

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 5

**The Devil's Own Town Trail**

*revised version January 2017*

**Route and Audio Points (APs)**

**START**

AP1. Berkhamsted Railway Station platform 4 exit - *Quartermaster's Stores*

AP2. Castle - *Musketry and Machine Gun school*

AP3. Kitchener's Field - *Parade ground and Tented camp, and start of walking route to Practice Trenches on Berkhamsted Common and IOCOTC War Memorial*

AP4. Railway Station forecourt - *YMCA site indicated*

AP5. Totem Pole - *Mess Room site of Keys Woodyard indicated*

AP6. The Moor - *exercise ground for horses*

AP7. Water Lane - *Old Brewery (Cavalry Stables) and Court Theatre sites indicated*

AP8. Court House - *Orderly Room* - and St Peter's Church, High Street - *The Red House (Officers' Billet) and The Crown public House (Squadron Room)*

**FINISH**

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**Audio Point 1 Berkhamsted Railway Station – platform 4 exit *Quartermaster's Stores***

- The walk starts outside the platform 4 subway exit.
- In September 1914 Berkhamsted's population of 7,500 was swelled by the addition of 2,500 members of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps (IOCOTC). The Corps was stationed in the town throughout the war years, finally leaving in 1919. The Devil's Own was the nickname conferred on the regiment by George III, on learning that the men were drawn from the legal profession.
- The station played a key part in 1914 in the decision to select the town as a base for training the IOCOTC. The Corp's Headquarters and Depot was in Chancery Lane, conveniently situated for Euston. All recruits spent their first two weeks of basic training in London before taking the train to Berkhamsted and the next three months of follow-up training which fitted them for commissions and posting to various regiments. And rail was by no means only for troop movements. The station was in constant use for the transport of horses and materials of every kind essential to the needs of the garrison. No wonder that *"Mr Blincoe, the helpful Stationmaster was singled out for special thanks by Colonel Errington, Commanding Officer of the IOCOTC."*
- In those days the station boasted goods sidings (on land now occupied by the carpark) with adjacent buildings and sheds for storage, long gone. But one railway building essential to the Corps' existence remains. This, part of the main structure of the station, with its entrance beside the Platform 4 subway exit, is now the Marlin Montessori School. In 1914 it was the private waiting room for Lord Brownlow and his guests, and he made it available to the IOCOTC. Throughout the war years it

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served as the Quartermaster's Stores and is immortalised in a revue song, written by officers of the Corps, from December 1915.

- [To the tune of *Mandalay*]  
*Near a well-known railway station,  
At the Quartermaster's Store,  
'Tis there I'd be parading  
As I've often done before;  
With a ton-weight marching order  
And a rifle full of grime,  
To be sloping arms and forming fours  
And ever marking time.*

[Chorus]

*On the road to Potten End,  
With a picquet to defend,  
Or patrolling in the darkness  
Along to Warners End.  
On the road to Potten End  
Where the gorse and bracken blend,  
And the sun sinks over Rossway,  
'Tis there I'd be, old friend.*

**Audio Point 2 Castle – *Musketry and Machine gun school***

- The fact that its walls lay in ruins did not exempt Berkhamsted Castle from being called upon to do its bit for the war effort. A model section of trench, better finished than the rough practice trenches on the Common, was created and named “The Labyrinth”. On 1 October 1917 a cow fell into the Labyrinth and was killed. Although quite how a cow strayed into the castle grounds is not recorded, a Court of Enquiry

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found that it died in an attempt to escape from an aeroplane (believed to be hostile) which flew over Kitchener's Field that night.

- The Castle grounds were used to erect several temporary wooden buildings, which served for musketry, including machine gun training. "The Devil's Own Time", a humorous memoir of their time in Berkhamsted written by members of the Corps for the entertainment of their comrades, includes the musings of a cadet posted as part of the all night Castle Guard.
- *I reflected on the ancient glories of the ruins I was guarding to see if, peradventure, the Middle Ages would cast a glow over me...William the Conqueror had, in olden time, marched past my beat, and been treated with every mark of civility in the Castle hard by. I wondered whether, if his ghost came by, I should treat it as an unauthorised person. Then I gat me up to the ramparts in a medieval frame of mind and thought myself as good as any old knight in shining armour, and a good deal better too...Then I went down to the moat, put my foot in a puddle and awoke from my imaginings.*

### **Audio Point 3 Kitchener's Field – Parade Ground, Tented Camp Site and start of walking route to Berkhamsted Common for Practice Trenches and IOCOTC War Memorial**

- With the Railway Station behind you, walk along Brownlow road, with the Castle to your right and you quickly reach Kitchener's Field. This has kept its name as a permanent reminder of the time when Kitchener's Army chose Berkhamsted to be its "Sandhurst". Now the home of playing fields, its wartime role was to serve as a drill ground. Photos by J H Newman (a local professional photographer, who documented Berkhamsted's time as a garrison town) show hundreds of troops, lined up in ceremonial order, almost entirely filling the vast space, with an admiring

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crowd of Berkhamsted townsfolk standing on the slope towards New Road for an audience.

- On the rising ground to the North West of Kitchener's Field was the huge tented camp that was home to two thousand men. Over 300 bell tents can be counted in a Newman photograph of the site. Another photo shows six heads peering out of a tent doorway. That gives a figure of at least 1,800 men! Colonel Errington's personal account shows that he had found exactly what he was looking for:
- *The situation of our camp at Berkhamsted was ideal, pitched in a field on the north side of the station and sloping gently up to Berkhamsted Place...The proximity of the station did away with all transport difficulties. On the west side, we had ample room for expansion, and on the east side another large field, subsequently given the name of Kitchener's Field, made an admirable drill ground.*
- The pattern of the IOCOTC's training year was to spend the winter months in billets in Berkhamsted and move under canvas in spring. One corps man recalled "*that winter [of 1916-1917] was the bitterest since 1895, and I had just come from the tropics.*" J H Newman photographed some of the troops' winter training in deep snow, including mock trench walls made of snow, rather easier to construct than digging the real thing on the Common. One long march back from Ivinghoe Beacon through snow was known to them as "The Retreat from Moscow".
- The footpath through Kitchener's Field leads up towards the Common and eventually to the site of the last remaining 600 metres of WW1 practice trenches, which were cleared of 100 years growth of scrub and surveyed and mapped by volunteers in a project from 2012-2013. The route to the site and to the nearby IOCOTC War Memorial at the top of New Road is set out in **Audio Trail No 2 WW1 Trenches & Alpine Meadow**, available to download from the Berkhamsted Town Council website:

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[www.berkhamstedtowncouncil.gov.uk/town-guide.html](http://www.berkhamstedtowncouncil.gov.uk/town-guide.html)

- Now retrace your steps back to the Railway Station and go through the underpass to the forecourt outside the station entrance

**Audio Point 4 Railway Station forecourt – view towards YMCA Hut site**

- Looking to your right, you will see a row of houses behind a tall beech hedge. This was formerly the site of Berkhamsted Cricket Club's ground, and the club allowed this part to be used to erect a large purpose built YMCA wooden hut, complete with a stage.
- The opening of the YMCA hut made the national press. The *Manchester Guardian* of 2 February 1915 under the headline "The men of the New Army – General Hutton's high praise" began:  
*In opening a new YMCA recreation hut for the use of soldiers in training at Berkhamsted yesterday, Lieutenant General Sir Edward Hutton said that the progress made by the men was due to the stuff they were made of...akin to the material which composed Cromwell's Ironsides.*
- For the cadets' assessment of the place of the YMCA in their lives while training we turn once again to the pages of "The Devil's Own Time":  
*...the YMCA that priceless boon without which the fellows would have been lost indeed. As witness that black spell when, owing to the Measles, the Hut was closed for three weeks. It was our place of recreation, reading, writing, refreshment, the indispensable and loved abode of our leisure moments. There were billiards and books, sweets and tea-cakes, pens and ink. A post office, boxing, concerts, a football field and all things.*

**Audio Point 5 Totem Pole marking the site of former Timber yard - Mess Room**

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- On leaving the Railway Station, cross the road and turn left. Take the footbridge over the canal. From the bridge there is a clear view of the Totem Pole, but you will have to imagine a canal side timber yard beyond it, stretching into the distance.
- Nowadays the vast site of this timber yard and storage facility, where Castle Street meets the Canal, is built over completely by a modern development of houses and apartments. But you can't mistake its location because of its one remaining landmark, Berkhamsted's canal-side Totem Pole. The IOCOTC wouldn't have recognised the Totem Pole of course, because it didn't make an appearance until the 1970s when it was given to Keys' successors on the site, Alsford Timber Merchants. For the cadets the timber yard meant one thing: food. Colonel Errington records:
  - *On 7 December 1914 we moved our Mess into the wood-yard...For the first years of the war we received a money payment per man per day in lieu of rations. The rate was gradually reduced to 1 shilling and 5 half pence [just over 6 new pence], and at that rate we succeeded in feeding at one time 2,400 men: no mean achievement.*
  - During the war years food was a precious commodity. A member of the Corps remembered,  
*On one occasion a private was reported for wasting food. When he was duly charged at company orders the Commander, remembering a poster he had seen that morning, sentenced him to attend a series of lectures on food-economy and to present full notes thereon. The delinquent complained afterwards that it was not so much the lectures or the notes he disapproved of, but the fact that he was the only man in the audience.*

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**Audio Point 6 The Moor exercise field for horses**

The footpath from the canal bridge leads you to Mill Street. Follow the pavement with an open area of grass to your right. This is the Moor, just a short walk from the site of the cavalry stables which lies ahead of you. It is not difficult to imagine the horses relishing the fresh air and having a bit of grass to nibble after stuffy stables. But, for training, the horses needed much more space. Colonel Errington again:

*We tried Ashridge Park, the Common, Haresfoot Park, and (perhaps best of all) a large field adjoining Chesham Road between Haresfoot and Kingshill. But for field-work the country was admirable. As training progressed and we had a long day in the field every week, we began to find out the great charm of the country round Berkhamsted, and were fortunate to get fairly regular hunting with the Old Berkeley and the Hertfordshire packs. A Corporal's stripe was the open sesame to the hunting field – a great incentive...We blew up every available railway bridge within miles, we burned forage stores at Whipsnade and Markyate, we waylaid valuable convoys on the Watford – Tring Road with resulting horrible massacre, our patrols knew every nook and cranny within a large radius, and we charged with reckless bravery against thickly manned imaginary trenches on the downland of the Ivinghoe Hills.*

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**Audio Point 7 Water Lane - sites of the Old Brewery *Cavalry Stables* and the Court Theatre**

- Follow Mill Street, keeping to the left, with the carpark on your right. Water Lane is now a continuation of Mill Street, becoming a narrow lane beside Tesco's.
- Fortuitously, shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914, brewers Locke & Smith had gone out of business, vacating extensive industrial premises and storehouses located partly where later the Court Theatre stood and now Tesco stands. In 1914 the range of buildings extended back for some distance along the side of Water Lane on land which is now car park. Errington recalls the first arrival of the Squadron (the cavalry section of the IOCOTC) "outside a massive pair of gates which screened the entrance yard of the Old Brewery – of blessed and glorious memory".
- *...empty spaces in the Brewery were transformed into stables, and before long were filled to overflowing, so that "D" Troop spread out across Water Lane into another building, and "C" Troop had a fresh enclosure made for some of their horses out of the forage store. The men too overflowed into the town, and were billeted out at the International Stores and the Progress Hall, over the Cooperative Society.*
- Spot the theatre! You are hard put to it to do so today. But on the plot of land on the north side of the High Street on the corner of Water Lane, where Tesco now stands, formerly stood the Court Theatre opened on 24 March 1917. It was named after the Inns of Court Officer Training Corps and provided entertainment for the troops. The regimental band played on the opening night. Before the theatre was built revues and other entertainments staged by the cadets themselves were put on in YMCA premises. In the early months of the war these were typically church halls loaned to the YMCA, but, later, a purpose designed and built YMCA hall was erected on the town cricket field by Lower Kings Road (**Audio Point 4**). Colonel Errington wrote with approval of self-generated entertainments:

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*This Christmas [1915] was marked by a most successful entertainment got up by our officers in the shape of a Revue entitled "Look Level or not a Move". One verse [to the tune of the music hall song "I don't want to be a soldier"] neatly summarised the basic framework of training.*

*On Monday you go out with a shovel*

*On Tuesday you make your soft feet hard*

*On Wednesday you're out simply learning to shout*

*On Thursday you're on guard*

*On Friday you get some gentle night ops*

*On Saturday you'll just be coming to*

*But on Sunday there's inspection, and sermon and collection*

*Till we make a dinky sub of each of you.*

A "dinky sub" was a subaltern (2nd lieutenant), the most junior commissioned rank.

- Follow Water Lane to its junction with a cobbled lane and turn left towards St Peter's Church.

### **Audio Point 8 Court House – Orderly Room and St Peter's Church**

#### **High Street – The Red House *officers' billet***

#### **The Crown public house *Squadron Room***

- In 1914 the Tudor building alongside St Peter's Church housed, as it does to this day, the Parish Rooms. On the arrival of the IOCOTC the Rector made it available to the Corps as the Orderly Room, in effect, the local military office from which all operations in Berkhamsted and the surrounding area were administered. (The Headquarters was at 10 Stone Court, Lincoln's Inn). A pen and ink sketch of the Court House forms the frontispiece of "The Devil's Own Time" above the single word title "Orders". The Orderly Room was not just an office for file keeping; it was also the place where offences against military discipline were adjudicated.

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- In the early months of the war the Corps drew most of its recruits from the legal profession. As you might expect, when there were misdemeanours of one sort or another cadets were quite capable of defending themselves with creative interpretations of military law. One story, possibly apocryphal, has it that when two cadets were late back from weekend leave they explained to Colonel Errington (the officer commanding), that, whilst they were on the platform a military band struck up "God save the King". It was no more or less than their patriotic duty to stand to attention whilst, "to their deep regret", their train and their kit left the station without them.
- Later in the war, in 1916, the Orderly Room moved house – apparently, with few regrets. Colonel Errington's memoir of the war years:  
*About this time it became very cold and windy in Camp. Papers in the Orderly Room were scattered about by wind or got covered in dust, and the Staff were much relieved when the Orderly Room was moved on October 16<sup>th</sup> to its new quarters in Keys Timber Yard [Audio Point 5], where it remained until demobilisation in July 1919.*
- Another IOCOTC memoir added "*The company orderly sergeant's week on duty involved a lot of work in the Orderly Room, the thick dust of which always gave me a severe cold after the healthy outdoor life.*"
- Draughty and dusty or not, conditions in the Court House at the time didn't prevent it being pressed into service as a temporary isolation ward. During the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918/19 some members of the Inns of Court Regiment were billeted in the Court House. A large sheet soaked in disinfectant hung over the door to stop the infection spreading to the rest of the building. All existing hospitals were full.
- The Court House was chosen as a favourite backdrop for Corps photographs. A shot of the band lined up with their instruments is a reminder of its significance to the regiment. A Corps man recalled that *their rendering of Sibelius' Finlandia ... was*

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*the best thing in their repertoire.* The regimental quick march is *Nancy Dawson*, named for the dancer who danced the hornpipe in 'The Beggar's Opera' in 1759.

- “The Devil's Own Time” noted that Church Parade (to St Peter's Church for the majority of cadets) was compulsory. A personal memoir of one of the cadets added, *It was curious how, from a cordial dislike of these compulsory parades, we came to like them better than almost anything else at Berkhamsted. Among the most appreciative members were those who at the start were either atheists or men of no religious convictions. The music, the atmosphere, the tout ensemble appealed, possibly, to the finer part of the human frame, and fed that which had been neglected during the week. Hymns, apparently opposed to the grim business on which we had embarked professionally, were sung with vigour and sincerity.*
- Their uniforms were another apparent incongruity of the IOCOTC's presence in the parish church. *The regimental buttons ... bear an artistically conceived image of His Satanic Majesty, with wings outstretched, all in black...[!]* found that on church parade it added a hitherto air of piquancy to divine service to have so many portraits of the Devil upon my person.
- On the opposite side of the High Street are two secular buildings which held special significance for the IOCOTC – The Red House and The Crown public house.
- A garrison of 2,500 extra men in Berkhamsted takes a lot of housing. A vast tented camp was set up to the north west of Kitchener's Field (**Audio Point 3**) and, in addition, the inhabitants of Berkhamsted opened their homes and provided billets. Graham Greene recalled that the Corps was regarded by the citizens with some pride because it was not an ordinary regiment – every man was a potential officer as well as a potential barrister. The war was not a remote concept, but felt very keenly in Berkhamsted, not just with its own loved ones away at the front, but also with its adopted sons: some 12,000 were trained in the town by the end of the war.

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One family home in Cross Oak Road took in three cadets (including the son of the house!). No doubt they did this willingly, as supporting the war effort. But the War Office provided a modest financial incentive in the shape of a billeting allowance to the householder. Of course, this being the Army, things didn't always run smoothly...

- *An order was published on 14 December, increasing the rates payable for Class 1 billets . This was read in the Corps and some other units, as applying to Class 2 billets. As a result, increased payments were made to the inhabitants of Berkhamsted and a great sensation was caused when six weeks later the mistake was discovered. Steps were then taken to recover the over-payments, but by War Office order this recovery was stopped. The amounts overpaid were disallowed in the various Company Pay and Mess Books, and it was not until early in 1919 that these disallowances were wiped out.*
- It is safe to assume that the Red House qualified unequivocally as a Class 1 billet and it is understood that some of the officers of the Corps were housed there. However, the more senior officers, including the CO, Colonel Errington, were billeted at Berkhamsted Place, a country house on a hill about a mile from Berkhamsted Castle. The house is no longer standing.
- Colonel Errington's association with the IOCOTC was abruptly terminated in August 1916, following a change of policy at the War Office concerning methods of officer training. He was appointed Base Commandant of 58<sup>th</sup> Division, then standing by to go overseas. *I left Berkhamsted on 1<sup>st</sup> September, deeply grieved at quitting the old Corps in which I had served for thirty-five years.* Interestingly, it seems that he must have regarded Berkhamsted as having some of the happiest memories of his long service career. By 1922 the Electoral Roll shows him living in The Red House, his home until his death in 1942.
- At 145 High Street the Crown's distinctive gabled frontage stands out. While all the town's public houses must have enjoyed the influx of thirsty khaki-clad customers

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which began to arrive in September 1914, The Crown was singled out as a special favourite. Colonel Errington's memoir again:

- *The Squadron sing-songs in the "Crown" became a feature of life, and elsewhere in the town who shall say how many hearts were set a-flutter by clink of spur and jaunty set of cap...We made a host of friends in and around Berkhamsted, among them Mr Newman, the ubiquitous and indefatigable photographer; Mr Bunker, of Northchurch Farm, who helped us in many ways; Mr Rawle, who ran the Staghounds; Mr Wingfield, the saddler; Mr Gubbins, the friendly proprietor of the "Crown", where we had our Squadron Room for lectures and singsongs; Mr Blincoe, the helpful Stationmaster; and Mr Pike, our landlord at the Old Brewery. The hospitality of the inhabitants generally is too well remembered to need any word here.*
- **Finish of the Devil's Own Town Trail**