

Invasion of the Chilterns 1905

There was great excitement in the West Wycombe area in September 1905 when, during the annual army manoeuvres or exercises, an army force set up camp in the fields north of the A40 between Piddington and West Wycombe.



View from the top of Piddington, looking east to the army camp in front of West Wycombe, 1905.

The army marched in from Marlow and round the Sands Road to West Wycombe. General French commanding the exercise apologised to the Mayor of High Wycombe that for “strategic reasons” they would have to miss the spectacle. The troops marched through West Wycombe village starting at 5am. There were 247 officers, 5,153 other ranks, 1,283 horses, 44 guns and 250 wagons.

It is not clear if there was any actual fighting during these manoeuvres (the enemy were just represented by a few men wearing white headbands) , the only real fighting was in the five pubs in West Wycombe on the Saturday and Sunday evening, when it seemed the whole army tried to get served at once. The Nags Head ran right out, many glasses were smashed, and the Black Boy pub was badly damaged and nearly burnt down, and soldiers stole a leg of mutton which was supposed to be for the officers’ lunch. No mention of the police or officers trying to keep order.

From early on Sunday morning many people came to look around the army camp. The local buses were full of sightseers arriving, along with cyclists, cars and every other form of transport. The army used a very early type of radio (wireless) set carried in a wagon, using a spark-gap transmitter which made a loud roar each time the morse key was pressed, and needed an aerial strung between several 40 foot poles. The water for the camp was supplied from the Piddington reservoir, kept full by Mr North’s furniture factory well and pump.

The army finally marched out past Piddington and Stokenchurch to defend the crest of the Chilterns from the “invaders” coming in from the west. The exercises imagined 50,000 enemy advancing from

Thames, so the "Aldershot Army Corp" were to hold the 6 mile line between Beacon Hill (near Chequers) to south of Watlington. They would be very outnumbered, so they were under orders to hold the enemy as long as possible and then retreat.

In heavy rain, the troops dug 6 miles of trenches in a couple of hours, then the chalk had to be hidden by brushwood, still in torrential rain, and soon there was no sign of the trenches from the "enemy" side. The guns were hidden behind the crest in deep dugouts hidden by branches and turf.

The enemy main force crossed the Thames at Wallingford, so would get round behind the British and they needed to retreat, but the rain got too heavy so General French called a ceasefire to the exercise at this point. Unfortunately there was no respite for the troops, who had to fill in all the trenches again and repair the damage to the countryside.

The troops should have then made a night retreat to Henley, but the rain was still too heavy for that, so they sheltered in their tents, and headed for Henley and then Marlow on Tuesday. The army had made a pontoon bridge at Spade Oak east of Marlow to let the army escape across the Thames. The army reached the bridge ready to cross, but they were not allowed to cause any inconvenience to civilians, so the local newspaper says "at a word of command, the bridge parted in the centre to allow one of Salter's steam launches to pass".

In these exercises the army had learnt that fighting in hedgerows and dense fields, in mud and heavy rain was very different from their previous experience in the Boer War on the African plain. The chalk trenches on the Chilterns must have looked very similar to those in the film 1917, and across the Somme and Arras battlefields. The officer in charge of these manoeuvres was Sir John French, who would go on to lead the whole British Expeditionary Force in France and Belgium for the first 17 months of the First World War.