

**‘Form! form! Riflemen form!’:  
The Oxford University Rifle Volunteer Corps in New College Archives**



New College Archives, Oxford, SCR/A1/20

New College Archives SCR/A1 is a collection of photographs, principally of New College Fellows, either as individual portraits or in groups, dating for the most part from around the 1860s. Three pictures (SCR/A1/18-20), however, are notably different from others in the collection. These depict young men in military uniforms, with rifles and swords, and consist of two individual portraits and one group photograph. No names or notes are attached to them, so the identities of the subjects and the military unit in which they served, appear to be unknown.

Research, however, has revealed a likely candidate for the division to which these men were attached. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 had seen British forces suffering significant losses, particularly in the infamous Charge of the Light Brigade during the Battle of Balaclava in October 1854. With much of the regular British Army dispersed around the Empire, it had been necessary to shore up the forces in the Crimea with members of local militia sent out from home. This shortfall in the number of readily available troops in turn posed a potential threat to the defence of Britain itself, coming as it did at the same time as increased tensions with France, which declared war with Austria in April 1859, and the belief that England was at serious risk of being invaded.

On 12 May 1859, in response to these issues, Jonathan Peel, Secretary of State for War, authorized the creation of volunteer rifle corps in each county of England, Scotland and Wales which, according to *The Times* of 13 May, ‘will cheerfully submit to instruction and discipline’ so that ‘every inhabitant of the British Islands within the necessary and obvious limits of age will learn the use of

firearms, if required. There will then be a deep and awful meaning in the cry, “Riflemen, form!”<sup>1</sup> *The Times* was here quoting from ‘The War’, the poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson it had published on 9 May, warning of an approaching war with the rallying cry: ‘Form! form! Riflemen form! Ready, be ready to meet the storm!’<sup>2</sup>

The issue of *The Times* of 13 May also reproduced the War Office notice,<sup>3</sup> sent out to the Lord-Lieutenants of each county, which indicated that the volunteer corps were to be formed ‘under the provision of the Act of 44 George III, cap. 54’. This was the Volunteer Consolidation Act of June 1804, which originally had provided for the creation of local defence units to counter the threat to the country posed by Bonaparte’s France during the Napoleonic Wars. This notice, which also allowed for the formation of artillery corps and ‘companies in maritime towns in which there may be forts and batteries’, set out the most important clauses of the Act. The corps were to be formed on the recommendation of the Lord-Lieutenant of the individual county and were ‘liable to be called out in case of actual invasion, or appearance of an enemy in force on the coast, or in case of rebellion arising out of either of those emergencies’. Having sworn an oath of allegiance, volunteers were subject to military law and were entitled to be paid like members of the regular army. They could not quit the corps ‘when on actual service’ but were allowed to do so ‘at any other time’ provided they gave two weeks’ notice. Members, too, were required to ‘provide their own arms and equipments, and to defray all expenses attending the corps, except in the event of its being assembled for actual service.’ Although paid for by the volunteers, the firearms themselves ‘must be furnished under the superintendence of [the War Office], in order to secure a perfect uniformity of gauge’.<sup>4</sup> The Lord Lieutenants were to provide to the Secretary of State ‘the nomination of proper persons to be appointed officers’ and ‘the precise number of private men which you will recommend, and into how many companies you propose to divide them.’

Giles Hudson, in his study of the Oxford volunteer corps,<sup>5</sup> has shown that the University was not slow in establishing its own division. However, because junior members were usually barred from handling firearms, it proved necessary to make an amendment to the statutes to facilitate its formation. Having been approved by the Vice Chancellor, the University Council and the Duke of Marlborough (as Lord Lieutenant of the County), three companies of volunteers were formed on 8 August 1859<sup>6</sup> and the 1st Oxfordshire (Oxford University) Rifle Volunteer Corps (OURVC) held its initial parade on 25 October.<sup>7</sup> December saw the addition of a fourth company.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Riflemen, form!’ was the title of a few stanzas’, *The Times*, 13 May 1859, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The War’, *The Times*, 9 May 1859, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Volunteer Corps’, *The Times*, 13 May 1859, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times* also contains an advertisement, headed ‘Rifle Clubs and Volunteer Corps’, for the book *The Rifle and How to Use It*, by Hans Busk. Reasonably priced at 2s. 6d. (‘or free by post, for 34 stamps’), it includes ‘besides a description of all the varieties of this valuable weapon, practical instructions how to use the rifle, with preliminary instructions in firing, and a simple method of calculating heights and distances, as well as a chapter on the Volunteer Rifle Service.’ The book was, no doubt, a useful and desirable purchase!

(‘[Advertisement.]—Rifle Clubs and Volunteer Corps’, *The Times*, 13 May 1859, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Giles Hudson, *Shots of Shots: Photographs of the Oxford Volunteer Rifle Corps* (Matters Photographical, 2012) <<https://mattersphotographical.wordpress.com/2012/12/01/shots-of-shots-photographs-of-the-oxford-volunteer-rifle-corps/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Westlake, *Tracing the Rifle Volunteers 1859-1908: A Guide for Military and Family Historians* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2010), p.196.

<sup>7</sup> Hudson, *Shots of Shots*.

<sup>8</sup> Westlake, *Tracing the Rifle Volunteers*.

University units were also formed in Edinburgh and Glasgow, while the 3rd Cambridgeshire (Cambridge University) Rifle Volunteer Corps was established in March 1860.<sup>9</sup> Two volunteer units established in the early 1850s became the senior rifle corps of the new “volunteer force”. These were the 1st Rifle Volunteer Corps, which became the 1st Devonshire Rifle Volunteers, and the Victoria Rifles, which became the 1st Middlesex Rifle Volunteers.

By January 1860 around 400 students had joined the Oxford University corps.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the initial four University companies, a fifth and sixth were added in March 1860.<sup>11</sup> The colleges hosted drills, which also took place at the militia armoury in New Road, with target practice at Cowley Marsh.<sup>12</sup> Numbers of members would peak in 1863 when 517 men, about a third of all undergraduates, were listed as volunteers.<sup>13</sup>



New College Archives, Oxford, SCR/A1/19

One of the clauses of the Volunteer Consolidation Act stated that the design of the uniforms of each corps could be ‘settled by the members’, as long as the Lord-Lieutenant gave his approval.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward M. Spiers, *University Officers' Training Corps and the First World War*, COMEC Occasional Paper no. 4 (Council of Military Education Committees of the United Kingdom, 2015) <[http://www.comec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/occasional\\_paper\\_no\\_4\\_no\\_crop.pdf](http://www.comec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/occasional_paper_no_4_no_crop.pdf)> (Accessed: 19 July 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Hudson, *Shots of Shots*.

<sup>11</sup> Spiers, *University Officers' Training Corps*.

<sup>12</sup> Hudson, *Shots of Shots*.

<sup>13</sup> R. Lamb Abbott, *The Muster Roll of the 1st (Oxford University) V.B.: The Oxfordshire Light Infantry from 1859 to 1887* (Oxford, 1887), cited in: *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume VI: Nineteenth Century Oxford, Part I*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 283.

Giles Hudson has identified an article in the *Illustrated News of the World* of 19 November 1859, which described the Oxford University corps uniforms as ‘picturesque and useful’. The description of a plain tunic, in ‘light brownish grey’, a dark blue Austrian knot motif on the sleeve, trousers to the knees with ‘stout leathern gaiters’, and sporting a dark blue cap similar to a French military kepi with a horizontal peak, is a near-perfect match for the uniform worn by the men in the New College Archives photographs. These compare favourably too with pictures researched by Hudson.

The uniforms were available from Foster & Co., Tailors and Outfitters, who were located on Oxford High Street, at the price of £3 7s 6d. Additional items included ‘a belt with sword frog and ball bag, and a shoulder belt with cap pocket and twenty-round pouch’.<sup>14</sup> Some of these can be seen in the Archives’ photographs.

The firearms initially made available to the volunteers (which, of course, they had to purchase themselves) were short Enfield rifles with sword bayonets. These were later superceded by the Enfield Pattern 1853 rifle-musket, which was noticeably longer.<sup>15</sup> The New College photographs appear to feature both models of gun—the shorter one in the individual portrait shot (SCR/A1/18), the longer 1853 examples in the hands of the men in the group photo (SCR/A1/20). This would suggest that the latter is of a later date than the former. It would appear too that, with the stripes on their arms, the men in the group shot are officers.<sup>16</sup>



New College Archives, Oxford, SCR/A1/18

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<sup>14</sup> Giles Hudson, *Shots of shots*.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> It is not immediately clear what the trophy in this picture represents—perhaps triumph in a competition amongst the volunteers.

Giles Hudson has also been able to identify the photographers responsible for the portraits of the University Volunteers. These were Edmund Bracher (1823-1887), who from 1846 ran Oxford's first portrait studio, and, Robert Hills (1821-1882) in partnership with John Henry Saunders (1836-1890). From the mid-1850s Bracher used albumen prints,<sup>17</sup> which 'were relatively large—approximately [7 x 5] inches—and as such more impressive as artistic works than their diminutive successors, cartes de visite, the craze for which reached Oxford in 1861.'<sup>18</sup> These "cartes" were small photographs usually measuring approximately 3.5 x 2 inches, mounted on a card 4 x 2.5 inches. It is unclear precisely who was responsible for the photographs in the New College collection. However, given their larger measurements (ranging from 7 x 5 inches to 10 x 8 inches), and taken in conjunction with the types of firearms depicted, it seems reasonable to narrow down the dates of the pictures to roughly the period 1859-1861, early in the life of the OURVC.

City and county divisions of the Volunteer Corps were also established, and a new branch of the Oxford City Volunteer Corps first appeared in public at a parade in the city centre on 25 March 1861.<sup>19</sup> The Oxford City Rifle Cadet Corps was organized in local schools with the hope that it may instil in the boys qualities of discipline and leadership, possibly inspiring them into becoming recruits to the adult volunteer movement. The first company was set up at the Linden House School, a private boys' school in Headington, with the volunteers wearing the same uniform as the adults and, in time, six separate squads came into existence. This Oxford company followed in the footsteps of the first school cadet corps to be established, in Rossall School in Lancashire, in February 1860. The modern reader may be surprised, if not shocked, to learn that, in May 1861, the War Secretary countenanced the issuing of firearms to the cadets, many of whom may not yet have been teenagers—such a move would be unthinkable today. These cadet corps can be seen today as the forerunners of the Army Cadet Force and the Combined Cadet Force (CCF), the latter of which operates today in, principally, independent and private British schools, and can include sections for the Army, Royal Air Force and the Navy. As a pupil at Magdalen College School in Oxford in the mid-1980s, this author can well remember the sight of his peers parading in Army and RAF uniforms in the school playing ground on a Tuesday afternoon, though he personally opted for the less regimented life of the Community Service Organisation (CSO)! Both of these still operate in the school today. Indeed, Magdalen proudly claims to host one of the oldest cadet units in the country, it having been established in 1871.<sup>20</sup>

By 1861, many of the small volunteer corps had been reformed into larger battalions as they were easier to administer, many taking the form of "administrative battalions" whereby several smaller units were combined into a larger one. In 1862, the 'Royal Commission on the condition of the Volunteer Force' was appointed, under the chairmanship of Viscount Eversley, to investigate the then-current state of the force, including numbers, and how best it may continue into the future. It found the force had a total strength of 162,681, of which 134,096 were rifle corps volunteers, the rest consisting of artillery, engineers and light horse. The recommendations of the Commission, which included proposing a government grant of 20 shillings per man to cover new uniforms, arms, buildings and other items, resulted in the passing of the new Volunteer Act 1863, which replaced the 1804 Act

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<sup>17</sup> The principal form of positive photographic printing between 1850 and 1900, the albumen print is made by coating a sheet of paper with egg white (albumen), which results in a smooth and glossy surface. A silver nitrate solution applied over the top forms a light-sensitive layer; when the paper is dry, a glass negative is placed onto the paper and exposed to light, thus forming an image on the paper. A gold solution could also be applied to tone the picture and reduce the risk of fading.

<sup>18</sup> Hudson, *Shots of Shots*.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Magdalen College School: Combined Cadet Force <<https://www.mcsoxford.org/senior-school/co-curricular-and-extra-curricular/combined-cadet-force>> (Accessed: 19 July 2019). Giles Hudson, in *Shots of Shots*, indicates MCS's cadet unit received War Office approval in February 1872.

under which the Volunteer Corps had initially been established. Amongst the provisions, it was declared that already existing corps could continue, permanently staffed, and the formation of administrative regiments was formally recognised. The force could now be called up in ‘the case of actual or apprehended invasion of any part of the United Kingdom (the occasion being first communicated to both Houses of Parliament if parliament is sitting, or declared in council and notified by proclamation if parliament is not sitting).’

In 1872, overall responsibility for the volunteers passed from the hands of the county Lord-Lieutenants to the War Secretary, and the corps themselves began to be incorporated into the regular army, a move consolidated by the Childers Reforms of 1881, a reorganization of the infantry regiments of the British Army by Secretary of State Hugh Childers. The Oxford University Rifle Volunteer Corps initially became a part of the volunteer battalions of the Oxfordshire Light Infantry<sup>21</sup> on its inception in 1881 and, in 1887, was renamed the 1st (Oxford University) Volunteer Battalion or the Oxford University Volunteers. The volunteer battalions as a whole eventually saw active service in South Africa, during the Second Boer War of 1899-1902.

A “Cycle Section” or “Cyclist Detachment” of the Volunteer Battalion was formed in 1889 under the Wykeham Professor of Logic, and Fellow of New College, John Cook Wilson (1849-1915; Wykeham Professor and Fellow, 1889-1915), who even wrote a drill manual for them.<sup>22</sup> A philosopher and classical scholar, fellow of the British Academy, founder of “Oxford Realism”, who numbered H. A. Prichard, W. D. Ross and H. W. B. Joseph among his students and followers, Wilson ‘combined a passion for cycling with an interest in war games and military matters’ by leading the cycle section.<sup>23</sup> He retired from the corps in 1904 having achieved the honorary rank of Major, and was awarded the medal for long service the following year. He died in August 1915.

Another New College Fellow, Gilbert Charles Bourne (1861-1933), Linacre Professor of Zoology from 1906 to 1921 and a noted oarsman who rowed for Oxford in the Boat Races of 1882 and 1883, and achieved renown as a rowing coach, was commanding officer of the OU Volunteers.<sup>24</sup> As a soldier, Bourne served with the 4th (Militia) Battalion of the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry from 1882 to 1897, as captain and honorary major. He rejoined them in 1899 as a major on the outbreak of war in South Africa and achieved the rank of honorary Lieutenant-Colonel in February 1900.<sup>25</sup> While stationed in Ireland, Bourne was appointed second-in-command of the battalion, and he later served in the First World War, being injured at Suvla Bay during the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. Bourne represented the University on the committee appointed by the War Office, under Secretary of State for War Richard (later Viscount) Haldane, in 1906 to consider the creation of an Officers’ Training Corps (OTC), which would provide leadership training units.<sup>26</sup>

The OTC, with a Senior division in universities (UOTC) and a Junior division in schools, was formally established in 1908. In Oxford, the Oxford University Volunteers now formed the basis of the Oxford University Officers’ Training Corps (OUOTC).<sup>27</sup> In 1948, the senior divisions of the OTC were reorganized and became part of the Territorial Army; their name also changed, to

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<sup>21</sup> This regiment was renamed the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in 1908 and continued until 1958, when it was renamed the 1st Green Jackets (43rd and 52nd) and became part of the Green Jackets Brigade.

<sup>22</sup> Hudson, *Shots of Shots*. This article includes photographs of the Cycle Section, with Wilson at its head. Wilson’s manual, *A Manual of Cyclist Drill for the Use of the Cyclist Section of the Oxford University Rifle Volunteer Corps* (Oxford, 1889), is held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, 23192 e.18 (1).

<sup>23</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>24</sup> *The History of the University of Oxford: Volume VII: Nineteenth-Century Oxford, Part 2*, ed. M. G. Brock and M. C. Curthoys (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 468.

<sup>25</sup> *The London Gazette*, issue 27169, 27 February 1900, p. 1354.

<sup>26</sup> ODNB.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Officers’ Training Corps’ <[https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/192738/Officer-Training-Corps-OT.pdf](https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/192738/Officer-Training-Corps-OT.pdf)> (Accessed: 19 July 2019).

University Training Corps (UTC). Women were also admitted to the Corps at this time. The junior division, by now known as the Junior Training Corps, merged with the Sea Cadet Corps and Air Training Corps to become the Combined Cadet Force (CCF). In 1955, the name of the senior division reverted back to the University Officers' Training Corps (UOTC), and it remains as such to this day, with nineteen units across the country, including that based at Oxford.

While New College Archives is fortunate to possess these three photographs from the formative years of the Volunteer Corps, regrettably the individuals depicted are yet to be identified. The building against which the men in the group photo are assembled does not appear to be a part of New College so, given that the volunteers were drawn from across the University, it is quite possible that it was taken elsewhere and that some of the men, at least, may have been students from other colleges. Further research may reveal their names, but any information readers of this article may possess concerning the identities of these volunteers would be gratefully received.

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