

## Where British Sailors Learn to Shoot.

BY E. A. BRAYLEY HODGETTS.



CAPTAIN PERCY SCOTT.

From a Photo. by G. West & Son, Southsea.

**T**HE war in the Transvaal has once more demonstrated the handiness of Jack Tar; the public will therefore be interested in hearing all about the place where British sailors learn how to "shoot straight."

There are many mud-banks in Portsmouth Harbour—one of these is called Whale Island. It was when Captain Percy Scott, who now commands the *Terrible* to such purpose in South Africa, and who devised the means for moving the big naval guns to the front, was commander of the *Excellent* that Whale Island definitely ceased to be a mud-bank.

The *Excellent* was commissioned in 1833, by Sir Thomas Hastings, as a gunnery school for the Navy, and such it has remained through these many years with varying fortunes. Sometimes it was the *Queen Charlotte*, sometimes the *Illustrious*, or the *Calcutta*, upon whom the name and

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mantle of the old *Excellent* descended; now it is a reclaimed mud-bank.

The original object of the annexation was to provide a convenient drill-ground and a shooting-range for the new patterns of long-distance guns. It was not until 1883 that Whale Island was converted into the barracks which it is now. Difficult of access, the place is approached to-day by the average civilian from a neighbourhood of interminable red-brick two-story houses, poor but scrupulously clean. No mud-bank greets the eye. Convict labour has altered all that, and where formerly there was nothing but a humble mud-hut, there are now handsome buildings, a beautiful green lawn, a gravelled parade ground, trees, a battery, and neatness and orderliness everywhere. To judge by the appearance of the officers and men, the salubrity of the place is unquestionable. The earth thrown up by harbour and dockyard excavations has been thrown upon the mud, which had previously received a bed of concrete, and by means of piles and ballast a fine and firm piece of land has been literally created, having an area of about seventy acres. Upon this splendid site, surrounded as it is by water, have been erected a battery, officers' quarters, men's quarters, a gymnasium and museum, a drill-hall, and innumerable other buildings, all retaining their nautical nomenclature. Here and on board the *Cambridge* the officers and men of the British Navy receive their instruction in gunnery. The sub-lieutenants from the adjoining Naval College come here to learn their drill and hear lectures.

In order to see Whale Island and get "on board" her, we must be ferried across. At the guard-house we are met by a sentry and a petty officer; who takes our card and gives it to a messenger to carry it to the



WHALE ISLAND—THE OFFICERS' QUARTERS.

From a Photo. by Dr. Strickland, of H.M.S. "Excellent."

commander. We are then conducted to the quarter-deck, which is an enormous space paved with flag-stones beautifully white in front of a large building containing the museum, the gymnasium, and the lecture-hall. It is surmounted by a clock-tower. Here is the marine sentry, and another marine, the bugler; here is the ship's bell, and here the men are inspected before going "on shore." We are practically standing on one side of a huge quadrangle. In front of us lies a soft, green lawn, large, level, and beautiful—suggestive of lawn tennis and happiness; to our right is the handsome façade of the officers' quarters, with the figure-head of the old *Queen Charlotte*, one of the many *Excellents*, over the entrance. Facing us, and nearly half a mile distant, is

Presently, the first lieutenant brings us before the captain, who introduces us to the commander, and now our tale of wonder begins. The genial commander takes us in hand and shows us everything of interest on the island.

Of course, the first thing to see is the battery. This is fitted to reproduce the conditions obtaining on board ship as much as possible. The guns are pointed at port-holes, through which we get glimpses of the harbour. The ship is supposed to be going twelve knots an hour. When we entered, the men were still at their gun drill, and a splendid sight it was to see that interminable row of guns tended by these active fellows, who were jumping about training them. It seemed absurd to expect poor,



From a Photo. by]

THE BATTERY.

[Dr. Strickland.

a long, low building—this is the battery. To our left is the drill-hall, with a large, gravelled parade-ground between it and the lawn. In the distance, in the extreme left corner of the island, we can just descry certain forbidding-looking iron structures—these are cranes for the hoisting of big guns; and everywhere are the merry faces, magnificent shoulders, and supple, lithe figures of our jolly tars, rushing to and fro on some errand or other. Now and then we get a glimpse of a toy railway bringing more earth to add to what we see, for the expansion of Whale Island, like that of England itself, is still going on; and so we can also descry occasionally parties of dejected individuals in parti-coloured clothes, attended by armed men. These are the convicts who are doing time, and whose criminal propensities have brought them, against their inclination, to the performance of a great and useful service to their country.

mortal man to direct and control these monsters, but still it looked very easy when it was done. By turning a wheel or moving a pivot, these enormous engines of destruction could be guided and manipulated with as much ease as a toy cannon. Here are guns of every description, all the patterns in use in the Navy being of necessity represented; even some of the old-fashioned muzzle-loaders are not wanting, for several of our ships, unfortunately, still carry them, and the men must know how to use them. As new patterns supersede old ones, the new guns are introduced, but the old ones are not displaced until they have been entirely abolished in the Service generally. There are about thirty odd guns in the battery, including machine guns, quick-firing guns, hydraulic worked guns (both turret and barbette), and 4in., 5in., 6in., and 9.2in. breechloaders. This last is the biggest gun here, and is such a size that the imagination refuses to grasp the



From a] IN THE BATTERY—MUZZLE-LOADING DRILL. LYING DOWN FOR FIRING. [Photograph.

possibility of a 111-ton gun, for this one is only 22 tons. It is fitted for drawing-room practice, as the commander pleasantly explained, for a rifle-tube has been placed in it, which in turn holds an aiming-tube, so that this roaring lion among guns has been made as gentle as a cooing dove. It has a remarkable target, consisting of the silhouette of a man-o'-war about a foot long, so as to give the effect of distance; this is mounted at a distance of about 30yds., upon a series of concealed eccentric rollers—a string is pulled, and the model works, and rolls about and pitches just as though it were at sea. The model is also used for night practice, when electrically illuminated sights are used. The little ironclad is then fired at, under circumstances so realistic that the only difference between the mimic and the actual warfare is that in the latter case the shot should weigh 600lb., when as in the former it

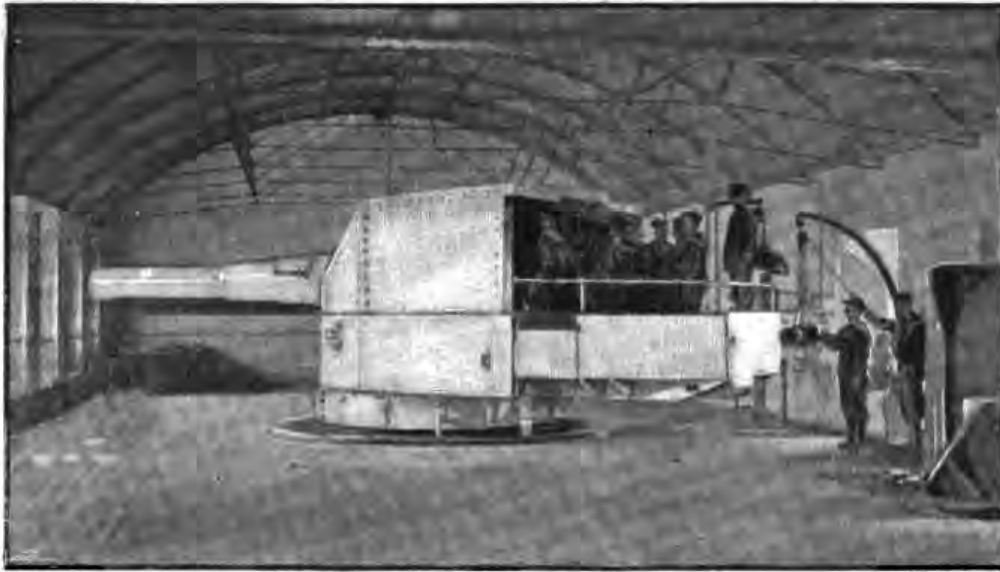
does not weigh more than a quarter of an ounce.

When this target was shown the German Emperor upon his last visit to Whale Island—for he often has a look round—he was told that the model was supposed to be a French ironclad, whereupon His Majesty is reported to have replied: "I am glad it is a French ship."

But the favourite gun is the serviceable 4.7 quick-firing gun, which fires a shot weighing 45lb., and requires a cartridge of 12lb. weight. This is a very respectable round,



From a] HOTCHKISS MACHINE GUNS. [Photograph.



From a]

IN THE BATTERY—THE 9'2IN. BREECHLOADING GUN.

[Photograph.

and quite serious enough for most purposes. Nearly all our cruisers carry this handy little weapon. Big as the battery is—it has a length of 60ft.—the authorities propose erecting a continuation for the quick-firing and machine guns only.

Near the parade-ground, where, when it is fine, the men go through infantry and machine and field gun drill, and cutlass and rifle practice, there is a small machine-gun battery which consists of two guns placed on movable platforms, which are worked by a winch to produce a rolling motion. The target is also movable, so that here all the conditions of actuality are reproduced. In bad weather the men are drilled in the drill-hall. They turn out splendidly, and their military bearing on parade is perfect.

We now retrace our steps to the handsome building in which are the officers' quarters: the mess-room, smoking and billiard rooms, etc. The mess-room is sometimes used as a ballroom, for life on board Whale Island,

although not all beer and skittles, has many amenities. Then we find there is a racket-court, as fine as that at Prince's Club, in the vicinity of the mess-room. We also learn that occasionally rinking parties are given on the white deal plank deck of the battery. On these occasions the beauties of Southsea disport themselves gaily among the deadly engines of warfare, and the susceptible hearts of the careless young officers often find the bright fire of a pair of eyes more dangerous than the steady old guns. The sportsman officer, who disdains soft dalliance and thirsts for nobler sport than rackets, can vent his murderous propensities on pigeons. One end of the island is a sort of Hurlingham, where pigeon-shooting matches take place from time to time, and prizes are contested for. Tennis parties are also given on the lawn.

From all this it will be seen that, so far as the officers are concerned, at least, the island is not unlike an admirably appointed social club, with just a few routine duties thrown in



From a]

FIELD-GUN DRILL.

Original from

[Photograph,



From a

ON PARADE.

[Photograph.

to vary the tedium of endless amusement. I fancy the officers themselves take a less optimistic view of their life, but we all know that it is the privilege of Englishmen to grumble.

Let us see what sort of a lot falls to poor Jack. Poor Jack's sweet little cherub, who sits up aloft, has looked after his life on Whale Island with more than its ordinary care. Behind the officers' quarters are those of the men; they consist of eight blocks of buildings, each composed of four long rooms, in which from twenty-five to thirty men are comfortably accommodated. The cleanliness and neatness of these dormitories are beyond description. The walls and ceilings are whitewashed, the floors are laid with canvas, and there is a beautifully clean deal table in the centre where the men mess. They do

not sleep in hammocks, but iron bedsteads; they have plenty of blankets, and lots of room for their kit. Behind the dormitories are the bathrooms, with hot and cold water, the hair-dressing establishment, where there are machine-brushes and every luxury, and the wash-houses. It is amusing to see Jack doing his own washing, and scrubbing away like a laundry-maid. But sailors have to do every-

thing for themselves, and so they are encouraged to make their own clothes, and they do them much better than the contractor. Jack, unlike his brother in arms, Tommy Atkins, gets no outfit from his country, but provides his own clothes, his pay being in proportion, and hence there is a store-room on the island where he can get his clothes; but if he should prefer to buy his materials and make his clothes himself, he can do this also, and makes a great saving thereby, for the cloth is sold to him at cost price.

But the glory of Whale Island is its canteen. Just as the officer has all the amenities of a club, so has Jack. Every night there is a smoking concert, and on guest nights the officers invariably come in, and assist in entertaining the men. The room where these entertainments take place



From a Photo. by]

A FIELD-DAY,

Original from

[Dr. Strickland.



From a

THE BLUEJACKETS' QUARTERS—DINNER-TIME.

[Photograph.]

is a large hall fitted with little marble-slabb'd tables and innumerable chairs. At one end is the platform, upon which stands the piano; near the platform are chairs for the officers, at the other end is the bar. We have heard all the latest popular songs admirably sung from this platform—sometimes by men, sometimes by officers. Jack loves dancing passionately, and in the intervals between the songs it is amusing to see the men take off their shoes, invite each other to a valse or a polka, and solemnly tread the mazy dance as though it were a religious rite. Occasionally, this hall is used for popular lectures, illustrated by the magic lantern.

Over the hall are the club-rooms, billiard-tables, writing and reading rooms, etc. Hard by is a bowling-alley. The canteen is managed, on co-operative principles, by a committee composed of a member of each mess, and presided over by the commander. Everything is sold at what is practically cost price, yet the canteen makes a small profit, which pays for the social amenities provided. In one corner of this building there is even a small electrical workshop.

Each mess selects its own cook, who is also the caterer; the rations are all put together; such extras as are wanted are purchased at cost price at the canteen, and the cooking is done in the huge kitchen, called the galley, which contains a range capable of cooking the food of 1,500 men! The galley itself is a picture of neatness, but one is inclined to be sceptical of the culinary attainments of the cooks. A vague notion seems

to prevail that these cooks are not entirely disinterested, and, like their prototypes on shore, manage to turn their office to a good account.

From the above description the reader will gather that Jack's life on board Whale Island is not unenviable, nor were we surprised to hear that when the time comes round for him to leave it he does so with regret. The great town of Ports-

mouth is close by, and the men are allowed to go on shore almost as much as they like, after four o'clock that is, provided they are on duty again at seven in the morning. It is a pleasant, healthy, happy life, and the men look thoroughly jolly and contented.

As is well known, we catch our sailors young and keep them long. In this respect their fate is more enviable than that of Tommy Atkins. There are numerous duties upon which superannuated sailors can be employed, and at Whale Island, for instance, there is a permanent staff of pensioners, who keep the lawn in order and do a quantity of routine work, analogous to that done by pioneers in a garrison.

The training of the men at Whale Island includes: company and battalion drill, fortification and trench exercise, heavy gun drill, breech and muzzle loading, hydraulic-worked guns, machine and field gun drill, and rocket drill, for saving life at sea. They have also to learn all about ammunition, and the different powders and fuses used. They must also pass through a course of heavy gun-firing in the gunboats, and a course of musketry.

For gun-firing practice the *Excellent* possesses a small fleet of nine gunboats, and an ironclad, the *Hero*. The gunboats go out to practise off Spithead, and the *Hero* makes periodical trips to Portland for target practice. There is also a special course of instruction provided for the armourers, who learn at the dockyard the mysteries of riveting and armour-plating, and are generally fitted to execute any repairs that an ironclad may require at sea.



From a]

THE GYMNASIUM.

[Photograph.

Having left the men's quarters we look in at the museum, lecture-hall, and gymnasium before taking leave of the commander. In the gymnasium we find boxing, fencing, and gymnastics are taught. Here are the trapeze, the horizontal bar, the climbing poles, etc. At the moment when we looked in a party of men were learning musical drill. In the museum are found collections of all those objects the men have to learn about: shots, shells, fuses, cartridges, armour-plates, etc. Of the lecture-hall we need not say much, beyond mentioning that it is well ventilated and comfortably warmed.

We now take leave of the commander and return to Portsmouth. On our way back reflections throng the brain, the impressions obtained form a wild kaleidoscope — everything is mixed up, and we wonder how we shall ever be able to give an account of all that has been seen. One thing, however, impresses itself upon the writer, and that is this: that as

At Walmer already the marines have their barracks; why should the sailors and marines at Portsmouth not be equally well cared for? There is plenty of room and waste land about, and I cannot but think that the adoption of such a plan could only have a beneficial effect upon the health and discipline of the men, and I am, moreover, confirmed in this opinion by the splendid object-lesson of Whale Island. Our Navy is already an extremely popular Service, but that is no reason why we should not try to improve it.



From a Photo. by]

THE WHALE ISLAND BAND.

[Dr. Strickland.