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'SOMEWHERE IN ENGLAND'

375

The story of one of Kent's W.W. 2 secret weapons

By David Collyer

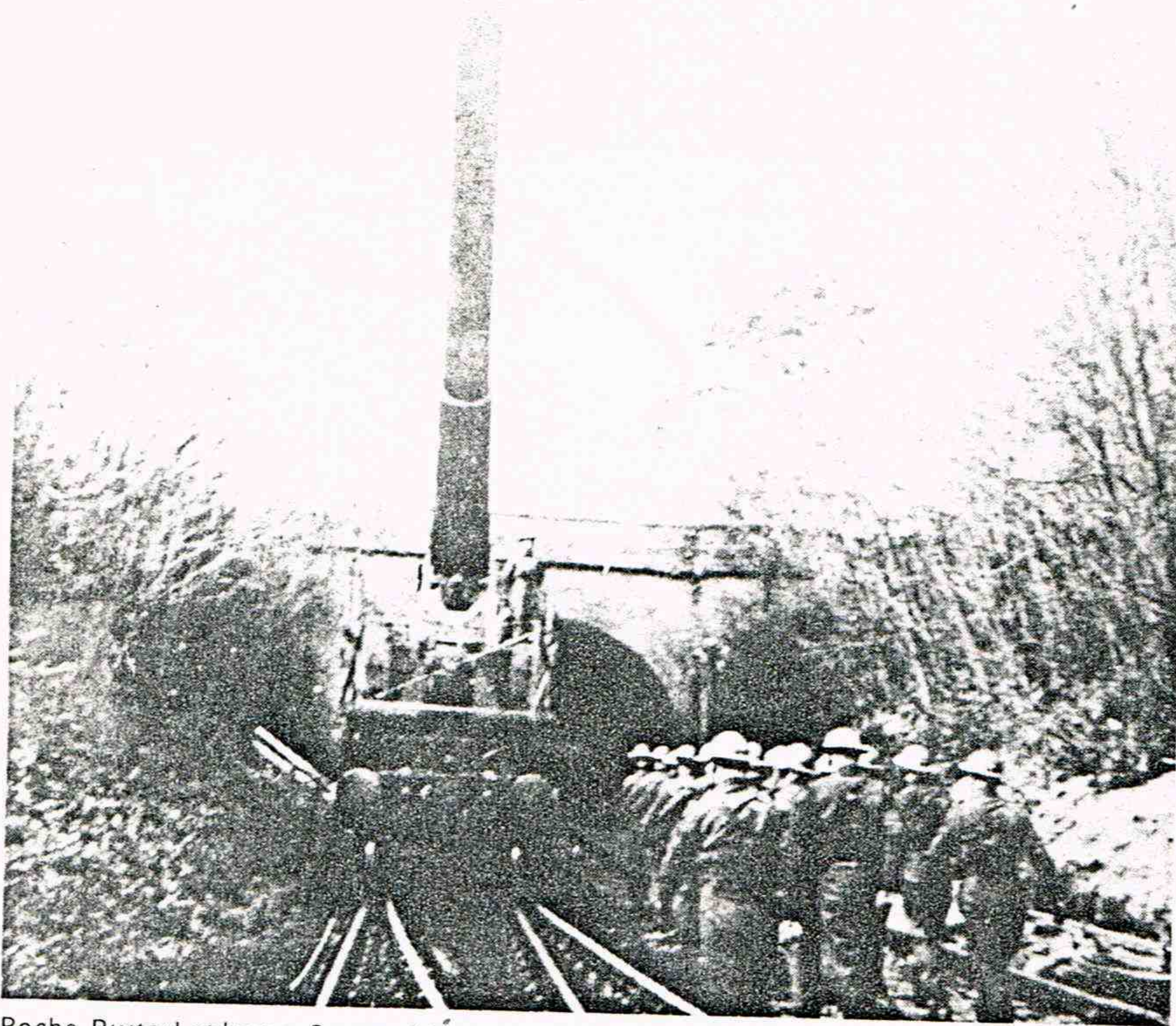
If you were old enough to go to the cinema during the last war, the British Movietone News will be familiar to you. Used for morale boosting and propaganda purposes, the newsreels would often contain heavily censored items about various aspects of the defences of the U.K. Only those 'in the know' would recognise where certain items had been filmed, and usually the audience would only be informed that the location was 'somewhere in England'. This was the case with the largest railway mounted gun fired in England and was often featured in the newsreels when visited by V.I.P.s, which it frequently was. The gun was the 18" Mk.I 90 ton Howitzer named 'Boche Buster' which was stationed on the Elham Valley Line which ran between Folkestone and Canterbury, being an adapted W.W.1 railway mounting carrying a larger calibre barrel (or piece) than the 14" Mk.III railway gun which had fired 'The King's Shot' at Arras on 8th August 1918. Four of these 18" pieces were delivered into the Arsenal at Woolwich at the end of 1918, being proofed in April 1919 onwards. They stayed on the Heavy Gantry until 1940.

Allocated to the 2nd Super Heavy Regt, Royal Artillery, 'Boche Buster' was sent to Catterick, Yorks to the School of Super Heavy Artillery, after the mounting had been discovered by Col. Montague Cleeve in November 1939 in a dingy railway shed at Chilworth, Notts, where it had been stored since returning from France in 1920. Both 'Sceneshifter' and 'Boche Buster' had 13.5" pieces mounted on them when they arrived at No.1 Bay South Boring Mills to have the modified Howitzers mounted on them, the front thrust rings having to be modified before the larger pieces were fitted. While the Howitzer was being refurnished, a model from the Imperial War Museum was sent to Catterick for the training of the 11th Super Heavy Battery, R.A. who were formed to man 'Boche Buster'.

One member of the 11th Super Heavy Battery is Mr Jim Woodward of Adisham who was a Bdr Signaller and remembers their arrival in Kent thus:-

"Our advanced party left Catterick on 30th January 1941 and we moved on the 2nd February, arriving at Bishopsbourne, Nr Canterbury at 0.400 hrs on the following morning. The Battery Offices were set up in the station buildings, while the Regimental H.Q. was at Charlton Park under the command of Col. J.F.C. Austin M.C., with his Adjutant Capt. L.G. Williams. We had Major Boyle with his Adjutant Capt. G.L. Sommerville as C.O.

"Boche Buster travelled down to Kent behind two ex G.W.R. 0-6-0 tank engines with its train of shell and cordite wagons, fitters coach, dining coach, galley wagon and brake van disguised as three banana wagons. Having arrived



'Boche Buster' at home. Seen waiting outside the Bishopsbourne Tunnel, 'Boche Buster's gun detachment march along the track to take up their positions, while the No.1 stands on the gun mounting. This photograph of Noll Battery of 2nd Super Heavy Regt R.A. was taken on 7th May 1941.
(Bob Hollingsbee)

at Bishopsbourne it was secreted in the tunnel between Bridge and Bishopsbourne. Whenever we moved it was disguised with tarpaulins draped over an angle-iron framework to look like an ordinary train, and I am sure that the Germans must have been aware that it was there.

"The whole battery consisted of 87 men which included some Royal Engineers for work on the lines and driving the engines, but the gun detachment was 24 men who had been picked from the St Helens and Wigan Rugby League teams. Our No.1 Sgt was named Sharrocks and had played for Wigan, while another, our No.2, Pimlett, had played for St Helens.

"We first fired 'Boche Buster' on 6th February, but we didn't think to warn the people at Barham, and I believe we shattered nearly every window in the village and also removed a few roofs. So after that we used to go round to the people and say 'We're going to fire a round, will you please open all your windows'. The first time we fired the gunners didn't have a clue and

only put the brakes half on, and 'Boche Buster' came quite a long way back down the track, and frightened us a bit. So after that we used to clamp the brakes on to all 30 wheels each time we fired, but even then it came back some 20 feet with the recoil."

The area to be covered by 'Boche Buster' in the event of an invasion attempt by the Germans was the strip of coast between St Margaret's Bay and Dungeness, the gun having to be shunted along the curved track to traverse it. A spur line was also constructed just north of the village of Kingston to enable the gun to be hidden from enemy aircraft. A shallow cutting was constructed and roofed with wire-wool impregnated netting on tubular steel poles and painted to match the surrounding fields. This was completed by 25th February 1941, when a special flight was made by a R.A.F. photo-recce aircraft to check the camouflage of the local gun emplacements.

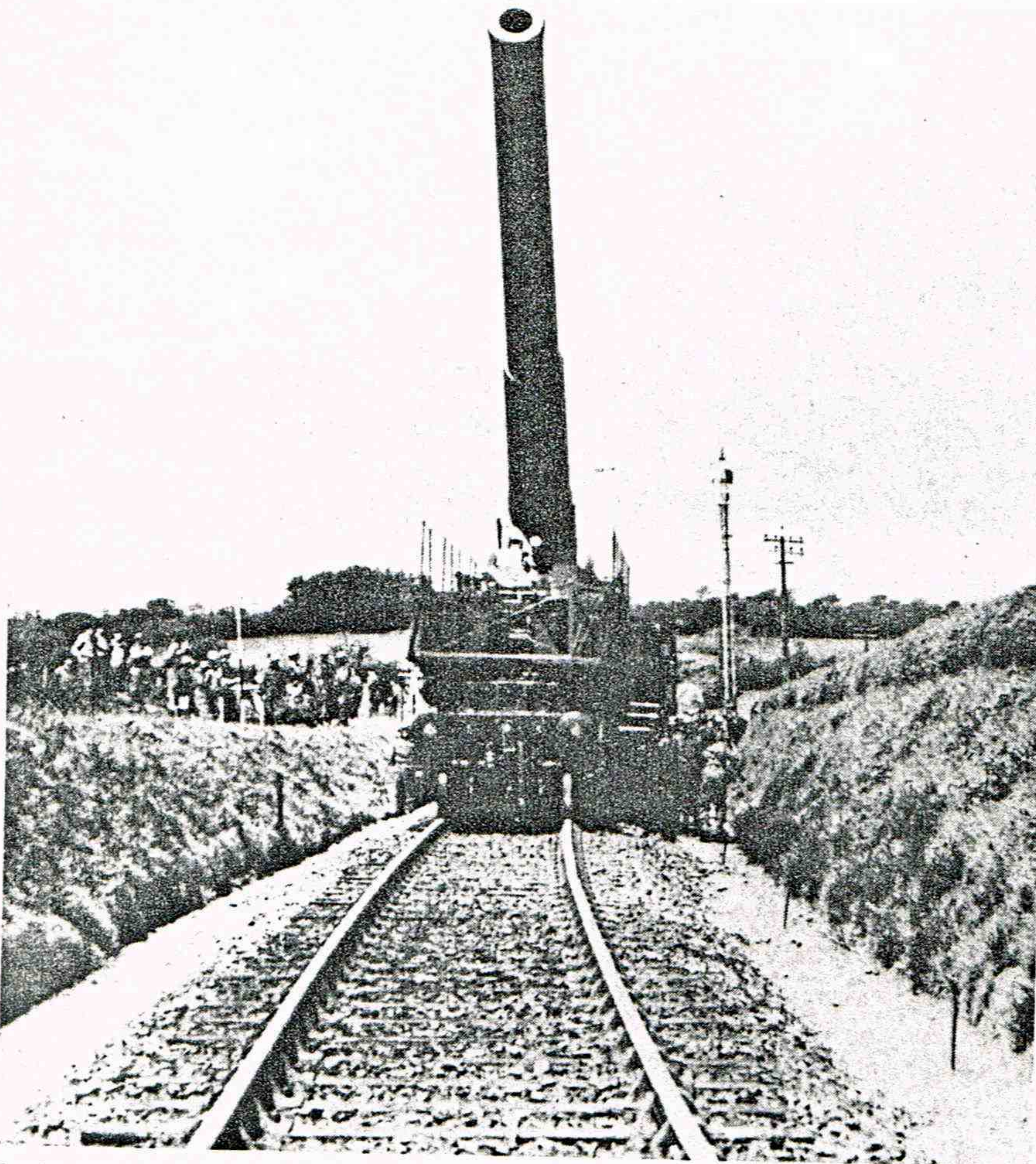
"This spur was necessary because we only had 4° traverse on the gun when we chugged up the line, and we could only fire ahead or 2° on either side. So if you wanted to cover the whole sweep of the Kent Coast, you had to back up to the curve to point in that direction. 'Boche Buster' was primarily a counter-invasion weapon, we didn't have enough range to lob shells to the other side until we came down to the coast, although we had various charges with the guns (1, 2, 3 and Super) depending on how far you wanted the shells to go.

"We fired 'Boche Buster' again on 13th February, near the Black Robin public house, Kingston when the shells fell in mid Channel and were observed from a Battery Observation Post at Dover. We received a Met. Office report every day. There was another firing on 7th April near the World's Wonder bridge, and again shortly afterwards from Lickpot Bridge, Elham.

"We had a Drill Order on 15th April, and another on 14th May when we started at 23.00 hrs and finished at 02.00 hrs on the following morning. The Drill Order was without the gun, we just went through the motions for practice. We arrived at the spur too early, so the whole detachment went on a route march and left me in charge of the gun.

"There must still be some shells in Dover Harbour from our practice firings, as we were using nose fuses at first and quite often the shells didn't explode. The theory was that it pushed a plug of air in front of it when it landed and prevented detonation. After this we changed to base fuses and the shells exploded, but unfortunately one of them exploded over the Royal Marines Depot at Deal. The following day a large piece of shell, weighing about 14 lbs, arrived back at Battery H.Q. with a note from the C.O. of the Depot tied to it which read 'Is this one of yours?'. I was in the office when it arrived, and I won't tell you what our C.O. said."

Another shell dropped near the village of Worth, near Sandwich and was blown up by the Bomb Disposal Squad fairly recently.



'Boche Buster' at Elham 14th May 1941. Some idea of the size of the 18" Mk.1 90 ton Howitzer can be gauged from the figures of the gun detachment alongside the gun. The curve of the rail track is evident along which the gun was shunted to enable it to cover the sweep of the Kent coast.
(Southern Railway Archives)

Because of the weight of the gun, some work had to be done to the railway track at the places where it was expected to fire. The track was re-laid with six additional sleepers every 45 ft length, laid on fine ballast to help absorb the shock. Extra track was laid in Bourne Park tunnel to enable service trains to bypass the gun as the northern section of line was only single track, while shell and cartridge magazines were built at Bishopsbourne Station, together with mess and sleeping accommodation. The whole area was surrounded with a barbed wire perimeter fence and Bren guns were mounted for defence.

"The complete gun and mounting weighed 243 tons, the piece itself weighed 81 tons, and the chamber for the cordite was like a bank vault underneath it. There was a ratchet and a big handle which undid a lock and then the breech swung open and you got into this vast cavern. According to the kind of charge which was used, the boys would come running along with the hessian wrapped bags of cordite, about 18" long, and throw in the appropriate number. When the breech was loaded, the door was shut and then the number one of the detachment would put in one of the firing cartridges he carried on his belt. It was just like a 12 bore cartridge and set off the charge, which was fired using an extra long lanyard about 12 yards long. Now the funny thing about old 'Boche Buster' was that it had more of a 'woof' than a bang, and if you were standing fairly close, it used to put you out for a fraction of a second.

"The shells weighed 1¼ tons and were 6'7¼" tall so had to be moved on railway trolleys and they were hoisted up to the breech level by two davits on the mounting. On the gun mounting there was a little trolley with a couple of lines and shells were hoisted up via the davit and rammed into the opening. It took ten men to ram the shells home, first of all it went halfway into the breech, then came the order 'Fully Home' and there was a 'Doing' as it went in. If you were on the other end of the gun you could almost tell which detachment was loading because the shell went home with a different kind of 'Shhh'. We had two Ford V-8 car engines to raise the barrel and one of the gun detachment had to stand by to kick start the engines. There was a big circle with a pointer to show how much elevation was being put up, but the detachment never stood on the mounting when it was fired.

"At Bishopsbourne we were loading one shell and one of the gunners must have slipped up, and the whole thing came crashing down, knocked a lump off the gun and then buried its nose between two sleepers. I was about three yards away, and wouldn't be here now if it had been nose fused.

"I believe we were supposed to be able to fire at a rate of one shot every three minutes, or that is what they said we could do. Another thing which worried Major Boyle was how many shells the gun would fire before the lining wanted renewing. It was thought that the large shells would rip lumps off the rifling, but the experts were surprised how little wear there was. Of course we never really fired enough times to find out how many shells could be fired before the lining wore out."

Practices were carried out in moving the complete gun train to other locations as quickly as possible. However, the sites where it could be fired were limited because of the shortage of suitable track. One such location was the firing spurs on top of the cliffs at St Margaret's Bay.

"We were nearly hit at St Margaret's Bay when we were ranging into the Channel; the Germans decided that it was time they started shooting as well. I remember that there was an elderly couple standing by their cottage near

where we were shooting, and every time we fired their roof lost a few more tiles. Then the Germans opened up, and the same thing happened every time their shells exploded and the poor old dears just stood there. They couldn't do anything, but they wouldn't leave the place. A lump of shrapnel went through the ammo wagon, and a lump went through the gun mounting, and afterwards we picked up some pieces and worked out that they were 15" shells they had been throwing back at us.

"Our Observation Post was on Shakespear Cliffe, Dover and we spent hours, even days digging a trench all the way to the clifftop so the enemy didn't see us. The poor gunners dug away carefully, carried the chalk away and formed a slit trench at the top, then we had a photograph taken by one of our Lysander aircraft. You could see every little bit of it, where they had covered it in and tried to camouflage it — it was a pathetic waste of time."

In November 1943 'Boche Buster' was relocated at Elham Station, where once again existing buildings were taken over for Battery H.Q. and accommodation was constructed. There it remained until it was relocated just prior to the D-Day operations and was earmarked for transportation to France together with some of the smaller calibre railway guns. But in the end it was decided that the rail-mounted guns would not be able to keep pace with the rapid advance through Europe when wheeled heavy artillery was available, so 'Boche Buster' stayed in the U.K. but had already played its part for publicity purposes. No V.I.P.s visit to the South East was complete without seeing 'Boche Buster', and Winston Churchill was a frequent caller, the first occasion being on 31st January 1942. He also accompanied Mrs Roosevelt on 30th October that year when she watched the gun being fired. The following day Canterbury received a heavy blitz from 'hit and run' raiders, two of which shot up a military train going from Canterbury to Folkestone, killing the driver and fatally injuring the fireman. More tragically a young boy riding on the footplate was also killed.

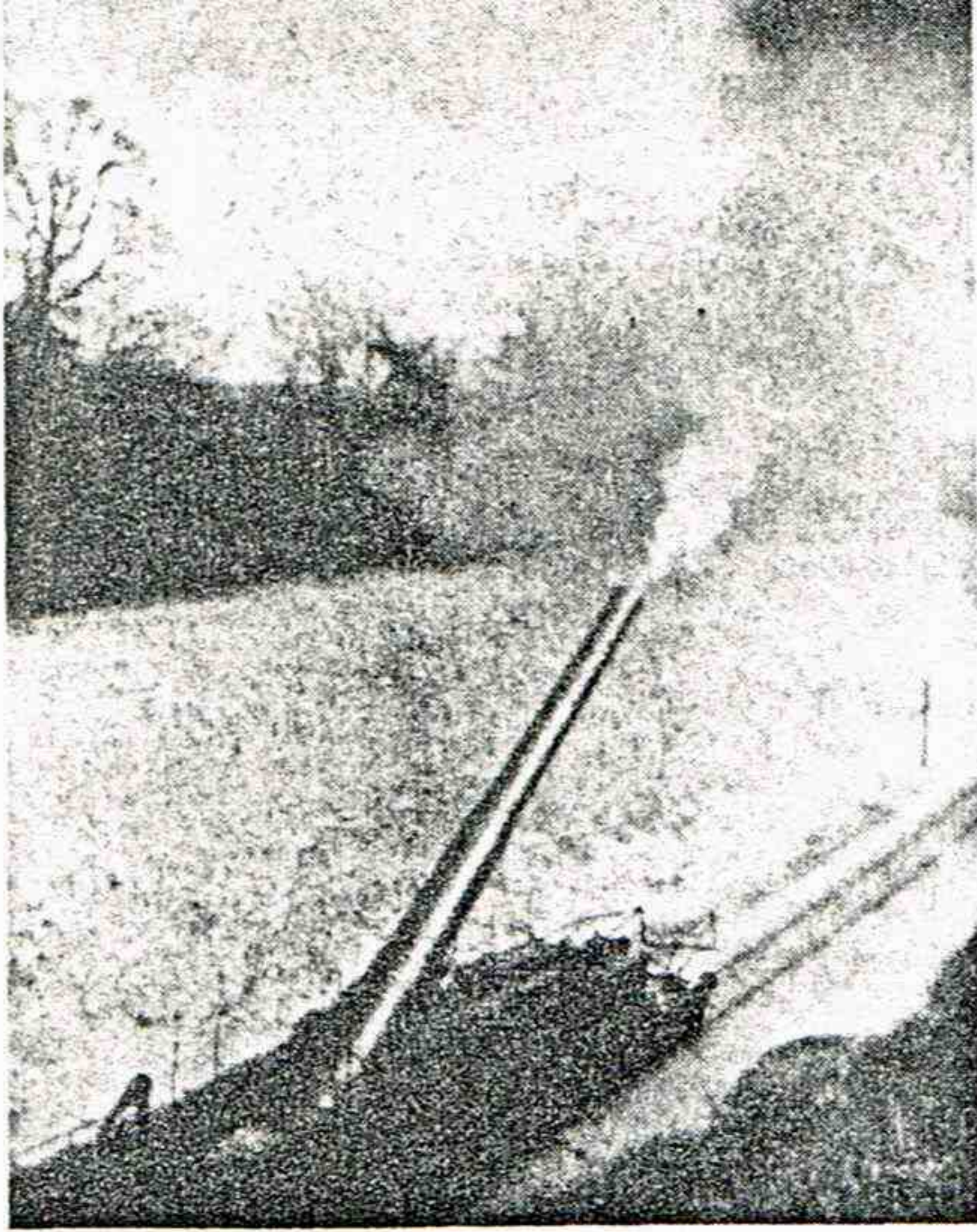
Mr H.A. Baker who worked at Woolwich Arsenal with the heavy artillery during W.W.2 recalls something about 'Boche Buster':—

"There was a Master Gunner in charge of the equipment when it left us, who was supposed to have had a course on it. As they hadn't been fired since 1919, and as far as we knew had never been fired for establishing range tables, we wondered who had given him the course; which makes the Fred Karno's turnout described quite feasible."

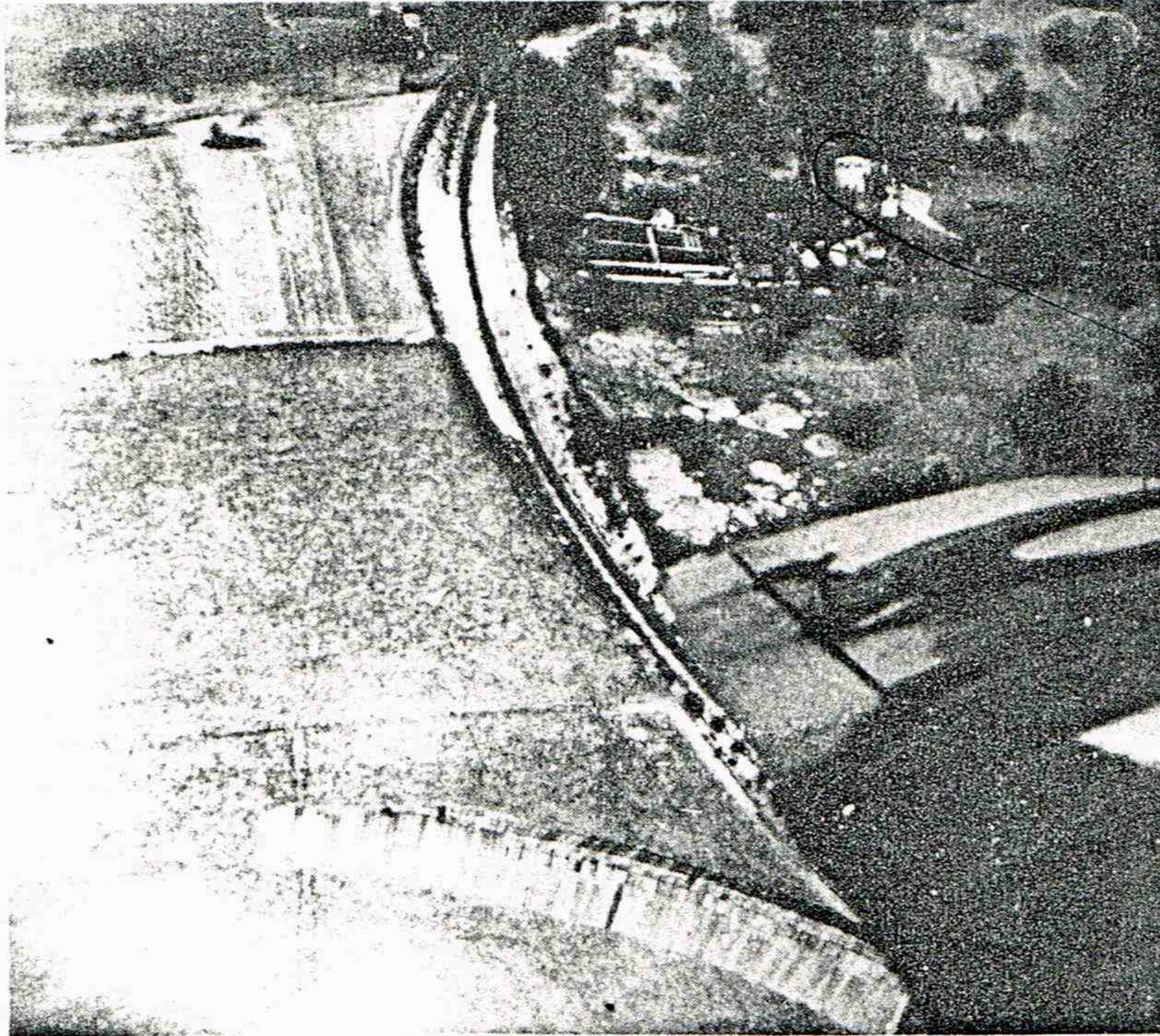
The 11th Super Heavy Battery was disbanded just prior to the fall of Calais in September 1944, and left 'Boche Buster' on Salisbury Plain, from where it was taken to Shoeburyness Ranges in Essex for use in experiments with 'skip bombing' by the R.A.F. After the war the mounting was returned to Woolwich, together with the smaller railway mounted guns and eventually was cut up in the early 1960s, leaving nothing to remind the future generations of the time when the Super Heavy rail-mounted artillery waited for the enemy 'somewhere in England'.

Acknowledgements

Mr J. Woodward, 'After the Battle' magazine, Lance Bombardier S. Taylor R.A. (Retd) and Mr H.A. Baker.



'Boche Buster' speaks. Taken at Kingston on 7th May 1941, this view shows the framework at the front of the mounting which was used to carry the tarpaulins when the gun was camouflaged. (Imperial War Museum)



'Boche Buster's' spur line at Charlton Park. To enable the Howitzer to remain hidden from the view of enemy aircraft, a spur line was built at Kingston and camouflaged with tubular scaffold poles and netting. This camouflage was checked on 25th February 1941 by a R.A.F. photo-recce aircraft. Unfortunately the chalk in the cutting behind Charlton Park shows up well. (Bob Hollingsbee)