

CUMBRIA Walney Island



The hidden home front

Uncovering First World War trenches in Britain

On Walney Island, just off the Cumbrian coastline, lies a system of First World War trenches. Why? **George Nash, Maddi Nicholson, Thomas Wellicome** and their team have been investigating this well-kept secret of the home front.

PHOTO: LAURENCE (18)

They said in 2014 that it would all be over by Christmas, but, as we know, the Great War was to continue for five more wretched years. This was a total, industrialised conflict, on a massive and unprecedented scale, with new weapons that required new tactics. Yet, to begin with, the military powers of Europe were still locked into the mindset of 19th-century battle strategies, in which opposing regiments of infantry, supported by cavalry, would take up temporary positions on the battlefield, and where battles would be lost and won within a couple of days. Indeed, the strategies employed at Mons (1914), and later along the Marne (1915), were based on these tried-and-tested 19th-century tactics.

At first, trenches – the hellish hallmark of the Western Front – were still considered to be a temporary measure, and were often shallow features (no more than 0.8m deep) that simply followed already-established field ditches and hedge banks. Nonetheless, the British Army wanted to understand more about this new form of trench warfare and how it might work. The solution was the rapid set-up of a series of practice trenching sites, usually close to existing military bases. Though these were dug across most of Britain, only a few are currently known.

Uncovering Fortress Walney

Until recently, the very presence of training trenches was highly sensitive information, and right up until the 1980s, the Ordnance Survey had a map-embargo on military installations from the First World War through to the Cold War. It was only in 2009, during a Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment Survey commissioned by English Heritage, that the presence of First World War practice trenches was officially identified on Walney Island, the largest of the islands just off the Cumbrian coastline of North-West England.

Located on the north side of the island, and understood to date to the first months of the First World War, these trenches had been a well-kept secret among the island's small population. Aware that they are now an extremely rare archaeological resource, in late 2014, a team of over 35 local volunteers – trained and led by archaeologists George Nash and Thomas Wellicome, commissioned by Art Gene in Barrow-in-Furness, and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund – began investigating.

OPPOSITE PAGE Aerial shot clearly showing the crenulated practice trench system on Walney Island.

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FIELD SERVICE POCKET BOOK.

1914.

(Reprinted, with Amendments, 2010.)

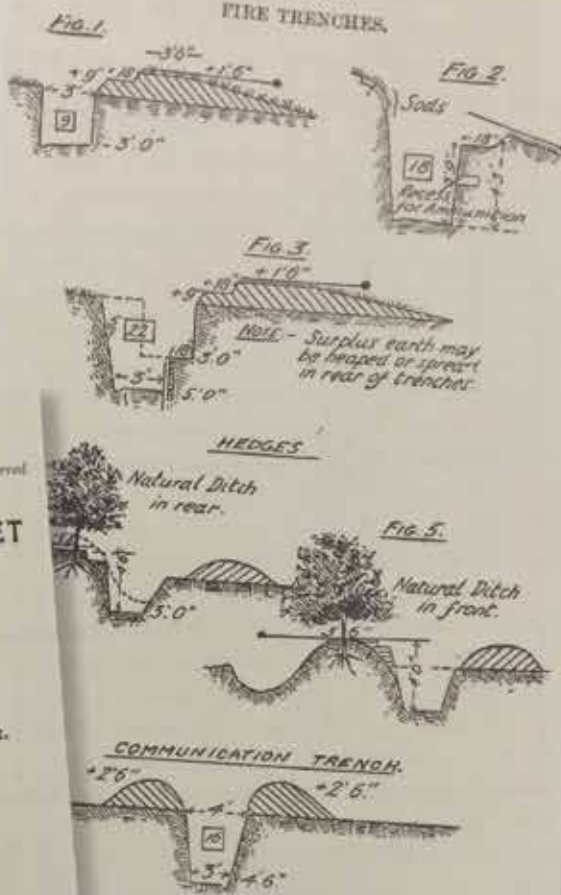
GENERAL STAFF, WAR OFFICE.



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ABOVE A service manual given to British Army officers of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), originally published in 1914, clinically illustrates a cross-section of a typical field trench. This type of trench was identified at the North Walney site (this manual belonged to George Nash's grandfather, who fought at the Battle of the Somme in 1916).

PLATE XII. FIRE TRENCHES.

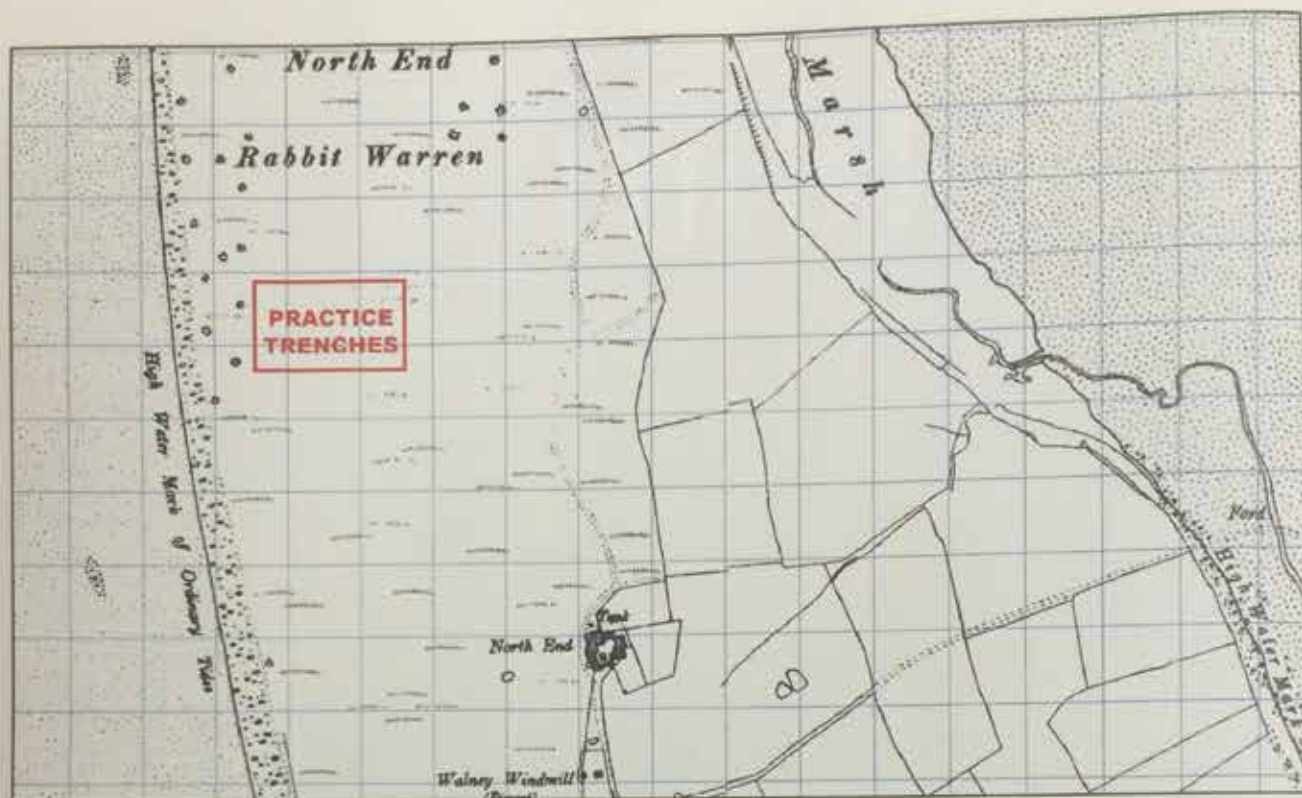


Since this was something of an archaeological *terra incognita*, the first job of the volunteers was to undertake a walk-over survey – while an allied desk-based assessment helped to provide a detailed

history of the development of the area and its surrounding landscape. Back in the field, the walkers identified a number of previously unknown military sites, including many from the Second World War.

As for those features associated with the First World War trench system, of note were two raised platforms – each standing c.2m above ground – which were perhaps command or observation platforms. The survey team also identified several short sections of partially back-filled trenching. These were plausibly remnants of a much larger trenching system that would once have included a forward trench and a network of strategic retreat trenching, which would all have been interconnected. Indeed, aerial imagery from practice trenching sites elsewhere shows an identical layout.

Meanwhile, the surviving practice trenching was represented mainly by a single line of a crenulated trenching that extended some 90m east-west. ☉



ABOVE Until recently, the very presence of training trenches was highly sensitive information, and the Walney Island network was not mapped until 2009, during an English Heritage coastal survey. Here their location is marked on an Ordnance Survey map from 1916. The island must have been an ideal location for a military training ground as it was sparsely populated, lay near to the naval shipyards of Barrow-in-Furness, and was home to Vickers, a large military procurement company responsible for the manufacture of munitions, submarines, warships and the first British military airships.

LEFT Surviving remains of the practice network are mainly represented by a single 90m-long stretch of crenulated trenching running east-west.

These crenulations, which sharply turn at right-angles at regular intervals, appear to replicate (or may even have informed) the trenching along the Western Front: each crenulated section would have protected the soldiers by preventing blast impact and shrapnel from penetrating populated sections of trenching, thus potentially reducing casualties.

Trenching over the trenches

Following the walkover survey, the team made a detailed survey of the complete line of the practice trench system, and of the remnant trench sections to the south. These two surveys allowed the archaeologists to target the location of the two archaeological trenches; and to minimise disturbance of the natural environment, the two trenches, each measuring 3m x 2m were located close to a footpath, west of Walney Airfield.

Once the team members began digging into the 100-year old trench system it quickly became clear that this would be no easy excavation. First, they were met with a significant wind-blown sand deposit across the site – of up to 0.4m in places. Second, they had to tackle a blanket of deeply rooted Marram grass, which reached down to the base of each of the archaeological trenches, sometimes to a depth of over 1m. However, the moisture levels of the sandy soil had remained constant over

The peoples' archaeology



ABOVE 43894 Private Hugh Thomas of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers with pals at a camp on Walney Island

The Walney Island project helped to kick-start an in-depth engagement with the residents of Barrow and Walney. Over 35 local volunteers, from all walks of life, worked alongside the archaeologists, and on a whole range of archaeological tasks, including the desk-based assessment, walkover surveys, as well as the excavation. Many of these volunteers offered useful insights and information that inevitably would have been overlooked or missed by a team made up of non-local archaeologists. The volunteer team was further bolstered by the presence of soldiers from the Territorial Army, plus an expert in ballistics. Added to this were all the local observers, bystanders, and supporters. For example, by chance, and, in that greatest of archaeological traditions, on the very last day of the excavation, local resident Andrew Bolton showed the team several photographs of his grandfather, 43894 Private Hugh Thomas of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. The team drew a collective breath when Mr Bolton explained that his grandfather had used these very practice trenches on North Walney between July 1916 and January 1917 prior to being sent to the Western Front to fight at bloody Passchendaele and the 3rd Battle of Ypres that year.

the years, which meant all sections within each trench revealed evidence of clear trench-cutting and later wind-blown deposition.

It seems that the sides of the original trenches had been supported by near-vertical corrugated iron sheeting and/or timber shoring – a fact remembered by many of the local volunteers and bystanders, who told George and Thomas how they remembered playing within these practice trenches as children. Several reported how they had used the corrugated iron sheeting from this section of the trench system to make 'dens' during their childhood adventures 40-50 years ago – a fascinating example of history in action (see

box). Meanwhile, back in the southern section of Trench 1, the team found a large corroded iron pin that must have been involved in securing such sheeting/shoring against the banked sides of the practice trenches.

As for other small finds, a limited assortment of material was discovered from within the two archaeological trenches. Thus within the various sand lenses that covered the main sections of the two archaeological trenches the team found numerous spent .303 calibre shell cases and bullet-heads, many of which had been made in the US by several munitions companies, including the United States Cartridge Co., in Massachusetts. One shell case was stamped 'W' and found to originate from the Winchester Repeating Arms Co. of Connecticut.

This came as a surprise since American shell-case manufacturing was considered to be of rather poor quality – indeed, it is estimated that over 1 billion US rounds were dumped into the North Sea following the end of hostilities in 1918. So why might the Walney enlistees have used American shells? It seems that the British-made munitions could be of equally poor quality. During the Boer War and later minor conflicts, the British Army had been plagued with poor-quality British-made munitions, with many bullets misfiring or exploding within the breach mechanism of their rifles. ☉

BELOW Local schoolchildren snaking their way through the hidden practice trenching.





As a result, the Ministry of War awarded contracts to a number of American munitions manufacturers to produce .303 bullets – though hindsight tells us that this was not a particularly good choice.

Only one personal object was found: a copper penny coin, stamped with a young 'bun-head' of Queen Victoria and dated to around 1840. Found within the upper stratigraphy of Trench 1, it may have been dropped by one of the enlisted soldiers. It is more than likely that such coinage was still in circulation at this time.

Pitfalls of the training trenches

The First World War was a bloody, brutal and unprecedented conflict. Could these training trenches on Walney Island really have helped the soldiers understand the brutality of trench warfare on the Western Front? The archaeological excavation provided some bitter insights.

The first observation was just how shallow the trenches were – only about 0.8m below the current

ABOVE Moisture levels in the sandy soil had remained constant over the years, which meant all sections within each trench revealed secure evidence of clear trench-cutting and later wind-blown deposition.

SOURCE

George Nash and Thomas Wellicome are archaeologists who, for the past ten years, have taken a keen interest in military archaeology, undertaking several contracts for BAE Systems and the Ministry of Defence, including the decommissioning of ROF Birtley (Tyneside), ROF Featherstone (Staffordshire) and historic building recording within the Devonshire Dockyard, Barrow-in-Furness. Maddi Nicholson is an artist and a Director of Art Gene.

ground surface. Moreover, the sandy soil excavated from the ditches appears to have been heaped onto the trench sides, giving sorely-needed extra depth to the trenching. Based on First World War archive images taken elsewhere, plus the diagrams within the British Army Service Manual, it is probable that the sides of these trenches were further raised simply by the stacking of sandbags along the trench edges. The shallow nature of the trenches demonstrates that the Walney Island practice trenches must have been cut when 19th century-style fluid mobile warfare was still considered by opposing armies to be best practice.

Added to this, the practice trenches were, of course, dug into the sandy, light soils of Walney Island. Given the relative ease (Marram grass aside) with which they were excavated by the team, it seems unlikely that the wet, clay-heavy and sodden soils of the Western Front would have been so forgiving. Would the practice trenches really have helped the British soldiers fighting in the blood and the mud of war-torn Europe? Perhaps the

crenulated outline of the practice trenches did aid understanding of trench combat tactics, by demonstrating how sharp angles helped to protect fighting soldiers against explosive devices, such as grenades and mortar fire.

But in the final analysis, Walney's practice trenches were clearly a world away from First World War reality. It is thanks to George, Thomas and Maddi's new project that we can understand something more about this supremely difficult period of world history and, moreover, firmly place a previously hidden and secret part of Britain's past onto the archaeological map. @



BELOW Some of the small finds from the site: a penny dating from c.1840, and a First World War army cap badge found along the shoreline of North Walney.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit www.archaeologyuk.org/cba/projects/dob to find out more about the CBA's Defence of Britain Project, initiated between 1995 and 2002, and responsible for identifying and collating many 19th- and 20th-century military installations. To explore the military structures on Walney Island, visit www.walney-island.com/island_history_01.htm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The team would like to thank the landowners BAE Systems and Natural England who manage the site, and Cumbria's Archaeology Service. The project was carried out as part of a Heritage Lottery Funded (HLE) community project, established by artist-led company Art-Cene Associates.



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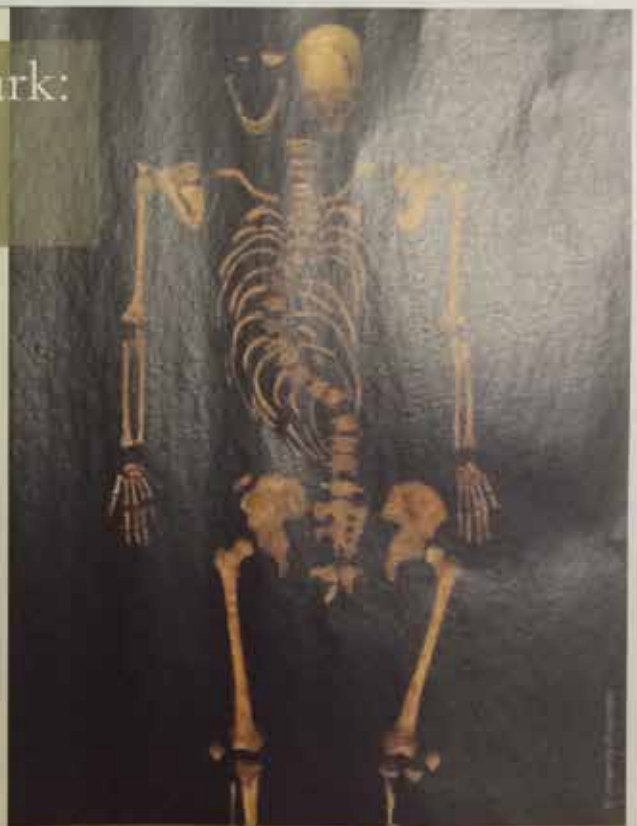
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Archaeology



NEW EXPERIENCES Artillery soldiers on Walney for training in July 1917. A major project will look at the archaeological and historic traces they may have left behind on the island

SUBMITTED

Digging for the story of island's wartime role

FIND out how you can help unlock the First World War secrets of Walney Island during the public launch of a major archaeology and art project tomorrow night.

Fort Walney Uncovered is the name for a programme which has been developed by the Barrow-based Art Gene.

It aims to survey and excavate part of a rare First World War practice trench and examine the site of the former artillery battery at Fort Walney.

Art Gene's team of artists and archaeologists are now offering a unique chance to get involved and rediscover the military heritage on the Northern end of the island - which played a role in both world wars.

You can find out more by going along to the launch event at the Nan Tait Centre, On Abbey Road, Barrow, from 7pm to 9pm.

Helping to outline the importance of the project will be archaeologist Dr George Nash, who is a specialist in prehistory and contemporary art at Bristol University.

Bill Myers, local historian and Evening Mail Memories Page writer will look at how we think young artillery and

infantry recruits might have reacted to their training on Walney.

Also at the launch will be artist in residence Jeni McConnell.

On Saturday Dr Nash will be leading an archaeology workshop which forms an extension to the volunteer "place makers" training at the Nan Tait Centre from 10am to 4pm.

Place makers are people from towns and villages around Morecambe Bay.

They help out on Art Gene art and heritage projects, exploring the social, natural and built environment.

It is hoped they will get involved in anything from uncovering the remains of a First World War training camp to recording people's memories.

The training day includes an introduction to research, interview and interpretive skills and an overview of the Fort Walney Uncovered art and archaeology project.

Refreshments will be provided throughout the day.

● You can book a free place for tomorrow's launch night, or Saturday's training day by calling Nick Owen on 07742 271578, or by sending an email to emailartgene.nick@btconnect.com



VANISHED WORLD Fort Walney seen from the air before the site was dismantled and much of it disappeared under a golf course

SUBMITTED



READY FOR WAR A First World War sniper rifle of the kind which could have been used by army recruits on the target range at North Walney

SUBMITTED

History



PRESS - Barrow Evening Mail

DN3 THIS The group of diggers prepare to search for relics at the North Walney site

PICTURES BY HARRY ATKINSON REP. BARROWMAIL

'Time Team' volunteers hope to unearth island's war relics

by **Karl Steel**

Senior Correspondent
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THE earth which could be hiding an island's military history is being shifted in Furness's own Time Team-style project.

The Fort Walney Uncovered art and archaeology project is well under way with the top layer of turf being removed yesterday.

Developed by Barrow-based independent research facility Art Gene, it aims to uncover the stories of Walney during the two world wars.

There are believed to be a number of practice trenches dating back to the First World War at the north end of the island, and a team of volunteers and professional archaeologists led by BBC's *Hidden Histories* presenter George Nash are working for five days to see what can be found.

Yesterday's initial "de-turfing" uncovered bullets from the era, and the hope is that there will be more clues lying deeper in the trenches.

Nick Owen, artist project manager at Art Gene, said: "We've had 20 volunteers turn up so far, which is fantastic, so we're right on schedule. We've found a lot of bullets and some other interesting items which we're working to identify."

"The hope is to find artefacts that tell us more about how the trenches were used."

"We know the trenches were here because you can see them from the sky, but not as easily from the ground. It's difficult to see how many there are because it's very overgrown, but the bit we're working



DETECTION TEAM Using metal detectors over the ground before excavation are, from left, Linda McCutcheon, George Nash and Carol Poole. Inset: Archaeologist George Nash with a bullet found in the sand

on is maybe soft or longer."

Work continues today, and Furness residents are encouraged to visit and even take part in the dig.

Art Gene's artist in residence, Jeni McConnell, will also be hosting a workshop about the project from 11am to 3pm.

Tomorrow's schedule also includes a four-hour walk that starts at noon from Earnse Bay car park. The walk explores the social, natural and built environment of Fort Walney - once a British Army

training camp and now a National Nature Reserve and site of special scientific interest managed by Natural England.

On Monday and Tuesday, schools in the area visit to learn more about the project and the history of the island.

Mr Owen said: "We're estimating that more than 100 people will visit the site over the five days."

"It is a fascinating project, and hopefully they will learn as much as we are learning about it."

"We need to thank BAE for helping us with this project, because we need to access the airfield to get to the trenches. They've been awesome."

"When it is all finished, all the work will be turned into a number of artistic products, and we'll be creating a publication about the project."

People can turn up at the North Walney nature reserve at any point over the weekend to help, though it is advised to phone ahead. Nick Owen can be contacted by phoning 07742 71570.

Accident



CRASH SCENE The air ambulance attend a motorcycle crash yesterday near Corston. A motorcyclist was airlifted to hospital

Air ambulance called to motorbike rider

A **MOTORCYCLE** rider was airlifted to hospital after a road collision in the Looe District.

Cornwall Police said a Yamaha 600cc bike and a Land Rover Defender were involved in a road traffic collision at Hays Bank, south of Corston on the A386, just before 1.30pm yesterday.

Police said the motorcyclist, a man from Barrow in his 40s, was airlifted to the Royal Preston Hospital.

A spokesman said the injured rider was believed to have any one injuries but they were not understood to be life-threatening.

The Land Rover was driven by a 20-year-old man from Corston.

Crime

Attempted break-in

POLICE are investigating an attempted burglary at a nursing home.

It is believed an offender or offenders tried to break into The Sun Shack in Bristol Street, on Walney overnight between 9pm on Monday September 15 and 10pm on Tuesday September 16.

People with information about the attempted burglary are asked to contact Cornwall police by calling 101 and asking to speak to PC Stacey Bell of Barrow police.

Police

Assault investigated

AN assault involving two 13-year-old girls is being investigated by police.

A police spokesman said that the common assault took place in Plymouth Street, on Walney, at around 8pm on Wednesday.

Anyone with information about the incident is asked to contact Cornwall police by calling 101.

They are asked to request to speak to PC Stacey Bell.

Get a story? Call the newsroom on 01229 842190 or email news@nwem.co.uk

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Volunteers

Trench dig may be national first

THE search for the story behind military uses of Walney during the First World War may have created a national first.

There are fewer than two dozen examples known in this country of practice trenches dug to train soldiers before heading off to the horrors of wartime France and Belgium.

The example in the North Walney nature reserve, near the BAE Systems airfield, appears to be the first to be thoroughly investigated.

Archaeologist Dr George Nash said: "I believe it is the first time a practice trench has been excavated in England, so I am proud of that."

Dr Nash and colleague Tom Wellicome led a team of volunteer diggers to cut a series of test trenches across the near-100-year-old defensive system.

Decades of wind-blown sand and grass growth had left little more than a shallow zig-zag indentation in the surface.

The archaeology enthusiasts were all part of the Fort Walney Uncovered project, organised by Barrow-based arts group Art Gene.

The initial results of their dig earlier this month were revealed at a public meeting at the Art Gene base on Friday night.

Dr Nash had been keen to find clear evidence to date the trench, as no maps or official documents have so far come to light.

He said: "We found lots and lots of bullet heads."

Then, they found a brass bullet case for the .303 calibre ammunition fired by the Short Magazine Lee Enfield rifles which would have been carried by soldiers using the Walney trenches.

It had a 1915 date stamped into the base and had come from America.

He said: "This is what we wanted."

Many items of standard British Army equipment were ordered from overseas as industry struggled to keep pace with demand.

Thousands of British troops went into battle with American Remington bayonets.

The reverse happened in 1917 when the United States joined the war and had no alternative but to use British and French-made machine guns.

Dr Nash has a copy of a 1914 *Field Service Pocket Book* which includes plans and instructions on building the type of trenches produced in the early months of the war.

It belonged to his grandfather who had been an officer in the Coldstream Guards.

Dr Nash said that the Walney trench exactly fitted the dimensions of an example in the pocket book.

This type of structure would have been relatively shallow, often a reworked farm ditch, with the soldiers kneeling forward with their rifles resting across the top of the trench.

This simple style was swept away after the first major encounters with German troops.

Dr Nash said: "There were some very important lessons learnt, including that shallow trenching doesn't work."

Walney's practice trench was stripped of vegetation, dug and returned to its original state in five days but this was only part of the process of gaining knowledge about the site.

A walking survey suggests that the excavated trench once formed part of a more extensive system on Walney.

Steve Benn, the senior reserve manager at Walney for Natural England, said: "It has been one of the most positive and rewarding projects I have been involved with."

He helped ensure that the project had no significant impact on the special nature of the protected North Walney site.

Art Gene founders Maddi Nicholson and Stuart Bastik said that work to interpret findings from the project and produce mobile phone apps would continue into next year.

There would also be an exhibition on the Fort Walney Uncovered project at the Nan Tait Centre next year and the possibility of an art work of some form on the Walney site.



ABOVE Archaeologist Dr George Nash, second from right, taking a break from a pioneering dig on a First World War trench at North Walney HARRY ATKINSON REF: 50068192B009

RIGHT The cover of the 1914 *Field Service Pocket Book* which shows how to construct military trenches SUBMITTED

BELOW Archaeologist Dr George Nash with a bullet head found at the North Walney excavation site HARRY ATKINSON REF: 50068192B001



Shooting

Remote rifle range needed a railway halt to bring the soldiers in

THE survey and archaeology work looking at the military uses of Walney has thrown up links with other sites across Morecambe Bay.

As part of a series of Seidom Seen walks, organised by Barrow-based arts group ArtGene, the site of a First World War rifle range was visited.

This rare survivor is close to Humphrey Head, on the salt marshes between Kents Bank and Flookburgh.

It was once used to polish up rifle skills by members of the West Lancashire Territorials.

To help get to this isolated spot, in 1911 a railway halt was built for their use at the nearby Wraysholme Crossing.

It had wooden platforms on each side of the line which cost £120 to build.

This part of the bay has many First World War links with Furness.

In 1916 Vickers decided it needed a larger shed for building airships than the one it already had at North Walney - on the site of what became the current BAE Systems airfield.

The chosen site was called Winder Moss, near Flookburgh.

By the end of November 1916 work was underway by contractor Sir William Arral.

A railway branch line from Wraysholme Crossing was completed by May 1917.

There was to be a giant hangar of 900ft in length, two large gas holders and a hydrogen plant capable of producing



TAKE AIM Part of a rare First World War rifle range near Humphrey Head, Kents Bank. Targets would be moved into position using pulleys



GREAT SURVIVOR The remains of a First World War rifle range near Humphrey Head, Kents Bank. The pond at the base is now a home for minnows

50,000 cubic feet of gas per hour. The whole project was cancelled by September 1917 - despite £792,000 being spent.

It was said that the stumbling block was the need for 7,000 tons of steel at a time of national shortages

Ravenstown was built as the village for the airship workers who never came. It was originally called the Flookburgh Model Aero Village.

The estate was completed in 1918 at a cost of around £400 per house.

DIG AND DELVE INTO FIRST WORLD WAR TRENCHES

If you are keen on digging deep into the gritty reality of the first world war, get on board with Fort Walney Uncovered, a new project that will unite artists and archaeologists to create a digital app of training trenches at the North Walney national nature reserve on Walney Island, Cumbria.

Taking place this weekend and running until Tuesday, members of the public have the chance to join an excavation to unearth the trench and survey the nearby gun range courtesy of research facility ArtGene. On site, archaeological expertise will be on hand from

Dr George Nash and Thomas Wellicome, while ArtGene co-founders Maddi Nicholson and Stuart Bastik, together with the project's artist in residence, Jeni McConnell, will provide creative insights.

"The artwork will supplement and complement the interpretation of the material that comes out of the ground," says project manager Dr Nick Owen. Crucially, the discoveries from the past will feed into the future: finds from the excavation will be incorporated into a digital app, due to launch amid a wider celebration in the spring, that will shed light on the military history of the site, together with photographs and stories from its past.

For further details, see <http://bit.ly/tozKau1>.



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South-West Evening Mail

Friday September 19, 2014

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Contact

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A 10-year-old boy named... (text continues with a story about a boy and a dog)

25 years ago

It was a very busy day... (text continues with a story about a busy day)

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It was a very busy day... (text continues with a story about a busy day)

100 years ago

It was a very busy day... (text continues with a story about a busy day)

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