

THE BUILDING OF BISLEY - THE 'NEW WIMBLEDON'

Iain Wakeford 2015



When you think of Wimbledon today, you probably think of tennis, but until 1890 the area was better known as the home of the National Rifle Association. The NRA (the proper one that is, not the little upstart in America) was founded in 1859. Two of the founders, the Duke of Cambridge and Earl Spencer, apparently held manorial rights on Wimbledon Common - which probably explains why the area was chosen for their first tournament in 1860.

By the time the tennis championship was set up in the area in 1887 the shooting tournament was well established – perhaps too well established as it was becoming increasingly obvious that the common could no longer cope with the crowds of people attending the annual event.

As early as 1888 several sites were looked at, including Cannock Chase in Staffordshire, Compton Downs in Wiltshire, Richmond Park and even Staines, but in the end the common at Bisley was identified as the ideal location, with the Guard's Camp at Pirbright (established

Many of the buildings at Bisley were brought from the NRA's site at Wimbledon.

in 1881) and nearby Aldershot probably helping to swing the vote in our favour. The fact that the London & South Western Railway were also prepared to build and operate a branch line into the new site also probably helped.

The NRA apparently paid £13,000 for the common with the War Office providing working parties from Aldershot to level the ground and construct the ranges and butts. The Pavilions and huts were brought from Wimbledon and re-erected with other temporary buildings constructed on the site for the 'season'. The *Daily Telegraph* commented that 'so far as could be judged, general surprise was expressed that, whilst there was much that was new at Bisley, yet in many ways the "camp" was uncommonly like the old quarters at Wimbledon. Perhaps there was a double advantage in having the same familiar buildings, tents, offices, and huts, because people had grown accustomed to them, and were cognizant of their advantages and disadvantages for use and residence'. I am not certain if that was a compliment or not!

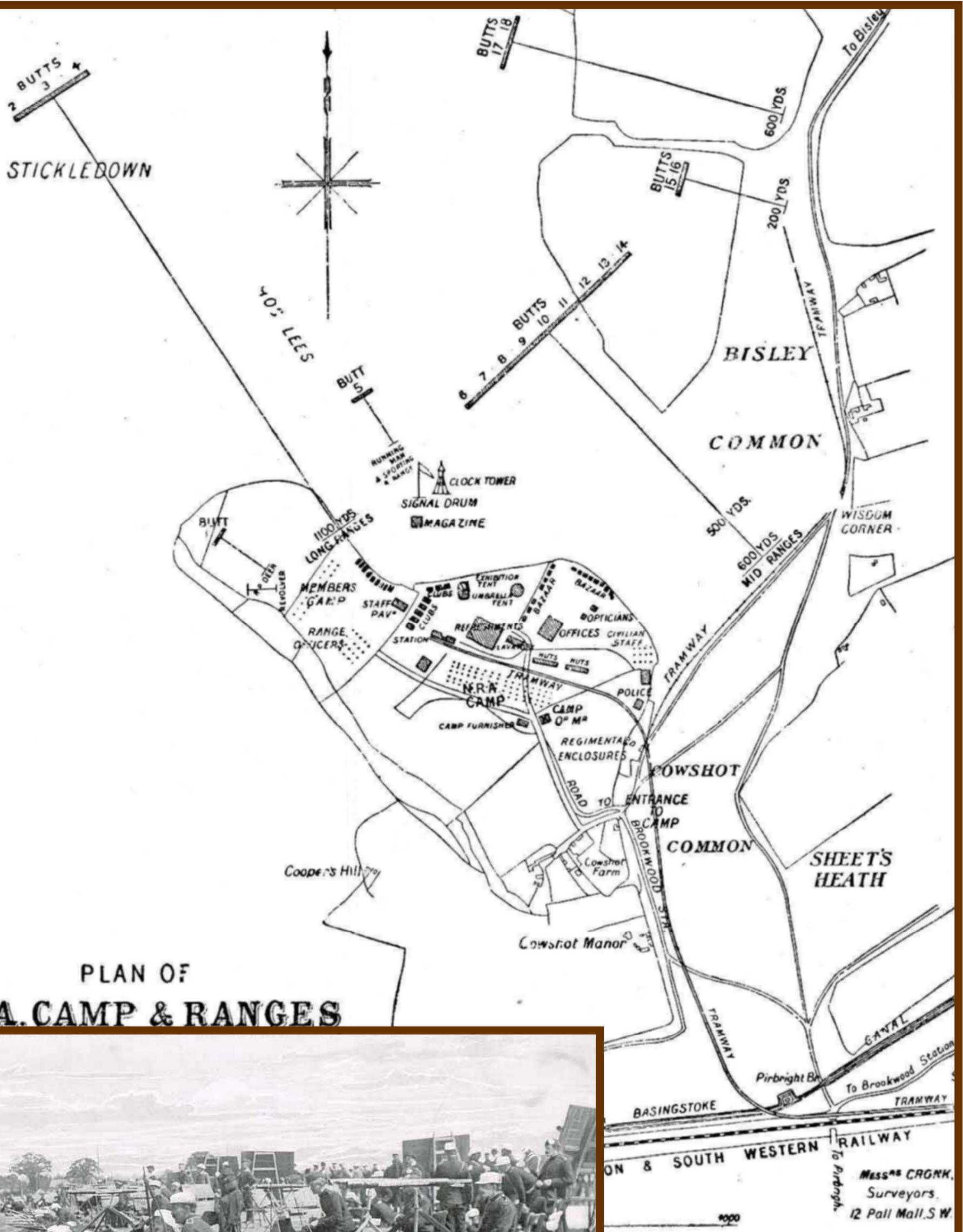
From the start the Association received Royal patronage and in 1890 Queen Victoria gave the NRA a Royal Charter, with the Prince and Princess of Wales performing the opening ceremony at Bisley on the 12th July that year.

'Thirty years ago' the *Daily Telegraph* reported 'Her Majesty the Queen, attended by the Prince Consort, was graciously pleased at Wimbledon to inaugurate these now world-famed

The Catering Pavilions from Wimbledon were re-erected at Bisley



PLAN OF N. R. A. CAMP & RANGES



tournaments of marksmen. The Princess of Wales, following the illustrious example set by the Sovereign so long ago, with like dignity and grace fired the first shot at the ranges which are henceforth to be the scene of friendly rivalry among the best sharpshooters of the English speaking nations.'

'The bugle sounded "Commence firing", and in an instant the mile-long row of ninety targets rose into view amid the cheers of the public. An answering call having proclaimed that all was ready, the Princess instantly pulled the cord, and the first bullet went whizzing at the rate of



2,000 feet a second towards the butts. Presently up went the signal for a bull's-eye, and looking through the fixed glasses of J H Steward, the royal party could see that the shot was within an inch of the exact centre of the target. The dense rows of people cheered loudly, and thus under happy auspices the new ranges of the National Rifle Association were opened'.

After inspecting a company of boys from the

nearby Gordon's Home the Royal Highnesses then 'drove over the ground' to inspect the various firing-points before retiring for tea in the Pavilion and then returning to London from the 'Pavilion Station' at 5.57pm.

Although the Pavilion Station only lasted a few months, parts of the line of the branch to the camp can still be traced with the supporting walls of the bridge over Connaught Road still

visible by the railway arch to Pirbright and the metal pillars that once supported the bridge over the Basingstoke Canal still in place. On Sheets Heath the gully through which the line went is still visible, whilst at the camp part of the track and central station buildings are preserved. Indeed much of Bisley Camp is now a Conservation Area with the ranges themselves being a Site of Special Scientific

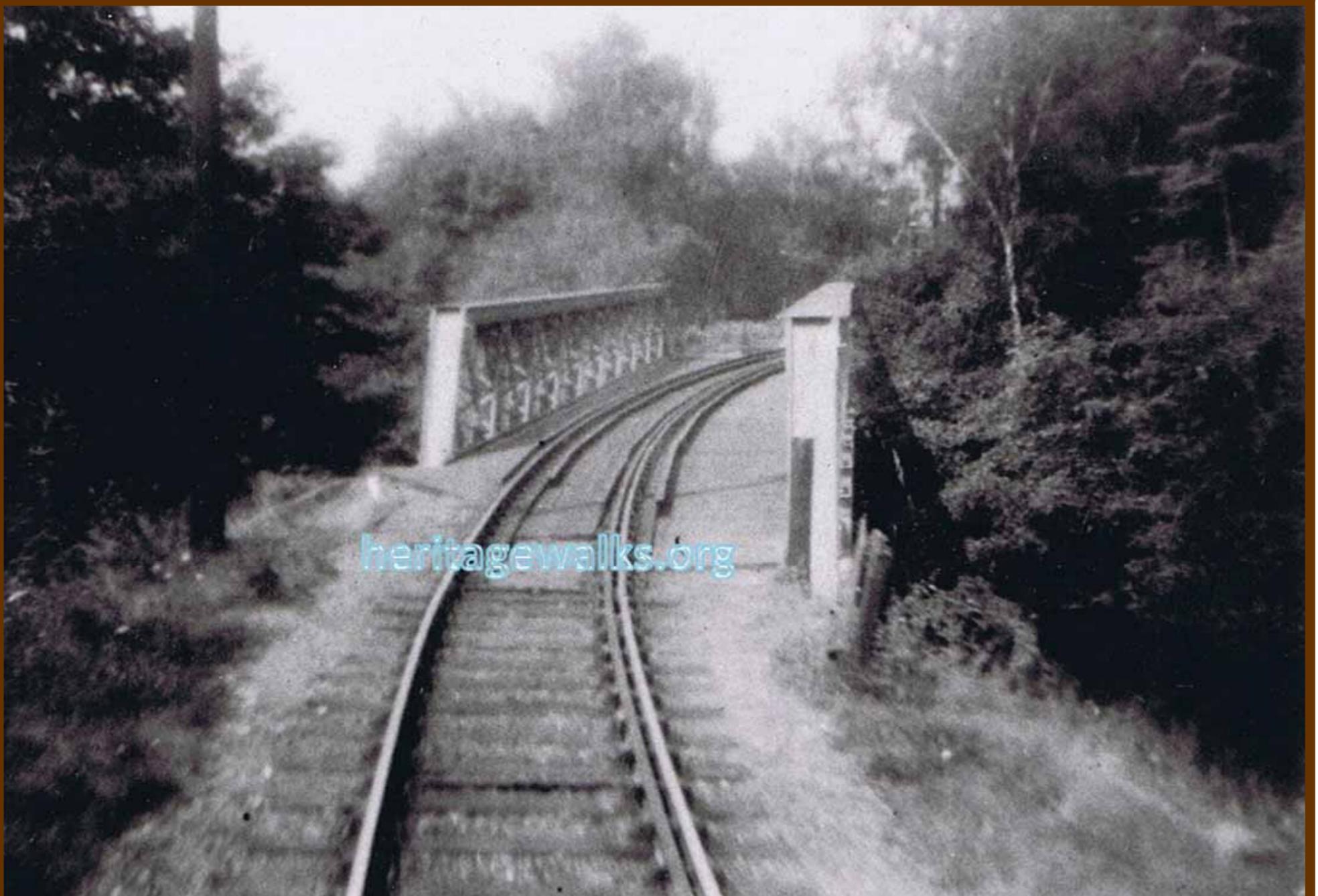
The original two stations at Bisley were soon replaced by just one in the centre of the camp.





Pirbright Lock (near the railway arch) with the Bisley Camp Railway bridge in the background.

The bridge across the Basingstoke Canal (demolished in the 1970's) was constructed by engineers from Aldershot Camp.



THE REBUILDING OF BROOKWOOD STATION

At the same time as building the branch line to Bisley, the London & South Western Railway also decided to extend Brookwood Station, presumably to accommodate the extra custom that was expected from the camp.

Originally the station had been opened in conjunction with the London Necropolis Company to allow mourners to return to the cemetery on 'normal' trains (rather than the special funeral trains), but the opening of a station on the main line inevitably led to development to the north of the railway, although such development was restricted by the closeness of the Basingstoke Canal.

Nevertheless by 1890 a number of properties were being built along what became known as Connaught Road, named after the Duke who lived at nearby Bagshot Park. He had just returned from India where he was commander-in-chief of the Bombay Army and was one of the royal party present at the opening of Bisley Camp in July that year.



THE WAR DEPARTMENT TAKE OVER WOKING PRISON

The close proximity of Aldershot and the Guard's Depot at Pirbright meant that in 1889, when the army were looking to establish a military hospital, they considered acquiring and converting the Male Invalid Convict Prison at Woking. In the end the idea of a hospital was not pursued and the site was converted into barracks instead – named after the battle of Inkerman in 1854 during the Crimean War.

The decision to close Woking Prisons over a ten year period had been made in 1886 (the female prison not closing until 1895), and by the 21st March 1889 the male prison was closed and the prisoners transferred.

In 1891 the War Department bought an extra twenty acres adjoining the site for use as a parade ground (at a cost of £5,600) and within a few years Inkerman was ready to receive the first of many regiments – The West Surrey, or Queen's Regiment, whose stay would be commemorated by the naming of 'Queens Road' in nearby Knaphill.

