



A Basic Introduction to
The Lee-Enfield Rifle of the Great War

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“So you want a Great War Enfield?” A short guide to “things to look for.”

Introduction (the purpose)

This short discussion is intended solely as a guide to a prospective purchaser of a British WWI service rifle. This is not intended as a history of the Lee-Enfield Rifle, or its evolution or detailed account of modifications – such accounts may be found elsewhere. The purpose here is to provide a concise guide to someone with an interest in the British Great War rifle.

The scenario I have in mind is this. A general WWI enthusiast or collector decides s/he wants to add a representative sample of the British service rifle to their collection and runs across one at a local “Antique Mall”, “Militaria shop” or “Collectors’ Fair” Faced with this example the collector, not a firearms specialist, perhaps wants basic guidance on what to look for. This is what this work seeks to provide. This is not a comprehensive guide to every nuance and variation but a basic general guide that should mean a prospective purchaser will know what they are getting. This is intended to provide basic information to the prospective buyer; it is not intended to be the sole reference.

The bottom line is this. A large number of surviving Enfields, especially deactivated ones, have been through a number of official and unofficial assemblies and reassemblies. Most are also getting on for a century old. This means that many of them are not in the format they would have been in the years 1914-1918. If this [originality] is the key criterion of interest, then the prospective buyer should be aware of this fact. Personally, I do not find modifications detract from my interest in the rifle, however my interest is often in the rifle as much as it is in the Great War use of the rifle and I recognize that others have different, and equally valid, interests. What follows is a straightforward attempt to provide a basic summary of information to help inform the buyer. I have not attempted to suggest values or prices, but on occasion I have noted comparative rarity.

It has been my experience that many vendors are not particularly knowledgeable about the details of what they are selling. As a result, details are sometimes omitted or crucial elements deemphasized. It is my view that this is usually a result of ignorance rather than malevolence although to the buyer who fails to recognize these shortcomings until it is too late, this distinction may be academic. Sellers will, understandably, emphasize those elements which they believe will enhance the salability/price of their object. Likewise, they may neglect to mention other elements which may detract. All of this serves simply to emphasize the importance of the well know Latin phrase “*caveat emptor!*” (Buyer beware!) – the purpose of this document is to provide the buyer with some information. To reiterate: a Lee-Enfield, unmodified in any way from the configuration in which it was used in the Great War is, despite production entering into millions, difficult to find.

Legal considerations (the fine print)

Nothing in this guide should be considered legal advice. Firearms are designed to kill. As a result, they are subject to considerable legislation. Obviously this regulation varies very significantly from country to country. This guide is written with a British collector in mind. The Firearms legislation in the UK is complex and under almost constant review. Although there are sometimes frustrations, inefficiencies and even apparent contradictions and inconsistencies within firearms legislation and the enforcement of that legislation, staying legal is very important. The penalties associated with firearms offences are significant. Ignorance of the respective legislation is not a defence, and it is incumbent upon the potential owner to ensure full compliance with all of the relevant laws and regulations.

As a result of the complexities and sometimes expense related to owning a “live” firearm in the UK, many collectors prefer to restrict themselves to “deactivated” weapons. “Deactivated” weapons are firearms which have been through an official (and documented) process of permanently rendering them incapable of firing. In effect they are converted from firearms to lumps of wood and metal in the shape of a firearm. The requirements for deactivation have altered over the years but it is important to ensure that a deactivated weapon meets the official requirements and is properly documented. It should be noted that potentially, even “relic” firearms, excavated from a battlefield and rusted into a lump might, under certain interpretations of the law, be considered firearms (as they have not been officially deactivated). The message is very simple, cut no corners, err on the side of caution and, if in doubt, seek qualified legal advice.

Identifying a Great War Enfield

Lee-Enfields of various sorts were in production for almost a century. Thus the first step is to identify those used in the Great War. Below are pictures of several more or less commonly encountered Lee-Enfields. The pictures are not to scale. Those preceded with an * are likely to have seen service in the Great War.



* **Magazine Lee-Enfield** – First Lee-Enfield rifle in service from Boer War to WWI no facility for charger loading. P1888 Bayonet



Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Carbine – carbine length weapon used prior to the introduction of the SMLE. P1888 Bayonet



***Charger Loading Lee-Enfield** – “Long” Magazine rifle with addition of charger bridge for loading. P1888 Bayonet



Short, Magazine Lee-Enfield Mk I** - short rifle with sliding charger guide mounted on bolt head. P1903 / P1907 Bayonet



Short, Magazine Lee Enfield MkIII - simplified MkIII without volley sights, cut-off etc. P1903 / P1907 Bayonet



Lee-Enfield No4 Mk1 (WWII and on) – note receiver (peep) sight and protruding muzzle. “Spike” Bayonet.



Lee-Enfield No5 Mk1 (WWII and on) – note flash hider, short length and receiver sight. Blade Bayonet



Rifle 7.62mm 2A1 (Indian 1964 on) – 7.62mm calibre, squared magazine and foresight protector ears. Shortened 1907 Bayonet

The types shown represent only a fraction of the variants and sub-variants (see reading lists for detailed sources), however they are the types most likely to be encountered. Magazine Lee-Enfields (“long” Lee-Enfields) will be substantially less frequently encountered, as will the early carbines. The good news is that the most commonly encountered rifles will be of the standard Great War vintage, however the vast majority of them will have been modified somewhere along the line. After the Great War huge numbers were put into storage, others were shipped all over the British Empire. SMLEs saw widespread use throughout WWII and continued in Australian service through the Korean War. The rifle continues in service in India, although these days relegated to third-line duty with paramilitary regional police forces and cadets. Large numbers of the rifles that have entered the civilian market in the past couple of decades have come from India.

Great War Enfields: Three most common types in service:



Charger loading Lee-Enfield (CLLE)



Loading from charger clips allowed the rifle's magazine to be refilled more rapidly. A clip of five rounds was placed in a guide on the top of the action of the rifle and thumb pressure was used to "strip" the rounds downwards into the magazine, 5 at a time. Initially SMLEs were fitted with a sliding guide on the bolt head but this was soon replaced by a fixed charger bridge over the action (below).



Although the short rifle had been introduced over a decade before the war, large numbers of British soldiers, particularly those from the Territorial battalions, went to war in 1914/15 carrying the earlier model “long” rifle – the Magazine Lee-Enfield. The vast majority of these had been modified to the Charger Loading format with the addition of a charger bridge, shown above. These rifles are referred to as CLLE (Charger Loading Lee Enfield). By early 1916, the majority of troops in the front lines had been reequipped with the Short Rifle, the famous Short, Magazine Lee-Enfield or SMLE. The most common versions of this rifle to see service in the Great War were the MkIII introduced in 1907 and the MkIII* introduced in late 1915 early 1916, as a wartime production expedient.



Short, Magazine Lee-Enfield MkIII introduced in 1907

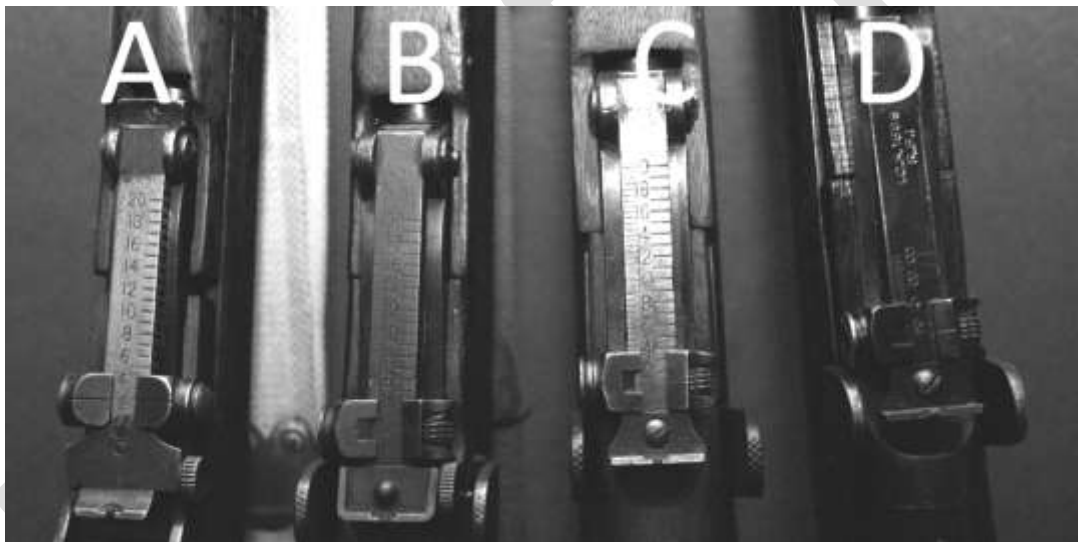


The MkIII introduced some refinements over the earliest MkI rifles. The most noticeable of these was the addition of a charger bridge to allow for charger loading of the magazine, this replaced a rather complex and fragile sliding charger guide attached to the bolt head. The upper hand guard was modified and rear sight protectors moved from being an integral part of the hand guard to a separate part attached to the foreend. The MkIII rifle also introduced a modified rear sight, but retained long rang “volley” sights on the right side of the rifle. MkIII rifles also had a magazine cut-off (a plate that pivots over the top of the magazine to prevent rounds from feeding into the action). The butt of MkIII rifles also included a brass disc inset into the right side onto which unit markings could be stamped. The need for massively increased production led to the approval of a series of production simplifications which collectively gave rise to a new mark of rifle the MkIII* (mark three star). MkIII* rifles dispensed with the volley sights, the magazine cut-off and the butt marking disk.



Short, Magazine Lee-Enfield MkIII* introduced in late 1915

As with all mid-production changes, there are all manner of variations where rifles were assembled (or later refinished) and demonstrate a mixture of these components. The picture is further complicated by post war refinishing which sometimes reconfigured MkIII* to MkIII configuration (on these rifles the asterisk is lined out). The variations and apparent exceptions to rules abound and are discussed at length in some of the recommended reading (below) For our purposes here a simple overview of the three main types is sufficient so long as it is borne in mind that there may be significant variation on these themes. One of the components that was modified several times during the long service life of the rifle was the rear sight. Initially a complex design adjustable for windage (left/right) as well as range, the sight was later simplified considerably.



A=early, B=windage adjustable, C= Standard WWI type, D Indian 2A1 rifle (800yds only)

One additional rifle that may be encountered is not a Lee-Enfield at all. Prior to the outbreak of the war Britain had been investigating a new rifle based on a modified Mauser action. This design was in an advanced stage of development however the outbreak of war meant that adopting a new rifle (initially designed in a new, smaller high-velocity calibre) was impractical. Rechambered for the standard .303 round, large orders were placed with three factories in the US: Winchester, Remington and Eddystone (Remington), to produce this new rifle which entered British service as the Pattern 1914 rifle.



Eddystone Pattern 1914 rifle. The US produced the same rifle in 30.06 as the Rifle .30 cal Model 1917.

What to look for: a checklist.

1) Examine the right side of the wrist of the rifle, here you will usually find basic identifying information. The standard format is as shown, a crown and royal cypher, manufacturer, date, model and mark. A standard wartime British SMLE MkIII will contain the markings Crown/GR/Enfield (or BSA Co or LSA Co)/date/ShtLE/III (or III* if post 1915). A small sample is shown below.



1901 LE LSA Co.



1905 ShtLE I*** BSA



1907 SMLE MkIII BSA



1918 SMLE MkIII* Enfield



1918 MkIII* BSA Co



1927 MkIII Ishapore



1939 MkIII Ishapore



1941 MkIII* Lithgow



1942 "DISPERSAL" MkIII*



1944 "DISPERSAL" MkIII*



Post independence Indian Mk3



Indian 1986 Production .303

It is also worth checking the opposite side of the rifle under the safety. Often conversion data or refinishing stamps will be found here. In these locations dates are usually rendered by using an apostrophe and the last two numbers so '41 would be 1941.

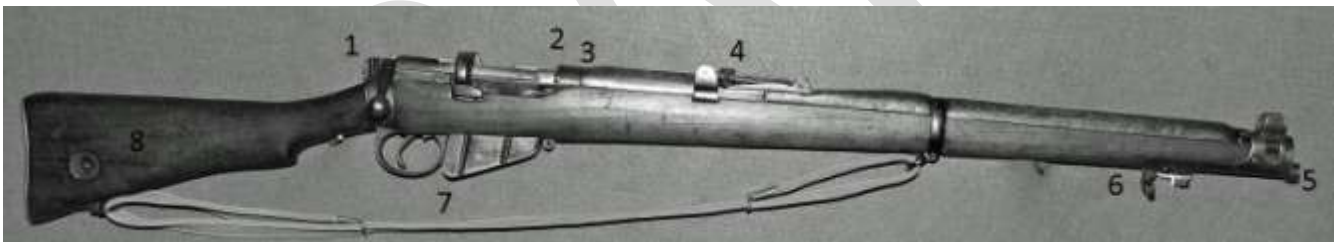
2) Remove the rear hand guard. (This is held in place with a circular spring-clip and needs to be levered off carefully taking particular care not to damage the thin wooded fingers of the hand guard). Under the hand guard you will probably find a plethora of markings and stampings (see below)



Upper hand guard clip

Receiver and barrel showing proof stamps, serials and dates.

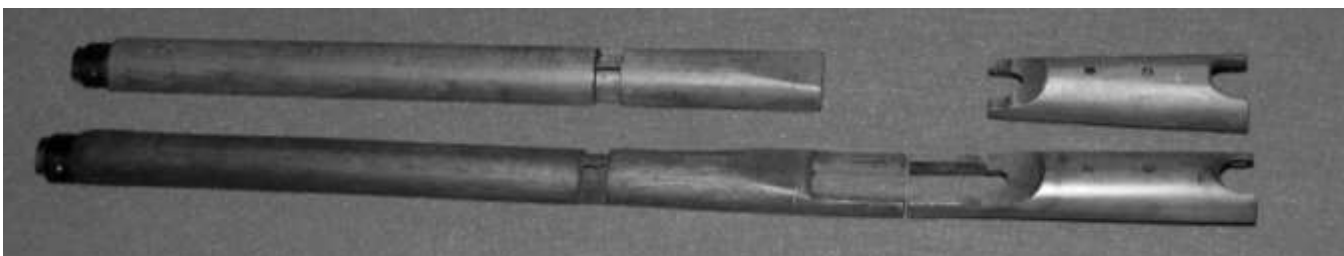
3) Compare serial numbers. SMLEs were usually numbered in six different places. Working from the rear of the rifle these are; 1 the bolt handle(rear face), 2 the receiver, 3 the barrel(under the rear hand guard), 4 the underside of the rear sight, 5 the bayonet boss of the nose-piece (below the muzzle) and 6 the wooden fore-end (on the underside just behind the nosepiece.) Some rifles also had the magazine numbered on the rear spine. This was not standard British practice but it is very common on rifles that saw Indian service. Rifles that have seen Australian service often have a good deal of stamping (including sometimes serial numbers) on the butt. Given the age and service history of most surviving rifles one which matches in all locations commands something of a premium.



Common Modifications and Changes

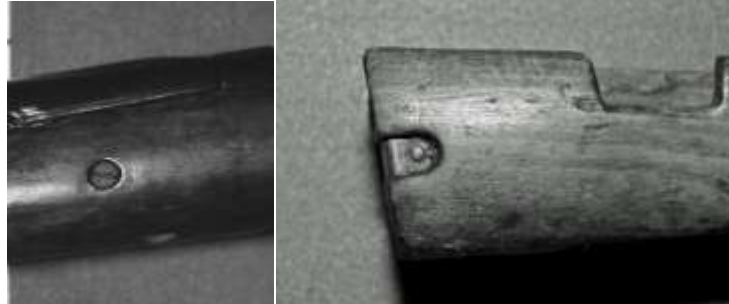
The SMLE MkIII/III* remained in British service throughout WWII despite the introduction of the No 4 rifle. In Australian service the MkIII/III* remained in production until the mid 1950s and in India production continues into the 1980s in small numbers. Given that this gives almost a century of service (SMLEs are still to be seen with paramilitary organizations in India) surviving rifles often exhibit a number of modifications and/or changes in configuration as a result of this long and active service. Attitudes towards this vary. Some collectors view this as part of the history of the rifle; others see the changes as modifications that should be "corrected". For a collector interested in a rifle as it served during the Great War some of these modifications are worth noting.

Trimming of Hand guard "fingers". The hand guards on SMLEs have thin projections of "fingers" of wood which run either side of the rear sight. These are fragile and can break relatively easily. At some point it appears to have become practice (it seems in Indian service and during WWII and after) to remove these from the front and/or the rear upper hand guards. Such a modification is common on surviving rifles but is unlikely to have been seen on WWI rifles. The picture below show trimmed and untrimmed.



Ishapore Screw: Large numbers of rifles in Indian service were fitted with a transverse screw through the forend. The purpose of this was to provide stiffening to the wood and prevent splitting. Although this practice was known to British armourers, the presence of such a screw in a rifle foreend almost always indicates WWII and later Indian Service or furniture of Indian origin. These screws would not have been present in Great War vintage rifles in original configuration.

Forend Backstrap: In later production Indian rifles a metal reinforcing backstrap, similar to that used on the No4 rifle, was introduced to strengthen the rear of the forend and prevent cracking. Earlier rifles had an internal metal insert and sometimes externally visible brass pins.



GF Bolt: In essence a scaled up version of the Ishapore Screw (above) – a quite considerable number of rifles were wrapped in copper wire (some, far fewer, in sheet metal) to stiffen them for grenade launching duty. Many of these rifles had a large transverse bolt through the fore-end. If the wire or sheet metal wrapping remains in place these rifles are readily identifiable – however some have appeared on the market with the wire removed (signs are usually apparent). The large transverse bolt is usually present. The vast majority of these rifles originate from India. Grenade Firing rifles (cord, wire and steel wrapped) were produced in the UK however these are uncommon and the vast majority of those encountered outside specialist sales are likely to be Indian, and of post Great War production.



Grenade Launching Rifle (with cup discharger and wire wrap – see also the large transverse bolt behind rear wrapping)



Foresight Protector Variations:

A & B = Great War. A= MkI, B= MkIII/III*, C= Australian (post war), D = Indian “squared” version (post WWII).

Locations and Meanings of Markings

As indicated above, the serial numbers on SMLEs are usually found in six locations. Rifles which have seen Indian service often have the serial number stamped on the spine of the magazine in addition. In addition to the serial number most surviving SMLEs also carry a large number of other markings and stampings. The majority of these are proof marks or inspection marks added during the manufacturing process and indicating that components have passed inspections. In addition to this “ownership” marks are sometimes present. These follow a standard pattern of a Broad Arrow (sometimes referred to as a crow’s foot) within a letter

An arrow within a D (or D arrow D) is an Australian mark, an Arrow with a C is Canadian, an Arrow within a U is South Africa, N-arrow-Z is New Zealand. Rifles that have seen Indian Service (perhaps the most common on the marked currently often have GRI inspection stamps or S-arrow-A stamps on the side of the butt. Many of the books listed in the bibliography at the end contain detailed charts of the markings, a comprehensive listing would be far longer than this entire work.

Accessories: Bayonets, Slings, etc.



P1888 (for “Long Lee” variants), P1907 (the standard British Great War bayonet) and the Pattern 1913 (for the P14 rifle.) Many collectors will want to add a sling and perhaps a bayonet to their rifle. As with the rifles themselves, the number of minor variations in bayonets are beyond the scope of this study. Suffice it to say that three main types of bayonet saw service with Enfields in the Great War, the Pattern 1888 (with the CLLE), the Pattern 1903 (with the SMLE) and most frequently the Pattern 1907 the standard British bayonet of the Great War. Of these the 1903 is relatively uncommon. One additional type is worth mentioning as it is at first glance very similar to the 1907, and this is the Pattern 1913 Bayonet designed to fit the Pattern 14 rifle. Despite the outward similarity these bayonets are not interchangeable as the muzzle ring is both of different diameter and height. They are distinguished by the P1913’s grooves on the grip. The US M1917 is virtually identical to the P1913. SMLEs had a compartment (trap) in the butt in which a pull through and oil bottle were stored, these can be added cheaply to complete your rifle.

Further Reading:

This is a very basic introduction. There are libraries of books written on the Enfield rifle. The selection below will give you a good basic introduction. If you have the first one (now in its 4th edition) the others are probably superfluous.

Skenneron, Ian. 2007. The Lee-Enfield: A Century of Lee-Metford & Lee-Enfield Rifles & Carbines. Skenneron Publishing.

Stratton, Charles. 2002 (2nd ed). British Enfield Rifles Vol 1 SMLE (No1) Rifles MkI and MkIII. North Cape Publishing.

Petrillo, Alan. 1992. The Lee Enfield Number 1 Rifles. Excalibur Publications.

Skenneron, Ian. 2000. .303 Rifle No 1 SMLE (Small Arms Identification Series #1) Skenneron Publishing.