

# A Brief History Of Inkerman Barracks, Knaphill



A Royal Military Police passing out parade at Inkerman Barracks, February 1953 – Pic: Courtesy – Tony Pearce

## Introduction...

In 1892, a prison for invalid convicts at **Knaphill**, to the west of Woking, was converted to accommodate two battalions of infantry. It was named **Inkerman Barracks** after the famous 'Battle of Inkerman' fought during the Crimean War in 1854. The first infantry battalion to be quartered there in 1895 was 2nd Battalion *The Royal West Surrey Regiment* (aka *The Queen's*).

In September 1947, the *Royal Military Police* moved from nearby Mychett to Inkerman Barracks, establishing Inkerman as the home of the Corps.

St Johns Memorial Hall was requisitioned by Canadian troops from local bases, such as Inkerman Barracks - during World War II until 'D' Day.

Queens Road and Sussex Road (both in Knaphill) are named after two regiments that were based at Inkerman Barracks in the 1890s...

The Home Office purchased 65 acres of land in **Knaphill** from a London owner to build a special prison for disabled (mental/physical) convicts. It was designated "The Woking Convict Prison", and was to be the first of its kind. Construction of the site began in 1859. It received its first officers and inmates a year later when they were transferred from Lewes, Carisbrooke and Dartmoor prisons. These male convicts helped construct it to reduce costs. In 1869, one hundred females were transferred from Parkhurst and employed on laundry, cooking, tailoring and other tasks. By 1870 its population had grown and had included both male and female miscreants which averaged about 613. Additional twenty acres of adjacent land was purchased for the parade ground and building was ongoing until 1892. The disabled wing was given over to the army in 1895, and converted to quarter infantry troops. The female wing continued to be used until 1895, when like all the male prisoners who had been transferred to other prisons earlier, they were sent to Holloway in London. It was given a new name and known as "Inkerman Barracks", so-named after a battle in a place of the same name in the

Crimea, Russia in 1854. Now it housed the 2nd Battalion Royal West Surrey Regiment, also known as 'The Queens' Regiment'.

Inkerman was an invalid convict prison until 1893 and conversion to a barracks were completed in 1903, when the 1st Bn. Royal Berkshire Regt. moved in. They were replaced by the 1st Bn. Royal Scots Regt. from 1904 to 1905, followed by the 2nd Bn. Royal West Sussex Regt. (1912 to 1914). The barracks was used as a military hospital during WW1 and then remained vacant until the 1st Bn. Royal Warwickshire Regt. moved in from 1925 to 1927. The 2nd Bn. RWR occupied the barracks from 1930 until 1935. They handed over to the 1st Bn. Royal Welch Fusiliers, who left Inkerman in 1937! During World War 2, a cinema (later called the 'Globe'); some wooden 'Spider' huts and other temporary structures like the Gym, were added at the rear of the buildings. Very little information is available from 1937 until September 1947, when the Military Police was lumbered with Inkerman. MOD decided that the RMP was to have it as their future training depot! A year later the Corps was to be graced with the 'Royal' title, and an impressive inaugural parade was held to mark the occasion. Have a look in the photo albums. The whole site was sold to Woking Borough Council and the Guinness Trust who began developing it as a housing estate in the early 1970's. Building continued on until the 1990's. All that remains of the original buildings is the prison officer's quarters on Wellington Terrace and Raglan Road. These were fully restored and sold for occupation.

### **A Soldier's Memories of Inkerman Barracks, Knaphill**

In the spring of 1947, when the Military Police Training School moved from Mychett to Inkerman Barracks at **Knaphill**, near Woking, Surrey, it was decided to include an Special Investigation Branch (SIB) training school, and the first course of 10 men completed their six weeks training just before Christmas 1947. The school was housed in a building at the side of the Officers Mess, just outside the main barracks and students were housed in the four rooms on the first floor.

Ablutions were very basic and as all students wore civilian clothes, they used the Sergeants mess inside the main barracks. They were all ex-civilian policemen, who had been recruited from British Army units cross the globe and at the end of the course, some of the senior NCOs were promoted to lieutenants and went on later to become Deputy Assistant Provost Marshal's with SIB. One of those was Sergeant Tom Baker from the Kings Own Scottish Borderers, later known as the Border Regiment, who was promoted to Lieutenant and then six months later to Captain and posted to Germany, where he became Deputy Assistant Provost Marshall SIB at 70 Section based in Hannover. Six week courses were then held every three months under the Chief Instructor, Major `Bill` Burcher, OBE, who was assisted by a CSM.

National Service conscription continued at the end of the war for all young men when they reached the age of 18, although for some, who were serving apprenticeships or in a reserved occupation, their two year service in the armed forces could be delayed until later. The National Service Act 1948, reduced the length of time served from 24 months to 18 months, although it returned to 24 months shortly after, with the Suez crisis in 1950. It also allowed some conscripts to volunteer to go into Coal mining where pay was much better than in the armed services. Conscription finally ended in March 1963.

About 10 National Servicemen served in the SIB. One of the first was Patrick Colson, who was called up for National Service on the 8th August 1947. He was a North Londoner who had worked in a City Stockbrokers Office from the age of fourteen. He was sent to a Primary Training centre at Central Barracks, Shrewsbury, the home of The Kings Shropshire Light Infantry and spent the next six weeks learning to be a soldier. Foot drill or square bashing as it was called, was an everyday exercise, and being the

home of light infantry every move was double quick time. Small arms training using that very heavy, but pretty efficient rifle, the Royal Enfield .303, was carried out in the butts halfway up the Wrekin, three quarters of an hours march at double quick time from barracks, and the three soldiers who shot the most bull eyes were taken back to Shrewsbury in the back of the three tonner everyday. It tended to concentrate the mind. Physical training in the well equipped gym, some basic first aid and plenty of boot polishing and blanching of equipment made up the rest of the time, at the end of which he went in front of a selection board, consisting of a Major and two other Officers and asked where he would like to spend the next two years. He told them he was a driver and held a full driving licence, so he would like to go into the Royal Armoured Corp and learn to drive tanks. The Chairman suggested he would be of more use in the Military Police where his driving skills would be put to good use.

Thus, on the 3rd October 1947, after a weeks home leave he reported to The Corps of Military Police Training School at Inkerman Barracks, for the thirteen week course. His Squad Instructor was Sergeant R. Thompson. I will let Patrick tell you the rest of his story:- "I arrived at Woking Railway Station with about 25 other recruits on that Sunday afternoon about 4pm, and we were driven to Inkerman Barracks in two, 3 ton Bedford trucks. The depot RSM. Percy Sedgwick, the highest rank in the Military Police at that time, apart from the Captain Quartermaster, welcomed everyone outside the main entrance in his usual eloquent style and one by one we were marched into the Guardroom to complete the necessary paperwork. We were then marched around the parade ground, nobody was allowed to walk across, until we reached an entrance to the main barrack block where half the recruits, or probationers as we were now to be called, were shown into a barrack room on the ground floor and the remainder went upstairs to a similar size room on the first floor. I went upstairs where a trained soldier made us stand in front of a bed for about ten minutes whilst he read out a list of do`s and don`ts. On the bed were two blankets, three straw filled pillow cases, two white linen sheets, a white pillow case and a straw filled pillow. There were no chairs in the room and the ablutions were situated outside at the top of the staircase where there were six toilets, six washbasins and a bathroom. It was all very primitive.

Inkerman barracks had been a women`s prison, then called Knaphill Prison and the bars were still fixed across some windows which added to its foreboding appearance. The tall dark brickwork and no outside lights, apart from a light outside the Guardroom and a flickering bulb outside the Naafi, made the place even more gloomy at night. The walls of the barrack room had been painted with white gloss paint and on that damp October evening, the walls ran with condensation. We were told to hang our clothes on the back of the bed and if pushed up against the wall they would have absorbed most of the moisture. I asked the trained soldier if we could light a fire in the fireplace at the end of the room. He had no objection, but had no idea where we would find any wood or coal. I noticed in his cubicle at the end of our room, he had an electric fire burning.

Together with the fellow in the next bed – John Dent, we went out in search of the necessary essentials and after about half an hour stumbling around in the pitch black, we came across a metal coal bunker full of coal, a pile of chopped wood and a metal bucket to put it all in. The noise from the adjacent building suggested that a party was in full swing, so I grabbed the bucket, scooped it full of coal, we grabbed a bundle of wood each and started to walk back to our barrack room. Suddenly, a door opened and bathed the whole area in bright light. Our friendly Regimental Sergeant Major, was standing at the door, silhouetted against the light inside shouting out a mouth full of obscenities. Within seconds the bucket of coal disappeared and we both found ourselves in the brightly lit Guardroom, standing to attention being told by the RSM, that stealing coal from the Sergeant`s Mess was a criminal offence and that within twenty-four hours we would both find out what life was like in a real Military Prison. It seemed that my new career as a Military Policeman had abruptly ended before I had even a chance to find out what a Military Policeman`s life was all about. – **Pat Colson(& family)**

## **All along 'The Watch Tower' - 1955**

"It was the 24th May 1955 when I arrived, with a number of other lads, at Inkerman Barracks, Knaphill to begin eighteen weeks training that would "hopefully" see us depart with the somewhat dubious title of Military Policemen. My memories of the Depot and Training Establishment RMP are quite vivid, including the hallowed parade ground that bods like me were only allowed to set foot when under instruction (square bashing), then to B-Coy lines where after six weeks initial training one was learning to drive 15 CWT Bedford vehicles, also those awful 350cc BSA motorbikes (a very painful experience), one had to be competent enough to ride the thing backwards, stand on the seat with one leg extended in the air, if that wasn't enough one had to sit with legs over the handlebars then made to ride hands free. At this point in time, after being inspected vigorously, one was given permission to walk into Woking town-in uniform of course. At meal times for the first six weeks training each squad were marched to the main dining hall which was situated behind the main block, mess tins and eating utensils were always inspected for cleanliness, fail and one was made to clean same before being allowed to eat. On the subject of food, one building within the barracks that I have fond memories of was the NAFFI, it was here that one could relax for short periods with tea and wads served throughout the day, thankfully beer could be purchased during the evening although a watchful eye was kept to make sure no one over indulged. At the end of the four weeks MT training it was on to the final eight weeks police training. The accommodation for the remainder of our time at Inkerman Barracks was far removed from that which we had endured in the main block. There the sleeping quarters were sombre with walls painted a very drab green, 30 men to a room, in the corner of the barrack room there was an open fireplace that looked as though it had not been in use for many years, each man had a small wooden locker plus a wooden bed box placed at the foot of the bed. Kit was arranged in typical military fashion, inspections were frequent. C-Coy accommodation was the nearest that could be described as comfortable, these were known as "Spiders", sleeping 6 to a room, as I recall the building was constructed with cedar-wood timber which contained a distinct pleasant aroma. The final stage of the eighteen weeks training ended with a "Pass-out" Parade, three Squads of 30 men in each would march proudly onto the barrack square, where a Regimental Band would be playing the Corps March, "The Watch Tower" - **Derek Palmer**

## **Knaphill & Inkerman Barracks – A Childhood Memory**

"I was born in Nursery Road, Knaphill, and left Winston Churchill school in 1972 and my first job was with RFDGQ with my friend Maureen Truman. I remember Valerie, Tony & Noel, and the boss was a lovely gentleman but sadly I have forgotten his name. I used to hang out around the barracks and know those houses. On route to school via Beechwood Road, I used to walk along the top of the high wall of the barracks...sure we were not supposed to! The barrack land where we did our cross country, is now full of houses". - **Gillian Alladyce**

## **"I Lived in one of those Married Quarters ..."**



"I moved into one of these houses in the picture (I remember which one but not the number) while living here I worked for (I think it was called RFGDQ) parachute makers and then was a driver for the home office prison stores which were behind the married quarters. I do remember our house had a bathroom added on at the back (it was so cold in the winter and with all the condensation you had to sit in the bath holding an umbrella!) but the quarters opposite had a bath in the kitchen and only an outside toilet! They were lovely houses if only they could have had some money spent on them. I also remember picking lovely blackberries on the derelict land at the back".

- **Jane Reddy**

## **1948 to 1951- Kid's Play**

"My father was a military policeman and we lived at no 17 MSQ (just around the corner from these houses and now known as Wellington Terrace). At the front of our house there were woods across the road and a small shop. The woods stretched right over to Hermitage Road and were a joy for us 7 year olds to play in.

Behind the houses were a large storage depot and more woods which were a short cut to the NAAFI shop and garrison church. I used to walk to school along the barrack path, firstly to the infants in St Johns and later to the junior which had entrances on both Hermitage Road and Barrack Path. We left in January 1951 to go to Kenya.

Now that I am retired I have decided to visit all my childhood places. Went to Woking in May 2008. Walking along Raglan Road in Knaphill was a lot like entering a time warp! The old houses were still there and those around the corner where I used to live. The woods across the road are now a school with a road running behind it, the woods at the back of the depot are now a large block of flats, the barrack path is now split in two by the Amstell Way and half of what used to be the path is now called Inkerman Way. The junior school building is still there and is now a Cranstock day centre, but the old infant school has long gone. The house that we lived in looks so much nicer these days. It has a back garden and not just communal washing lines and old air-raid shelters."

- **Sandra Evans**

## **1969 and a year of marital bliss?**

"I lived in Inkerman Barracks with my Spanish sister-in-law, Josie, and her family for a few months and was married out of her house on 9 August 1969 and then moved to Guildford! Then my Gibraltar brother-in-law returned from a posting in Malaysia, he was in the RAOC, and we used to visit frequently with our baby son and I also remember picking fat blackberries there. Josie kept the little house spick and span and as neat as a pin and took it all in her stride. She is in Canada now, widowed, and 80ish now. I have forwarded this page and hope at least one of her four children add to it!"

- **Sylvia Turner**

## **Memories of No. 1 Inkerman Road**

"My dad was a military policeman stationed at Inkerman Barracks, Knaphill and we lived at No. 1 MSQ Inkerman Road. It was great fun there, the woods over the road, next to the Victoria Cafe (all now gone). To the side of No. 1 was Herbert Crescent, to the back was an army stores depot and at the other end of the road was the Barrack Path. This was the way to St John's School. I remember the hill up to Knaphill and having my haircuts at the top on the right. We had wonderful times as kids climbing those 2 or 3 trees on the green at Herbert Crescent. My mum, rest her soul, once saved me from being hanged by a group of Teddy Boys! Then my dad chased and caught a man who had taken a little girl off into the woods. It was fantastic to watch my own dad jump on somebody and fight him! What is left there? I was recently on the M3 and took the opportunity to visit the area and blow me down, No. 1 is still there and looks very nice. The trees and Herbert Crescent (Hello Christine!) are still there and if there were not so many houses around, I might have attempted a climb! The Barrack Path is still there as is the old school building but it is no longer a school. The woods have been cleared, the area is now open grassland. The army depot has gone too, so has the Victoria Cafe over the road. By the way, anyone passing, stand facing No. 1 with the Spar shop (or Londis or Co-Op or something), behind you. Where the hedge ends, to the left, have a furrow around and you may find a shilling piece. I know it's there somewhere 'cos I pinched it from my mum and then could not find it. Memories!" - **John Burbridge**

## **RMP Training at Inkerman**

So, it was just over five years later when I landed in Inkerman. From November 1952 until April 1953. During this time we spent many hours in the cold class-rooms learning map reading; how to handle prisoners; Corps History; Discipline; the Army Organisation and Acts; Powers of Arrest (AFB252); Judge's Rules; Courts Martials; Factual Report writing; Traffic Accidents; investigation techniques of probe and search; physical training in the Gym; unarmed combat; assault course training; square-bashing and weapons training/firearms safety both at Inkerman and Bisley to gain our proficiency points. I've still got some of my old notes, and they make strange reading in this day and age, especially the bits on unarmed combat and police restraining holds and how to use handcuffs and truncheons! All this had to be recorded in a manila exercise book-SO Book 135. The thing that I was never able to understand was spending all day copying Badges of Rank into our exercise book when we already had them in a small pocket diary you could buy for 6d from the NAAFI!

All of us had to go to the "Globe" cinema hall to see that scratchy old film about VD,(today the fancy name is 'STD's'). Wobetide any man who shut his eyes or said, "Yuk" with Harry B sitting at the back!

One of the first parades was for the education tests. Of course, many of the guys had either HNC,HSC,ONC,GCE's etc., (*work that out!*) and so were exempt. These men had an annotation, "Exempted from General Education for the following reasons:" written on their Army Form C359. The rest had to sit exams for the required Army Certificate of Education-Third Class-a minimum requirement for Lance Corporal rank.

Some of us were interviewed for WOSB (War Office Selection Board) short-term RMP National Service Officer training at Eaton Hall, Chester for six months after pass-out as a Lance Corporal. The Probationer was 'left-right-left-right' marched into a room, told to salute a number of retired officers seated around a table. There the Probationer was

told the virtues of a short term commission and asked a series of questions, the answers to which were recorded. They scored with a few of the guys. They proudly collected their 'Sam Browne's' from the QM stores after our pass-out parade. Their pay as a subbie then would have jumped to 5 Pounds a week, (we got about 47 shillings and 6d as a Lance Corporal I believe-a bit different from the 300 Quid a week they get now)! What someone failed to tell them was that their shared Mess Bill would cost them 4 Pounds 19 shillings and sixpence a week! Other guys chose to go for parachute, signals or other specialist training, which gave them another 7 shillings a week, which was a lot in those days!

The fatigues at Inkerman were varied. Some others have written of hard times. I must have been very lucky as I can only remember doing potato peeling once. I never got lumbered for the washing pots 'n pans detail. Picking up leaves and paper was a favourite-and painting-now there's a story! I once got selected to clean the urinals. "Polish the copper pipes", was the order! I got the Brasso and started to polish-then I had a brainwave. I went to the stores and got some awful "Racing Green" colour paint and painted the bloody pipes after placing an "Out of Order" sign at the doorway. So far as I know-nobody ever tumbled it. I never ever went back to Inkerman, as I was demobbed direct from 156, and so I didn't have the chance to see if the pipes were still painted! There sure must have been a few skives for those detailed to polish those pipes after that!

Physical Training Instruction at Inkerman involved the squad performing various routine exercises for one hour per day in the Gym and outside. A cross country run had to be completed by each man in a specified time before passing out. Once posted there were compulsory fitness runs usually on a weekly basis.



Inkerman-December 1955

When we passed out, (there were only a couple of guys who got back-squadded; one had failed the assault course), there were so many Probationers that the parade took up nearly three-quarters of the oblong parade ground. It has always amazed me that so many pairs of hob-nailed boots (yes, we had studs in them in those days), always came down with one thud on the command 'Shun!' Commands always resonated off of the four walls and sounded like 'Shun-hun, hun, hun!

I well remember that assault course: imagine a bitter cold frosty morning in winter. A round telegraph pole situated high over an ice covered pit full of dirty green slimy water. We had to regularly walk over it from one side to the other. You could be back-squadded for repeated failure! We had to climb up the rope tied to a cross-bar hand over hand. The bit that I didn't like was having to carry a 'wounded' man over your shoulder. I was over 6ft tall, but I buckled under the weight of some guys! Then there was that Gym, the PTI swearing at me for running up to the 'horse' then stopping suddenly-just couldn't lift both legs together!

During the weapons training bit they showed us how to take various weapons to pieces and reassemble them. When it came to the 9 mm Stengun it looked so easy, and taking it to bits was. When the Instructor (Maj.Baker ?) said, "OK-Now put it together again". We were all fingers and thumbs! Eventually we got the hang of it, and the smarties among us could strip a Sten and put it together again in under seven seconds! Firing the 32 clip dammed things was another matter! At Inkerman there was a row of tin cans suspended on a wire between two posts. Imagine us all lined up with our old Webley .38 pistols and on the command, "Two rounds each man, fire", the whole row of cans dropped to the ground! "Alright, who's the smart b\*\*\*\*\*d. He's either a crack shot or lucky with a stray"! Nobody owned up to hitting the wire, and the matter ended there. Nearby Bisley was where we tested out the Brens and rifles-those beautiful but heavy cumbersome .303's! This was the place where Instructors aged rapidly with what the 'correct' speakers of today call 'stress' (in those days it was simply called 'frustration'). At Bisley we would all dress up in camouflage and move forward on the look-out for snipers hidden in the trees. The first man to spot one had to shout 'down'! To have spotted a sniper was guaranteed to please the Instructor ! - **Ian Dixon**

## The Demolition



Local opposition to the demolition of this historic site was ignored and the wrecking ball was sent to work and I for one was deeply saddened. There was probably never much hope for the original massive buildings although it had been hoped that the great clock tower might be saved as it was a local landmark but what should never have happened was the demolition of all the other houses in Barrack Road. Opposite the houses in the picture were similar but semi-detached properties and on the same side of the road facing the playing fields were a series of large detached houses; again in the same style but exceptionally fine residences - presumably reserved for the officers. The gardens were quite large and always well maintained - as one might expect from the military top brass. At the end of the road could be found the Sergeants Mess. In itself impressive. I was in the Military Police stationed at Inkerman Barracks in 1962. It's a shame most of it has gone". - **Raymond White**

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Fore more on the **History of Inkerman Barracks** and its earlier existence as an Invalid and Woman's Prison we recommend that you visit Corrine Garstang's excellent blogsite at:-  
[www.wokingprison.blogspot.com](http://www.wokingprison.blogspot.com)