

Harry Mitchell

The Smethwick Drill Hall was built and donated by Henry Mitchell to the Smethwick Corporation and the Staffordshire Volunteer Reserves in 1898, in memory of his son Harry Mitchell. Henry Mitchell Jnr was known to his family as 'Harry' and was well liked by his colleagues at the Cape Hill brewery. He was a managing director of his fathers company and superintendent of the breweries own fire brigade. His career was a tragically short one. In 1894 he contracted typhoid fever and died from the effects aged just 32 years. Harry had been known for his interest in sport and the deed of gift by his father to the borough was a fitting way to remember him.



Sandwell Leisure Trust

A Company Limited by Guarantee

Registration: England & Wales 5011501

Registered Office: Sandwell Leisure Trust, Castlemill, 4th Floor, Burnt Tree, Tipton, West Midlands, DY4 7UF

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Henry Mitchell

Opening in 1881, Henry Mitchell took over his father's pub, the Crown Inn in Smethwick and set about constructing a small brewery adjoining the premises. In 1877, Mitchell began constructing the Cape Hill brewery which was completed in 1879 and became a joint venture with prominent local brewer William Butler in 1898 with a merging of their respective companies to form Mitchell's and Butler's Brewery.

Henry Mitchell was an astute businessman with high standards and is best remembered as one half of the famous brewery "Mitchells & Butlers". In 1897 he purchased 14 acres of land from the Dorothy Parkes trustees. The 14 acre estate consisted of the cricket ground, park and drill hall. In 1899 Henry Mitchell presented the land to the Smethwick Corporation (now Sandwell Council) as a gift to the volunteers of Smethwick in memory of his son Harry. The park was named 'Harry's Park' (now 'Harry Mitchell Park') and contained gymnasium facilities. The drill hall was home to the H Company Of The First Volunteer Battalion Of The South Staffordshire Regiment Of Rifle Volunteers (now 'Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre').



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Dorothy Parkes

In 1719 a local heiress called Dorothy Parkes had an indenture of lease and release drawn up. This document was used as a settlement of land from owner to trustees. The land which Dorothy Parkes owned has always focused on the Old Chapel (now "The Old Church") but it also included much of the land along The Uplands and Broomfield. Dorothy Parkes died in 1727, the land then transferring to the trustees under the Dorothy Parkes Trust / Charity.



Miss Dorothy Parkes

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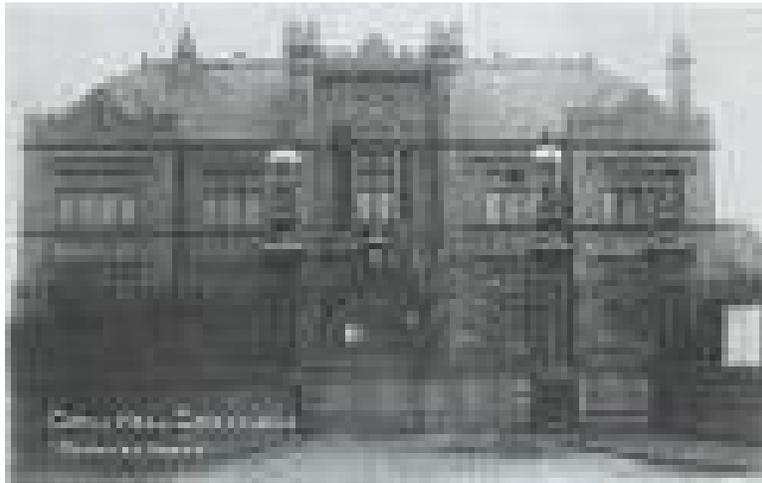
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A marble plaque is still in place on the wall as you enter the Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre and reads:

THIS DRILL HALL
FOR USE OF THE SMETHWICK VOLUNTEERS
AND THE SURROUNDING RECREATION GROUNDS
CALLED 'HARRY'S PARK' WERE PRESENTED TO
THE INHABITANTS OF SMETHWICK IN MEMORY OF
CAPTAIN HENRY MITCHELL
OF THE SMETHWICK RIFLE VOLUNTEERS AND
CAPE HILL BREWERY FIRE BRIGADE
BORN AT SMETHWICK SEPTEMBER
11 TH 1862



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The Sergeant Instructor's House



The Sergeant Instructor's house stood separately in the grounds.

It was common for a drill hall to be cared for by a retired sergeant, who might also carry out some training, in exchange for accommodation.

Alternatively, the house may have been the home of the Sergeant Instructor or Sergeant Major.

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The Drill Hall

The drill hall has been a part of British military and social life since the 1860s, when Corps of Rifle Volunteers constructed premises for drill, funded by benefactors or public subscription.

The heyday of the drill hall began in the 1880s, following the Cardwell reforms of the Army, in which the Rifle Volunteers were formed into Volunteer Battalions of the County regiments to which they were affiliated.

Many of the Senior Officers of the units were also local businessmen or landowners, and funded not only the building of premises but the raising and equipping of the units themselves. Other units raised funds for building by means of the formation of limited companies, or public subscription and fundraising events such as fêtes and bazaars.

Further changes in the development of the drill hall occurred following the disbandment of the Volunteers and the formation under the Haldane reforms in 1908, of the Territorial Force and the County Territorial Associations. In Staffordshire for example, a number of premises were built which provided shared accommodation for infantry, artillery, engineer or medical units, and facilities for the local Yeomanry units.

Although primarily a building for military training, the drill hall provided a useful space for other organisations and functions, including fetes and dances, which provided funds for the upkeep of the hall. Many older people have fond memories of social events held there.

In later years, many drill halls passed into the ownership of local authorities, to be used as leisure facilities, GPO sorting offices or telephone exchanges, often replaced in later years by more modern premises for the new occupiers. Many others were downgraded to cadet unit premises, with new purpose built structures for the parent unit built alongside. Some passed into the private sector to be used as engineering or stores buildings.

The current trend for the redevelopment of brownfield sites has increased demolitions dramatically. The drill halls yield a valuable space, often close to the town centre, and these redundant buildings are often replaced by apartments or houses. Often all that remains is a plaque or stone to mark the site.

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About Drill

A hundred years or so after the heyday of the Volunteer Drill Hall, many people have little idea of what 'drill' actually was, yet it is clear from contemporary sources that drill halls and the training which took place in them were valued by the community. Towns prized their drill halls and encouraged their young men to give up their time, unpaid, regularly and diligently, to participate as Volunteers.

'The Volunteers carefully attended to the ordinary routine of drill, with an occasional "camp out".'

The 'camp out' was for many the closest thing to an annual holiday. Each company would join up with the rest of their battalion, and they in turn would join the other units of their division in tented camps. They would then engage in rifle competitions and exercises with hundreds of others to ensure that the division, as a whole, would provide a cohesive fighting force to defend the Empire.

The 'ordinary routine of drill' involved marching and rifle drill (including cleaning and the dis and re-assembly of their weapons; engineers and gunners and medical professionals would study their own particular skills) relentlessly, week in, week out, to develop unquestioning discipline and proficiency in their role.

An Example Of A Weekly Routine In The Drill Hall

Saturday 8th April: Class Firing for Trained Volunteers

Monday 10th April: Machine Gun - 7.45 pm Armoury - 7.30 pm - 8.30 pm

Tuesday 11th April: Recruit Training - 7.45 pm

Wednesday 12th April: Signallers - 7.45 p.m. Semaphore instruction, all Companies - 7.45 pm NCO's Class - 7.45 pm

Thursday 13th April: Company Training - drill order, with leggings - 7.45 pm
Recruit Training - 7.45 pm Morris Tube training for recruits - 7.30 pm

Friday 14th April: Signallers - 7.45 pm

Saturday 15th April: Class Firing for Trained Volunteers (E, F, G and H Companies) Signallers - 3 pm
Company Training (H Company) - drill order with leggings, FS caps - 3 pm

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The Anatomy of a Drill Hall

A drill hall is best described as a purpose-built military building, providing a space sufficiently large for soldiers to practice marching, drilling and 'the knotty points of tactics'.

As a large room, heated and well lit with various facilities to hand, it was often let for dancing, concerts, entertainments and bazaars. This provided the committee-run hall with valuable income, or the local worthy with a sense of civic pride as it allowed the community to enjoy its architectural gift.

The drill hall was usually entered through a pair of doors, generally 'sufficiently wide to admit the Volunteers in full marching order, four abreast'. Some had entrances wide enough for horse-drawn transport and later, motor vehicles.

Alongside the main hall, various offices and stores were provided. Most drill halls had a small armoury, which may have had a powder magazine as well as stores in case of mobilisation, with bedding and clothing. Some included a number of small closets and storage for several hundred thousand rounds of ammunition. Other corps such as artillery, engineers and medical units had specific storage for their needs.

A drill hall may have been adjoined by areas provided for leisure and self-improvement, such as a reading room, a recreation room or a library. Some provided facilities for billiards and smoking. Lavatories 'and other conveniences' were attached to the gymnasium, which had 'every imaginable appliance for gymnastic exercises. It is clear that the intention to improve the lives of the men by exercise and education was considered a valuable part of their military training.

Catering facilities were often installed including a large kitchen and scullery with cooking ranges, ready to cater for banquets and tea parties.

Space was allocated where possible for firing practice. Harry Mitchell had a narrow rifle range at the side of the drill hall, running its length (Now the Hammer Strength Gym).

Drilling practice took place outside where possible.

Heating was often by hot air apparatus, steam, hot water, or fireplaces with hearths.

Offices were invariably provided, in the form of Committee Rooms, offices for secretarial staff and rooms for the Adjutant of the Battalion.

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'The day will come when the country will have to depend on its Grand Volunteer Army'

It is clear that the drill halls were well used, often for several training activities at a time; and that almost every evening and Saturday afternoon, something was happening, overseen by 'Officers trained in tactics and the science of war.

The opening of a town's drill hall was generally reported with pride and excitement, reflecting the views of local opinion formers that the training activities which would take place therein could only be good for the community and for the country.

Local newspapers record 'the weekly company drills and almost nightly training of recruits, which had an additional benefit for towns, 'because the training and discipline of so many of her young men must have a healthy effect upon the tone of the inhabitants at large'. Indeed, the physical activity of drill was seen by some as beneficial to the health of the nation too; apparently boys and young men in large towns 'saw great want of physique in the boys who would be the future men of the country'; and some argued that their health and physical development would be improved by drill.

Preparation and instruction in drill halls 'developed men physically and taught them organisation and self-reliance, besides training them in the use of arms for the defence of the county against invasion.'

'...They had but one thing to do, and that was to do what they were told, and to do their duty to their country. They were brought up to that high state of efficiency which was required by modern warfare, eager to go into camp realising what practical work in camp meant, realising that a fortnight in camp was infinitely more valuable than one week, and realising that 900 good men were better than 1200 who were only partially efficient.'

'The day will come when the country will have to depend on its Grand Volunteer Army. When the country is at war, it is probable that the Regular army will be engaged elsewhere, and England will have to depend mainly upon our Volunteers for her very existence.'

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“The Smethwick Recreative and Amateur Athletic and Gymnastic Association”

In 1899 Henry Mitchell presented the local Volunteers and the town with the drill hall, the adjacent Broomfield cricket ground, and a small park (now Harry Mitchell Park) as a memorial to his son Harry (d. 1894). After a public meeting in 1900 to discuss methods of making use of the gift the Smethwick Recreative and Amateur Athletic and Gymnastic Association was formed to promote and organize sport and leisure activities in the borough. Mitchell laid out the park as a recreation ground and provided gymnastic equipment for use in the drill hall. The hall was used by the Volunteers and subsequently by the Territorial Army until 1967 when, with some adjoining buildings erected by the army during the Second World War, it was handed over to the borough. Since then it has been developed as the Harry Mitchell Recreational Centre.

Letter from Mr R Howell

“I was born in 1922.

When I was around 8 or 9 my brother was in the army and he took me to the Drill Hall.

I can remember there being a wooden horse that they used to teach the men how to ride. It looked absolutely massive to me. The horse moved like horse would move and nothing like a rocking horse. My brother put me on the horse and I can remember crying my eyes out because I was so scared.

Because I was crying a gentleman who looked very important because he was in full uniform came across and gave me a silver coin. As soon as I got outside my brother took it off me!

My brother looked after 9 horses and he regularly had to ride them to Lichfield to share them with soldiers based there.

I can also remember that my brother used to box in the hall.

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Letter from Mr T Turley

“I was born 21-2-23 at Brisbane Road. The school I attended was opposite, (no longer there having been demolished in recent years and replaced with houses).

As a lad growing up in the 20's we often watched the T.R. South Staffs training and marching off from the Drill Hall led by the regimental band down to Rolfe Street Station to the annual camp.

I was turned 16 years when war broke out; at that age I was able to join the L.D.V. (Local Defence Volunteers) at the Drill Hall, this was before the Home Guard, they came later. We wore a white arm band with L.D.V. in block letters, at that time the regular army had all the Le-enfield Rifles so we had to train with broom sticks, we had night guard duties once a week and one night during 1940 Smethwick, Birmingham and most of the industrial area of the west Midlands was subjected to heavy bombing. I was on duty that night and had just reached the top of Little Moor Hill when a land mine at Brewery Street demolished several houses and badly damaged the foundry opposite. An ?? bomb had exploded, setting fire and destroying Cape Hill Market to where I and another volunteer had been hurriedly kitted out with rifles and khaki greatcoats and surprise surprise the Quarter Master sergeant had acquired 2 Le-enfield rifles which he proceeded to load with live ammo, one up the breach, safety catch on, with orders to shoot any looters, this being the first time we had even seen the weapons let alone used one. We were thankfully relieved there was no such going on when we arrived there”.

Letter from Mr Waldron

One night in 1938, a local resident who was walking home near to the drill hall noticed a man, wearing top hat and tails, crossing the road ahead of him.

The local resident thought that it was someone returning from a posh night out until the figure disappeared through a wall of the drill hall where an entrance had previously been situated.

As part of his duties the Territorial Army paymaster would often have to stay overnight in the drill hall during the Second World War. At around 1.00am the paymaster and his son, who would often stay the night with him, would hear the sound of footsteps. They believed that this was the ghost of Harry Mitchell. The paymaster was armed with a pistol and he was so alarmed that he was ready to shoot at the figure if it appeared. The sound of footsteps continued throughout the time when the paymaster changed from his role as paymaster for the drill hall and became caretaker when the building became the Harry Mitchell Leisure Centre. There are two houses just outside of the gates to Harry Mitchell in Littlemoor Hill that are more modern than the surrounding buildings. The original houses were destroyed by a high explosive bomb. It was believed that the drill hall was the intended target.

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Secret Bunker found under Harry Mitchell

In 2011 when Harry Mitchell changing rooms were undergoing a major refurbishment one of the workmen on removing a panel in a small under stairs cupboard was shocked to find a shaft leading down to a large underground room.

On further inspection it became clear that the discovery was actually a very large coal bunker that at one time must have been used to store coal to heat the building when it was being used as a drill hall for the Smethwick Rifle Volunteers. The bunker still contained a large amount of coal.



Wrestling, boxing and other events

In the main drill hall off the facility the lighting rig for a boxing ring can still be seen in the roof space of the hall. In the past Harry Mitchell has hosted both wrestling and boxing and wrestlers such as the famous 'Big Daddy' have performed at the site.

One person recalled how the great boxer Sonny Liston once performed in an exhibition bout in the hall.

One of the longer serving members of staff says that she recalled as a child sitting on the steps to the first floor while the politician, Enoch Powell, delivered a speech to a crowded hall.

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Harry's Park

The photographs show the area of ground adjacent to the Drill Hall that was donated as a park for the people of Smethwick at the same time that the Drill Hall was built around the turn off the century.



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The Holly Bush

The Holly Bush public house still stands adjacent to the cricket field next to the drill hall and still displays the famous brewing name of Mitchell's and Butler's Brewery.



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