

The History of Chichester Rifle Club

Preface

I joined the above club in September 1951. I was never a member of the Home Guard having served in the army throughout the war, so early events are taken from the first minutes of the club. After 1960 I have relied on my memory and it is possible that my dates are not strictly accurate. F C FRANCIS

Origin

The Home Guard stood down in 1944 and there was a general feeling amongst members that the camaraderie generated during the war should be preserved by the formation of old comrade associations. A meeting was held at the British Legion on January 29th 1945 and the Chichester Home Guard Old Comrades Association was formed.

In the main this was a social club and a smoking concert that attracted 140 members at the Assembly Rooms in Chichester. Children's Christmas parties were arranged, as were dinners and dances. Altogether there was, on paper over three hundred members. However there was a strong shooting element and on February 10th 1945 a Rifle club was created within the association. It's H.Q. was at the Fleece Inn, East Street, Chichester where monthly meetings were held and all H.G. members were welcome.

On April 5th 1945 a range committee was elected, after which shooting was to take place weekly at the Drill hall in East Row Chichester. Ten .303 and two .22 rifles had been allocated to the club from army sources. Full bore took place at the Cocking range, the Barracks and the gravel pits. The range at Cocking extended to 800 yards but it is probable that only 200 and 300 yard firing points were used. The gravel pits may have extended to 100 yards whilst I believe the barracks were 30yds. The small bore range at the Drill Hall was 25 yards and was accommodated in a brick built lean-to along the side of the hall which had a corrugated tin roof (the potential damage to ears was not realised then).

The firing point consisted of two sloping wooden platforms; between these was a pillar to which the only telescope was attached. The .22 rifles and ammunition were kept in a locked wooden cupboard in the range (shades of security!!). Shooting was at five bull targets. A member watching through the telescope on the pillar did the spotting. He would spot for both shooters calling the position of the shots on the targets. Later when another telescope was obtained a spotter got down on the firing point with the rifleman and operated similarly. When later the number of members increased, the boards were removed and this enabled three members to shoot and spot for themselves. In passing it may be mentioned that we were not the only club to find range accommodation to be a problem. Harting HG Rifle Club used one of the bars of the White Hart Inn for a 15-yard rifle range on Friday evenings. During this period, matches took place against County Hall, Sussex Police and R.A.F. Tangmere, all at their own ranges. R.S.M. Nash of the Royal Sussex Regiment was in charge of the Drill Hall and proved a good and helpful friend to the club over the many years that the premises were used.

In November 1946 civilians were accepted as members and the headquarters moved to the Royal Arms in East Street. At a meeting in January 1947 the Old Comrades Association was wound up and later that month on the 22nd, the constitution of the Chichester H.G. Rifle Club was drawn up and officers appointed. Admiral Palmer was elected president and in March 1947 the HQ moved to the White Swan in Westgate where it remained for many years. It may be mentioned that the clubs various H.Q.'s were adorned by a small wooden shield denoting its place in each move and was finally placed on the Quarry Lane range in 1961 before disappearing (who took it?).

For the remainder of the forties the club flourished and had become affiliated to the N.S.R.A., the N.R.A. and the Sussex S.B.R.A. It had matches at Cocking and entered the Canada and Norfolk cup competitions at Kithurst, where they also had club competitions. Small-bore matches were continued and there was a monthly spoon shoot within the club.

1951-1960

This decade was probably the most, or one of the most active in the clubs history. Membership continued to grow with a total of between 60 and 70 members. The first lady member joined in 1953 and was soon joined by several others enabling them to form a ladies team in 1955. There was a nucleus of junior members and on the competitive side, the club had entered the County Small-bore events with Fullbore teams in the Canada and Norfolk cups. In addition the club held eight half-day Full-bore meetings at Kithurst where the Price and Croft cups were contested. The club captain had entered both the annual N.S.R.A. and N.R.A. National competitions at Bisley in 1954. This encouraged other members to follow suit and at every one of these meetings since that time the club has had members participating. Also during this period members entered the S.C.R.A. annual meetings at Hampden Park, Eastbourne and the W&WS meetings at Fittleworth. Full-bore matches took place at Langley Point Eastbourne, Welcome Bottom Hurstpierpoint and at Tipnor Ranges Portsmouth. Following a match at Havant R.C. on their self-built range Chichester members were inspired to follow suit especially as our membership had grown. As a result of the many competitions entered, shooting time was

extended to as late as 11pm, from a 6.00pm start.

The first thing required for a new range was a site and the then Club Secretary, Reg Plumb and Club Captain; Fred Francis travelled many miles and spent many hours seeking one. Farm buildings in Oaklands Park were offered by the City Council but were unsuitable. The site where the Festival Theatre now stands was also offered but it had too many snags and so it went on and on.

Reg Plumb left the club and Basil Ballantyne became secretary and helped continue the search. At one time the possibility of an outdoor range at Westhampnett in one of the old gravel pits raised hopes and plans went ahead. The pit was kindly made available by Messer's Heavers. Police and local people who might object were approached and all seemed well but the pit flooded and that was the end of that. However nothing daunted the search, which continued on until the latter part of the fifties, when after two approaches, the City Council, offered the club its old site in Quarry Lane. Additional land could have been acquired for an outdoor range but the outlay was beyond the club.

In the meantime a full shooting programme was followed with teams in National and County competitions. The social side was not neglected with dances, prize givings and entertainment taking place regularly at the Unicorn Hotel where the committee meetings also took place. Basil Ballantyne took money raising for the new range in hand and having attained charity status, an annual national charity draw was arranged. National businesses and organisations were approached for funds. Amongst the donators were Billy Butlin, Imperial Tobacco and International Stores.

On a trip from Bisley the club Captain had inspected the ex Canadian Hospital buildings which were being dismantled at Superior camp Greysheet and thought it had possibilities. A sub-committee from the club made an inspection and a decision to buy at a cost price of about £200.00, which included dismantling and transport. The sections of the hut were stored in Quarry Lane by the kindness of Cole Bros who had a works yard there. Enthusiastic members prepared the site in Quarry Lane and again due to the generosity of Cole Bros were given the footings for the building. One weekend all the sections were laid out on site ready for construction but vandals intervened and all 365 panes of glass were smashed. Thanks to the foresight of Basil Ballantyne there was insurance cover and the Portsmouth glass company repaired the damage. Amongst our benefactors was the club president, Mr Macleod-Wallace, who made an interest free loan of £200.00 to the club and also made a generous donation.

Towards the end of the decade the club suffered the loss of several of its old and experienced members due to their work taking them away from the district and consequently competitions suffered. The social side was also low key, with the prize giving, buffets and the Christmas parties being held at the Drill Hall courtesy of R.S.M. Nash. The East Preston Rifle club had closed owing to lack of support and had very generously donated equipment and surplus funds to the club. West Ashling club asked us a little later if their rifle equipment could be of any use that they would donate it to us. They had been formed in volunteer days before the Great War and been defunct for many years. On the N.R.A. register it was club no 8. The equipment was acquired and was of vintage interest and sold to Chichester members.

Equipment had become more sophisticated and consequently more expensive, so in order to help members purchase equipment an interest free loan scheme was inaugurated by the club's committee.

1961-1970

Shooting started on the new range in March 1961. It was of an experimental order and it was found that owing to 'give' in the wooden floor it was not conducive to accurate shooting. Later a working party under the guidance of Phil Holmes, constructed a concrete floor at the firing point. Interest in the formation of a pistol section arose and later a dropped firing point at twenty yards was also constructed again under Phil Holmes supervision. The club captain had noted in the 'Rifleman' that Northumberland County Council had allocated funds to a Rifle club to further shooting by youngsters as part of the educational program and suggested that the W.S.C.C. be approached for a similar grant. This was done and the council agreed to donate £1.00 for every pound that the club subscribed. The club received a total of £106.00, part of which went to the new pistol section under the care of Basil Ballantyne and the remainder of the grant purchased a new rifle. Shooting was still suffering from loss of members but one member; Diana Turnbull had been Sussex lady champion in the past season. The W.S.C.C. grant was to be devoted to junior members and their training. It would be a maximum of £53.5s.6d and subjected to an annual report. Junior membership expanded rapidly during this period. The pistol section also became popular with Tuesday evenings being allotted to this section.

General Sir Lashmer Whistler, Patron of the club, opened the range in Quarry Lane officially on the 2nd September 1961, in the presence of several members of the City Council and other guests who had helped the club. The General was president of the N.S.R.A. and N.R.A. as well as the Sussex S.B.R.A. and he also managed the N.R.A. overseas teams. He took great interest in the club and presented it with some of his medals which were mounted on wooden shields by Phil Holmes for annual competitions. One of which is the Whistler Inter club trophy which is still shot annually on the first Friday of April. Sadly General Whistler died during that year, he was greatly missed. During this period Life Membership was granted to the President and Club Captain, Messer's Macleod-Wallace and Fred Francis who duly received certificates to this effect.

The junior section was coached on Wednesday evenings by Basil Ballantyne and succeeded in winning the Davis Bowl in the county division 12, winning every round; it was the team's first competition venture. Four members Bob Kennett, Den Voke, Fred Francis and Phil Holmes joined Fittleworth clubs outdoor section in the N.S.R.A.'s 50-yard summer league paying their own entry fee's etc. although they were not as successful as the juniors.

Fundraising continued including weekly raffles at the club, novelty items such as pens etc, collecting newspapers, a football pools scheme and many other ideas. At this time in Chichester there was a demand for a swimming pool and the old Gaumont cinema was earmarked. To further this project, Mr D Thomas of the T.S.B. formed the Chichester Sporting Trust involving leisure interests in the city and the club was approached. This involved football results and work on Saturday afternoons from an office in the market. Don Netley played a very active part in this with a band of volunteers and as a result the club benefited by receiving many grants over the years.

On the social side, the annual prize giving and dances continued first at the Pond Club Bracklesham and then for many years at the Clair-Haven Hotel Bognor Regis, usually attracting about 70 guests and members. The decade was very active proving that we were a healthy club.

1971-1980

Shooting was changing; the club had overcome the poor performance of the early sixties. There were three teams, each in the National Leagues, the County and West Sussex plus two in the National Pistol League. Den Voke helped the club captain at the range, the members were keen and most had their own equipment. Full bore participation had declined owing to a number of factors the worst being the loss of ranges. Kithurst was available only with difficulty, Cocking had gone many years before, Wellcome Bottom and Langley Point had gone and this meant that inexpensive and half-day facilities had dwindled. Shooting did take place at the Steyning Range but this was regularly vandalised. The H.G competitions still took place at Kithurst but with dwindling competitors.

Incidentally I have failed to mention why the Home Guard title was dropped from the title of the club. In 1953 there was a national scare and a new Home Guard was formed nationally and a unit was created in Chichester. The club was asked to provide volunteers and there was liaison with the new unit. However, the M.O.D ordered all old clubs to drop the Home Guard title. This caused resentment amongst the original H.G. so they retaliated by calling themselves H.G. 1944. This was later dropped and we became the Chichester Rifle Club, more apt as there were hardly any original H.G members. The pistol section was then created and we adopted the title of Chichester Rifle & Pistol Club.

The club continued to thrive with membership somewhere around the half century, Bob Kennett who had won the Viking Shield at the N.S.R.A.'s National meeting at Bisley in the sixties was now joined by a band of keen competitors, who participated in open events at National and County levels. The range was no longer the isolated building in Quarry Lane; improvements to the range resulted including toilets.

In the sixties the range had been used by various organisations including cadets and the Bognor R.P.C, who when they had to quit their own range were accommodated at our range and had their own area. The local archery club The Chichester Bowmen also used it for practice. Owing to terms on the lease we were not allowed to sub-let so we received donations. The massive safe was obtained by the club captain and adapted by Bill Pope as a rifle store. Members took an active and full part in competitions of the S.C.R.A at Bisley and also N.R.A. and N.S.R.A annual meetings, one or two also went to the Channel Isles. The club also enjoyed a long extension of the lease. During this period the building was beginning to show its age and needed constant repairs. Shooting progressed much the same as it had in previous years and membership remained around the fifty mark. We still had no ladies or juniors teams. And we suffered from two burglaries but sustained no serious loss or damage. Quarry Lane was fast becoming an Industrial site.

1981-1990

There was little change in the shooting pattern. The Bognor Club had long since left and combined with Aldingbourne who had recently built a new range at Eastergate. They had lost their old range when a new vicar arrived as the range was on Church premises. The other users, Chichester Bowmen and the Jazz Band had also left but the pistol section was thriving on Tuesday evenings. Problems arose due to safety and the range was closed until the matter was remedied to the satisfaction of the inspecting officer. During this period the club was accommodated at Aldingbourne to shoot team cards. In the sixties interest had been shown for three positional shooting and the necessary rifle and equipment had been purchased but the interest died, however, towards the end of the decade keenness was again expressed. A big problem was now showing itself, the site was infill land and there were signs of serious subsidence and serious discussion took place, either to quit the site and obtain compensation for the unexpired portion of the clubs lease or rebuild on the original site. The latter would be an expensive project as pilling would be expensive, the former would mean finding another site, in either case funds would have to be raised so we were back to the fifties again. Eventually it was decided to remain on the site.

Once this decision had been taken then the old problems of fund raising etc arose yet again. Donations however, were received from many local businesses and other rifle clubs. One in particular from Lerwick R.C. demonstrated the

fellowship among clubs. Promises of grants and loans were also received. There was a surprising lack of assistance from certain rifle organisations. Eventually the old "home" was dismantled and piling commenced. Steelwork for the roof and supports were ordered. The skilful club members, mainly under the supervision of stalwart Phil Holmes, carried out footings and the brickwork.

Shooting in the meantime was carried on in a limited scale through the kindness of Aldingbourne R.C., who let the club use their range, (accepting no payment.). It should be mentioned that the pistol section had previously decided to separate from the rifle club and had formed Novio Magnum Pistol Club, but they continued to use the range on a rental basis which proved satisfactory to both parties. On a national scale both Peter Terry and Neil Braisher excelled, Neil also reaching the Queens final at Bisley.

Peter Terry introduced a scheme to the committee; it was an annual competition involving sponsored teams from local pubs with a grand finale at the range. The proceeds from the sponsors were then divided in half, one half going towards a chosen local charity and the other half towards the clubs funds. It involved a great deal of work and organising, and many thousands of pounds were raised for local charities. It ran successfully for many years but hasty and restrictive legislation following Dunblane killed it.

1991-2000

The highlight of the year in 1991 was the completion of the new range, which was opened by the local M.P. of the time, Anthony Nelson. There were several visitors present and Mr Nelson duly shot at the customary plate. All enjoyed refreshments afterwards.

Shooting continued on the usual lines throughout the year. On Sunday afternoons the range was used by a P.S.K. group (Prone, Standing and Kneeling). The clubs star members were P Terry and N Braisher who both excelled on a national scale the latter on an international field. At long last shoulder-to-shoulder matches had got a hold and competitions were contested in the Hampshire League, all of which had been raised at a committee meeting by the club captain thirty years previously. Another outstanding event was a dinner to celebrate the clubs fiftieth anniversary. This was held at the Jarvis Hotel and was the most colourful social event since the last dinner and prize giving at the Dolphin Hotel in 1973.

The new range was in great demand by other shooting clubs for finals day etc. Sadly the decade was blighted by the tragedies of Hungerford and Dunblane. The club had introduced its probationary system over thirty years previously to weed out such people as these misfits.

The club, which was founded primarily as a Full bore club, became mainly a Small-bore organisation. Two reasons for this was the change from the old .303 target rifle and the second reason was the loss of range facilities. Aggressive and hostile legislation have not helped the sport of target shooting.