



How The Sovereign's Prize nearly became a (C)SR competition

George Ellis digs into the genesis of CSR – and what might have been.

CSR has been a NRA-recognised shooting discipline for just over a quarter of a century - but it might have become the primary full-bore target shooting discipline 110 years ago were it not for the First World War. This article describes how and why the War Office attempted to change the format of many NRA Imperial Meeting competitions, including the Sovereign's Prize, to what we would recognise today as CSR. It also covers the reaction from elements of the-then civilian target shooting community and highlights that only the start of the First World War prevented the changes from being applied in 1915.

Background

The NRA was formed in 1859, primarily to promote improvement in marksmanship with the service rifle of the day – the Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifled Musket – within the context of the volunteer rifle movement. The result was the birth of competitive rifle shooting, using service rifles, as a recognised sport within both military and civilian circles.

The initial format was predominately shooting against bulls-eye targets used for basic marksmanship training. This suited both military and civilian (volunteer) shooters as, after an early emphasis on individual shooting skills in military training, 'operational shooting' in a colonial context largely reverted to volley fire as the primary means of delivering fire effect (e.g. as depicted in the film 'Zulu').

Over time, the military need to change competition shooting to better reflect changing field requirements was gradually recognised. As a result, the Army Rifle Association was formed in 1893 to '*promote interest in small arms shooting for service purposes by means of collective competitions, matches being framed to induce practice in methods which lead to increased efficiency on the battlefield.*' [PAM 20 p1-1].

Musketry Regulations 1909

The Boer War exposed the fundamental weakness of both delivering fire-effect and training in rifle marksmanship skills. This resulted in a markedly different approach that was captured in the famous Musketry Regulations 1909. The War Office's view of competitive shooting changed significantly and was now focused on the needs of practical military shooting. Competitions were to be used as a means of improving overall standards, not to develop the 'phenomenal skill' of a few champions [MR 1909 574].

More explicitly: '*If a championship is awarded to an experienced competitor for skill in applying fire to a bull's-eye target when range is known and each shot is signalled, money and ammunition are wasted, young soldiers are discouraged, and false ideas as to musketry training are disseminated.*' [MR 1909 576].

The format of competition was now intended to reflect, as far as possible, the variety of field shooting, while also recognising that field firing ranges were limited and competitions would need to be carried out on standard ranges. It was stressed that: '*Specialising in any one form of shooting should be discouraged; competitions for trained soldiers should include not less than three different forms of shooting, such as snap shooting, sighting, attack, rapid firing, observation, appreciation of fire limits etc., with as much variation of targets and conditions as can be conveniently arranged.*' [MR 1909 538].

In terms of targets, this led to the '*abolition of the bulls-eye target practice in the Army*' and that this would '*in the course of time bring about a material alteration in conditions of the contests at Bisley.*' [Nottingham Evening Post, 12th July 1909.]

It was also stated that the rifles used in competitive shooting should be standard 'As issued' i.e. with no adaptations for target shooting: '*It is essential that in competitions open to the rank and file, competitors should be allowed to fire only with a rifle on charge to their unit, and no departure from the regulations governing the painting of sights, use of slings, provision of wind flags, targets, rifle accessories etc is to be permitted in service rifle competitions.*' [MR 1909 595].

These competitions covered 'every conceivable form of service rifle shooting' and included 'bulls-eye and service targets, stationary, moving and disappearing targets, requiring all varieties of rapid and deliberate fire'. [Source: 'Rifle and Ammunition and Rifle Shooting' by Ommundsen and Robinson, 1915.]

The War Office however lobbied the NRA for a change to figure targets in the main competitions and in 1909, the NRA agreed, as a compromise and for the first time, to introduce a figure target in the King's Prize. This was initially limited to 500 yards using the Army Second-class target, but was subsequently extended to replace the 200-yard bulls-eye target. Thus, in the run-up to the First World War, the King's Prize First Stage used service targets for the 200- and 500-yard details and a bulls-eye target at 600-yards.

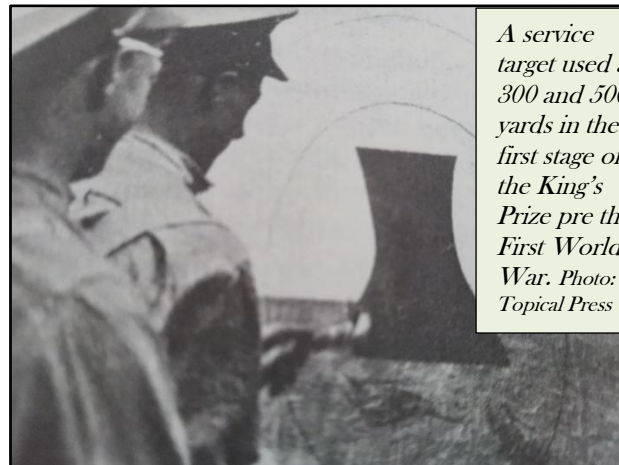
These changes were seen as likely to have a wider impact on target shooting, with a growing move away from bulls-eye targets to figure targets as standard. The traditionalists opposed the changes, but as one newspaper noted: "*Bisley must adjust to the new order before the meeting's popularity with the citizen army is fully restored.*" [Nottingham Evening Post, 12th July 1909.]

Both the formation of the Army Rifle Association and the introduction of Musketry Regulations 1909, combined with growing pressure from the War Office, were ultimately to lead to a 'political' clash between the developing sport of civilian target shooting, with modified service rifles, run under the direction of the NRA, and the War Office need for competitions to move further away from exclusively slow-fire bull's-eye shooting (i.e. to address the 'defence of the realm' requirement).

War Office proposals for the Sovereign's Prize

The War Office negotiated with the NRA Council on more fundamental format changes to many of the Imperial Meeting Service Rifle shooting competitions, including the Sovereign's Prize. An agreement was eventually reached, with most of the NRA Council voting in favour. The proposals became public in February 1914 and included restrictions on rifles in addition to revised shooting formats. Aperture sights and slings were to be abolished, open sights only to be used, and rapid shooting was to be introduced, including for the Sovereign's Prize.

The proposed conditions for the-then King's Prize at Bisley were: *First stage, 10 rounds; deliberate firing at the 200-, 500- and 600-yards' ranges. Second stage: 5 deliberate and 10 rapid and five snap shots. Third stage: 15 shots at short distances at disappearing targets.* [Waikato Argus, Volume XXXV, Issue 5525, 3 February 1914, Page 3]. These proposals would have changed the Sovereign's Prize and other matches into what we would recognise today as a CSR-type competition. So why didn't the change happen?



A service target used at 300 and 500 yards in the first stage of the King's Prize pre the First World War. Photo: Topical Press

First stage of the King's Prize at Bisley circa 1914: 600 yards, civilians using service rifles. The NRA paid military personnel to act as scorers and operate the butts. Photo: Gale and Polden Ltd.



The Colonial revolt

The changes didn't go down well with target shooters wishing to retain the format of slow-fire bulls-eye shooting with adapted service rifles as an increasingly distinct discipline under the existing rules. Disquiet culminated on 21 July 1914 during the Umbrella Tent meeting at the Imperial. The most vociferous opponents appeared to be the 'Colonials' (as they were then called) who were adamant in their opposition to change. Colonel Merrett (i/c of the Australian team) declared that: '*.. the Australians would refuse to accept the War Office proposals because they meant the decadence of rifle clubs, upon which rested the Australians' second line of defence*', and '*No Australian Government would accept the War Office ultimatum at the bayonet's point.*' Canadian commandant Colonel Ross stated that: '*if the War Office persisted, no Canadian team would visit Bisley*'.

The eventual compromise resolution was a 'qualifying shoot' for the Sovereign's Prize would be conducted under War Office conditions but the King's Prize itself would remain unchanged [Nelson Evening Mail, Volume XLV, Issue XLVIII, 24 July, 1914 Page 5].

Strange as it might seem today, the revolt received widespread press reporting, and it was noted that: *'The colonials' stand against the new regulations is the general subject of camp conversation.'* [Evening Post, Volume LXXXVIII, Issue 20, 23 July 1914, Page 7].

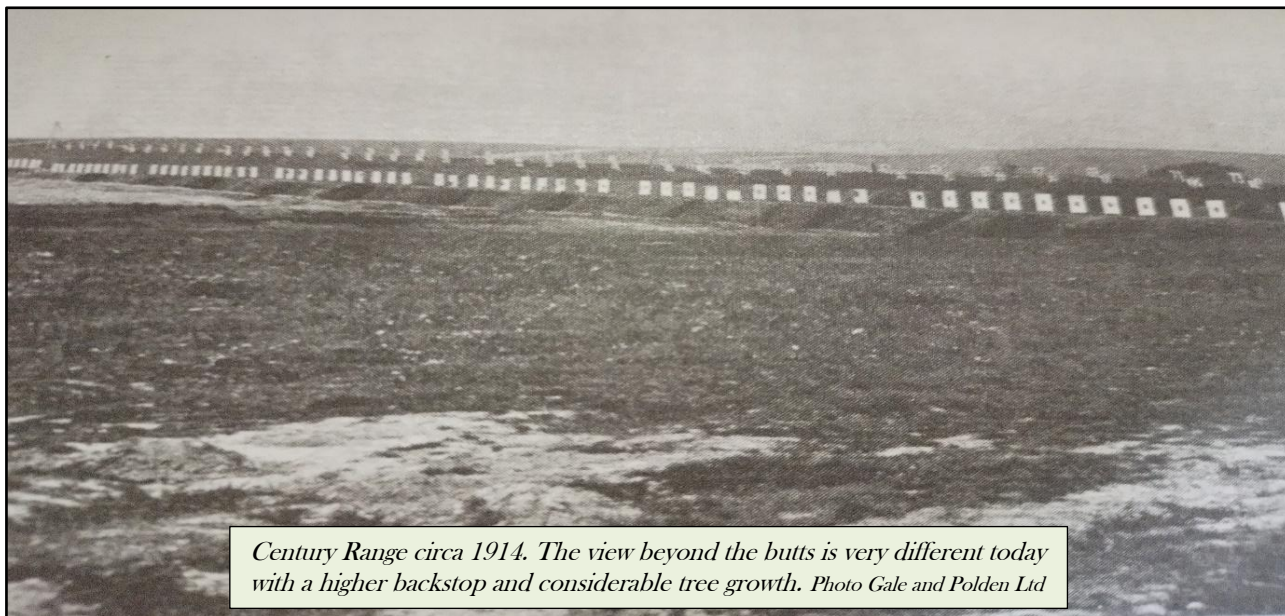
The rising opposition to change expressed at the Umbrella Tent Meeting saw NRA president Lord Cheylesmore convey the concerns to the War Office. A subsequent and almost immediate meeting between the War Office and the NRA only resulted in an impasse, with the proposal temporarily withdrawn but leaving the War Office determined to force the NRA Council to implement the previously-agreed changes.

The Prime Minister gets involved

The 'target shooters' weren't content to leave it at that point, and arranged for a question to be asked in Parliament, asking that the changes be reconsidered and ultimately abandoned. The MP asking the question claimed that the proposal to abolish aperture sights and the sling, together with the introduction of rapid-fire elements, was: *'calculated to eliminate interest in rifle shooting throughout the Empire and have a disastrous effect on the Territorial Forces.'* [Hansard 27 July 1914 vol 65 cc922-3].

Prime minister Herbert Asquith defended the changes, noting that: *'... it is hoped that the changes will do much to stimulate rifle shooting generally throughout the country, and will greatly assist in increasing the musketry efficiency of the Territorial Force'*. He added: *'the agreement between the War Office and the Council of the National Rifle Association was arrived at after protracted negotiations, and I think that time should be given for the new conditions to be thoroughly tested.'* [Hansard 27 July 1914 vol 65 cc922-3]. He did however agree to consider consulting the Australian Commonwealth Council and the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association on the proposed changes, if representations were made to him.

It now seems incredible that on the very verge of the outbreak of the First World War, proposed changes to the Imperial Meeting would be worthy of a question in Parliament and a response from the prime minister. In a matter of days, the Empire would be at war and the ruckus over the format of the King's Prize and other competitions instantly forgotten.



Century Range circa 1914. The view beyond the butts is very different today with a higher backstop and considerable tree growth. Photo Gale and Polden Ltd

So what happened after the Great War?

The First World War saw the suspension of Imperial Meetings suspended for the duration and by the time they recommenced, the War Office proposal had seemingly died. Other changes did occur, more along the lines of a compromise, with Service Rifle A and Service Rifle B being recognised as separate categories. Bull's-eye targets and shot-by-shot marking remained for the Sovereign's Prize and the other target shooting competitions during the Imperial. But to satisfy military requirements, the NRA adopted ARA-devised competition formats to be shot primarily by military competitors, and this ultimately became the distinct 'Service' portion of the overall Imperial Meeting that we know today.

The use of Lee Enfield service rifles by civilians continued to be mandated in Bisley competition until the end of the 1960s. With the SLR finally replacing the Lee-Enfield No 4 in NRA-run service shooting competitions in the mid-60s, civilians then adopted purpose-built target rifles later that decade, when today's TR came into existence. This completed the final severance of the original direct link between military and civilian competition shooting that had been created when the NRA was founded. At least in terms of competition formats, it might be argued it has now been partially restored with the introduction of the CSR discipline!

What if?

It's fascinating to speculate what might have happened to civilian full-bore target shooting had the First World War not intervened to prevent the implementation of the War Office changes to the competition formats in the Imperial Meeting. Would it have killed it off, as the detractors at the time claimed, or encouraged more people to take up the sport, as its supporters claimed? If the latter, then today's TR might not have become the current dominant form of Bisley shooting. The Sovereign's Prize would have looked far more like the CSR discipline, potentially retaining the original unity of military and service competitive shooting, rather than separating them. It **might** also have meant that civilians could still possess semi-automatic rifles.

When the NRA was asked prior to the 1988 ban if there was a recognised shooting discipline involving semi-automatic rifles, it answered 'no'. Had the 1914 War Office proposals been successful, perhaps the answer might have been 'yes'. All speculation, of course, but the 1914 debate was undoubtedly a key moment in development of civilian full-bore target shooting at Bisley.

7 July 1966, Bisley

While a United Services match was being held, 26 Royal Navy officers and men in No. 1 uniform escorted a gun carriage with a No. 4 rifle arranged on top of a coffin draped with the Union Jack. A piper played the lament. At the graveside, an officer said solemnly: "We are gathered here today to mourn the passing of our valued friend, the manually-operated musket. In spite of the advent of the gas-operated gadget, it has continued to demonstrate that it is the man behind the gun that counts." An RAF officer dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief, stamped to the grave and scattered cartridge cases over the coffin. A Royal Marine officer placed a wreath of laurel leaves by the grave. Two army officers planted a cross. A bugler played the Last Post. The escorting party, who had carried reversed-arms No. 4 rifles, pointed them to the sky and let off a volley of blanks.



The burial marked the beginning of the end of Civilian Service Rifle shooting and its replacement by Target Rifle as the dominant competition at the Imperial Meeting.