



CANNON RESEARCH PROJECTS

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A free service to the muzzle loading enthusiast

NAVY FESTIVAL - MARCH 2005

During the Navy Festival I was invited to combine a cannon display with the Model Ship Society display. Ian van Oordt brought his 9 pdr Armstrong Frederick, Martin Venter his 7 pdr RML and Peter Wright his Armstrong 4 pdr. To this we added the Swedish 8 pdr from Sentinel and a 3 and a 2 pdr from SAS UNITIE to give us six firing guns. We borrowed two bronze Indonesian guns from a private collection in Hout Bay, an 18 pdr French gun from SA Metal and the rare Portuguese bronze rifled field gun from Sentinel for the static display.

There were offers of other guns for the occasion, but time and logistics limited what we could achieve. This does however leave plenty of scope for improvement next year!

We fired 29 shots over the three days ending in a six gun broadside late on the third day, consuming 8,2 kg of black powder in all. Many of the individual shots were sponsored by friends, associates and victims of Ian van Oordt. For this we offer them our great appreciation. Without this backing the exercise would have crippled the piggy bank.

The firings also taught us a lot about coping with adverse conditions. The Navy detonated massive underwater explosions just prior to our firings, drenching everything in sea water. Fortunately, seeing what was about to happen, one of the gunners thrust all the linstocks down the convenient barrel of the 9 pdr and kept them dry. We had a steady 15 knot wind directly from the front for two days, and the same from behind for the last day. We estimate that the wind "stole" about a kilogram of priming powder.

We all returned home sunburned and smelling of burned sulphur, but the smiles on our faces could not be removed with dynamite.

YARNS ABOUT THE NOON GUN

There are many stories told about the Noon Gun which have been passed down the generations with a smidgen of embellishment with each telling. These stories have almost passed into folk lore, but their inaccuracy prevents them from being classified as history.

There is the tale of a visitor who asked the chap at the gun how he obtained the correct time. The gunner showed him a fine pair of binoculars and directed his gaze to the clock on the City Hall. He would keep an eye on the clock and fire the gun exactly as the minute hand twitched onto midday. The same visitor visited the City Hall a day later and asked the janitor how he checked the time on the City Hall clock. He replied that he listened for the Noon Gun, and the clock had never been a second out of step with the gun. This story began doing the rounds as soon as the City Hall was built.

There is another yarn about the gunner having a hangover one day and not being as alert as he should have been. In his doubtful state he loaded the gun and forgot to remove the wooden rammer from the bore. When the gun fired, the rammer sailed over the nearby houses and struck a donkey at Greenmarket Square, killing the poor animal instantly. The yarn continues with supposed facts which are intended to lend credibility to the tale. The donkey in question, named "Gwendolyn", belonged to a stonemason named Borchards who subsequently sued the City of Cape Town for his loss.

The two stories above are not true. The next two stories, no less interesting than the first, are apparently true in every respect.

During World War II the last of the available electrical primers for the gun were spent and there was no possibility of obtaining any more. Consideration was given to cancelling the Noon Gun until such time as replacement electrical primers became available. The intrepid gunner, in fear of losing his

cushy posting at Lion Battery, obtained percussion detonators which fitted into the vent once the small breechblock was removed. He connected a small buzzer to the wires which would have fired the electrical primer, this gave him the signal to fire. When the buzzer sounded the gunner would give the percussion primer a solid thump with a four pound hammer. The resulting flash from the vent would almost knock the hammer out of his hand. This risky firing continued until electrical primers became available late in 1946.

In 1991, an unauthorised Japanese visitor to the Noon Gun left his briefcase standing below the muzzle of the gun while he, apparently not having understood the gunners instructions, stood near the muzzle to take a photograph of the muzzle flash. In those days, before the battery was opened to the public, the lone gunner had to be at the clock repeater, some 50 metres away and out of sight of the gun when it fired. He thus had no control over what happened at the gun. In the words of the gunner, "All hell broke loose when the gun fired, the blast burst the briefcase open and the lens popped out of the mans camera". The gunner rushed to the gun to find a half deaf man, with a broken camera around his neck screaming blue murder in Japanese while he chased papers from his briefcase around the battery.

The procedures and safety have since been improved to an internationally accepted standard.

ONE MAN'S CANNON IS ANOTHER MAN'S.

During a recent tour group visit to the Sentinel cannon display one of the guests appeared to detect something humorous in the display cabinet. When I spoke to him later he explained in a French accent that he originated from one of the islands off the east coast of Africa. He asked me about the Lantaka cannons on display, and particularly about the origin of the name.

He eventually explained that where he came from the word "lantaka" was a slang term for a penis.

An island of self deceiving wishful thinkers I assume?

SHIP AND GARRISON GUN CARRIAGES

The style, nature and design of a ship or garrison gun carriage can vary to such a degree that it is difficult to advise someone on what design is appropriate for a given gun. Every navy had their preferred designs, of which excellent construction drawings have survived, but these drawings were for a specific gun which was to be mounted in a specific position during a specific era. On these excellent contemporary drawings are listed sizes, proportions, angles and much construction detail, detail that some historians have seized and etched into stone as the beginning and end of carriage construction.

Some of these historians have studiously ignored the leeway specified in the designs by the words, "The proportions and dimensions must be adapted to suit the peculiarities of the specific gun and the nature of the emplacement where it will be mounted".

Apart from the differences in the designs adopted by the preferences of nations, and the variances in these with time, the following factors influenced carriage design.

SHIPS CARRIAGES

- a. Due to limited space, ships carriages were generally smaller than garrison carriages.
- b. Ships carriages had wooden trucks (wheels) that would not tear up the wooden decks.
- c. The calibre of the gun determined the wood thickness.
- d. The height of the gun ports determined the overall carriage height.
- e. Bow chasers and stern guns were differently mounted to side guns.
- f. Upper deck guns which had to shoot over the gunwales had higher carriages.
- g. The slope of the deck determined the difference between front and rear truck sizes. Bow and stern guns, which were not effected by the port and starboard slope of the deck, often had carriages with the same size trucks front and rear.

GARRISON CARRIAGES

- a. Unhindered by space considerations, garrison carriages at shore batteries were generally larger and more robust than ships carriages. This was because guns at shore batteries had to be manually traversed to follow the target, whereas a ship manoeuvred to aim her guns.
- b. The height of the carriage was such that the gun was able to fire over the parapet at about 3 degrees of depression. The parapet height varied between batteries and even between different facets of a single battery.
- c. Garrison carriages on stone platforms had iron trucks, or wooden trucks clad in iron. whereas garrison carriages on common wood or wooden traversing platforms had wooden trucks.
- d. From about 1810 many English garrison carriages, particularly those at batteries far from their home country, were made of cast iron to prevent their loss to wood rot. Russia also adopted the iron carriage a few years later, but most other countries persisted with wooden carriages.

WHEN FACT, LOGIC AND BELIEF DISAGREE

Gun 348 was first recorded by us in Riebeek Kasteel about 7 years ago. It was privately owned by a Mr Casaleggio and it stood in his front yard. The owner moved to Malmesbury and took the gun with him, but he soon moved again and decided to donate his most cumbersome possession to the Malmesbury Museum.

I was approached about recovering the missing third gun from Perdeberg, and I pointed the enquirer in the direction of Malmesbury, where I was told that the gun from Perdeberg had gone many years ago. He subsequently located gun 348 lying behind the museum, was told, or claimed, that it was the signal gun from Perdeberg, and he promptly recovered it for that mountain.

Upon inspecting this gun, I recognised it as the gun that we already had on record in Riebeek Kasteel. I pointed out to the new owner that this was very definitely an English 4 pdr gun cast in about 1830, and could thus not have served as the signal gun in a system that was already abandoned in 1806.

I located Mr Casaleggio and enquired about the origin of the gun. He explained that he had worked for the railways in the district of Malmesbury, and that one day in about 1965 he and his partner scampered off the track and into the bush when a train came by. In the bush they found two iron guns, one large and one small. They and some friends returned a few days later and collected the smaller gun, they could not move the larger one. He said that he never mentioned Perdeberg as he did not even know that there had been a gun on the mountain.

If the smaller gun had not come off Perdeberg, was it the larger gun? Where was the larger gun? The larger gun was found about 18 months later lying among the rotted timbers of its carriage in Hero's Acre in the Jewish cemetery in Malmesbury. This Swedish 6 pdr I believe to be the third gun off Perdeberg and is registered as Durr 830.

The new owner of 348 believes that he has the original Dutch gun off Perdeberg, and that is final !

REFURBISHED GUNS

There is now a 6 pdr English gun in firing condition in Worcester. This is the replacement for the 6 pdr Dutch gun from the Call-up System which is on the square in Worcester and can no longer be fired.

The owners of the farm in Somerset West, where the signal gun off Helderberg now stands, contracted me to refurbish the gun and build a functional carriage for it. It is now in firing condition, but has not yet been proof fired.

Ian van Oordt has "rescued" the 9 pdr English Armstrong / Frederick mentioned above and it is now in firing condition and has been proof fired. It took my labourer and I five days and several strange home-made instruments to get the stones, sediment and junk out of the bore.

It is our intention to fire a series of guns replicating the Dutch system used in 1806 to call the Burghers to arms prior to the Battle of Blouberg / Blaauwberg / Blaauwberg (whatever) for the bi-centenary of the event in January 2006. We now have several guns for the occasion.

UNFAITHFUL TO THE MUZZLE LOADING PRINCIPLE

I have long held the belief that this new-fangled breech loading business is merely a passing fad, and will quickly fade away in favour of muzzle loading. (*WHISPERED - and when I see the new firearms act I feel justified in my belief*).

Here I have a serious admission to make. I have been dabbling in the background of some breech loading guns. Wait ! Hear me out, and you may be able to forgive me.

PART 1

There are two strange rifled bronze breech loading guns which still have vent holes in the chamber. One gun is at Sentinel near Stellenbosch and the other is in Standerton. Being forced to research this gun for the client, I identified the crest as being that of King Carlos I of Portugal and the inscription "FUNDICAO DE CANHOES" as being the Portuguese Government Foundry. The guns are dated 1893 and 1898.

Through very little research, and much assistance, I determined that these guns had been issued in about 1904 to Portuguese Colonial Forces serving in Southern Angola. A Major Franke of the German SWA forces was sent in October - November 1914 on a punitive mission into Angola when a German Magistrate was murdered by Angolans. Franke's forces captured some guns and equipment which they returned to SWA as the spoils of war.

When General Brits led the SA forces into SWA during WW I, they in turn captured guns and equipment which they brought back as prizes. The gun in Standerton has, neatly engraved on the top of the breech, the words COEN BRITS - 1915. I rest the case for the prosecution!

PART 2

I was recently requested to find a secure temporary home for two 75mm iron BL mountain guns. These guns are engraved " FCM HAVRE 75mm Sme CANET M.1885 ". Once again, through very little research and much assistance, I determined that these are extremely rare mountain guns of European origin. Mr Canet was the design engineer for Schneider Arms of Le Creusot where the well known Schneider -Canet gun system originated and where the famous SA "Long Toms" were made. The problem with the two guns being identified is that they bear only the name of Canet and do not conform to the Schneider - Canet system.

Nuno Rubim, a serious student of Portuguese artillery, reliably informs me that the Canet mountain guns were quickly superseded by recoil absorbing models and that the Canet guns were sent out to the colonies for use as secondary armament at far flung garrisons. Most of the Canet guns were used by the Portuguese and guess where they sent them - Southern Angola! I am sure that Coen Brits had a hand in these two guns appearing in SA.

The words "FCM HAVRE" still have me baffled. Any ideas ?

I have partially restored the guns and they are on display at Chavonne's Battery in the V&A Waterfront. I am now seeking a sponsor for R2,500 in order to complete the restoration.