allegiance, sworn by each man, was: *"I do hereby make oath that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her majesty, her heirs, and successors, and that I will, as in my duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend Her Majesty, her heirs, and successors, in person crown and dignity, against all enemies: and will observe and obey all orders of Her Majesty, her heirs, and successors, and the generals and officers set over me. So help me, God."*



Uniform of the 2nd Volunteer Battalion in the 1880s. The 1st Battalion, which included the Oldbury Company, did not have the red facings.

[On display in the Regimental Museum
photo: Terry Daniels]

The original members of the company were: Levi Allen, Jonathan Bradley, Thomas Bonser, Edwin Bridge, John Cheshire, Joseph Clarke, Richard John Cooper, John Dingley, John Dudley, Joseph Edwards, Thomas Element, Francis Ensor, Joseph Green, Walter Groves, Richard Gwinnett, George Hall, John Henry Hartill, Samuel Hartshorn, Phillip Johnson, John William Keene, Benjamin Lancaster, William Lees, Joseph Merris, John Moore, David Morgan, Thomas Morris, Charles Pigott, James Plant, John Rawlins, William Richards, John Robertson, John Rogers, Samuel A Sadler, Matthew Sillitoe, William Sillitoe, John Simkiss, Francis Skelding, James Skelding, John J Slade, Edward Southwick, William Sower, John G Taylor, Charlie Thomlinson, James Whitehouse, Thomas Whitehouse, Thomas Yeomans. Six of these are listed as traders in the 1860 directory for Oldbury and include a provision dealer (Bonser), a

grocer and wine merchant (Ensor), a draper and clothier (Lees), a bootmaker (Moore), a clogmaker (Hall) and a 'shop-keeper' (Clarke). Richard Cooper was the son of Dr Thomas Cooper, and articled to an attorney. Thomas Yeomans was promoted from the ranks to become the company's fourth Captain.

The volunteers came to the notice of the townsfolk as they paraded out to various pieces of waste ground for their regular drill. Dr Cooper stated that they needed a 'respectable bugle', and his daughter Isabella formed a small committee of ladies in the town to raise funds to buy one. This was achieved quickly, and the presentation of the bugle was a big event. The company paraded in front of Dr Cooper's house in Birmingham Street, and marched to a field near the Carriage Works. After a display by the volunteers, Miss Cooper presented the bugle, which was inscribed: "Presented by the ladies of Oldbury to the 16th Company, 39th Worcestershire Volunteer Rifles, September 1860". The day finished with a grand celebration at the National Schools.



The bugle presented to the Oldbury Volunteers in 1860. It is now owned by the Regimental Museum.

[Photo: Terry Daniels]

The growth of the Oldbury Volunteers

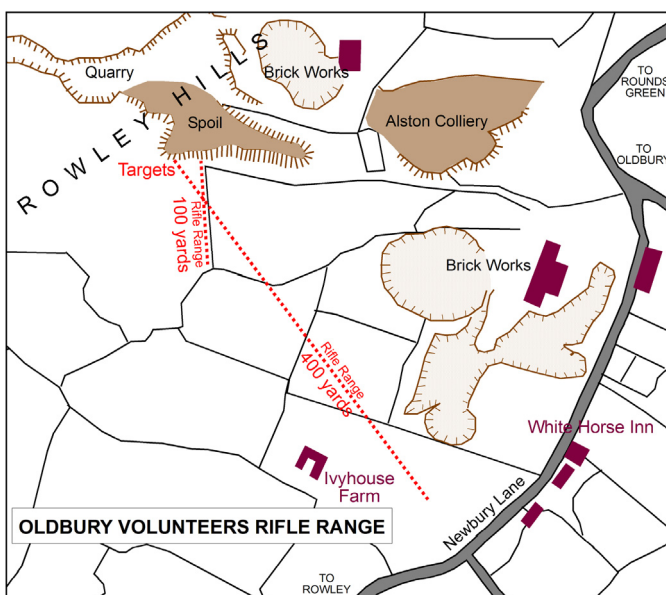
The volunteers were trained as riflemen, although they were only issued with one rifle to five men in the early days: the army would issue one rifle per man should they be called out to fight. Accurate shooting was a critical part of the training, and to encourage this, in 1861, Lord Beauchamp gave each company a cup to be held by the winner of an annual shooting competition within the company. The whereabouts of the Oldbury Beauchamp Cup is not known, but other examples are on display at the Regimental Museum.

The Oldbury Volunteers did not have their own rifle range, and had to travel to the Dudley company's range for practice and competitions. The first Beauchamp competition was held on a dull misty day, and, with great forethought, Cpl George Hall, the clogmaker, took a fire-bucket and wood with him to keep the target mist free for all the com-



Two of the cups presented by Lord Beauchamp in 1861, and now displayed at the Regimental Museum.

[Photo: Terry Daniels]



petitors. Not only was he applauded for this, he actually won the competition, and so was the first holder of the cup. The officers of all the Worcestershire companies had their own annual shooting competition, the winner holding a splendid silver salver.

Having to travel to Dudley for shooting practice was very inconvenient in the days before trams, and the volunteers soon acquired their own range on the Rowley Hills, close to Ivy House Farm in Newbury Lane. The range was laid out by the men of the company themselves. The targets were backed by the spoil mounds from Alston Colliery, brick works and quarries: even in those days, the safety of live firing was a major concern. This range was used until the turn of the century, when advances in weaponry made it unsuitable.

The company was heavily involved in the social life of



Officer's shako and forage cap, 1860.

[In the Regimental Museum - photo: Terry Daniels]

the town, turning out on special occasions. One such event was the wedding of the Prince of Wales in March 1863, when the volunteers paraded in the Market Square, marched around the streets and fired a 'feu de joie' when they arrived back at the old churchyard. They also took a prominent part in the celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilees in 1887 and 1897.

Instructions to members of the brigade were published in the 'Weekly News', outlining the schedule of activities for the coming week. On 25th September 1880, for example, the instructions were:

*"1st Worcestershire Rifle Volunteers (K Company).
Orders for the ensuing Week.*

Orderly Sergt. - L-Sergt. Cooper.

Saturday, 25th and Monday, 27th - Class Firing for Recruits, at 3pm, when all who can must attend.

The following Rifles must be returned to the Armoury without further delay - Nos. 38, 43, 46 and 54.

*By Order (Signed) H R Wolrige,
Major and Adjutant, Commanding H Company."*

There is a strange combination of order and request in 'all who can must attend'!

As part of Lord Cardwell's reform of the army in 1881, county regiments were established. The Worcestershire Regiment was formed by bringing together two Regiments of Foot, the 29th (Worcestershire) and 36th (Herefordshire), the two regiments of the Worcestershire Militia and the Worcestershire Volunteer Companies. The regulars became the 1st and 2nd Battalions, the Militia the 3rd and 4th (Militia) Battalions, and the volunteers were organised into two Battalions, the 1st and 2nd (Volunteer) Battalions. The 1st (Volunteer) Battalion covered the north of the county, and the Oldbury volunteers became the 'K' Company of this battalion.



Belt pouch plate and helmet plate of the 1880s-90s.

[On display in the Regimental Museum - photo: Terry Daniels]

In 1881, they had a rare opportunity to see Queen Victoria at the Royal Review at Windsor. The volunteers fell in at the armoury on a Saturday morning and marched to Langley Station where a special train awaited them. There were stops to collect the Halesowen Company at Old Hill, and at Kidderminster to take on other companies. Two carriages were added containing meat, bread, ginger beer, beer, weak whisky and water. Stops at Bewdley and Stourport added further companies, and the battalion was complete. They stopped at Slough station and marched to Windsor, welcomed by flags and bunting all the way. In the afternoon they joined other regiments and were reviewed by Queen Victoria. Favourable comments were passed on the Worcester Regiment, particularly their behaviour during a long delay before retraining back to Oldbury. They arrived back at 9.15 on Sunday morning to be greeted by strains of 'Home, sweet home' from the band. Although the men had been expected to pay 2s 6d towards the cost of the trip, all their contributions were paid by Captain Woodhall.

The 'Weekly News' of 15th May 1886 reported, "A drill hall is the one needful thing for the Oldbury Volunteers. The expense need not be great, while such a building would prove of incalculable benefit to the Volunteers themselves and the town generally." A suitable building was found by 1892, when the old skating rink in Tabernacle Street was purchased for a drill hall and barracks, with an adjoining house for the drill instructor. In 1904, the drill hall and armoury was moved to the former police station at 37 Church Street, and remained there until the 1960s when a new hall was built at Causeway Green.

Captain P W Bennitt resigned in 1868. The full list of captains is



The original drill hall in Tabernacle Street (left) and the new drill hall and armoury in Church Street (above).

[Photographs from 'Picturesque Oldbury', Revd H McKean, 1900]

Captain P W Bennitt
 Captain J Chambers
 Captain Bullock
 Captain Thomas Yeomans (promoted from Sergeant)
 Captain J W Keene
 Captain Woodall (of Netherton Boiler Works)
 Captain Anderson (of Lloyds Bank, Oldbury then New Street, Birmingham)
 Captain J Sadler Stockton
 Captain Guy V Evers (until the disbanding of the Volunteers, 31st March 1908)

There were seven sergeant-instructors in the forty-eight years of the volunteers, Sgts Gwinnett, J Harris, C Harris, Chiverton, Palmer, Newman and Pickerell.

In 1894 a long service medal was introduced for volunteers who had completed 20 years service. Colour-sergeant Charlie Thomlinson was one of the longest serving members, being part of the brigade for thirty-five years, and retiring from the brigade in 1895.

The Volunteers at War, 1900-1902

When the Boer War started in 1899, many volunteers offered to serve with the regiment. The offers were not taken up at first, but after the campaign had suffered disastrous losses, volunteers were accepted. The first contingent in January 1900 included eight men from Oldbury: Sgt James Darby, Evan Evans, Arthur Holloway, William Jukes, Samuel Langford, William Lowe, Benjamin Parkes, and Frank Price. Adam Rubery later joined the first contingent. Evan Thomas Evans was only eighteen when he joined the volunteers in 1896, and twenty-two when he was accepted for service in South Africa.

The volunteers left Southampton for Cape Town in March 1900 to join the 2nd Battalion of the Worcesters at Bloemfontein. They saw action at Cape Colony, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, and engagements at Reit Spruit, Hackport, Bethlehem, Fouriesber, Thurnedale and Bosch-Fontein over the next year. On 10th September 1900 Sgt Darby was commended for his action.

Volunteers were only expected to serve for a maximum of one year, and in October 1900 the original volunteers were ordered home. However, they were then diverted to duties on lines of communication, mainly manning blockhouses



Eleven of the Oldbury Volunteers who served in the Boer War. This photograph is taken from the illuminated address presented to the soldiers in June 1901; William Fisher, whose photograph was inset above the main picture, is omitted.

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|------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Benjamin Parkes</i> | <i>Frank Price</i> | <i>Arthur Holloway</i> | <i>William Jukes</i> | <i>William Lowe</i> |
| <i>Evan Evans</i> | | <i>James Darby</i> | <i>Samuel Langford</i> | |
| <i>William Price</i> | | <i>Adam Rubery</i> | <i>Thomas Garbett</i> | |

[In Regimental Museum - photo: Terry Daniels]

along the railway lines. They finally left South Africa in May 1901, arriving home in June. A second smaller contingent of volunteers replaced them on duty in the blockhouses, and these did not return until June 1902. This contingent included two men from Oldbury, William Fisher and William Price. Thomas Garbett, also served, making a total of twelve Oldbury men.

In total, four officers and 179 men of the Worcestershire volunteer companies served in South Africa, and six died there of disease. All received the Queen's South Africa Medal. The returning soldiers went first to Worcester for a Civic Reception and were presented with a watch-chain medallion, known as the 'Worcester Jewel'. Then they travelled to Oldbury for a civic reception and a rapturous welcome.

Welcome home!

The people of Oldbury loyally supported the families of the men who were serving in South Africa. In June 1901 the 'Weekly News' reported comments by Revd Brown that over £2000 had been raised for the wives and children of the volunteers during their absence 'mainly from the pockets of the working men of the town'. Bone's 'Yearbook for 1905' quotes the Income & Expenditure Account of 'Oldbury Soldiers, Sailors and Reservists Association' for "...assistance to families of those taking part in the late South African War": total credit £2227 16s 6d, of which £1774 15s 9d came from employers and employees, and the remainder from concerts, football matches, collections, and other fundraising. The balance of this fund was used as a basis for a similar fund at the start of the First World War.

Their return after eighteen months in South Africa was accompanied by local festivities. They returned on the 'Avondale

Castle' which made slow progress, so their arrival was delayed, and it was uncertain exactly when they would reach Oldbury. The town was rather caught out when they arrived on Monday 17th June 1901, since they were expected on the Tuesday. Nevertheless, the Reception Committee was hastily assembled and handbills distributed around the town. Eight of the men returned that day: Sgt Joseph Darby, Corp Arthur Holloway, Pvts Evan Thomas Evans, William Jukes, Samuel Langford, William Lowe, Benjamin Parkes, and Adam Rubery. They pulled into Langley Green Station on the 4.30 pm train, and were greeted by Langley Village Prize Band, and the Volunteers under command of Captain Sadler Stockton, who led the procession to Oldbury Town Hall. Although they had not been expected until the next day, there were very large crowds all along the way, 'waving hats, handkerchiefs, with ringing cheers as they passed'.

The procession bringing the returning volunteers to Oldbury, Monday 17th June 1901. They are led through the cheering crowds by the Langley Band and the Volunteer Company.

[Sandwell Community History and Archives]



In the Town Hall they were greeted by the Chairman of the Council, Councillor W T Davies, and the civic leaders. After the singing of the National Anthem, they were welcomed back on behalf of the town, and presented with an invitation to a formal dinner on the following Thursday. Speeches followed from Revd Brown, the Vicar of Oldbury, and Cllr Henry McKean of the Unitarian Church. Cllr Thomlinson, a founder member of the Volunteers, greeted his old comrades, commenting that he was glad they had been fortunate enough not to be disabled. Captain Stockton responded on behalf of the men, saying that he was amazed at the crowds who had turned out to see the procession and greet the men.

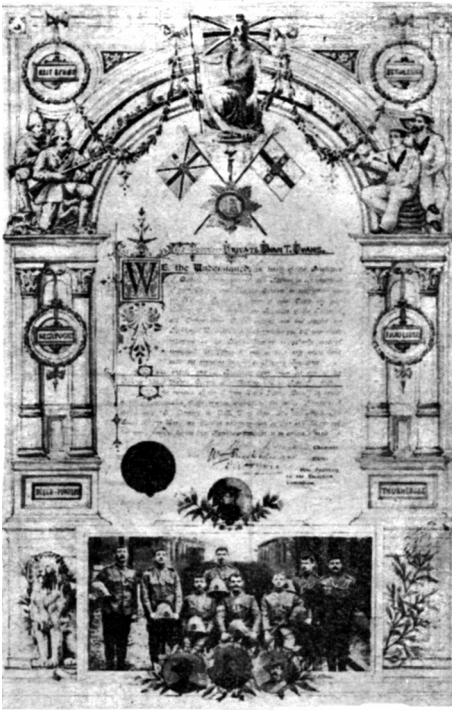
On the Tuesday, Sgt A T Johnson of the Worcestershire Yeomanry returned to Langley after a year in South Africa. He too was met at Langley Green station by the Chairman of the Council and dignitaries. Led by the Langley Band, he was carried shoulder high around the streets of Langley by members of Langley Cricket Club with which he was associated before going to war.

On Thursday 20th June, the civic banquet was held for the eight volunteers, Sgt Johnson and twenty-two reservists who had served in the Boer War. After patriotic speeches and speeches of welcome, the volunteers were presented with a framed illuminated address, designed and executed by T R Stokes of Oldbury Technical School. It read:

"We the Undersigned, on behalf of the Inhabitants of Oldbury, present you with this Address in commemoration of your Gallant and Patriotic Services in volunteering into the National Forces in defence of your Queen and your Country, at a time when the Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State declared war and invaded our Territory. We most heartily congratulate you and your eleven colleagues on the Noble Services so gallantly rendered throughout the campaign, and on your safe return home under the protecting care of an Almighty Providence ... We also embody copy of Resolution given under the seal of Oldbury Urban Council meeting held on June 7th 1901 "We the members of Oldbury Urban District Council do hereby record our appreciation of the services rendered by the twelve Volunteers of the Oldbury "K" Company 1st V B Worcestershire Regiment who served in the South African War; we rejoice in welcoming them on their safe return, and feel deeply grateful for the loyal Patriotism displayed in so serious a crisis."

OLDBURY SEAL
Public Buildings, Oldbury
June 13, 1901"

William R Davis, Chairman
William Shakespeare, Clerk
Thomas Jones, Hon Secretary of the Reception Committee



Reproduction of Evan Evans's illuminated address in the 'Oldbury Weekly News' [Photo - Terry Daniels]

The 'Oldbury Weekly News' of 15th June 1901 included a description of the illuminated address:

'The basis of the design is a triumphal arch, the keystone to which is fronted by a seated figure of Britannia, supporting in her right hand a Union Jack, under her is a trophy composed of the regimental colours of Worcestershire. To the right hand, upon the pier of the arch, is a group of khaki-clad scouts, crouching, rifles in hand, and looking very much on the alert, whilst to her left, on the opposite pier, is a group of our "handy-men". The groups of figures are joined by garlands and festoons of laurel and other leaves and flowers. The centrepiece at the base consists of a photograph of a group of eight of the brave men who volunteered for active service, whilst vignettes of the remaining four are skilfully arranged around. To the right of the photographs is a figure of the British Lion, alert and watchful as ever, whilst in the corresponding panel on the other side is an olive branch emblematical of the peace that is so slowly dawning on our land. On the other side are garlands surrounding cartouches on which are inscribed the names of some of the engagements in which the volunteers have taken part. The whole is brightly coloured, subdued, however, by the introduction of mauve and purple ribbons, a touching reminder of the change which has taken place since the outbreak of the war.'

Six decades later Oldbury conferred the Freedom of the Borough on the Worcestershire Regiment. The 'Weekly News' published pictures of a Boer War survivor, Evan Evans, and his illuminated address, 'his most prized possession'.

On the following Saturday there was a procession around Oldbury. The streets were decorated with flags and bunting, and again lined with spectators, despite the steady drizzle falling all day. The procession left the Market Place headed by the including Oldbury troopers of the Worcestershire Yeomanry, followed by Oldbury Police, Langley Village Prize band, and a 'good muster' of the Oldbury Corps of Volunteers. Then came the coach with the returned volunteers, brakes with the ward committees, the Oldbury Church Lads Brigade, Oldbury Fire Brigade with its manual and tender, a floral car, a car with Britannia, a working forge with two anvils, a hospital ward and many more floats. Jack Judge appeared in a pearly suit, and there were decorated brakes from local public houses and tradesmen.

The celebrations concluded on the Sunday with a thanksgiving service at Oldbury Parish Church.

In September 1902 the first reservists to arrive back from the war returned, Privates Barratt, Carroll, Griffin, Starraway and Webley. They received a warm welcome from the people of Oldbury, but nothing on the scale of the reception that greeted the volunteers.



The band of the 1st Worcestershire (Volunteer) Battalion

[In the Regimental Museum - photo: Terry Daniels]

The last days of the Oldbury Volunteers

The volunteers had a routine of firing practice, drill and lectures, sweetened by the opportunity that membership provided for mixing socially. They went to an annual camp, alternately at a military base and at the seaside. This continued for a few more years.

The end of the Volunteers came at midnight on 31st March 1908. The army was reorganised from 1st April in response to the perceived growing threat from Europe. The Territorial Army was established and took over the role of the volunteers and their drill hall and facilities. When they were disbanded, most of the volunteers transferred to the 'E' Company, 1st Battalion Worcestershire Regiment of the Territorial Army, still based in Oldbury. One exception was Evan Evans, who retired from part-time soldiering. The first instruction for all members was to attend Church Parade at Oldbury Parish Church.

The Oldbury Volunteer Company was also a training ground for men who went on to enlist in the regular army, usually the Worcestershire regiment. James Williams of Langley Green joined the Volunteers in 1906, and then the 4th Worcesters, serving in India: he died at Gallipoli. With the outbreak of war six years later, many others who had served in the Oldbury volunteers enlisted or served their country with the Territorial Regiment. Sgt Joseph Grove of Wesley Street, Oldbury, had joined the Volunteers in 1900 at the age of fifteen, and transferred to the Territorials in 1908: he acted as an instructor in the army before volunteering to go to France, and was killed in the German Spring Offensive of 1918. Although only 'Sunday soldiers', the men of the Oldbury Volunteers served their country well!

The 'Weekly News' of 8th June 1901 included a poem written by N L Cooke of Queen Street, Oldbury, as a tribute to the men returning from the Boer War, '*Welcome to the Oldbury Volunteers*'.

Welcome home, brave sons of Britain,
To your native town today;
To this hour we've long looked forward
Since to war you marched away.
When the call of duty bade you
Leave your country, home and wives,
You were ready - aye and willing,
With your service and your lives.

God has spared you in his mercy,
Through the perils of the war,
Through its troubles and privations;
May you never know them more.
You have borne them well and bravely
And are back, all safe and sound;
You shall find a hearty welcome
Waiting in your native town.

Every subject, young and old,
Throughout all the town, today
Welcomes you, with pride and honour,
From amid the battle's fray.
Underneath the King's bright colours,
We will greet you with our cheers;
Every heart cries out in union -
God bless our gallant Volunteers!

Much of the information contained in this article is based on contemporary reports of activities in the 'Oldbury Weekly News', especially a short history of the volunteers in the edition of 18th April 1908, and a report of the return of the volunteers from the Boer War in the edition of 15th June 1901. These have been supplemented by information and photographs from the Regimental Museum at Worcester and other sources. The photographs are individually acknowledged.