

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

**Audio point 1 Berkhamsted, WW I Garrison Town**

- On leaving the railway station cross Station Road, turn left and take the first right, crossing the canal by the pedestrian bridge and bear right along Mill Street. The Moor, an open grassed area, is on your right hand side.
- On 14 September 1914 Berkhamsted, then a quiet country town numbering some 7,500 inhabitants, awoke to the arrival of the Inns of Court Officers Training Corps. The first contingent set about erecting tents in fields just to the north of the railway station and by the time the garrison was fully established their strength was 2,500 men. The impact on the townsfolk was immense.
- Many local families provided billets for the officer cadets. The town quickly became a “pocket Aldershot”. The war was not a remote concept but felt keenly in Berkhamsted, not just with its own sons away at the front, but also with its adopted sons: some 12,000 would be trained in the town by the end of the war.
- Troop movements could be seen at any time of day or night. The countryside around the town was considered ideal for training with its mixture of woodland, commons and parkland, threaded with waterways, and the open downland of Ivinghoe Beacon a short march away. Eight miles of practice trenches were dug on Berkhamsted and Northchurch commons. Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 2 includes a description of a 600 metre stretch that can be visited. It was cleared, surveyed and mapped by volunteers, 2012-2013.
- The IOCOTC was the “Sandhurst” of Kitchener’s New Army. 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. Strictly speaking, although this was true at the start of the war, admission criteria were soon relaxed as officer casualties mounted. The regiment traces its history back to 1584. Its nickname “ The Devil’s Own” was conferred on the regiment by George III, on hearing that its men were drawn from the legal profession.
- Various buildings around the town were either requisitioned or voluntarily placed at the disposition of the corps. Apart from private homes, billets included the International Stores and the Progress Hall over the Cooperative Society. Barncroft off Shootersway became a military hospital.
- The railway and the station facilities played a crucial role throughout the war years 1914-1918 when the IOCOTC was stationed in the town. The Corps' HQ was at 10 Stone Court, Lincoln's Inn and recruits spent 2/3 weeks in London before continuing their training in Berkhamsted for a further 2/3 months leading to being commissioned into other regiments. Thus the rail link to London Euston was in constant use to carry men, horses and equipment. A building beside the Platform

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

4 exit, now the Marlin Montessori School, was, in 1914, the private waiting room for Lord Brownlow and his guests. At the outbreak of war he made it available to the IOCOTC and it was in use, along with other nearby station buildings, throughout the war as the Quartermaster's Stores.

- Fortuitously, brewers Locke and Smith had just ceased trading and their extensive vacated premises in Water Lane (now Costa Coffee and adjoining premises, but then stretching back over today's car park) were occupied by a squadron of cavalry. The landlord of "The Crown" provided a Squadron Room for lectures and singsongs. The Moor, the recreation ground between Mill Street and the canal, was used for exercising the horses. For training exercises they needed to get out into the open countryside. In his memoir of the Corps' time in Berkhamsted, Colonel Errington, their commanding officer, noted, "For field-work, the surrounding country provided a most admirable variety of terrain..."
- The sheds of Keys' timber yard, beside the canal at the end of Chapel Street, provided messing facilities for a thousand men.
- Berkhamsted castle served as a drill ground and centre for machine gun instruction.
- The Rector made available the Court House (the Tudor parish rooms beside St Peter's Church) and this became the Orderly Room. Other local church halls were used by the YMCA to provide recreation facilities and, later, a large purpose-built hut was erected on the cricket field beside Lower Kings Road equipped with snooker tables and a stage for weekend concerts.
- Lord Brownlow put his estate at the corps' disposal and part of his Ashridge Mansion was put to use as a military hospital in the early months of the war.
- Continue along Mill Street until you reach the High Street. Cross the road to Prince Edward Street and, at the end of the road take the footpath to the right of Victoria School. This path leads to an open piece of ground called Butts Meadow.

#### **Audio point 2 Butts Meadow and beyond**

- The Butts in the name Butts Meadow refers to a place where targets were set up for archery practice. Centuries before the arrival of the IOCOTC, the garrison of Berkhamsted castle included archers and it is said that they once honed their long bow skills here. Shooting nowadays is confined to the football pitch.
- Follow the path along the left hand side of Butts Meadow as it climbs the hill and emerges into another piece of open grassland, known as Tompkins Meadow, where, behind you, a panoramic view opens up of the town in its valley setting. You can enjoy it from a helpfully placed bench. Tompkins was a prominent

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

butcher in 19th century Berkhamsted and this is where he grazed his delivery horses.

- At the meadow's end follow a fenced-in footpath, until you emerge through a gate into playing fields. The footpath now roughly follows the line of trees (perhaps an ancient field boundary line) straight across the playing fields. The Inns of Court cavalry squadron rated "a large field adjoining Chesham Road between Haresfoot and Kingshill as perhaps best of all" in the vicinity of the town as a drill ground.
- Soldiers are not the only ones to wear ID tags. Look out for numbers on the trees as you cross. These are their ID tags. The numbering is understood to be part of a national database to record the location of notable trees throughout Britain and Ireland. The database is maintained by The Tree Register, a registered charity (<http://www.treeregister.org>).
- You leave the sports ground through a gate on to Kingshill Way. A signpost reads Town Centre 3/4. Turn left and walk along Kingshill Way to its junction with Chesham Road.
- Cross Chesham road by way of the traffic island and follow a tarmac road. Where the road forks, bear right and look out for the entrance to a pedestrian tunnel under the by-pass (A41) on your right. Go through the tunnel and turn left.
- To your right, across the valley, is Haresfoot Farm, and just out of sight beyond, Haresfoot House, former home of General Smith-Dorrien, now a school. This stretch of countryside was much prized by the Inns of Court for training. Errington's memoir notes, "Haresfoot Park was a convenient training ground for night operations, and offered surprising facilities for losing a company on a dark night...most famous of all was a night, early in the first winter, when, after plunging through inky darkness on the further side of Haresfoot, and miraculously assembling beyond White Hill, the Corps stood in line along the side of a hedge in pouring rain for a mortal hour, while the allotted guides, who were to head the advance on compass bearings taken during the day, rectified the errors due to two of them omitting to look at their compasses in the (erroneous) belief that they could find the way without; and the third having neglected the difference between magnetic and true bearings".
- You are now on a bridleway, mercifully not in darkness, and, (with no need to take a compass bearing) it takes you through a narrow strip of woodland known as Sandpit Green. This is secondary semi-natural broadleaf woodland, covered with mainly oak with ash and sycamore. There is an understorey of elder and holly together with elm regeneration. Cherry, beech and hawthorn are also present.
- At the end of the bridleway turn right on to Swing Gate Lane and continue as the metalled road turns into the access lane to Bottom Farm and nearby cottages.

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

Just before the farm turn left taking a footpath that follows the line of the valley bottom, the Bourne Gutter.

**Audio point 3 Bourne Gutter**

- You may see a stream flowing near the footpath, but then again, you may prefer not to see it. In a memoir recalling his youth in the Chilterns, nature writer Richard Mabey refers to “a valley with a woe-water, supposed only to flow in time of trouble”.
- When the stream is flowing it is a tributary of the River Bulbourne. It rises from a spring on Spring Meadow Farm, just over the border in Buckinghamshire and flows down the valley, under the A41 and into the village of Bourne End where it joins the River Bulbourne.
- We know that it flows only during a lengthy period of very wet weather - over 32 inches (810mm) in 12 months. The Bourne Gutter is, therefore, usually dry and perhaps that is all to the good.
- So, what times of trouble have earned it the designation of woe-water? It is said that when it flows it foretells specifically war and expensive bread. Excessively wet weather would be bad for crops so the expensive bread bit may well be true. But war? Graham Greene, no less, evidently gave some credence to the story: “There was one dried stream-bed, half hidden in the bushes, called the Woe Water because the stream only ran before a war. It ran before the Boer War and in July 1914. ”
- While it may have correctly foretold the outbreak of WW I, perhaps even the Bourne Gutter may have been taken aback by the arrival of the IOCOTC on training exercises. Colonel Errington's memoir again, “The surrounding country was the best imaginable for training...We went where we liked and we did what we liked. For the squadron, long treks without touching a road, wide movements, distant reconnaissance; for the infantry, wood fighting, canal crossings, river crossings, big fights on open commons and downs, local fighting among the enclosures, every form of open training was available....There are few parts of the country in a six mile radius round Berkhamsted which the Inns of Court have not fought over. Potten End, Little Gaddesden, Nettleden, Hawridge, Haresfoot and Bourne Gutter are the Ypres, Arras, Cambrai and the Somme”.
- Continue along the same path which eventually joins a short stretch of metalled road close to Lower Farm, which you will see up the hill on your right. Where the farm access road bears left go right, through the gate to a signed footpath which climbs steadily through fields towards a gap in the treeline ahead of you.

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

**Audio point 4 Bovington Airfield and Whelpley Hill**

- After passing through the narrow strip of trees turn left and the path follows the edge of the field, with hedgerow to your left. The expanse of grassland stretching away into the distance to your right was the site of military activity during WW II as a bomber base. We'll come to that later. Meanwhile there is one more IOCOTC link to record.
- Just a mile away from you, on the opposite side of the airfield, lies Whelpley Hill which made such an impression on the IOCOTC that it earned itself a place in one of their songs. In December 1915 the officers of the Corps put on an entertainment for the cadets and the closing Epilogue Song, adapted from the Kipling ballad *Road to Mandalay*, included this chorus.
- “On the road to Whelpley Hill  
That was aye a bitter pill,  
Doing long night operations  
That are guaranteed to kill.  
On the road to Whelpley Hill,  
Of the scheme our knowledge nil,  
And the night alarm by Friday Street Farm,  
Which makes me frightened still.”
- Continuing the theme of night operations, Errington adds, “... no one will deny the utility of night training. It is of the first importance to get over the unfamiliarity with night sounds and sights which besets the town-bred man, and acquire some practice in finding one's way in the dark. The terrors of the dark disappear with habituation, and many an officer must have laid the foundations in Berkhamsted for the patrols in No-Man's-Land which formed a necessary part of the routine of France and Flanders.”
- Sergeant Edwin Deller, an Inns of Court instructor throughout the war, recalled “that more than one old Corps man has told me how he applied with success on the Menin Road or in the fighting around Arras the lessons he learnt at Potten End and Whelpley Hill”.
- Singing along with the trainee soldiers of WW1 may help to keep your spirits up as you trudge along the path following the former airport perimeter. However, in the interests of historical accuracy it may be noted that a contributor to Errington's memoir described the IOCOTC's singing on the march “as a rule [was] spasmodic and none too good...it is surprising what a large proportion of men can continue to sing contentedly with the beat on the wrong foot, or will attempt to march to rag-time.”
- It must be admitted that some surroundings of the disused airfield are not things

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

of beauty; evidence of its regular use as a market site doesn't exactly serve to enhance the hedgerows. But beauty is in the eye of the beholder and film directors have also chosen to use parts of the airfield as locations, including *The War Lover* (1961), starring Steve McQueen, *633 Squadron* (1964) and *Hanover Street* (1978), starring Harrison Ford. Most recently (2014) it was the location for *Fury*, starring Brad Pitt.

- At the end of the field path turn right along a metalled access road, passing on your left the transmitting aerials of Bovingdon radio navigation beacon for aircraft. The airspace above the airfield and nearby Chesham is known as the Bovingdon stack. When Heathrow becomes congested, aircraft are requested to fly a holding pattern until a landing slot becomes available. So, if you spot aircraft circling overhead on a clear day, that's the explanation.
- But that is the only aircraft movement associated with the airfield nowadays. The airfield was shut down in 1972, after a military lifetime of 30 years. The units stationed there alternated between RAF and USAAF during WW II and afterwards. Its longest wartime role was as a training facility for US bomber crews, but perhaps a rather more glamorous association was as the home base for General Eisenhower's personal B17 Flying Fortress.
- The access road leads directly back to the now familiar clay path skirting the airfield, with the facilities of *HMP The Mount* now directly facing you. This section of the walk can be muddy after wet weather, but cheer up! Bear in mind, as Errington reminds us, that, "Hertfordshire is not quite so muddy as Flanders".
- The last section of the path, now enclosed and running alongside the prison perimeter fence, takes you to a housing estate. Turn left along Newhouse Road to reach the village of Bovingdon. The Halfway House pub is on your left by the double roundabout on the Chesham road. Bovingdon High Street is facing you, on the opposite side of Chesham Road, well served with shops and refreshment facilities.

#### **Audio point 5 Bovingdon meets the IOCOTC**

- WW I Infantry training was not restricted to operations in the open countryside. Fighting in built up areas also had a part to play as the trainee soldiers familiarised themselves with the rather different techniques needed for fighting the enemy street by street, or house to house. Referring to local fighting among enclosures, Errington recalls that Berkhamsted's neighbouring villages, Potten End, Nettleden, Little Gaddesden, Aldbury, Tring, Ashley Green and Bovingdon, were all pressed into service for this purpose. Perhaps the net was cast so widely so that the local inhabitants might not have cause to complain that their turn came round too often.

Berkhamsted Audio Trail No 4  
In the Devil's Own footsteps  
*first draft Oct/Nov 2014*

- Errington paints a rosy picture, “In all seasons, in all weathers, at all times of the day or night, our men were all over the country; except for musketry and the minimum amount of close order drill, they were never in camp...We went where we liked and did what we liked. The big landowner, the small landowner and the farmer were all equally ready to help”. It is hardly to be expected that relations were always so completely harmonious all of the time, but, “If there was any trouble, Major Mead at once got on his horse, rode over and smoothed things out”.
- Reflecting on the IOCOTC's war time training from the vantage point of 1922, Errington summed up the experience. “Never before in England can the armed forces of the Crown have been so free to utilise the whole of a tract of country; and if fences sometimes got broken, if gates were sometimes left open, if somebody's goat was attacked by one of the many dogs which attached themselves, with touching devotion, to the Corps' operations, it will not be denied that the country got full value for it on the fields of France and Palestine.”
- So were the locals always so welcoming to the military that were wished on them? Perhaps “welcoming” is putting it a bit strongly. Tolerant, may be. At least, Errington considered they thought it all for the best. “In ...Bovingdon the awakened villager turned to sleep again with greater security when he realised that the outburst of firing, and the swift rush of feet through the village street, betokened nothing more than a night raid of the Devil's Own.”
- So, as the satnav tells it, “ You have reached your destination”. If you are up for it, having enjoyed a little Rest and Recreation in Bovingdon, you can retrace your steps back to the start in Berkhamsted. For those who have had enough exercise for one day, public transport is available. Buses run from Bovingdon Memorial Hall to Hemel Hempstead Railway Station. You then have the option of taking another bus, to Berkhamsted town centre, or a train back to your start point.