

## GUNS IN THE GARDENS

On the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1949 G. Prideaux, MBE, Lieutenant Commander RAN (Retired) wrote to the Town Clerk, Ballarat.

Dear Sir.

On my return from World War 1 I paid a visit to Ballarat and on being shown over your Botanic Garden by the Curator he asked me if I could give him any information about the large gun and a group of smaller muzzle guns in the Gardens. He said the impression was that the large gun came from the Rock of Gibraltar and the smaller ones from the Crimea War. *It was a coincidence that he should have happened to have asked me - for I was possibly the one man that could have given him their history.* I told him the previous impression was quite wide of the mark. After serving on HMVS Cerberus in the early 90s as the Armourer of the ship it was my duty to examine the guns and mountings. On examining the right gun of the after turret I found the trunnion of the gun fractured and hurriedly reported the accident to the Gunnery lieutenant, Lieut. A. H. Christian R.N. (later Admiral Sir A. H. Christian, 2<sup>nd</sup> in command at the Dardanelles operation on HMS "Swiftsure") who immediately condemned the gun. The gun in your Gardens is that same weapon.

The group of 64 pr muzzle loading guns were presented to Ballarat on the dismantling of HMVS Nelson in which my father, Chief Engineer John Prideaux came out to Victoria in 1868- the Nelson had been laid down in 1805, completed in 1815 and never hoisted a pennant until she was presented to the Victorian Government in 1867. She was originally a three decker but before coming to Australia was reduced to a 2 decker and converted into an auxiliary steam and sail. I told your Curator. Mr T Toop. I would, on my return to Flinders Naval Depot make and engrave two brass plates and enclose them in a glass frame to be attached to the gun mountings - when fitted I received a very nice letter from your City Council.

At Flinders Naval Depot I was appointed Official of Gardens at the wardroom mess and received many gifts of plants from Melbourne Parks and Gardens per Mr Smith of Burnley School of horticulture from Mr Jessop and the botanical gardens from W Roe, also from your own Gardens from Mr Toop.

In the centre of the lawn in front of the Mess is a weeping ash which one of my staff brought from Ballarat on a motor bike. It has grown into a beautiful tree as I saw this particular tree when over at FND a few years ago. The editor of Life Digest recently asked me to write a series of articles for that magazine in MMSS. I have made special mention of the guns in your Gardens which, unless the editor does not use the blue pencil too freely, should be in one of the articles. In June issue they published one on the Australian Navy's part in the Boxer Rebellion. I have the honour of being the father of the RAN by many years having entered the Victorian Navy on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1885 and served without a break until 1930 - 45 years.

My association with Ballarat goes back to the Naval and Military sports which was an annual event and when Con Burrows was a well-known identity in the world of sport in your city.

I am now tucked away in the bush on a mixed farm owned by my son – I amuse myself in the garden and twice a year goes to Perth to the Spring and Autumn Rose Show. I have the honour to be the founder of the W.A. National Rose Society and a life honorary member. I am going to ask a favour of your Council – if, when your Gardens Curator has finished planting out all his beds with the representative subjects, could i have sent to me a parcel of tuberous or bulbous subjects. I have very vivid (*memories*) of Mr Toop's display of begonias the like of which I have never seen anywhere. My request may not be permissible but should you accede to my request I would be very appreciative indeed.

If Mr Toop (whom I understand like myself has retired) should still be about please convey to him my vert good wishes.

Yours sincerely, G. Prideaux MBE Lieut Cdr RAN ( Ret)

Ps Should anyone be curious enough the fractured trunnion on the 10" 18 ton gun can be located with the aid of a thin knife on the under part of the said trunnion.

Tom Beaumont had succeeded Tom Toop as Curator and forwarded this memo. to the Town Clerk:-

Dear Sir. When replying you may ask Mr Prideaux what varieties of tuberous bulbs etc. would do well in his district in WA as there is generally a surplus of different things in season. Mr Toop remembers the gentleman well and also the incidents with which he has been connected with him. He must be about 85 years of age and a fine man.

Yours faithfully, T Beaumont.

#### GEORGE PRIDEAUX

George Prideaux was born at Williamstown in 1872. His father, John, came from Devon and joined the Royal Navy as an apprentice, eventually travelling to Victoria in 1869 on HMVS Nelson, seconded to the Victorian Navy as a gunner. He had married Ann Collings in 1856 at Devonport in Devon, England. They had 4 children.

George had a remarkable career as he indicates in his letter. He joined the Victorian navy in 1885 as an armourer's apprentice and rose through the ranks to become an Ordnance lieutenant eventually serving at the Flinders naval Depot where he was credited with the building of a replica of the

"Nelson". He also became a keen gardener with a particular interest in roses and graced the depot with a fine garden through his endeavours. As he indicated in his letter he became something of an author using his diaries and memories of his service career to produce a series of articles.

### THE GUNS

The big gun referred to in the letter is no longer in Ballarat having been returned to the Navy by the Council in 1987 and was installed at HMAS Cerberus. The plaque that George Rideaux prepared following his conversation with Tom Toop reads :-

This 10 inch 18ton rifled muzzle loading Armstrong gun was fabricated at the Royal Gun Foundry, Woolwich. England in 1869.

It formed part of the armament of HMVS Cerberus which arrived at port Philip in April 1871. During gunnery practice in the Bay in 1884 serious cracks ( still visible) developed in the R H trunnion making the gun unsafe to fire. It was brought to a Ballarat foundry for repair but it was beyond the capacity of the foundry and left here.

It is the only remaining complete gun from the Cerberus the hulk of which now forms a breakwater at Half Moon Bay, Sandringham, Victoria.

Muzzle loaded the gun was fired electrically hence the very small touch hole.

This gun was the left gun in the Aft. turret of the Cerberus. Although George takes the credit for the discovery of the cracks officially in the Cerberus log book that it was reported by J. White, Armourer. *( I suspect that White reported it to George as his senior who then took the message to the officer)*

When originally produced these 18 ton rifled muzzle loading guns were considered to be "the most magnificent guns in the world" costing some 16000 pounds each. Infuriately their performance for the Victorian Navy was less than exhilarating with successive problems causing removal and replacement.

Ballarat's gun was placed near the pavilion and entailed the expenditure of 77 pounds by the Council for its installation. It stayed there from 1898 until 1987 The City Council returned it to the Navy and it now resides in the forecourt of HMAS Cerberus Naval Depot at Flinders.

The four 64 pounders from HNVS Nelson, also muzzle loaders, remain beside the Pavilion (now Pipers) on the foreshore. The plaque that George prepared reads:-

**PRESENTED TO THE CITIZENS OF BALLARAT**

12-PR M.L.GUNS forming part of the armament of the Three Decker Line of Battleship  
HMVS Nelson 120 guns Senior Naval Officers ship of the Victorian navy .

Keel laid 1798 Launched 1814. Arrived in Hobson's Bay 1869 Out of commission 1898.

## THE SHIPS

### HMVS CERBERUS

She was ordered by the Colony of Victoria in 1867 from Palmers Shipbuilding and Iron Company, Jarrow, and was the first of the "breastwork monitors". An ironclad, she was fitted with two rotating turrets, each with two 10" muzzle loading guns in each turret weighing 18 tons. It was one of these (the right gun from the aft turret) that finished up in Ballarat after the discovery of the damaged trunnion. These guns were later replaced by breech loaders enabling the guns to project from the turrets.

She was laid down on 1<sup>st</sup>. September 1867, launched on 2 December 1868 and completed in August 1870. She was the first British warship to be solely steam powered and her engines enabled her to travel economically at a speed of 6 knots (coal consumption 24 tons / day, and a maximum of 9.75 knots (coal consumption 50 tons per day.)

She did not sail well. Her breastworks were built up for the voyage to Australia and after a failed attempt to set off from Chatham due to gale conditions she was fitted with two masts in the hope that this would help her coal consumption. In the Suez Canal she flew the flag of Victoria so that she could get reduced fees as a merchant ship. She rolled badly in choppy seas (up to 40 degrees,) due to her flat bottom and shallow draught, and her captain had a near mutiny on his hands on several occasions.

She arrived in Port Philip in 1871, became part of the CNF in 1901 on federation and renamed HMAS Cerberus in 1911. She acted as a training ship, munitions store and guardship during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War and renamed HMAS Platypus in 1921 when she became a submarine tender. She was sold for scrap in 1924 and sunk as a breakwater off Half Moon Bay. There she remains.

### HMVS NELSON

This ship has the most remarkable history. She was ordered by the Admiralty on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1805, laid down in December 1809 and launched on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1814 .At the time of her launch she was described as " the largest ship in England and the Prince Regent, the Royal Family, Emperor Alexander , Field Marshall Blucher ( who fought at Waterloo) , General Count Platov and the King of Prussia.

She remained inactive for many years, being officially designated as a three-decker line of Battleship, 120 guns. In 1854 she was converted to an auxiliary steam vessel and cut down to a 2 decker and her armament reduced to 46 guns, In the late 1860s the Victorian Government requested a vessel to train local volunteers and the Admiralty transferred her on a permanent loan basis at a cost of 42,000 pounds.

She was commissioned on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1867 and reached Hobson's Bay in 1868. In 1870, with great celebration, the new Victorian Navy ensign was broken out on her mainmast. ( she had previously sailed under the blue ensign, She was converted into a fighting ship in the 1870s due to the perceived Russian threat, cut down to a single decker and some of her armament (muzzle loaders) replaced with Breech loaders. In 1891 she was paid off and laid up at Williamstown, later being sold and converted to a coal lighter and then to Hobart as a coal storage vessel and finally dismantled in 1920 and fired.

The muzzle loading guns were distributed around the state. One of the four next to the Pavilion bears George Prideaux's plaque. However, another bears the plaque that reads: -

"Lent by the Defence Department to the Ballarat City Council."