



# FIREARMS

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PART 5

## BRITISH GOVERNMENT MODELS – MARKS I-VI

• **DESPITE** the variety of models which Webley's produced throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century, Henry Webley realised that the best basis for the contracts. For this reason, he spent some effort in designing carefully-made weapons whose parts were completely inter-changeable. This was an obvious requirement for military revolvers for which, spare parts were held centrally and whose repair had to be undertaken quickly and in distant parts of the world. The civilian owner not only treated his weapon with rather more consideration than the average soldier, but he could also usually return it to the factory for overhaul or repair; it could therefore incorporate frequent modifications, and if necessary, could be individually assembled and fitted. Not so the military weapons, which had to be even more alike.

In 1880, the British government accepted the Enfield revolver, in both Marks I and II, but this was not a satisfactory weapon and the search was continued for a better one. By 1886, the choice had narrowed to either the break-action Smith & Wesson or a new Wembley. After detailed trials, the Webley was accepted in July 1887. The pattern of this revolver has differed in only minor respects from the day of its acceptance until now, for it is still to be found in service in small numbers, in British forces today.

One cannot say that the Service Webley revolvers have not had their share of criticism throughout this long period of use, and it has to be agreed that many of them have been heavy, difficult to hold, and relatively clumsy in use, the more so when compared to modern side-arms. But they have rarely, if ever, been beaten for reliability, robustness, and resistance to neglect. Much of the latter-day criticism refers to the comparative ineffectiveness of the .38 calibre round, which is not by any means a fault of the weapon.

The principal features of the government revolvers can best be summarized as:-

A strong and completely reliable breech fastening.

A good trigger and cocking ac-

tion.

A cylinder capable of being freed or locked as required.

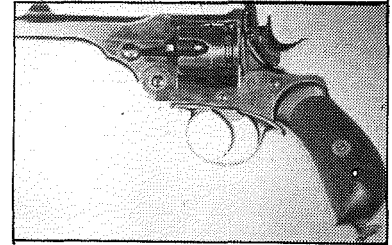
Good resistance to dirt and fouling.

### WEBLEY MARK I, 1887

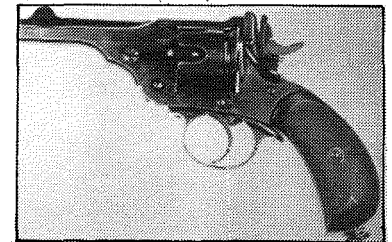
The weapon which won acceptance in 1887 was a six-chambered revolver of .442 calibre, fitted with a 4 inch barrel, and weighing 34 oz. In shape it was not markedly different from other army models made by the firm. The frame was much like the solid-frame Army Express models and so was the birds' head butt and the tail of the hammer. But the mechanism of the lock was reduced to five main parts; the hammer, the lifter, the trigger, the mainspring auxiliary and the mainspring. The mainspring functioned the entire lock action, a notable introduction, since this dispensed with at least five separate parts, all small, and complicated to machine and fit.

The cylinder could revolve freely if required, and its easy rotation was carefully checked on manufacture. The trigger pull on single-action was 6-8 lb, and on double action 12-15 il. Sights were fixed, the backsight being an open 'Buckhorn' notch.

The entire barrel and lug was



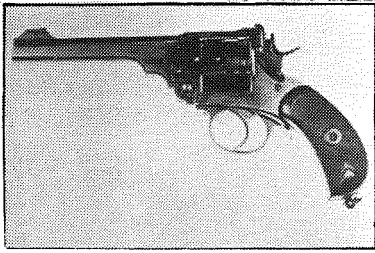
*Webley .455 Mk. 1*



*Webley .455 Mk. 2*

machined from the solid, and the rifling was the then fashionable Metford form.

The butt grips were a departure from tradition, and were made from artificial materials instead of wood. The specification called for black Vulcanite, and the two grips were secured by a single screw. Another feature of the Mark I, was the shield on the standing breech. After some experience, it was discovered that there was erosion of the firing hole, and the shield was made detachable so that it could be renewed when worn. This was done by locating the shield with horizontal dovetails and locking it with a screw, and the change was deemed sufficient to designate the model Mark I\*. The addition of stars to a model number has been a peculiarly British habit, adopted also among the Dominion countries, to indicate a minor change in the design, which was not such as to warrant



*Webley .455 Mk.3\*\**

a completely new Model number. In other words, a half change. However, there have been several cases where a model ended up with an accumulation of stars, and this makes for subsequent difficulty in identification.

Within the Mark I designation, there were alternative calibres, and the revolver was produced in .476 and .455 as well as .442.

The Mark I was a great success and attracted a good deal of favourable comment both from the military users and from the civilian press.

#### **WEBLEY MARK II, 1894**

By 1894, there had been an accumulation of minor changes to the Mark I, to warrant the issue of another Mark. The changes had been the shield which was incorporated in the Mark I\*, a new hammer with a larger spur to permit cocking while wearing gloves, and a small change to the barrel catch. The resulting revolver is quite attractive in appearance with a smooth curve running down from the barrel catch, around the back of the butt and finishing at the toe. Production dates for these early government revolvers are not easy to determine exactly, and there is some evidence to show that the introduction of a new Mark did not necessarily halt the production of the earlier one. It may be that specific contracts were allowed to run out, in which case, there must have been occasions when two different marks were in manufacture at the same time. In the case of Mark II, there are some revolvers remaining today which were made in 1900, three for four years after the Mark III has been introduced.

#### **WEBLEY MARK III, 1897**

The Enfield Mark II revolver

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was declared obsolete in 1894 and production ceased in that year. Webley therefore had the complete production service revolvers and the Mark III was accepted in October, 1897. It was identical with the Mark II in all general respects, including the frame, calibre and barrel length, the change was in the cylinder and extractor mechanism which was adopted from the W.G. 1892 Model. This gave a more satisfactory cylinder release and less friction when the cylinder was rotating, and a good deal of design effort went into this aspect of friction reduction in the various models and marks of early Webleys.

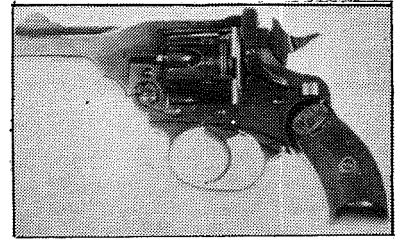
Lest it should be thought that the Mark III closely resembled the 1892 Army Model, it may be appropriate to bring out the major differences. The first is the length of the barrel; on the 1892 Model it is 6 inches, whereas on the Mark III it is 4 inches, and has a distinctive stubby look. The butt of the Army Model curves much more sharply, and finally, the foresights are quite different. The Mark III has the rounded version which was fitted to all the government Marks, whereas the Army Model has the earlier angular blade set on a flat hump.

Production of the Mark III continued for some years after the Mark IV appeared, and certainly through the Boer War.

#### **WEBLEY MARK IV, 1899**

The Mark IV was the first government model to chambered for the .455 only. The previous alternatives were now dropped completely, and until 1932 there was only one military revolver calibre. The choice of such a large bore was due to the army's experience in colonial wars throughout the Empire and a resulting belief that a soldier needed a man-stopping bullet when faced with a determined enemy. The American Army had come to the same conclusion in the Spanish War of 1898, and had opted for the same large type of bullet.

The Mark IV is usually known



*Webley .38 Mk. 4 with Safety Catch and 3-inch Barrell.*

as the 'Boer War Model', because its introduction coincided with the start of that war, and many volunteer troops were armed with it. Apart from the calibre change, there are few differences from the Mark III, though the hammer spur was reduced in thickness, for what reason is not known. There were several barrel lengths, 6 inches, 5 inches, 4 inches and 3 inches, but the great majority were produced in the standard 4 inches.

This excellent revolver continued in production without any modification until 1913, fair proof that the design was right at the beginning.

#### **WEBLEY MARK V, 1913**

This was a short lived model, accepted in late 1912, and scarcely differing in any feature from the Mark IV. The barrel was standardized at 4 inches, though there are records of some being made in 6 inches. Production was terminated in 1915, when the Mark VI was adopted.

#### **WEBLEY MARK VI, 1915**

The Mark VI was approved for British service in May 1915, and orders were placed immediately for maximum production from the Webley factory. It is likely that this production quickly became of the order of 2,500 a week for the next three years, and many of these revolvers survived the war. The differences from the Marks V and IV were not great. The shape of the butt was changed once again, for the last time as it was to turn out, to a broad slightly-flares pattern, very much like that on the Wilkenson-Webley's of 1905 and 1911.

Another change was that the foresight once more became a

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blade, pinned into a flattered hump on the muzzle.

The barrel length was standardized at 6 inches, though once again, some alternatives in 4 inches were made. In the opinion of the authors, six inches is a little long for a really handy military revolver, and since the Mark IV had been such a success with its 4 inch barrel, it is hard to see why the change was made.

The need for rapid reloading of the six chambers led to the invention of a device for inserting six cartridges at once. This was the Prideaux Cylinder Loader, a round spring clip which held six cartridges and allowed them to be pushed into the cylinder in one movement. It was invaluable in the flurry of an attack, or at night. Another device was the Pritchard-Greener Bayonet, made by the Birmingham firm of William Greener. This was a 7 inch bayonet which fitted onto the Webley Mark VI, by locating on the barrel lug, holster guides and foresight ramp. It allowed the revolver to be handled and loaded without interference to

the firer, and obviously gave an extra capability in close-quarter fighting.

The Mark VI was also given a shoulder stock, a well-known method of improving the effective range of a hand-gun, and one which has been used at different times since the eighteenth century. The shoulder stock could also be used with the Webley Flare pistol when it was desired to shoot flares with some precision, however, it was not used in any quantity, and examples of the shoulder stock and the other additional equipment are now scarce and not often seen.

The Mark VI continued in service after the war and in 1921 its manufacture was transferred to the Royal Small Arms Factory at Enfield, where small numbers continued to be made. These Enfield revolvers are identical with the Webley manufacture except for the markings, and they carry the stamp of the crown and the word 'Enfield'. In 1932, the Mark VI was replaced by the '38 Enfield, and the long line of large-calibre revolvers was finally ended.