



Field Archaeology at Coleshill

The wartime history of the National Trust site at Coleshill continues to be an on-going topic of interest. In 1940 Coleshill was chosen as the location for the Headquarters and training centre for Britain's secret underground army – the Auxiliary Units.

Between August 1940 and December 1944 members of this secret army from all over the country came to Coleshill to receive training in the use of explosives, weapons and the arts of sabotage and silent killing. Their role, in the event of a German invasion, was to leave their homes and families and literally disappear into underground hides known as Operational Bases and then to emerge behind enemy lines to commit acts of sabotage and assassination before they were brought to action, betrayed or tracked down.

At the end of the war the areas of Coleshill estate used by the Auxiliary Units were cleared of any structures or aspects of their wartime use. However, over the years interest in Coleshill and its wartime role has grown. An intact Operational Base used for training the Auxiliars was discovered in the late 1970's and the bases of various wartime buildings were found in the woodland.

In July 2010 a one-day event marking the 70th anniversary of the formation of the Auxiliary Units took place and at the instigation of the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) it was agreed that a non-invasive archaeological survey be undertaken to ascertain and identify the extent of any other remains of Coleshill's wartime use under the project name 'Coleshill Uncovered'.

During the weekend of 22/23 January an initial survey took place under strict conditions laid down by the National Trust. The survey was conducted under the direction of the Archaeological Department of Bristol University overseen by archaeologist Neil Faulkner and supervised by local



Photos: Evening Advertiser

field-archaeologist John Winterburn and Anna Gow. The work was carried out by volunteers from a number of organisations including the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART), Ridgeway Military and Aviation Research Group (RMARG), Subterranea Britannica and the Military Vehicle Trust.

Over the weekend the foundations of a number of wartime buildings were uncovered, measured, mapped and recorded and a number of artefacts discovered. The work will provide, for the first time, a detailed layout of part of the site and allow a broad interpretation of the use of the buildings in this area.

During the survey, the need for great care when investigating ex-military sites was underlined when a WW2 mortar bomb was unearthed. The bomb was left 'in-situ' and isolated. The police were notified and the army Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit carried out a small controlled explosion to render the bomb 'safe'.

A further interesting find was a military bayonet in its scabbard which had been hidden in a recess. The bayonet was well preserved considering that it must have been concealed for over 65 years. The locations of all 'finds' were recorded and the finds removed for cleaning and identification.



It is intended that the 'Coleshill Uncovered' project will continue and further exploration will be undertaken later in the year. The project was reported on BBC Radio Wiltshire, BBC Radio Oxford and in the Swindon Evening Advertiser. It was reported on BBC Television 'Points West' from Bristol and on the regional Television News. Further coverage can be seen on the web site of the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) at www.coleshillhouse.com.

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