Approaching War Cloisters from Kingsgate Street through South Africa Gate, there is a building on the right which scarcely gets a mention in any of the books about the College and is totally absent from the guide book – Armoury. This is an oversight since, as soon as one steps inside, one is aware of a wealth of memorabilia representing the past and of an active and vibrant present day Combined Cadet Force (the “Corps”). It was built at the same time as the gate in 1902.

The Winchester College Rifle Volunteer Corps was started in 1860 as a result of the so-called Volunteer movement after the provocative French sabre-rattling following the Orsini Plot against Napoleon III two years earlier. All over the country, particularly in Public Schools and Universities, young men formed Corps which would give them a uniform and teach them how to shoot. At Winchester there were no dons that were either interested or involved in the Corps; and the War Office knew nothing of it. The funding was from members’ subscriptions and their officers were chosen from their own number. The new institution was primarily, if not entirely, a shooting club. The College Corps was reviewed with the other Hampshire Corps, on Compton Down by Lord William Paulet, in October 1860.

In the early days the rifles were muzzle loaders, but in 1869 the Corps received a grant of seven short Enfield rifles and in 1871, seven Sniders were donated by the Government - the days of muzzle loaders were over. The same year, the College won the Ashburton shield for the first time and then again in 1872, in 1873 and in 1876. This success was not repeated until 1904 when the team included George Mallory, who was to die on Everest twenty years later.

At first a grey Volunteer uniform was worn, with light blue stripes and black stockings; then scarlet tunic, blue trousers and spiked helmet; then khaki with floppy Australian type hats from the South African War; then khaki battle dress with khaki and subsequently dark blue berets. The blue berets remain but the uniform is now combat jackets and trousers.

In 1862, a handsome pair of Colours was presented to the Rifle Corps by the Moberly family, whilst a band consisting of a big drum, four side drums, thirteen fifes and ten bugles was formed in 1892. By 1899, the band had deteriorated into “a totally rotten state” and £20 was raised for its “adornment”. The big drum was painted and embossed with the College Arms, a tiger skin was bought and leg guards were provided for the side-drummers. The improvement was short lived as the band was gone by 1904.
Arms drill soon became part of the Corps’ activity when, in 1868, it was enrolled as a Cadet Corps in the 1st Hants Volunteer Battalion, with the Second Master, the Rev. C. Richardson, taking over command. In 1908 the Officer Training Corps was established, and from 1914 onwards, the War Office insisted on regular training for senior cadets. Virtually the whole school became members. Strictly speaking the Corps has never been compulsory; conscientious objection was countenanced but rare. Winchester is not a military school and never has been. Even in 1914, when suddenly so many activities were being channelled into the war effort, the Headmaster was able to say “I am not afraid of any spirit of Militarism at Winchester: other influences are too strong.”

During the Second War sensitivity about class and rank led to the OTC being renamed the JTC, Junior Training Corps, but its main function was still to prepare boys for Officer responsibilities. Montgomery claimed that he detected “latent leadership in all ranks” when he inspected the Corps in 1946. In 1948 there was yet another metamorphosis into a Combined Cadet Force (CCF), which facilitated the existence of RN and RAF sections. Until it ended in 1960, National Service provided justification for maintaining an element of compulsion. The wind of change was felt earlier at Winchester than most schools and in 1963 the ASA – Alternative Service Activities – was instituted for the employment of those who chose not to join the Corps. Those in the second half of their time at the College could opt to involve themselves in some form of non-military work or to take on a social responsibility for the benefit of the local community by visiting or gardening for old people, providing entertainment for Homes and Day Centres or other activities of this nature. There was no mass desertion and a more streamlined organization has operated very effectively ever since.

The Wykehamist considered upon the Corp’s centenary in 1960, that its days were numbered unless it could provide enjoyment and amusement for the modern boy. Jack Parr, involved in the Corps on and off from 1905 until 1947, and without a mention of whom no article about the Corps would be complete, considered that its object had never been to provide “fun” but rather be an instrument of education in its widest sense.
145 years after the formation of the Corps, Armoury opens the door for opportunities to fly in fixed wing and helicopter aircraft, to sail, to experience life onboard a warship, to learn competition shooting and map reading and to participate in adventure training camps in the UK and occasionally abroad. In his second year, a Wykehamist is required to serve two and a half terms in the CCF. He has a reasonably free choice to join any one of the four Service Sections: RN, Royal Marines, Army and RAF. Each section follows its own proficiency syllabus, which is 60% military and 40% adventurous training.

This sounds like pretty good “fun”! With the enlightened and generous support of the Ministry of Defence, the Corps still fulfils its official aims of helping to develop discipline, endurance, self-reliance and leadership – things that are of profound consequence to the stamina and stability of the nation, in peace as well as in war.

In another five years the Corps will celebrate its 150th anniversary. What will The Wykehamist say then? Will it say that the work of the Corps has been well done thanks to the willing and cheerful cooperation of the Staff and School and its record is one that can instil a legitimate pride?

It could, but let’s wait and see.