

The Veteran and National Reserve 1910-1918 – By Simon Wilson

The Veteran Reserve was founded in 1910, and renamed the National Reserve in 1911, when Lord Roberts became its Colonel-in-Chief. Most people are familiar with it because of the lapel badges, which are readily available at militaria fairs. Generally, they are oval in shape, with blue enamel outer rings, and roses or crowns in the middle. There are other varieties and I will be illustrating some of them here. The badges are almost all that is left of an organisation that had over 200,000 members at peak. They were the only “uniform” the members had, and were usually paid for by the members or by local donors. The Government, which consistently tried to avoid any cost associated with running the Reserve, said these badges were sufficient to gain the members protection as combatants under the Hague Convention,

Without these signs of military service, they could be executed as spies when captured. This question was still being considered after WW2 when Article 4 of the Third Geneva Convention (1949) said that combatants were entitled to be treated as prisoners of war if, amongst other things, they had “a fixed distinctive sign recognisable at a distance”. This was a serious consideration at the time as the Germans, having suffered at the hands of francs-tireurs during the Franco-Prussian War, took a harsh view of civilian resistance fighters – as seen by some of their actions in 1914. Whether these lapel badges are recognisable at a distance, is a matter for debate.



Left, Badge of a Class II member in London. Number stamped on rifle butt indicates the company the recipient was in. Unfortunately, I can't find a listing anywhere. Class I badges have a different number and a red centre.

Right, Reverse of the London badge with individual number and “LONDON”. Other areas of London have been seen.

The Boer War had shown that Britain could send an expeditionary force overseas quickly and efficiently, but it had also shown that the reserves and volunteer force needed strengthening and reorganising. Haldane's Army Reforms made many changes to the Volunteers, including forming the Veteran Reserve. This was administered by the same county organisations that organised the newly reconstituted Territorial Force, hence the counties named on the badges.

Haldane envisaged three different reserves – the Territorial Force Reserve (TFR), the Technical Reserve (TR) and the Veteran (later National) Reserve. The first two were not popular and did not reach viable



Left, National Reserve Cambridgeshire. Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire are unusual as they are made by Bliss Brothers, Birmingham, most others are by Gaunt, London.

Middle, Devon - one of the more colourful badges.

Right, one of the more unusual badges – made by Croneen, Brompton, a high street jeweller active from the 1890s to the 1930s. He made many prize fobs for New Brompton FC (now Gillingham FC) and was Chairman of the club.

numbers, but the National Reserve proved to be very popular and many men who could have joined the TFR joined it in preference. This is hardly surprising when you consider that the only obligations imposed by the National Reserve was to enter your name on a list and wear a badge.

They were divided into three groups. The first two were Class I - men who were fit for active service at home or overseas - and Class II - men who were fit for duty in garrisons or for administrative work at home. Both groups signed the “honourable obligation” to serve, and were entitled to a bounty if they were called up - £10 for Class I and £5 for Class II.



Left, A pair on Notts badges – one normal, one silver. London also did a silver badge – I am not sure if all counties did, and whether they are an official (possibly officers') issue or a private purchase.

Right, Reverse of Notts badges with hallmarks showing anchor, lion and “p” - Birmingham 1914.

Class III was divided into three sections – the first two were men who were fit for Class I or II, but who, for one reason or another, had not signed the “honourable obligation” to serve. The third section

consisted of men who were not fit or who were too old to serve. They were retained as social members and, often had considerable local influence. The majority of members were in Class III.

This is just a general overview, and the categories altered slightly over time. The various wartime arrangements, where Protection Companies became Supernumerary Companies, before becoming Protection Companies again, can be both confusing and, if I'm honest, boring.



An unusual badge – circular and with a pin back – Middlesex.



Unusual shape – Staffordshire, with knot.

Before the war, most mentions in the Press related to parades. The Surrey National reserve advertised regular Church Parades, the King reviewed the London National Reserve in 1912 and in 1913, former members of the Grenadier Guards were invited to a Royal Review of the Brigade of Guards – wearing medals and National Reserve badges. Men of the Nottinghamshire National Reserve paraded at Wollaton Park alongside veterans of the Crimea and Indian Mutiny when George V visited Nottingham in 1914.

There were meetings across the country to give out badges, including one at Winsford, Cheshire, where a man of 70 and a Bandmaster with 45 years service in the Volunteers were enrolled. Many of the men given badges at Crediton, Devon, had previous service in the Volunteers.

When war came, mobilisation of the National Reserves was slow and haphazard. According to the papers, men with required skills had already been called up in August. In Bakewell the National Reserves were mustered and went off to war (though no specific details of employment were given) and in December the Dundee men were called on to provide men to guard Prisoners of War at Stobs Camp. Many men had already rejoined their regiments but it was hoped that there were still 100 fit men of military age to contribute to the task.



A striking design - one of several patterns of Somerset badge, all of which show the wyvern.

An exchange of letters in the London Evening Standard, in August 1914 (after a member of the National Reserve had complained about lack of employment) contained the official advice that the duty of members of the National Reserve was to be "ready, but silent".

By the time the Government decided what they wanted to do with the National Reserve thousands of members had already returned to the army. The ones that remained were advised either to join up, as the New Army needed experienced men to act as instructors and NCOs, or to join the Territorial Force to provide the manpower necessary for guarding vulnerable features such as waterworks, bridges and harbours.

That left the Class III men, the vast majority of the Reserve. They were available for hire by local businesses requiring guards, and would be issued with a brassard rather than a uniform and would be unarmed. There was no need to give them uniforms, as they would not be serving overseas. When local associations did provide uniforms there were difficulties in supplying uniforms to fit, as the older men tended towards a fuller figure.

These groups would become Protection Companies, freeing up younger and fitter soldiers for active service. They protected, amongst other things, the Manchester Ship Canal, the Dover Garrison, Lowestoft and the Suffolk coast, the Tyneside shipyards and munitions factories, and various railways.



A pair of West Yorkshire National Reserve badges. East Lancashire has two similar designs, using red roses. Could they, like the London badges, denote different classes?

They were just one of the many groups providing security for key points – the Special Constabulary, youth groups and local volunteers all provided similar services. Many older members of the National Reserve, looking for a more active role, found a home in the Volunteer Training Corps, an organisation which would eventually outnumber the Veteran Reserve.

Conscription took the remaining fit men of military age in 1916 and the rest were used on guard duties. By early 1918, the organisation of the Royal Defence Corps (RDC), which absorbed the Supernumerary companies, meant the National Reserve had

ceased to exist. The RDC, amongst other things, provided 14,000 men to guard prisoners of war. They would be disbanded in 1919, revived in 1922 and, in 1936, would become the National Defence Corps.

The National Reserve was never formally disbanded, nor was it revived. It had been useful in its time, concentrating the minds of the nation on the coming war, but it had never been properly funded or

equipped and, to be honest, seems to have had no real purpose once war was declared. Men would have joined up without it, and there were many other organisations available to provide protection for vulnerable points.

There are over 80 varieties of badge, according to a list on the internet but don't be misled, despite the variety pictured here, most of them are blue oval badges with different county names.