

The Mystery of the Holm Oak Bullets

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When Paul Fisher came across the bullets as he was digging a hole to plant a blueberry bush in his Holm Oak garden, he immediately stopped digging and called the police. They were on the scene within the hour and took the bullets away, apart from a just two that were not live.

The mystery is how did the live bullets get where they were found?

For those who may not know, Holm Oak stands in what until fairly recently was an orchard that backed on to the tithe barn and to a small area, now the church car park, on which stood a truncated wartime Nissen hut with a rectangular extension, plus another small corrugated iron storehouse. The Nissen hut and storehouse dated from the war years when they housed rudimentary cooking facilities, a sort of field kitchen that together with similar cooking facilities built on the recreation ground served the needs of RAMC soldiers and later the American soldiers stationed in the village prior to D-Day. (The soldiers used the tithe barn as a mess.) After the war the Nissen hut was used as a scout hut, tents and camping equipment being stored in the smaller building. This information, whether new to you or not, will surely influence your thoughts regarding the origin of the buried bullets.

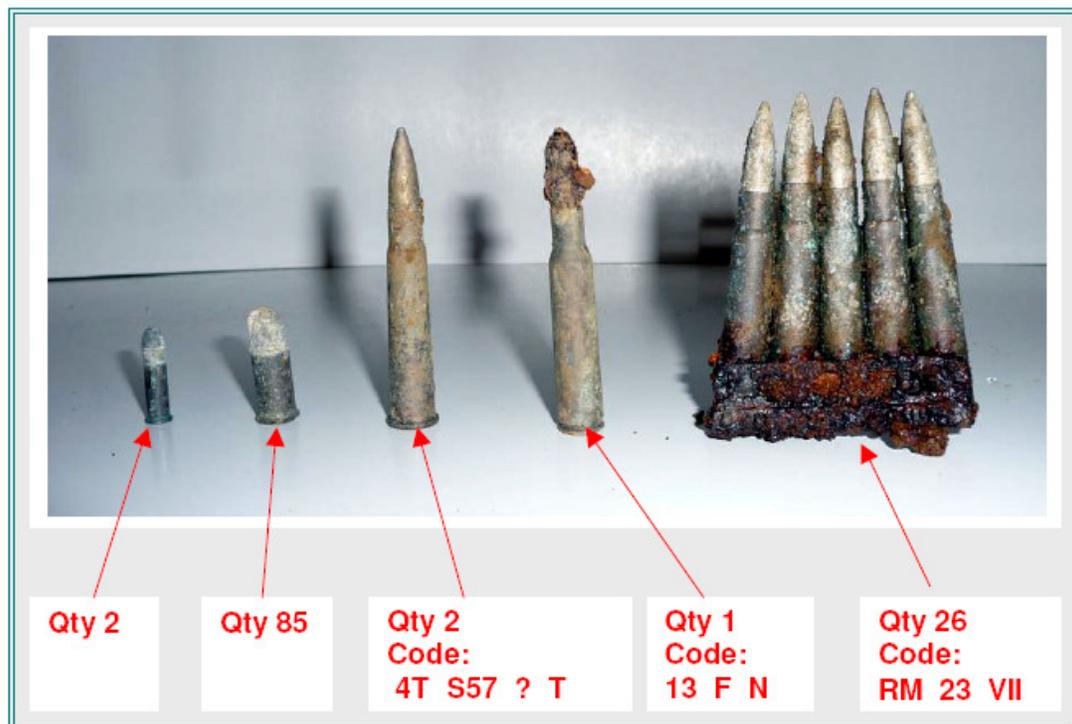


So, back to how the bullets came to be buried where they were found. Options that spring to mind include that they might have been:

- A village soldier's keepsake from WW1, eventually discarded, not necessarily by the original 'owner'.
- Illegally acquired by a member of the local WW2 Home Guard and eventually discarded, perhaps many years later and not necessarily by the original 'owner'.
- Illegally acquired by a WW2 soldier, either American or British, and eventually discarded. If this was a British soldier they could possibly have been discarded well after the war and not necessarily by the original 'owner'.

But all of that is neither here nor there, merely possibilities of which there are plenty more. What we could do with are a few facts, like when and where the bullets were made.

Superficial research via the internet seemed like a good idea. There's loads of stuff there to peruse. For instance, you soon learn that bullets normally bear a code on the ends, the head stamps, that indicates where they were made, when they were made, the propellant and so on. Some of the Holm Oak bullets had codes on the head stamps as shown in the photograph below.



So you would think it was just case of matching the codes on the bullets with a published list, like the one on this particular website:

www.cartridgecollectors.org/headstampcodes.htm

But codes are not standardised. Not only that. Bullets have been made in numerous countries and in various locations within these countries for decades. The lists seem endless. An exact match for any of the above codes appears to be elusive to say the least but if you turn detective and give it a try you might reach the conclusion that the cluster of twenty-six .303 rifle bullets were UK made in 1923. This assumption is based on the figure 23 and the Roman numeral VII. (On the other hand, the RM code is close to R-M, which was the code used by an American manufacturer: Riverside Metal Products, Oakville, Connecticut.)

So, if - and remember this is merely a suggestion - if the bulk of the bullets were made in the UK in 1923, that rules out the WW1 theory. It might also rule out any American involvement, unless you are prepared to think the Americans were issued with British ammunition - most unlikely, surely? Especially when you come across information that says one third of the rifles and ammunition used by British troops during the war were made in America!

If they are British, we are now left with the option that the bullets were once in the possession of a British soldier, including possibly a member of the WW2 Home Guard.

As is well known, the supply of weapons to the Home Guard was a very hit or miss affair and any ammunition that did eventually arrive in the village for use by the local unit would surely have been closely guarded and any use recorded.

Could any have gone walkabout? Surely not? But that's just an opinion, you may think otherwise. Another factor here is that the site where they bullets were found was not used by the Merriott Home Guard.

That leaves at least one finger of suspicion pointing at a British soldier. But the British soldiers stationed in the village prior to the Americans arriving were RAMC, Royal Army Medical Corp. Would they have been issued with bullets, away from the fighting? Hmm don't think so. There were no British soldiers stationed in the village after the Americans left. But it could be it was a British soldier from the village, a local chap, who brought the bullets home with him and eventually off-loaded them. That's what I reckon anyway.

So there it is; a mystery for sure. Or is it? Maybe you are an ex- military man or have experience of armaments, and particularly ammunition codes. If so and you believe you can shed some light on things, please contribute your thoughts so we can add them to these notes, just for the record.

Oh, and there's just one other thing. Towards the end of the war the village was home to German and Italian prisoners of war. Now I'm not suggesting for one minute these chaps had bullets in their kitbags, that would be ridiculous, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it? All I want to say is that, as a young boy, together with my pals we befriended many of the Italian prisoners, spending hours with them in their Nissen-hut billets on the recreation ground. One prisoner made two or three of us each an engraved ring. I still have mine; that's it in the picture below, being worn by my grandson some 65 years later. I thought it was solid gold at the time, but I later found it that it was made of brass, from a bullet casing.

