A short history of Tyneham since 1943

St. Mary's Church, Tyneham from the north west, photograph © David Day, 1995.

In September 1916, the first tanks went into action on the Somme. By the start of the following year, the Machine Gun Corps (Heavy Branch) - later the Tank Corps - moved from Elveden, Thetford and Bisley to Bovington Camp in Dorset [2]. Eventually a full-calibre gunnery range came into being on the Dorset coast east of Lulworth Cove. The became, in time, the Gunnery School of the Tank Corps Depot. After the war ended, the area was compulsorily purchased by the War Office - not without controversy - and extended eastwards to reach Arish Mell [3].

At the start of the Second World War, all public access to the range area was banned. By 1943, it was becoming increasingly clear that the Lulworth range was inadequate for training purposes. The development of more powerful weapons, the long distances required for safe high explosive (HE) firing, the need for more realistic battle training in fire and movement and a general expansion in personnel (and associated training needs) meant that there was an urgent need to expand the size of the range. The most pressing of these needs, according to General Duncan at the public enquiry in 1947, was the need to train tank gunners in the new, indirect, methods of fire control needed for long-range firing [4]. The range area was also much too small to attempt any training in fire and movement, "except for a very short run for a troop of tanks" [5]. The story of the resulting evacuation of Tyneham is told, obliquely, in the series of half yearly reports on the progress of the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC). The report for early 1943 commented that "the range at Lulworth has been rendered quite inadequate by virtue of the necessity for longer ranges and H.E. shooting to cope with the modern guns" [6]. The next report noted that this problem had been solved [7].

Fortunately, it was possible to obtain a larger area in the vicinity, otherwise the removal of the [Gunnery] School with all its training repercussions, would have had to be forced.

This rather bland phrasing hides the eviction of the inhabitants of the village of Tyneham, of two smaller settlements at Povington and Worbarrow, and of numerous farms. The inhabitants left just before Christmas in 1943, many with the understanding that they would be allowed to return at the end of the war, a promise later known as 'Churchill's pledge'. A sad note (written by Evelyn Bond) was left pinned to the door of the Church [8]:

Please treat the Church and houses with care. We have given up our homes where many of us have lived for generations, to help win the war to keep men free. We shall return one day and thank you for treating the village kindly.

For a variety of reasons, the RAC had problems integrating the new area. Training in HE firing took place on the new Heath ranges, but the further development of the range itself could not be started because of the presence of an Royal Air Force radar installation (RAF Brandy Bay) within the danger area and a general shortage of manpower during the lead up to the invasion of Europe [9]. This work was still very much in hand when the war came to an end.

After the end of the war, there was some surprise in the local area that the Army had not begun to immediately vacate the Heath range area [10, 11]. Instead, there was growing evidence that the ranges were still being developed and 'improved', seemingly for permanent occupation. A programme for a tank gunnery demonstration held at the Gunnery School in April 1946 did not suggest that the wartime extension of the ranges was anything but permanent [12].

The development of tank guns during the war made the extension of the ranges essential. It was therefore decided to use the heathland between Wareham and East Lulworth for long-range firing. The maximum range for HE shooting is 5000 yards. The battle area is south of the Purbeck Hills in the Tyneham valley and although small, offers scope for a useful battle practice with a somewhat restricted arc of fire. The ground in the valley is good for tanks and can be used all the year round.

The local authorities, in association with local landowners and several MPs soon made representation to the War Department about releasing some of the land it held in Dorset - and in particular the Tyneham area. A public inquiry ensued, which was conducted by Sir Cecil Oakes in the Masonic Hall in Wareham in March 1948. Those who opposed the continued military 'occupation' of Purbeck attacked on two main fronts [13]:

- The War Department had a moral duty to relinquish the extended range area because they had given a promise (symbolically called 'Churchill's pledge') to local inhabitants assuring them that they could return to their homes 'at the end of the present emergency'.
- The area was an important amenity that should be returned to public use.

Representatives of the RAC responded by asserting that the expanded range was now indispensable. Duncan, then Colonel Commandant of the RAC Centre, argued that the Heath ranges needed to be retained for three reasons [14]:

- There was a continuing need for training in the use of indirect fire.
- It would be impossible to run courses at long distances from the other training components at Bovington and Lulworth.
- There was an urgent need to train instructors that would be able to undertake the training of RAC personnel on short-terms of National Service.

Duncan not only opposed the closure of the Heath range area, he also opposed public access to the area when the Gunnery School was not firing. Duncan gave two reasons for this in a talk to the Dorset Council for the Preservation of Rural England [15]:

- There was a continuing need for training in the use of indirect fire.
- It would be impossible to run courses at long distances from the other training components at Bovington and Lulworth.
However, he was willing to make arrangements for special parties to visit the ranges from time to time, if these were requested.

The main argument of the ranges' opponents had already been undermined by the publication of a Government White Paper on the 'Needs of the armed forces for land for training and other purposes' in December 1947. This addressed the problem of 'Churchill's pledge' by accepting that in some cases promises had been made, but did not commit the Government to honouring them [16].

In the case of some of the proposed training areas, particularly Stanford and the Purbeck tank gunnery school, it has been, or may be, represented that pledges were given that persons required to leave their homes would be allowed to return at the end of the war. The Government accept the fact that pledges of this kind were given or understood to be given, and it will not therefore be necessary to press the point at any public inquiry.

Oakes sent a report of the public inquiry to Lewis Silkin, the Labour Minister of Town and Country Planning, who announced the outcome in July [17]. Silkin told a meeting held at the offices of Wareham and Purbeck Rural District Council that when the pledge was given, it was assumed that if the war was won, the country would be "in a position to prevent aggression, at any rate for a long time in the future". However, after the defeat of the Axis forces, Britain needed to "re-arm and prepare for a fresh war", this time with the Soviet Union [18]. As Patrick Wright has commented, the village that had already died for D-Day was "going to have to die all over again for the Cold War" [19].

Tyneham, from that time onwards, ceased to exist as a real village but, as part of a carefully constructed myth of a lost English idyll, supported by occasional journalistic visits and the publication of Lilian Bond's Tyneham: a lost heritage in 1956 [20]. The Army did their part in ensuring that this myth gained common currency - the Elizabethan part of Tyneham House was taken-down by the Ministry of Works in the late 1960s and parts reconstructed at Athelhampton and Bingham's Melcombe.

Spurred by the ongoing destruction of Tyneham House, a renewed campaign to 'free' Tyneham was started in December 1967 with the publication of an article entitled 'Surrender Purbeck' in the first issue of a new journal called Dorset: the County Magazine [21]. In this, Rodney Legg, the editor of the magazine, proposed the setting up of an action group that would argue (and agitate) for the release of the Tyneham area. The Tyneham Action Group was set-up in May 1968 to do this.

In 1970, the Prime Minister Edward Heath announced the setting-up of a Defence Lands Committee under Lord Nugent to investigate and discover which parts of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) land holdings could be returned to private ownership.

While the Nugent Committee collected evidence, the Tyneham Action Group began to implode under the pressure of divergent personalities and strategies. Legg and some of the more radical members of the Tyneham Action Group left to form new groups, first Care for Dorset and then the '1943 Committee'. The Dorset Evening Echo briefly explained the differences between the two sides [22].

Whereas the Tyneham Action Group want just the Tyneham Valley handed back to the families of original landowners, the 1943 Committee want a wider area released by the Ministry of Defence and handed to the National Trust for the safekeeping of the nation.

The 1943 Committee lobbied Parliament and indulged in a variety of stunts to gain the public's attention, trespassing when the range was not in use and indulging in other activities designed to cause maximum embarrassment to the Army and, incidentally, the Tyneham Action Group.

On the 5th July 1973, the Nugent Committee finally reported. Amongst its other conclusions, it recommended that the MoD sites at Lulworth should be released, and that the RAC Gunnery School should be re-located to Castlemartin in Dyfed (Pembrokeshire). The Committee recognised that it could not recommend the use to which a site should be put after its release, but advised that "special steps should be taken to ensure that the land released can be protected and enjoyed" [23].

At a press conference held on the 5th July, Legg set up a Public Trust Fund called 'Friends of Tyneham', ostensibly to act on behalf of the surviving ex-residents of Tyneham who wished to return. In practice, however, Friends of Tyneham continued the 1943 Committee's militant campaign against the Army at Tyneham.

On the other hand, the publication of the Nugent report resulted in a more active defence of the Army presence in Purbeck led by local councils (in particular West Lulworth Parish Council) and a new 'Keep the Army in Lulworth Committee' that made representation to the Government. The Keep the Army in Lulworth campaign soon gained the support of the local Conservative MP, the National Farmers Union and the representatives of some local union members. David Lambert has recently noted that the protests over Tyneham did not tend to include the local working-class, who often strongly supported the MoD [24].

The ranges brought jobs and there was satisfaction in seeing the feudal landlords being dispossessed by a modern, egalitarian state.

In late 1973, Dorset County Council - who had previously encouraged the MoD to explore the possibility of transferring the ranges elsewhere - significantly changed its emphasis. This was articulated by the Planning Committee Chairman [25].

The need for a range still existed somewhere and to move it from an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to a National Park [i.e. Castlemartin] was far from the Planning Committee's mind in 1971.

The Government finally published its White Paper in August 1974 [26]. It said that it was unable to accept the recommendation that the Gunnery School should be moved from Lulworth to Castlemartin. They cited the heavy additional cost of the move, and the impossibility of making "acceptable arrangements for sharing facilities between the RAC Gunnery School and the German Army who use the range for tank training" [27]. They also noted that whilst there had been "total and united" opposition in Wales to the greater use of Castlemartin, this was not the case in Dorset [28].
However, the Government also proposed to spend £10,000 on improving access to the Lulworth ranges, with a similar sum to be spent annually on running costs [29]. Both the Tyneham Action Group and Friends of Tyneham initially criticised the Government's response but the climate of opinion was changing. The Tyneham Action Group soon decided to disband and formed a 'Watch Committee' that would look after the interests of Tyneham and to help secure public access.

In February 1975, Brigadier Roy Redgrave unveiled proposals for improving public access to the ranges. Legg, who had in the meantime reformed Friends of Tyneham as the 'Purbeck National Park Committee', organised a trip around the Purbeck coast on the 11th May. This was arranged in consultation with Brig. Redgrave, who cut short a Territorial Army exercise to allow the party in [30]. On 5th September 1975, Colonel Sir Joseph Weld cut a tape marking the opening of the Lulworth Range Walks. This was the effective end of the various campaigns to free Tyneham. Legg has since admitted of Friends of Tyneham that "a membership of two thousand slid to oblivion as the government pre-empted further campaigning with such attractive concessions on public access that there was no longer a mass movement" [31].

One of the ironies of the campaigns to release MoD lands in Purbeck is the gradual realisation that the Gunnery School's presence at Lulworth and Tyneham may not only have been of benefit to the local economy, but also to the environment. The campaigners in the late 1960s were concerned with the negative effects that the Army were having on wildlife. They reported craters in Worbarrow Tout, damage to Gad Cliff's crags, rifled badger setts and - especially - the potential risk to wildlife created by firing Malcara wire-guided missiles [32].

Each of these missiles trails a thin wire behind it, stretching from its launching vehicle position to its point of impact which may be thousands of yards away. These wires are resistant to rust and have on ranges in Germany frequently got caught up in antlers of roe deer, round their mouths and round their legs leading to death by hunger, strangulation or gangrene [sic].

Half-way through the campaign, some of the protestors began to realise that the Army may have had less impact on the environment than commercial development. Once it was clear that application of the Crichel Down rule meant that the ranges would first have to be offered back to its former landowners, Friends of Tyneham began to consider what impact this might have on the environment. Horror visions of caravans, extensive ball clay extraction and factory farming were conjured up in an attempt to swing public opinion behind the National Trust 'option'. Kenneth Allsop, the broadcaster, wrote [33]:

If there is going to be a share-out among the big landowners, the campaigners who have fought for the rights of the dispossessed and to safeguard this unique wildlife reserve will have been taken for a ride. It would be better left in the Army's hands than degraded for day trippers and the factory farmer.

The range area began to be regarded for its environmental 'purity'. An Observer Colour Supplement article gushed that the coast was "virginal, inviolate, usually unapproachable and majestic" [34].

The wildlife does not appear to fear the shells or the bullets. Explosives seem to demand less of local life than man. I would leave it all for our time as it is. Here, by chance, we have laid up treasure.

The Army now make a point of being seen to be environmentally aware. The MoD now have a Conservation Office who publish a glossy magazine called Sanctuary that occasionally carries articles on MoD land holdings in Dorset [35]. On the other hand, the work undertaken since 1975 to improve access to the ranges has had a significant effect. Lambert notes that the "upgrading of public access facilities and the insistent considerations of public liability have significantly altered the 'unspoilt' qualities of the village" [36]. Cottage walls have been reduced and capped with concrete, strips of wood keep the window frames in place, there are picnic tables and a very large car-park. Lambert is extremely scathing [37].

What has been created is a kind of wildlife garden, in which the clutter and dangers of any association or memory have been expunged in a kind of landscape lobotomy.

It is unclear, however, what is the alternative. Wright has already commented that the measures taken to convert it into a tourist attraction have demythologised the place [38]. This may be no bad thing.

References:

12. ‘RAC School, Gunnery Wing, 'Tank gunnery demonstration for Senior Officers School Course', 10 April 1946. [Tank Museum library, RH.88 RAC GS : 1208].
18. Note of a meeting held at the offices of the Wareham and Purbeck Rural District Council, on Friday 16 July 1948, at 3.30 pm. [Tank Museum library, RH.88 RAC C: 5202].
25. 'County Council want the Army to stay.' Western Gazette, 6 September 1974.
27. 'Army to stay at Lulworth'. Dorset Evening Echo (final), 29 August 1974.
29. Cmd. 5714, para. 11, p. 4.
30. 'Retreat from Lulworth' Evening Echo, Bournemouth, 12 May 1975.
32. Mark Bond, cited in [Monica Hutchings], The fight for Tyneham, pp. 35-36
33. Kenneth Alsopp, cited by Wright, op. cit., p. 302
36. Lambert, op. cit., p. 68.
37. Ibid.
38. Wright, op. cit., p. 367.

Further reading:

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