

376 Coastal Defence Battery, 1940-44, Lyme Regis

Memories by Albert Thorington

Compiled by Graham Davies in response to an enquiry in 2022.

A concrete tunnel which used to link two coast defence guns to their magazine during the last war has been exposed by further land slippage in the Spittles area to the east of Lyme. The guns, in place between 1940 and 1944, were under the control of the Royal Artillery's 376 Coastal Defence Battery. One member of the battery Mr Albert Thorington married a Lyme girl and moved to the town. He said "the guns were 4.7's which had been taken from a Japanese destroyer their magazine was in the middle and the tunnel was used to join them. One gun shelter was camouflaged as a hay stack and the other as a farm building. In the middle of the field was an observation post camouflaged as another farm building." The guns were taken away in 1944.
(Lyme Regis News 1987)

In 1991 Mr Thorington wrote down his memories of his time with the Battery during the war, of which the Museum has this copy:

The battery was formed in 1940 from a T.A. battery from Hartlepool. It was situated on the cliffs in front of the copse at the top of Timber Hill.

The battery consisted of 2 – 4.7" naval guns, 2 coastal searchlights, twin Lewis guns, and about 110 officers and men. The shell was 50 lbs either H.E. or A.P. and the range was 12,000 yards.

I joined the battery in late 1940 along with about 30 others and after three weeks basic training at Shoeburyness. We were first billeted in Pound Dairy in Broad Street. Before that they had been in Woodville House at the top of Woodmead Road.

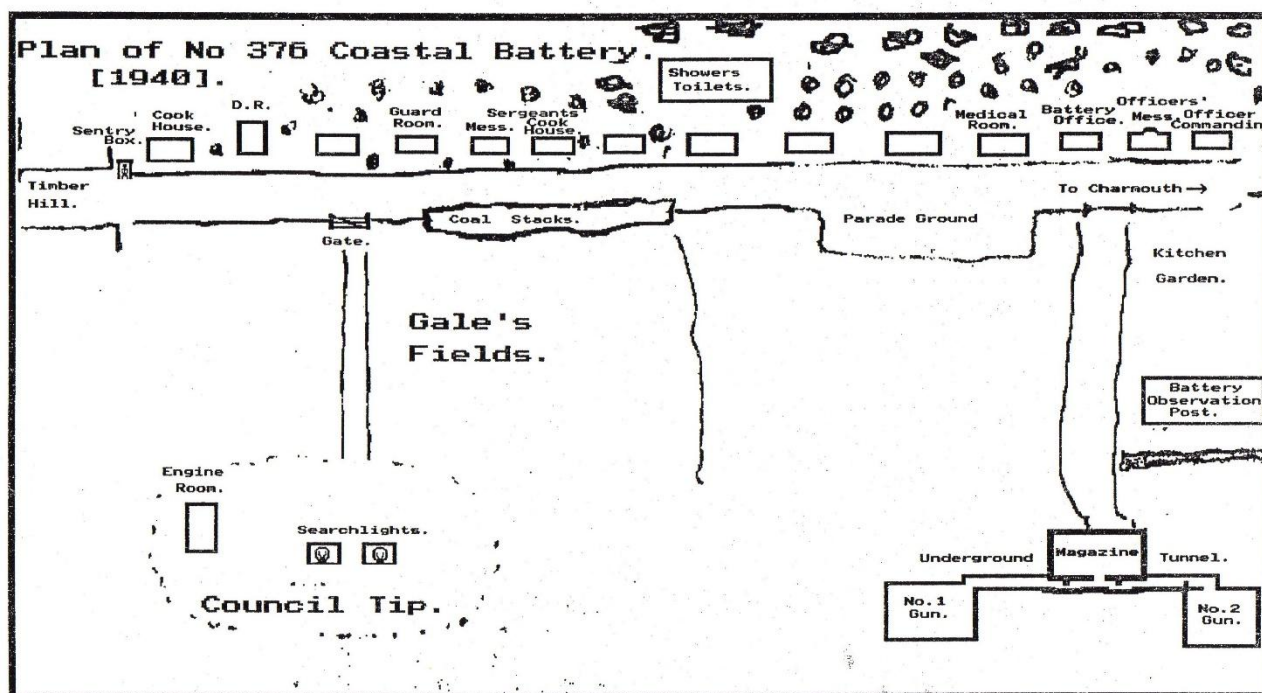
After about 3 weeks we moved up to the W.T.A. in Colway Lane and the officers were below in Colway House. Before moving in we had to scrub the whole house from top to bottom.

The officers at the time were Major Johnston who was Canadian, Capt Turner and Lieutenant Ray. The Major was known as the Mad Major as he used to get a bit tipsy and then call everyone out in the middle of the night saying there was an invasion alarm. He used to be driven around in an army staff car, by Dvr. Stafford and he had a big brown dog. The officers' batman was Gnr. Lucas and he got the job by putting his hand up when the sergeant asked if anyone could make a cup of tea.

There were two sergeants at first – Sgt. Horsepole and Sgt. Dodd. We were divided into two sections A & B and did 24 hours on the guns alternately. There was a N.A.A.F.I. in the billet with two girls serving, which we were very glad of as the cook was terrible. He was L. Bdr. Hitchman, an ex-boilerman from Birmingham and we called him the black bomber. As there were no baths in the billet we used to go to the old laundry at the top of Mill Green which was adapted with showers.

At that time we only had nine rifles for the battery and these were used for guard duty on the battery and billet. The battery itself just consisted of two guns on concrete platforms and shells and cartridges stacked at the back covered with tarpaulins. A firm of contractors came in to make it look like a farm. No. 1 gun was made to look like a haystack and No. 2 like a barn. They built an Observation Post and made it look like a farmhouse, with stone walls in front. We all had to work on this. We had to dig out a connecting tunnel between the guns with a magazine in the middle, and also gun shelters at the back of each gun for the gun crews, when on duty. While this was being done the duty watch slept in tents in the copse and meals were brought up from St Albans.

A company of engineers came in and put up nissen huts in the copse. Water and electricity was laid on. The road was tarmaced and a parade ground made at the top part near the Battery Office. When we moved up into the huts we had no beds so at first we had to sleep on concrete floors.



Before leaving the W.T.A. Major Johnston was moved to the Isle of Wight and we had Capt Hopkins as C.O. who came from Bath. He had lost his left arm in the first world war but he was a crack shot with any weapon. Then we had Sgt. Major Robinson and a Sgt. Holley who came from Portland and a Sgt. Fell. Later on Robinson was moved and we had Sgt. Major Tozer who came from Devon. Lieut Ray was moved and also Capt. Turner and we had Lieut. Watkins and Lieut Leaster. A toilet block was built with showers, toilets and washbasins as before that we had outside ablutions with only cold water.

The searchlights were down on the council rubbish tip. There were two emplacements for the lights and one for the generator. These were manned by about a dozen men and connected to the Battery Observation Post by telephone.

There was a large hut out by Rabbits Field where we used to have concerts and Dvr. Wright who was a commercial artist drew pin-ups on the walls. He also used to do portraits from photographs.

In the Spring of '41 the field behind the Battery Observation Post was turned into a kitchen garden and a lot of vegetables were grown there. Gnr. Pryce and Gnr. Hodges were the gardeners. We used to collect seaweed from the Monmouth Beach in the 15 cwt truck. It was rotted down and used as manure. There were four drivers – Hughes, Ingham, Guyer and Wright.

The N.A.A.F.I. was moved up into one of the huts and we had two new girls. One was a local girl, Miss Foxwell. Her father kept a grocer's shop in Bridge St. The other girl came from Weymouth.

The Home Guard used to come up to the battery, and were trained on the guns. They also came to some of the practice shoots, where we had a target towed by a motor-boat. Sometimes they were at night, when of course the searchlights were used, and the town crier used to go round to tell everyone to open their windows as the blast used to shake them.

There was a lookout on each gun and the B.O.P. twenty-four hours a day. We used to do an hour at a time. Stand to was an hour before dawn and an hour before sunset, when everybody had to be at their posts.

We were allowed to take down any dead trees in the copse which were used for firewood as there was a tortoise stove in each hut, but they couldn't be lit 'til 4 o'clock. The coal we used get from Honiton by lorry. It was stacked along the road and whitewashed.

At first the cookhouse was the first hut inside the gate and when on gate guard, the fire had to be made up during the night so it was ready for the cook in the morning. One night there was a visit from a Major from H.Q. which was at Portland, and when he came to the gate there was no challenge from the sentry. So he went looking for him and found him asleep on a form in front of the fire, he rocked him until he woke up and then put him on a charge, which he got 28 days for. After that the cookhouse was moved to the middle of the camp. Gnr. Hill was the sentry found asleep.

At first when there was fear of invasion we only used to get out once a week, but later on we got out more often, and we also had bathing parades in the afternoons. The favourite pub with the lads was the Three Cups. Mr and Mrs Lloyd were there at the time, the Marine Theatre was a canteen run by the W.I. where you could get tea and cakes etc.

There was a radio location site built on top of Cain's Folly the other side of Charmouth and the operators were billeted with us. It used to track the shipping up and down the channel, then one night it just slipped down the cliff. It went down about sixty feet. All the equipment was saved and it was abandoned.

We had a new cook, as about thirty of the men were posted out. He was Gnr. Smith. He married a girl from Seaton and still lives there as far as I know. Gnr. Bradshaw also married a local girl, Marjorie Holman from Silver Street.

Captain Hopkins was a stickler for spit and polish and when he was told the quartermaster was making a visit for clothing exchange we were told to try and get new battledresses. If they weren't worn enough we had to rub them with stones, so they became thin and worn looking and it worked as they were exchanged for new ones.

Gnr. Jackson was the officers' batman. He was a bricklayer and he built a fireplace and chimney in the officers mess so they could have an open fire. Gnr. Cage was the barber and we used to pay 6d a time for haircut. Bdr. Mackness was in charge of the battery office, L. Bdr. Allen was the battery clerk. Later Mackness was made up to Sgt. but he had to move to the guns. L. Bdr. Beckworth was the storeman and Gnr. Fraser was the cook in the sergeants mess.

We had a football team which used to play the local teams, and when we had an E.N.S.A. concert, the local people were invited up.

Eventually the battery was broken up and some went into the field artillery, anti aircraft or the infantry. The camp was then used by the American army who trained here before D-Day.