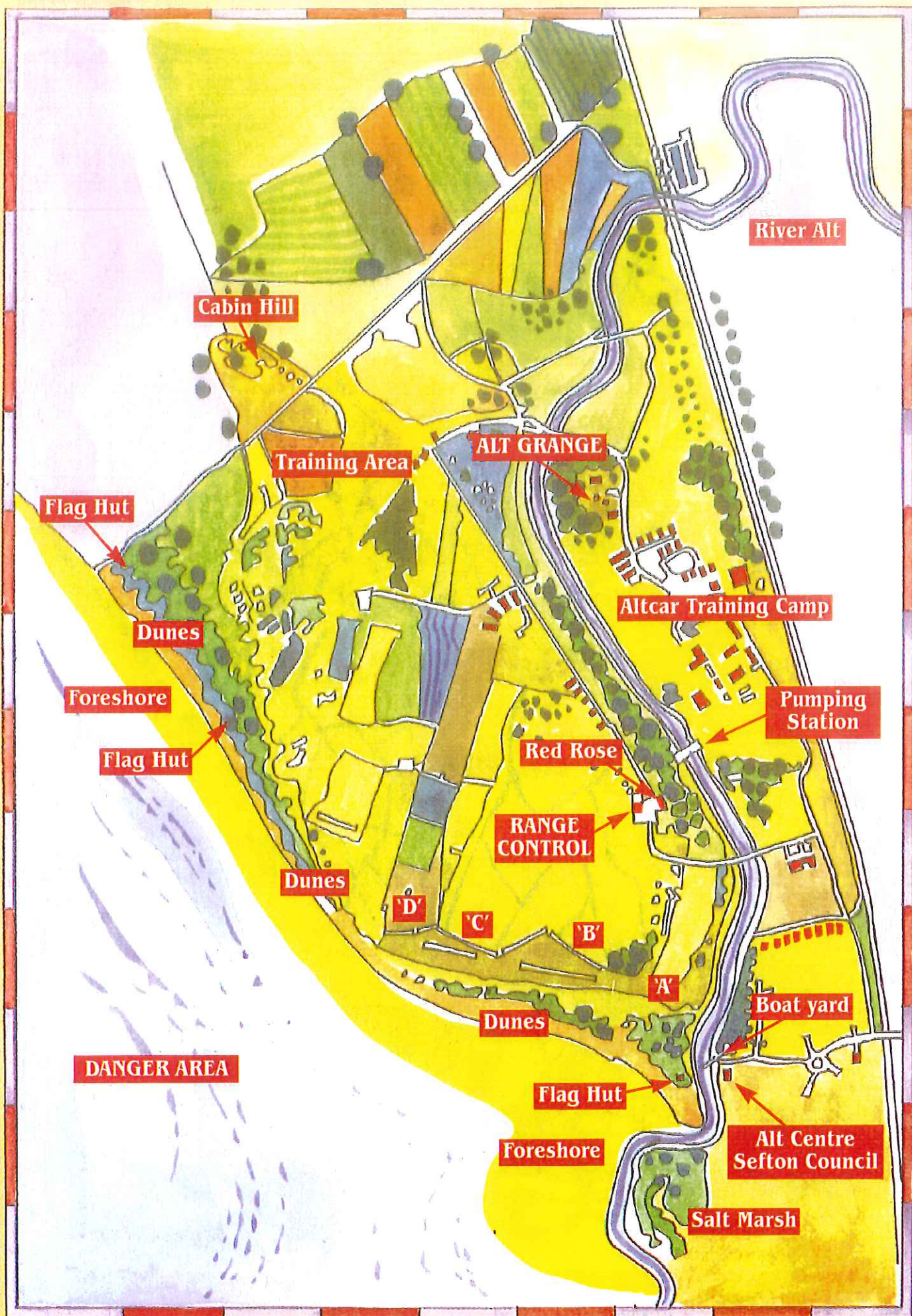


ALTCAR

RIFLE RANGE



ITS HISTORY AND WILDLIFE





Foreword

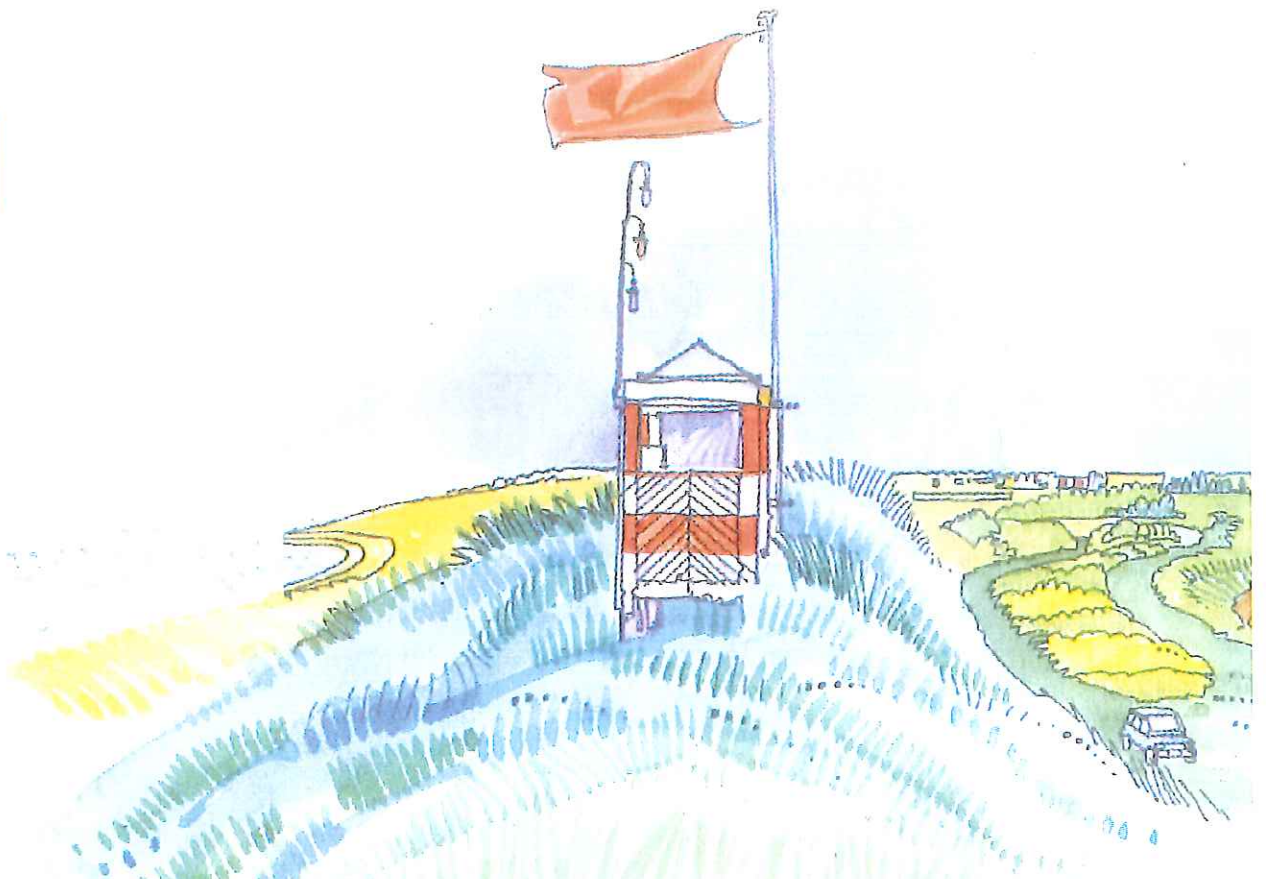
The conservation of local wildlife habitats plays an ever increasingly important part in our everyday lives, and we in the Territorial Army Volunteer Reserve Association are very conscious of our highly important coastline.

In recent years we have been pleased to host visiting parties to the Altcar Rifle Range Estate to view wildlife and habitats with a difference due to the restricted public access. It is hoped that members of the local population will appreciate that restraints are placed on access due to the present national security situation. We therefore welcome the opportunity to become involved in the publication of this booklet, and we are grateful to the members of the Conservation Advisory Group for the work and preparation which is involved in its publication.

Much preservation of habitat is being carried out on our Estate by the Conservation Advisory Group, formed from local organisations and I am exceptionally pleased to chair this group and become involved in such a necessary publication as this.

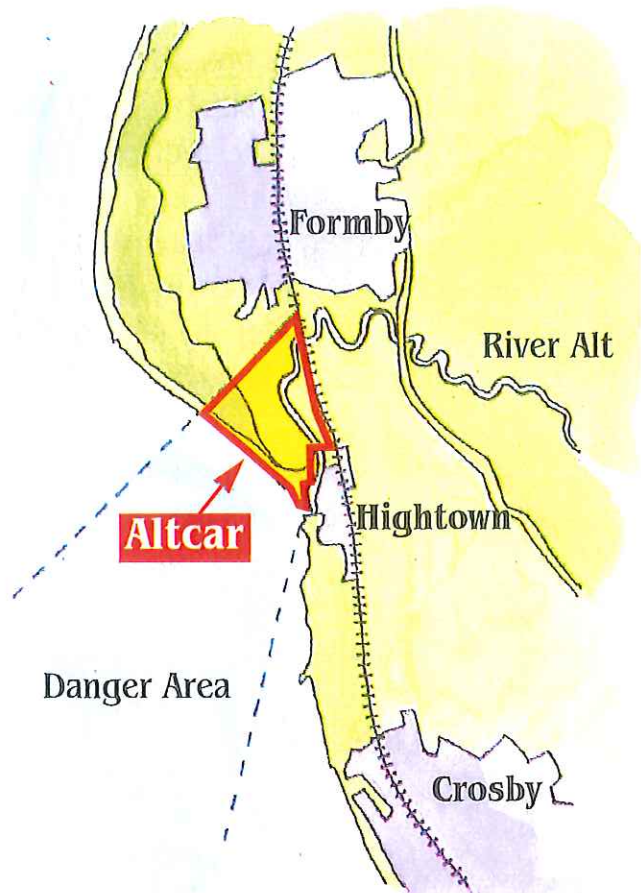
Working for the greater community at large, we intend to preserve our bit of the Sefton coastline for the benefit of future generations.

TJD Farrington
Major (Retd.)
North West TAVRA



The Altcar Rifle Ranges are owned by the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association for the North West of England and the Isle of Man. They lie at the estuary mouth of the River Alt, towards the southern end of the Sefton Coast sand dune system, twelve miles north of Liverpool, near the village of Hightown. The estate covers 250 hectares (620 acres) of beaches, sand dunes, fields and small woods. The Altcar Rifle Ranges are strictly closed to the public. Red flags indicate that live firing is in progress. Access to the beach area is only possible when no flags are flying. The general lack of access, however, creates a sanctuary area for birds and this booklet has been

published to make better known the importance of the area for wildlife.





The earliest evidence of man in this area is provided by flint scrapers of mesolithic era (middle stone age: 5-9,000 years ago). The people were hunter-gatherers and would have survived on the rich populations of fish, shellfish and seabirds along the coast, as inland would have been impenetrable marsh and wildwood. During the Bronze Age, around

1,500-2,000 years ago, people began using agriculture. Recently animal and human footprints and a wooden trackway have been discovered on the

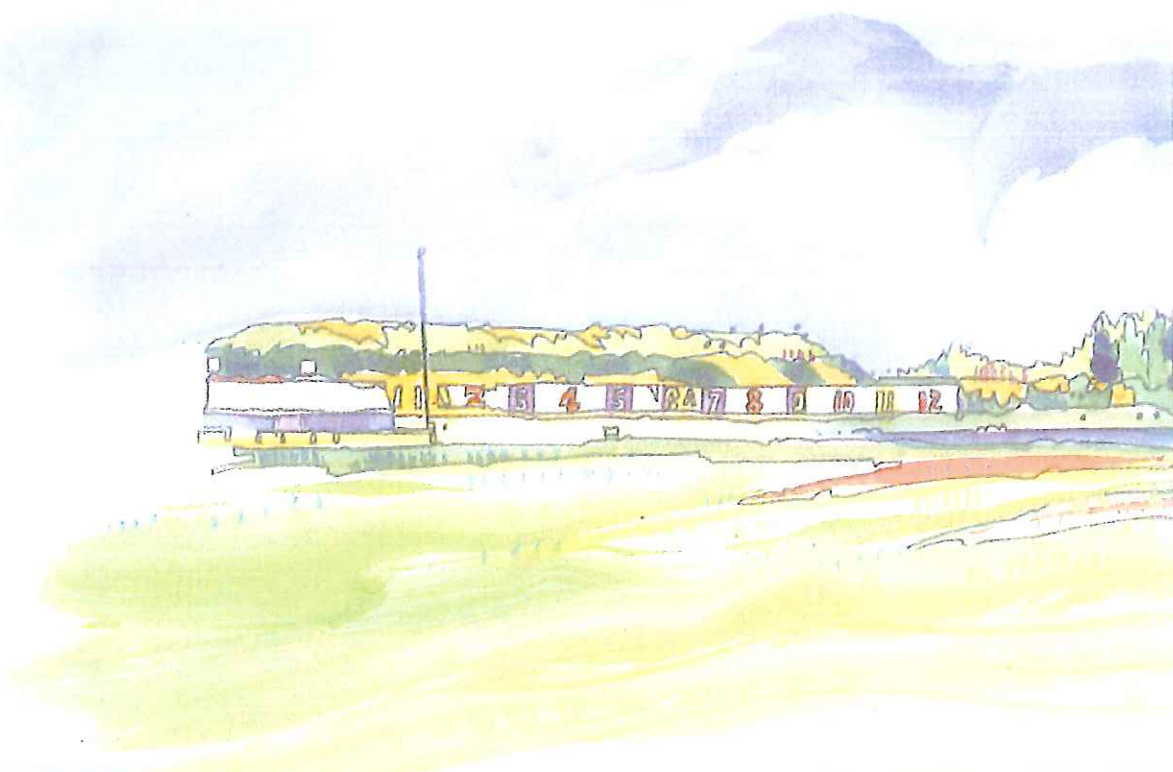
The old Range Office in 1977



beaches around Formby Point and Hightown. The first lasting evidence of people living on the site can be traced to the time of William the Conqueror when Alt Grange was constructed on the site of the present Grange Farm. Little remains of this



Memorial stone



Stone water trough

original settlement. The first barn was replaced in 1550 by the present brick built structure, now a Grade II listed building. The Grange has played an important role in local history. In 1220 it was leased by a local nobleman, William Blundell, to the monks of Stanlow, near Ellesmere Port. It appears to have remained in the ownership of the church until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII. He granted Alt Grange to Thomas Holt by Letters Patent dated 1st August 1543. Within months the Molyneux



Reed Bunting

family bought the property and it remained with this family for nearly two hundred years. The Grange has a long association with Catholicism. During periods of persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries it was used as a chapel. Secret masses were held and there are stories of covert landings and embarkations by Roman Catholic priests and Royalist and Irish sympathisers. On each side of the door jambs a niche exists in the stonework which may have been used as stoups for holy water. Another explanation is that they were merely a safe place to rest tallow candles or lanterns. Two interesting discoveries



Roof timbers of the barn



were made around 1900 when John Hesketh held the lease. One was a silver chalice presented to the Church of Our Lady of Compassion in Formby. The other was a metal plaque depicting The Last Supper. Unfortunately, its whereabouts is unknown. The barn also appears to have been used as a tithebarn, a warehouse of taxes in kind gathered by the church from its tenants. Its large central doorways would have

Grange made it an ideal location for smuggling and local stories testify to a healthy brandy trade.

The present Grange Farm building dates from 1795. The use of sandstone for wall construction, for example adjacent to the railway, is noteworthy and locally peculiar to Blundell Estate land.

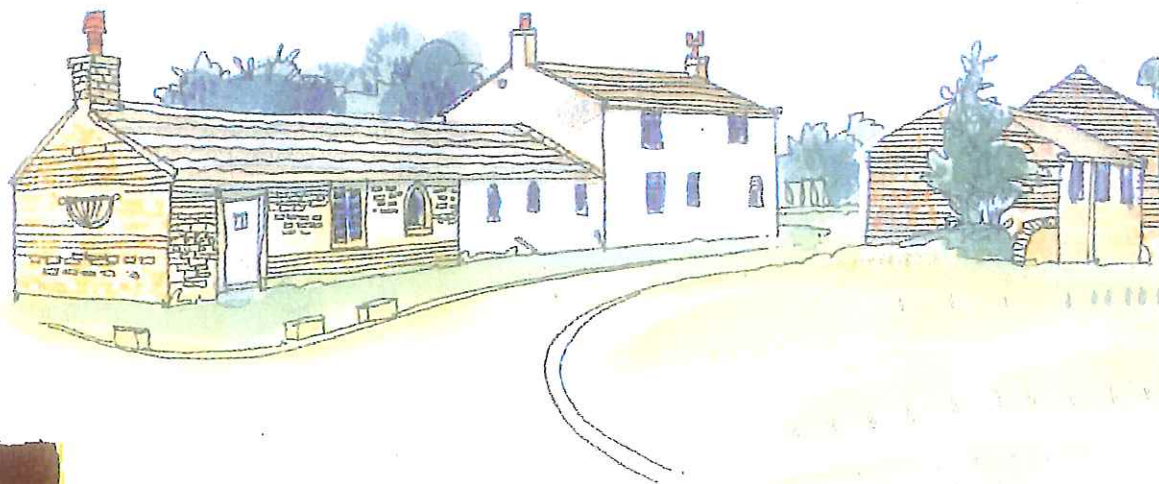


Sea holly

allowed carts to pass easily from one side of the barn to the other. There is some evidence of a first floor or 'solar' which may have been used as domestic offices or for sleeping. The remote position of the

Two hundred and fifty years ago the area would have been a sandy wilderness with marshes inland. The human population would have been sparse, being scattered amongst farms and fishermen's cottages. These conditions were then





Col. Gladstone



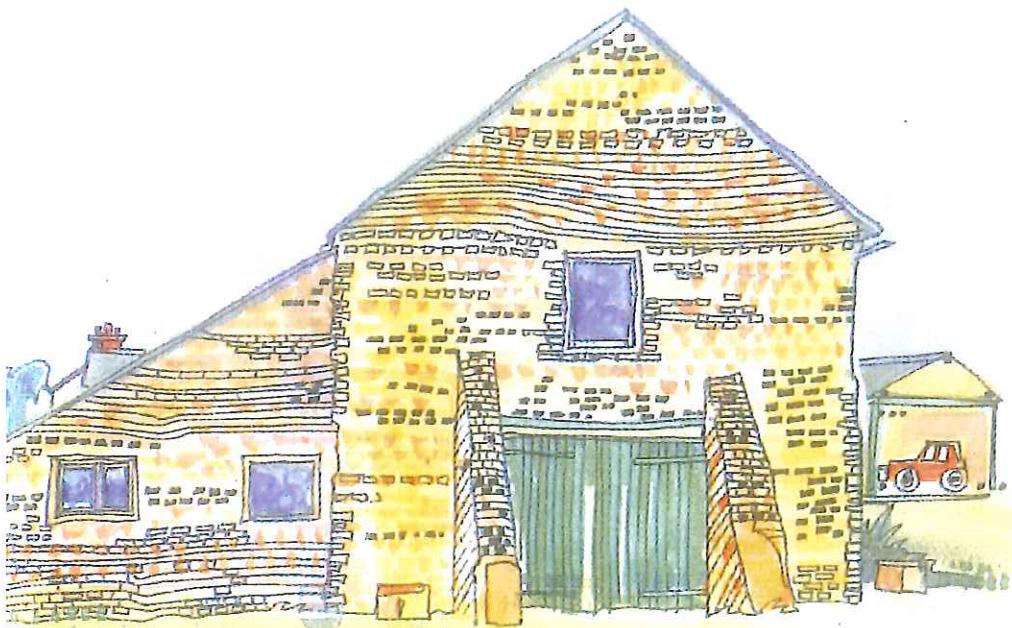
prevalent all along the West Lancashire Plain between Liverpool and Southport.

However in 1779 Commissioners were appointed to supervise the drainage of the Alt marshes, known locally as 'mosses', for agricultural purposes. A Mr Gilbert, builder of the Bridgewater Canal, was drafted in as an adviser. However sand drifting southwards from Formby Point frequently blocked the river. The problem was solved by planting bundles of gorse to trap the sand. It was soon realised that new land could be claimed by this method and

brushwood fencing was supplemented by the planting of 'starr grass' or marram. By 1855 grazing land of 150 acres had been created from an area of sandflats previously known as 'Balling's Wharf'. Although it proved to be poor farmland, a Lt. Colonel Gladstone, of the military, expressed an interest in using an area as a rifle range. A lease was duly arranged with the landlord, Lord Sefton. The tenant farmer helped to design the first range layout. Initially the site was uneven, waterlogged and access was difficult. The site was levelled and ditches dug and a new railway siding and platform constructed.



Watercolour of Rifle competition

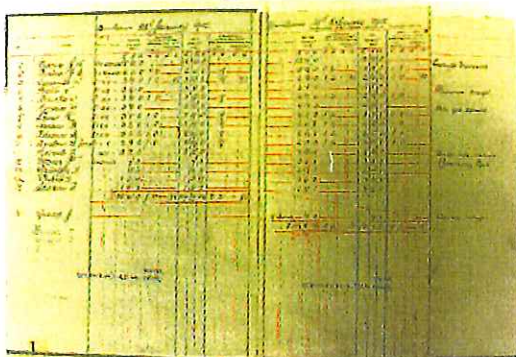


The Altcar Range halt can still be seen from the coastal footpath on the estate boundary.

On 28 July 1860 one target of 1100 yards was available and the first shot was fired by the Earl of Sefton. It was used by the 5th Lancashire Rifle Voluntary Corps. On the 20th October 1860, the range was first used for the Grand Lancashire Rifle Contest. Further land was rented

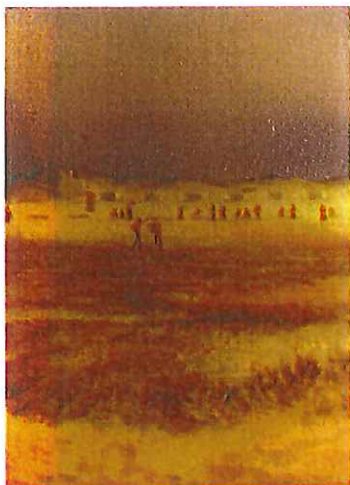
from Lord Sefton in February 1862 to provide a rifle range for Liverpool Volunteer Units. In 1885 Lord Sefton made an agreement with the Secretary of State for War for the use of the range by

the Regular Army and the Militia. The statement included that its use was subject to accommodating the volunteers, it being for their 'special



Army ledger

use'. The rented land west of the River Alt and the land between the River Alt and the railway were purchased by the Territorial Association in 1912. The following year the foreshore was purchased from the Blundell Estate to provide a suitable danger area.





Rifle practice is carried out by both soldiers and civilians. During the First World War two hutted camps,



Stained glass window

'A' and 'B' camps, were built for the Command Musketry School adjacent to the railway. Between the Wars, 'B' camp was used for weekend training by West Lancashire Territorial

Army Units.

There are a variety of ranges, the most modern of which use electric targets. There is an interesting collection of rifle club-houses near the main car park. Several date from the late 19th century and include colonial-style verandahs and stained glass

windows. The Forbes Hut originally used by the Liverpool Scottish Regiment can be identified by the Thistle and Cross of St. Andrew depicted in stained glass.

The drainage work of the adjacent mosslands has continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. A pumping station with flood gates was installed and the river was canalized and embanked, and feeder ditches were dug. In this way the mosslands were drained and converted into one of the most



Cartridge collection

Stonechat



productive market gardening regions of the United Kingdom.

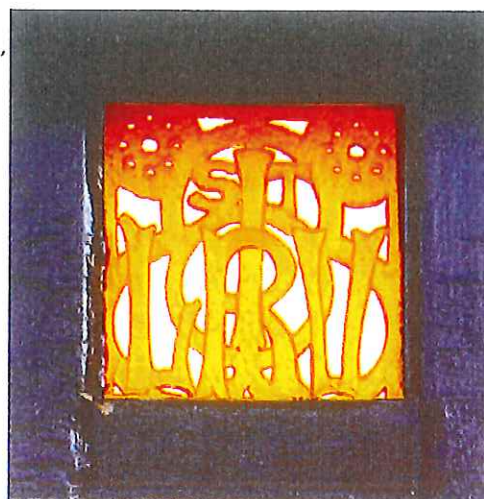
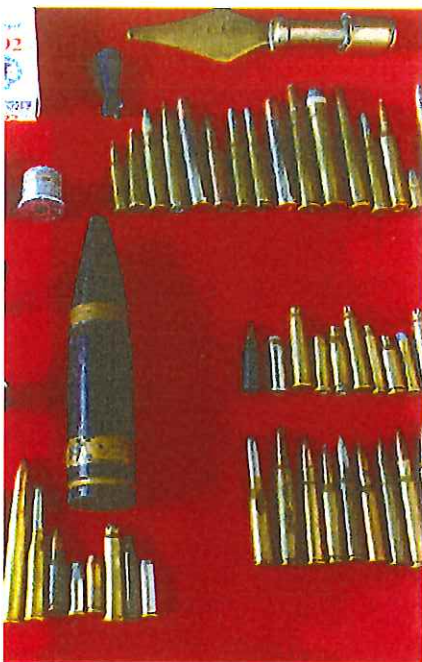
When the Altcar Rifle Range estate was purchased it included 500 acres of farmland. The 150 acres west of River Alt has been converted to ranges. A further 125 acres between the river and the railway has been

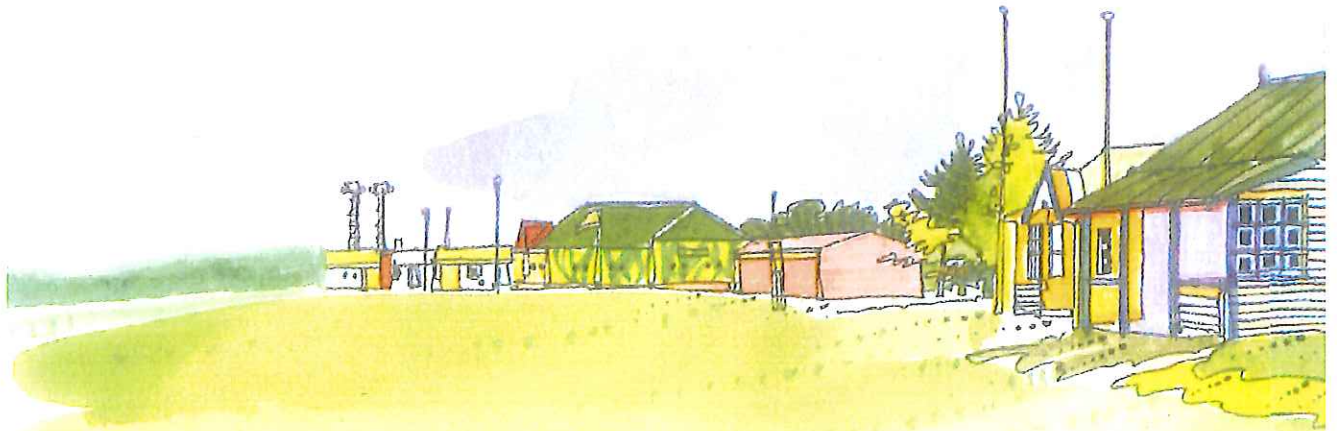
gradually developed as a camp. The remaining area was leased to a local farmer until 1992 when it was returned to TAVRA and developed as a dry training area. This new area has provided a welcome

addition for training needs, as land to the north of the ranges had to be given up in 1979 when the lease from a private owner expired.

As the estate has been developed, a variety of mainly brick buildings have been constructed, dating back to 1865. Four modern bridges span the River Alt including two Bailey Bridges. Tree planting was started in 1938 and now includes parts of the new dry training area.

Feature showing 1st. Lancashire Rifle Volunteers in fretwork.





Natterjack Toad



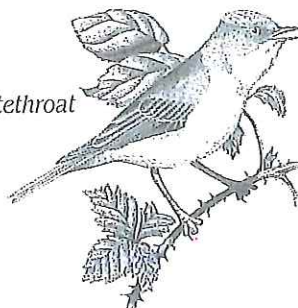
Originally, the Altcar Range Committee was responsible for both the ranges and camp. However, in 1966 the camp was handed over to the Regular Army HQ North West District and in 1970 it was re-named Altcar Training Camp.

The Altcar Estate is a rich area for wildlife. This is due to the wide variety of habitats and the relative lack of disturbance which has

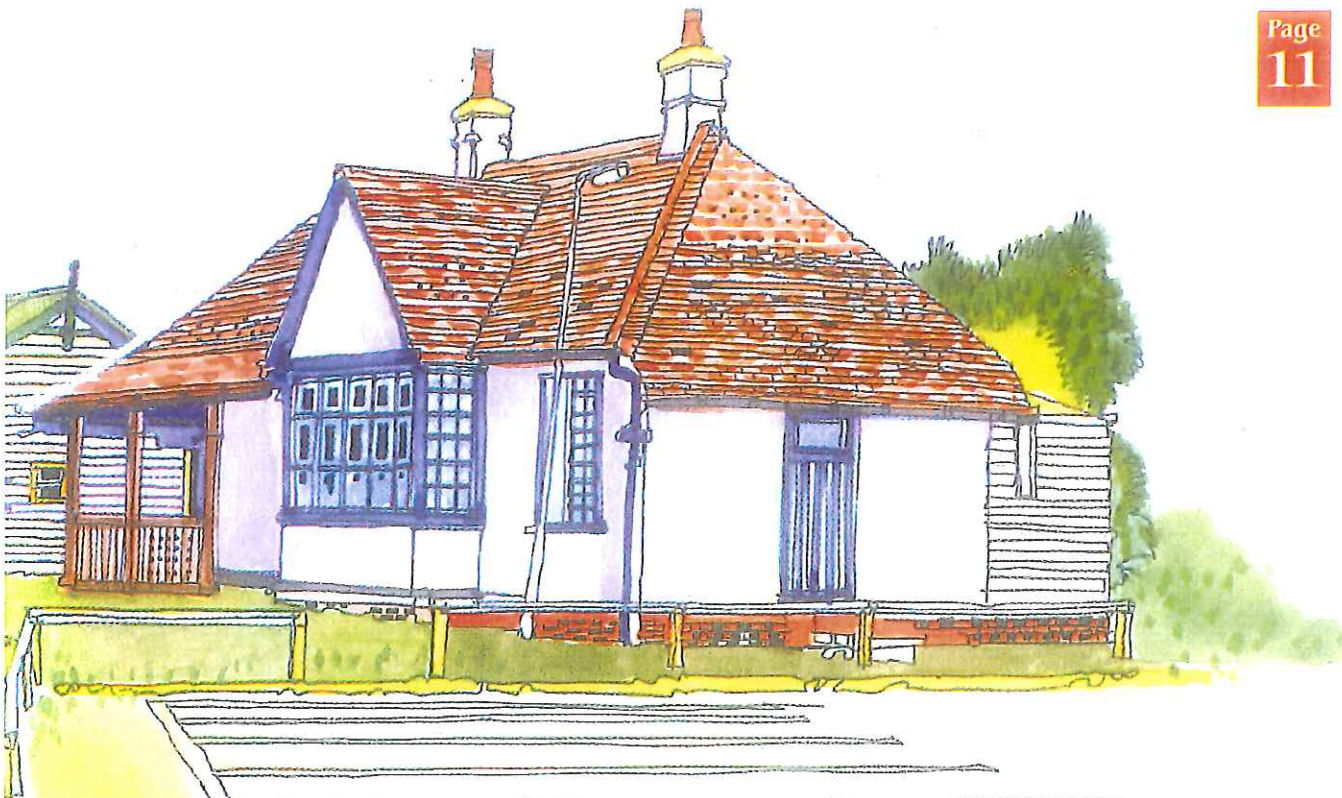
created a sanctuary for nature. At least 148 species of bird have been recorded, while 40 species have bred or attempted to breed.

The nature conservation importance is correspondingly high. The sand dunes are part of the extensive Sefton Coast dune system, the largest example in England, and the finest in North-West England. Much of the site has been designated as part of an internationally important 'Ramsar site', European Special Protection Area and candidate 'Special Area of Conservation'. The main dune area, beach and the flower-rich 'I' range

Whitethroat



Six wheeled Scout car



form part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Much of the remainder of the estate is listed as a Site of Local Biological Interest by Sefton Council.

The Alt estuary foreshore is probably the most important wildlife area on the estate. This is one of a series of estuaries used by migrating waterfowl in Western Europe. Since 1970 they have been counted each month by observers as part of the nationally co-ordinated 'Wetland Bird Survey' (WeBS). Huge numbers of wading birds feed on marine worms such as lugworms, and

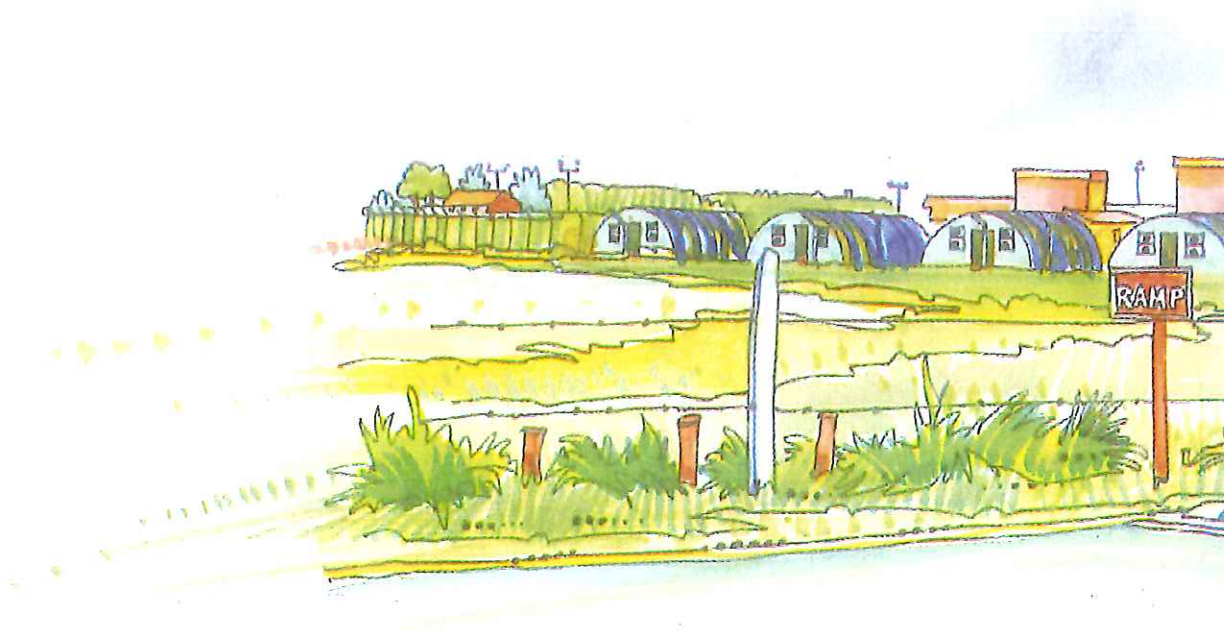
molluscs such as cockles and tellins. In winter over 30,000 birds can be present, with numbers of knot, bar-tailed godwit, grey plover, sanderling, redshank and pink-footed geese being particularly important. Most of the waterfowl breed in the



Sea Rocket

high arctic so few are present in mid-summer. The best views are from the south shore of the Alt or





from the beach south of Formby Point, obtained on a rising tide between autumn and spring.



Army field glasses

The River Alt rises twelve miles away in Huyton, Liverpool. It is the second largest river system in Merseyside with over 75km of rivers, streams and brooks within its catchment. It becomes polluted along its course from industrial and agricultural inputs and its natural condition has

been much altered by flood protection schemes. Originally the River Alt ran out to sea 1km north of its present position, but it has been diverted southwards by sand drifting from Formby Point, together with the land reclamation programme of the late 18th century. Water quality in the Alt is generally poor. However, improvements are taking place aimed at re-establishing a coarse fish population throughout the catchment by the year 2000.

The beach around the estuary mouth has an interesting small area of saltmarsh including plants such as saltmarsh grass,

One of the three lookout towers. Red flags are flown when ranges are in use.





thrift and sea aster. From here there is a wonderful panorama across the river to the south. The Hightown dunes stretch to Crosby. Beyond them is the City of Liverpool and Birkenhead, whilst further west on a clear day one can see the coast of North Wales and the mountains of Snowdonia.

Along the strandline all manner of flotsam and jetsam can be found. A rare white woodlouse (*Armadillidium album*), can sometimes be found under driftwood. On warm summer nights, natterjack toads scour the debris for a meal. In the late summer a variety of plants exploit this temporary

habitat. They include sea rocket, prickly saltwort, sea sandwort and even tomato!

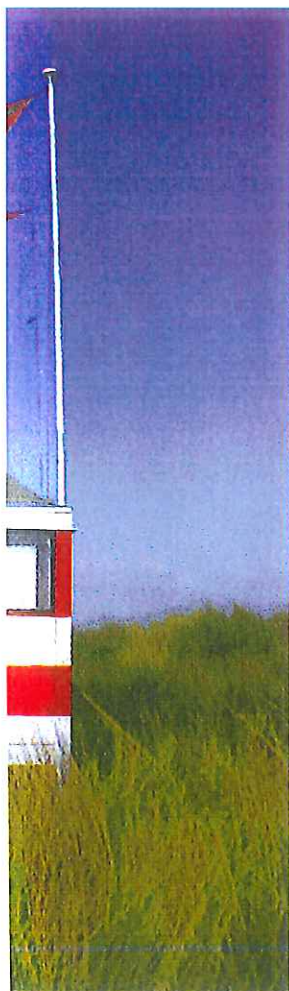
Willow Warbler

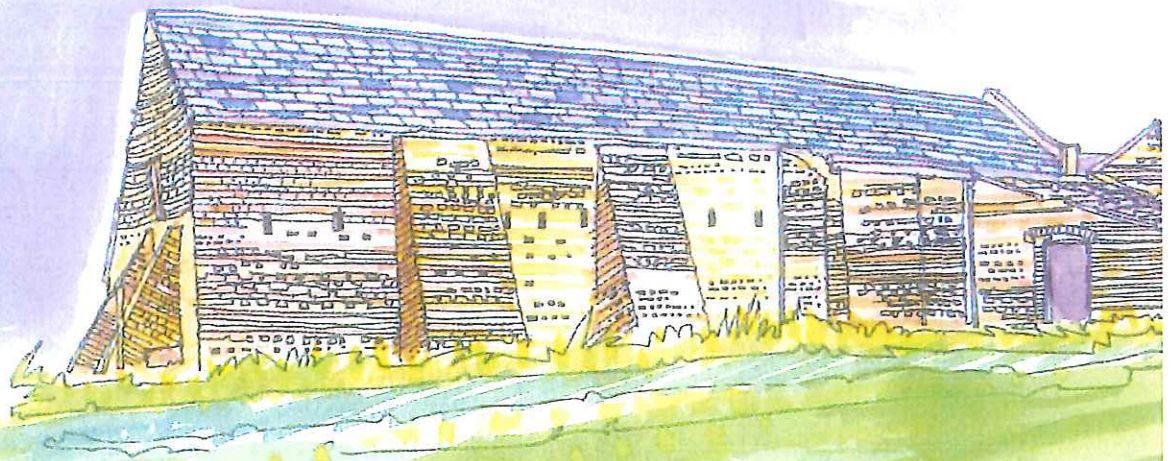


Blown sand is trapped by any obstacle on the strandline. This may be natural marine debris such as seaweed, or driftwood or an old plastic bottle. As the sand piles up, dune grasses are able to gain a foothold, safely above the reach of the high tides. The first grasses to colonise are the sand couch grass and the large exotic looking lyme grass. The rare sandhill rustic moth

is found here. Its caterpillars feed on the roots of sand couch grass.

Common Broomrape





Beyond this pioneer zone, the main dune building grass, marram dominates. Unusual plants such as sea spurge and sea holly can also be found. These are the mobile dunes. The area between the targets and the shore are the most natural on the ranges. Marram grass endeavours to stabilise the landscape. As it grows through the sand, at a rate of up to 1 metre a year, it creates a huge network of roots and stems which hold the dune together. This is the home of the rare natterjack toad. It stays burrowed in the sand during the heat of the day, but emerges at dusk to feed. Clear tracks of this nocturnal amphibian can sometimes be found on sand still damp

from morning dew. A shallow breeding pool has been created behind the 'B' range targets and there are others in the training area by the northern boundary. On hot sunny days tiger beetles, including the scarce *Cicindela hybrida*, take off and fly a short distance when disturbed. Grayling butterflies seen here in late summer can survive the drought conditions of the mobile dunes. In early summer, tiny spring ephemeral flowers including early forget-me-not, whitlow grass and rue-leaved saxifrage, appear in sheltered places. Between the mobile sandy dunes and the



Early Marsh Orchid



2nd World War anti-aircraft
gun emplacements



Ragwort

more fixed vegetated dunes lies the favoured habitat of the rare sand lizard. Very few have been recorded at Altcar in recent years. They are more brightly coloured than the common lizard which is found throughout the estate.



flowers such as carline thistle and common centuary are also present. Lime - loving plants are particularly common as a result of sea shell fragments in the sand. The presence of lime

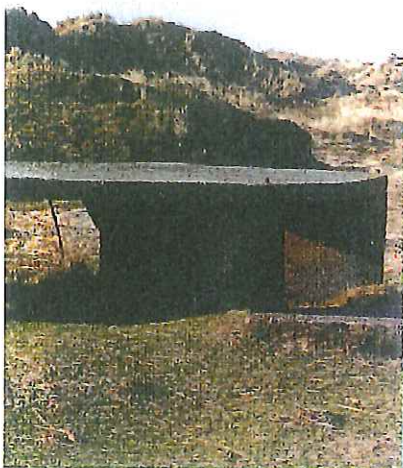
also attracts snails to sand dunes and banded and garden snails thrive here.

The area is rich in invertebrates including the scarce grass egg moth and butterflies like the common blue, meadow brown and gatekeeper. In the damper valleys or slacks an unusual tree species grows. It is called creeping willow as it grows along the ground rarely reaching a metre high. The rare



Wren

Further inland the dunes progressively become stabilised by a complete cover of vegetation. On the drier slopes of these fixed dunes, birdsfoot trefoil and restharrow are common and





dune helleborine orchid lives in this habitat, often amongst the willow. In some areas the ground is cropped short by rabbits allowing different plants to grow. Burrowing by



Selection of early
Range Booklets

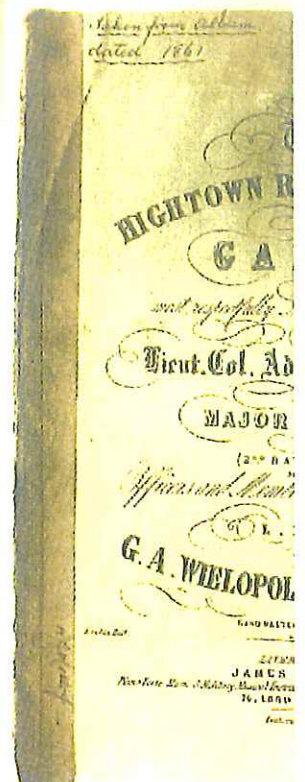
rabbits can be inconvenient to range activities and this species has been controlled since 1921. By the 1930s rabbit numbers had reached pest levels but myxomatosis outbreaks since the late 1950s have seriously reduced the population. Foxes and stoats patrol these dunes hunting unwary rabbits.

At the northern end of the estate is a large low lying area of fixed dune which stretches onto the adjacent Cabin Hill National Nature Reserve.

This used to be an area of natural dunes and slacks but was quarried out after the second world war, the sand being used towards the rebuilding of Liverpool.

This area is most noteworthy as the main breeding site for natterjack toads.

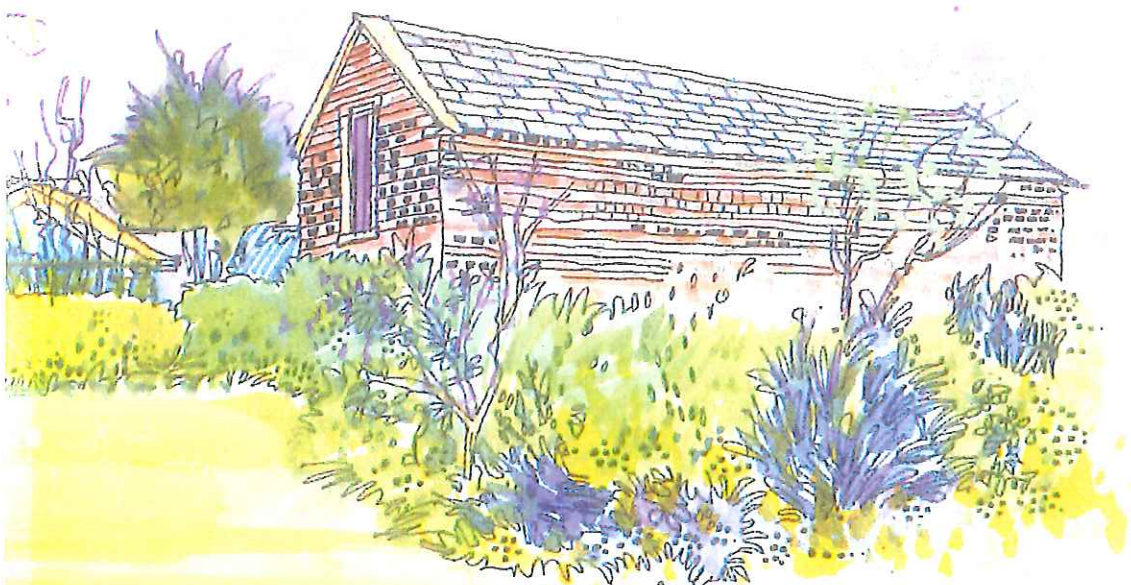
Several breeding pools were accidentally created by the building of the sea defence bank in 1970. Further scrapes were constructed in the late 1970s and were initially very successful. However in recent



Rifle Contest programme

Yellowhammer





years very few natterjacks have bred here and extra conservation work is planned. A rare baltic rush x hard rush hybrid clone grows beside one of the main scrapes. This is one of a variety of baltic rush hybrid clones found along the Sefton Coast. This plant is not native to Altcar. It was moved here from Hightown dunes in the 1980s by Dr Philip Smith, a local naturalist, just as it was about to be washed away by the sea.

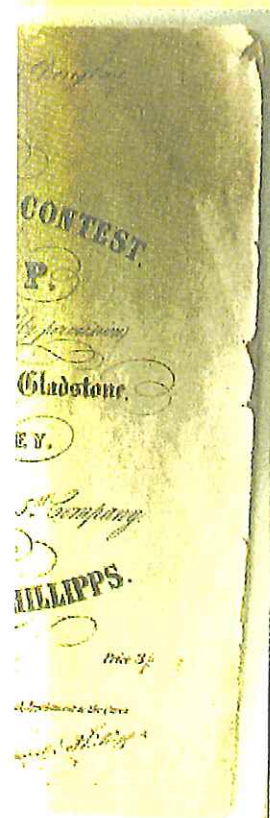
The oldest dunes on the estate are to be found adjacent to the railway and south of the St Georges Centre. They were formed over two hundred years ago before their sand supply was cut off by land reclamation. Rain has washed much of the goodness out of the sandy soil, leaving it very poor and acidic. However, this allows different plants to grow such as the delicate harebell and fragrant wild thyme.

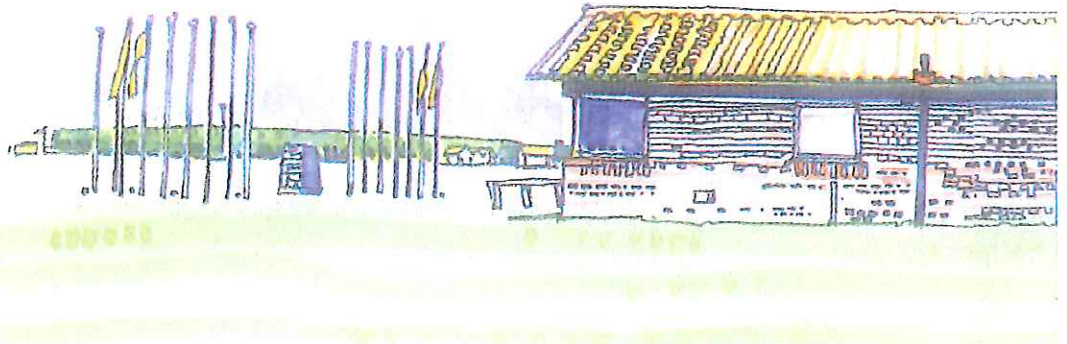
Skylarks and meadow pipits can usually be seen amongst the dunes.

Their numbers are swelled by summer visitors such as sedge and grasshopper warblers and whitethroats which nest in damp scrubby areas. Lapwing, partridge



Grass of Parnassus





and stonechat also breed, and Altcar was the last recorded nesting site for whinchat on the Sefton Coast. Migration can be spectacular with landfalls of birds in bad weather. Ringing studies began in 1983 and have revealed both local movements of common species as well as the

though an occasional hunting barn owl or finch flock in winter adds interest. It is hoped to enhance the wildlife value of this area in future.

Small woods and gardens, with a mixture of native and exotic plants, are scattered across the estate.

activities of long distance migrants such as a sedge warbler ringed in Senegal. Rarities like an Asian yellow-browed warbler have also been intercepted.

Most of the common woodland birds can be seen as well as spotted flycatcher, tawny owl and great spotted woodpecker. Nestboxes made by range staff have been erected for owls and kestrels. Bats can be seen patrolling the woodland edges on



Green-Winged Orchid

The large dry training area of former farmland is less rich in wildlife



Display of Regimental coats of arms



mild evenings. Red squirrels occur on the estate and are likely to become a more common sight as the pine plantations mature.

Several of the rifle ranges are spectacular wildflower sites. These areas were first marshland resulting

from land reclamation in the 19th century.

They have since been partially drained but remain damp in parts.

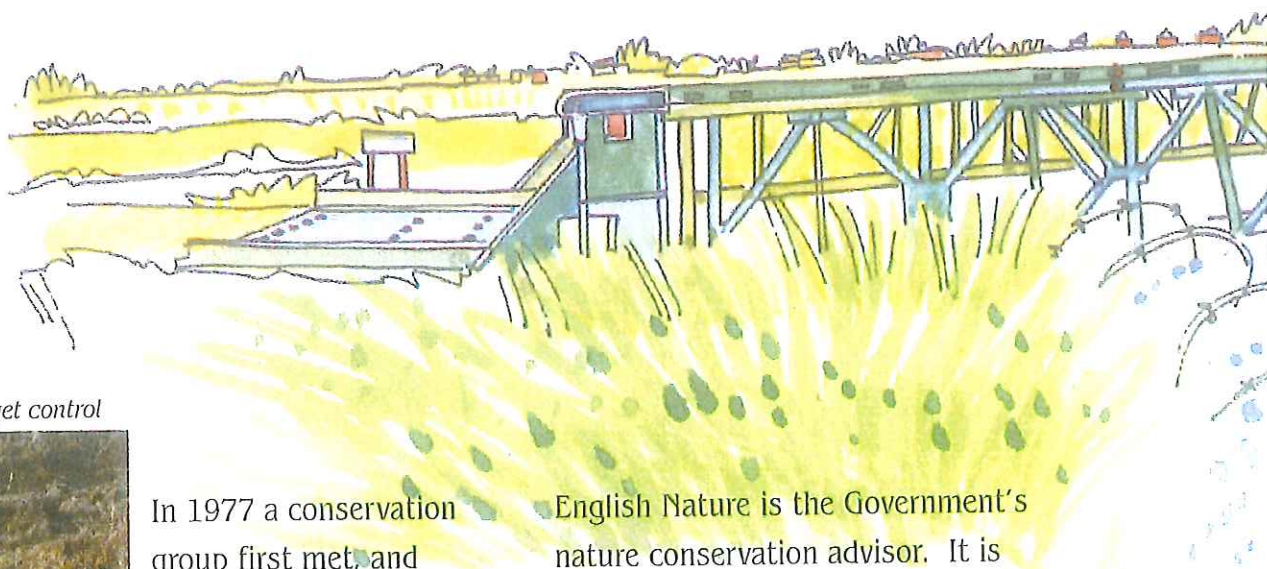
The best example is 'Y' range. In May and June a beautiful purple display of the scarce green-winged orchid can be seen, whilst cowslips are also

common. This range is very rich in plant species with up to 30 in a square metre of turf. Species of note include adders tongue

fern, twayblade, marsh orchids and quaking grass. A careful mowing regime helps to maintain this superb sward.

Evening Primrose





Old two lever target control



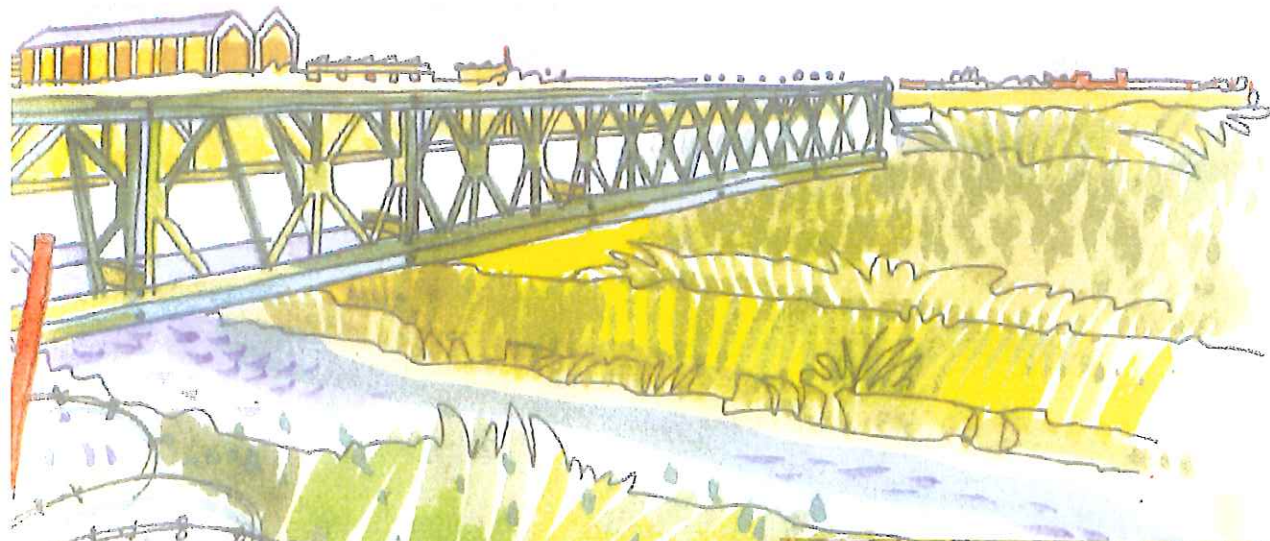
In 1977 a conservation group first met, and continues to meet, as the Altcar Rifle Range Conservation Advisory Group. The group brings together the managers of the estate with statutory agencies such as English

Nature and specialists who provide much of the information about species found on the site. Much of the recording work is carried out by volunteers and the Conservation Group always welcomes offers of help from people with special interests. A site dossier of information is being maintained and updated and a nature conservation management plan has been prepared.

English Nature is the Government's nature conservation advisor. It is responsible for the designation of the Altcar Sand Dunes and Foreshore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and for monitoring site quality.

The Alt foreshore is part of the Ribble and Alt Estuaries Special Protection Area, a European designation and part of the site is also a candidate European Special Area of Conservation. Together these designations will form part of a pan European network of protected sites to be known as Natura 2000





The Territorial Army is a key partner in the Sefton Coast Management Scheme. The Scheme promotes a coordinated approach to the management of the Sefton dune system and estuaries. The Scheme has received additional funding from the European Community's Life Fund for nature and is helping at Altcar with habitat and species conservation work.



Restharrow

Alt 2000 is an alliance of organisations striving to improve the River Alt, working within the aims of the Mersey Basin Campaign. Alt 2000 coordinates improvements throughout the catchment and is supported by the Territorial Army at Altcar.

Prices	
Tea	2'
Coffee	3'
Bobril	4'
Cocoa	3½
Orangeade	3'
Minerals	4'
Cakes	3½
" Slab	3'
Buns Plain	2'
" Buttered	2½
" Chelsea	3'
" " buttered	3½
" Head	3'
" " buttered	3½
Jam Puffs	3½
Sandwiches Jam	2'
" " Meat or Cheese	3'
Sausage Rolls	4'
Meat Pies	6'
Swiss Rolls	3'

Altcar Menu – 1939 style



*China Cup Winners, Bisley 1930
55th West Lancs Division TA*

The publication of this booklet has involved many people. Current and past members of the Conservation Advisory Group include; Brigadier Ian Shapter, Major Doug Farrington, Major Bill Hunter, Major John Morrison, Frank Addy, John Houston, Ian Wolfenden, Steve Cross, Phil Smith, David Simpson, Steve White, Peter Carty, Peter Gateley, Jeff Lunn, Richard Hall, Heather Bingley, Ian Deans, Christine Bennett, Steve Judd, Peter Knights, Col. J.H. Baker and MOD Conservation Staff, Chessington, Surrey.



Carline Thistle

The Altcar Rifle Range estate is strictly closed to the public. However, the Territorial Army wish to encourage visits of an educational nature, by societies and by specialists who can assist with the nature conservation management.

In the first instance enquiries should be addressed to:-

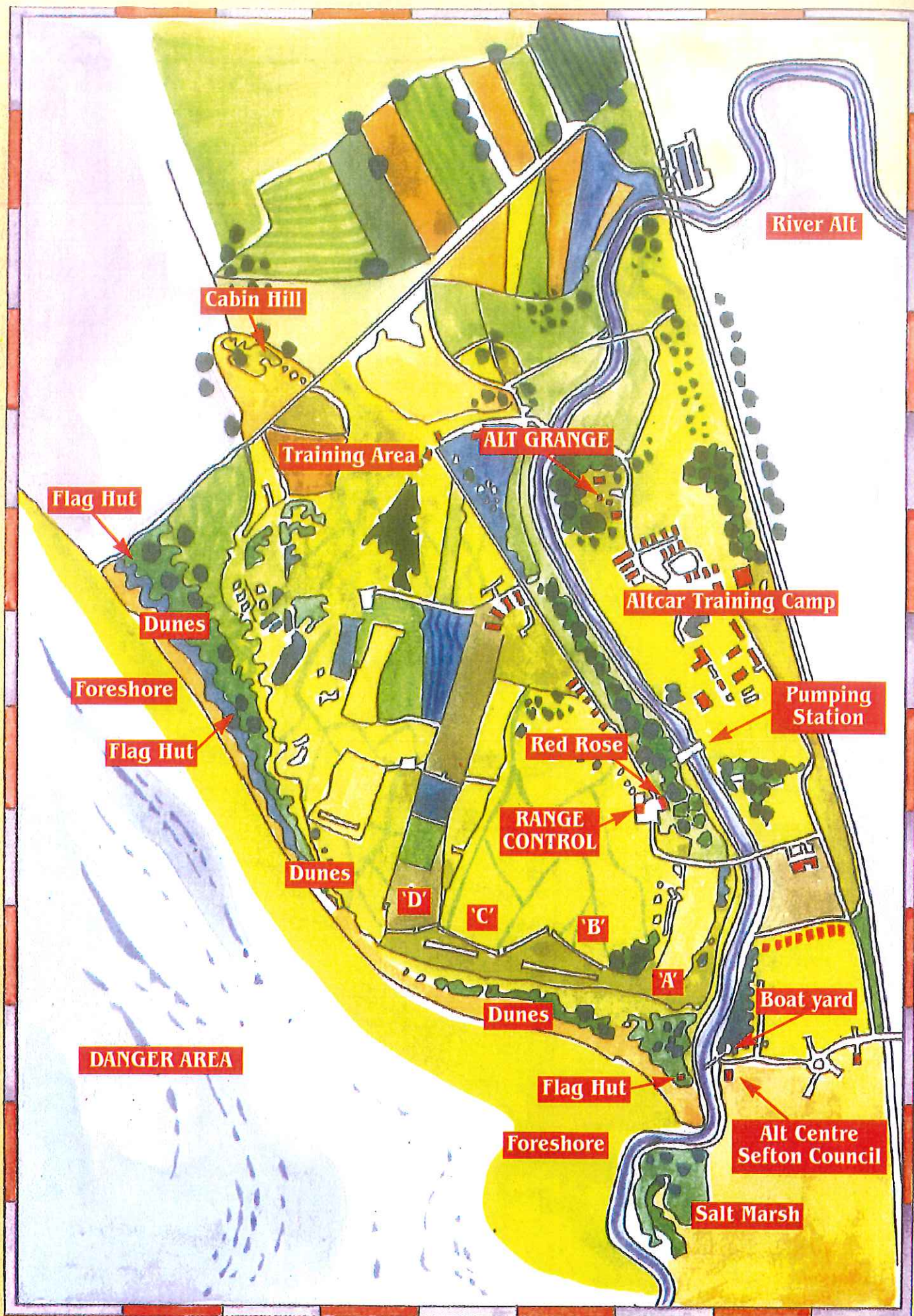
Range Control Officer,
Altcar Rifle Range,
Hightown, Merseyside. L38 8AF



Sedge Warbler

Further reading:

Altcar: The Story of a Rifle Range by A.L.M. Cook (1989).
Published by TAVRA



ALTCAR RIFLE RANGE

ITS WILDLIFE AND HISTORY

Compiled and Published 1997 by
Altcar Rifle Range Conservation Advisory Group.
Chairman Major Doug Farrington

Text: David Simpson

Design & Illustrations: Ian Pendleton

Line drawings: Anthony Smith

Photography: Bob MacFadyen / John Houston

By kind permission of TAVRA.

Published by



...with support from



Price £2.00
Distributed in Sefton Libraries.

METROPOLITAN BOROUGH OF SEFTON

