

64 x 3293.
20.5.18-14.

Harlaxton Manor, The Machine Gun Corps and its First World War Trenches

Douglas Brown



Context

- **4 August 1914**

Britain declares war on Germany and her allies.



The Dawn of Trench Warfare

- After an early highly mobile phase of warfare the impact of artillery and machine guns meant “Digging in” soon became the norm on the Western Front.

The first trenches were simply lines of individual shell scrapes joined together to form a defensive line.

These evolved into highly complicated and carefully designed structures



The Dawn of Trench Warfare

- There were distinct doctrinal differences between the Allied approach to trench warfare and that of the Germans
 - For the Germans it was all about keeping the ground they had captured – so deep well constructed defensive lines with carefully prepared trench systems utilising heavy materials such as concrete and steel reinforcements plus deeply dug redoubts.
 - For the allies, the strategic imperative was to re-capture territory. Trenches were regarded as a point of departure NOT as somewhere to sit and hold.
 - Consequently, allied trenches had a less permanent feel and were constructed out of less durable materials.

The Dawn of Trench Warfare



Trench systems

- There are three basic types of trench
 - Front Line Trenches
 - Support Trenches
 - Communication Trenches

WW1 British Trench systems

Front line trenches
(Note zig zag design)



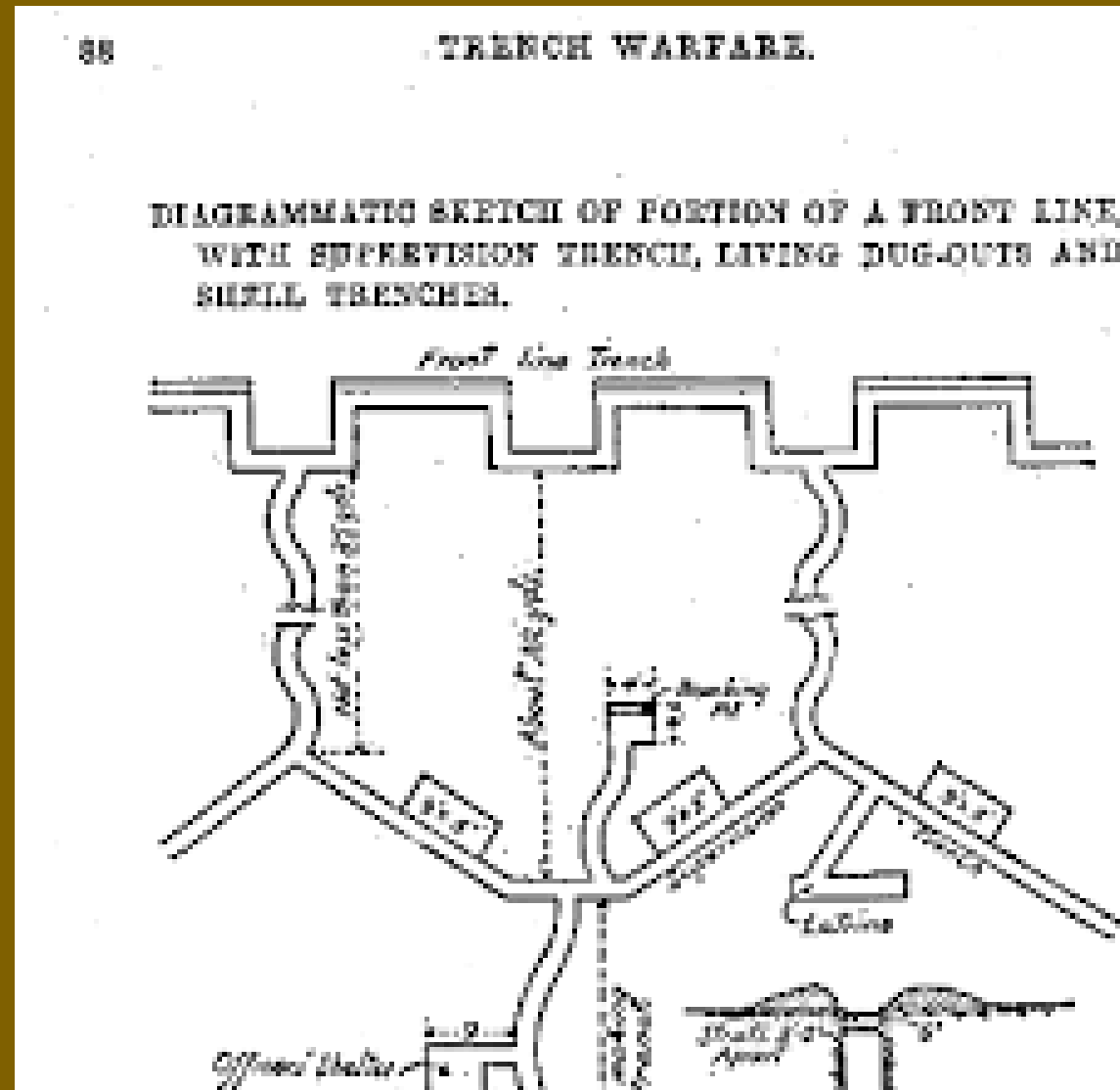
Communication
trenches



Support trenches



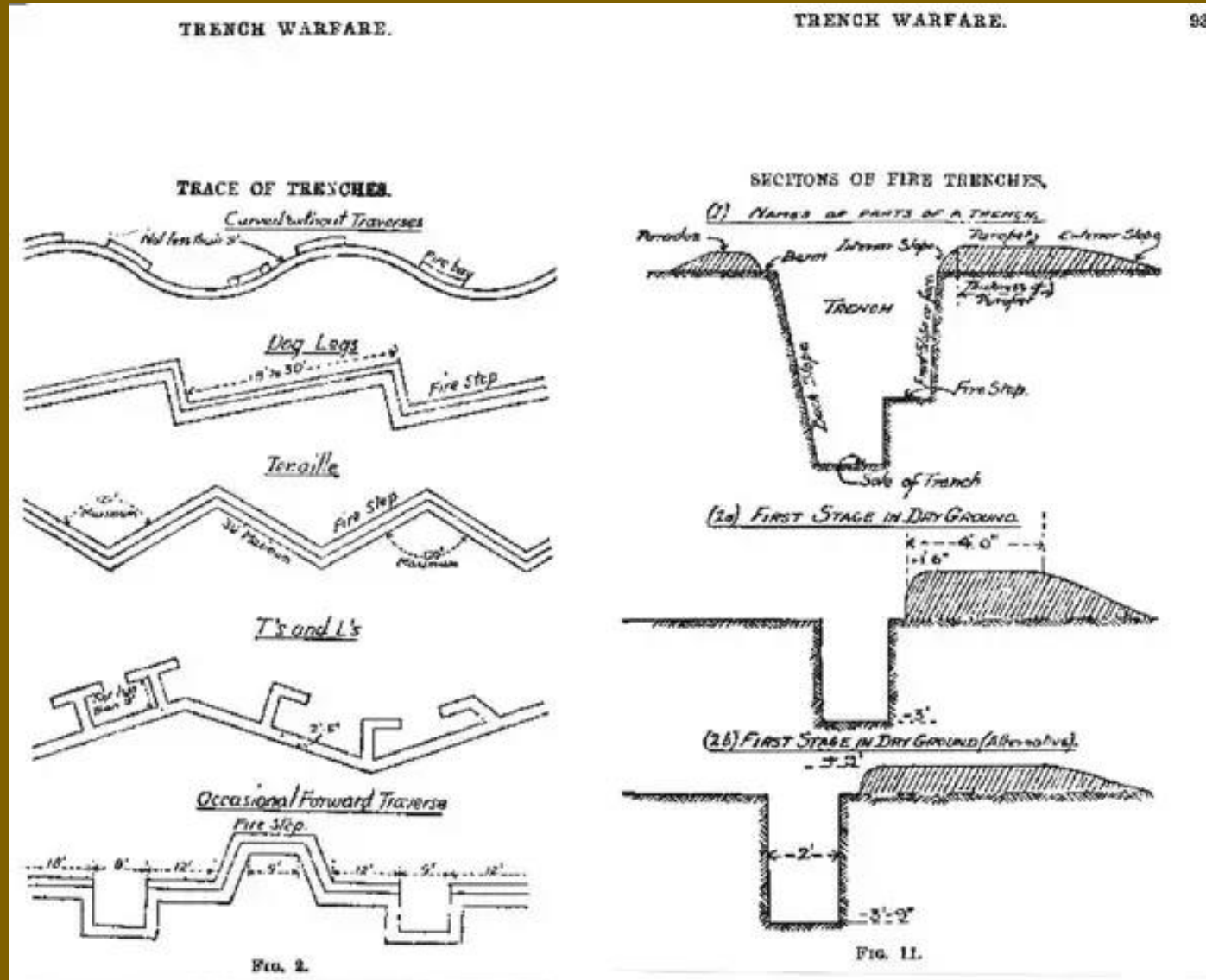
All interspersed with
bunkers



ENEMY



WW1 British Trench systems



Trenches in the face of mass artillery



Queen of trench warfare was the machine gun

German Maxim
Gun crew



The Machine Gun Corps



The Machine Gun Corps

- At the outbreak of the First World War (1914-18), the British Army had no specialist machine-gun unit, simply providing two heavy Maxim or Vickers machine guns for each cavalry regiment and infantry battalion.

The first VCs of the First World War – Pte Sidney Godley and Lt Maurice Dease of the 4th Btn. Royal Fusiliers at Nimy Belgium 23 August 1914.



The Machine Gun Corps

- Consequently in November 1914 a Machine Gun School was set up at Wisques in northern France and a Motor Machine Gun Service (MMGS) of motorcycle-mounted machine guns was established within the Royal Artillery.



The Machine Gun Corps

- Subsequently the Machine Gun Corps (MGC) was created by Royal Warrant on 14 October 1915, followed by an Army Order on 22 October.
- The Base Depot and HQ in England were established at Belton Park and Harrowby Camps with an additional Base Depot in France at Camiers.
- Belton Park camp was the main depot and training centre for the newly formed MGC and it remained active until 1922, accommodating around 20,000 men at any one time as they progressed through their training.

The Machine Gun Corps

- Between 1915 and 1922 around **170,500** officers and men served with the MGC, each man spending a minimum of five weeks in training before being posted to frontlines around the world.
- There were several 'schools' at Belton Park, from the Machine Gun Corps to Signalling and a Cooks School. The men of the MGC were taught the mathematics of the machine gun, firing, map reading and the use of semaphore flags.

The Machine Gun Corps

- Units from the Machine Gun Corps were responsible for offensive and defensive fire support so were always a prime target for enemy fire.
- Wartime casualties were so heavy (62,000 killed or wounded out of 170,000 officers and men) that the corps was nicknamed the 'suicide club'.



The Machine Gun Corps

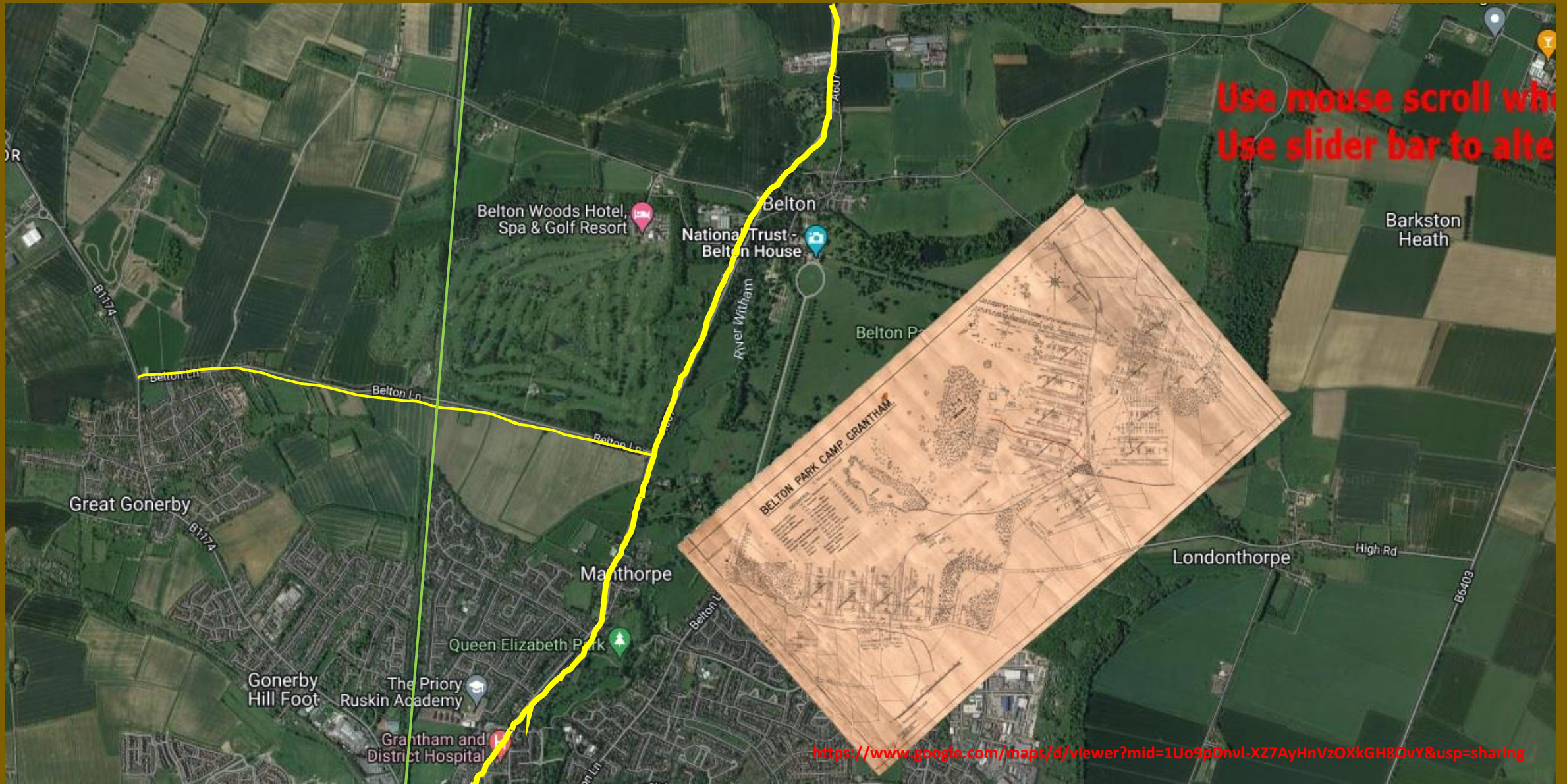
- Seven Victoria Crosses were awarded to officers and men from the Corps or attached to it - all in 1917 and 1918, and all but one on the Western Front.
- The MGC's personnel included WE Johns, the author of 'Biggles', and Kermit Roosevelt, son of American president Theodore Roosevelt.
- As well as on the Western Front, the MGC operated in the Middle East, Italy, Salonika and East Africa



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



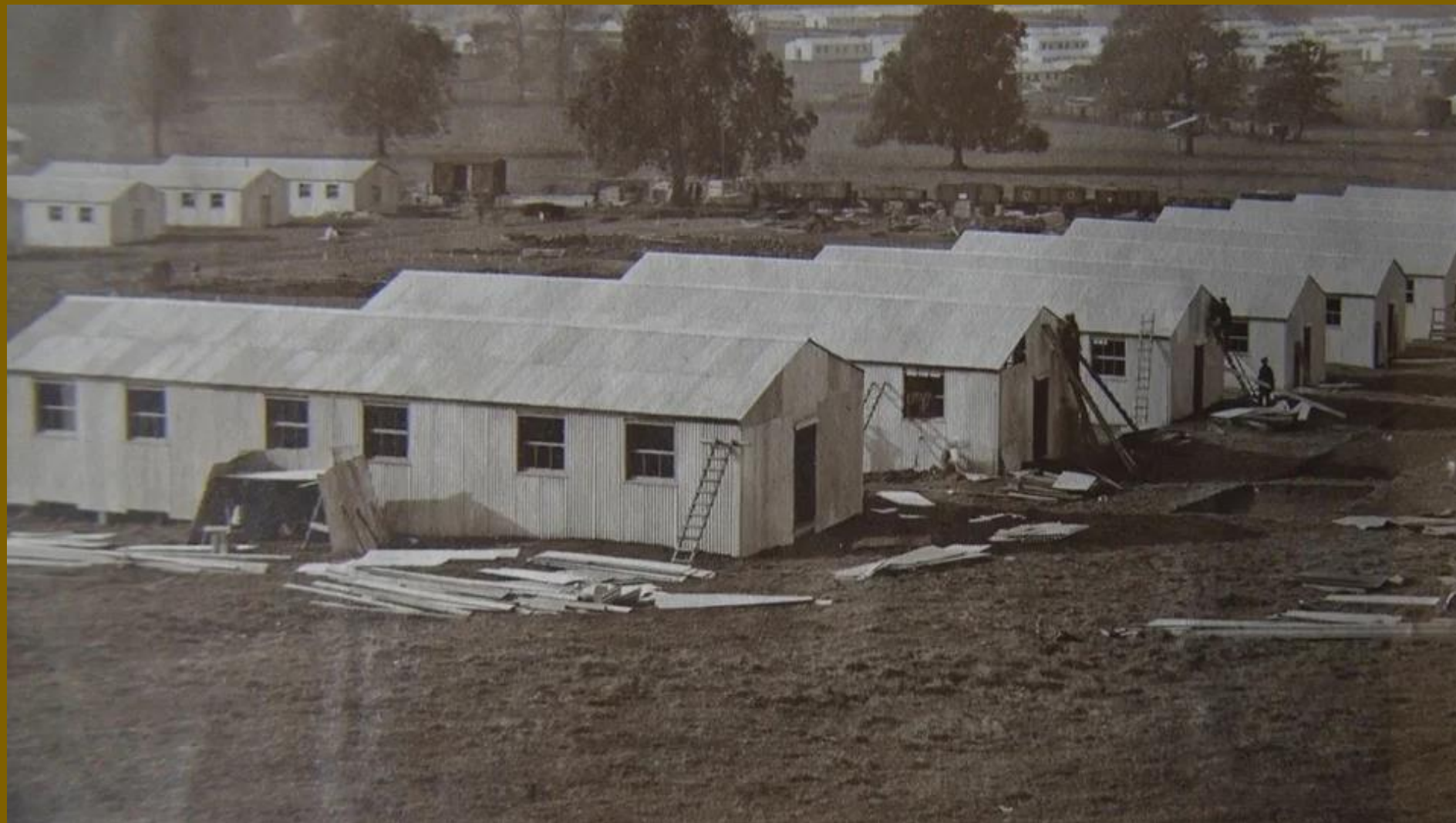
The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton

5 church rooms, 3 YMCA huts for recreation, a post office, a cinema and even its own railway line



The Machine Gun Corps at Belton

Belton Park Military Hospital was run by the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) and purpose built within the parkland.

Similar in size and structure to hospitals close to the Western Front, with 670 beds, it was built to care for men returning from active service. This hospital was the penultimate stop on a soldier's journey home after being wounded on the front lines.

However, given the size of the Belton Park Camp, the hospital was also kept busy with the medical needs of soldiers in training.

32 men of the MGC who returned with wounds or who were killed in training lie in Londonthorpe Churchyard.

A further 55 lie in Grantham town cemetery.



The Machine Gun Corps tools of the trade



Vickers .303 heavy machine gun (1912-1974)



Lewis .303 light machine gun (1915-1942)

Training for war

- One of the enduring myths of the First World War is the “Lions led by Donkeys” trope.
- Nothing could be further from the truth.
- The British Army was highly professional (even after the massive upscale in 1914 through volunteers joining and latterly through conscription) and training was comprehensive and detailed – especially for junior leaders and officers.

Training for war

- An essential part of training was ensuring troops were familiar with trench practice
 - Trench construction and maintenance
 - How to fight from trench systems (sighting and use of machine guns in attack and defence)
 - Trench administration and daily routine

Training for war

- Extensive 'practice' trenches were dug to train troops before they were sent to the Western Front and some may still be found across England such as, those at Redmires Reservoir dug by the Sheffield Pals, at Breary Banks, North Yorkshire, dug by the Leeds Pals and at Old Oswestry hillfort in Shropshire.



Beacon Hill, Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire

Training for war

- At the beginning of the war with the huge influx of recruits into the army, the digging of practice trenches was a means of imparting a valuable military skill to the volunteer soldier, building up men's fitness and fostering team spirit.
- For the most part though these practice trenches are all more extensive than those built at Harlaxton for the MGC.

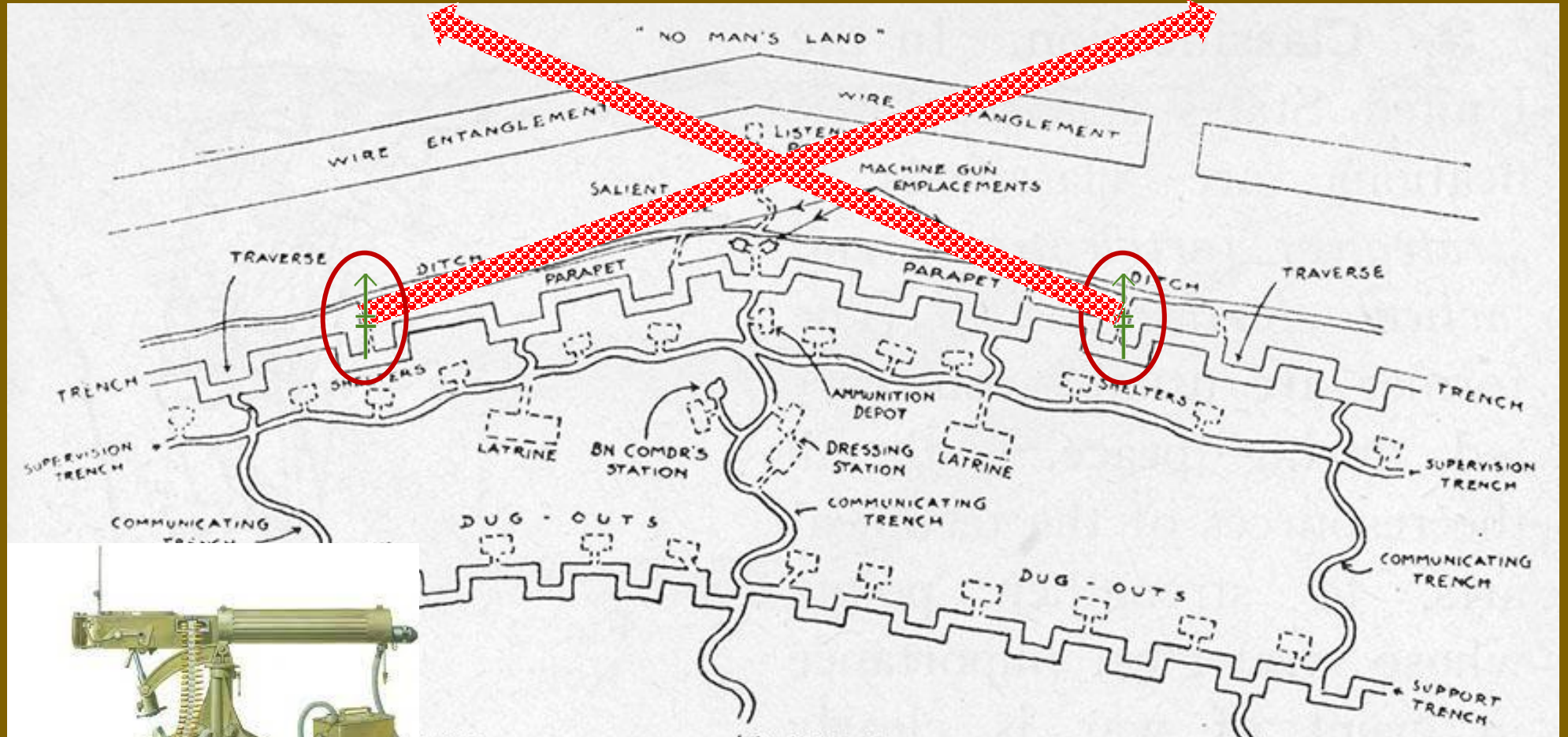
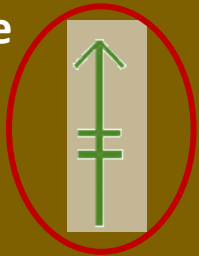
Training for war

- Harlaxton probably provided a specialist “dry” training area for Belton offering a small trench system where Officers and JNCOs could hone their skills in the deployment and use of machine guns in a trench environment.
- It would not have been used for live firing, though blank ammunition might have been used.
- More likely, given its size, it would have been used for demonstrations and TEWTs (tactical exercises without troops).
- **Training for the MGC would have been highly technical.**

WW1 British use of machine guns

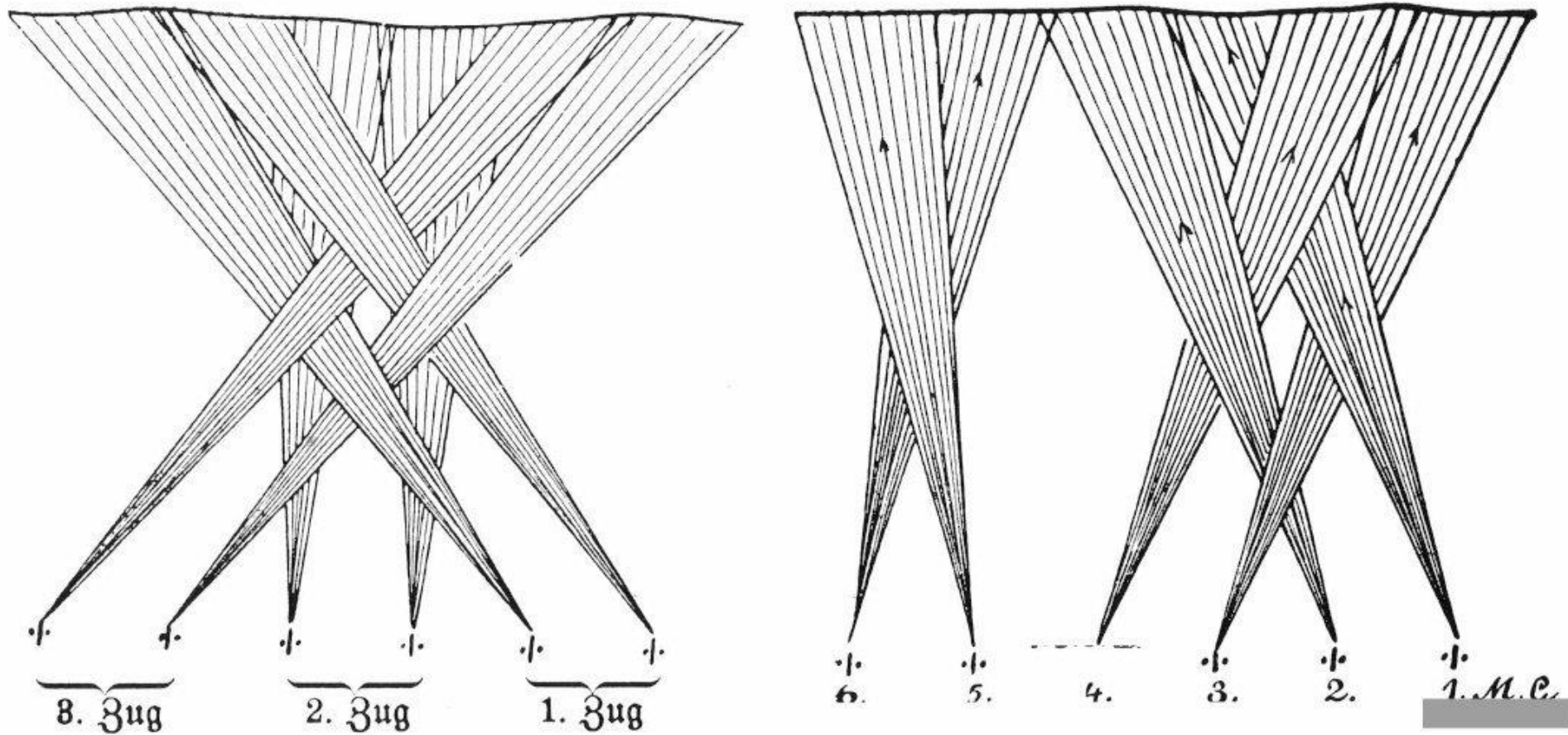
Enfilade fire

Fixed machine gun position



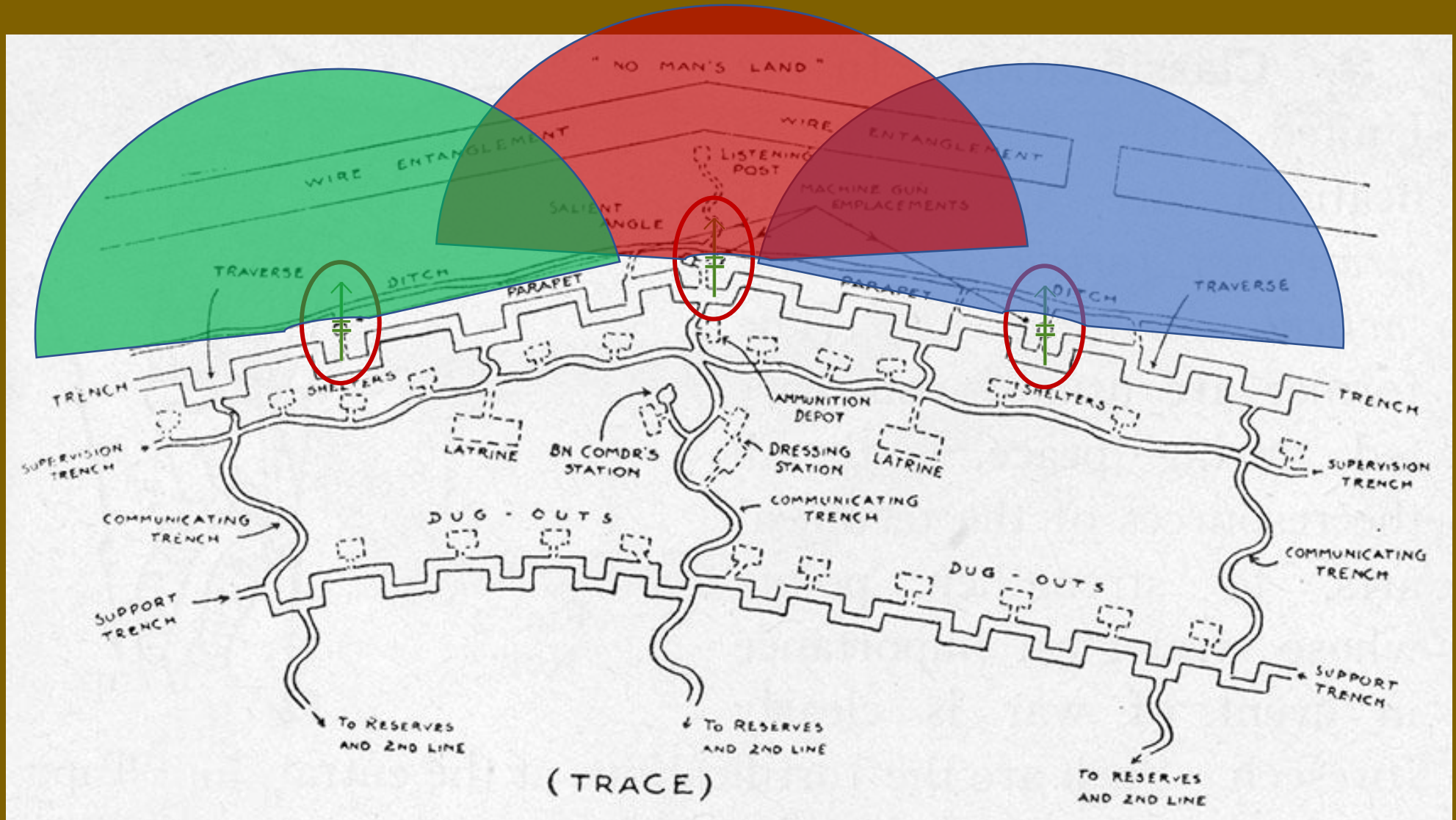
The Vickers Machine Gun was effective up to ranges in excess of 3000m firing up to 500 rounds per minute

WW1 diagram of interlocking machine gun fire



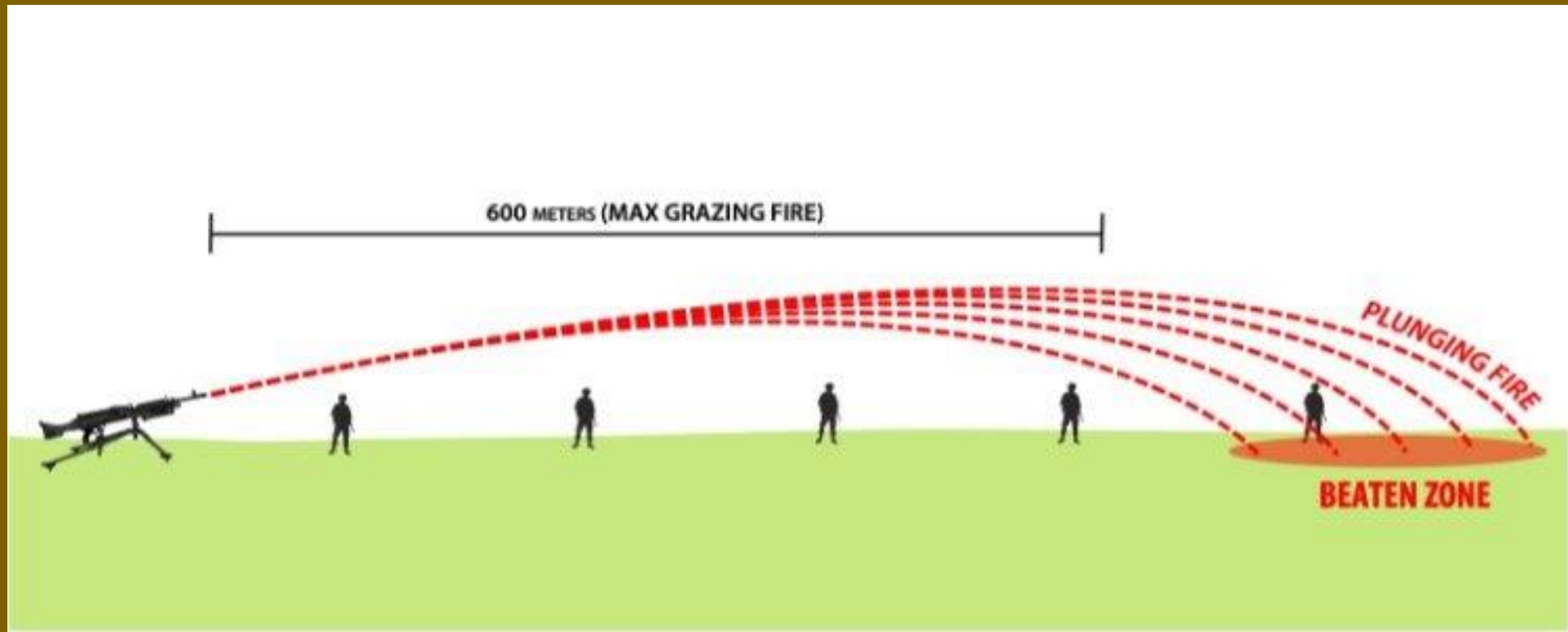
WW1 British use of machine guns

Mutual defence with interlocking fire



WW1 British use of machine guns

Indirect fire



Harlaxton Manor in WW1

- Like so many Country Houses with land the Manor was taken over for War duties and this is when the significant trench system was constructed.
- Harlaxton is a matter of a few miles from Belton House and estate where from October 1915 thousands of men were trained to join the newly formed Machine Gun Corps.

Harlaxton Manor in WW1

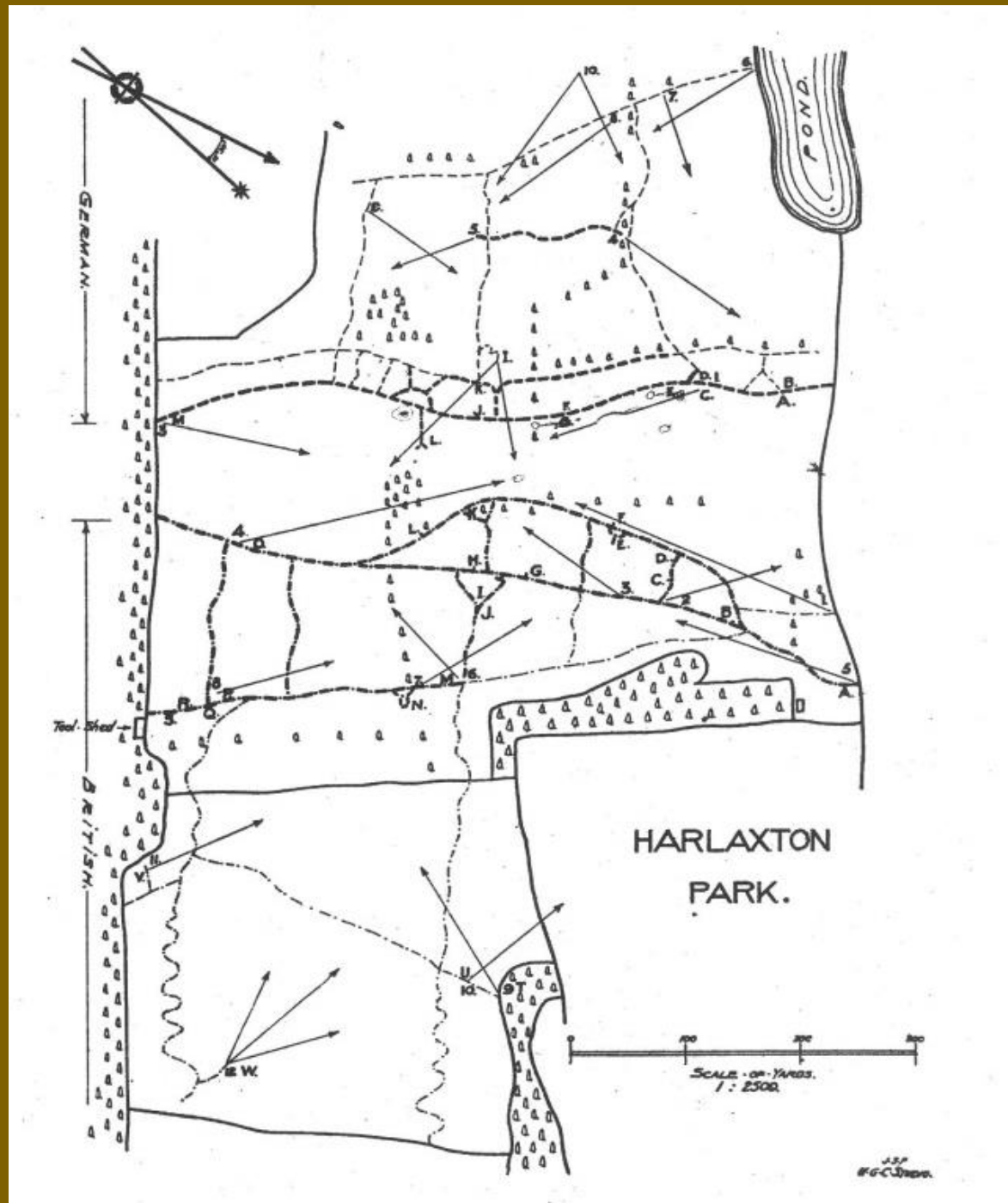
- Owned by the Lord of the Manor, Thomas Pearson Gregory
- His only son, Philip Pearson Gregory was a professional soldier having been commissioned in the Grenadier Guards. By 1913 he had left the Army but re-joined immediately on the outbreak of the War and returned to his regiment.
- He was posted to the Western Front in 1916, and won the second highest award for bravery – the Military Cross in the battle of Passchendaele in 1917



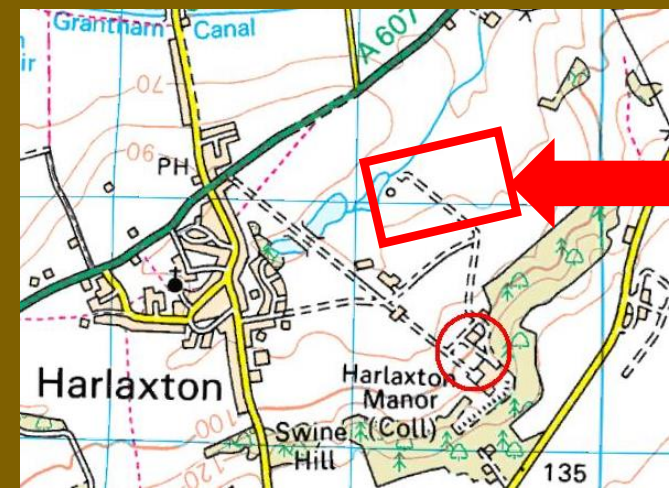
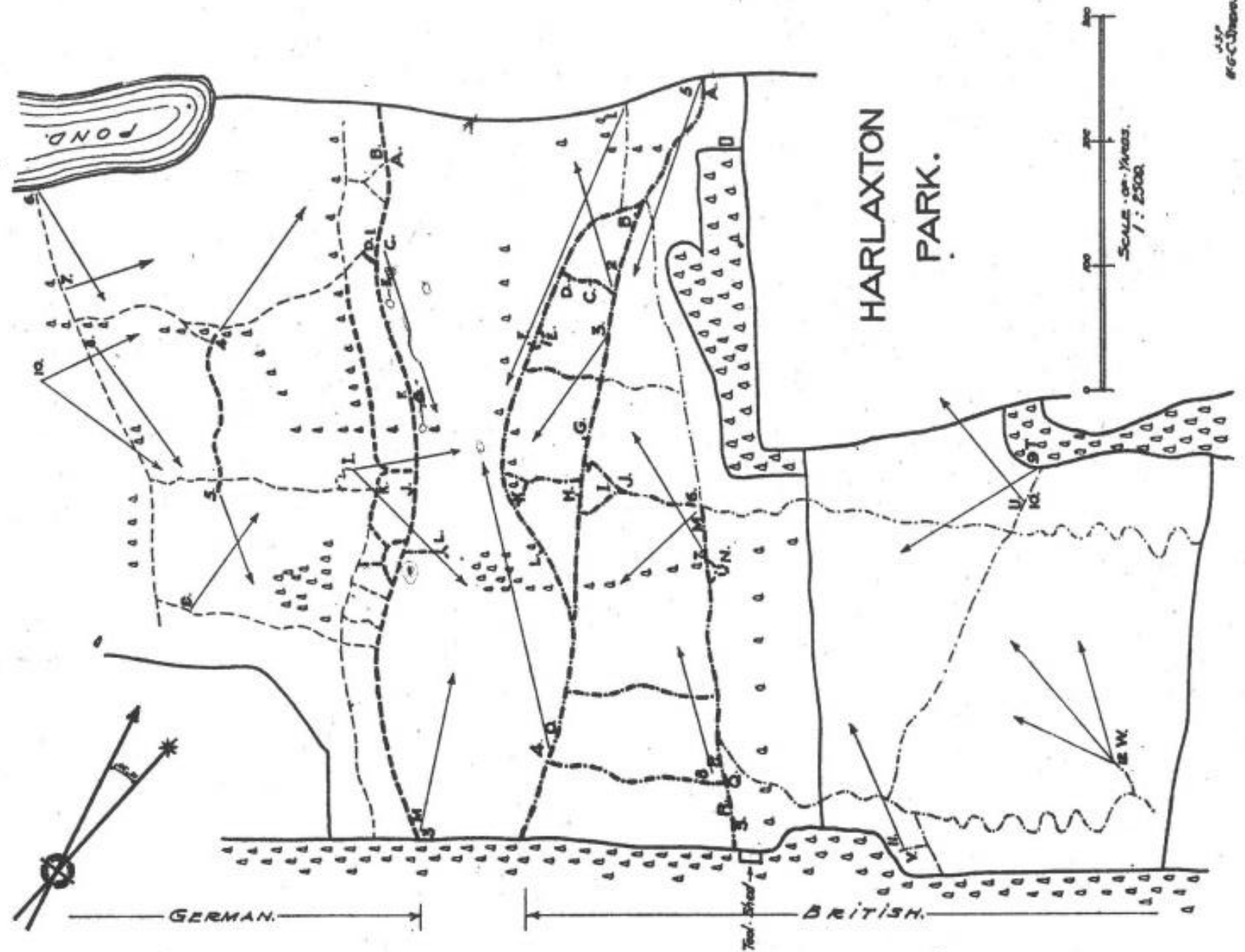
Trench warfare training at Harlaxton



Contemporary plan of the trench system



Contemporary plan of the trench system



Site of RAF Harlaxton

Picture
1916/17

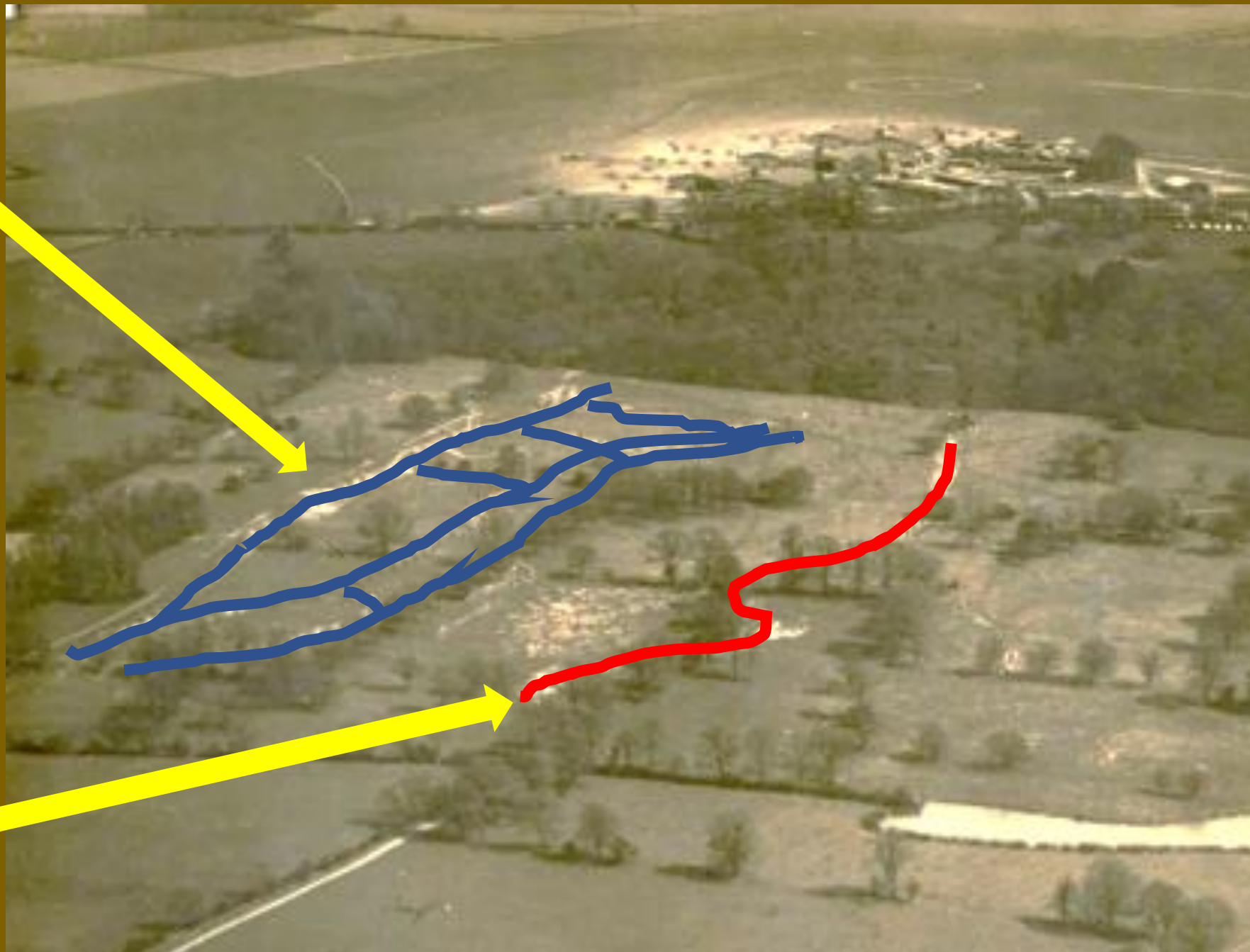


Harlaxton Manor sits
about here

Lake the bridge on
the Main Manor
Drive crosses

A607

Old lake now silted up



British trench system



German Trench line



Harlaxton – what can still be seen?

**Historic
England**
June 4, 2013

Flight: N839

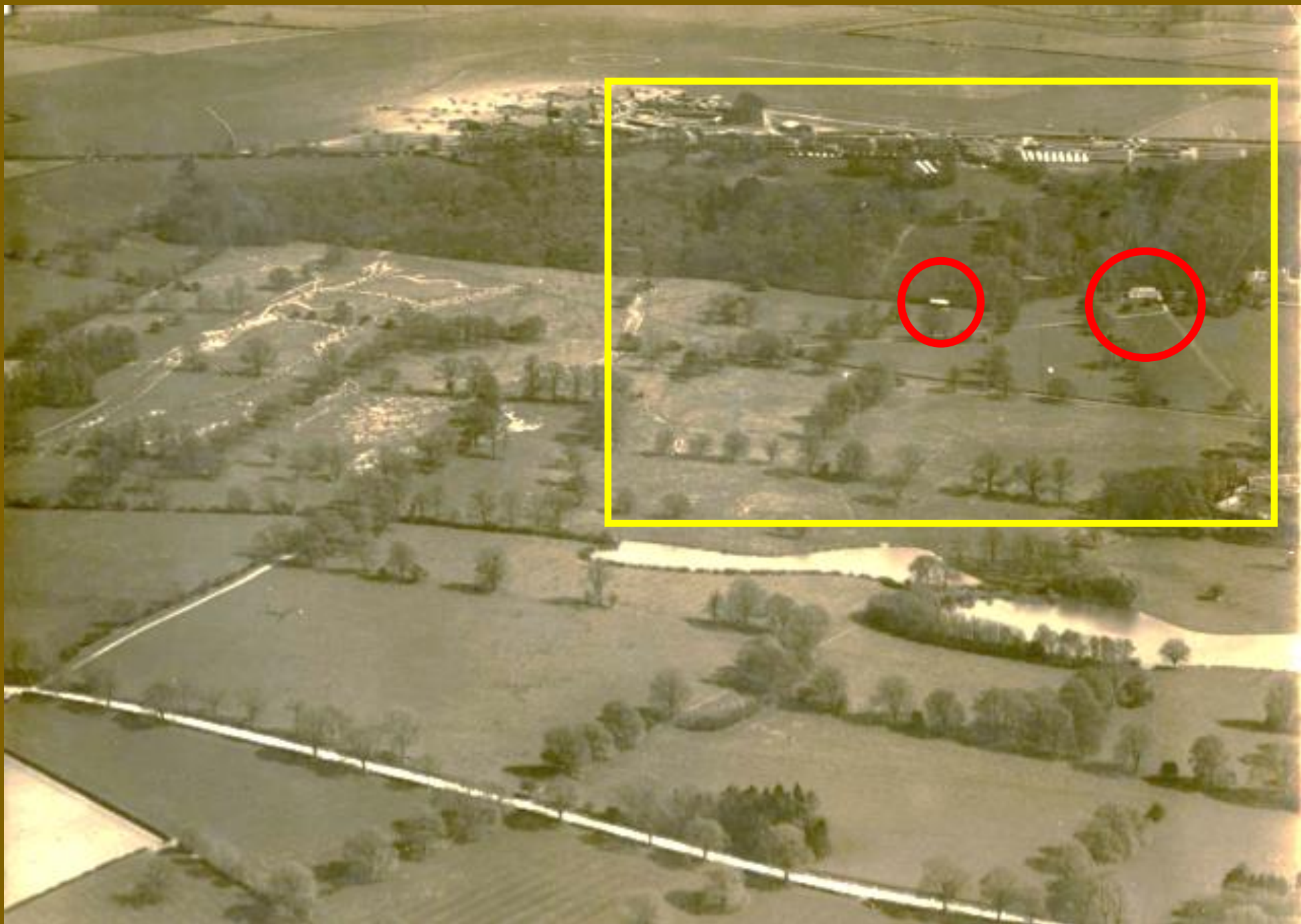
Photographer:
David MacLeod

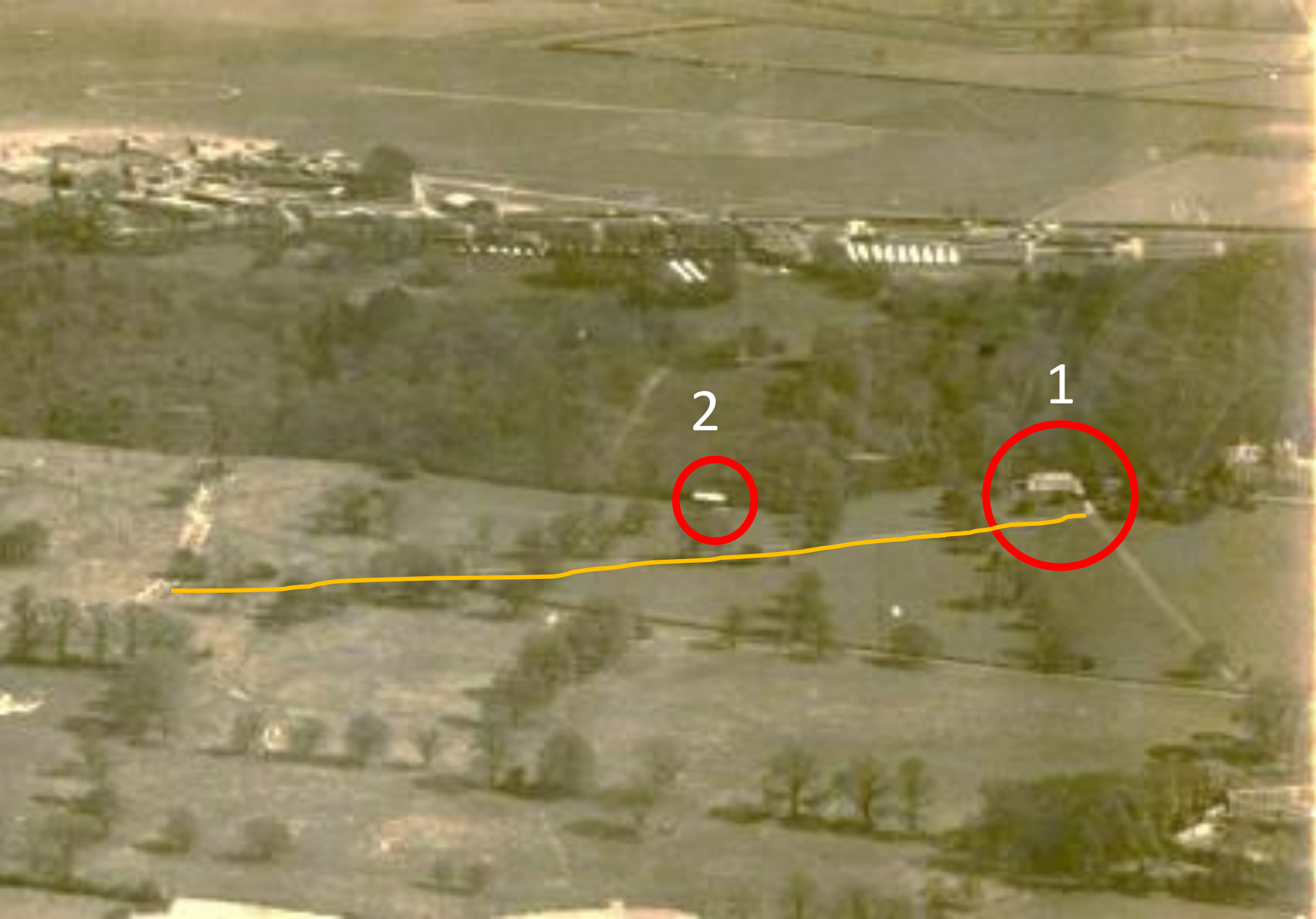


Harlaxton – what can still be seen?

Google earth
1999







2

1

Harlaxton – what can still be seen?

Site 1

A group of three buildings



Harlaxton – what can still be seen?



Harlaxton – what can still be seen?



Similar WW1 military architecture elsewhere



© Richard E Flagg



© Richard E Flagg

Similar WW1 military architecture elsewhere

WW1 telegraphy
station in Tyne-side



Harlaxton – what can still be seen?

Site 2

A single small building with two rooms, now severely degraded. Possibly the “tool shed” indicted on the plan.



Harlaxton – what can still be seen?



Harlaxton – what might lie underneath?

Pictures of the Hill 80 dig at Wytschaete in Belgium



Harlaxton – what might lie underneath?



The state of preservation at Harlaxton will depend on the thoroughness of the post war clean up.

The trenches shown here at Messines, in Belgium were actually part of the fighting and were simply filled in at the end of the war with little salvaging of materials.

Harlaxton – what might lie underneath?



Finds from a Wessex Archaeology dig at practice trenches at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain

History as Remembrance



GRANTHAM

10. — PM

POST CARD



GRANTHAM

10. — PM



6 JUN 15

Dear Bertha

Here is another card for your album.

We go training in this estate. It is about 7 miles from camp. I am a wet bundle of clothes we have been boiled alive today with the sun

Grantham Needham Bros. Series

G.M.S.

16 JUN 15

THE ADDRESS ONLY HERE

Miss. B. Grundy.

10. Albert. St.

Lt. Hulton.

Mr. Bolton.

WMS

1.50

PRIVATE J GRUNDY

4th Bn. Machine Gun Corps (Infantry)

Service Number: 18800

- Date of Death 4 September 1918
- Age 36 years old. Son of James Grundy, of 7, Alick's Fold, Westhoughton, Bolton.
- Buried or commemorated at FAUBOURG D'AMIENS CEMETERY, ARRAS



Harlaxton's casualties

- William J Dann
- Arthur Drinkwater
- Tom Foster
- James Gooch
- James Hall
- Richard Harby
- Cecil Harris
- Frank Harris
- Spencer H Jeudwine
- Percy Kettle
- Albert Lane
- Aubrey Lane
- Sydney Lane
- Fred Moore
- Robert Robinson
- Herbert Sargent
- William Walton
- Robert Woodward



October 2022



Lest We Forget

Any Questions?

