

## **FORMING THE UVF AND GUN RUNNING**

The events of the Ulster crisis tended to unfold as a direct consequence of the Home Rule bill arriving at its various stages of the parliamentary process. 1913 was no different as the bill endured a third reading in the House of Commons and thus further plans were made for its opposition in Ulster. By using the County Inspector reports of the Royal Irish Constabulary and contemporary newspapers this piece will look at some of the key developments in 1913 including the establishment of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

In late 1912 the government moved to apply a fixed time-table, under a 'guillotine resolution' in order to speed up the passage of Home Rule. Winston Churchill sarcastically warned, "those who talk of revolution ought to be prepared for the guillotine", meanwhile the same resolution was described by Edward Carson as "sheer tyranny". The guillotine was duly applied and consequently only 6 of 51 clauses were fully discussed and not a single opposition amendment was accepted by the government. Simultaneously R.I.C. intelligence documents from December 1912 recorded an 'increased Unionist Club activity' as well as information to suggest a 'volunteer force 2000 strong to be raised for the mutual protection of all loyalists and generally to keep the peace'.

Parliament was adjourned for a short Christmas recess during which Carson spent his time in Rottingdean with his seriously ill wife Annette. After recess on January 16 1913 the Home Rule bill faced a third reading in the Commons during which Carson was not on the opposition benches, instead he was once again by his sick wife's bedside, he confided in Lady Londonderry, 'I do not think I can leave her any more unless she gets a change for the better'. As Annette lay motionless Carson cancelled all his engagements, never leaving the house for more than a few hours. Annette later died on 6 April 1913.

The R.I.C. had gathered evidence during January 1913 suggesting that members of the various Unionist Clubs were being enrolled to the 'Ulster Volunteer Force', there was further evidence to suggest that the drilling men were only armed with revolvers at this stage. Interestingly an observation was made regarding a 'large building in course of erection for the purpose of drilling and shooting for the Willowfield Unionist Club.' In February 1913 the R.I.C. claimed that arrangements for raising the Ulster Volunteer Force were 'not making rapid progress' and that it was hoped that the formation of the force would rekindle enthusiasm in drill which had notably slowed. However by March 1913 a more sinister development had been recorded. Intelligence confirmed that the SS Glendun had imported a shipment of arms for the volunteers, the captain of the Glendun was believed to be a Unionist Club member.

Carson's lack of public engagement during this period ensured that the opposition campaign was temporarily subdued. So much so that it prompted English newspaper 'The Times' to predict a 'rude awakening' for those who had felt the campaign had slackened. The report went on to describe some rumblings regarding an organised militia, 'it is certainly true that the officials of the Ulster headquarters in Belfast have put the name of every available trained man in Ulster upon their books and could therefore mobilise such a force at very short notice.' The piece went on to describe how 'arming, drill and discipline of Ulster have already had practical results' this comment refers to the controlling influence in which organised structure inevitably brought to the volunteers. There is space here to argue that the creation of a volunteer militia, and the organisational structures that this subsequently provides, was principally a controlling mechanism, in other words, much better to have (potentially) 100,000 drilling, and (in some cases) armed men under your control than outside of your control.

The site of the Willowfield Unionist Club became a modern and refurbished unionist hall at a cost of £4,650, collected by the locals. Sir Edward Carson made a personal visit, his first since the death of his wife, to officially unveil the hall on 16 May 1913. The ceremony had previously been postponed on account of his personal grief, meanwhile the event was described in the local press as a 're-opening of the Home Rule campaign' following the lull during which Carson was absent. With a new state of the art hall and with Carson's personal visit Willowfield had symbolised the club's ambition, they were one of the most successful clubs of the time. Carson addressed the large crowd in attendance, he accepted that drilling was a good concept, while reminding that unionists did not drill for aggressive but for defensive purposes, 'he did not know a better emblem of force, accompanied with discipline than this drill hall.' Spectators later paraded the streets in jubilant fashion and the remainder of the day passed off without any major incident.

R.I.C. reports for May 1913 suggested that the membership of the U.V.F. was at 30,000 men whom were anxious for more weapons, though it was suggested that the Unionist leadership was not of the same eager mindset.

By May 1913 there was still no mention of the Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Volunteers, or even Carson's Volunteers in the local printed press, according to them all drill was conducted under the auspices of the Unionist Clubs. the decision to constitute the UVF in January was not made public at the time, however he doesn't explain the reasons why this was the case. One newspaper reporter from the time stumbled upon one of the reasons for this situation. He described an evening spent in Omagh and a visit to a particular Unionist Club in the area, his companion in the car was both an ex-soldier and a member of the Unionist Club. They exchanged some discussion regarding the drilling and training of men in the area. Afterwards the newspaper reporter felt that the gentleman was rather coy, and was withholding certain elements of information. "I had not wanted secrets and I had said we were all aware that Ulster's plans and preparations were of an extensive nature... But, are the details such that if revealed they would arrest attention and provide a sensation?" The response given to him was "undoubtedly".

In June 1913 several consignments of weapons were intercepted by the authorities. On 4 June it was reported that eight containers marked 'electrical plant' were detained by customs, upon inspection they were found to contain rifles and bayonets of foreign manufacture. On 7 June a second seizure of weapons was reported, this time in Dublin, again they were bound for Ulster. The Belfast Evening Telegraph commented that 'it is perfectly well known that numerous consignments of arms have reached Ulster of late', even more surprising was the fact that no laws were broken in the process. A leading Irish KC said that so far as he knew there was nothing to prevent 500 rifles being consigned to any man, there was nothing illegal in the matter. The King could order a proclamation against the importation of arms if he believed they were to be used for seditious purposes. The unionists of Ulster had clearly exposed a loophole in the law and were intent on exploiting it to its maximum purpose. Further consignments of weapons were seized in Hammersmith and in Newcastle Upon Tyne, the rifles contained in these batches were of Italian manufacture and had originated in Hamburg. The Globe newspaper observed chillingly; 'The Ulstermen are preparing for civil war in that cold blooded deliberate way which men have when they really mean what they say.'

It was not until 18 July 1913, seven months after their formation, that the term 'Ulster Volunteer Force' was used in the Belfast Evening Telegraph for the very first time. It was used to describe an inspection the previous day when Edward Carson had visited the Holywood Ulster Volunteer Force. "Let your motto be 'For God And Country'" said Carson, "I believe the Holywood club was the first to be formed and therefore it was natural that I should should desire to come down to first see the Holywood force before I went to see any other of the forces throughout the province."

Carson reviews his first UVF detachment at Holywood Co. Down in July 1913



The Ulster Volunteer Force was officially and publicly created in order to assimilate the various unionist elements under a single command structure. The UVF organised itself largely along territorial lines and mimicked the framework of the Unionist Clubs. Recruitment was limited to 100,000 men who had signed the Ulster Covenant and who were between the ages of 17-65. R.I.C. intelligence reports for June 1913 suggested that there were more men engaging in drill than ever before, it had also commented that 'membership of the U.V.F. is assumed complete as the circulation of enrolment forms has ceased.' In July 1913 the R.I.C. had dedicated a new section of their

intelligence report entirely to the U.V.F. this may suggest some sobering of opinion and perhaps the U.V.F. were to be taken more seriously by the authorities.

On 28 July the UVF were involved in a peculiar operation. In the early hours of Monday 28 July 1913 the Boyne Bridge at Drogheda was blown up, as were the fords across the river at Oldbridge, by a section of the UVF. It was described as a 'daring raid' carried out by a flying column of motor cyclists and motor transport volunteers. By September 1913 companies, battalions and regiments were in place. Men residing in a certain street formed a section under a section leader, a number of sections formed a company, and a number of companies formed a battalion. A battalion generally contained around 1000 men and a regiment contained around 4000 men. R.I.C. reports have endorsed this sentiment and have also included that U.V.F. membership greatly increased this month (September) and that there were further imports of weapons, 'hundreds at a time'. Beyond September 1913 the UVF gained in strength but also in structure. The focus then switched to Irish Nationalism, how would they respond? Eoin MacNeill, from the Antrim glens, and founder of the National Volunteers had initially welcomed the formation of the U.V.F. he even called for 'three cheers for Carson' at a rally in Cork (though admittedly he received three chairs hurled at the platform). Unionist militarism actually gained a distant admiration from the Irish Republican Brotherhood, their leader Bulmer Hobson suggested that Carson had opened a revolutionary door which the I.R.B. would strive to keep ajar, 'Carson reignited the fenian flame'. As 1913 drew to a close there were two militias in Ireland who were partially armed and drilling regularly, it seemed as though Ulster was on an inevitable course for civil war.

The April 1914 gun-run at Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor was a serious (and very successful) attempt to arm the Ulster Volunteers. In a single evening the UVF had evolved from a poorly armed force to an adequately armed force. However, the fact that the UVF were 'poorly armed' before April 1914 proves at least one serious point; The Ulster Volunteer Force were transporting weapons to Ulster for a long period before April 1914, but it is 1913 which gives me particular interest given that this is the centenary year.

Unionists had been arming, in all likelihood, since 1910 in preparation for their opposition to Home Rule in whatever form that opposition chose to take. Major Fred Crawford had been tasked to seek out and acquire weapons for the Unionists of Ulster, he was not alone, others like Robert Adgey and William Johnson were involved at various stages. As we will see, arms were usually brought in from continental arms deals eg Hamburg and processed via Great Britain. As Alan Parkinson has discovered there were some unlikely sources of assistance for the gunrunners. Edward Carson received a letter from Miss Alexa Jameson of Ardwell, Scotland. She proposed that 'machine guns in parts, rifles and ammunition should be sent from the continent to London as grand pianos, pianolas, orchestrations, or as spare parts of a French or German make of motor packing cases.'

In 1913 the United Kingdom had reasonably relaxed legislation with regard to firearms, it meant that anyone who possessed a firearms license (costing 10s) could legally own a firearm in the UK. It is important to point out here the differences between possessing a firearm, carrying/using a firearm, and the importation of firearms, all were viewed upon differently by the authorities and each created their own loopholes. The leadership of the Ulster Volunteer Force took full advantage of the loopholes in the legislation (or lack of) to bring countless weapons to Ulster prior to, and throughout 1913. Timothy Bowman has placed this in a context of what he termed a 'vibrant gun culture' in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

RIC intelligence reports for 1913 first made its first reference to arms importation when it commented on arms which had been transported into the country by the SS Glendun. By May 1913 the intelligence were commenting on the anxiety of the rank & file volunteers to obtain arms, this anxiety, it seems, was not shared by their political leaders. In June 1913 eight containers marked 'electrical plant' were detained by customs at York Dock, Belfast. Upon inspection they were found to contain rifles and bayonets of foreign manufacture, however there appeared to be no mention of who exactly they were intended for. 'A Second Seizure' was reported on June 7 1913 when a furniture van containing rifles on board a vessel was intercepted at the North Wall, Dublin and was addressed to Lord Farnham in the North of Ireland. Lord Farnham later claimed to know nothing about the consignment. The Belfast Evening Telegraph went on to report that 'it is perfectly well known that numerous consignments of arms have reached Ulster of late and the inability of the authorities to discover anything about them is somewhat disconcerting to them'. A leading Irish KC commented at the time that so far as he was aware

there was nothing to prevent 500 rifles being consigned to any man unless there was a proclamation against the importation of arms into Ireland. It is against this backdrop that the second reading of the Home Rule Bill took place on Monday 9 June 1913, and to Unionists who were reading the local printed press it must have seemed that the situation was encouraging. Globe newspaper relayed how 'the Ulstermen are preparing for civil war, in that cold blooded deliberate way which men have when they really mean what they say... The man who has not got his rifle and ammunition and does not take part in his weekly drill is regarded as unusual.'

June was a busy month for both the UVF and the authorities. On Wednesday 11 June it was reported that as many as 4000 rifles of Italian manufacture, including bayonets, were raided by the Metropolitan Police in King Street, Hammersmith, England. The rifles, it was claimed, were being stored on behalf of the Ulster Unionists. However, the Hammersmith seizure was less to do with illegality and the protection of citizens and more to do with protecting the British gun-making industry after complaints had been lodged about the continual importation of foreign made weapons. Another consignment which was destined for Belfast was discovered this time at Newcastle Upon Tyne, England. Strangely there were allegations that the frequency of these seizures in such a short space of time pointed towards foul-play by either Nationalists or the government in order to generate an excuse to ban the importation of arms. It was claimed that the Nationalist MPs and newspapers were aware of an imminent seizure the day before it had happened and that information was provided by a 'Hibernian source'. Several days later ten cases of rifles containing around 300 weapons from Newcastle were openly dispatched to Holyhead, Glasgow and Belfast. The cases which were simply labelled 'old rifles' could not be detained by the police without first obtaining a Home Office order. It was thought that the rifles had come to Newcastle from Hamburg, Germany. The arms seizures of 1913 were also viewed with suspicion by Fred Crawford and made him sceptical about proceeding with any large scale importation in 1914, it was this scepticism which led to more detailed planning and consequently a successful operation in April 1914.

#### Arms seizure at Hammersmith



In September 1913 the RIC County Inspector for Belfast noted that there had been further imports of arms 'hundreds at a time', and in October a more serious development was reported; 'serious consideration and planning by leaders for arms imports'. It was evident that local gunsmiths were profiting from the difficult political situation, for example Hunter & Co. gunsmiths on Royal Avenue who sent six rifles to the Willowfield Unionist Club on 28 October 1913. In November 1913 the County Inspector reported that there were 22,061 Volunteers in Belfast of which 2732 individual volunteers had access to a rifle. This figure supports comments

which were made by the County Inspector a month later when he reported 'rank & file and rougher classes' had been induced to join the UVF but crucially they were 'not armed'. RIC reports are useful to a certain extent but they are not totally reliable, this is also the case with the printed newspaper press of the time, but as we will see these two sources are entirely at odds with one another.

On 4 December 1913 a defining moment occurred when the King, under severe pressure, issued 'A proclamation for prohibiting the importation of military arms and ammunition into Ireland'. There were in fact two Royal Proclamations announced; One which forbade the importation of arms and ammunition apart from those intended for sporting purposes, and the second prohibited the carriage by sea of military arms and ammunition. The British government and the ruling elite were clearly concerned about the armed inaction of the Ulster Volunteer Force, but in reality this proclamation was likely to make life more difficult for customs officials and for RIC intelligence as it would simply drive arms importation underground and perhaps make it less likely to be tracked and traced.



Carson was in Nottingham when he learned of the Royal Proclamation. He was particularly keen to inform his audience of the proclamation, all the while invoking the frequent jibes about the UVF's wooden rifles. "Do you think that I mind that proclamation?" asked Carson. "No my Lord Duke (the Duke of Portland) you will not gain the English people in the use of coercion towards Ulster by firing upon unarmed people any more than you will an armed people." Carson reminded his audience of what Lord Macaulay had said about Derry, "He said it was not the battlements or ammunition that saved Derry... It was the spirit of the men behind the walls." In other words the proclamation could prevent easy access to firearms but it could not crush their determined spirit. Finally in a chilling warning Carson asserted, "I tell Sir Edward Grey that I am not going on forever being a restraining influence in Ireland. There is hardly a day passes when in Belfast that I do not hear it said 'when are you going to give us the word Sir Edward?'" The Belfast Evening Telegraph on 6 December 1913 were able to state 'with positive knowledge' that there were sufficient British

made weapons to arm the whole Ulster Volunteer Force, as well as ammunition to supply them for a considerable time. 'Rifles are in Ulster, not in thousands but in tens of thousands, and ammunition not in tens of thousands, but in millions.' The report claimed that this work had been ongoing for the past eight months in a 'systematic and wholesale way' and accused the British government of complacency in not only accusing the UVF of 'bluff and bluster', but in being led by Mr John Redmond, and for its jibes about 'wooden guns'. All the while the loyalists of Ulster, it claimed, were taking this necessary step of arms importation to defend their rights and liberties. In a scathing attack the Belfast Evening Telegraph read, 'this government of time-servers and sycophants, this aggregation of political charlatans and tricksters have awakened to the knowledge that Ulster is in a position to become an armed camp tomorrow.'

#### Arms seizure 6 December 1913

When Sir Edward Carson next travelled to Ulster he was subjected to questioning and a search for weaponry. Carson had arrived in Belfast (date) via the Liverpool route and was met at the dock by the Marquis of Londonderry. Customs officials had been observing the disembarking passengers with a vigilant eye before an amusing exchange occurred with Sir Edward. When challenged by the officer in charge as to whether he had any guns or ammunition the Unionist leader replied "No", with a cheeky smile, "but I have three blackthorn sticks." The few people who were present are said to have greatly enjoyed the joke, some even stepped forward to shake the hand of Sir Edward.

