

Title: Kingley Vale in World War 2 and the remaining evidence

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Summary: A summary of the lesser known military history of Kingley Vale as a training ground, involving the use of live ammunition in WWII, using research from newspapers, letters from Ministry of Defence, historical maps, aerial photographs, oral history and national archives.

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Kingley Vale in World War II and the remaining evidence

Kingley Vale a National Nature Reserve designated in 1952 is popular with walkers. It is well known for its ancient yew forest and Bronze Age Barrows. Less well known is that it was used as a military training ground during World War II.

The shape of the landscape with the Vale largely enclosed by the surrounding hills makes it ideal as a self-contained military training area. In the late 1800's it was used as a rifle range¹ with the targets set-up around 300 metres down the slope from the top. The map² shows firing positions up to 800 yards from the targets. At that time Kingley Vale was owned by the Duke of Richmond and was leased¹ by the military.

During World War II Canadian and British troops were charged with the defence of the Sussex coast and based all along the South Downs. In the event of invasion Kingley Vale was one of the locations for the "British Resistance Movement"³ often referred to as "Home Guard Auxiliary Units". Formed in 1940³, these units were intended to harass the invaders and gather intelligence. The West Stoke Patrol was based at Kingley Vale with their main hideout near the bottom of the valley, linked by telephone to an observation post (see photo) midway up the western ridge. Today the observation post is under trees but aerial photographs^{4,5} from the period show that the site was much more open affording clear views.



Remains of Auxiliary Unit
Observation Post on
western ridge

Kingley Vale was never used as a base where troops were stationed, its main role was as an infantry training ground. Troops came to the site for short periods. This makes it harder to put together a good picture of what happened. No permanent buildings were constructed, troops probably stayed in tents or huts all now gone. Canadian soldiers based nearby at Horndean and also probably Rowlands Castle, trained at Kingley Vale. Training records⁶ refer to "Bullets and Bayonets" and training with 2" mortars and Bren Guns.

Training with live rounds and mortars is inherently dangerous and one member of the Home Guard was killed⁷ by a stray bullet during training in 1942. Richard Williamson the Nature Warden for Kingley Valley for 30 years from the early 1960's recalls⁸ Fred Longman a local bailiff talking of removing the bodies of nine Canadians killed during training.

Despite the potential hazards, Kingley Vale was not totally sealed off. Ben Dunk⁹ a local schoolboy recalls cycling over to the site. Finding an unexploded mortar bomb he tried to prize off the fin with a knife. Luckily for him the knife slipped stabbing him in the hand, probably saving his life.

Training at Kingley Vale probably reached its peak in the months running up to D-Day from late 1943 on. That is when the greatest number of troops, were stationed nearby.

After the War Kingley Vale returned to private ownership, becoming a National Nature Reserve in 1952. The site had been cleared of its most obvious war time relics but as time went on the hazards that remained caused increasing concern. Richard Williamson recalls⁸ Fred Longman talking about ploughing up live mortar rounds, in the large field to the East of the main entrance.

As more people visited Kingley Vale it became clear that there were still many unexploded munitions on the site. In 1956 a newspaper article¹⁰ headlined "Death Lurks in this Lovely Vale" demanded that the War Office do something about it. Action to clear the site was undertaken during 1957-1958. One issue they faced was identifying where the mortars had been fired from, the wartime records are poor and did not really help. The assumption was made that the mortars were fired from the Valley up towards the top. Accordingly an area (see map attached) about 600m wide, extending 300m down the valley was cleared.

Unexploded munitions continued to be found and in 1966 a bomb disposal unit made a selective search of part of the Valley. A letter¹¹ from the Ministry of Defence states that "it is now fairly certain that the earlier idea that missiles were fired from the valley into the head of the valley was quite wrong and that the general practice was to fire from the British Camp (on the north side) into the Valley.

It was not until 1990 a proper clearance of the site was made. The MoD contacted a number of Nature Reserves as potential training areas for bomb clearance. Richard Williamson knowing what lurked in Kingley Vale volunteered and a comprehensive clearance began. The area chosen (see map attached) stretched from under the top ridge all down the valley. It took many weeks but the search was thorough using the latest detection equipment and 6000 bombs of various types (see photo) were recovered. This is quite remarkable considering that the site had been open to the public for nearly forty years.



Examples of mortar rounds recovered from Kingley Vale

Unexploded mortar rounds continue to turn up, in 2013 one was found and destroyed by a controlled explosion recorded¹² on YouTube. Further evidence of the war can be seen in the scars on the yew trees (see photo).



Three shrapnel scars in a row on a yew tree

Most people walking through Kingley Vale today would not be aware of its wartime past. There are few reminders of its use as a training ground or possible dangers. However if you know where to look Kingley Vale will give up its secrets.

References

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2. Ordnance Survey, Six Inch 1888-1913, Sussex XLVIII.SW, Revised: 1896, Published: 1899
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6. CANADIAN FORCES, Schools and Training, 1942 Jan-Apr, National Archives Kew, Reference WO 179/1615
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8. Oral History, recordings made of conversations with Richard Williamson 29th June 2015, SHW archives
9. So Many Secrets, Chapter 14, memoirs by Ben DUNK, West Dean House, West Sussex, England, © copyright 2010 Benjamin Dunk.
<http://www.dunkantix.com/secrets/Chapter14.htm>
10. See attached Newspaper Article below
11. See letter below
12. Video of controlled explosion of mortar first published 2013
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Nsr9B66xDU>

DEATH LURKS IN THIS LOVELY VALE

Unexploded Bombs

DEATH waits in beautiful Kingley Vale, near Chichester. It may be death for an adult who should know better, or for some unsuspecting child...

It is there in the shape of mortar bombs, hand grenades, and a miscellaneous assortment of rusty but none the less dangerous ammunition.

And although adults should have sense enough to leave these things alone, there is not a single warning notice at the entrance to the Vale—nothing to tell the stranger that at any time he might step on a bomb and perhaps be severely injured or blown to pieces.

It would not be a remote possibility if someone did step on a bomb. For although there are about 150 acres of Kingley Vale, it took two reporters and a photographer only half-an-hour to find four suspicious objects yesterday.

One was a bakelite object like a large screw-cap, another looked like a grenade, the third was a flat brass disc about four inches in diameter, and the fourth was definitely a mortar bomb, about a foot long, and with a finned end.

There is something of a mystery regarding the absence of warning notices in the Vale. At the end of World War II there were large notices which warned: "Soldiers use bombs here which can kill you," and advised people to leave objects alone, and inform the police.

As recently as five or six weeks ago new notices were put up. From all accounts they were most effective. They were in red paint on a white background, and proclaimed: "Unexploded mortar bombs may remain in this area. Do not touch unfamiliar objects but inform the police."

Acting on orders received, the War Office's Garrison Engineer at Brighton put up those notices. Then, a couple of weeks ago, also acting on orders received, he went back and took them down.

Why such a dangerous area should be left without warning notices was a mystery reporters could not solve. No-one was prepared to say who had objected to the notices to cause their removal, but the police said they were as concerned as anyone about it.

Supt. S. L. Simmonds told the Evening News: "Discussions are going on now, and have been going on for some time, between the War Office, the Nature Conservancy, and the

Police, as to the possibility of erecting signs and where they will be put."

The Police realize the need for urgency, for with the beginning of the summer, the picnickers will soon be coming in their hundreds, ramblers will be tramping over the Downs, and many will no doubt make the journey especially to see Kingley Vale, where the best yew trees in Europe grow.

Ownership of the Vale is divided among the Forestry Commission, the Nature Conservancy, the National Trust, and a number of farmers in the area.

Much of it is dense scrubland, and it is probably for this reason that War Office attempts to remove all the explosives have not been effective.

Mr. R. S. Mason, of West Stoke Farm, West Ashling, who owned part of the Vale before selling it to the Nature Conservancy, remembers the days when it was used as a battle training ground for soldiers. Squads of soldiers fought mock battles there with live ammunition, and there were dumps of explosives all over the Vale. He recalls that the Army authorities took out loads of live mortar bombs and smoke bombs when they cleared it up after the war.

"But no-one will ever manage to get all the stuff out of there," he said. "It's too big and too overgrown for that."

Mr. Mason believes people should have the sense to leave things alone if they find them, and he also believes many of the bombs are "duds," anyway.

The opinion that the place is dangerous and that people ought to know what to expect, is held by Coun. E. W. Tozer (Chichester's Deputy Mayor).

While riding from Kingley Vale to Stoke Clump on horseback the other day, he met two police sergeants who said they had exploded five bombs there in the last ten days. Each made a crater five feet wide and three feet deep.

Coun. Tozer was warned to look out for further bombs, and found one.

"People ought to know about these things, because obviously they are not only alive, but also very dangerous," he said.

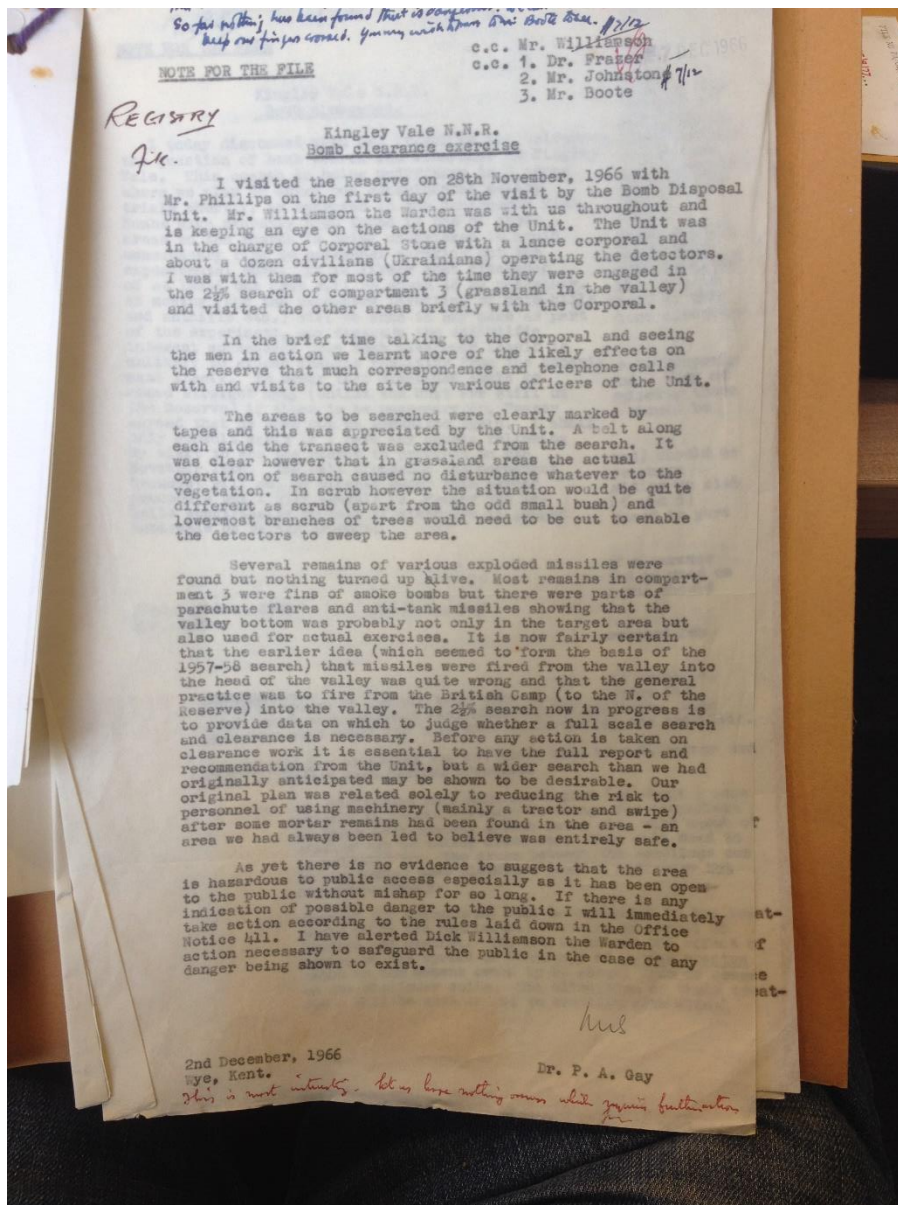


This mortar bomb might have killed. But the reporter who found it was careful not to move it. A child, however, might have risked it.

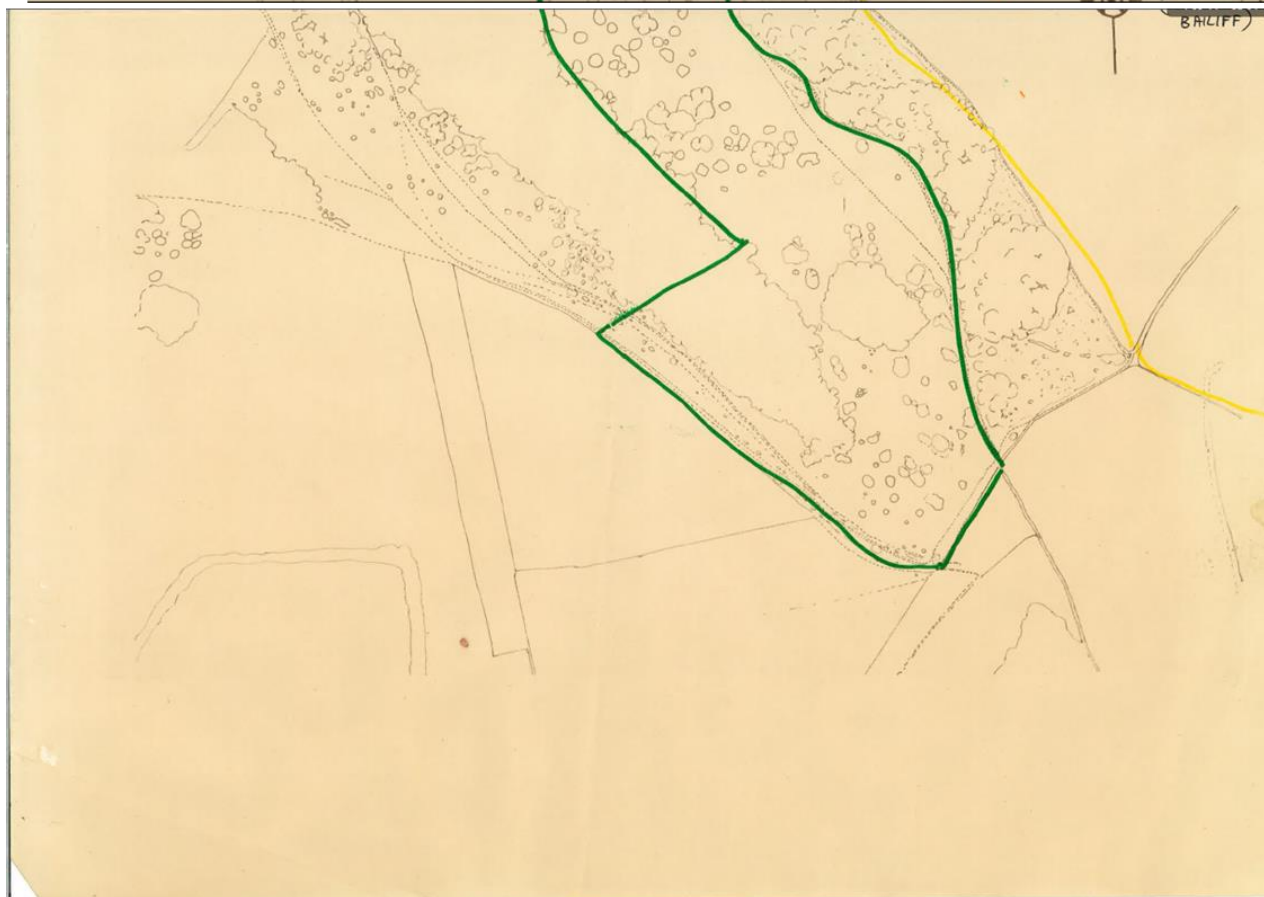
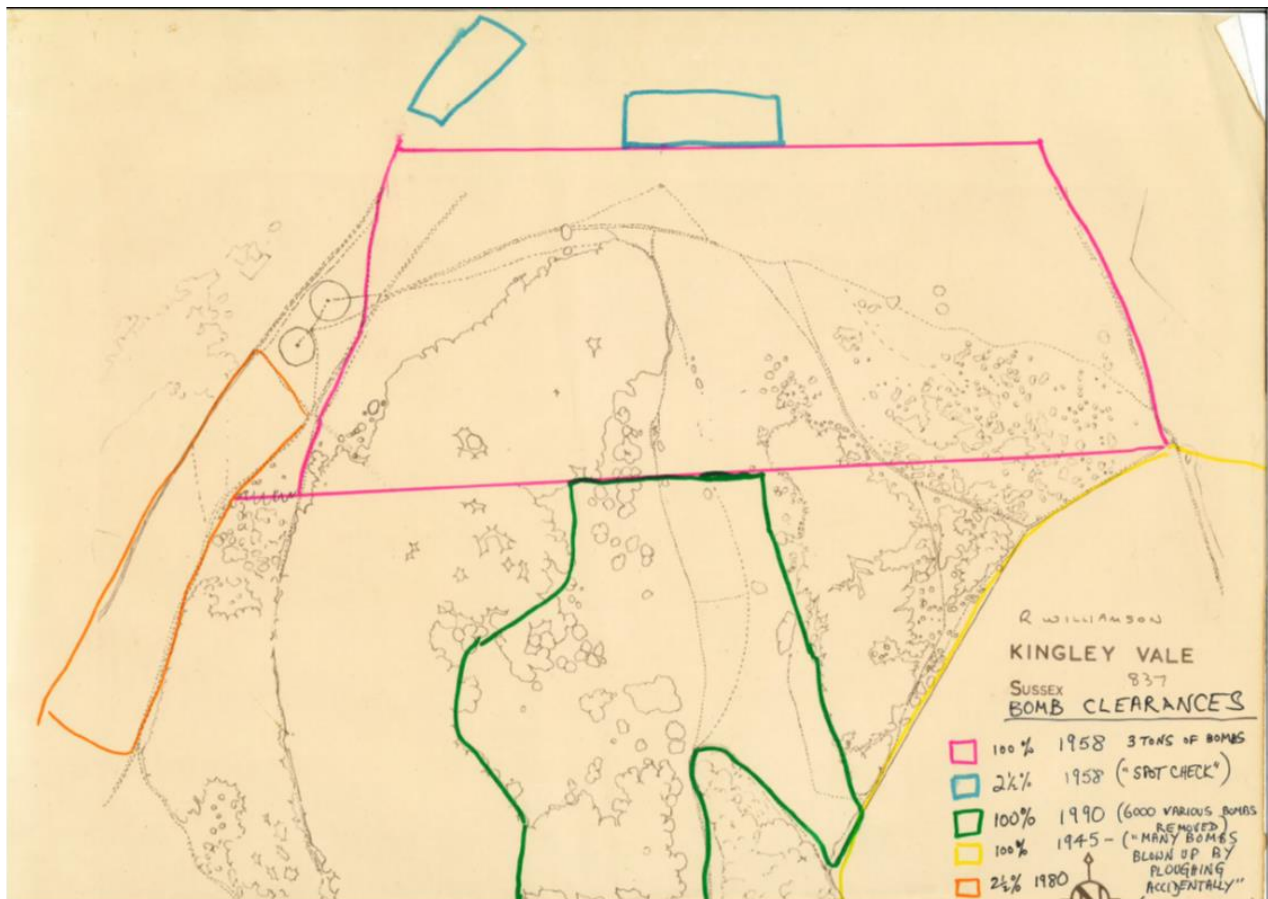


"Anyone finding an unusual object should report it," clearly said the notice. But this photograph was taken in vain, and reporters who visited Kingley Vale yesterday did not see one.

Ref 9. 1956 a newspaper article9 in the Evening News and Southern Daily Mail headlined "Death Lurks in this Lovely Vale", SHW Records



10 Letter from Dr P A Gay December 1968 concerning "Bomb Clearance Exercise at Kingley Vale", SHW Records



Kingley Vale, map showing areas cleared of munitions at various times from 1958 onwards. SHW Records