

Report on suspected firing range, possibly used by Auxiliary Units in woods between Faringdon and Coleshill.

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Contents

**Introduction
Background
Walk over surveys
Finds report
Conclusion & Findings
Recommendations**

Introduction

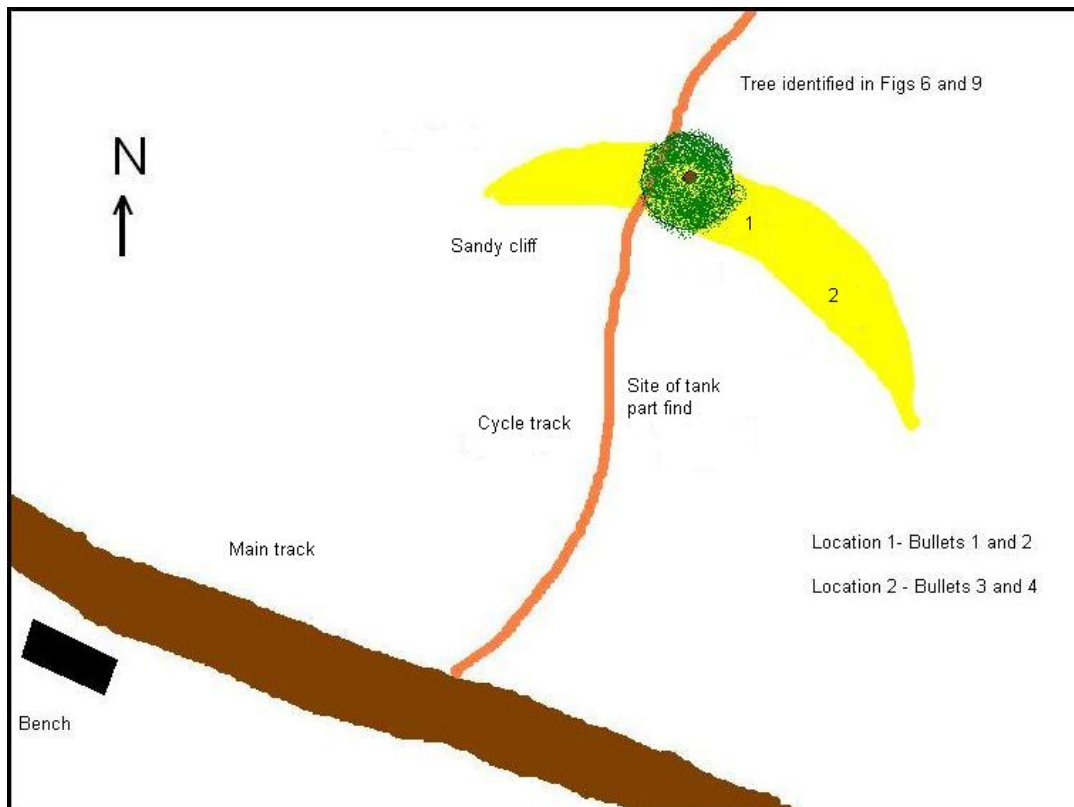
This report details a survey undertaken of a suspected wartime firing range thought to be associated with the Auxiliary Units based at Coleshill House.

Background

The author is a volunteer with Churchill's Underground War (CUW) Archaeology group, Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) and The British Resistance Organisation Museum (Parham Airfield Museum).

Bill Ashby, a CART researcher interviewed Eddie Cox, a former wartime resident of Coleshill, who as a teenage boy, explored the woods between Faringdon and Coleshill House. He had discovered the suspected firing range and remembered collecting bullets from there. Eddie Cox took Bill Ashby to the site and confidently identified it, even though he had not been there for 60 years and said that it had changed significantly in appearance. He reported that during the war, there was a horseshoe shaped, near vertical, sandy cliff. There were no trees below the cliff. Since then, the area has been managed as a forestry plantation and used for recreation. Below the cliff there are now mature pine trees. The cliff is now slumped, with animal burrows in many areas (1) The site is located in woodland to the west of Badbury Hill, on the Coleshill estate. It is on the side of the woodland closest to Coleshill House, the site of a wartime training base for Auxiliary Units.

Initial exploration of the site on 11th May 2011 revealed no obvious evidence of a firing range. However, a large piece of metal was identified and recovered, together with a right angled piece of metal drilled with holes (Figs 1 – 3). These have subsequently been identified as pieces of an inter-war Vickers Medium tank, specifically including the area of the air inlet for the engine (2). The location of this find is shown on Map 1. There is also an eye witness testimony from Horace and Bill Plaskett (Auxiliary Unit members trained at Coleshill House) that one activity which formed part of their training at Coleshill was to find a tank in the woods and blow it up with sticky bombs (4). It may be that this was the location of the tank described, or that a piece of this tank was brought to this location.



Map 1.

A sketch map (not to scale) of the site showing the approximate locations of the main elements of the site.

Subsequent research has identified one written account of Auxiliary Units at Coleshill House which mentions that in late 1940 there was a range to fire .45 Webley and .32 Colt pistols from 15 yards at figure targets and the .300 Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) from 30 yards at a 4 foot target (3). It is possible that this site could be the range referred to. The maximum possible range length would be 50 yards given the geography of the site.



Fig 1.
11th May 2011.
Tank armour section *in-situ*
Image © CART



Fig 2.
11th May 2011.
Angled metal find, with tank armour in background.
Image © CART



Fig 3.
5th July 2011.
Tank armour after cleaning.

Walk over surveys

Two walk over surveys were conducted, the first on 28th June 2012 and the second on 16th September 2012. Both surveys covered the area of the sandy cliff and the ground between the main track and the cliff. The purpose was to look for surface evidence that might confirm the eye witness account of a firing range. The surveys were conducted by one volunteer and were confined to areas not covered by vegetation. The excavated earth below rabbit holes was a particular focus as this has proved a source of surface finds on other range sites.

The first survey revealed no evidence that would suggest the area was used as a firing range. The second identified spent bullets on the surface in two locations midway up the main bank area (see Map 1). Both were a short distance below rabbit holes and had presumably been excavated by the animals while burrowing. A number of other rabbit holes were investigated with no evidence of finds.

The ground was walked over in detail at approximately 25yards (22.9m) and 50yards (45.7m) from the sandy cliff, these distances were chosen as being possible lengths for the range. (At the time of the survey, it was not known that the sole account of a range in this area referred to 15 yards and 30 yards as the range lengths). At 22.9 metres the ground was densely covered with pine needles, whilst at 45.7 metres it was largely overgrown with ferns. No surface finds were made at these locations.



Fig 4.
16th September 2012.
Bullet 1 as found on surface spoil of rabbit burrow.



Fig 5.
16th September 2012.
Bullet 2 as found in surface spoil of rabbit hole.



Fig 6.
16th September 2012.
Wide view, showing the rabbit hole, (bottom right of photograph) where bullets 1 and 2 were discovered. Upper centre of the shot shows the area eroded by off road cycling.



Fig 7.
16th September 2012.
Bullet 3 *in-situ* below second rabbit hole.



Fig 8.
16th September 2012.
Bullet 4 *in-situ* near second rabbit hole.



Fig 9.
16th September 2012.
Wider view showing the location of bullets 3 and 4 (marked by blue camera bag) in relation to second rabbit hole to the right centre of picture. The tree trunk visible in the far left of the shot is the same one seen centre right in Fig 6.



Fig 10.
16th September 2012.
View of the sandy cliff possibly used as a firing range, taken from 25 metres to west looking back up the cycle path.

Finds report

Methodology

Due to the public location of the site and the risk to finds left *in-situ*, all four bullets were recovered, bagged and recorded. No GPS was available to record precise locations at the time of survey. All finds were photographed *in-situ* prior to being recovered (see Figs 4, 5, 7 & 8).

Processing

The finds were washed, with a wooden skewer used to extract dirt from cavities, and then dried. The finds were logged and recorded. They have been stored at present on the National Trust site at Coleshill, along with other CUW - Coleshill Archaeology finds.

Identification



Fig 11.
16th September 2012.
The cleaned finds. From bottom clockwise, Bullet 1 , Bullet 3 , Bullet 2 , Bullet 4.

Bullet 1

Bullet with a smooth rounded top. This appears to be a 9mm round, of the type used in the Sten gun. Green copper discolouration is seen which indicates a full metal jacket round, typical for military not civilian usage. It is known that the Auxiliary Units used Sten guns.

Bullet 2

A rifle bullet – likely .300 or .303 calibre. Bent over at tip as a result of striking a solid object. Given the soft nature of the sand, this may indicate that this is a .303 MkVII bullet, where the tip of the round is softer (aluminium) within the full metal jacket. It is known that Auxiliary units used both the .303 SMLE rifle and .300 (.30-06 US) Springfield rifle as well as the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) in .300 calibre.

Bullet 3

Pistol bullet – smooth domed top with two indented bands to body. The shape of this round is relatively unusual. From the profile of the top of the bullet this may be a .455 Colt or Webley Auto round for an automatic pistol. The .455 Colt and Webley Automatic Pistols were both issued in limited numbers to British Armed Forces.

Bullet 4

Pistol bullet with smooth rounded top and hollow base – possibly .455 Webley revolver round. The .455 Webley was a standard issue British Army revolver.

The rounds are almost all in good condition. This is the result of having been fired into sand. The exception is Bullet 2, which is bent over at the tip. However it shows considerably less damage than similar rounds recovered from chalk ranges, suggesting it may have impacted a stone or similar object after an initial deceleration in sand.

Further measurement and expert opinion should allow a definitive identification of the rounds

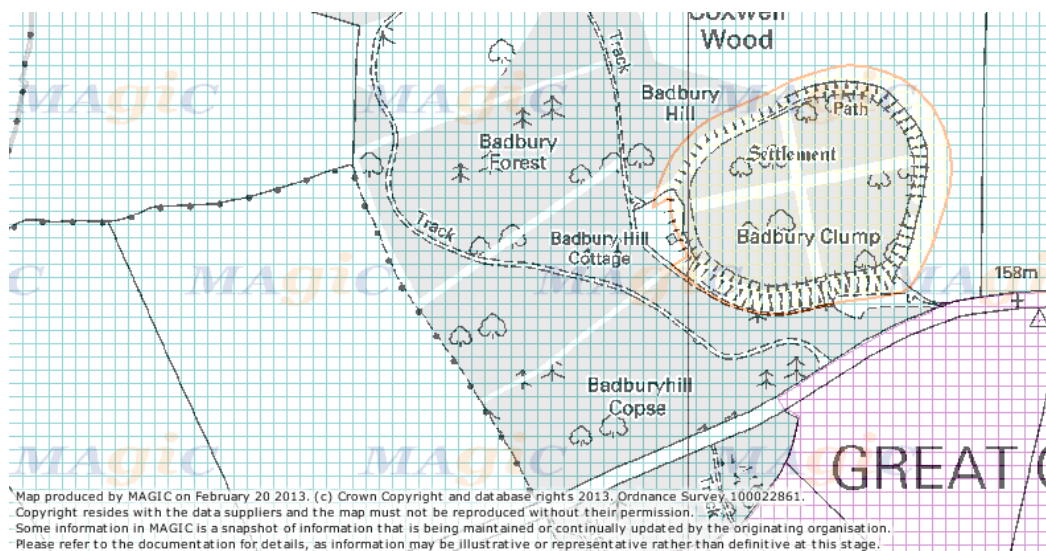
Conclusion and Findings

This site was identified through eye witness testimony. The finds recovered during the walk over surveys indicate that they were fired from several different types of weapon. The presence of the portion of tank armour collected in 2011 may indicate its use as a target for anti-tank weaponry, or as a shield to fire behind on what is a relatively short range. The tank armour is from a type that would have been obsolete after 1940 and so would have been considered suitable for demolition practice. The ammunition finds would be consistent with a wartime firing range, with 9mm rounds being unusual in the pre-war period.

Recommendations

As a documented account of 15 and 30 yard ranges in wartime use have been identified following these initial surveys, the site should be walked again, focusing on these distances from the sandy cliff, to try and identify evidence of firing positions such as slit trenches. It is likely that the majority of spent rounds will be found in the sandy cliff as this will have been behind the range targets. It is suggested that a formal systematic metal detector survey of the site with GPS location of finds should be undertaken to look at the distribution and type of finds. This would allow identification of the extent of the site and the types of weapons used, together with precise recording of its location. It might also allow the firing position(s) to be identified through location of discarded casings. The pattern of discarded casings would also be able to assist in identifying if single shot or automatic weapons were used (such as the BAR) as well as providing dating evidence from the manufacturers' marks which are only found on the casings.

It is likely that there would have been some form of trench at the firing location which could form the focus of a subsequent formal excavation. The site is subject to constant erosion due to recreational use by mountain bikers, with the sand being cut away to provide jumps and the site is also subject to animal and weather erosion. Without a formal investigation it is likely that any further information that could be gained from the site will be lost without record. The location of the site is adjacent to a Scheduled Ancient Monument (SAM). If any part of the site is within the scheduled area, consent (Section 42 consent) will be required before metal detecting is used and any excavation undertaken.



Map 2.

The orange ring indicates the extent of the Scheduled Ancient Monument at Badbury Hill, also known as Badbury Camp. The location of the Map 1 is approximately indicated by the word "Track" to the west of the scheduled monument.

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- (2) <http://coleshill-house-auxiliary-unit-forum.15901.n3.nabble.com/Help-Needed-What-is-this-td2926527.html>
- (3) National Archives files CAB120/241
- (4) Mercian Maquis, Mick Wilks & Bernard Lowry, Logaston Press, 2002