

THE ROYAL ARTILLERY CLERKS SECTION

Army Order 54 of 1903 authorised the formation of the Artillery Clerks Section. St John Brodrick, at "Our Court of St James's, signed it this 21st day of March 1903, in the 3rd year of our Reign By His Majesty's Command." The Army Order was the notification to the Army of the Royal Warrant that authorised this change. St John Brodrick was Secretary of State for War and was signing "At His Majesty's Command". The establishment of the RA Clerks Section did not, in itself, require a Royal Warrant, but financial provision for the change could only be achieved by an amendment to the Royal Warrant for Pay and Promotion of the Army. The Warrant clearly sets out the rank and pay of members of the Royal Artillery Clerks Section but it provides no information as to where these clerks would be employed nor is there any mention of why it was found necessary to form the Section. Presumably there were clerks employed in the Artillery before April 1903 but not in the form that was created by the Warrant. War Office File No. 18/Artillery 3938 might well have held some clues to this question but the file does not seem to have preserved as a Public Record. However, there were two major changes in the organisation of the artillery in the four years preceding the Royal Warrant, which may have been the reason why the Clerks Section was formed.

Until 1899 there was, in the Royal Artillery, no higher permanent command structure than the battery. Most of the batteries existing today are part of a Regiment, which has a Commanding Officer, an Adjutant, Quartermasters and a Pay Officer with suitable staff in support. Until 1899 each battery was responsible for its own affairs under the Battery Commander and the Battery Captain with a Quartermaster Sergeant and a Pay Sergeant. The Battery Commander corresponded direct with such Departments as the Record Office, the Army Clothing Department, the Deputy Adjutant General RA, the Ordnance Department and the Pay Department on all matters to do with the discipline, pay and promotion of officers and soldiers and the clothing and equipment on charge to the battery. Wherever there were two or more batteries in a particular district Lieutenant Colonels were appointed to oversee the batteries, but these officers had no staff and no authorisation to interfere in those matters where the Battery Commander was authorised to deal with the War Office direct. It has been said that the Lieutenant Colonels could not even expect to take their batteries to firing camps. The Lieutenant Colonels were appointed each year to command practice camps but the batteries which attended might not have included any from their own districts, the batteries being simply ordered to attend a Camp of Instruction commanded by a named Lieutenant Colonel.

In 1899 this all changed. The experiences of the German and French Artillery in the Franco-Prussian war had been studied in detail in the British Service but there were as many views as there were those prepared to comment on these matters. Furthermore the introduction of quick-firing guns had resulted in a change in the nature of the employment of field artillery and, consequently, the need for revision of drills and deployment. What slowly emerged was that there was a need for a permanent unit of field artillery of two or more batteries commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel and staff in peacetime who would train and organise the unit for war. Eventually a plan was produced to group batteries in a particular area into what were to be called brigade divisions each of three batteries. The brigade division headquarters was quite small, consisting of the Commanding Officer, an Adjutant, an Orderly Officer, a Brigade Sergeant Major (RSM of today) and a handful of batmen and horse-holders. These brigade divisions began to form as the artillery moved off to join the forces in South Africa and, indeed I Brigade Division RFA consisted of the three field batteries then in South Africa. Unfortunately the artillery which fought in the South African War were not long employed in the brigade division scheme and were soon in action as independent batteries, and indeed sections (of two guns), when the war became very mobile. There was, therefore, by 1902 very little experience of the employment of the brigade divisions in operations of war.

The problems of organising the forces which went to South Africa had resulted in the War Office accepting that there had to be a proper command structure in peacetime ready to be deployed in war, and in March 1902 a Special Army Order was published setting the organisation of the field army in the United Kingdom into permanent Corps, Divisions and Brigades, each with its establishment of artillery. Commanders and staffs were authorised for the Corps and Divisional artillery and it is at this point that the need for a specialist group of clerks, Artillery Clerks, must have been perceived. In addition there was, of course, a need for such clerks at brigade division and battery level so that specialist clerks could support the whole of the staff work of the artillery in peace and in war.

It is believed, therefore, that the Army Corps Scheme, as it was called, was the reason why the Artillery Clerks Section was formed and the Section can be closely associated with the major reorganisation of 1902 and onwards, the principals of which are still with us today. One might well say that if there had been Artillery Clerks in post in 1902/3 the War Office File on the subject might have been preserved for prosperity.