

The Russian Gun

A Crimean War Trophy

The Crimean War was fought by the allied forces of Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire to prevent Russian expansion into that part of the world. It lasted from October 1853 until February 1856 and the main episode that led to the end of the war was the lengthy siege and the eventual capture by the allies in September 1855, of the capital of the Crimea, Sevastopol.



The Siege of Sevastopol

Among the Russian armaments captured at the fall of Sevastopol were more than 300 cannon from the fort of Redan. The guns were of no use to the allied forces and the British Government was left with the problem of how to dispose of them. Its solution was to distribute them among the cities and chief towns of Britain and her Empire as memorials of the allied victory in the Crimea.

The antiquarian Ebenezer Henderson, whose pride in Dunfermline knew no bounds, was outraged that his town was not considered sufficiently important to be offered a Russian trophy. He successfully lobbied the Government for redress of their omission and in 1857 a gun was duly allocated to Dunfermline.

Henderson's efforts, however, were not received with universal enthusiasm. At the start of the war the British people had wholeheartedly approved of their Government's action, but as the conflict dragged on, revelations about the waste of soldiers' lives through the incompetence of some of the Generals, by the appalling conditions in the hospitals and from inadequate shelter during the harsh Crimean winter, turned the public mood sour. The allied victory was hailed as a relief but not many regarded it as a great triumph.

Feelings about the Government's gift were certainly mixed among the members of Dunfermline Town Council, especially when they discovered that all they had been given was the barrel of the cannon. The town would have to pay for a gun-carriage for it to rest on as well as its freight from London to the Forth.

Although everyone already knew about the gift, and its cost and possible location had been informally discussed, the news was officially broken to the Council by Provost Robertson at a special meeting on Saturday 13 June 1857. The report of the meeting in the *Fife Herald* on the following Thursday reflected the full gamut of conflicting local opinions about the gun and the hostility of the local reporter.

The chairmen then stated that through the intervention of Dr Henderson of St Helen's, Liverpool, the Government were about to honour the burgh of Dunfermline with a Russian gun taken from the Redan. Unhappily it appears that all the mounted Russian guns had already been disposed of and if the Council accepted of this present they would have to supply it with a carriage at their own expense. A gun-carriage, as stated in the letter of Lord Panmure's Secretary, could be had at the military arsenal of Woolwich – the price of a wrought-iron one being £30 and of a cast iron one £16.

Mr Whitelaw (a local iron-founder) said that so far as he could judge from the photograph of the cast iron carriage, which had been sent along with the Government letter but which wanted a scale of feet, he would say that it would not be overcharged at £16. The gun and carriage would be little within three tons. They would get the Carron Company to bring them down in one of their vessels for nothing. They had done so for the Stirling people and there was no doubt that, considering the trade they had with Dunfermline, the Company would carry them from Woolwich to Charlestown free of charge...he thought the Council should merge all idea of expense and accept the cost of everything – gun, carriage, bringing them down and erecting a proper pedestal for placing them on would come to no more than to between £25 and £30.

Mr Morrison said that in place of £30 it would cost £50 before all was done. He had not the least doubt of it. With regard to giving it a site in the Bowling Green (the New Churchyard) that was out of the question. A burying ground was not the place for a trophy of war. The ground was too small already for its legitimate uses, without occupying any of its space with a useless ornament. Besides, the heritors had to be consulted before they could place it there.

Mr James Morris was totally opposed to spending £50 on the Russian gun. They had more need to apply the sum to the drainage of the town. He did not value the present at all and he was equally against laying out £4 upon it as he was of laying out £50. And where were they to find it? The Council had not a bit of ground for holding such a trophy, except it was the room they were now sitting in (the Council Chamber); and it would not do there either, unless they hung it on the wall like a picture. As for the churchyard, to place it there would be a desecration of its sacred ground and its presence in such a solemn place would do constant violence to the feelings of those who came to mourn over the graves of their friends. Mr Morris would accept of the gun provided they could get it free of expense.

Mr Morrison proposed a motion for delay but withdrew it afterwards. After much debating and sub-debating on the subject, silence and order were at length restored by a witty appeal to their whereabouts from one of the members, when Mr Whitelaw, seconded by Mr Ja Balfour, moved a resolution to this effect – That as there was no site in Dunfermline for a mounted gun, this gun be accepted of but in the same naked condition as it has been offered by the Government. On the votes being taken there were eleven for the motion and three for the amendment.

(A final comment by the writer of the article)

At this Council meeting, which began by refusing to grant one single farthing for the construction of a road necessary to the convenience and safety of the inhabitants, wound up the business of the day by voting away £50 of the public funds on an old Russian gun barrel.

The *Dunfermline Journal*, however, took the opposite view from the *Fife Herald*:

The town of Dundee stands uniquely ridiculous in refusing the gift of a Russian cannon from the War Office because a carriage to mount it on would cost a few pounds. We are

thankful that Dundee is left alone in his shabbiness and that Dunfermline has not to march through Coventry with it. Our cannon will be here soon and the question is – where to place it? On the old Bowling Green undoubtedly. That site forms a bastion-like projection where the trophy could be placed to the very best advantage. There ought to be a bronze plate affixed to the carriage, having inscribed the names of those natives of Dunfermline who fell in the Crimea. The cannon would thus be at once a memorial of victory and a monument to those who died for their country.

After rejecting objections to placing it in the churchyard by pointing out that the Queen was not offended by war trophies in Westminster Abbey and that Regimental Colours were hung in many churches, the article concluded:

We are sure after it is erected many will feel grateful to Dr E Henderson for the trouble he has taken in procuring it for us.

Dr Chalmers in his history of Dunfermline published in 1859 was also of the opinion that the town was indebted to Henderson for the gift, but the evidence is that he and the editor of the *Journal* were in the minority.

On 23 June this short item appeared in the *Herald*:

On it being told to one of our Town Councillors, who was absent at the last special meeting of Council, that it was proposed to locate the Russian gun in the playground of the High School, he said – “Wasn’t it curious that Mr B did not try his wit on this proposal and tell them that this was a laudable suggestion, inasmuch as it was teaching *the young idea how to shoot*”.

(A quotation from James Thomson’s poem *Spring*, which extols the joys of teaching.)

Just over a week later Provost Robertson was able to tell the Town Council that he had received a letter from Lord Panmure informing him that orders had been given for the construction of a cast iron carriage for the gun, to be paid for by the Town. He added that the site of the cannon had not yet been decided. At the beginning of September the problem had still not been solved, but the Provost was negotiating with one of the Heritors to have it set up in the churchyard. Opposition to this suggestion and the placing of it in the School playground was still fierce at the beginning of October, as reported in the *Fife Herald*:

We understand that this trophy, carriage and all together, is ready for delivery whenever a proper site has been fixed upon. The proposal of placing it in the churchyard is meeting with many objections, partly on account of the want of room, but much more on the impropriety of placing an engine of violence in such a sacred and solemn spot as a churchyard. But the authorities have no other alternative. The only other spot where such a thing could be set up is the play-ground of the High School; and there is as great an objection to familiarising the young mind with an object of violence as it would be to place it where it would seem to outrage ‘the stillness and peace of the grave’.

However, the gun was inexorably on its way and on the afternoon of 16 December:

...this piece of ordnance was carried by truck from the railway station down through our streets, attended by a numerous crowd of youngsters, and posted into the churchyard through the east gateway. The trophy was, after some difficulty, conveyed to its appointed site on the Bowling Green where it now stands. The gun, nine feet in length, is a dangerous-looking customer; but the carriage is of so rickety a character that a full charge of powder on the Queen’s birthday would shake it to pieces.

(The railway station in question was the terminus of the line from Charlestown, where the gun would have been landed from a ship, to Dunfermline. It was located on the west side of Elgin Street about twenty yards north of the Grange Bridge.) The gun had been safely delivered and set up in the churchyard but this was not the end of the matter, as yet another report in the *Fife Herald* of 11 February 1858 makes clear:

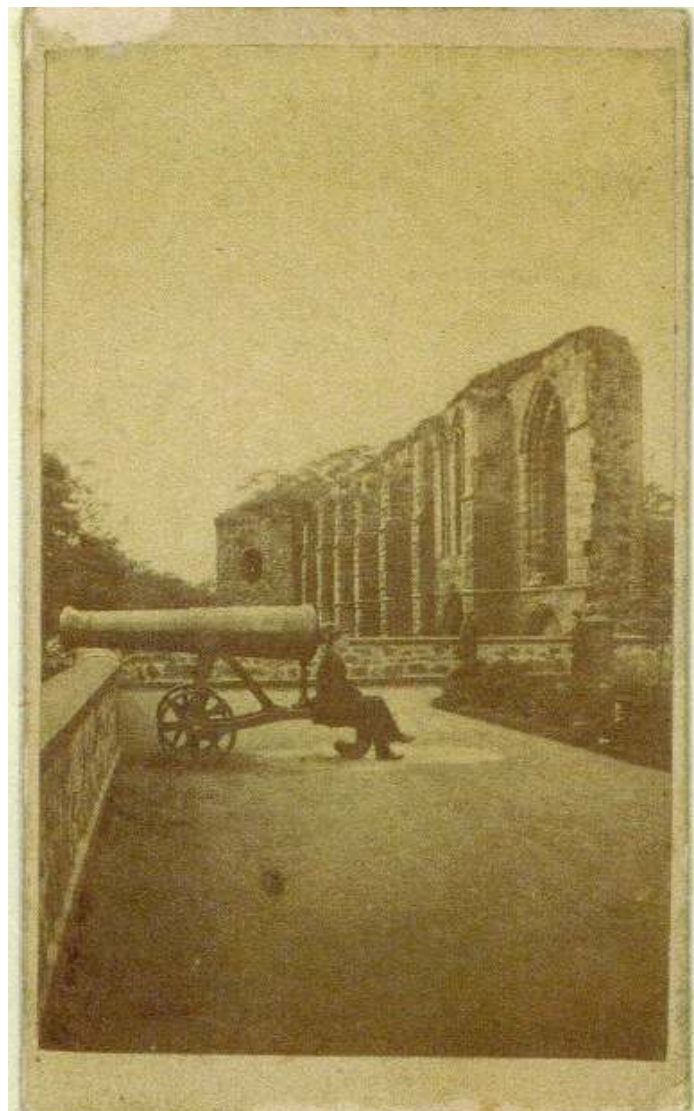
The account which Mr (Andrew) Balfour has sent in against the Magistrates for bringing down the Russian gun from the Railway station, preparing a position for it in the

churchyard and placing it up there was £10 12s. The Council had objected to this account last meeting and had appointed a committee to examine it. The committee met on the 9th of January and having examined it reported that they considered £6 instead of £10 12s a liberal allowance for all the work performed, taking into consideration the fact that Mr Balfour was only employed to lay the pavement and set up the gun and carriage and had no authority from the Magistrates to bring it down from the station, but in this had acted entirely on his own responsibility.

Mr Balfour denied that he had acted on his own responsibility. In proof of this he had gone that morning to Bailie Whitelaw and borrowed chain-slings from him for the purpose of bringing it down, and Bailie Whitelaw knew it was for that purpose. Bailie Whitelaw replied that he knew that Mr Balfour was employed by the Magistrates to lay the pavement; that was all. When he came for the chain-slings he had no idea for what purpose Mr Balfour was going to use them, much less in taking down the gun, a work he had no authority for doing. Mr Balfour said he thought he should have got praise for it instead of all this abuse.

After some words from Mr Morrison and Mr Brown it was unanimously agreed that the Council should stand by the opinion of the Committee, viz. that Mr Balfour's account should be reduced from £10 12s to £6.

(It does not seem to have occurred to the Councillors that someone would have had to be paid for bringing the gun from the station and that they had been very remiss in not arranging for it to be done officially.)



The Cannon in the Churchyard



**The Location of the Cannon
in 1857 there were no burials in this area**

In 1863 a far better potential location for the gun, the Public Park, was opened, but it was not until 1884 that the Public Park Committee approached the Heritors for permission to move it:

The Council highly appreciate the kindness of the Heritors in allowing the Gun to be placed in the Burial-ground, which at the time was perhaps the best site that could have been found. But now that there is a Public Park belonging to the Burgh the Council trust the Heritors will be of the opinion that it is proper the Gun should be removed there.

The Heritors agreed on condition that the Council would pay for any damage caused by the removal of the gun, so to the Public Park it went, where it became a favourite play object for children. The place where it had stood in the churchyard was very soon allocated for burials.



A Brownie Troop playing on the gun in the 1930s

The gun fell victim to the metal salvage sweep during the Second World War and was melted down to make modern weapons. Most of the Russian guns throughout Britain suffered the same fate, but one survivor still stands on the Cathedral Green at Ely in Cambridgeshire.

