

Context

A 29mm Blacker Bombard spigot mortar located within a hedgerow on land off Bennetts Road, Keresley. Reported to the Coventry Historic Environment Record in 2022 by a member of the public and confirmed during archaeological works undertaken by the University of Leicester Archaeological Services. Located at Grid Reference SP 32023 83357.

Visits

A site visit was undertaken by the Council's Archaeology Officer on 5th April 2023.

Assessment – Discussion



Figure 1 Spigot Mortar (looking north)

From the summer of 1940 England's defences were strengthened against the threat of German invasion and a variety of defensive structures were built across the country. These included 29mm spigot mortars which were developed between 1940 and 1941 as anti-tank defences.

Designed by Lieutenant Colonel VVS Blacker they were also known as 'Blacker Bombards'. In addition to mobile units, a large number of static emplacements

were issued. They were placed at points of local tactical advantage often as part of linear defences schemes such as 'stop-lines', composed of a number of defensive structures which were designed to obstruct the enemy's advance.

Drawings issued by the Directorate of Fortifications and Works in September 1941 show that the fixed emplacements were designed to consist of a circular or octagonal concrete pedestal or 'thimble' with a metal pintle at its center onto which a weapon could be swivel mounted. A narrow pit around the outside of the pedestal allowed the operating crew a degree of protection and the ability to turn the mortar in any direction. The pits could also incorporate approach trenches and up to four brick or concrete ammunition lockers. It is estimated that around 8000 fixed emplacements were issued, though far fewer survive.

The majority of spigot mortar emplacements that are represented on the NHLE are designated as components of wider scheduled sites, however two examples are scheduled in their own right. The spigot mortars at Hapton, Lancashire (NHLE 1432881) and Farnham Park (NHLE 1444575) both survive remarkably well and have readable layouts which retain a diversity of original features including ammunition lockers. They also have group value with other listed assets that form part of a wider Second World War group.

This spigot mortar emplacement east of Bennetts Road on the northern outskirts of Coventry was probably constructed around 1941 or 1942. It will have formed part of an inland defensive stop-line, along with the undesignated red-brick pillbox approximately 270m to the north-west.

However, no other associated defensive structures have been identified and it may be that others that formed part of the defensive line have been lost. The spigot mortar is situated in the tree line / hedgerow between two fields and is composed of a round concrete pedestal, or 'thimble', mounted with a central steel pintle. There is no visible evidence of an associated pit, trench or ammunition lockers.

Historic England have recently assessed the site for formal designation but determined that it fell just short of national listing, stating that while the spigot mortar was of clear local interest as one of a small number of recorded defensive structures in Warwickshire, it falls just short of the level necessary to recommend it for listing in the national context. It is representative of the wartime value of Coventry, with its vast contribution to the military efforts, and a site type which has hitherto not been recorded within the city.

The mortar sits within the tree protection zone of a number of mature oaks and therefore is outside of the area of proposed redevelopment. As part of the planning consent, the mortar spigot will be protected and a historic building survey completed, recording all elements of the structure. Should this reveal further surviving elements, such as ammunition lockers, it may be national designation will be revisited.



Figure 2 Spigot Mortar close-up

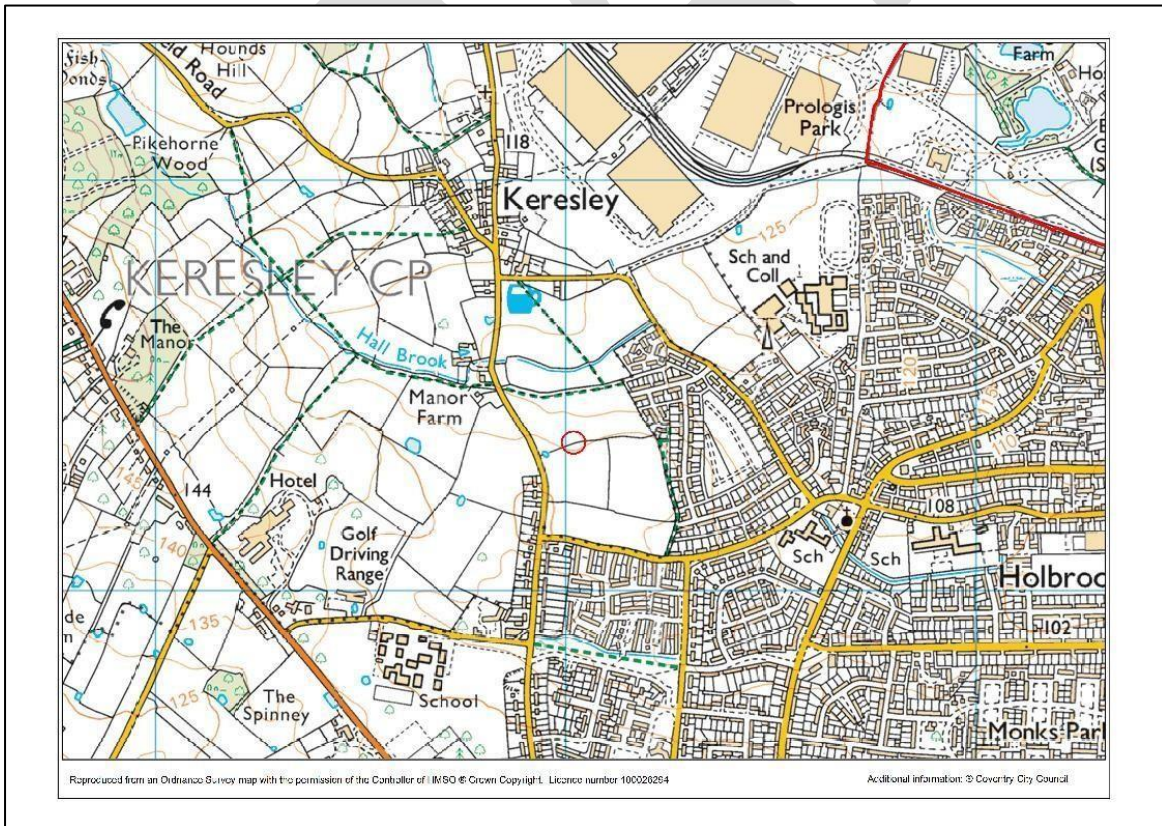


Figure 3 Spigot Mortar Location

Assessment – Criteria

Assessing the heritage asset against the Local List criteria, the heritage asset is valued locally for the following:

Historic:

The site displays substantial historic, social and community significance and was felt by Historic England to only fall short of national importance. Historic value considered medium to high.

Age:

The site was likely constructed in 1940-41 and although not of great antiquity, dates from a period when there was a massive change in the very fabric of the lives of Coventrians.

Rarity:

This is a solitary known surviving 29mm Blacker Bombard from Coventry. Rarity is considered to be medium to high.

Integrity:

The spigot emplacement itself is relatively complete although it is uncertain whether any associated elements have survived. Integrity is considered to be medium to high.

Group Value:

It was once part of a wider defensive network but now stands alone. It may be associated with a pillbox 200m to the northwest. The pillbox is of red brick and concrete construction, with walls of red brick and a roof of corrugated iron or asbestos sheeting covered in a later of concrete. It has a square plan form with wall 2.75m in length and 1.75m. To the south there is a central entrance opening, which steps down onto a sunken concrete floor. The entrance has suffered damage to its brickwork in addition, may have had a concrete/brick blast guard in front of it – several large lumps of concrete were lying on the ground on the east side of the structure. Its northern wall has a single firing embrasure offering a good field of fire along the line of Bennetts Road to the north and is positioned close to a small bridge over the Hall Brook. It is a non- standard design, but the nearest comparable examples architecturally are the Royal Ordnance Factories (ROFs) type. It is not proposed at this stage to locally list the pillbox. Group value is considered low to medium.

Coventry's identity:

The site represents a rare or potentially unique example of the wartime defensive circuits around Coventry. There are no other examples recorded on the Coventry Historic Environment Record.

Coventry's local identity value is considered medium to high.

Image Right - Figure 4

Home Guard soldiers operate a 'Blacker Bombard' spigot mortar during training at No. 3 GHQ Home Guard School in Shropshire, 20 May 1943



Evidence:

The site has high potential to contribute to the narrative of wartime Coventry, being a rare or perhaps unique survivor of the defenses placed, around the city and reflects the value Coventry had for the nation's wartime efforts. Although more common originally, the site may now be a symbolic, remnant of the wider defensive network and should therefore, be recognized as such. Although the structure is legible as a spigot mortar emplacement, it lacks the level of survival and diversity of original features that are better demonstrated in designated examples and therefore is deemed to be of local to regional significance. It is possible that further evidence survives such as ammunition lockers, which may be hidden by overgrowth or buried now beneath the soil. Consequently, the site has clear historical value and the potential for further archaeological significance. There has been no known record of any surviving world war defences from this period of history in the wider Warwickshire area.

The evidential value is considered medium to high.

Conclusion

After review of the information submitted in nomination and desktop research, the application is assessed to be valid, and it is therefore recommended that the nomination progress to a public consultation.

Recommendations of the inclusion of the Spigot Mortar on the Local List of heritage assets will be subject to the findings of public consultation and presented to Cabinet Member in due to course.

Reasons for recommendation decision

To be completed following public consultation process.

This report dated: 29th November 2023

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