I wrote this article for the French gun magazine "Cibles". It was released in the issue n° 446 of May 2007.

The series of break open Webley revolvers in 455 caliber, service sidearm of the English army for 60 years, began in 1887 with the Mk I, followed by the Mk II in 1894, the Mk III in 1897, the Mk IV in 1899 (not to be confused with the Mk IV of 1942 in 38 caliber), the Mk V in 1913 and the last one, the Mk VI in 1915, which was withdrawn from active service in 1947. All these revolvers where available for the civilian market and were also made in "competition" versions.

I will briefly speak of the Webley-Fosbery automatic revolver (1901). The cylinder rotation and cocking of the hammer are actuated by the recoil. It is usually a 6 shots in 455 caliber but a scarce 8 shots version in 38 ACP was manufactured. For the film enthusiasts, it is this last version which appears in the film "The Maltese falcon", directed by John Huston in 1941, with Humphrey Bogart in the part of detective Sam Spade. Another film where a Webley-Fosbery can be seen is "Zardoz" directed by John Boorman (1974) with Sean Connery and Charlotte Rampling. The Webley-Fosbery is a very expensive collector's item.

To finish this cultural detour, I will point out that the Webley is the handgun Sir Arthur Conan Doyle chose to equip Doctor Watson with when assisting his friend Sherlock Holmes in his dangerous investigations. That is no wonder. Doctor Watson is a retired India army officer. In the English TV series "Sherlock Holmes" starring the late Jeremy Brett (the best Sherlock Holmes ever filmed, available in DVD's) it can be seen some Webleys Mk V and Mk VI.

The Webley company history:

It all began at the turn of the 19th century in Birmingham with William Davis and Philip Webley.

William Davis was born in 1790. At the age of 9 he began his apprenticeship with a small manufacturer which made bullet moulds and other tools related to the gunsmith trade. Later he volunteers for the army and participated in the battle of Waterloo. In 1817 he opened his own shop of moulds and tools.
In 1827, Philip Webley, 14 years old, is apprenticed to a manufacture of gun locks. William Davis died before his time in 1831. His wife, Sarah, managed the small manufacture of moulds and tools he founded. She is helped by is elder daughter Caroline.

In 1835, Philip Webley is 23 and has finished his apprenticeship. He joins his brother James who is a gunsmith. In 1838 he marries Caroline Davis. No wonder, the two shops were in the same street, Weaman Street in Birmingham.

In 1845 Philip Webley buys the business created by William Davis.

Philip Webley

Since 1853 James and Philip Webley manufacture cap and balls revolvers. These revolvers are on a par with those made by the others manufacturers quality wise. But they are more expensive because they are hand-made. The revolvers industrially made by Colt in the London manufacture in England are cheaper.

Colt closed his London factory in 1857. It is an advantage for the Webleys who use every endeavor to improve their manufacturing processes. It is the beginning of their ascent notwithstanding that the British government buys its handguns from their rival Adams.

In the 1860's, two of the sons of Philip Webley, Thomas William and Henry, join their father. The name of the company is now "P. Webley & Sons of Birmingham and London".

In 1867 it is created the revolver which will become famous under the name of Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), due to its adoption by the Irish royal police.
Webley RIC

In 1878 the production of pocket revolvers known as British Bulldog begins.

In July 1887, the Webley Company gets its first contract with the British government for the supply of revolvers. The Webley revolvers are the official service sidearm of the British army with the Mk I and this will be the case with the succeeding models until 1963.

On March 24, 1888, Philip Webley passed away followed by his wife Caroline in 1891.

In 1897, P. Webley & Sons merged with two leaders of the gunsmith industry, W & C Scott and Richard Ellis & Son. The name becomes "The Webley and Scott Revolver and Arms Company Ltd of Birmingham".

It must be noted that the Webley Company, famous for its revolvers (the 455 series representing a small part of the production) also manufactured many rifles, shotguns, semi automatic pistols and air guns.

The company stopped production of firearms in 1979 to produce only air guns. Webley closed its business on the 22nd December 2005. In March 2006, the brand is bought by the Airgunsport firm which resumes the manufacture of air guns.

The service revolvers, Marks I – VI in 455:

In 1880 the British army officially adopted the Enfield revolvers Mk I and II. But, after a series of severe tests it appears that these weapons are not what it is the best for Her Majesty's army. It is decided to test other handguns. Two revolvers emerge: the Smith & Wesson n°3 and the Webley, both break-open. Eventually, the Webley is adopted in 1887.

The models Mk I to Mk V externally look alike except for some details: 4 inch barrel, bird's head grip. The Mk VI will be fitted with a 6 inch barrel and a square grip.

MK I (1887):
These revolvers, the first issue being the Mk I, are among the sturdiest break open revolvers ever made. Have a look to the bulky locking stirrup with its powerful flat spring to be convinced. The revolver has few parts, powered by one single V flat spring. The hammer is of the rebounding type. After striking the primer and when releasing the trigger, the hammer takes a rest position and the firing pin does not protrude anymore inside the frame. The grip panels are made of ebonite (hardened rubber through inclusion of sulfur).
**Webley Mk I with its shouldered grip**

The 4 inch barrel (101.6 mm) has 7 right-handed grooves of the Metford type. On each side of the barrel there are two flat triangular protuberances. These are guides designed to ease the insertion of the revolver in a holster. They are milled from the block, with the barrel.

Trigger pull: 6 to 8 pounds (2.72 to 3.63 kg). Necessary force to cock the hammer: 12 to 15 pounds (5.44 to 6.80 kg).

The recoil plate is milled from the block with the frame. The cartridges used are loaded with black powder.

**Mk I**: The asterisk beside the model number means a modification with no model change. The recoil plate is now a steel plate inserted in the frame through a dovetail and secured by a screw.

**The new recoil plate**
**Mk II (1894):**
The shape of the hammer is modified, the grip does not have a shoulder anymore, the locking stirrup is modified.

**Mk III (1897):**
Important modification of the mechanism for extraction and securing the cylinder.

**Mk IV (1899):**
Known as the Boer War model because it was the sidearm of the military forces sent to South Africa between 1899 and 1902.

The hammer is modified. The part securing the cylinder is attached by two screws instead of a single one. The standard barrel is four inches but barrels of 5, 6 and 3 inches are found. The steel used is of a new type. The cylinder's axis is milled from the block with the barrel. The ratchet is case-hardened.

**Mk V (1913):**
The diameter of the cylinder is increased by 0.012" (0.3 mm) to allow the use of smokeless powder (cordite). The frame is modified accordingly. The standard barrel length is 4 inch but some 6 inch were also made. There were 20,000 examples made.

**Mk VI (1915):**
The shape of the revolver is modified. Six inch barrels (some special batches with 4 inch barrels are made) with interchangeable front sight and a square grip. A 22LR instruction model is also produced. The Mk VI was manufactured by Webley & Scott until 1921. After this date, the Royal Small Arms Factory in Enfield takes over.
Comparison Mk V (bottom) and Mk VI (top)

The cartridge:

Several versions of the 455 cartridge were used in the Webleys.

455 Mk I (1891):
Attentive readers will have noticed that the Webley Mk I (no connection with the Mk of the cartridge) was released in 1887. Question: were the Webleys used with the only cartridge they could chamber in 1887, the 450 Adams, or were they released only from 1891, when the proper cartridge was available? Many specialists favor the second hypothesis.

Specifications:
- Case: brass, 0.855" (21.7 mm) long center fire.
- Powder: black.
- Charge: 18 grains (1.17 gram).
- Bullet: lead-tin alloy (12 for 1) of 265 grains (17.17 grams), conical and hollow based with three lubrication grooves.
- Muzzle velocity: 650 fps (198 m/s).

In 1894, the black powder charge is replaced by 6.5 grains (0.42 gram) of cordite Mk I, the new smokeless powder. Such loaded cartridges are distinguished by the "C" letter stamped on the head of the case.

455 Mk II (1897):
Experience proved that cordite is more efficient in a shorter case. The 455 Mk II case is shortened to 0.760" (19.3 mm). The primer diameter is increased. The primer is of the Berdan type. The case is loaded with 7.5 grains (0.486 gram) of cordite with the same 265 grains bullet.

455 Mk III (1898):
Back in those times, the army was concerned with the stopping power of the cartridges used. The 455 cartridge is modified and is called the 455 Mk III. It is
identical to the Mk II but the bullet is a 220 grains (14.25 grams) hollow point of the so called "Man-stopping" type.

The 1899 La Hague convention bans the use of expansive bullets, although War is still allowed. The slaughter must be done according to the rules. Reassuring isn't it? The consequence is that the Mk III is replaced by the Mk II in 1900.

455 Mk IV (1912):
Researches go on to find a more effective bullet than the one used with the Mk II cartridge. The result is the 455 Mk IV with its 220 grains lead wad cutter bullet.

455 Mk V (1914):
Same as the Mk IV except the bullet made of a lead-antimony alloy (99 for 1).

The wad cutter bullets used with the Mk IV and V cartridges have the same effects as the hollow point bullets used with the Mk III. Thus, these cartridges are reserved for practice and in 1914 the Mk II is once more the service round.

455 Mk VI (1939):
As lead bullets becoming less and less politically correct, the 455 Mk VI is designed in 1939.
It is a Mk II with a full metal jacket bullet. When the smokeless powder used to load this cartridge is not cordite, a "Z" is stamped on the head of the case. This cartridge is known as Mark VI Z. Target accuracy is inferior to the lead bullet loading.

The tested revolver:
It is a 1914 Mark V in 455 Webley. I point out the caliber because many 455 Webleys were altered to accept the 45 ACP (with clips) or the 45 Auto Rim like the 1917 Colt or Smith & Wesson. In this instance, the rear of the cylinder is shortened by 1/16" (1.59 mm). Of course, the extractor is reduced by the same amount and is weakened. This transformation is not really advisable.

The single action trigger pull is of 3 600 grams (almost 8 lb). In double action, it is the double. Let off is crisp with no creep.

The rifling is not of the Metford type like on the Mk I. The lands of the Metford rifling are polygonal with no sharp angles. They are designed to minimize the black powder fouling. But they are not suitable for cordite which wears them rapidly.

The rifling of the Mk V
There are proof and control marks everywhere. The "Broad Arrow", mark of the State, is stamped on many parts as well as the official proof mark which is composed from bottom to top of the letter "P", two crossed lances with pennon, the initials of the reigning monarch (GR for Georgius Rex; in 1914 it is Georges V who rules the United Kingdom) and a crown.

**The markings**

When the hammer is down with the trigger squeezed, the cylinder is perfectly centered with the bore and there is no play at all. Craftsmanship is outstanding. The firing pin is from the block with the hammer like on all revolvers of this series.

**The firing pin and the locking stirrup spring.**

The complete disassembly is easily done. The main V spring must be compressed to be extracted.
The Mk V stripped off

The cylinder may be pulled off its axis through a clever system. Open the revolver, unscrew the small screw bearing a large slot which is on the left side (look at "The markings" photograph) with a coin and push up the small lever which is now freed. The part locking the cylinder lowers. Pull off the cylinder from its axis.

The front sight is from the block with the barrel and the non adjustable rear sight is milled in the locking stirrup.

The rear sight notch

The cartridge:
Fiocchi manufactures 455 Mk II rounds but sells no empty cases. I chose to reload.

The bullets:
This Webley is designed to shoot lead bullets. So, no jacketed bullets will be used. Copper plated lead bullets can be used if the copper plating is thin. I measured the chambers exit and the barrel diameter through a Cerrosafe® casting:
• Chambers muzzle : 11.48 mm (0.45196").
• groove diameter: 11.49 mm (0.45236").

**Chamber and barrel castings**

Vintage bullets are not available. The bullets used in the reloads are those used for the 45 ACP and 45 Colt. They have a suitable diameter:
- 230 grains round nose lead, diameter 11.47 mm (0.4516").
- 215 grains conical copper plated lead, diameter 11.46 mm (0.4512").
- 200 grains semi wad cutter lead, diameter 11.47 mm (0.4516").
- 255 grains conical flat nose lead, diameter 11.50 mm (0.4523").

**The case:**

Bertram Brass manufactures 455 cases but they cannot be found everywhere. The 45 Auto Rim case has the good dimension excepted for the rim which needs to be thinned. But this case is not easy to find either.

**455 Mk I and 45 Auto Rim**

The solution is the 45 Colt case. It must be trimmed to the suitable length and the rim must be thinned (from the front not from the head) to 0.8 mm (0.0315"). 455 Mk I or Mk II cases can be made from the 45 Colt. I cut the case to 23.5 mm (0.925”), according to the chambers of the revolver, which is a little longer than the Mk I.

*From left to right, vintage 455 Mk I, 3 rounds Mk I made from 45 Colt cases, 45 ACP, 45 Colt*
Lee manufactures a 455 carbide die set.

**The powder:**
The performances and working pressure of the original cartridge will be duplicated. The nominal pressure for the 455 is about 1 000 bars (14 510 psi), like the 44 S&W Russian. It is slightly less than the 45 Colt (1 100 bars; 15 960 psi) and well under the 45 ACP (1 400 bars; 20 310 psi). The Mk V is designed to use smokeless powders.

A chronograph must be used when tuning a load. Loads for the 455 may be found in some reloading manuals as well as in reloading tables of some powder manufacturers.

With good reloads, this revolver is able to group within 50 mm (2") at 25 meters.

**To conclude:**
The 455 Webleys have been the witnesses of the triumph of the British Imperialism and of its fall. From India to Transvaal through the Far East. They were used in the two World Wars. From the muddy Somme plains in the north of France to the Libyan desert sands.

Mankind’s history is a rather sad one and this is not limited to the past 150 years or so.

All that remains is a beautiful revolver, perfectly made which is also a historical witness. Look at it and carefully listen. Yes, it is Pomp and Circumstances from Elgar.

**Bibliography:**
The Webley Story by William Chipchase Dowell.

JPB