

## SMLE – THE STANDARD BRITISH RIFLE.

Throughout World War 1, the standard infantry weapon of the British Army was the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield rifle (SMLE). ‘Short’ referred to the length of the barrel, and ‘Magazine’ denoted that its ammunition was contained in a magazine. It was developed to replace the Magazine Rifle Mk1, otherwise known as the Magazine Lee-Metford (MLM) or ‘Long Lee’ (49.5” long), and the Lee-Enfield Carbine (39.9”) used primarily by the Cavalry. The SMLE, at 44.5”, was a compromise intended for use by both infantry and cavalry. The barrel rifling was altered to handle the new ‘smokeless’ Mk7 Cordite-propelled ‘High Velocity’ ammunition, which had caused overheating problems in the MLM and the Carbine, which were designed to fire ‘black powder’ ammunition. The sights were also re-designed to suit the flatter trajectory characteristics of the ‘High Velocity’ ammunition.

‘Charger Loading’ was employed on SMLEs, whereby two clips of five rounds of .303 ammunition could be pressed down with the thumb through the action body into the magazine, thereby ‘charging’ it. All SMLEs, or ‘Smellies’ as they were known to the troops, were designed for right-handed operation, which made using them difficult for left-handed men, who virtually had to become ambidextrous to become effective marksmen.

Production of the SMLE Mk1 commenced in 1903 at the Royal Small Arms Factory Enfield (RSAF Enfield), and in 1904 at RSAF Sparkbrook, the Birmingham Small Arms Co. (BSA) and the London Small Arms Co. (LSA). Minor modifications followed and in 1906 the SMLE Mk1\* was adopted, which went into production at Enfield, Sparkbrook, BSA and LSA.

In addition to the new SMLE Mk1\*, from 1903, various old ‘Long Lees’ were converted to SMLE configuration and designated SMLE Converted Mk11. Further improvements to the SMLE Mk1\* led, in 1907, to the SMLE Mk111. This was a simplified version of the rifle, easier to mass produce, and was minus some of the ‘niceties’ of the earlier SMLEs, such as the volley sights. The Mk111 was produced by Enfield, Sparkbrook, BSA and LSA, from 1909 in India at the Ishapore Rifle Factory and from 1913, at the Lithgow Small Arms Factory in Australia.

Before the war started, many of the earlier SMLE Mk1\* and SMLE Mk11 rifles were modified to include the improvements of the SMLE Mk111, albeit mostly retaining their volley sights and magazine cut-offs, being re-designated SMLE Mk1\*\* in 1908 and later SMLE Mk1\*\*\* in 1914.

To increase production output more simplifications were approved, such as the elimination of the magazine cut-off plate, and were embodied in the SMLE Mk111\*, adopted in 1916, which became the standard rifle of the BEF and the Anzacs for the remainder of World War 1. Later marks, still perfectly recognisable as SMLEs, were used as the standard British rifle throughout World War II.

Obviously, enormous numbers of SMLEs were manufactured before and during World War 1:

### Royal Small Arms Factory, Enfield

1903 to 1907	Mk 1 and Mk 1*	193,644
1907 to 1912	Mk 111	100,000
1913	Mk 111	30,000
1914	Mk 111	51,576
1915	Mk 111	271,856
1916	Mk 111*	418,283
1917	Mk 111*	640,113
1918	Mk 111*	623,330
Total:		<u>1,681,726</u>

Royal Small Arms Factory, Sparkbrook

1903 to 1906	Mk 1	<u>14,640</u>
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Birmingham Small Arms Company (BSA)

1903 to 1906	Mk 1 and Mk 1*	150,000
1907 to 1909	Mk 111	50,000
1910 to 1913	Mk 111	30,000
1914	Mk 111	51,419
1915	Mk 111 and Mk 111*	275,927
1916	Mk 111*	435,212
1917	Mk 111*	468,447
1918	Mk 111*	345,732
Total:		<u>1,811,734</u>

London Small Arms Company (LSA)

1903 to 1906	Mk 1 and Mk 1*	65,000
1907 to 1918	Mk111 and Mk 111*	430,000
Total:		<u>495,000</u>

Standard Small Arms and National Rifle Factory

1916 to 1918	Mk 111*	<u>275,000</u>
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Ishapore Rifle Company (India)

1906 to 1909	Mk 1*	3,000
1910 to 1914	Mk 111	30,878
1914 to 1918	Mk 111 and Mk 111*	136,800
Total:		<u>170,678</u>

Lithgow Small Arms Factory (Australia)

1913 to 1918	Mk 111 and Mk 111*	<u>112,454</u>
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<u>Grand total:</u>		<u>4,561,232</u>
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The author's Lee Enfield SMLE Mk. 1\*, manufactured by the Birmingham Small Arms Company (BSA) in 1907. In August 1914, such rifles were in short supply and, despite being seven years old, it was still a state of the art weapon. There is little doubt that it would have gone to the Western Front in 1914 in the hands of an infantryman. The marking 'E.Y.' on the stock is somewhat ambiguous because 'E.Y.' stamped into the metal of the receiver was an indication that the rifle was obsolete and designated for 'Emergency Use Only', many being relegated for use as rifle grenade launchers or for drill practice, but in this case the 'E.Y.' is only stamped on the top rear of the wooden stock. Whether this also indicates an 'Emergency Use Only' role, or the alternative possibility that it was issued to the East Yorkshire Regiment, is not clear. Other markings on the bottom of the stock suggest that it was used by the Royal Engineers at some point, probably after being downgraded to second line use when new rifles became available for the infantry (SMLE Mk. 111 and Mk. 111\*). The brass butt plate has 'MSG 23' stamped on it. While '23' is almost certainly a gun rack number, the meaning of 'MSG' remains uncertain, Malay Straits Guards perhaps? If not, it probably originates from Colonial use in the between-wars period, rather than anything to do with the British Army during the Great War. The dark patina of the woodwork suggests staining from Cosmolene (grease), in which it may have been stored for a considerable period in a hot climate.