

Mystery Object Identified



In the last edition of the Newsletter, we published the picture reproduced above of a mystery object found on Naphill Common near Wycombe. Initially, the thought was that perhaps it was the sort of garden roller that is hollow but which, when filled with water, would be sufficiently heavy so that it might effectively flatten soil and grass. An alternative suggestion was that this was some sort of agricultural equipment. These thoughts of harmless and pacific rural technologies were savagely blown away when it was suggested that the object had the appearance of an unexploded military projectile. Faces paled at the memory of this “garden roller” aka bomb thumping about in the boot of the car in which it had been with a certain happy nonchalance transported along the potholed surfaces of Buckinghamshire lanes. In fact there was no risk, for any explosive charge and detonator had long since drained from the empty casing which was now no more than an empty canister, a judgement confirmed when the object was declared harmless by the military experts called in to examine and deal with it.

Now Stuart Thornley, a member of BAS, has taken it home where he carried out extensive researches. He has found that it certainly is a piece of military equipment – but not a bomb or mine or shell. It seems that this is a type of nautical smoke flare used between the two wars and finally phased out in 1942 and sometimes referred to as Holmes Light. There are two compartments, one air filled so that the cylinder will float, and the other sealed compartment containing a mixture of chemicals which, when triggered on exposure to water, will send out a brilliant light and dense clouds of smoke. These flares had two alternative uses: they may be used as lights on life rafts to attract rescue vessels, or they were attached to anti submarine nets to be triggered by enemy craft unknowingly caught up in the defences.

Our thanks are due to Stuart for this detective work and solution. There remains one mystery: whatever was a nautical flare doing more than a hundred miles from any naval base and several hundred feet above sea level? That old song we sang at school springs to mind: “What shall we do with the drunken sailor.....?”

Michael Ghirelli