

MUZZLE LOADING CANNON OF SOUTH AFRICA

A Guide For The Enthusiast

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NEWSLETTER No. 3 - February 2002

A free service to the muzzle loading enthusiast

With silly season activities and laziness now behind me, I resume with the newsletters.

Our field of interest is strictly that of muzzle loading cannon, and we don't have much to do with the new-fangled breech loading guns, (it will never catch on anyway!). It would take an exceptional event for us to even mention a BL gun in these pages. By sheer coincidence, I have been informed of just such an event.

An intrepid group in the Bloemfontein area, operating under the name of "Oranje Vrijstaat Artillerie Corps", have restored one of the Boer Krupp BL guns to full working order. As one involved in this kind of work I can appreciate the levels of enthusiasm, drive and endurance required to undertake and complete such a project. The gun is now fired by a crew in period dress on appropriate occasions of celebration and remembrance in the Free State. I have contact details if interested.

1. ROB BEN ISLAND

There are three muzzle loading guns on Robben Island, one 8 pdr which was apparently the signal gun and two possibly 6 pdr civil guns outside the church. I was contacted by the team of historians and architects who are restoring the island with regard to the two smaller guns at the church. A 19th century drawing of the church shows the two guns half buried and serving as bollards, one on either side of the entrance. The restoration team wanted my opinion on the idea of returning the guns to bollard duty as per the old drawing.

As far as I have been able to establish those two guns were moved to the island purely for decorative purposes and had no military or other operational significance. The two guns (Durr 487 & 488) which are in poor condition and are both without their trunnions, will thus be replaced in their original decorative positions, vertically at the church entrance.

2. THE DUYFKE N

In 1602 the Dutch ship DUYFKEN was the first European ship to chart the western coast of Australia. In November 2001 a replica of this ship berthed in Cape Town on her way to the Netherlands to celebrate the 400th anniversary of this event. On board are four replica 3 pdr cannon, three cast in aluminium and one in bronze. The bronze gun is an exact, but scaled down replica of the 8 and 12 pdr bronze guns used in c.1600, complete with dolphins and VOC(A) markings. The external parts of the gun are perfect, but the bore is still rough-cast and has not yet been machined out to 75mm.

In response to a request for assistance, I inspected the gun and recommended two large engineering firms which would be able to bore out the gun. I also offered to proof fire the gun and provide the wherewithal to ceremonially fire the gun on arrival in Holland. Unfortunately the small ship was berthed opposite the Hildebrand Restaurant, in a position where a crane could not access the gun. With time constraints and much else to be done, the boring could not be done in Cape Town.

I did manage to manufacture a rammer, sponge, reamer and linstock, complete with slow match, which I presented to the project leader at a function at the Maritime Museum.

3. WHERE DID ALL THE BRONZE GUNS GO?

It is significant to note that of the 50 odd bronze guns which were at coastal batteries around Cape Town in 1809, not one remains. Apart from a few English Royal Mortars, which were cast later than 1809, and a few even later English field guns, all of the surviving bronze guns have been salvaged from wrecks.

One possibility is that the English removed them as trophies of war. It was fashionable, nay almost mandatory, for a regiment, unit or HQ to have a gun displayed in a prominent position. If the gun was an attractive, polished bronze piece with dolphins, crests, monograms and markings, all the better. When the units returned to England the guns would probably have accompanied them, as they did from almost every other country where the English won engagements.

The Curator of the Armouries of the Tower of London assured me that he had lists of all the ML guns presently in Her Majesty's armouries, museums and fortifications, and that the missing Dutch bronze guns were not among them. I have also searched those lists, and apart from a few iron Boer War trophies, there are no guns which came from South Africa.

Arms producing countries did practise "re-casting" of bronze guns, and England was no exception. The softer bronze barrels suffered from much more rapid wear and damage than did iron guns. These guns were often returned to the foundry and cast anew. During the Crimean War (1854 - 1856) the foundry at Woolwich produced up to 15 bronze guns per week.

I wonder where they obtained all that bronze ?

4. HOW LONG IS A FOOT?

Sixteenth and seventeenth century guns were cast to the specifications and beliefs of the individual gunfounders. They were the designers and developers of guns, and the art of gunfounding was passed from father to son. The users of guns purchased off-the-shelf guns from those gunfounders in whom they had faith. Only in the last quarter of the 18th century did armed forces begin to specify what calibre, length and weight guns they wanted. The initiative was taken from the gunfounders and vested in armament boards and committees. Gunfounding then slowly became a documented science and not a secret and jealously guarded art.

The isolation in which the early gunfounders worked resulted in the use of local units of measurement for length, diameters and weight. One fortunate tendency (not an infallible rule) among these gunfounders was the habit of casting guns to a length measurable in feet and half feet. Another fortunate factor is the fact that a standard foot had not yet been defined or adopted. This often offers a clue as to the origin of a gun which has lost its markings.

If the length of the gun is measured correctly and accurately from behind the base ring to the muzzle face, a conversion of this length into one of the ancient foot lengths (and half lengths) may indicate its origin. The more common known localised foot lengths were as follows:-

English foot	304,8 mm
Swedish foot	296,8 mm
Rhineland foot	314,2 mm
Mechelen foot	280,2 mm
Amsterdam foot	283,1 mm
Spanish foot	305,1 mm
Danish foot	313,8 mm
Parisian foot	325,0 mm
Portuguese foot	329,8 mm
Enkhuizen foot	326,0 mm

One has to make minute allowances for manufacturing tollerances and the ravages of time.

5. THE GUNS OF ST HELENA

Numerous readers have mentioned the many guns lying around on the island of St Helena. Very little is known about the origins, types and calibres of these guns. With a history of occupations and ownership similar to that of South Africa, I can only imagine that the guns would reflect the history of the island, with predominantly English guns remaining. I posted a query on the St Helena notice board on the internet asking if anybody knew anything about the guns. I had only one response - from Martin Crawford.

Martin has shown me photographs which show some of the guns, not as the subject of the photograph but in the background. There are several coastal defence RMLs, of which one appears to be a 7 inch and others 6,3 inch, one iron Queen Anne 18 or 24 pdr SBML which could be from the period 1700 - 1712, several Blomefield pattern guns on cast iron carriages and two bronze howitzers or mortars mounted at the castle gate.

Martin has also given me an unpublished document by Mr P.L.Teale of Barrydale which explains the military history of St Helena in terms of guns and gun batteries.

Martin has taken an interest in identifying the guns on behalf of the Islanders as part of their 500 year celebrations, and will take specific notes and photographs during his visit. A progress report will appear in a later issue of this newsletter.

6. CORRECTIONS TO THE BOOK

I have been asked why we publish so many corrections to the book. I guess the simple answer is that we made so many mistakes! The more complex answer is that we are still learning a lot, we are obtaining more and more research material, in some cases we were misled by other people's mistakes and in others we should have been able to notice conflicting facts. The reason for publishing the errors is to prevent the perpetuation of those errors.

Andy May in Port Edward has pointed out that the three small guns in the lower picture on page 89 are not Krupp guns, they are Armstrong 3 pdr ML guns with hexagonal rifling. We have every reason to believe that Andy has unearthed the truth.

In newsletter No.1 I mentioned that guns 334, 335 and 336 had been removed from the Suikerbossie Restaurant in Hout Bay. I am happy to report that I saw them neatly arranged on the lawn behind the restaurant.

Gun 556 on page 115 is not a Dundas pattern, but a Millar pattern 32 pdr of C.1830.

7. 13 INCH MORTAR SHELL LIFTING CHAINS

The 13 inch mortar shell was fitted with two permanent lifting rings, one on either side of the fuze hole. They were so positioned that they could not touch the bore of the mortar when the fuze was facing the muzzle when correctly loaded. These shells weighed approximately 100 lbs (45 kg) and were difficult to carry or load into the mortar. Two short chains were provided for handling the shells. Each chain had a hook on one end and a larger ring on the other. The hooks were attached to the lifting rings on the shell and the larger rings served as handles. When carrying the shell for any appreciable distance it was common practice to pass a carrying bar through the rings and two men could then carry the shell safely.

The loading procedure stipulated that the shell must be lowered slowly into the mortar and must not be allowed to roll down the bore as this may bring the lifting rings into contact with the bore. Should the shell roll or twist on entering the bore, the loading members were to lift the shell slightly to realign it, and then continue lowering it.

Some 13 inch mortars were fitted, adjacent to the mortar, with a davit-like lifting arrangement with a small ratchet winch for lifting the shell into the bore. The davit could pivot out of the way when firing.

8. MY RECENT FIELD TRIP

My son, Leon and I undertook a gun recording trip to Grahamstown and all points between there and Cape Town. We recorded another 14 guns and met some very nice people along the way. We went to see Zane Palmer in PE and we were lucky enough to see his latest models of various guns. If you want to be amazed, contact Zane and ask him for a free brochure, if in SA, it may be a good idea to enclose a self addressed envelope with stamp affixed.

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