

Curragh History Archives



The Curragh Camp and District

Published by Eason, Dublin 1910

MILITARY

The Curragh has possessed some sort of Military history from a very remote period. An important battle was undoubtedly fought on it in 781, while from its proximity to the town of Kildare, which was plundered and taken by the Danes on not less than fifteen separate occasions between 833 and 1016, it must have been the scene of many a desperate foray.

The earliest date, however, from which there is any definite Military information is 1234, when Richard Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, and Earl Palatine of Leinster, in arms against the Viceroy, fought a battle on the Curragh in which he was defeated and killed.

It is probable that this locality had its share in some of the many conflicts which took place in the County during the Rebellion of 1641, when the famous Earl of Ormonde defeated an army of 15,000 men under Lord Mountgarret, at Kilrush.

On 28th March 1798 some 2,000 rebels assembled on the Curragh, under arrangements by which they had agreed to surrender. Major-General Sir J. Duffe went with 600 men to the Gibbet Rath to accept the surrender, but some stray shots seem to have been fired by the rebels, on which the order was given for the troops to open fire, while Lord Jocelyn's Mounted Fencibles charged and pursued the unfortunate Irish, of whom not less than 200 were killed.

The first approach to a Military occupation in the vicinity was in 1643, when the Town of Kildare was made a garrison post, under the Earl of Castlehaven.

About 1805, during the Napoleonic scare, an extensive camp was formed on the Curragh, but fifty years later no record of the details was extant, though the site was shown on the Ordnance Map, and could still be traced on the elevated ground, known as Long Hill.

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Early in 1855 when, in consequence of the operations then taking place in the Crimea, it was found necessary to afford facilities for training men in large bodies, and when also the embodiment of the militia necessitated a large amount of barrack accommodation, orders were issued by general Sir John Burgoyne, Inspector-General of Fortifications, for the construction of a hut encampment on the Curragh to accommodate 10,000 Infantry.

Some difficulty was experienced in selecting a site, as at the time the instructions were received the ground was covered with snow, but the work was pushed on, and by the 9th July, 1855, accommodation for 5,000 men was ready for occupation. The work was completed the same year; the huts, each measuring 40ft x 20ft, being arranged in 10 separate squares, 30 yards apart, each square accommodating 1,000 men. The Officers' Quarters were placed on a line 120 yards in front; the general lie of the Camp being from East to West, facing the North, and having in front a fine general parade ground, nearly level, and about a mile in length.

The left division occupied the site of the old encampment of fifty years earlier, and between this and the right division were constructed the Staff Officers' Huts, Offices, Churches, Clock, Water Tower, etc. The Huts for the General Commanding and Headquarters Staff were placed on a gentle elevation about 300 yards from the right of the troops, commanding a view along nearly the whole line of front.

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Roads were also formed towards Newbridge on the North; Athgarvan and Kilcullen to the East; Brownstown and Athy to the South, and Kildare to the West.

The measure for obtaining an adequate supply of water for so large a force were naturally of the first importance, especially as it was known that the want of an adequate supply of water had led to the abandonment of the old Camp of the early part of the century. After much deliberation it was decided to sink a trail well, with the satisfactory result that, at a depth of 54 feet, a flow of water was obtained which overcame the pumps and steam power employed in the progress of the work, and has continued to furnish an abundant and inexhaustible supply of pure water ever since.

At the conclusion of the Crimean Campaign it was decided to continue the Curragh Camp as a Camp of instruction, where Infantry could be trained and manoeuvred in conjunction with Artillery and with the Cavalry at Newbridge (for whom extensive barracks had been constructed as early as 1816), and the Headquarters of one of the Three Military Divisions, into which Ireland was organised, was fixed at the Curragh Camp.



Sandes' Soldiers Home

This township of wooden structures remained for many years a monument to the skill and foresight of the generation who engineered the scheme under the hasty circumstances which called it into being half a century ago. Remote from the public eye and knowledge, except as a silhouette against the distant skyline seen from a passing train, the experimental training camp which arose out of the experiences of the Crimea, has served its purpose, and even now many of the structures are still fulfilling the objects for which they were first

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erected. The headquarters Establishment, situated slightly apart to the north-east, still remains a most attractive and commodious group of bungalows. The huge wooden churches, too, perched in the centre of the Camp ridge, are scarcely dwarfed by the more modern surroundings, which will next be described.

The Camp, as it is still called, has, until a dozen years ago, been of slow growth. As the individual requirements of its various barracks and departments increased, its retention in its old form became, in the course of years, impossible, and the consequent erection of structures of a more permanent character, suitable to modern requirements, was seen to be inevitable.

The first important change had already been made by the replacement of the wooden huts constituting the infantry barracks, long known as C Square, by buildings of a slightly more pretentious kind, constructed of concrete, but otherwise on more or less similar lines to their predecessors. As time went on this group was brought into line with still more modern requirements until its buildings, apart from the barrack rooms proper, became as they are now, as well equipped as could be desired; the officers' Mess recently completed being now one of the most imposing structures on the Camp.



St Pauls Church Curragh Camp

In treating of this latter we anticipate we anticipate somewhat the chronological order in which the reconstruction of the Camp has been brought to its present state – the greater part of the present Beresford barracks having been built before an Act of Parliament of some twenty years ago. By this Act a standing fund was voted for the reconstruction of barracks throughout the kingdom on a scale to meet modern requirements, such as was impracticable on the ordinary principle of annual allotments of public money.

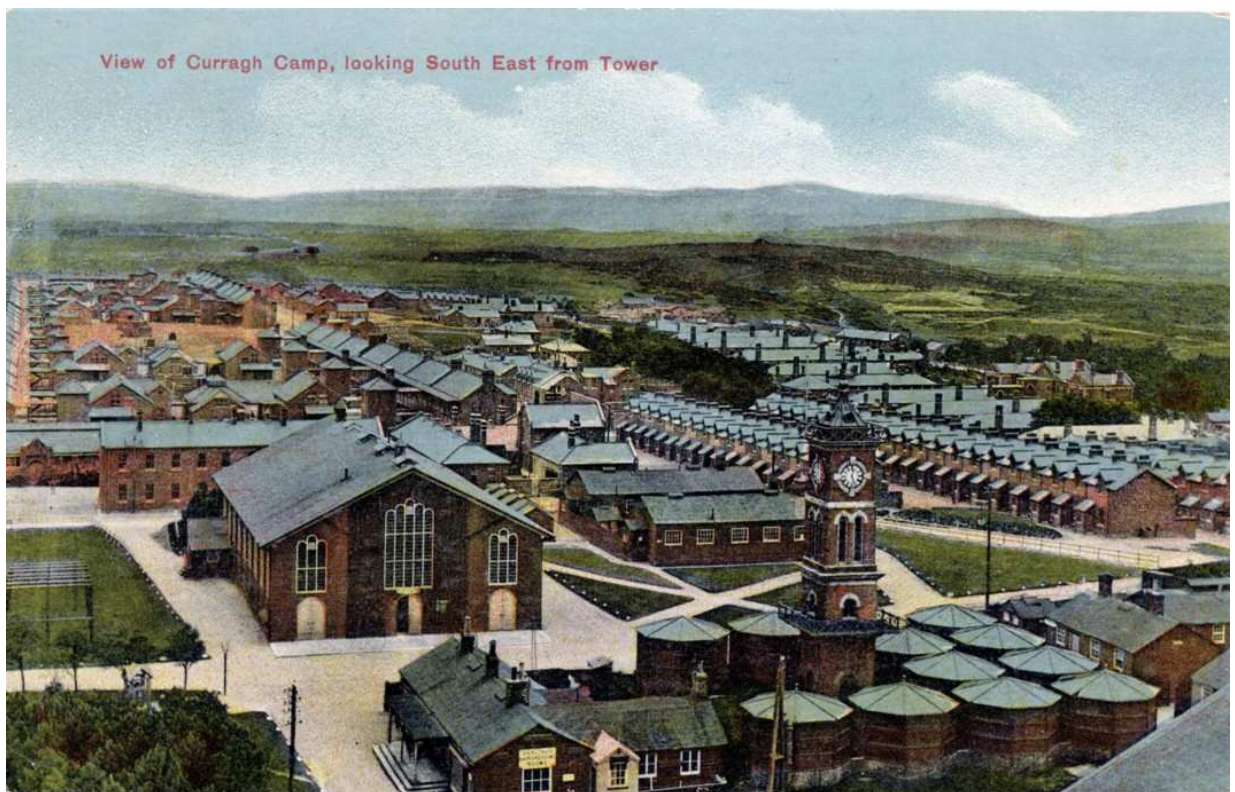
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Thus it appears that within a dozen years has sprung up the great group of imposing buildings, now to be seen on the Curragh ridge by any passer by on the Great Southern and Western Railway, or by visitors to the Curragh Races, and a short walk or drive from either Newbridge or Kildare, or from the Race Course, will repay the traveller for his trouble.

Entering the Camp from Kildare end the visitor passes two fine cavalry barracks, known as the Posnonby and Stewart Barracks – first leaving on his right the military prison of the district. These barracks each give accommodation for a Regiment of Cavalry and Corps, through whose lines the visitor passes.

Leaving Stewart barracks, the Infantry barracks, before alluded to, are passed, and will be recognised by the more or less primitive concrete huts on one side and by the important Officers' Mess building, already mentioned, on the other.

The Army Service Corps Lines are next entered, with their expansive parade ground; the Barracks proper being set back to the sough. Here at intervals can still be seen the remnants of the old wooden camp, a line of self-contained huts, which are occupied by the Officers, but now only await the fate of those formerly existing in the three barracks just passed, before being replaced by structures more in keeping with their present surroundings.



Curragh Camp looking South East from the Tower

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Leaving the Army Service Corps Barracks, those of the Royal Engineers are next entered, in their main lines almost identical with the former. Facing the parade will be noticed to the east a long line of concrete buildings consisting of the various administrative offices of the 7th Division, of which the Curragh is the headquarters, the Headquarters Offices of the General Staff being to the left of the road, under the shadow of the massive tower, which dominates the landscape for many miles around.

In this tower and its appurtenances is installed the local Fire Brigade, whose quarters are appropriately capped by the great high level tanks which contain the reserve supply of water for use in case of fire. Here, failing a natural gravitational supply of water, is stored a reserve of 40,000 gallons at a height commanding every building in the Camp, the water being obtained from the wells at the two pumping stations, the overflow furnishing the ordinary water supply of the entire station, stored in the two low level tanks adjoining. This enormous pile replaces the historic 'Flagstaff', for so many years the landmark to the main approach of the Camp.

A climb to the roomy concrete platform of the roof of the water tower will well repay the trouble. The beauties of the Curragh surroundings are lost to the ordinary wayfarer by the flatness of the country, but from this height such an impression disappears, and the fine point of vantage displays a superb panorama, rising to the east and south to the Wicklow and Slieve Bloom Mountains; the visitor is now six hundred feet above the level of the streets of Dublin, and the Camp itself is mapped out at his feet like a Garden City. Proceeding on the journey he finds himself in the centre of the Military Settlement, where stand the huge Temporary Churches, which were the crowning glory of the original wooden Camp. Here, too, remains the only permanent remnant of the old Camp in the shape of the Clock Tower, whose upper galleries were for so many years the eyrie of military operations in the surrounding country.

Leaving the central group and proceeding to the right and south the visitor will reach the group of Institutes which were erected by the various religious denominations for the amusement and entertainment of the soldiers, and which provide the freedom from the restraint of barrack life so highly valued by those for whom they are intended. The fine Post Office, too, stands here from which the Camp and the country for miles around is kept in touch with the outside world. Near this central group of buildings will be found the branch establishment of Messrs. Eason & Son, Limited

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Curragh Camp Post Office

Here on the north side of the road are the quarters of the Officers of the Divisional Staff, picturesquely situated on the slope of the Long Hill, with the prospect of the broad Curragh stretching uninterrupted in front. In these and in most of the residences of the officers of the Permanent Staff in Camp, from the Commander-in-Chief of the Forces downwards, the old buildings are still serving their original purpose. Descending Tower Hill southwards the Market Square is reached, where the goods of the outside world are on sale to the inhabitants of the Camp. The shops here will shortly give place to structures more in keeping with their surroundings. The road leaves the Camp here and forms the County Road to Athy. On the right of its exit is the Army Services Corps Compound, to be recognised by long rows of wagon sheds and stables, faced by the Central Bakery worked by that Corps. On the left are the new Ordnance Stores and Workshops, covering a large area, and but recently completed. The Gymnasium, another notable remnant of the old Camp, sands close at hand, wherein troops from all parts of the country receive their thorough course of physical training. Immediately adjoining is the fine Military Hospital, as well equipped and extensive as any in the country. It covers a very considerable area, and can provide accommodation for upwards of two hundred patients. On the "South Road" to the right, are situated the residences of the major-General Commanding the Division; of the Commanding Royal Engineer and his Staff; of the senior Medical Officers, Chaplains, Ordnance and A.S.C. Officers.

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The South Road is the most sheltered avenue in the Camp, bounded by a pleasant belt of foliage. To the south, and beyond the Rifle Range ground, is the Sewage Farm, recently reconstructed on the most modern system of sewage disposal which throughout the entire Camp has now replaced the primitive system of former years. Adjoining the Military Hospital and the Gymnasium are the Royal Engineer Workshops, Stores and Offices. The road rejoins the North Road about this point, having on the right the Rifle Ranges, the first of their kind to be constructed in this country for the long range rifle now in use. At the junction of these two roads on the right, a portion of the old Camp is still standing, a derelict and dismantled area, whereon stood the huts which until recently accommodated two battalions of infantry, but of which only a few now remain to show the lines on which the old Camp was laid out. Taking the turn to the left from the junction, and catching a glimpse of the headquarter group of huts before alluded to, their picturesque setting of trees, the great area of Barrack Buildings most recently reconstructed will be reached.

Gough and Keane Barracks are identical in all their details, and embody all the most modern accommodation which has yet been provided for the soldier. The barrack rooms have been laid out in such a manner as to allow of each man having a small cubicle bedroom (when completed), and the old system of messing in the barrack rooms in which the men sleep is here abandoned, and replaced by cheerful and roomy dining rooms, served from a central kitchen, all being in communication under cover from the weather. With their fine recreation establishments and general air of liberal provision it can here be realised that the soldier's life is made a pleasant as circumstances will permit, his health and comfort being well cared for – with hot baths, hot chambers for drying his clothes in wet weather, well equipped reading rooms and regimental club rooms.

The Perry Soldiers' Home

The Perry Soldiers' Home was built over 20 years ago by Mrs Perry, a lady much interested in soldiers. When she died in 1899 she gave this home to Miss Sandes, who had 31 similar Soldiers' Institutes in Ireland and in India.

The Soldiers' Home is a rallying place for men from the Curragh Camp and Newbridge. They use it as a Club, and as all soldiers are honorary members, and pay no entrance fee or subscriptions, Miss Sandes looks to the Public to help to maintain it.

The Coffee Room is open from 7a.m. till late at night. In the Lecture Room voluntary services and meetings are held every night, for the motive which constrains Miss Sandes and her Lady helpers to give their lives freely to this work is the great desire that many men in the Army should lay hold of the ONE ALMIGHTY FRIEND who wants to save and help them. The Recreation Room is filled with plenty of games, reading, and music. There are no rules or restrictions. The men come in and out as they like, and bring their dogs and their pipes.

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Wesleyan Soldiers' Home

The present commodious building is the result of several enlargements which were necessitated by the growing popularity of the Home, and the efforts of the Methodist Church to provide the best equipment possible in the interests of the Troops composing the Garrison.

The first 'Home' was built in 1893, a New Wing was added in 1900, and extensive internal alterations were executed in January, 1906. It provides Recreation and Games' Rooms, Library and Reading Room, Boarders' parlour, Coffee, Bar, Baths, eight Bedrooms for letting purposes, Manager's apartments, Assistant's quarters, Kitchen etc.

There are many enterprises at work in the Home for the welfare of the Soldier. These include Social Evenings, temperance Concerts, lantern Entertainments, a Soldier's Savings Bank, and Religious meetings, among which is a branch of the Soldiers' Christian Association.

The Home, though under Wesleyan control and management, is open free to all Soldiers irrespective of denomination, the greatest care being taken not to interfere with the religious persuasion of any who frequent it.

Church of England Soldiers; and Sailors' Institute

The Church of England Soldiers' and Sailors' Institute is one of many Institutes in the army worked in connection with the Soldiers' and Sailors' Institute Association.

It is free and open to all wear the King's uniform, who can make use of it without question or interference, without regard to religious persuasion or conviction.

The Institute contains a Bar, where refreshments of all kinds are served (except intoxicating liquor) at a moderate cost; also, Reading and Writing Room, Library, Baths, Beds, Billiards.

There is also a Devotional Room, where prayers are said every evening at 7.30, and other meetings are held.

The Garrison Branch, Royal Army Temperance Association, as well as the Independent Order of Good Templars meet in the Institute.

The Secretary is Col. R. Bond, late R.E. Any further information can be obtained from him, Address: Moorfields, Newbridge, or the Senior Chaplain, the Rev. Dr Pentreath, Curragh Camp.

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Catholic Soldiers' Institute

This building, of which the first stone was laid by Lady Anne Kerr, wife of major-General Lord Ralph Kerr, on 18th April 1896, was opened by Field Marshall Lord Roberts, V.C., on April 29th, 1897. The Institute consists of a large Reading Room, a Room for games, a Dining Hall, sleeping accommodation, Chaplain's Room, etc. The three Large Rooms are so constructed that they can be converted into one large apartment for Concerts and Social Gatherings.



Catholic Soldiers Institute

Notice of above would be incomplete without reference to Rev. Joseph Delany, late Catholic Chaplain to the Forces, Curragh. To his tact and unflagging zeal the Catholic Institute owes its existence. One fact may be mentioned. – that mainly by visiting the different parishes of the diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. He obtained a purely civilian contribution to the building fund, which defrayed nearly two-thirds of the expenses. The aim of the Institute is to provide for the material and social well being of the Soldiers.

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Presbyterian Soldiers' Institute

The existence of this Institute, which has the honour of being the first built by any branch of the Presbyterian Church, is due very largely to the Rev. Stuart Gardiner, M.A., Minister of Kingstown. He pressed upon the Church in Ireland the claims of the Army, and was successful in obtaining a grant of £1,000 from the Twentieth Century Fund. With this the Institute was built, consisting of a main Hall and two rooms, the intention being to provide merely for meetings, recreation, and reading, with a room for the Chaplain's use. It was opened 21st January, 1904, by the late Major-General de C. Morton, Commanding 7th Division, on behalf of H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught, the foundation stone being laid by Lady Morton. The basis of working was broadened, and one room was given over for refreshments. Later, an extension, finished in May, 1906, was built, providing a Dining Hall, Bedrooms, and Baths, thus completing the place as a Soldiers' Home.

The position of the Institute is central, being right opposite the Post Office. Its windows look towards the south, and command a magnificent view of the surrounding countryside, distant hills, and Wicklow mountains

Published by Eason, Dublin c.1910.

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Transcribed by Sue Rowbotham Oct 2008.

This document and images prepared by Matt McNamara Jan 2010