

GUNS IN THE GARDENS (Newsletter)

On the 19th July, 1949 the Town Clerk of the Ballarat Council received a letter from Lieutenant Commander George Prideaux, (ret'd) for some tuberous or bulbous plants "when your Gardens Curator has finished planting over all his beds". In his letter he recalled visiting Ballarat after the 1st World War and being taken around by the then Curator, Tom Toop. Tom asked him if he could provide any information concerning the 4 muzzle loading guns near the Gardens Pavilion, which he had been told came from the Crimea and the "Big Gun" nearby which was said to have come from the Rock of Gibraltar

He could not have asked a more knowledgeable person. George Prideaux had joined the then Victorian Navy in 1885. He then served for 45 years rising through the ranks to become a Lieutenant Commander. His father had come to Australia from England serving on the warship "Nelson" which had been transferred to the Victorian Navy .

The Nelson had been laid down in 1809 and launched in 1814 as a three decker 120 gun ship of the line. In 1854 she was cut down to a 2 Decker and fitted with a steam engine and her guns reduced to 46. The Victorian Government submitted a request for a vessel to train its local Naval volunteers and she was transferred on a "permanent loan" basis, arriving in Hobson's Bay 1868. When concern about a Russian attack was raised she was further reduced to a single decker with her old muzzle loader guns replaced by new breech loading guns. She was sold in 1898 and became a coal lighter and later a coal storage vessel in Hobart and was broken up in 1920. Our four guns were part of her original armament and distributed around the state when they were dispensed with.

The Big Gun was from the aft turret of the Cerberus, . She was ordered by the Victorian Government in 1867 - the Russian scare again- and arrived in 1871. She was classed as a monitor and had a turret fore and aft with two 18 ton 10 inch rifled muzzle loading guns in each. When these guns were first introduced they were described as " the most magnificent guns in the world" but their record in practise was not all that marvellous, one needing to be replaced and another , the left aft gun was found to have its trunnion damaged after firing practice. George Prideaux was the armourer on the Cerberus at the time, he reported the problem and the gun was removed. Cerberus never fired her guns in action but, in attempting to intercept an unidentified craft she did fire and hit a chemist's shop in St Kilda with one shot and the Gellibrand lighthouse with the next!. When she fired a broadside it caused chaos through the ship

What happened to the damaged gun that George Prideaux reported? It was sent to Ballarat for repair to the Phoenix Foundry but that was not possible. Accordingly the Council installed it on the Lake Foreshore near the Pavilion at a cost of 77 pounds and there it stayed until 1987 to be climbed upon by successive generations when it was returned it to the Navy. It now resides in the forecourt of HMAS Cerberus at the Flinders Naval Depot.

George Prideaux left telling Tom Toop that he would prepare a plaque for the 4 smaller guns. This he did and it can be viewed on the gun pointing North West.

George Prideaux was a keen gardener and was responsible for the planting and upkeep of the garden at Flinders – the Prideaux Rose garden.. On one occasion he arranged for a weeping ash to be brought down from Ballarat by one of his men on a motorcycle and apparently it did well. He was a founder of the West Australian National Rose Garden and remained an active gardener after his retirement.

I have no doubt that Tom Beaumont would have made sure that his request for plants was granted.