



## NEWSLETTER No. 61 June 2018

An informative service to the muzzle loading cannon enthusiast

Readers will notice that most of the articles in this news letter are centred round the Cape Town area. This is because members in the other centres and outlying areas are not communicating with me regarding their events, activities, progress and accomplishments.

### FIRINGS AT THE CASTLE OF GOOD HOPE

Olivia and I have now been firing the half pounder cannon at the Castle for about ten years; we actually began in August 2008. There was a period when members of the Castle Guard fired the gun until the regular changing of the guard units made the frequent re-training impractical. There was a period between November 2016 and May 2017 when the Castle had no access to gunpowder and firings were suspended, but we have been continuously active since then.

According to our records we have used more than 100 Kg of gunpowder, some bought and some provided by the SA Navy. The records show that I made replacement loading equipment after 1,809 shots because the old equipment would no longer gracefully accept repairs. The total number of firings to date (07 June 2018) is 2,746 shots without any unpleasant incidents. The four or five misfires were used to explain the correct procedures to the spectators. The firings were attended by 60,208 spectators since re-commencement in May 2017.

With the current unprecedented low numbers of adult visitors during the quiet winter months we have scaled back our firings to three days per week on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays until we re-assess the situation in August.

### DURR 399

The couple who have bought a section of the old farm Saxenberg in the Kuilsriver district have also inherited the old VOC cannon which stood on the hill known as Vlaeberg. Saxenberg was subdivided at some stage and then Vlaeberg was on the section known as "Skoonheid", which was later changed to "Stirling". The hill, officially listed as Vlaeberg, sometimes called "Asiaskop" is also locally known as "Kanonkop" which throws it into the quagmire of the other nine "Kanonkops" in the Western Cape.

Never before has a cannon changed address so often without actually moving!

The gun is a long graceful 4 pounder Finbanker cast at the Finspang foundry in Sweden and bears the markings of the VOC and an "E" for the Enkhuizen chapter of the VOC. The bore appears to be partially open through to the vent which is also open.

This is not the original gun which was placed on Vlaeberg prior to 1687 and declared unserviceable in 1743. This replacement gun must have been positioned there in the mid 1740's and both guns stayed there until the old gun (Durr 279) was donated to the Kuilsriver Municipality in May 1972.

The new owners will most likely look for a suitably qualified gunner once the gun is on a carriage.

## AMSTERDAM BATTERY

Situated near the entrance to the V&A Waterfront Amsterdam Battery was demolished about seventy years ago to make room for harbour expansion. The 36 and 24 pounder cannon were sold to the harbour for use as bollards.

The current operators of the V&A are building modern offices and commercial outlets on the site which is now referred to as “The Amsterdam Precinct”. The demolished battery will be represented by the name and two of the original cannon mounted in mock embrasures and aimed out over the large water feature.

## NAMES OF CANNON

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries it was common to give cannon a name, an inspiring inscription or some form of good luck emblem in addition to the founders mark or royal cipher. The Bocarro gun in Simon’s Town has the emblem of Saint Catherine after which the Catherine wheel firework is named. One English gun has the inscription “The final argument of Kings”, which I suppose it was!

In much later years the Voortrekkers and the Boers gave muzzle loading pieces names which were much more down-to-earth. A mortar was known as “Seepot” because it resembled the pots used to boil fat to make soap. A gun of unknown origin was known as “Weeskind” (orphan), the bronze gun used at Blood River was known as “Koperstuk” (copper piece) and more than one gun was named “Grietjie”, the diminutive form of “Dulle Griet” the well known massive bombard which is still in Ghent in Belgium.

The Boer habit of naming guns continued into the Boer War as when one of their Creusout guns was sabotaged by the English and a part of the muzzle was damaged, they sent it to Pretoria for repairs. The repairs involved cutting off the damaged piece of the muzzle and re-facing the muzzle face before sending it back into action. The Boers immediately named the gun “Die Jood” (The Jew). I have lifted, cleaned and mounted several cannon some of which I gave names, but fortunately nobody was listening.

## GUNPOWDER AND HUMIDITY

Gunpowder is fairly hygroscopic, ie. it readily absorbs moisture from the air. Some will have noticed that some gunpowder makes the fingers go a grey/black colour, this is not only the charcoal component dirtying the fingers, it is a fine graphite coating on the grains to reduce their propensity for water. This is most noticeable on the nice big shiny grains of coarse blasting powder of yesteryear. Of course some products are not treated with graphite.

Now if gunpowder likes to absorb moisture, the messy residue left after a firing takes the cake for water absorption. It only takes an overcast day for the dirty vent block, pan and vent to become a black, wet sticky mess and to try and trickle priming powder through this becomes impossible.

In the old days, (even before Jurg was born), they used to use a “fid”, a thin tapered wooden plug which fitted tightly into the vent to keep it dry during a lull in the action.

***“a fid is a little okum made like a naile put in at the touch hole and covered with a thin lead (apron) bound above to keepe the area dry on the peece. ( Smith – 1627 p.28 )***

When firing cannon on wet days a dry rag with which the vent patch can be dried and two pipe cleaners twisted together with which to dry out the vent are pretty useful.

UBIQUE,

Gerry de Vries