

Richmond Park and the First World War

A hundred years ago the First World War (1914-1918) began, a conflict which affected everyone in the country.

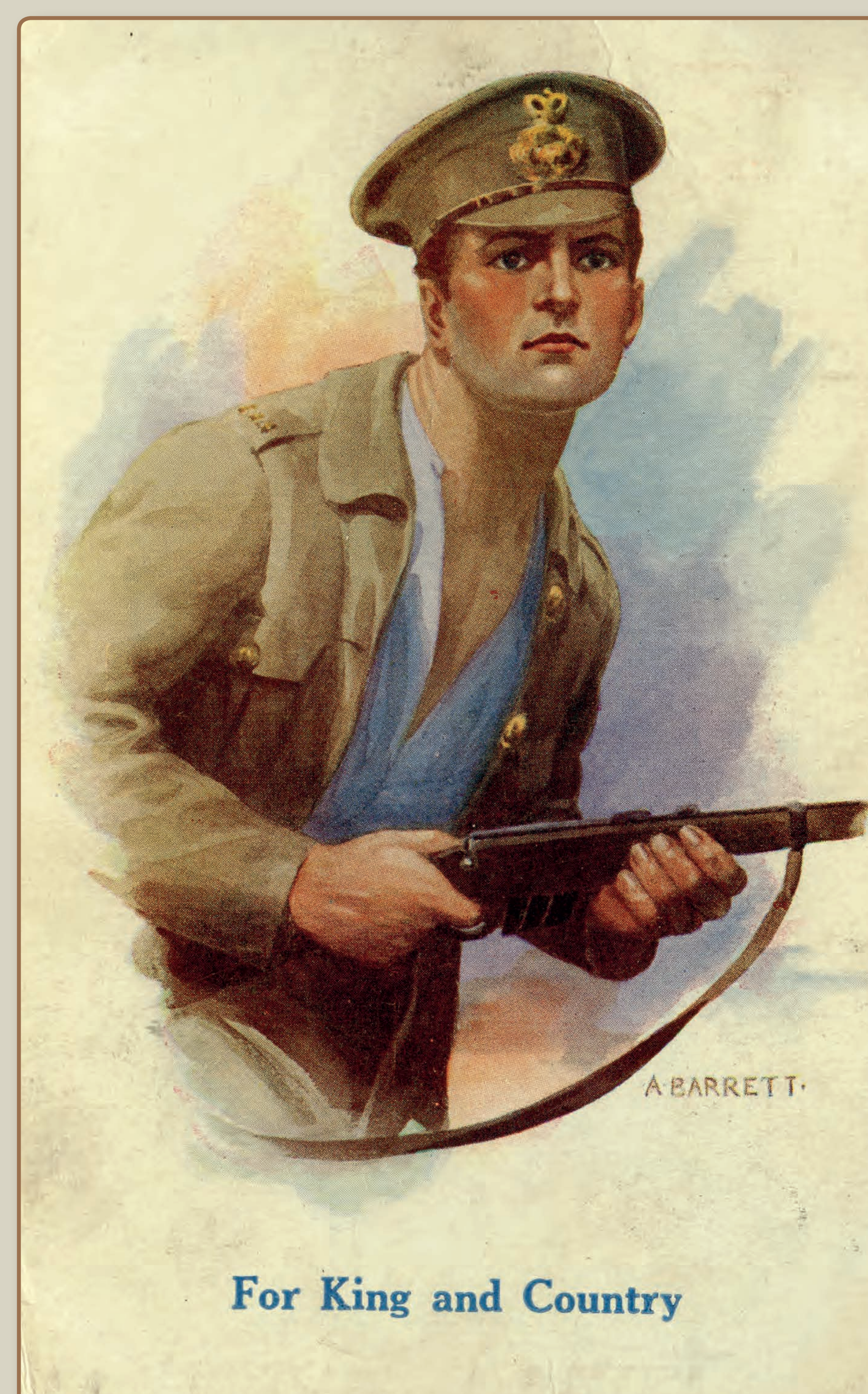
Nothing like it had ever been seen before, not least in Richmond Park. This display, mounted by the Hearsurn Collection, shows some of the notable things which took place here at this time, from cavalry training to the construction of a military hospital, a top secret military experiment and women working on the Home Front.

The period before the outbreak of war is sometimes seen as a Golden Age when Richmond Park was a place of leisure and genteel residence.

When war broke out in August 1914 the army initially relied on volunteer recruits and Richmond Park was one area where units mustered and prepared for action.



A postcard from 1906 showing a view near Kingston Gate



Pembroke Lodge in 1883, the home of the Dowager Countess Russell, widow of Lord John Russell, and her young grandson Bertrand Russell, who was to become a renowned philosopher

Soldiers in the Park

Army encampments were set up in the Park during the war, including a large camp near Roehampton for volunteer rifle regiments, and a depot for the Royal Naval Air Service between Roehampton and Robin Hood Gate.



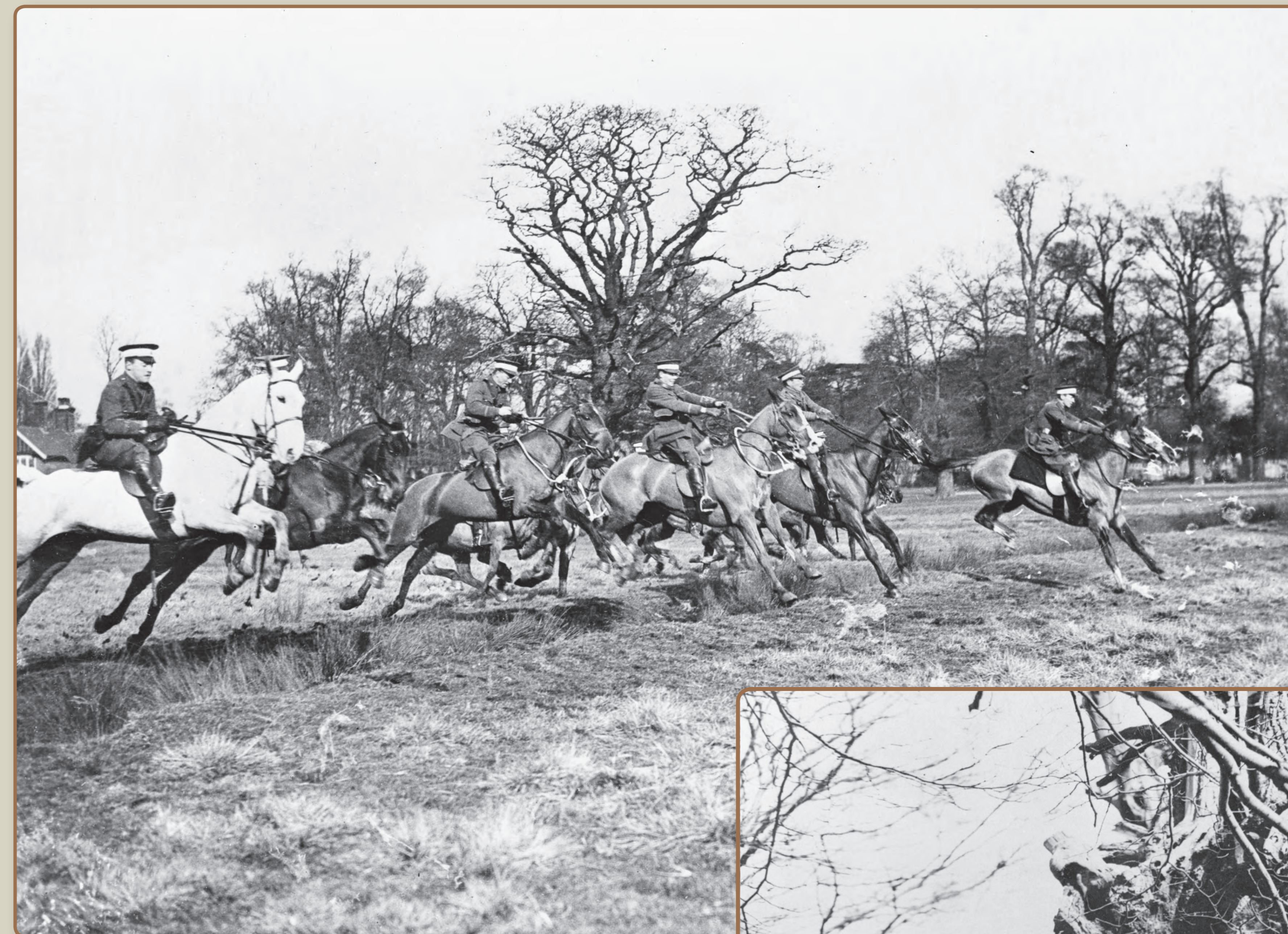
The Royal Naval Air Service, Roehampton, August 1917, John Lavery

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The 2nd Battalion Artists' Rifles leaving Richmond Park for a route march, headed by their band, 1914



In the Park, units trained for battle.



Cavalry charge in Richmond Park, 1915

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Sniper training in Richmond Park, 1915

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A Hospital in the Park

In 1916 a fully equipped military hospital was built in Richmond Park for South African troops injured in the fighting.

With access via a new gate at Cambrian Road, it was on a large site of some 12 acres between Conduit Wood and Bishop's Lodge, near Richmond Gate. It eventually housed over 600 beds, workshops and a concert hall. As part of the war effort, the hospital performed over 2,000 operations and treated over 9,500 patients.

Nearby, the Star and Garter Home for disabled servicemen continued to support victims of the conflict after the war was over, making the most of its location just outside Richmond Gate.



South African military hospital in Richmond Park

During the war, morale at the hospital was maintained by a programme of activities such as concerts and fancy dress parties. Patients, staff and volunteers wrote and published a magazine 'The Springbok Blue' with articles, pictures, poems and cartoons.



The Wounded at the Gate, 1920



'Jackie' the regimental mascot, a monkey who lost a leg to a German shell on the Western Front but recovered to re-join his unit

One patient's view of the journey from the Front Line to a hospital bed in Richmond Park

© London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Local Studies Collection



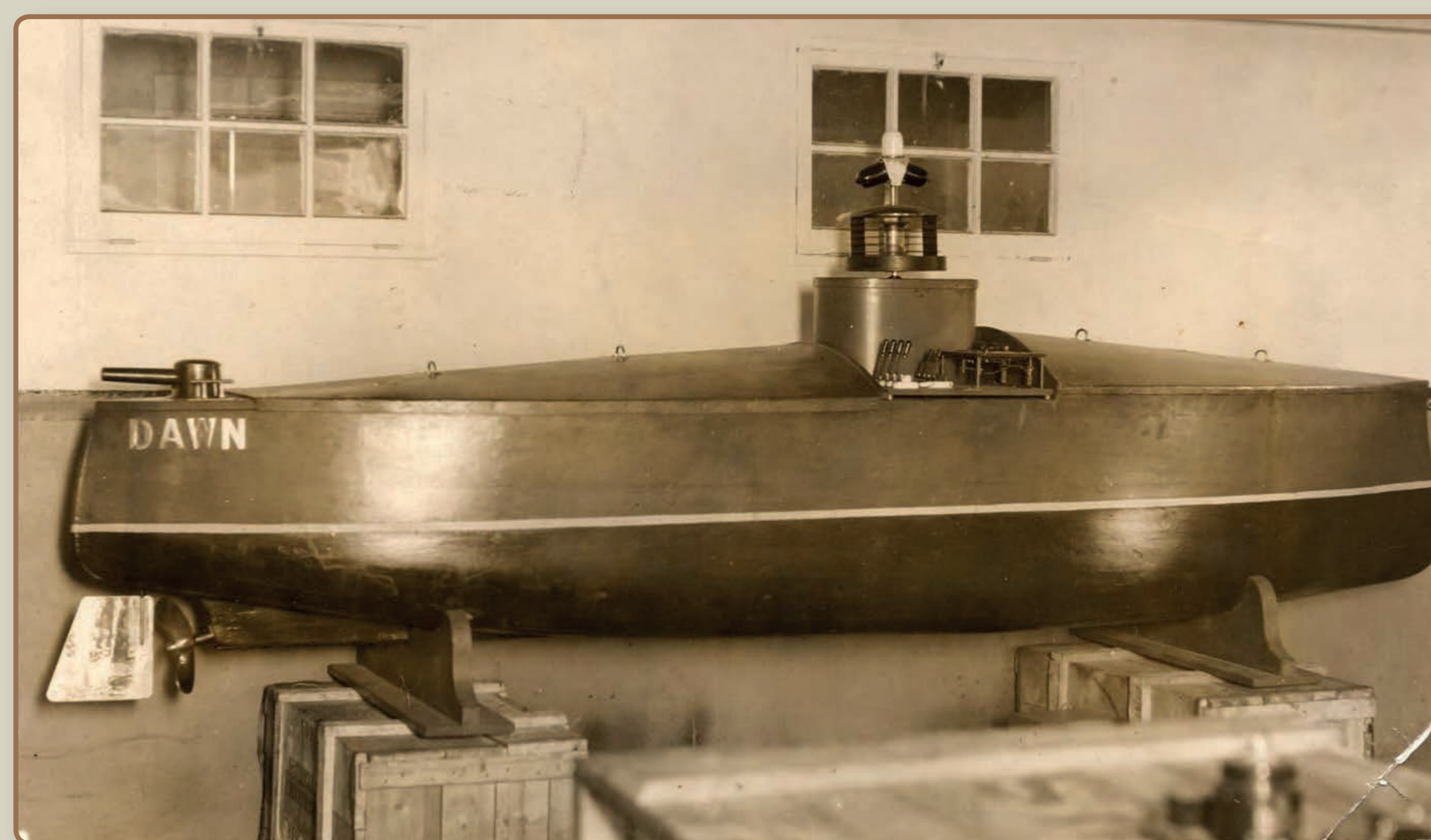
A Top Secret Experiment in the Park

In the First World War over 500 people were killed in Britain in bombing raids by German airships called Zeppelins.

The British government announced an award of £25,000 to anyone who could create a weapon against this alarming new threat. In response an English inventor, Harry Grindell Matthews, created an “electrical light ray” system, using selenium cells. In a secret experiment on Pen Ponds in Richmond Park in December 1915, Matthews successfully demonstrated his invention, using a remotely controlled boat to detonate mines at a distance. Matthews won the £25,000 but the invention was never used as other means of dealing with Zeppelins were eventually adopted.

Press articles reveal the secret experiment to destroy Zeppelins

© ‘The Death Ray’ by Jonathan Foster, 2008



© Illustrated London News
Ltd Mary Evans

YOUNG INVENTOR WINS £25,000 IN ONE NIGHT.

Secret Experiment on Richmond
Park Pond in War Time.

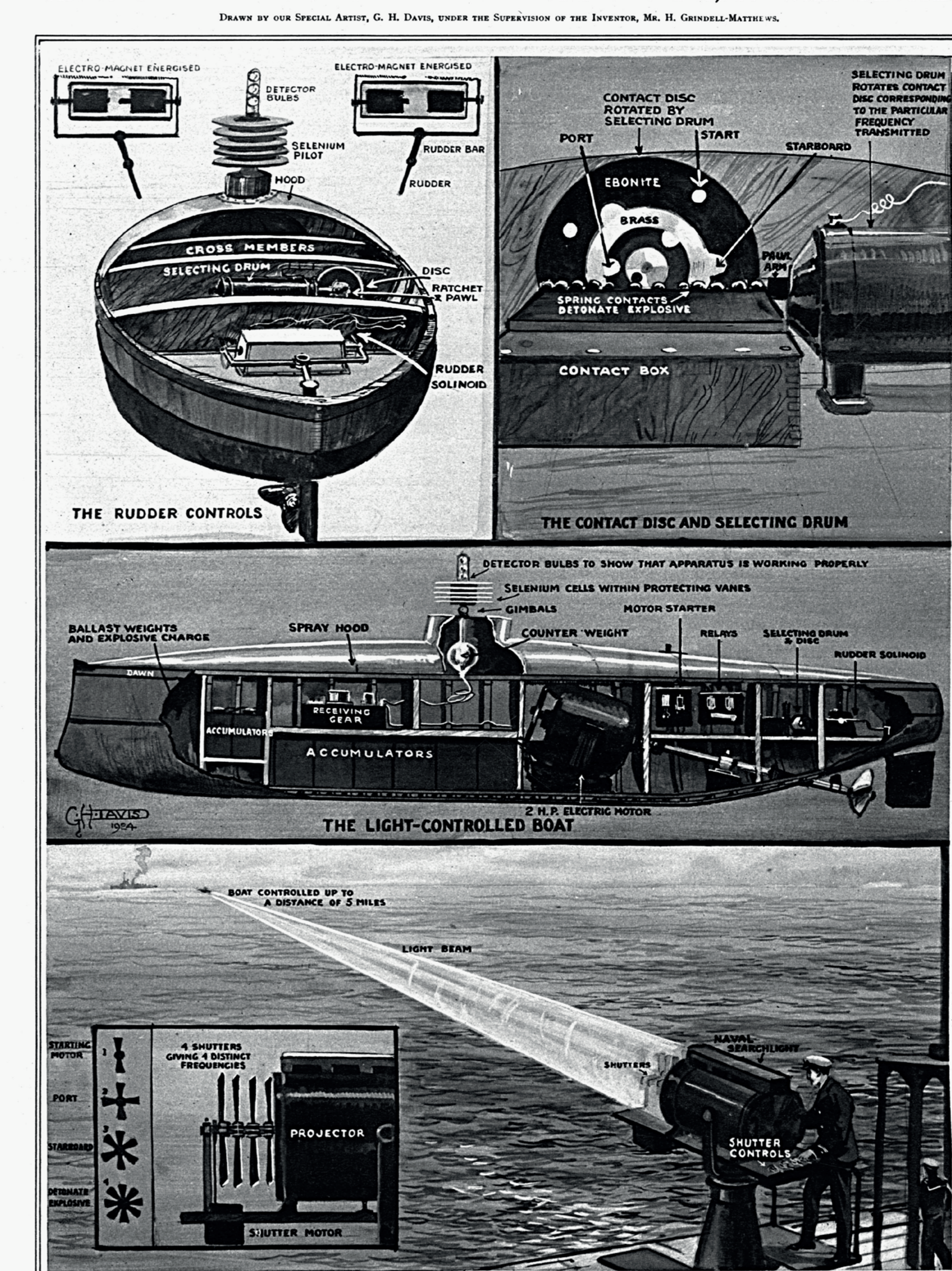
ZEPPELIN DESTROYER.

How a young inventor won £25,000 from the British Government in a single night as the result of an experiment with a ten-foot motor boat on Penn Pond, Richmond Park, is revealed to-day.

Hitherto it has been one of the closely guarded secrets of the war. The experiment, having for its ultimate object proof that an aerial destroyer, controlled from the ground, could be used to attack Zeppelins, was carried out with a model launch, in the presence of Lord Balfour, the late Lord Fisher, and a staff of experts.

It was so successful that a cheque for £25,000 was handed to the inventor, Mr. Grindell-Matthews, the next morning.

AN UNMANNED BOAT STEERED BY LIGHT: A £25,000 WAR DEVICE.



TESTED DURING THE WAR BEFORE LORD FISHER AND MR. BALFOUR ON PENN POND IN RICHMOND PARK: MR. H. GRINDELL-MATTHEWS' LIGHT-CONTROLLED MOTOR-BOAT—DIAGRAMS OF THE APPARATUS.

The Home Front

In October 1914, Princess Mary, the daughter of George V, launched a Christmas Fund to send gifts to those fighting in the armed services.

(Mary was the grand-daughter of the Duchess of Teck who lived at White Lodge in Richmond Park in the 19th century.) Over 400,000 gift boxes were distributed, each containing a pipe, tobacco, cigarettes and a lighter, or paper and envelopes for non-smokers.

The huge effort to fight the First World War meant that at home many women took on jobs previously seen as exclusively for men in sectors such as industry, munitions, transport and agriculture. By the middle of the war it was increasingly difficult to maintain the army's front line strength. To release more soldiers to fight, the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) was formed in 1917, and a unit served in Richmond Park.



Princess Mary's Gift Box

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WAACs in Richmond Park

© Jon Spence



WAAC recruitment poster

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The Hearsam Collection is part of the international First World War Centenary Partnership.



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