

The 1913 Army Manoeuvres and Bugbrooke

September 1913 saw south Northamptonshire swarming with soldiers who were taking part in the last – and very large – peacetime manoeuvres before the First World War. Their simple aim was to practise the running of high-level army headquarters, but it would involve the deployment of some 50,000 men (and 25,000 horses), as well as newer elements such as wireless communication and aircraft of the recently-formed Royal Flying Corps.

A large ‘Brown Force’ comprising two separate armies, supplied from Aldershot, was to move northwards to push back a smaller single-army ‘White Force’, nominally supplied from Nuneaton, but actually from a field depot established at Daventry.

Campsites were being prepared by detachments of Royal Engineers (RE) from early August and included Stony Stratford and Wolverton, capitalising on the availability of Watling Street (the A5) and the railway depot respectively. There were smaller sites at Towcester, Broughton Park and Spratton. Some of the later build-up was noticed in Bugbrooke; the school newsletter dated Friday 19 September reported that a large army balloon with two men aboard had passed over the village. It went on to say ‘We are between two armies ... today one part of the north army will be in Bugbrooke about 4.00pm, 900 men will bivouac in the park ...’. The letter noted that Lance-Corporal [Walter] James Clarke [1st Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment], originally from Bugbrooke, was part of the guard provided at Althorp while the King was staying there to visit the manoeuvres. James’s older brother, Private Mark Clarke, from the same battalion, was believed to be somewhere south of Northampton (in 8 Infantry Brigade, in the 3rd Division of the Brown Force 2nd Army).

That afternoon from about 4.00pm, hundreds of troops from the Leicester and the Staffordshire Yeomanries arrived in the village and set-up a tented overnight camp in Rectory Park, with the noise of their mallets causing particular comment; they had struck camp and left by 8.00am the next day. [These two yeomanry units – normally part of the Territorial Force – were part of the North Midland Mounted Brigade within the White Force Cavalry Division].

The next day, Saturday 20 September, saw 2,000 or more soldiers pass through on their way to Towcester. That evening, three ‘officers from the telegraph service’ took over the school wireless, staying until midnight. [The ‘London Wireless Telegraph Unit’ of the RE was attached to White Force – was it them?].

Aircraft flights over the village aroused much interest at first and were reported in some detail, but as the manoeuvres got under way and activity increased, such flights were just noted along with other routine events.

The manoeuvres proper started on the morning of Monday 22 September and the local populace had been warned that Watling Street would be ‘... thronged with troops and transport ...’. The airship ‘Delta’, attached to White Force, passed overhead that afternoon, and was seen again the next day. On that Tuesday, the local scouts went to Blisworth to stand guard at The Mill, where they saw the King pass by, waving to them, on his way to Towcester. From Bugbrooke, the sound of heavy artillery to the south could be heard throughout the day, while at the school, army messages were listened-to on the wireless.

Much of this is reported in the school letter of Friday 26 September, also the day that the manoeuvres ended, with Brown Force victorious, as had been scripted. They were generally considered to have been a success, with many valuable lessons learned – more urgent than may have been realised at the time.



Though Bugbrooke was on the fringe of the ‘fighting’ in those manoeuvres, soldiers did camp here and many more passed through, never mind any socialising that may have taken place both before and after the official activities.

Young local detectorist Ben Snelson has made some potentially relevant finds and three are shown here.



There is an RE soldier’s cap badge (*above left*), the domed front of an 11th Hussars trooper’s tunic button (*right*) and the lower scroll component of a Royal Warwickshire Regiment soldier’s cap badge (*below left*). There were many RE units and sub-units involved in the manoeuvres on both sides.



The Hussars were in 1st Cavalry Brigade, of the Cavalry Division attached to Brown Force as HQ Troops. 1st Battalion, the Royal Warwicks (based in Shorncliffe) were in 10 Infantry Brigade, within the 4th Division of Brown Force’s 2nd Army.

The manoeuvres were intense but short lived. By the end of the week they were all over, and the excitement in the village died down to its normal peace time levels. A peace which was to last less than one more year.

Roger Colbourne for the 100 Years Project

Additional source: Sunderland, John and Webb, Margaret, *All the Business of War*, 2013, Towcester & District Local History Society.