

## **The Guernsey Guns**

### **By Simon Hamon**

Standing in a quiet formal garden in Guernsey, as a silent reminder to war, are two German 13.5cm field howitzers. Most people may simply pass them by as they drive or walk past Victoria Tower and Gardens in St Peter Port. Surprisingly these two pieces of artillery were not left over from the German Occupation of the Islands in the 1940s, but had been presented to Guernsey after the Great War.

Even as the Battle of the Somme was raging in France, the question of how the authorities were going to deal with trophies and relics seized from the enemy was being raised. During a debate in parliament on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, 1916, the MP for Newington West, James Gilbert, asked the Secretary of State for War whether it was '... the intention of the War Office to exhibit in London any of the captured guns and trophies obtained during the recent advance by London and other regiments; and, if so, can he state when and where such an exhibition will be held'.

This question was followed by a further one from Sir Archibald Williamson, the MP for Elginshire and Nairnshire. Also directing his enquiry at the Secretary of State for War, Williamson asked whether '... the distinguished services of Highland regiments [would be recognised] by placing some of the captured German guns in the North of Scotland; and whether he will place one in Cooper Park, Elgin?'

In both cases the advice given was that both MPs should direct their requests to the Army Commander of the District in which their constituencies lay. This system appears to have proved unsatisfactory and before the year was out the War Trophies Committee had been established to investigate the matter further. The Committee was chaired by the Under Secretary of State for War, Ian Stewart Macpherson, 1<sup>st</sup> Baron Strathcarron.

Acting upon the recommendation of this Committee it was eventually agreed that a general distribution of captured trophies would be made by the Army Council. The war trophies were divided into two classes. The first were those objects upon '... which substantiated claims have been made by the units which [had] captured them'. These were allotted to particular regimental depots, towns and boroughs, according to the wishes expressed by the units.

The second group of trophies consisted of those items which were unclaimed. These were distributed to places recommended by the Lords Lieutenant of the various counties who, in turn, were asked to '... pay special regard to war services in submitting their lists'. At the same time, the trophies were not despatched before the relevant public body or museum had assumed responsibility for a trophy's care and custody.

When the trophies were being allocated, it was stated that the best examples were to be kept for a British National War Museum (later to become the Imperial War Museum), whilst the remaining items would be distributed to the

dominion countries. By the 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1920, some 3,595 guns, 15,044 machine-guns, 75,824 small arms and 7,887 assorted other trophies had been distributed under the auspices of the War Trophies Committee.

In Canada, the Dominion Archivist, Sir Arthur Doughty, was named as Controller of War Trophies. Doughty was charged with gathering trophies and shipping them back to Canada. As a consequence of his endeavours, by early 1920, the Canadian government's official collection consisted of 516 guns, 304 trench mortars, 3,500 light and heavy machine-guns, and forty-four aircraft.

Another Commonwealth recipient of large numbers of trophies was Australia. Australia, however, had opted to follow a different route to the British. In May, 1917, the Australian War Records Section (AWRS) was founded. Initially responsible for the collection, preservation, and classification of all official documents relating to the Australian Imperial Force, the role of the AWRS was later expanded to include photographs, trench and regimental magazines, sketches, personal memoirs, relics, and war trophies. By the end of 1917, the AWRS controlled the administration of all war trophies captured by Australian units.

To facilitate its work, the AWRS established collection depots in France at Bailleul, Boulogne, Péronne, Corbie, and Longeau. From here items were initially despatched to Britain, from where they were then shipped to Australia. A further base was created in Egypt in 1917. Items were to be clearly labelled, contain the name of the unit that had captured the item, the town or area it was from, the time and place the item was found, and the unit's wish for its ultimate disposal. The information was transferred to a history sheet or card for each item.

Each Australian state had its own committee to oversee the final allocations and these organisations had all agreed a system that was made according to the size of a community's population. Under this scheme, towns (other than the capital city) with a population above 10,000 were allocated two artillery pieces and two machine-guns; towns with a population between 3,000 and 10,000 were allocated an artillery piece; towns with a population between 300 and 3,000 were allocated a machine-gun.<sup>2</sup>

No part of the British Empire was ignored, and in 1921 the Channel Island of Guernsey received its share of the Allies' spoils of war. The list of items received included four 13.5cm Kanone 09 artillery pieces, two trench mortars, two anti-tank rifles, two machine-guns, a gas gong, six steel helmets, two sets of body armour, an entrenching tool, six rifles, three bayonets, twelve 'Pistols Illuminating', three carbines, and a field gun of unspecified calibre.

The arrival of the war trophies, however, was unexpected by the Islanders. A temporary home was found for the items at the Town Arsenal in St Peter Port, then the headquarters of the Royal Guernsey Militia and today, the home of the Guernsey Fire and Rescue Service.

In October, 1921, Major FHS Le Mesurier, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General of the Royal Guernsey Militia, complained to the States of Guernsey Supervisor that the war trophies were taking up valuable space and preventing the Militia from using their own drill hall. The matter was considered at the States Deliberation (being a self-governing Island this is effectively a Parliament meeting) where it was decided to set up a committee to report back on what should be done with these war trophies.

The committee's report was submitted back to the States on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1922. Amongst their recommendations was the suggestion that the four 13.5cm guns, the two trench mortars and the field gun should be placed on display in the gardens of Victoria Tower. Located on the opposite side of the road to the Arsenal, the gardens already contained two Russian cannons, trophies of the Crimean War. The States Engineer submitted the costing and a plan for how the works were to be carried out which would have seen the guns ringed by railings at a cost of £120. The rifles, machine-guns and other small items were to be distributed among the local schools.

However, the memory of the loss of life during the Great War was still very fresh in the minds of some of the islanders, and opposition to the guns being placed on public display soon became apparent. One letter in *The Star* newspaper, for example, contained the following comments: 'The field guns at the Arsenal, bearing traces of German camouflage and in some places covered with grease, were monstrous pieces of artillery which in all probability were responsible for the deaths of many gallant British soldiers in France and Belgium.'

Similar views were expressed when, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 1922, the States debated the proposals for displaying the guns. Thomas Ozanne, the Peoples' Deputy for the Parishes of St. Sampson and Vale, protested about the artillery pieces, claiming them to be 'murderous trophies of war'. However, he also went on to argue that the smaller weapons should not be given to schools but presented to conscientious objectors to hang on their walls as a reminder of what they '... had not done during the war'. In his speech, Jurat George Kinnersley stated: 'Why shouldn't these guns just sink into the ground, let them sink, put them there and let them sweat.'

Other counsels carried the day. The Parish Rectors of St. Andrew's and Castel favoured sending trophies to the schools as a reminder of the war and the King's representative in Guernsey, the Lieutenant Governor, General Sir John Capper, warned that '... it was by forgetting the lessons of history that this past war came about.' The States decided to adopt the committee's suggestion and instructed that the guns should be placed in the grounds of Victoria Tower, though the sum of £70 was saved by not installing the railings.

After two decades of the guns being on display with no maintenance and in frequently damp conditions, particularly at the western end of the gardens which are normally in shade, the wheels of two guns placed that end of the garden had started to collapse. As children often played on the guns, the potential risk of injury was considered too great and in 1938 the decision was

made to call in a local scrap merchant, Mr. Ralph O'Toole, who was asked to dismantle and remove the two western guns.

With the swift advance through France of the German forces and following the withdraw of all military personnel from Guernsey on the 19<sup>th</sup> June, 1940, the States became concerned that the two remaining 13.5cm Kanone 09 guns would be seen by enemy aerial reconnaissance aircraft and be misinterpreted as active artillery. They chose to hide them by simply burying them, and consequently large sloped pits were dug in the centre of the gardens and the guns pushed in to the holes and covered.

Following the Liberation of Guernsey on the 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1945, all of the German guns from the occupation were removed and scrapped or dumped at sea. The two 13.5cm Kanone 09 guns remained buried and all but forgotten for the next thirty-eight years until the author's grandfather, Arthur Oswald Hamon, who was at the time Chairman of the Ancient Monuments Committee, approached States member Roger Berry with the proposal that the guns should be dug up and restored.

This suggestion duly became a subject of the States meeting in November, 1978. The States approved the recovery and granted a budget of £2,000 to excavate and restore them. It was decided to replace both guns in the gardens, one at either end. Work was soon underway, the task being completed in December, 1978.

Exposed to the elements, both artillery pieces were quickly painted with Croda Triple Coat grey paint. This was done not to conform to any military colour scheme but simply this was because it was the same paint that was used during the maintenance of the cranes in St Peter Port Harbour. The guns still retain that colour scheme today.

Still on display beside Victoria Tower, the artillery pieces in Guernsey are believed to be two of just three 13.5cm Kannon 09 guns, from an original production run of just 190 of the type, that have survived worldwide. As such, with the approaching centenaries they provide the visitor with the opportunity both to examine unusual reminders of the role of artillery in the Great War and to remember the role of the population of Guernsey in that conflict.

The author welcomes any additional information about other examples of the 13.5cm Kannon 09 artillery piece, or the original camouflage scheme that may have been applied to the Guernsey examples.

**References:** HMSO, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War* (HMSO, London, 1922), p.780.

Notes for "AWM262 Trophy History Sheets, 1914-18 War", quoted on the Australian War Memorial website: [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au).

## The Guns in pictures:



The 13.5cm Kannon 09 gun that is on display at the eastern end of the gardens by Victoria Tower in Arsenal Road, St Peter Port, Guernsey. It was one of four examples of this artillery piece that were sent to the island in 1921. Surviving records reveal that the four guns were: No.56 (carriage No.1320), No.69 (carriage No.23), No.81 (carriage No.143) and No.100 (carriage No.168). The 13.5cm Kanone 09 was a heavy breech-loading field artillery gun that was built by Krupp AG in Essen. Only four were in service at the outbreak of the war, and it was withdrawn from service in 1915 as it was deemed to be too much gun for too little shell, but it was returned to service later in the war when the Allied blockade began to affect German ammunition production.

The Crimean War cannon in the gardens by Victoria Tower (which dominates the background). The shield carries the following wording:

“Presented by Her Majesty’s Government to the Island of Guernsey as a trophy of the Russian War 1856”. The cannon can today be seen on the ramparts of Castle Cornet in St Peter Port. (Carol Toms Collection)





One of the 13.5cm Kannon 09 guns supplied to Guernsey receiving the attentions of the scrap man in 1938. (Author)



One of the guns having been placed in the pit dug in the Victoria Tower gardens prior to being infilled. The two 13.5cm Kannon 09 artillery pieces that were not dismantled would remain hidden feet below the surface throughout the German occupation. (Author)



Guernsey's pair of 13.5cm Kannon 09 guns out in the open together for the first time since the German Occupation of the Channel Islands in 1940. (Author)



Two close-ups of the gun on display at the eastern end of the gardens by Victoria Tower. The barrel on the 13.5cm Kanone 09 gun was 15 feet 6½ inches long, the limit of elevation was 26 degrees and it could be traversed 4 degrees. The maximum ranges were 15,748 yards for percussion (High Explosive) shells and 15,311 yards for timed (shrapnel) shells. The projectile weighed approximately 89lbs.





The gun that is positioned at the eastern end of the gardens. The state of preservation of the two guns in Guernsey is currently under review with proposals being considered regarding their future display. These include erecting shelters over them to protect the guns from the worst of the weather. (HMP)



This is believed to be the only other surviving example of 13.5cm Kannon 09 gun anywhere in the world. Residing at the Botanical Gardens in Wellington, New Zealand, it was restored and placed on public display in 2006. This gun is missing its shield which is believed to have been partially destroyed during the Great War, there being some corresponding shrapnel or fragment damage to the left side of the barrel. (Author)

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