

The Carlton Rifle Company

In the nineteenth century, Carlton had its own troop of soldiers, the Carlton Rifle Company. It was one of many such companies of unpaid part-time soldiers in the various suburbs around Melbourne and in regional centres who formed what was known as the Victorian Volunteer Force. These part-time soldiers were the basis of the colony's defences in those days.

For the first 35 years of its existence, the Port Phillip District, later the Colony of Victoria, was defended by regiments of the British Army. But these were gradually reduced and in August 1870 the last of the British regiments left the colony. The defence of the vulnerable gold-rich colony was then the sole responsibility of the Victorian Government. From the 1850s there had been local volunteer military forces supplementing the British troops, organized into companies or troops in various suburbs of Melbourne, including Carlton, and in regional centres. The volunteers were not paid but were supplied with uniforms and armaments, and were expected to turn up to parades or training two or three times a week. A drill instructor was attached to each company, these men often having been sergeants in the British Army. Parades were held in the early morning before work, or in the evening after work, and involved training in military drill and at times classes in gymnastics, boxing and fencing.

The Carlton Rifle Company was formed in 1860 and operated for a quarter of a century, until it was disbanded in February 1884. During that time, it had a membership of between 100 and 175 men, plus up to six officers. The members of the Company were typically a mixture of ordinary working men, the sons of well-to-do families, former soldiers who had settled in the colony, and men who just enjoyed the companionship that the Company offered. Parades were held several times a week at their drill hall or 'orderly room', which was in Grattan Street, on the south side between Lygon and



Men of the Carlton Rifle Company, 1865.
(Photo: State Library of Victoria)

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Drummond Streets. Once a year, usually at Easter, the Company would attend the annual encampment at Sunbury or elsewhere outside the city, at which all of the troops and companies of the Victorian Volunteer Force would assemble for reviews, parades and mock battles.

The Company's drill hall was built in 1860 and stood initially on what was an empty block with vacant land all around it and plenty of room for parades and drilling. The hall was such a large and commodious space that it was also used by the local community for public meetings, lectures and other events that had nothing to do with military training. It was described in an 1875 newspaper article as 'a very handsome building' measuring 40 feet (12 metres) by 190 feet (58 metres), with committee rooms, office room, store room and drill instructors' quarters. Today the site of the drill hall is still owned and used by the military as a training facility, run by the University of Melbourne Regiment.

In the early 1880s there was a major review of the defences of the colony and as a result it was decided to replace the Volunteer Force with a militia of part-time soldiers who were partly paid. At the end of December 1883 the Volunteer Force was disbanded, replaced by the new militia. The records show however that many of the volunteer companies remained intact and simply changed their title and continued on as paid militia.

(Source for this article: George Ward, *Victoria's Land Forces 1853-1883*, self-published 1989)



Aerial view of the Carlton drill hall (centre of picture) taken in the 1940s. Carlton Gardens are at bottom left. The street running from bottom left to upper right is Grattan Street. (Photo: State Library of Vic).

Rifle range in Carlton

One of the activities of the Carlton Rifle Company was training in rifle shooting and marksmanship. The company had regular rifle practice on a rifle range, and there were marksmanship competitions between the members of the company, as well as shooting competitions between different volunteer companies. In October 1865, for example, there was a match at the Sandridge Butts (a rifle range in Port Melbourne) between what were described as 'two crack rifle companies', those of Bendigo and Carlton. Bendigo won with a total of 634 points to Carlton's 610.

In the early years, the Carlton Rifle Company had their own nearby rifle range. This was described in an 1875 newspaper article as located 'betwixt the old stockade and the cemetery', which puts it in what is now Drummond Street, North Carlton (*The Argus*, 7 September 1875). We know from an early map that the target end of the range with its protective mount of earth (the butts) was near the corner of Drummond and Fenwick Streets.

However by the late 1860s, most of Carlton and North Carlton was being built on, and firing rifles in the area was no longer considered a sensible thing to do. In 1868 an indignant Brunswick city councillor wrote to *The Argus* newspaper to complain about 'the dangerous practice of firing at the Carlton butts, notwithstanding the remonstrance made against it by a memorial adopted at a public meeting and signed by nearly 300 inhabitants'. Eventually the company had to give up its rifle range and travel to the Sandridge Butts for their rifle practice.

Local History News

Podcasts of history talks

Because it cannot run its usual series of public lectures due to the COVID 19 lock-down, the Royal Historical Society of Victoria (RHSV) has made available on its website podcasts of over 50 talks given in the past, covering a wide range of topics related to the history of Victoria. They are available at <https://www.historyvictoria.org.au/resources/lecture-podcasts/>

Australian Aboriginal history

Among these podcasts are a series of lectures presented in 2007 by Emeritus Professor Richard Broome on Australian Aboriginal History. Each week, a new lecture is made available, complete with lecture notes and further resources. The lectures focus on how our colonial past has shaped current perceptions of First Nations peoples, and how through key skills of research and conceptual analysis, history can help identify the wrongs of the past and contribute towards a reconciled future. The podcasts are available on-line at:

<https://www.historyvictoria.org.au/resources/australian-aboriginal-history-podcast-series/>

Researching the history of your house

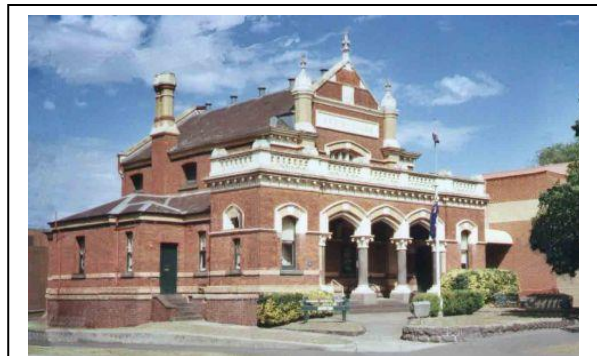
The Fitzroy History Society has produced a useful guide to researching the history of your house. Although meant for houses in Fitzroy, there is plenty in it that is of equal use for researching the history of houses in Carlton. It is available at <https://fitzroyhistorysociety.org.au/research/>

The history and meaning of placenames

If you are the sort of person who is interested in exactly which point of land was that first sighting by Captain Cook in Australia, or why so many streets in Australia have Maori names (there are 18 Timaru Streets in various parts of the country), then you might be interested in a magazine called *Placenames Australia*, the newsletter of the Australian National Placenames Survey. Have a look at back copies at <https://www.anps.org.au/newsletter.php?pageid=3>

Essendon's court house restored

On 27 June 2016, the 1890s former courthouse in Mount Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, that was the home of the Essendon Historical Society was extensively damaged by fire. Fortunately most of the society's archives were saved. To help fund the restoration the society formed a partnership with the City of Moonee Valley which will now have part-time use of the building. After more than three years of restoration work the courthouse is now restored to its former glory, and in November 2019 was officially re-opened.



The Essendon courthouse, home of the Essendon Historical Society, now fully restored

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Our aim is to help preserve our past for the future.

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We've been here before

This is an abridged and edited version of an article by Sharon Betridge that appeared in the June 2020 edition of History News, the newsletter of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

Isolation is not new to our world, though most of us have not experienced it before. However, Australia has experienced several waves of pestilence. Our Aboriginal peoples suffered high rates of mortality when exposed to diseases brought here by people from other countries. In the 19th and 20th centuries Victoria experienced several major health crises that sent people into isolation or quarantine, sometimes by force, at other times voluntarily - tuberculosis, diphtheria, typhoid, pneumonic influenza, polio, scarlet fever. We have managed these epidemics in a range of ways, isolation and immunisation being the most successful. Victoria has had quarantine stations since 1840, and from 1904 to 1996 the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital provided isolation for those suffering from infectious diseases. From 1996 its functions were relocated to other Melbourne hospitals.

Pneumonic influenza, sometimes referred to as Spanish flu, spread around the world in 1918 with troopships returning soldiers to their homes. From early October, Australia instigated a range of measures, including quarantining all ships with any sign of influenza. From early January 1919



The Royal Exhibition Building converted to an emergency hospital during the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1919. (Photo: *Sydney Mail*, 19 Feb 1919).

Victoria's newspapers were filled with articles of thanks to our leaders for their efforts to keep the State free from this epidemic, and grumbles from others about the way their lives had been interrupted. On 2 January Dr. Cumpston, Director of Federal Quarantine, said that 'not all risk is past, but it is certain that the critical period is over'. But others were sure the worst was still to come, and by late January newspapers were reporting increasing daily figures of reported cases and deaths.

Throughout 1919 pneumonic influenza cast a very dark shadow over the lives and actions of Victorians. The Government announced the closure of theatres, libraries and other venues where the public met, except churches. It was recommended that people wore masks and gatherings be held outside. During 1919 all ships from South Africa and New Zealand were quarantined regardless of sickness. Where influenza was discovered, the local district was quarantined. Several cases were diagnosed at Yarram, and consequently that area was quarantined within a 20-mile radius. While travel across state borders was restricted, this did not apply to those residing within 10 miles of the borders and did not include transport of goods or mail. The Red Cross produced masks from six folds of muslin sprinkled with eucalyptus and creosote. These face masks were worn by front-line workers including medical personnel, bank workers and tram conductors. During 1919 people complained that restrictions were constantly changing.

Come the first quarter of 1920, activities started to return to normal once pneumonic influenza cases diminished. Brighton District Poultry Society celebrated their first meeting for twelve months. The Young Phonographer League announced recommencement of their monthly meetings. The Catholic Church celebrated St Patricks Day, the celebrations having been cancelled in 1919. Schools closed from the beginning of February 1919 opened on 10 May and to make up for lost time they 'abridged the term holidays of that year'.

Did you know

Fife and drum band

The military have always used bands and martial music, and the Carlton Rifle Company was no exception. Like many other Victorian Volunteer Force corps, they had their own fife and drum band, which was used for parades and reviews, but also for non-military community events. For example at a bazaar held in the Trades Hall in Lygon Street in October 1864 in aid of the Carlton Primitive Methodist Church, 'a guard of honour was furnished by the Carlton Rifle Company (Captain Radcliffe in command) and the drum and fife band of the corps gave its services' (*The Argus*, 20 October 1864).

British troops used in Victoria

Two of the British Army regiments that were stationed in Victoria in the 1850s as part of the colony's defences were used to put down the 'uprising' on the Eureka gold fields in Ballarat in December 1854. Later both regiments were sent to New Zealand to put down an uprising there known as the Second Maori War. A member of one of those regiments, Drum Major Joseph Foster, took his discharge from the army in New Zealand in 1864, returned to Melbourne and joined the Carlton Rifle Company as a Volunteer. It was he who trained the fife and drum band. When he died in 1872, his funeral was attended by the band and a large number of members of the Company in dress uniform.

Prospect of war

When the Victorian Volunteer Force was disbanded in 1883, joining the newly formed militia was not popular with some former volunteers. Part of the reason was that, unlike volunteers, militia men were required to serve overseas if called upon, and there was a feeling at the time that war with Imperial Russia was imminent. At a meeting held in the drill hall in Grattan Street in May 1885, the chairmen stressed that 'it behoved everybody capable of bearing arms to come forward and assist in the protection of their hearths and homes'. (*The Age*, 9 May 1885).

Training for the Boer War

The war with Russia did not eventuate, but war with the Boers in South Africa did, from 1899 till 1902. The militia that succeeded the Victorian Volunteer Force provided the training ground for the 179 officers and 3,373 men whom the Colony of Victoria sent to fight in that imperial war in South Africa. Many did not return.

Captain William Radcliffe

From its founding in 1860 until he left Melbourne in early 1876, the Carlton Rifle Company was led by William Radcliffe, a prominent local resident who lived in Bouverie Street just off Grattan Street and worked in the city as a partner in a firm of wholesale grocers. He was a keen cricketer and in 1860, the same year that the Carlton Rifle Company was founded, he became the founding President of the Carlton Cricket Club. In October 1864 the members of the Carlton Rifle Company presented him with a handsome sword in appreciation of his services. A newspaper account at the time noted that:

'Everyone acquainted with the history of the volunteer movement here will be aware that for a long time Captain Radcliffe had an up-hill task, and that much merit and much courage was required to win for him and for his corps the present high position they occupy. The entire force will be pleased to hear of the honour done to an able officer, a splendid rifleman, and a right good volunteer'. (*The Australasian*, 22 October 1864)

Radcliffe was a champion rifle target shooter. In 1860 he won the Governor Barkly prize at an inter-company rifle shooting competition, and the following year won a gold medal in a competition against thirty of the best riflemen in the Victorian Volunteers.

In 1876 he decided to leave Victoria and take his family to New Zealand, and three years later he died there in Christchurch. Although Captain Radcliffe and his family left for New Zealand, some of his prized possessions remained or returned to Australia, for in 2016, the presentation sword mentioned above and his Whitworth target rifle came up for auction in Sydney.



Officers of the Carlton Rifle Company, circa 1861, Captain William Radcliffe on the left, seated. (Photo: State Library of Victoria).

This Newsletter is produced and distributed four times a year. If you would like to be put on the mailing list, email the Carlton Community History Group at cchg@y7mail.com or visit our website www.cchg.asn.au

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