

Trench Warfare Weapons and Armour

The First World War saw new weapons being created and used.

These weapons were the products of industrialisation and were more effective and deadly than anything that had ever come before.

However, sometimes these technologically advanced weapons were not the most fit for purpose. Some surprisingly simple weapons became increasingly effective and sought after by the soldiers fighting in the cramped trenches of the Western Front.

The war also inspired a huge amount of literature. Poems from the time depict the range of weapons used on the battlefield, and the often devastating effects they had on human life.

Explore the artefacts and poetry in this worksheet in order to come to your own conclusions about the type of protection and weapons you would use and how they would affect you.

Additional resources

Watch a video all about trench warfare on our YouTube channel.



Fascinating Facts

SMLE

The Short Magazine Lee-Enfield, or SMLE, was the standard issue rifle for the British infantryman during the First World War. It was lovingly referred to as the Smellie.

It was a bolt-action rifle, with a box magazine capable of holding 10 rounds. This rifle was used across the world, and is famed for its rate of fire – an average of between 15 and 25 aimed shots per minute.

All SMLEs had a bayonet with a 17-inch long blade.



Body armour

The British Army never issued body armour to their soldiers but they could purchase their own from commercial companies, if they could afford it.

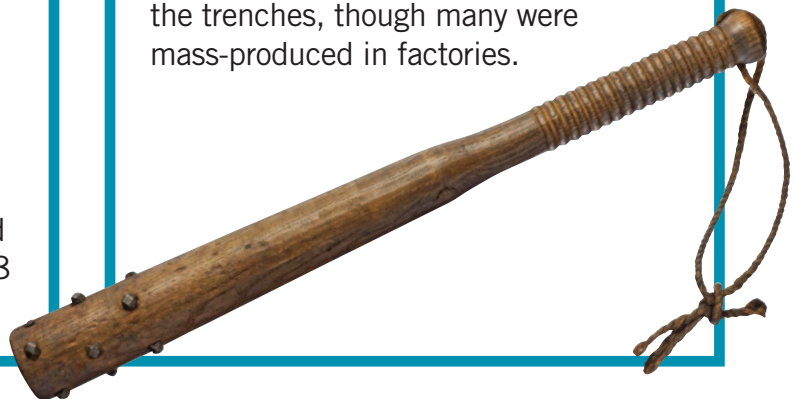
This British Expeditionary Force body armour was made in 1917. It is made from steel plates covered in kahki cotton and weighs 3.4kg. It was owned by F. E. A. Taylor, who enlisted in 1918 when he was just 18 years old.



Trench Club

Clubs, maces and batons were popular with British soldiers as they often faced hand-to-hand combat in the trenches. SMLE rifles were long-range weapons, and even with the bayonet affixed, were difficult to use for close combat in the narrow confines of the trenches.

Simpler weapons designed to be used against an enemy within arms reach were much more effective. These weapons could be made by the soldiers themselves, from objects they found in the trenches, though many were mass-produced in factories.



Things to do

Make your choice!

Imagine you are a soldier, serving on the Front Line. You must choose between having some body armour or a rifle. Make a list of the pros and cons for each of these items and explain your choice.

	Pros	Cons
Body Armour		
Rifle		

I would choose the _____ because _____

Compare and contrast

Read these stanzas taken from two different poems inspired by the weapons and armour of the First World War. Pick out three differences and three similarities between the two.

For the Fallen

By Laurence Binyon

They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
and in the morning
We will remember them.

The Kiss

By Siegfried Sassoon

To these I turn, in these I trust—
Brother Lead and Sister Steel.
To his blind power I make appeal,
I guard her beauty clean from rust.

	Differences	Similarities
1		
2		
3		

Petrifying or poetic?

War poetry can be very diverse. Some poems romanticise war, whereas others highlight the grim realities.

Using weaponry and armour as inspiration, compose your own war poem. Be sure to include imagery, emotions and your own opinions.

Keep in touch

We would love to read your war poem.
Please email them to educate.leeds@armouries.org.uk