



Army on the Common

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The Army on the Common, and the Fire

At Abinger Common, next to the Leith Hill road, between Friday Street road and the Abinger Bottom road, are some archaeological remains dating from the early 1940s. There are foundations, walls, kerb stones and a water tower.

After the retreat from Dunkirk, and whilst the Army was preparing for the invasion of Europe, it was necessary to have large supplies of munitions available for the invading forces, near to the Channel ports. One day the Army arrived at Abinger Common, and set up camp on the common. There were living huts, kitchens, offices, a NAAFI, even their own sewage disposal system. Shortly after the camp was set up the munitions started coming. Along every road, track and path accessible to lorries, from Abinger Common to Leith Hill, every 20-30 yards was a palletted pile of ammunition boxes, small arms, artillery shells, grenades, all covered with tarpaulins or the curved corrugated iron sheets of Nissen Huts. Needless to say, access to the public was denied, but residents of Abinger Bottom and other places in the restricted area had passes allowing them past the sentries guarding every road.

In 1942 "something" happened. There were several stories circulating, but the generally accepted one is that a soldier

was lighting a Primus stove. He was probably unfamiliar with the stove, and over-pumped it. When it flared up, instead of releasing the pressure he panicked and threw it out of the window. A dry, hot period had left the common as dry as tinder; a fire rapidly started, and got out of control. Soldiers were sent to evacuate the village, and most of the residents walked through the Pasture Wood to Holmbury, where they were cared for by the local people. When the fire reached the ammunition there were explosions, putting the soldiers, the Fire Service and the local Auxiliary Fire Service at considerable risk. One particular dump, on the east side of the Rifle Range about half way down, went up with a tremendous explosion that blew in doors and windows, and cracked one of the chimneys at Goddards. (Mr. Hall recently had this taken down and rebuilt). The fire was eventually brought under control.

After the war, when the army had left, the local boys collected "souvenirs" - rifle cartridges and cartridge cases, shell splinters, etc., that littered the common, until the local policeman found half a hand-grenade, and decided that something should be done. The army was brought back, and they scanned every inch of the affected area with metal detectors. The common is, I think, now quite safe!

By Terence O'Kelly. From Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News, May 1999