

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARTILLERY IN VICTORIA

There have been, and still are, many Artillery Units in all States of Australia. Many have been disbanded, redesignated, relocated, born again or survived against the odds.

This article attempts to give the reader an insight into the formation of organised artillery units in Victoria only, from the sponsored units of the mid to late 1800's to the present day.

I have compiled information from various sources which are acknowledged at the end. However, I must mention the late Maj. Jim Killender. His book, THE GUNNERS OF VICTORIA, 1948 – 2000, has been of invaluable assistance to me. Regardless of the sources I have used, any errors contained herein are my responsibility, and mine alone.

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Editor

Cascabel

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## Part 1 - COLONIAL DAYS TO FEDERATION

Since a series of Bushranger attacks in the Plenty River area north of Melbourne, authorities considered the formation of volunteer forces, to be set up in twelve districts. However, it was not until twelve years later that the Eureka rebellion demonstrated the necessity of the formation of armed forces.

An act was approved by the Governor, Sir Charles Hotham in 1854 to establish a Volunteer Corps, not exceeding 2000 and Officers appointed by the Governor. A number of rifle units came first, quickly followed by Artillery and Cavalry. By 1860, the Act had been amended to allow a Volunteer force of 10,000.

The volunteers expanded into a variety of new areas; into cavalry and accompanying horse artillery units, an increasing multiplicity of field and garrison

artillery batteries, and a Corps of Engineers out of which grew a fine Torpedo Corps.

Many units were established, but often they were short lived. There were some exceptions that existed for twenty years or more.

- Belfast Artillery Corps 1866-1883
- Brighton Battery 1866-1876
- Collingwood Battery RVVAR 1860-1863
- Drysdale Det. Artillery 1867-1873  
(then combined with Queenscliff Det.)
- East Melbourne Battery 1863-1883
- Emerald Hill Battery RVVAR 1860-1883
- Footscray Battery RVVAR 1862-1863
- 1 Geelong Arty. Corps 1863-1872
- 2 Geelong Arty. Corps 1863-1872
- Geelong Corps RVVAR 1873-1883
- Hotham Battery RVVAR 1862-1863
- Melbourne Artillery Corps 1860
- Metropolitan Arty. Corps 1863-1883
- 1 Metropolitan Arty. Corps 1863
- 2 Metropolitan Arty. Corps 1863
- Portland Artillery Corps 1866-1883
- Prahran & S. Yarra Battery RVVAR 1860-1863
- Richmond Battery RVVAR 1861-1863
- South Grant Arty. Corps 1873-1884
- St Kilda Artillery Corps 1860-1883
- Victorian Garrison Artillery, formed 1882
- Victorian Marine Arty. Corps 1856-1860
- Victorian Permanent Artillery 1870-1880
- R. Victoria Volunteer Artillery Regt. 1855-1875

### Volunteer Artillery Units

1860s-1883

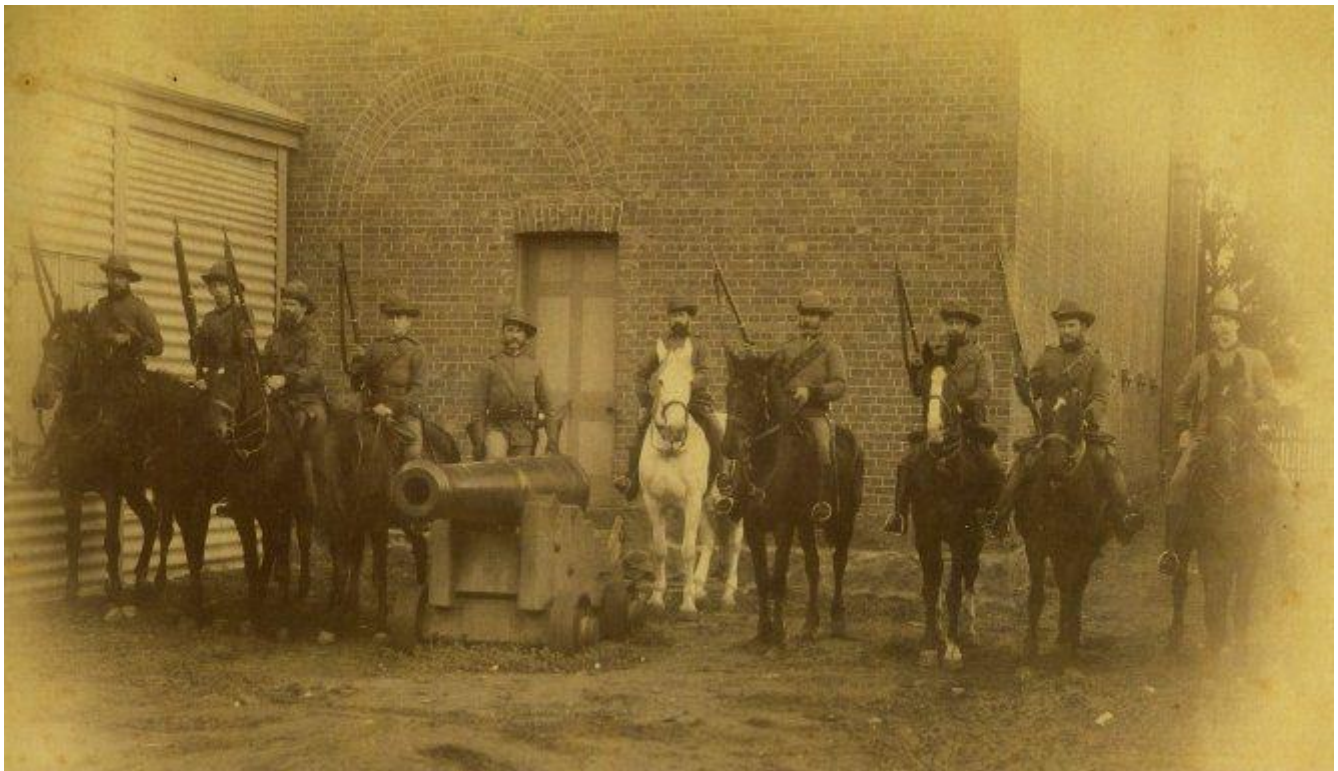


Geelong Artillery c. 1870  
Photo provided by Lee Power.

RVVAR Mounted Section 1860-1861  
 Warrnambool Artillery Corps 1866-1883  
 W. Melbourne Battery RVVAR 1861-1863  
 Williamstown Arty. Corps 1860-1883

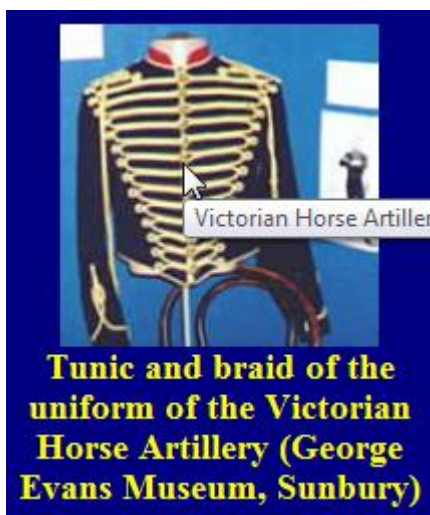
**Werribee Park Half-Battery (1889-1893)**

Werribee Park, home of the Chirnside family, had provided its grounds for the large Volunteer encampments of the 1860s, and the family



Victorian Volunteer Rifles 1854 Drill hall, Skene St Geelong. Rear of Gold Diggers Hotel

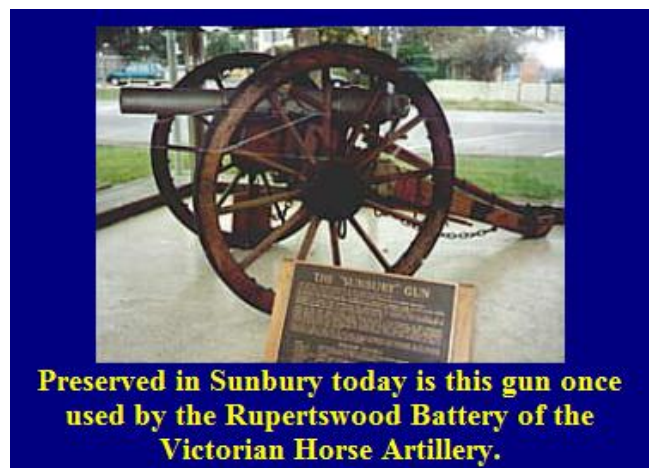
**Victorian Horse Artillery 1889-1893**



**Tunic and braid of the uniform of the Victorian Horse Artillery (George Evans Museum, Sunbury)**

**Nordenfeldt Battery (1884-1889)**

Victorian Nordenfeldt Battery (raised 30 December 1884), based at Sunbury and known as the Sunbury Regiment. The battery comprised horse-drawn Nordenfeldt machineguns. Part-sponsored by the Clarke family of Sunbury, the battery consisted of three Nordenfeldts.



**Preserved in Sunbury today is this gun once used by the Rupertswood Battery of the Victorian Horse Artillery.**

sponsored prizes and volunteer awards. Andrew Chirnside in 1889 offered to contribute to a half-battery of artillery to be based at Werribee.

**Rupertswood Half-Battery (1889-1893)**

Part-sponsored by the Clarke family of Sunbury, the half-battery combined with the Werribee Park half-battery on military occasions and during camps and most parades where possible.

## Rupertswood Battery of Horse Artillery (1893-1897)

In 1893, a team of 14 VHA Officers and men were sent to take part in the annual British military tournaments at Islington and Bisley. They ended up acting as an escort to Queen Victoria and were photographed at Her Majesty's insistence in the grounds of Buckingham Palace.

Among other events, the VHA won the Driving Contest over the Royal Artillery at Islington. The skills, dash and horsemanship of the Victorians thrilled the spectators and amazed professionals.

By 1896, though, the Age newspaper reported that the artillery was in 'pitiable condition through old age . . . the guns themselves are obsolete". The Victorian Government, despite initial assurances, did not replace the defective guns. But the Rupertswood Battery lasted long enough to lead the funeral procession of its originator, Sir William J. Clarke, in 1897.

One factor about the volunteers irked paid staff officers, HQ staffs and visiting British officers. This was the volunteers' right to elect NCOs and, in some units, junior officers. The demise of the volunteers soon after a Royal Commission in 1875 saw an end to this democratic anomaly.

At the 1875 Royal Commission opinion against the Volunteers' preparedness for battle predominated. Giving evidence about the lack of firing ranges, **Major F. T. Sargood**, CO of the St Kilda Battery, stated drily: 'At present the Field Artillery are utterly ignorant - except in theory - as to the elevation and range of their guns'. Despite reforms, the inadequacies of Australian artillery continued well into World War 1, where artillery support for frontline battalions was at

first almost non-existent.

## Hastings Battery Victorian Rangers

Another famous unit was the Hastings 40 pounder Battery. Formed on 21 July 1890, the unit was a position battery for the protection of Westernport and took the place of earthworks for the defence of the locality.



40 Pdr RBL Gun (Armstrong) used by Hasting Battery

The Battery's guns were drawn by bullocks hence the nickname "Bullock's Battery" and had an establishment of 54 all ranks.

The Battery was formed through the energies of Col Teddy (Battle-Axe) Otter (previously of the Field Artillery) and was under the command of Major Ham. From his name and the animals drawing the guns came a second nickname "The Ham and Beef Battery".

Uniforms worn were similar to the Garrison Artillery but of khaki instead of blue, khaki helmets with brass ball and mountings and a pill box forage cap. Taking into consideration the scanty population of the district it is interesting to note that the posted strength always exceeded its establishment.

A Nordenfeldt detachment was also formed at Queenscliff on 9 January 1893 but disbanded on 16 March 1897.

## THE KELLY GANG BRINGS OUT THE GARRISON ARTILLERY

Australia's icon bushranger Edward 'Ned' Kelly and his gang's robberies in NE Victoria and Southern NSW stretched the Victoria Police force to the limit. Police sent to the area were usually urban members with no bush skills and little understanding of the struggles of bush folk. The government responded by drafting members of the Garrison Artillery to help guard banks. After the raid on a bank at Euroa in



Image: Uniform - Victorian Artillery  
Source: Museum Victoria



December 1878, artillerymen were sent to towns like Seymour (15 December) and Shepparton (November 1879-January 1880) to stem local panic about the Kellys, who seemed to appear and vanish at will in remote and rugged 'Kelly country'.

On 28 June 1880, a further artillery detachment complete with a 12 pounder field gun, was dispatched from Melbourne by train to take part in the siege at the Glenrowan Inn. Such a gun would have reduced the hotel to splinters in minutes. But the siege ended early when Ned Kelly, clad in armour, exchanged shots with police and the hotel was set on fire--while the artillerymen camped impatiently at Seymour.

*I am indebted to the **Defending Victoria Website** <http://users.vic.chariot.net.au/~ianmac/volunt.html#horse> for the preceding information ed.*

The volunteer forces were disbanded in 1884, replaced by the 'Militia' organisation. The Militia were paid, and enrolled for a fixed term. Mounted Rifles and Victorian Rangers - The Victorian Mounted Rifles - were established a year later, and a permanent Artillery Corps (or the Victorian Artillery) was formed in 1870. (*Museum Victoria*)

When the Crimean War ended in 1856, many of the local units that had been raised declined as the enthusiasm of Victorians for military service dwindled. Around this time, the rifle regiments and corps that had been raised were converted to artillery. When British troops began to be redirected from the Australian colonies to New Zealand in the early 1860s there was renewed interest in Victoria for raising local forces to take over more of the responsibility for garrison duties. From 1861 Victorian forces undertook annual training at Easter with the first camp being undertaken at Werribee. The Volunteer Act was passed in 1863, and this legislation allowed the government to raise a voluntary force consisting of various arms including infantry and artillery. There were around 13 companies of infantry volunteers in Victoria at this time. From 1863 all mounted troops in Victoria became part of the Prince of Wales' Light Horse. By December 1863, along with the

13 companies of infantry, there was one company of engineers and seven of artillery.

**Medal - Royal Victorian Volunteer Artillery Regiment, Australia, 1858**

Royal Victorian Volunteer Artillery Regiment medal awarded to **S.C. Newman on 24 May 1858**. Newman served in the No. 1 Gun Detachment of the Royal Victorian Volunteer Artillery Regiment.



In 1870, the Victorian Permanent Artillery Corps, consisting of about 300 men, was raised. The colony's first permanent, or "regular" unit, it was created to take over responsibility for manning the fortifications that the British garrison had occupied prior to their departure. They were also used to instruct volunteer artillery units.

Throughout the rest of the decade, Victoria's military remained roughly the same size, although it obtained higher levels of efficiency as training opportunities were expanded and its organisation was improved. By the time that the British garrison was withdrawn in 1871, the Victorian military consisted of 206 permanent troops and 4,084 militia and volunteers.

The following year, the various volunteer rifle companies were re-organised, being placed into battalion-level structures which saw the establishment of two metropolitan battalions, as well as a battalion in Ballarat and another in Mount Alexander.

**Officer's Sword Belt with slings.** Worn by an officer in the Victorian Permanent Artillery, 1893



In January 1879, a survey of the colony's military forces determined that there were 228 permanent staff, all of which were serving in the artillery, and 3,202 volunteers serving in the cavalry, engineers, artillery and infantry.

In 1880 the permanent artillery units were disbanded, but were later reformed in 1882 as the Victorian Garrison Artillery Corps. The volunteer system was replaced with a permanent (paid, full-time soldiers) and militia (paid, part-time soldiers) system in 1884. Volunteer artillery units were disbanded and re-raised as two brigades of garrison artillery, one based at Geelong and the other at Portland. In 1895 they were re-organised again and the Geelong, Port Fairy, Warrnambool and Portland batteries became part of the Western District Garrison artillery.

By 1896, Victoria boasted the largest artillery arsenal of all the Australian colonies, possessing nineteen 12-pounder BL guns, six 12-pounder rifled breech loaders (RBLs) and another six 6-pounders of the same type.

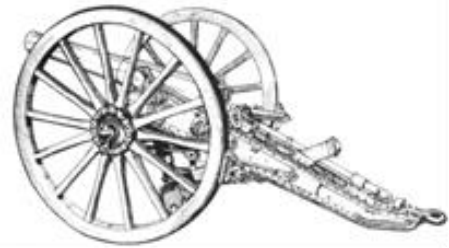
I am indebted to Museum Victoria for much of the above. You can visit their site at

<http://museumvictoria.com.au>

For the defence of the approaches to Melbourne and the shipping in Hobsons Bay, forts were erected on the foreshores at Williamstown and South Melbourne from 1858. At Williamstown the gun batteries extended from the pier to the present cricket ground, and in the sand hills on the other side of the bay from the present Mills Street, South Melbourne (St Kilda Battery), to the Sandridge Lagoon. The present formation of Danks Street is caused by the reservation for a military tramway behind the forts. In 1864 the four batteries at Williamstown mounted 28 guns, with 60 rounds per gun. The four batteries at Sandridge in 1864 mounted 17 guns, with 30 rounds per gun. The report of the Committee on National Defences considered that the guns were of limited use because of their relatively short range, and that the main fortress defences should be built instead at Port Phillip Heads. The Sandridge forts were demolished in 1879, along with the adjacent rifle range, but some of the

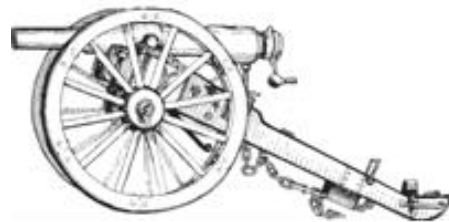
works at Williamstown were partly modernised to include the 9-inch (23 cm) muzzle loaders now on display, as well as smaller more modern weapons. Fort Gellibrand was retained until 1922, though with an obsolete armament.

<http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00599b.htm>



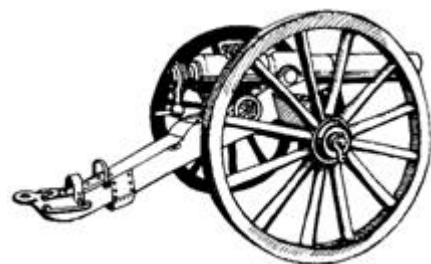
12 Pdr BL Gun

Made by the Elswick Company and 18 were made for Victoria around 1885



12 Pdr RBL Gun (Armstrong)

Six of these were possessed by the Colony of Victoria around 1860



6 Pdr RBL Gun (Armstrong)

6 were purchased by Victoria 1864

Sketches from Guns of the Regiment by SN Gower

Victoria's army camps were a function of contemporary defence systems, fluctuating in scale and developing in type as Victorians and Australians responded to defence issues. The first camps were temporary encampments of volunteer corps, held annually at Easter from 1861 at Werribee Park and Queenscliff, and from 1887 at Langwarrin, where semi-

permanent buildings were erected. During the Boer War (1899-1902), the Victorian contingents were mustered at the showgrounds, Ascot Vale, and later at Langwarrin. Easter encampments persisted after the war at Langwarrin and around Port Phillip heads.

### Victoria Barracks

Originally built, as accommodation for British Imperial Garrison troops, including the 12th and 40th Regiment of Foot who were involved in putting down the armed Eureka Stockade rebellion in Ballarat Victoria, and later the Colony of Victoria's colonial forces. The Barracks housed the Department of Defence from the creation of the Commonwealth of Australia (Federation) in 1901 until 1958 when the Department of Defence moved to the new Russell Offices in Canberra. The earliest building

(G Block) at Victoria Barracks were built by soldiers on the 40th Regiment, under the supervision of a Royal Engineer officer, from 1856 to 1858, while the remaining buildings were built by civil contractors with the original bluestone buildings being constructed between 1856 and 1872. A large extension (A Block New Wing) was added to accommodate HQ Department of Defence in 1917 and while it looked like the original A Block building the construction method and interior was completely modern for the time. Another modern, for the time, art deco building (M Block) was added in 1939 and the floor was the first continuous concrete pour in Australia. The Barracks were named in honour of Queen Victoria. There are also Victoria Barracks in Sydney and Brisbane.



Photograph of the military barracks, St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, 1870. Shows two and three storey brick buildings, with dirt road, low wooden fence and trees at front.



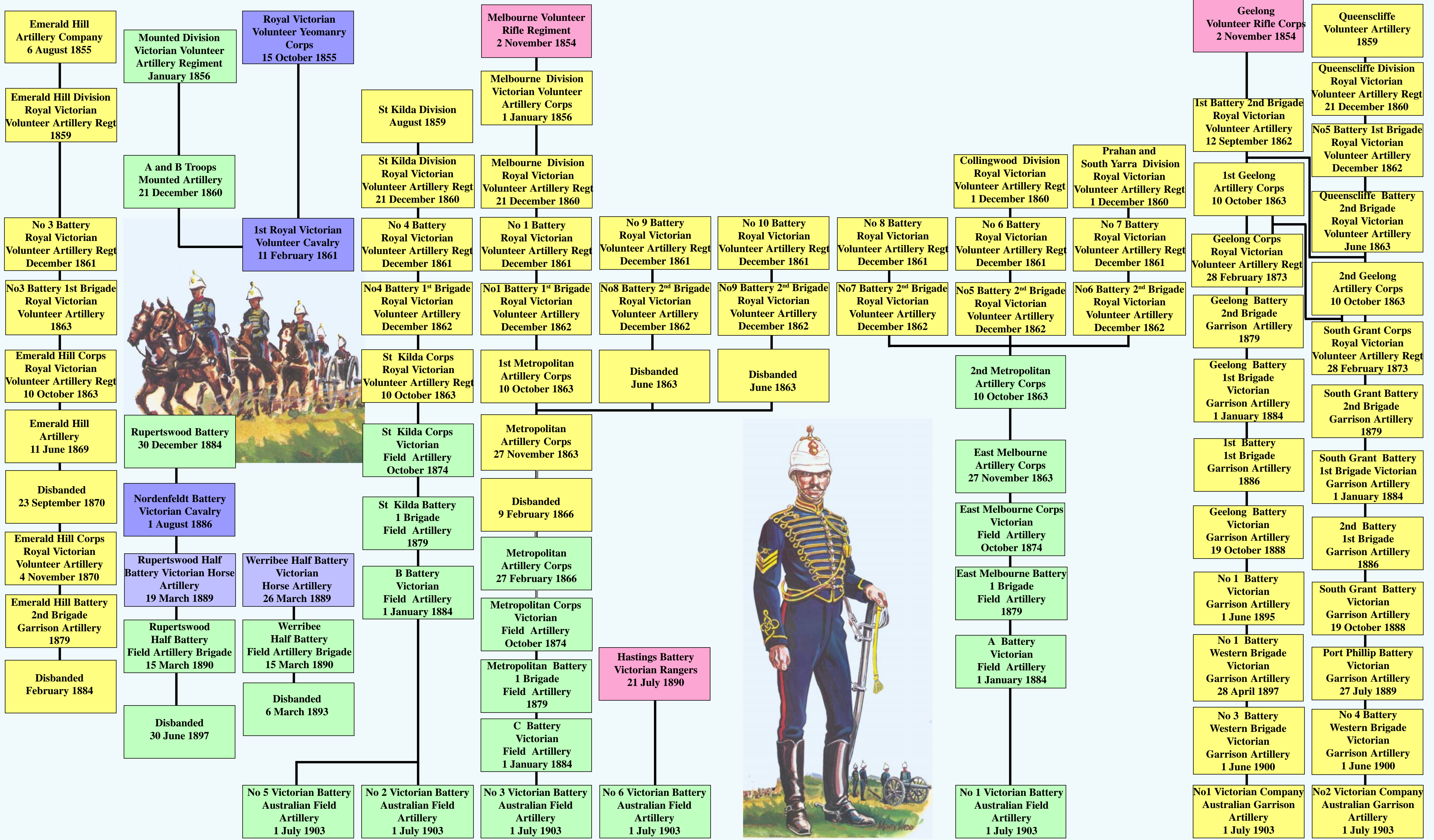
Victorian Garrison Artillery 1900 Drill Hall McKillop St Geelong.  
Just prior to movement to Myers St Depot (Current location)

## **Federation.**

In July 1899 the Permanent Artillery of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria became Regiments of the Royal Australian Artillery. Thus a start had been made to form the Australian Army prior to 1 March 1901 when the states transferred to the Commonwealth slightly more than 29,000 troops, 1700 of these were Permanent. However until the Defence Act of 22 October 1903 these troops continued to be administered under the relevant State acts.

*To be continued*







# Lineage of the Colonial Artillery of Victoria

