

## A Clarecastle Rifle-Range

On 2 October 2010, Mickey Kerrigan invited me to visit his farm in Islandmagrath, Clarecastle to see a location on the bank of the Fergus where he had been discovering lead bullets. It was a fine day as we walked through Mickey's fields and we climbed up on the large earthen bank that keeps the tide out from the reclaimed land in that area. He pointed to Islandmagrath Point out from us and then we walked back a little to where an earlier embankment had been. Mickey had brought a spade with him and he made a number of small holes in the blue mud that made up the remains of the embankment. Occasionally, I could hear the spade making a scraping noise as it came in contact with solid objects. Sifting through the mud we found a number of bullets of various sizes including a number of round musket balls. In all, we found about a dozen bullets in a short space of time. Mickey very kindly allowed me to keep the objects and gave me a few more that he had found earlier in the same spot when we returned to his farm-buildings. I was able to identify the ammunition as minié-balls.

The Clare Journal of 18 June 1868 reported that *“a detachment from the Royal Artillery stationed at Limerick arrived at Clare for the annual practice at Island McGrath. The guns were deposited at Clare Castle and some of the men were billeted in the village, the remainder being sent on to Ennis.*



The map shows the 5 km. route of the soldiers' march from the Barracks in Clarecastle to the shooting-ranges at the old embankment in Islandmagrath. The wording of the report in the Clare Journal states that the gun-practice was an annual event. The massive land-reclamation projects of the 1880s under Drinkwater greatly altered the landscape in the slob-lands in this area. It made the existing embankments redundant when new embankments were constructed much further out in the estuary, thereby rescuing large quantities of mudflats that would become arable land. This new land was eventually passed on to the Irish Land Commission who set about dividing it up into farms and individual landholdings to serve the local farmers. It also served farmers who were brought from other parts of Clare, particularly from the Inagh area, to begin new lives there. The dividing up of the land meant the construction of fences and boundaries but standing on the old embankment today, one can visualise the great expanses of corcass that made an ideal and safe area for the military shooting-ranges.

The Minié rifle was an important rifle in the 19th century, developed in 1849 following the invention of the minié ball in 1847 by the French Army captains Claude Etienne Minié of the Chasseurs d'Orléans and Henri-Gustave Delvigne. The rifle was designed to allow rapid muzzle loading, an innovation that brought about the widespread use of the rifle as a mass battlefield weapon.



**Clare Castle Barracks**

Clare Castle Barracks was listed among the garrisons of Connaught in Queen Anne's army establishment of 1704. The barracks contained two companies of foot soldiers, accommodating a total of about 126 men. In the late 1740s the barracks was greatly extended, with some new blocks added. The complex of buildings continued in use as a military barracks until the formation of the Free State in 1921. Many of the buildings have been renovated in recent years for residential accommodation. The ten-bay, three storey Officers Building shown in the picture above, is presently being restored and will add greatly to the appearance and preservation of the complex. A roof-beam with the date "12 December 1751" was found during the restoration work which helps to precisely date the building. Note the sentry box in the picture.



**Various types of Minié Balls found in Islandmcgrath**

The rifle used a conical-cylindrical soft lead bullet, slightly smaller than the barrel bore, with three exterior grease-filled grooves and a conical hollow in its base. When fired, the expanding gas forcibly pushed on the base of the bullet, deforming it to engage the rifling. This provided spin for accuracy, a better seal for consistent velocity and longer range, and cleaning of barrel detritus.



**The British version of the Minié rifle caused huge wounds with its large sized bullets.**

The rifle saw limited distribution in the Crimean War but was the dominant infantry weapon in the American Civil War. The large calibre with the high-speed spin of these easily deformed bullets (13-18 mm) created terrible wounds.

The combination of the rifle-musket and minié bullet also made the bayonet nearly obsolete. In earlier years, the bayonet was often the most decisive infantry assault weapon, because the smoothbore flintlock musket's short range allowed attackers to approach close enough for hand-to-hand fighting. In the American Civil War, however, firepower almost always decided an assault's outcome before charging troops came within stabbing distance. In fact, very few Civil War surgeons reported bayonet wounds. During Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's bloody campaign against Confederate General Robert E. Lee in the summer of 1864, for example, Union medical directors recorded only 37 bayonet wounds. As they had done to the bayonet, the rifle-musket and minié bullet also reduced the effectiveness of field artillery. In the early 1800s, Napoleon often placed the artillery forward in his battle lines, even during advances, to provide direct fire in support of the infantry. During the Civil War, however, it was too easy to shoot down an exposed cannon crew operating in the front lines. The artillery was forced to seek protection in the rear, a position from which it was more difficult to hit enemy targets without endangering friendly troops in the front.

The cavalry was similarly ousted from its former role by the rifle-musket and minié ball. Napoleon often used his cavalry as a surprise offensive weapon, sending his horsemen on charges to trample infantrymen armed with smoothbore flintlock muskets. But the Civil War soldier armed with a rifle-musket and minié bullets could hit a man at 100 to 200 yards; a horse and rider made an even larger target. Consequently, the colourful cavalry charges of the Napoleonic era became all but obsolete. In fact, as the war continued, more and more cavalymen fought as mounted infantry, using their horses for mobility and then dismounting to fight on foot. In effect, they became the forebears of today's mechanized infantry.