

# On English railway artillery during the First world War

## Introduction

One of the Achilles' heels of the British army at the beginning of the First World War was the lack of heavy artillery. Inspired by continental friends and enemies, they therefore began to look around for opportunities to remedy this deficiency. If you didn't have enough cannon tubes, you did have some in stock - from e.g. obvious warships and spare equipment for the coastal artillery. Correspondingly, there was experience with regard to the necessary firing from the Royal Navy's broadside guns and the equipping of coastal forts.

Railway equipment of sufficient strength was also available, so the challenge was to combine the three elements, and the Elswick Ordnance Company became the largest producer of railway artillery for the British Army.

The first railway guns - 9" railway guns - went to the forces at the front in France in 1915, and a number of valuable experiences were quickly gained, which benefited the later development of railway artillery. It was especially difficult at first to be able to raise the guns sufficiently and thereby. Similarly, the lateral freedom of the guns could make it difficult to have an appropriate firing position on ordinary railway tracks.

### The pamphlets

	Caliber	Weight	Firing Range	Qty
9.2" cannon	230 mm	84 h	18 km?	
12" howitzer	305 mm	58 h	13 km	138
12" cannon	305 mm	173 t	28 km	4
14" cannon	355 mm	250 t	34 km	4

The 9.2" rail guns and 12" rail howitzers came in a variety of versions, the gun, aftuge and rail undercarriage, while the 12" and 14" rail guns do not appear to have varied much.

## Organization

Cf. Source 2 included the below-mentioned railway batteries from the Royal Garrison Artillery in the English army's order-of-battle per 11 November 1918. Some of the batteries were divided into half-batteries, which in the tables are marked with ½; the reason for this division is not known.

### First Army

2 x 9.2" rail gun 366th Siege Battery

2 x 9.2" rail gun 461st Siege Battery

2 x 9.2" rail gun 523rd Siege Battery

1 x 12" rail gun 92nd Siege Battery (½)

1 x 12" rail gun 543rd Siege Battery (½)

1 x 14" rail gun \*) 471st Siege Battery (½)

2 x 14" rail gun 515th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 52nd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 86th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 444th Siege Battery

1 x 12" rail howitzer 514th Siege Battery (½)

## **Second Army**

2 x 9.2" rail gun 45th Siege Battery

1 x 9.2" rail gun 53rd Siege Battery (½)

2 x 12" railway howitzers 22nd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 63rd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 82nd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 104th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 359th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 381st Siege Battery

\*) *His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster"*

### **Third Army**

2 x 9.2" rail gun 363rd Siege Battery

2 x 9.2" rail gun 442nd Siege Battery

1 x 12" rail gun 92nd Siege Battery (½)

2 x 12" rail howitzers 83rd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 89th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 333rd Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 343rd Siege Battery

### **Fourth Army**

1 x 12" rail gun 543rd Siege Battery (½)

2 x 12" rail howitzers 374th Siege Battery

### **Fifth Army**

1 x 9.2" rail gun 53rd Siege Battery (½)

2 x 9.2" rail gun 456th Siege Battery

1 x 14" rail gun \*\*) 471st Siege Battery (½)

2 x 12" railway howitzers 18th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 44th Siege Battery

2 x 12" rail howitzers 64th Siege Battery

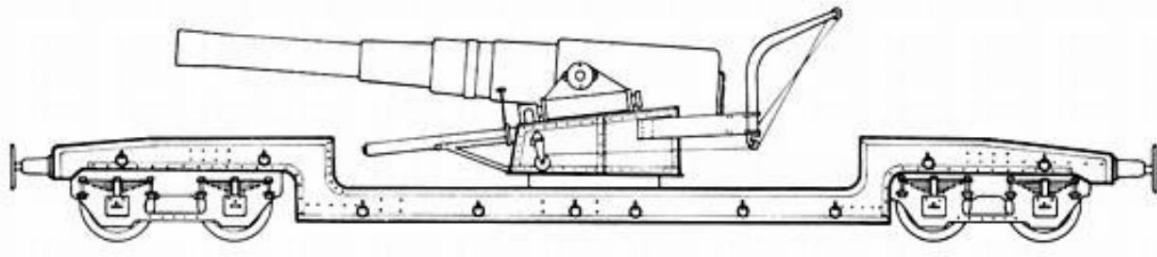
2 x 12" rail howitzers 128th Siege Battery

1 x 12" rail howitzer 514th Siege Battery (½)

2 x 12" rail howitzers 524th Siege Battery

\*\*) *His Majesty's Gun "Scene Shifter"*

Source 4 mentions that a railway battery of 4 officers as well as 67 non-commissioned officers and privates.



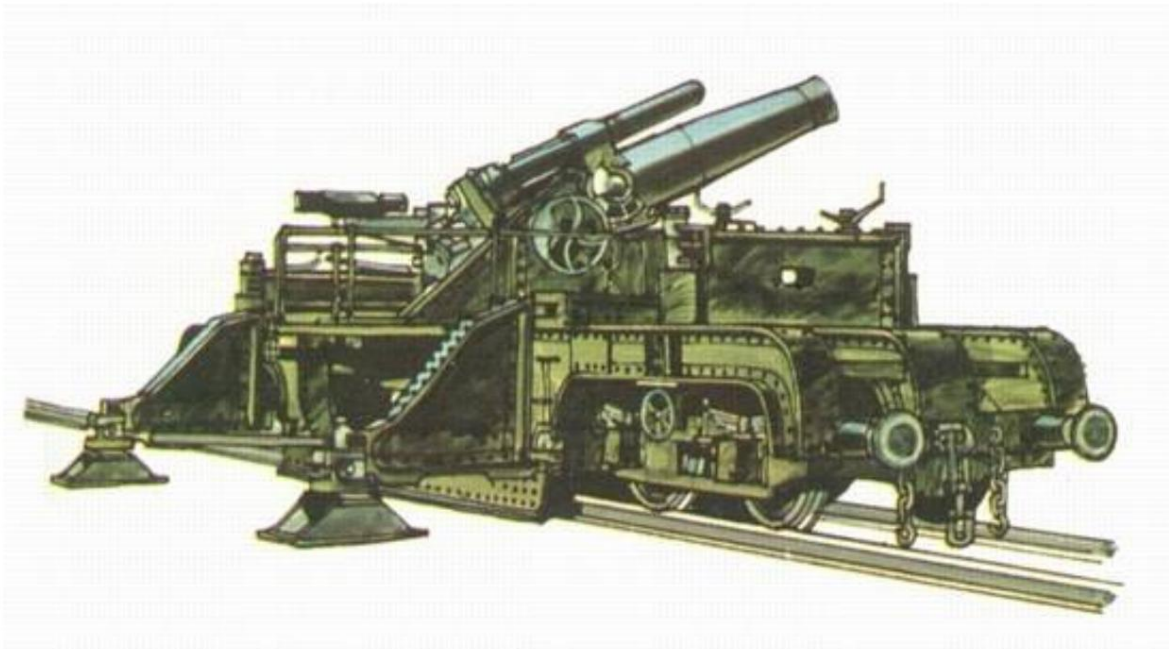
9.2" gun Mk 3, in railway carriage Mk 1.

From Source 1.

## 9" rail gun

The first 9.2" rail guns had a limited lateral freedom, but later versions made up for this.

## 12" rail howitzer



*12" howitzer Mk 1, in railway carriage Mk 1.*

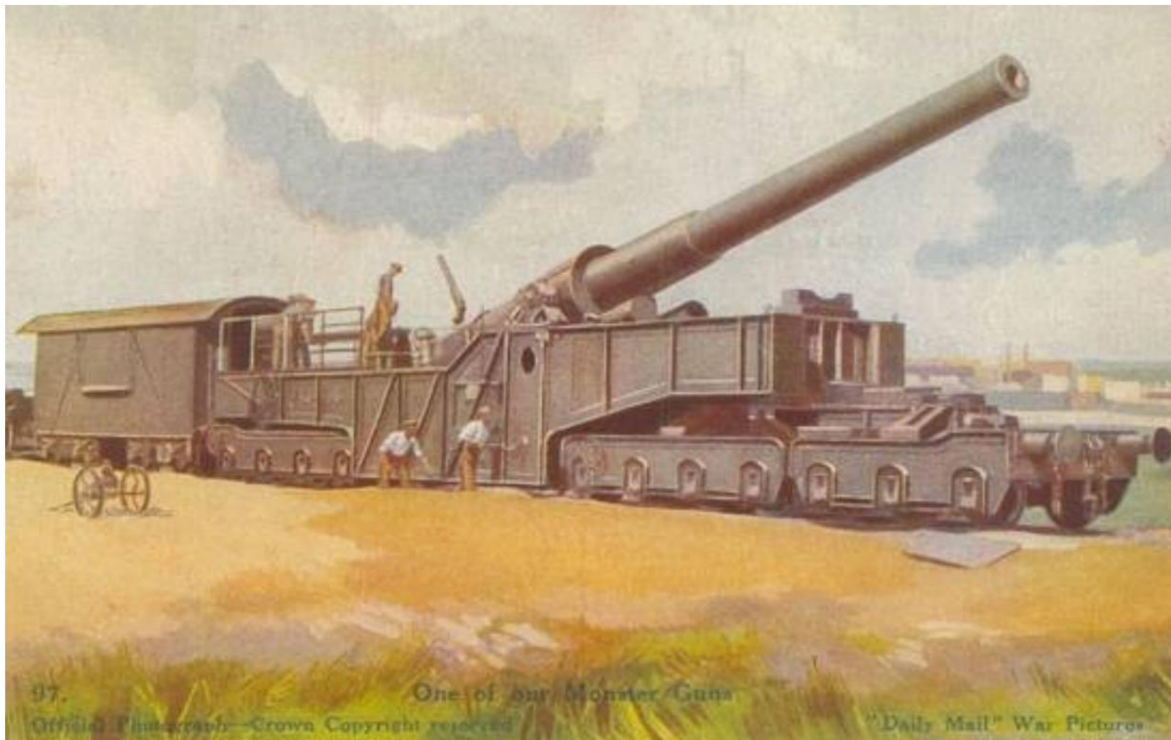
From Source 6.

The first 12" rail howitzers were put into service on 1 March 1916, and in improved versions later in 1916 (Mk 3) and in 1917 (Mk 5).

The pamphlet is seen here equipped with support legs, which ensure a stable base for the cannon when firing.

The later versions of the 12" rail howitzer had longer barrels.

### **12" rail gun**



*One of our monster guns on railway trolley.*

A postcard in the series Official War Photographs (Series 13, No. 97), published by the Daily Mail newspaper.

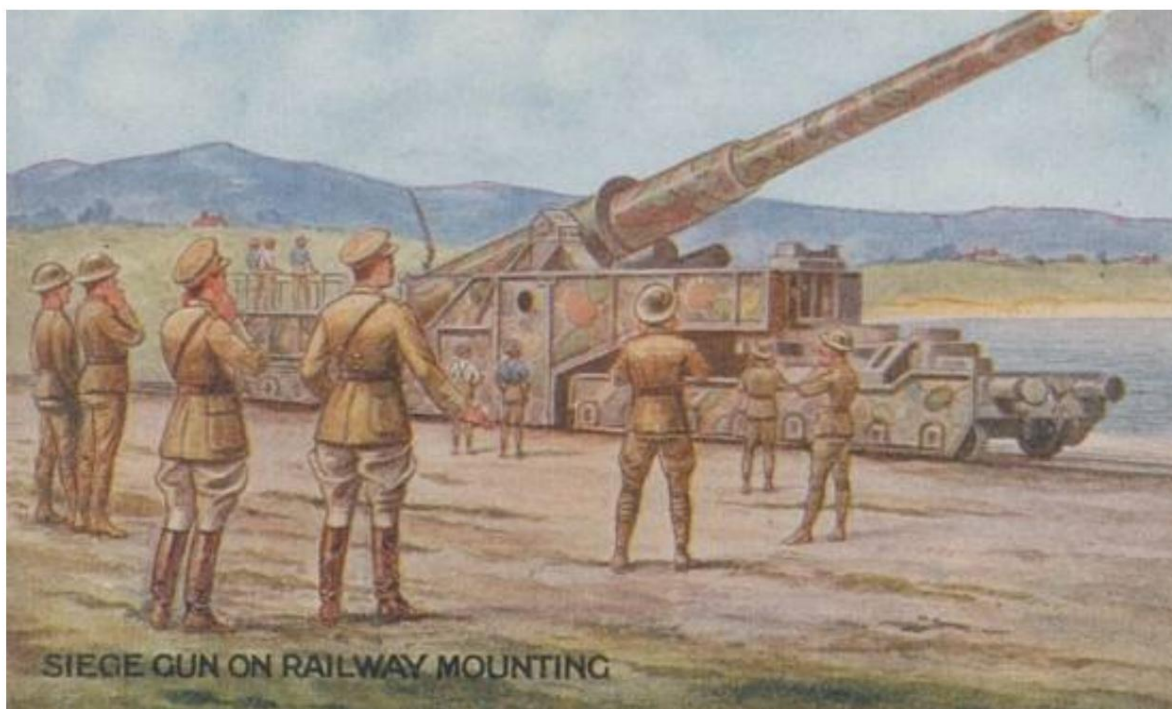
The text on the back of the card reads as follows:

*One of the monster guns with which we are hammering our way forward is seen traveling on a railway trolley.*

The pamphlet is a 12" gun Mk 9, in railway carriage Mk 11.

In September 1915 the Royal Navy handed over two 12" cannon tubes (spare) from HMS Cornwallis to the army and they were mounted as railway artillery. The pamphlets were sent to France seen in 1915 and as early as 14 January 1916 the commander of the 53rd Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery, file a report with the experience. Apart from a few small things, everything was fine.

An additional 2 units were delivered. 12" rail guns, which cf. Source 3 could vary in some details. This is primarily because the guns for HMS Cornwallis were built by three different factories - Elswick, Vickers and Woolwich Arsenal.



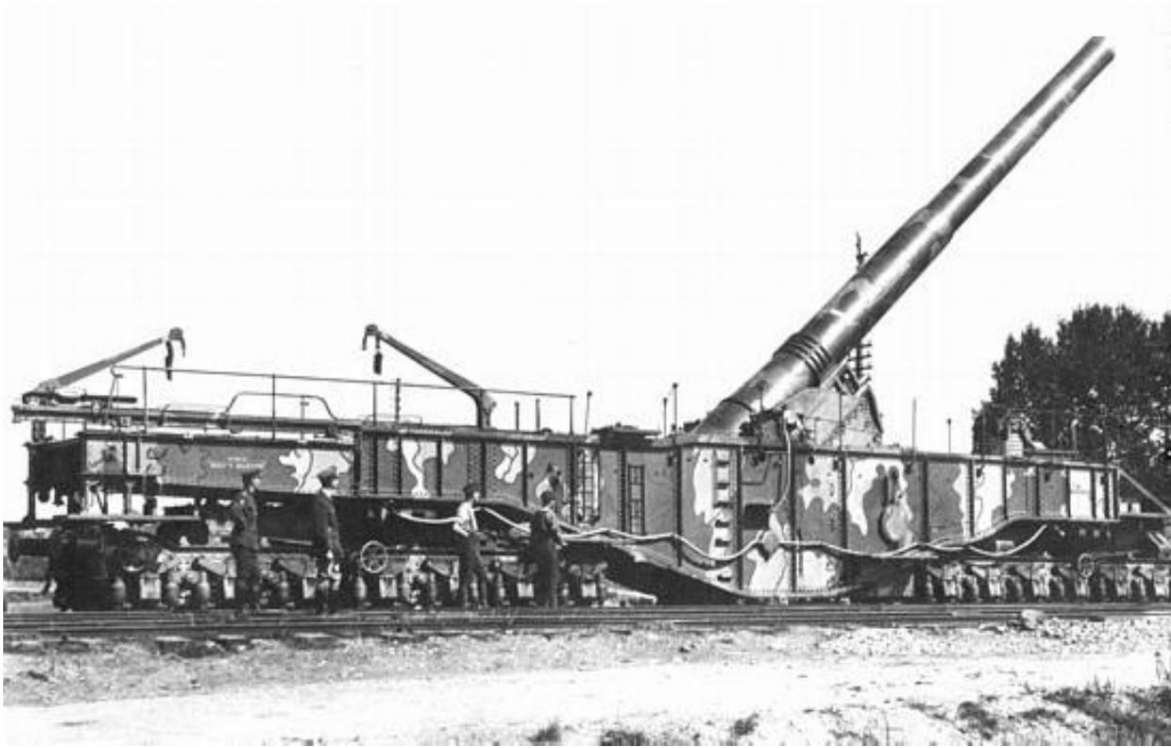
*Siege gun on railway mounting, approx. 1918.*

No. 3 in contemporaneous series of postcards issued to support the sale of war bonds; the campaign's theme *Feed the Guns with War Bonds* is printed on the back.

The pamphlet is of the same type as above.

The drawing gives an impression of the camouflage colors of the time, which can also be seen in certain photographs from the time.

### **14" rail gun**



*His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster".*

From Source 3.

This type was the ultimate rail gun.

The basis of the first two pamphlets were guns developed for a Japanese warship that - probably due to the war - could not be delivered.

Based on the good experiences with the 12" railgun, it was decided in August 1916 to build two 14" railguns.

In May 1918 the pamphlets arrived in France where they were handed over to the 471st Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery. Dubbed His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster" and His Majesty's Gun "Scene Shifter", the names were promptly painted on.

On 8 August 1918, King Georg V inspected the battery. Under the command of Battery Commander Major SM Cleve, the "Boche Buster" fired a shot at a target designated by the King, namely the town of Douai, an important railway junction behind the German lines.

This story appears in my article *The King's Shot by Jeff Dorman*, published in December 1975 in the defunct English magazine *Battle*. You also get a small insight into how a railway battery (in practice a half-battery) works.

## **The railway material**



*His Majesty's Gun "Boche Buster" (14-inch railway gun) in transport position.*  
From Source 5.

The locomotive is a Caledonian 0-6-0, with the number ROD (*Railway Operating Department*) 2823.

The carriage behind the cannon is for ammunition. The crew, who in honor of the photographer have taken their places on the cannon, were transported in a separate train.

## Sources

1. *Artillery* by John Batchelor and Ian Hogg, Ballentine Books Inc., New York 1973, SBN 345-23499-5-495.
2. *History of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - Western Front 1914-18* by Sir Martin Farndale, Royal Artillery Institution, London 1986, ISBN 1-870114-00-0.
3. *British Artillery Weapons & Ammunition 1914-1918* by Ian V. Hogg and LF Thurston, Ian Allan Ltd., Surrey 1972, SBN 7110-0381-5.
4. *Tanks & Weapons of World War 1* by Bernard Fitzsimons (ed.), BPC Publishing Ltd., London 1973, ISBN 0-7026-002-4.
5. *The King's Shot* by Jeff Dorman, article in *Battle* magazine, December 1975.
6. *Railways and War before 1918* by David Bishop, Blanford Press Ltd., London 1972, ISBN 0-7137-0703-8.
7. *Railways and War since 1917* by David Bishop, Blanford Press Ltd., London 1974, ISBN 0-7137-0706-2.

## Postscript

The following German aerial photographs originate from:

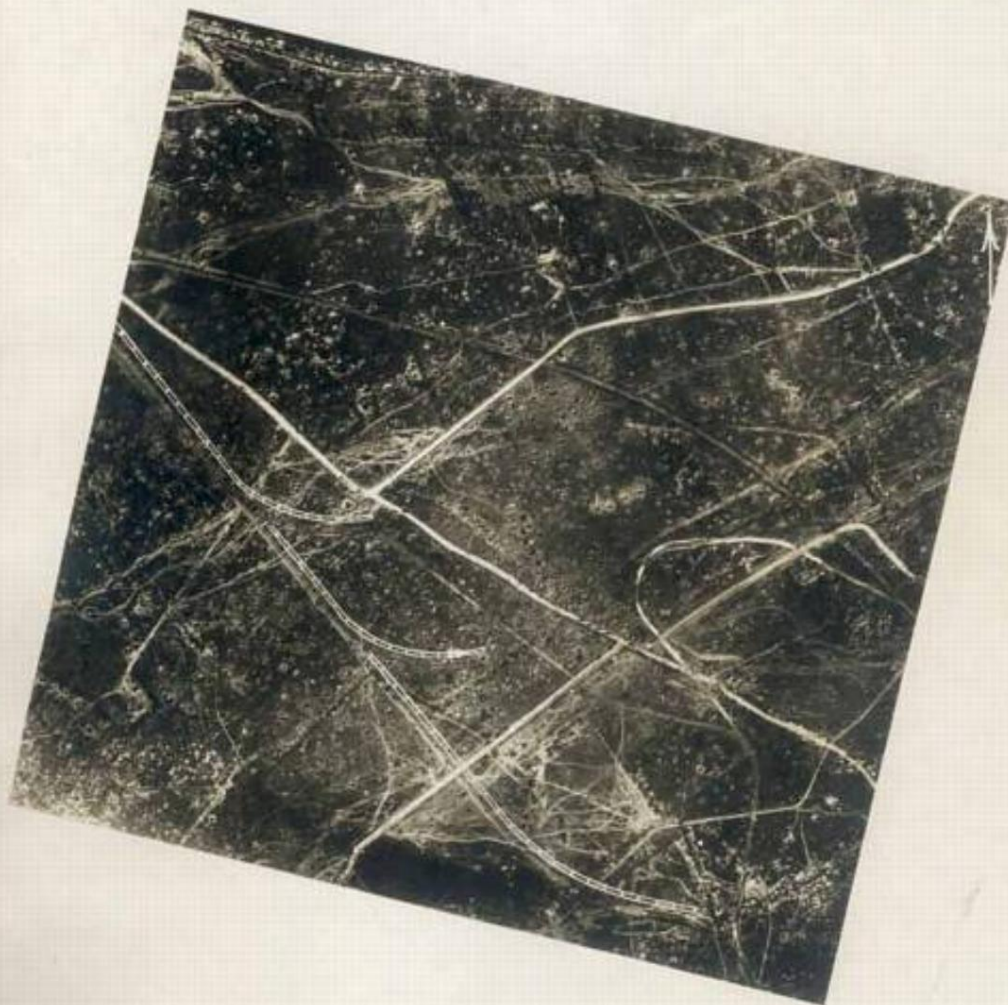
*Sammelmappe von Luftbildern aus der Schlacht in Flandern im Zeitraum vom 31. July - 30. September 1917. Stabsbildabteilung der Kommandeur der Flieger AOK 4. (Stabsbildmeldung Nr. 11).*

Quite by chance I came across a July 29, 2005 post in the Great War Forum by a gentleman named Malte Znaniecki, who apparently also owns the book. Among the examples of illustrations shown was interestingly a reproduction of photographs of English railway gun emplacements at Ypres, 25 September 1917.

In this way, this little account of English railway artillery can thus be rounded off with the enemy's impression of what the railway artillery positions looked like.

Per Finsted





Nach örtlichem Vordringen führte der Gegner von den bei Jeperen endenden Vollbahnen Stichgleise ostwärts in die Nähe seiner vorderen Linien.

(Entfernung von der vorderen Front 3,6 und 3,1 km.)

Die Gleise dienen der Aufstellung schwerster Geschütze und dem Munitionsnachschub.

English railway gun emplacements at Ypres, 25 September 1917.