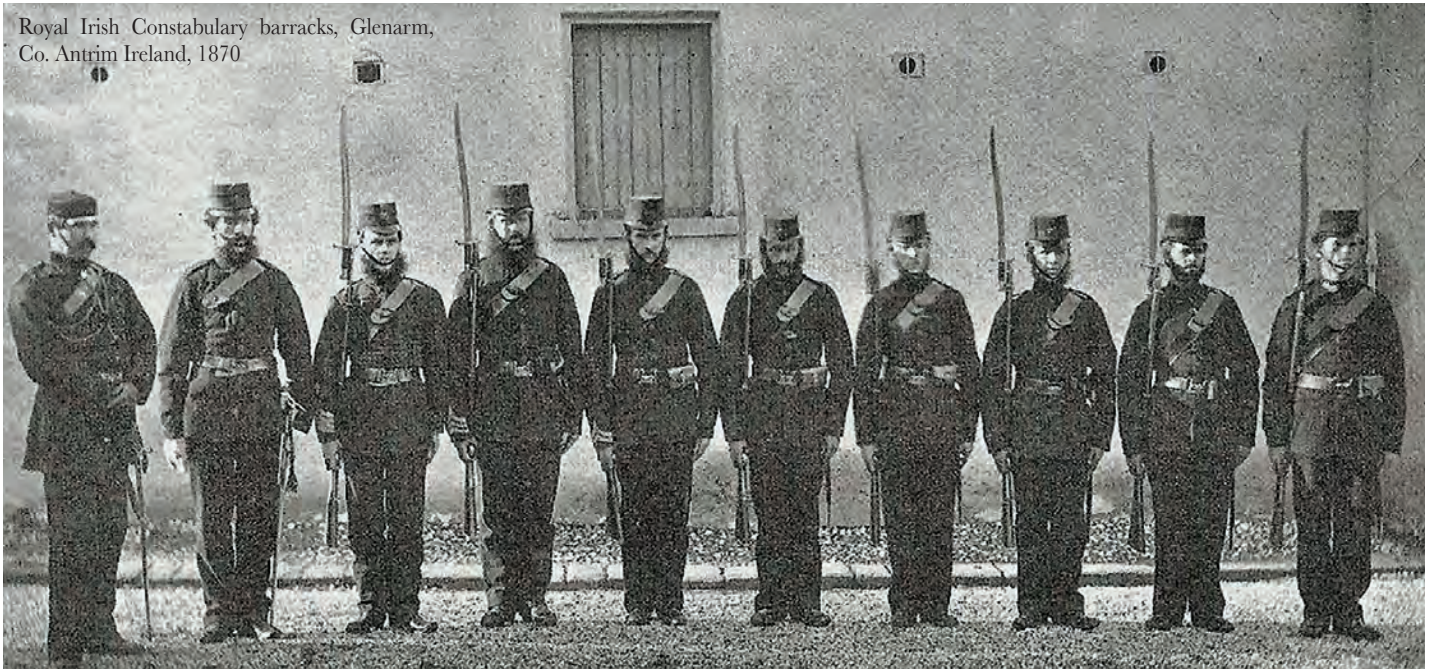


Royal Irish Constabulary barracks, Glenarm,
Co. Antrim Ireland, 1870



The Irish Constabulary Sawback Bayonet

by Derek Complin

Until the early 19th century, policing in Ireland was achieved through a patchwork of baronial constables appointed by the government and county grand juries. They were under the supervision of local magistrates, but subject to little control or discipline. These worthies were largely untrained, without uniforms, unarmed and, realistically, only capable of dealing with petty crime and minor disorder. In the face of serious disturbances, the ever-present British Army was quickly called upon.

In 1812, the Government in Westminster appointed Sir Robert Peel as Chief Secretary for Ireland. Peel applied his zeal for organised law enforcement to Ireland, championing the Constabulary Act of 1822. As founder of the London Metropolitan Police in 1829, he used the experience to formulate the systematic organisation of a police force in Ireland, leading to the establishment of the Irish Constabulary in 1836.

Under the central control of the Government administration in Dublin, detachments of the Constabulary were housed in barracks across Ireland. Their prime task was one of local security against insurrection, a constant concern to the British Government and local authorities. Consequently they were armed. As a quasi-military force, the Constabulary no longer had to call on the Army for support. By the end of the 19th century, there were approximately 1,600 police barracks located throughout Ireland, each with its small unit of constables.

Initially the Constabulary was supplied with rifles and bayonets from Army stores held at

Dublin Castle. However, it quickly became apparent that with an overall length of 72 inches these weapons were inappropriate and too cumbersome for normal daily policing duties.

Whilst it was clear that small arms supplied from Army stores were not suited for policing duties, the question became 'what was?'

The matter was referred to Colonel Dixon, Superintendent of the newly established Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield Lock, just north of London. He took a personal interest in finding a solution. It was determined that a more handy firearm would best meet constabulary needs, something similar to the Army issue Artillery Carbine.

From 1866 onwards, percussion Enfield rifles and carbines were being converted in large numbers to the Snider breech loading system at Royal Small Arms Factories. The timing could not have been more fortuitous. To meet the needs of the Constabulary, quantities of Enfield Short Rifles were converted at RSAF Pimlico to produce a breech loading Snider carbine with a 22.5-inch barrel, a handy firearm well suited to their activities. In appearance the new Constabulary Carbine was very similar to the regulation issue Snider Artillery Carbine.

Meanwhile, having proved their mettle during the Fenian uprising of 1867, later that year the Constabulary was awarded a Royal title in acknowledgement, becoming the Royal Irish Constabulary.

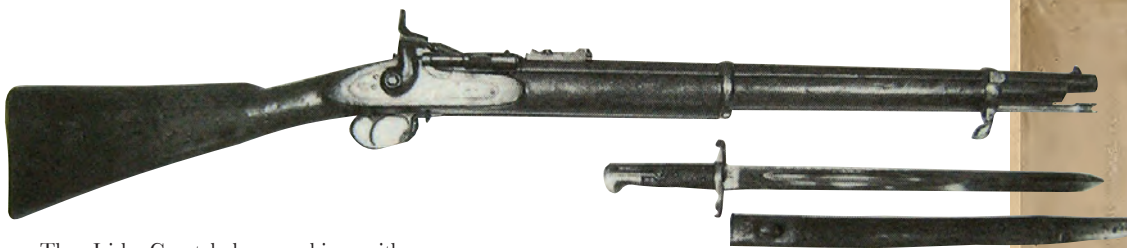
Along with their newly acquired Snider Carbines, the Constabulary received an equal supply of sword bayonets.

Officers were armed with percussion Enfield Short Rifles and yataghan blade sword bayonets. Note the cross belt pouch to carry percussion caps. The waist belt pouch carried handcuffs.





The Irish Constabulary bayonet, with 18 inch sawback blade, black leather frog and scabbard.



The Irish Constabulary carbine with sawback bayonet and scabbard.

The Army continued to retain the old pattern Enfield bayonet with its 23inch long recurved blade for the Snider Artillery Carbine. But for Constabulary use a shorter, handier bayonet was preferable. Col. Dixon was instrumental in its design, which differed considerably from the Army issue pattern. The pommel and crossguard of the new bayonet were more streamlined, now familiarly known as the 'Dixon hilt'. The blade was reduced in length to 18 inches, made straight, and for some as yet inexplicable reason given a very functional saw back.

Although there is no obvious reason for this feature for Constabulary use, a broad explanation might dispel some of the myths associated with sawback bayonet blades.

Long used to campaigning around the globe, the British Army was highly adept at living rough. Whilst the Quartermaster's stores and Commissary would take care of ensuring a steady supply of food, it fell to each individual regiment or unit to prepare meals. Where possible, food was cooked. However, in the field the challenge was to scrounge and secure sufficient material to burn in stoves and campfires. The task of

gathering fuel usually fell to soldiers detailed with the chore. Wood and brush was gathered accordingly, and the addition of a saw on the back of a bayonet blade immediately provided a useful tool without the separate need of one specifically designated.

The intimidation aspect of a sawback on an already fearsome weapon was purely coincidental.

The production of all IC bayonets was undertaken at RSAF Enfield. By fiscal year end (31 March) 1868 a total of 5,988 had been delivered, and by year ending 1869 another 7,033 bayonets, all for a unit cost of 10 shillings.

Each bayonet was subjected to rigorous inspection at Enfield, tested at each stage of manufacture to conform to specification, and rejected or passed; if passed the Inspector's stamp was applied. Bayonets for the IC carbine can be identified from other similar bayonets by two features – a muzzle ring diameter of 20mm to fit the Snider barrel plus the application of Enfield inspector stamps on the blade, pommel and tang.

The Snider carbine and sawback bayonet remained in service for many years. Whilst scarce, a number of photo images exist showing the bayonet in wear. They appear more frequently in studio portraits, also occasionally in group photographs.

Carbines were fitted with a black leather sling, and the bayonet was sheathed in a black leather scabbard with steel mounts. The top mount had a frogstud to engage in a slot in the black leather frog, the loop of which slid over the officer's waist belt. The handcuff pouch had a looped back and was similarly attached to the waist belt.

LEFT: Enfield Inspector stamp on the blade, crown/E/27, together with the Government ownership mark of a broad arrow over WD.



RIC Constable - c1880



The Snider had a long and venerable service life, in later years notably with police forces and Colonial troops well into the early 20th Century. It was often loaded with buckshot, as effective as ball ammunition but with the advantage of a better chance of a hit. Buckshot was also less lethal with a chance hit of a fellow office. With bayonet fixed, the carbine was just as effective a deterrent as when it was first issued. This last point must surely have influenced the decision to retain the bayonet when the RIC 'upgraded' to Martini Henry arms in 1899/1900.

The Martini-Henry rifle had been in service with the British Army since 1873. It featured a much improved breechloading system to the Snider and a smaller bore size. The last years of the 19th century witnessed a proliferation of small arms development, and by the 1890s the Martini-Henry had been supplanted by ever more effective firearms for front line troops.

With vast stores of obsolete but good-working arms at hand, the War Department in Whitehall tendered them at knock-down prices to any qualified force looking to upgrade.

The RIC fitted that bill, but the same initial objections voiced over the length of the Snider rifle were raised over the Martini-Henry rifle. It was too cumbersome for the job. The original solution was resurrected. With an abundance of surplus Martini-Henry rifles already converted to the Artillery Carbine MkII, a handy weapon was readily available.

As for the bayonet, an equally simple solution was found. At 18mm, the Martini Henry carbine had a slightly smaller outside muzzle diameter to the Snider. Other than that, the bayonet fitting was identical. All that had to be done was to bush the bayonet muzzle ring from 20mm to 18mm, and the adaptation was complete.



RIC, E District, Belfast 1898. With their Snider carbines. Handcuff pouch and bayonet (just visible) attached to waist belts.

REARMING THE ROYAL IRISH CONSTABULARY, 1904

MAGAZINE RIFLES VICE MARTINI-HENRY'S

The Martini-Henry rifles, with which the members of the Royal Irish Constabulary have been supplied some years past, are about to be discarded, and within the next few weeks their place will be taken by magazine rifles. The Belfast barracks have already been supplied, and several of the city sergeants, who have undergone a special course of training at the depot in Dublin, will initiate the men into the mysteries of the new arm. Although the Martini's have now been in use for a long time the men in Belfast at least have never fired a shot with them. The old practice of a day's ball-firing at Kinnegar and Carrickfergus has dropped into misuse, and though at morning and evening parades the men go through the motions of loading and firing in the barrack yard, they have no practical knowledge of their weapon. It is understood, however, that the new rifles will be fitted with Morris tubes, and that every man will be required to fire at least 100 rounds. That

announcement has not the significance it would formally have borne, for if one thing is certain it is that the R.I.C. will never again fire a shot in anger in Belfast. The new carbines will be used for parades and guards of honour, and in one respect they will be an undoubted improvement. They are some inches longer than the Martinis, and so we will be spared the spectacle of a line of six footers vainly endeavouring to obey the order "Grounded arms" with weapons which, when held even by the end of the muzzle, have still the butt dangling in mid-air.

With the Martini disappears the familiar sword-bayonet, and its place is to be taken by the short-bladed bayonet that Tommy Atkins has appropriately christened "bread-knife". The sword has long been the peculiar attribute of the R.I.C., and it is noticeable that the word of command has always been "Fix swords," not "Fix bayonets."

Originally issued with the Snider, it was refitted to the Martini, and, old fashioned though it is, many of the force will be sorry to see it go. Its strange saw-toothed back has puzzled every observer, and the men themselves are not altogether clear as to its exact use. The most probable explanation is that it was intended to prevent an opponent wrestling it away when a force was engaged in driving back a crowd with rifles carried at the "port." The R.I.C. have always been strongly armed, each man when fully equipped carrying rifle, revolver, sword, and truncheon, and ominous as the first three sound, it is in the last, strange to say, that was proved the most formidable weapon. Organised and trained as a military force, and repeatedly commended for the soldiery appearance and smartness, the men have not taken too kindly to the rifle, but with batons and blackthorns they can do much more than hold their own.



ABOVE: RIC Martini Henry Carbine

RIGHT: An RIC Constable, late 1890's. Still armed with a Snider carbine, handcuffs and bayonet suspended from his belt.



RIC group, Snider carbines with sawback bayonets fixed, Late 1890s



The muzzle ring brushed to a diameter of 18mm to fit the MH carbine.

So it would appear that the only cost incurred by the RIC for an upgrade in their weaponry was the cost of converting their 'swords'.

But by this time the Martini-Henry's days were numbered, and along with it the sawback sword bayonets that had seen service with the RIC for nearly 40 years. The swan song of the

Irish Constabulary sword bayonet was neatly summarised in a contemporary news item from 1904.

Given the substantial number of bayonets originally issued, it's hard to see why they are so scarce today. Certainly the chance of finding an unbushed example originally intended for the Snider is slim. As for those bushed, it's probable they were ultimately returned to the War Department, and found their way back into the Ordnance system for reissue in far-flung corners of the British Colonial Empire.

Present day collectors and enthusiasts can consider themselves fortunate in finding one.

Writing to the Chief Secretary's Office, Ireland during April 1899, RIC Inspector General A. Reed noted that the War Office in London quoted the 'maximum cost for the "rebushing" and repair of the Snider sword bayonets is estimated at 2/6 each, which for 11,000 bayonets would amount to £1,375'.

In the same month, the Irish Times reported 'the swords at present in use will be retained but will require to be bushed so as to fit the muzzle of the new rifle'. Later that month the British Government announced in the House of Commons that 'The new carbine will be supplied by the War Department free of charge'.

Further indication of bushing the sawback bayonets to fit the Martini Henry appear in the report for fiscal year end 1903 at RSAF Enfield: '1,192 sword bayonets, Snider, converted for use with the MH carbine RIC - cost - £156.3.7d'.



RIC marching order 1902 with MH carbine



The handcuffs were also standard issue to police in England

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