

War Games



Camouflaged up at a Field Day in 1976.

Field Day

A wide expanse of tree and fern,
A rifle shot, and we discern
From stifled scream and writhing mass
A soldier fall, with heavy crash
And chilly splash in hidden stream.
Alas! 'Twas but a troubled dream.

Instead we shoot with useless blanks,
And read large maps and roll down banks,
And climb up hills and picket mills,
And hide in gorse; from which we learn
Precisely nil. And still we yearn
For yet more Field Days 'mid the fern.

RSGB, FORM D5, WHITGIFTIAN, DECEMBER 1958.

The reaction of Whitgift boys to being trained for soldiering has been mixed. In the early days it wasn't compulsory, but it soon was, with the Scouts the only alternative. Many loved it, and the school produced several eminent professional soldiers. For some, neither academically gifted nor sporting by nature, it was the only opportunity to be in a position of authority before being thrown into the world of work. Quite a few detested it, and escaped as soon as they could. The majority, though, seemed to take it as they took the rest of school life – we'd better do it, and take every opportunity for fun that we can. Field Days and residential camps afforded plenty of opportunities for that, as we'll see.

This section that follows comes from before the First World War. A long article in 1901 in *The Navy and Army Illustrated* says that Lieutenant Cheyne replaced the original antiquated uniform of 'forage cap, much-padded tunic, and useless shoulder-belt' with field service cap, serge jacket with patch pockets, waist-belt and ammunition pouch, leggings, water-bottle and haversack, with an overcoat for cold weather. The 1901 report goes on to give the Corps' strength as 104 including two buglers, with regular drills on Wednesday and Saturday, and shooting – before a school range was built – two days a week at a range in Woldingham. They had taken part in Queen Victoria's review of Cadet Corps at Windsor in her Jubilee year of 1897. Over fifty former Whitgift cadets were serving in South Africa in 1901.

The school hours were from 9.30 to 12.30 and from 2 to 4, except on Wednesdays and Saturdays, when they were 9 to 1. On half-holidays the last hour was devoted to drilling for the majority of the boys. The cadets formed one company, the remaining boys being divided into several companies. Drilling was conducted by Sgt-Major Burke, a big man with a big Voice.



A group of unnamed young cadets in 1907, wearing the uniform introduced in 1904. Most would have been in the trenches ten years later.



Cycles were still used, as they had been in the 1909 Assault-at-Arms skirmish, in such events in the 1930s, as this tangle shows. Their benefit in war is somewhat unclear, but it was a lot of fun.