

VILLAGE ECHOES

A few months ago the pictured “badge” was dug up in a garden in Goudhurst. The centre is missing but the inscription around the edge reads “Kent Rifle Volunteers” with the number 37 at the bottom. A few days later a smaller, but complete, button was found nearby with a similar inscription and the Invicta Horse adorning the centre. What do we know about these volunteers?



In 1859 the government had authorised the formation of volunteer rifle corps to provide the country with a part-time defence force. This was in case Great Britain became caught up in the war of Italian Independence involving France, Italy and Austria. Members of the Corps had to swear an oath of allegiance, were subject to military rule and received military pay. As good marksmen, they were also expected to provide their own arms and equipment.

In response to this development, in 1859 Goudhurst men formed the Weald of Kent Rifle Club, as distinct from Corps as they wished to retain their independence from government interference. This proved a short-lived arrangement as, at the AGM of the Goudhurst Agricultural Association in January 1860, it was announced that the club had now become the Weald of Kent Rifle Corps and that the club rules would be replaced by those issued by the government concerning the Volunteers. The “37” badge probably dates from this period, and indicates that the wearer was a member of the Goudhurst corps. More changes took place in 1861 when small rural corps were formed into administrative battalions, and at this point Goudhurst became part of the second battalion and its corps number changed to 41. At that time it consisted of 57 men, led by Captain Newington of Tattlebury. The men of Goudhurst who joined the movement came from all walks of life but, even so, their rank in the corps reflected their standing in the parish; thus we have members of the professional classes filling the officer ranks, with the tradesmen, farmers and labourers making up the rest.

One of the latter was Amos Mercer, a shoemaker by trade, and it is his memories of the rifle corps that Tiffin recorded in the Goudhurst Jubilee and Coronation books. Amos had joined in 1876 and was very proud of his service in the corps: in 1889 he commissioned an oil painting of himself in uniform, and ultimately he was presented with a silver medal in recognition of his long service. We also learn from Amos that the rifle volunteer movement held annual reviews, initially major ones at Woolwich or Chatham, but later on these became local events at places such as Furnace Farm, Taywell and Glassenbury.

Activities of the corps were regularly reported at the AGM of the Goudhurst Agricultural Association; thus we learn in 1863 that the “company was very pugnacious” and that the colour of their uniform was grey. However, in 1867 it was reported that the colour had changed, although tantalisingly they did not record to what. The most likely colour was green as favoured by other units.

By the 1880s those in charge at Goudhurst were lamenting that they needed more middle class men to join but it seemed that the sons of the original volunteers were not interested. By this time the volunteer force nationally was becoming more closely connected with the regular army and in 1908 they merged with the Yeomanry to form the Territorial Army. Amos declared that he “gave up” just before this as he did not “like the Territorials”.