



CANNON RESEARCH PROJECTS

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NEWSLETTER No. 13 - JULY 2005

A free service to the muzzle loading enthusiast

A QUESTION ANSWERED

Newsletter 12 ended with this plea for assistance :-

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

The question was again answered by Nuno Rubim. The FCM stands for "Forges et Chantier de la Mediterranee", a French shipbuilding company in the port of Havre which produced several types of weaponry under licence. Nuno is convinced that these are the only surviving examples of the Canet Mountain guns.

I have completed the restoration of the guns and they are on display at Chavonne's Battery in the V&A Waterfront. **The Unitie Trust** financed the restoration of the guns and carriages and **Chris Engineering** in Epping Industria financed the display board.

THE GUN ON TYGERBERG (Durr 15)

I was recently approached by members of the Friends of Tygerberg organisation with a view to restoring the 6 pdr (now 8pr) cannon in the mountain reserve. The gun is not the original Dutch signal gun but one that I persuaded Chief of the Navy to donate to the reserve in 1996. The original Tygerberg gun was a 12 pdr and now stands outside the Parow Municipal Buildings, (Durr 8).

Thanks to a sponsorship from the Bellville Municipality the Tygerberg gun has been restored to firing condition and now stands on a new hard-wood carriage. We have successfully proof fired the gun.

THE POSTBERG GUN (Durr 416)

There was a 4 pounder Dutch gun on Postberg opposite Langebaan which was apparently used as part, or the whole of some signal arrangement. The gun was too small and placed too far from any vital road, anchorage or facility to have had a defensive role. The generally accepted view among locals is that the gun was used to announce the arrival of ships.

The gun was placed near the summit of Postberg and the rudimentary stone platform on which it stood is still visible. A short distance away are the remains of a small stone structure which is reputed to be the magazine where the powder and loading equipment were stored.

The gun was at one stage used as a fence corner post before it was moved to Oudepos, the area outpost of the VOC and ships post office.

This gun was disposed of in the early 1950's by a Mr Eksteen to a Mr Versveld of the farm "Slangkop" in the Darling district. Versveld parted with the gun to a Mr Halvorsen who bought the farm.

The gun is at time of writing mounted in the middle of a fish pond at the "Vyevelei" Farm Stall near Yzerfontein.

SOURCES - Interview with the late Mr Piet Siebrits and Mr Piet Haumann, who were both working at Oudepos at the time of the disposal.

PERSENT

During an interview on 30 June 1997 with Mrs (Oakaline) Hewitt or Hewatt, daughter of Dr Anthony Viljoen, of Oak Valley Farm in Grabouw she related a remarkable story.

Mrs Hewitt was 95 years old at the time of the interview, but she displayed a sharp mind and a clear memory. She recalled that one of her minders when she was a small child was an old slave by the name of Persent who used to tell her of events in his long life. Persent was almost 100 years older than Mrs Hewitt. He was born in about 1800 in Mozambique and had come to the Cape with his family as a baby. In 1806, as a 6 or 7 year old, he had acted with his father as a horse holder behind the lines at the Battle of Blouberg.

Persent told how he and his father were part of a group who carried and dragged the Dutch cannons "to the foot of the mountains near the pass". He said that some cannon were on "wagon wheels" and other, smaller guns were strapped on the back of horses. He also said that, "After the meeting they were instructed to move most of the guns over the mountains to keep them out of reach of the English".

Mrs Hewitt could remember some of the stories that Persent told her and others were related to her by her father who had had long discussions with Persent. The only confusion in her mind were exact dates and whether she had heard some of the details directly from Persent or from her father.

Such a two generation connection to a battle which took place in 1806 is remarkable. It is just a pity that nobody had recorded Persent's entire story for posterity.

THE BATTLE OF BLOUBERG - 200 YEARS

About a year ago I attended a meeting in Blouberg of about 25 interested parties regarding the 200 year commemoration of the Battle of Blouberg in January 2006. Every conceivable council, tourism, historical and cultural body was represented. Great things were discussed and basic plans were proposed. My function was to get as many of the Dutch Call-Up System guns refurbished and in firing order as I possibly could. The intention was to initiate the commemoration activities with a sequential firing of the same guns which called the Burghers to arms in 1806. I also would provide sufficient working guns for a minor re-enactment of the Battle, and a Dutch gun for permanent placement in Blouberg as a memorial.

I have, through the efforts and support of the owners of the guns, brought 11 guns to the condition required for a blank firing. I have located and negotiated a suitable Dutch gun for permanent display in Blouberg, but I can get neither support, encouragement nor even a reply from the organisers.

The commemoration seems to be following the pattern of the Battle, all local participants are in disorganised and hasty retreat, leaving me with the financial battle scars.

Ian van Oordt and I are trying to salvage what we can and produce some form of re-enactment on a reduced scale. We will keep all informed.

THE FIREARMS ACT (Act 60 OF 2000)

Several cannon owners have received a letter or fax from the Central Firearms Registry pointing out that "cannons" are prohibited items and, as such, may not be owned by private individuals.

4.1.b of the Act, under **PROHIBITED ITEMS** states " Any gun, cannon, recoilless gun, mortar or launcher manufactured to fire a rocket, grenade, bomb or explosive device".

When new, the old cannons with which we are involved fired only a solid iron shot, or multiple solid iron shot, they could not and did not fire any form of explosive projectile.

5.1.e of the Act, Under **DEVICES EXEMPT FROM THE ACT**, includes "An antique firearm".

The Act defines that **ANTIQUE FIREARMS** are, " Any muzzle loading firearms manufactured before 01 January 1900, or any replica of such arm".

The muzzle loading cannons with which we are concerned were manufactured between 1620 and 1882.

The Act does provide for permits or licences under section 17, a certified collector; section 18.5, deactivated ammunition for "cannons"; section 19, a public collector (museum) and section 20, for the conduct of business for which the firearm is essential.

Portable and concealable front loading muskets and pistols are exempt from the Act and do not require permits or licences. Who will be the first to commit a crime using a 2,500kg 18 pdr cannon ?

One must assume that the Act will be applied to the letter, in full and equally to all, without spurious exceptions and omissions. If this is done, then the following anomalous situations will arise :-

1. The owner of an old muzzle loading cannon that has been lying on his property since 1770 will be in contravention of the law. I can list more than 30 cases where this will apply.
2. Must somebody apply for licences or permits for the hundreds of cannon and more modern guns which adorn Cenotaphs, monuments and historical sites around the country?
3. What is the legal standing of a salvage diver who recovers an old cannon from a wreck? Does it become a prohibited item once it crosses the high water mark ? Does he have to apply for a licence for it before he can recover the cannon and have it in his possession ?

By virtue of not being mentioned as exempt, under **section 90 AMMUNITION**, it becomes an offence to possess a solid cast iron cannon ball or any form of inert shot associated with a cannon. If I am not mistaken, in athletics the women's shot put is a 9 lb cannon ball and the men's a 12 lb. Has their put been shot ?

Some wise guy once said, " Common sense will prevail, but not before all alternatives have been given an opportunity to fail".

Up to this point the Registrar has been cautious, but permissive in his interpretation of the Act, which, after all, was designed around modern firearms and modern social behaviour. The Registrar is aware of the needs of some communities to fire a cannon on occasions of remembrance, celebration and for charity. He, however, has many more pressing implementation problems to solve. We need to be patient and allow the authorities to implement the most important, and most urgent aspects of the Act before they can consider the cultural, historical and commemorative firing of old cannons.

BUT WHEN THE FIRST GUNNER MAKES A MISTAKE, WE MUST EXPECT THIS TO CHANGE.

WE ARE APPROACHING A SOLUTION

The new Firearms Act stipulates, via several devious sub and sub-sub clauses, that the Registrar may issue a permit or licence for a prohibited firearm under certain conditions, which are still open to various interpretations. One condition which is clear is that the applicant must be a certified member of an approved collectors association for that type of firearm.

If old muzzle loading cannon and newer breech loading guns are bundled together, it appears that the Act cannot be interpreted to satisfy the requirements of the owners of both types. A couple of us enthusiasts have pooled our ideas and are working on the establishment of a collectors association which would satisfy the needs of muzzle loading cannon guardians, owners, collectors and the Firearm Registrar alike.

Enquiries and suggestions can be communicated to the address above.

THE BLUNDERBUSS, COACH GUN or ESPINGOLE

In some forms, the blunderbuss was not quite, but nearly a cannon. The smaller versions were used to deter Highwaymen from robbing coaches, hence the term "coach gun". Aboard some ships a larger version of the blunderbuss was used against boarding parties, to enfilade the decks of another ship at very close quarters, or to just generally intimidate any group who might need intimidating.

Typical nautical examples have an iron or bronze barrel about 850mm long which expands into a wide funnel at the muzzle. It was (incorrectly) believed that this trumpet-like mouth distributed the multiple shot more widely and evenly. These large pieces had a rifle like shoulder butt and were mounted on a yoke with a spindle which could be dropped into any convenient hole on a gunwale or railing.

Loaded with lead pellets or shot, nail heads, pieces of glass, stones or any small projectiles, the "espingole", as it was termed in Europe, was seldom lethal except at extremely close range, but the sight of somebody aiming this pain dispenser at you could be pretty discouraging.

Durr 530 in the Simon's Town Museum is the only example of an Espingole that I know of in South Africa. This bronze gun has a bore of about 50mm and is marked with a crown above crossed swords with the letters "A", "F" and "C" in the left, right and lower quadrants created by the swords.

The meaning of the marks is unknown.

FIRING ON 14 JULY

The Hout Bay Heritage Society are having a big day at East Battery on Bastille Day 14 July. There will be pomp and ceremony and a formal firing of one or more of their 18 pdr guns. All are welcome, dress is smart casual and visitors are invited to bring the old wicker basket of eats and drinks. The time is 11h00 for 11h30.

SENTINEL FIRINGS

Sentinel Wines, at the "castle" on the R44 near Stellenbosch, have decided to fire their gun at 12h30 on the last Saturday of every month until the next tourist season, when weekly firings will be resumed.

READERSHIP AND DISTRIBUTION

This newsletter was sponsored by **CHRIS ENGINEERING**, of Epping Industria, manufacturers and installers of fume extraction fans and trunking. The distribution of this issue is 293 by e-mail and 86 by licky-sticky post. Many of the e-mailed letters, or extracts from them, are re-distributed into other contact circles via the newsletters of other organisations. I am happy that they do so.

If any reader is receiving the newsletter by normal post, but has an e-mail address (and knows how to use it), please let me know so that I can cut distribution costs.

When e-mail newsletters are returned to me marked "unknown address" I have to delete the recipient from the listing. I have no means of verifying the validity of the statement and must assume that the reader has changed e-mail address without informing me.

Gerry de Vries - Website Geocities.com/noongun