

# Brief History of Smallbore Rifle Shooting

On 11th October 1899 war was declared by the farmers of Dutch descent in the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State thus setting in motion a chain of events which were eventually to bring about the existence of THE NATIONAL SMALL-BORE RIFLE ASSOCIATION.

Within two months of the outbreak of this, the Second Boer War, our forces were continually being outmanoeuvred; Mafeking, Ladysmith and Kimberley were besieged, and the Boers' superior marksmanship had come as an unwelcome surprise. Their ability to pick off British officers, at times over ranges in excess of 1,000 yards, led to the issue of a general order that officers should dress as private soldiers!

At home there was increasing concern at the capability of the Army to defend the population against an invasion. The call went out for British civilians to learn to shoot to defend their country should the need ever arise.

At this time there were few established rifle clubs and those that did exist usually comprised Volunteers (the forerunners of the Territorials) practising on open ranges with service - type rifles. The ranges were often located some distance from any centre of population and consequently the cost of travelling, coupled with that of ammunition, was affordable by few.

Interest grew rapidly during 1900 when, supported by the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Lord Wolseley, THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION, which had been founded 40 years earlier under the threat of invasion from France, obtained the "nomination of the War Office as the official medium for the recognition of Rifle Clubs". Practice with service rifles was now more easily available to civilians.

However, as rifles of .22 calibre were readily available at modest cost (a sporting type rifle could be purchased for £1.00 or less) and the safety requirements for ranges easier to satisfy, several influential public figures and military men formed the opinion that civilians could learn to shoot just as accurately using the comparatively cheap "miniature" (small-bore) rifles and ammunition.

At the forefront of this belief was Major General Charles Edward Luard, late of the Royal Engineers, of Ightham Knoll, Kent. Following the First Boer War, which had led to the defeat of the British forces at Majuba Hill in 1881, he had served in Natal from 1884-1886 where he had been responsible for making preparations in anticipation of the resumption of hostilities. On 12th April 1900 he drafted a Bill "for making further provision for instruction in the Science and Art of Rifle Shooting in England and Wales", to which he attached, as his signature, his family's motto, "PROSPICE".

Unfortunately his Bill was not debated in Parliament but, undeterred, he continued to exert his considerable influence and it was largely due to this that the Marquis of Salisbury, then Prime Minister, made a speech in the Albert Hall to the annual meeting of the Primrose League (a Conservative political organisation) on 9th May 1900, stressing the need to create civilian rifle clubs throughout the land so that

"without stirring from their homes the people of this country shall be able to practice rifle shooting so that when danger comes there shall be a force which no enemy could despise".

Three days later, on the 12th May 1900, the formation of THE BRITISH RIFLE LEAGUE was announced by Lt. Vere D'oyly Noble, then editor of "The Regiment", a popular "weekly illustrated military journal for everybody" (the "Regiment Cup" is still offered for annual competition at Bisley) with the stated intention of bringing "into one association all civilians who want to be able to defend their country in case of invasion". Civilians only, persons attached to Her Majesty's Forces initially being excluded, were invited to enrol on payment of one shilling (5p). The League appealed for five million men to join.

Meanwhile, having seen a previous attempt to form a national organisation for civilian rifle clubs, namely THE BRITISH RIFLE UNION, fail for lack of support from public figures, General Luard had set out to obtain the backing of, among others, the Duke of Westminster, Lord Dudley, the Duke of Norfolk and, importantly, the most influential national hero of the time, Field Marshal Earl Roberts of Kandahar, Pretoria and Waterford, V.C.

Frederick Sleigh Roberts, was born in Cawnpore, India, on 30th September 1832, the son of a General, and with an elder brother who also became a General. He joined the Bengal Artillery in December 1851 and subsequently served in India for over 40 years during which, as a young lieutenant, he had been awarded the Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny of 1858 and eventually, following campaigns in Abyssinia and Afghanistan, became Commander-in-Chief India in 1885. He returned to the United Kingdom in 1893 and, after promotion to Field Marshal in 1895, was appointed Commander-in-Chief Ireland - his native land! He had always been a firm believer in the need to improve the standard of shooting in the Army, both with rifle and artillery.

Following 'Black Week' in December 1899, during which the British Army suffered a series of unprecedented catastrophes at the hands of the Boers, the Government reacted to public outcry and, on 17th December 1899, at the age of 67, Roberts was appointed Commander-in-Chief in South Africa. That same day his only son, Lt. Frederick Roberts, died of wounds inflicted during action against the Boers at Colenso, for which he, like his father, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The arrival of 'Bobs', as he was affectionately known to his troops, transformed the situation. The sieges were soon lifted and Pretoria, capital of the Transvaal, surrendered to him on 5th June 1900. By the end of the year, believing that the war was nearly over (although it was to drag on for a further eighteen months) he handed over his command to Lord Kitchener on 29th November and returned home to a hero's welcome. On 2nd January 1901, in one of the last public acts of her reign, Queen Victoria rewarded him with an Earldom, and he was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, the last to hold that office.

Thus, with Roberts now supporting his plans, General Luard went ahead and, on 23rd March 1901, called a meeting at the Mansion House, chaired by Sir Frank Green, Lord Mayor of London, and attended by such dignitaries as the Lord Mayor of

York, the Lord Mayor of Liverpool, Members of Parliament and officials of the Federation of Working Men's Social Clubs, the Federation of London Working Boys' Clubs, and an Association of Conservative Working Men's Clubs.

The outcome of this meeting was the passing of a resolution "That the foundation of THE SOCIETY OF WORKING MEN'S RIFLE CLUBS, for facilitating rifle shooting, more especially in the evening, with small-bore rifles and inexpensive ammunition, as an ordinary branch of recreation by working men's and working boys' clubs and institutes, be now proceeded with". General Luard stated that the formation of the Society was in the nature of an experiment whereby "the gentlemen of the country would contribute to the funds, whilst the working men would be expected to join the clubs and make themselves efficient in the matter of rifle shooting".

Earl Roberts had been unable to attend the meeting but had written his support to the Lord Mayor as well as provisionally accepting the Presidency of the Society although he did not take up this office until his retirement from active service.

A committee was appointed under the Chairmanship of General Luard, Mr Hyam Marks was appointed Secretary and offices were rented at 17 Victoria Street SW1. A badge, consisting basically of a Maltese Cross on a wreath of laurel leaves, was designed and the General's family motto, in its anglicised form, "LOOK FORWARD", adopted.

The General enthusiastically set about making the Society a success. He had invented, for indoor use, a target apparatus which he named the "Ian Hamilton Range" after his friend and compatriot, Major General Sir Ian Hamilton D.S.O., who had served with conspicuous gallantry in both Boer Wars and, as a former Commandant of the School of Musketry, strongly supported the "miniature" movement for civilian riflemen. The device, a combination of stop-butt and holders for moving and disappearing targets, demonstrated Luard's emphasis on training in sharpshooting which he believed to be the most likely form of shooting that would be required in the field.

This apparatus was offered, free of royalties, to clubs who wished to use it and the Society later purchased the patent rights. The S.W.M.R.C. also traded with member clubs, supplying rifles, ammunition, targets and shooting accessories, a service which continues today.

Towards the end of 1902, by which time nearly 80 clubs had affiliated to the Society and preparations were going ahead to hold the first shooting meeting, it was realised that, not only did the aims of the British Rifle League have much in common with those of the Society, but it too was planning its first meeting. The two organisations decided to combine their efforts and so the first "Miniature Bisley in London" was held at the Crystal Palace late in March 1903.

Indeed, a month earlier an informal amalgamation had taken place, this being formalised by the passing of a Special Resolution, on 15th May 1903, that the name of the Society be changed to "THE SOCIETY OF MINIATURE RIFLE CLUBS (with which is incorporated the Society of Working Men's Rifle Clubs and the British Rifle League)". The Society had previously taken steps to set up a Limited Company with

an appropriate Memorandum and Articles of Association, and the Company had been duly incorporated on 8th January 1903 following which, the 15th Duke of Norfolk became the first Chairman of Council whilst General Luard remained Chairman of the (Executive) Committee. Thus, was born the S.M.R.C., a name that was to be used for the next 44 years until, by Special Resolution passed on 8th March 1947, it changed to "THE NATIONAL SMALL-BORE RIFLE ASSOCIATION" (N.S.R.A.).

The Society's motto "LOOK FORWARD" continued; the heraldic "Royal Crown" from the British Rifle League's badge was added to the Society's badge and, from 1903, became that which is still in use over ninety years later.

On 18th February 1904 Earl Roberts retired from active service and formally took up office as first President of the S.M.R.C., devoting himself to encouraging his fellow countrymen to practice rifle shooting. Although General Luard had the honour of founding the Society, it was the tireless enthusiasm of Lord Roberts during the next ten years, in which he urged the formation of civilian rifle clubs in every town and village in the country, that built the foundations of the small-bore shooting sport of today.

Late in 1904 the S.M.R.C. moved from the original offices to 20 Bucklersbury EC4, however, due to limited space and for convenience, for two years from 1906 when Major A.C. Morrison-Bell (on loan from the War Office) held the post of Organising Secretary, much of the Society's business took place at his flat at 88 St James's Street SW1. In December 1909 the office moved to 11 Queen Victoria Street EC4 but, with the continuing growth of the Society, this also quickly became inadequate and, less than two years later, on 15th September 1911 the Headquarters were again moved to larger premises at 15 Arundel Street WC2.

In June 1905 Earl Roberts had launched an appeal to raise £100,000 for civilian rifle clubs to which there was little response from public, the popular feeling being that it was a matter for the Government of the time to provide the necessary finance and, by January 1908, the published balance sheet showed that only £5148:11s:9d had been donated from various sources. Although only a fraction of what had been hoped for, it did allow the S.M.R.C., which was operating at a financial loss each year, to continue with its work, and without which it may well have ceased to function.

In 1906 "The Rifleman" periodical appeared for the first time and has been published continuously since that year as the official journal of the S.M.R.C./N.S.R.A. That first issue, dated April 1906, carried the announcement of the resignation of General Luard as Chairman of the Executive Committee. He felt that the S.M.R.C. was not in harmony with his perception of what might be required in battle and was moving towards, in his view, less realistic deliberate prone shooting. Luard remained a member of the Council under the Chairmanship of the Duke of Norfolk who, additionally, now became Chairman of the Executive Committee.

Later, writing in the November 1906 issue, the General stated that "shooting at stationary targets with no limit of time is only the elementary part of practical rifle shooting for war and that to enable the most useful results to be obtained from the

magazine rifle of today (1906), and the automatic rifles of the near future, quick aiming and firing at disappearing targets requires to be well taught for twentieth century warfare".

An important landmark was reached on 5th June when, following representations by Earl Roberts, the S.M.R.C. was officially recognised by the Army Council and accorded equal powers and privileges to those enjoyed by the National Rifle Association, including exemption from liability for payment of Gun Licence Duty by members of affiliated clubs. (A second resolution, carried unanimously at the inaugural meeting in 1901, calling on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to grant this exemption was unsuccessful at that time!). As the cost of a Gun Licence was the not inconsiderable sum, in 1906, of ten shillings (50p) per annum, having been set at that fee by the Gun Licence Act of 1870, this was a major concession and incentive for the advancement of the sport.

In January 1907 the Society agreed to encourage the formation of County Associations and this gained a further incentive on 7th February 1907 when "The Queen's Cup" was "presented by Her Majesty the Queen to the S.M.R.C. for competition amongst the Counties of the United Kingdom." It was intended that each county should be represented by a team of ten but, realising that most counties had, at that time, not yet formed their own associations and would be unable to select teams, the conditions were altered and, following the initial stage which was open to all club members, each county was represented by one individual in the final two stages. In the event only one county, Huntingdonshire, was not represented in the competition.

A.G. Banks of Southport, representing Lancashire, was the first winner and, following the Final Stage held at Southfields Range on 27th July 1907, he received the cup and a gold medal personally from HM the Queen at Buckingham Palace. (That same gold medal is now displayed in "Lord Roberts House" at Bisley, having been presented to the N.S.R.A. by his daughter, Mrs Barbara Doyle, on 18th August 1984).

A description of the presentation at the Palace written, in later years, by "A.G.", gives an insight into the importance attached to rifle shooting by the aristocracy in the early days of the Society - "Our instructions were to go from the range to Buckingham Palace just as we were, in shooting kit and we were conveyed thither to be presented at 5.30. The presentation was performed, as it turned out, not in the Palace, but in a marquee or awning erected at the foot of the palace steps. There were vast numbers of celebrity's present, including Princess Victoria, Field Marshal Earl Roberts, many royalties, generals and practically every notability in the world of shooting. After much preparation, arrangement and anxious coaching of the men to be honoured, Her Majesty came down the steps, accompanied by her entourage, and one by one the twenty (finalists) approached her to receive the cup and medals. She was very gracious, and so far from being the ordeal that we had expected, the ceremony was a pleasure. After that we were entertained to tea in the Palace, and you may be sure that we needed it."

Three years later, in 1910, the conditions reverted to the original idea of county teams, but of six and not ten members. Middlesex emerged as the winners of this

first Inter County Team Competition which, following the death of King Edward VII that year, was re-named "The Queen Alexandra's Cup Competition" and, at the present time, continues to include rapid fire shooting which would, no doubt, have pleased our Founder.

In 1907, General Luard went on to form THE PATRIOTIC SOCIETY, with Mr Clarence Moss as Secretary, as "an organisation for speeding the progress of rifle shooting throughout the United Kingdom" and, on 24th/25th June 1908, his newly formed Society held an exhibition meeting at the Royal Horticultural Hall, Westminster, which included rapid fire competitions for automatic and magazine rifles with prize money totalling £500.

At the Annual General Meeting of the S.M.R.C. held on 2nd June 1908 he had severed his remaining link with the society by resigning from the Council and died three months later on 18th September 1908, shortly before his 69th birthday. Following his death, the Patriotic Society amalgamated with the S.M.R.C. and four of the six "Patriotic Shields", handed over at that time, are still offered for annual competition to this day. However, his family connection with the S.M.R.C. continued with the subsequent appointment to the Council of his elder son, Captain Charles Elmhurst Luard D.S.O., until his untimely death in action on 15th September 1914.

By the outbreak of war in 1914 the S.M.R.C. had, through its affiliated clubs, taught many thousands of civilians to shoot and they were ready to take up arms in military service. Earl Roberts, at the age of 82, was appointed Colonel-in-Chief of the Indian Expeditionary Force by King George V and left for France on 11th November 1914. On the way he caught a chill and died three days later, as he would have wished, on active service with his troops. His body was laid to rest with full military honours in St. Paul's Cathedral on 19th November 1914. It was not until 1917 that Field Marshal Earl Haig was appointed his successor as President.

The war having called away Colonels Lake, Winter and Blackburn who had in turn been appointed Secretary of the Society since the resignation of Hyam Marks in 1909, Mr Frank Carter was appointed Acting Secretary in January 1915 and Secretary in November 1919.

Following the Armistice of 1918, the post war years were a difficult time for the Society; many club members had lost their lives in the conflict and, with the introduction of legislation in the form of the 1920 Firearms Act, enthusiasm for shooting waned.

On 17th July 1919 Earl Haig had stated that, in his opinion, "no fit man can claim to be a good citizen, or have realised his duty to his country, until he has learnt to handle a rifle" and he appealed to the public to become Life Members of the Society in the hope that £10,000 could be raised. The appeal fell on deaf ears! By the end of 1920 the accounts showed that £146:4s:0d had been donated and the number of affiliated clubs had fallen to some 1,500.

In 1920, a site of just over six acres at Perivale, west of London, was purchased at a cost of £2,500, with the intention of establishing a national small-bore range, together with the Society's Headquarters. It already had a partly built (at Government

expense) stop butt, and plans went ahead to hold the 1921 London Meeting on the new range. However, this was not to be. Although some progress was made, little support was received to an appeal for funds, some £5,000 being required and, following the establishment of small-bore meetings at Bisley, the project lapsed. The site was leased to a tenant (at an annual rental of £100) in the hope that the financial situation might improve but, on 31st October 1933, it was finally sold to a firm of builders for £3,900 and who, a few months later, went bankrupt! So ended the first attempt to set up our own 'National Range'.

During this time the Society was on the move again, and on 26th March 1929 settled into offices at 23 Water Lane, EC4 (renamed Blackfriars Lane in 1939). The premises became known as "Codrington House", named after Lt. General Sir Alfred E. Codrington, a member of the Society's Council since 1903, appointed Chairman in 1917 and the fourth President in 1932, holding that office until his death on 12th September 1945 at the age of 91. Sir Alfred had well known the value of skill with the rifle, having himself twice been wounded during the Boer War.

Hard work and dedication by a small staff, led by Mr George Pethard as Secretary following the death of Frank Carter on 14th January 1923, slowly revived interest during the inter war years. In 1924 Douglas Oakey had been appointed S.M.R.C. Travelling Representative for the Southern Counties. He was provided with a "Motor Van Show Room", becoming a familiar sight delivering shooting requisites and offering advice and assistance to clubs in his area. Scotland was not forgotten with, from 1933, Tom Walker carrying out similar activities north of the Border in his "wee" Austin 7.

Although airgun clubs had been enrolled as members as early as 1906, it was in 1929 that a National Air Rifle Section was formalised within the Society, and so by 1939 the number of affiliated organisations totalled 2,374 Clubs, 77 Local Leagues, 60 County Associations and 13 Overseas Associations.

With the country again at war, and several members of the staff leaving to join the forces, the Society, for the first time in its history, had to reconsider the policy of offering employment to men only - at least until the cessation of hostilities! The number of affiliated Clubs increased with the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers, soon re-named the Home Guard. Many of our present Clubs can trace their origins to "Dad's Army". The Society again assisted with training and range certification work and, as in 1914, tribute was paid in the House of Commons, by the Secretary of State for War, to the work carried out by the S.M.R.C.

Disaster struck on the night of 10th/11th May 1941 when, during the heaviest air raid on London during six years of war, "Codrington House" was totally destroyed. Ironically, repairs following damage caused the previous month were nearing completion. The Society's records were lost and, of 48 challenge trophies stored in the basement, just three were repairable. From the charred ashes of the remainder, all that could be recovered was molten silver to the value of £18. Six of the larger and more valuable trophies did survive, among them the Queen Alexandra Cup and the Chas R. E. Bell Trophy, having been deposited with the bank. (There had been insufficient storage space in the vaults to take more). Fortunately, none of the staff was in the building and the firewatchers on duty escaped injury. The Society's

printers, with them the complete stock of targets, solicitors and auditors also suffered the same fate that night. 1,436 Londoners lost their lives and many more were injured.

Thus, an enforced move of Headquarters was made and two days later, whilst delivering replacement ammunition into storage arranged at the Ham and Petersham Rifle Club, it was noticed that a suitable residential property known as "Mayleigh", Petersham Road, Richmond, Surrey was available for purchase. Negotiations led to the Society taking possession on 23rd June 1941 at a cost of £1,750, with a further £1,000 being spent on essential renovations. Outwardly at least, within three months of the destruction of "Codrington House", the Society was again running smoothly in the relative safety of the new location.

Having been favoured with the Royal Patronage of Field Marshal HRH Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn for nearly forty years until his death early in 1942, a further royal accolade was received on 27th April 1942 when His Majesty King George VI granted his Patronage to the S.M.R.C. This honour was continued by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, following her accession in 1952.

By 31st December 1945 there were 4,019 affiliated clubs and other organisations, of which 1,012 were former Home Guard Units. Although having been stood down during 1944, the War Office announced that it would "assist in continuing the comradeship of the Home Guard through the formation of rifle clubs".

Another landmark was reached on 1st July 1946 when, following agreement with the N.R.A., the Society assumed control of .22 pistol shooting.

The last link with our founders was broken with the death, on 12th October 1947, of General Sir Ian Hamilton at the age of 94. His appointment as a member of the Council dated from the early days of the S.M.R.C. and he was an active Vice-President of the N.S.R.A.

Ill health brought about the retirement of George Pethard in 1947 and, following twelve months in an acting capacity, A. J. "Jerry" Palmer was appointed Secretary the following year. He had first joined the staff in 1924 and represented Great Britain in the Dewar International Match of 1934. Many will remember the dulcet tone of his voice over the P.A. system at Bisley in the 50's and 60's. Upon his own retirement in January 1970, another long serving member of staff, R. C. "Ron" Russell, filled the Secretary's office for the next 15 years.

A return to the capital came on 9th March 1953 when the Society, which by now had become the N.S.R.A., having sold "Mayleigh" for £5,000, moved to an office building and showroom at 113, Southwark Street, SE1 which had been purchased for £11,500 and subsequently became the new "Codrington House".

On becoming Chairman in 1959, General Sir Lashmer Whistler made strenuous efforts to establish a permanent range for small-bore shooting and, following his sudden death in 1963, it was hoped that a "Whistler Range" would become a memorial to him at Bisley. Various plans were considered until 1977 when, with financial assistance from the Sports Council, a demountable 'National Range' was



constructed on the Bisley Century Range for our Rifle Meetings and used for the first time that year.

The establishment of a permanent range, capable of hosting the National Small-bore Meetings as visualised by General Whistler, has yet to be realised.

With Bisley known as the "Mecca" for marksmen and being developed as a National Shooting Centre, the decision was taken to move out of London and establish the Association's Headquarters within Bisley Camp. The old "Roberts Hut" site was purchased from the N.R.A. and, financed by the sale of the Southwark Street premises for £145,000, a new "Lord Roberts House" built, just within the camp boundary, opening for business on 5th February 1980.

Whilst Secretary of the Association from 1985-93, Group Captain Dennis King, a former winner of the Earl Roberts British Championship in 1956, found much of his time taken up, in the face of adverse publicity by the media, arguing against punitive firearms legislation. Public opinion was now very different from that of the early years of the S.M.R.C.!

With the less restrictive appeal of air gun shooting, the N.S.R.A. as the Governing Body for Air Gun and Match Crossbow Shooting, established, at a cost in excess of £200,000, a purpose built National Indoor Shooting Centre at Aldersley, Wolverhampton. This facility, opened by the Mayor of Wolverhampton, Councillor S. S. Duhra, on 28th October 1991, not only hosts the National Air Gun Championships but is open daily for use by local clubs and individuals.