

‘A Loss That We Cannot Recover’;
A Cairn of the Manzimnyama River, iSandlwana

By Ian Knight

Immediately above the current road-bridge across the Manzimnyama river, to the west of iSandlwana hill, there stands on the eastern side, built into the banks, a cairn of stones. Originally quite an impressive mound and once topped by an iron cross, it had crumbled over the years until recently restored; some of the top stones have been piled up to make a smaller beacon, and painted with whitewash.

That coat of whitewash inevitably associates the cairn with those on the battlefield of iSandlwana itself, just a two kilometres away, although in truth that Manzimnyama cairn has long been popularly associated with the battle. The most common story is that it represents the grave of members of a fatigue party from the British camp who were working to improve the Manzimnyama crossing at the time of the fighting on 22 January 1879. And certainly this was the area traversed by the Zulu right ‘horn’ during the battle, and the topography is highly suggestive; the ridges press close upon the road here, and the very course that the Manzimnyama has cut through them provides a route by which the right ‘horn’ could – and quite possibly did – accomplish such a movement. Isolated from the camp, unable to see anything of the early stages of the battle on the far side of the hill itself, it’s easy to imagine how a small party trying to level the steep, rocky banks of the Manzimnyama drift might have been completely unaware of imminent danger until the Zulus suddenly spilled down the valley above them.

And at first glance, there is superficial evidence, too, to support such a scenario. There is evidence that Lieutenant Edgar Anstey of the 1/24th had commanded a fatigue party working on the road on the morning of the 22nd – and wasn’t Lt. John Chard RE, based at Rorke’s Drift, ordered forward that same morning because the Sappers under his command were urgently needed at the camp? Could the remains of the men of either of these parties lie beneath the whitewashed cairn on the banks of the Manzimnyama?

Yet a careful analysis of the movements of the prospective road parties suggests otherwise.

It is certainly true that the Manzimnyama provided a difficult obstacle to Chelmsford’s advance. Chelmsford, it should be remembered, had crossed at Rorke’s Drift – about ten kilometres as the crow flies further west but longer by road – at dawn on 11 January 1879. He had camped on the Zulu bank and, the following day, had acted to suppress any local resistance by dispersing the followers of the Zulu guardian of the border, inkosi Sihayo kaXongo, in the Batshe valley directly to his front. Yet, even with the road ahead cleared of military obstacles, Chelmsford had not been immediately able to advance. His command consisted of over 4700 men (less detachments on the border) whose tents and equipment were carried in 300 wagons and carts, and he was following a track which had hitherto seldom seen more traffic than occasional passage of a handful of traders’ wagons. In two places, at least – at the drifts through the Batshe and Manzimnyama streams – there were crossing points which were steep and narrow and likely to provide dangerous choke-points on the road for so large a baggage train as his. Whilst the bulk of his command remained on the Zulu bank at Rorke’s Drift over the following days, he established a detachment on the eastern bank of the Batshe, close to the cliffs Sihayo’s followers had defended on the 12th, to both secure the crossing and to protect against any possible re-occupation of the Zulu ‘stronghold’. This had served to screen work parties improving the Batshe drift but it had not been possible to address the section of track running from the Batshe forward to iSandlwana before Chelmsford advanced his column on the 20th. The column passed through the Batshe safely

but, when the ground dipped again a few miles further on into the valley of the Manzimnyama, it was found that another obstacle lay ahead. According to Lt. H. C. Harford (99th Regt., attached to the NNC);

Large working parties both from the 24th and ourselves [were] sent forward to render the road passable for the wagons. If it hadn't been for the services of two of our officers, Captain Krohn and Lieutenant Vane, who were expert wagon-drivers and did nearly the whole of the driving themselves at the bad places, many would have broken down and the Column would have been delayed for weeks. (1)

In the event about a third of the wagons could not be brought through the Manzimnyama drift that day, and were forced to remain overnight on the western bank. Here they were joined by Captain William Mostyn's F Company 1/24th which was marching down from Helpmekaar en route to the column; Mostyn's company bivouacked with them over-night, and the wagons and escort all reached iSandlwana safely the following day.

If the road from Rorke's Drift remained problematic, however, it had been traversed by the entire column by the 21st. By that time, events were already moving fast and the strategic attention was very much focussed on the road ahead. Aware that a Zulu army might be marching to confront him and concerned about possible Zulu movements through the rough country to his right front – the Malakatha and Hlazakazi heights – Chelmsford ordered most of his mounted troops and NNC to scout the area on the 21st. In the meantime, at the camp, some 30 supply wagons were unloaded and were scheduled to return to Rorke's Drift on the 22nd to collect the stockpile of biscuit boxes and mealie bags waiting for them there. Late on the evening of the 21st, however, Major J.G. Dartnell, commanding the reconnaissance, encountered a Zulu presence some eighteen kilometres away, at the head of the Mangeni gorge and when the news reached Chelmsford at iSandlwana in the small hours of the morning of the 22nd he decided to seize the initiative and march a portion of his force out to intercept them. So as not to alert any Zulu scouts who might be watching throughout the night he gave orders that most of the 2/24th, four of his guns and two ambulances be made ready as quietly as possible, and without bugle calls.

Chelmsford and his force marched out at about 3.30 AM on the 22nd. Although he had deliberately left the column baggage and transport behind – including his reserve ammunition – so as not to slow him down, this was the first time any military carriages had used the road forward from iSandlwana. Unlike the previous stage of the advance – where Chelmsford had paused at Rorke's Drift to prepare the road ahead – there is no record that anything of the sort had been attempted on the 21st, and as a result any difficult points on the road only became apparent during his advance on the 22nd. In a letter – the last he was to write, as it turns out - to Major Clery (Staff Officer 3rd Column) on the morning of the 22nd, Lt. Nevill Coghill, 1/24th, offered an intriguing insight into the state of the road immediately in front of the camp, and its suitability for column traffic;

Dear Major

Bloomfield Qr Master came to me just now with his finger in his mouth saying the light spring waggon would not hold the 2,000 rations so I have requested a larger one from the M.I. There was no escort so I sent down to the 1/24th to know if they could provide one. I was waiting for an answer when Pugh came and told me you had sent an order to the same effect.

I do not think any waggon can cross the last donga near the Kraal. Perhaps waggon and escort could take advantage of the [stone] cattle Kraal, pulling down the huts and wait til the NNC come for their rations.

Yours,

Nevill J.A.Coghill (2)

The context of this letter is relevant because it clearly refers to the road ahead – the only NNC due to ‘come for their rations’ were under the command of George Hamilton Browne and who were part of Chelmsford’s command but who had been sent back to camp once it had become clear that Dartnell’s encounter the night before had not disclosed the presence of the main Zulu army. And indeed, the entire column’s transport had, of course, already negotiated the obstacles behind iSandlwana – what was concerning the Column staff, then, was the road in front of iSandlwana, and its practicability in the light of the column’s imminent advance.

This is significant because it places the movements of two possible road parties on the day into context. While Lord Chelmsford was out the camp went about its normal duties on the morning of the 22nd. Long before anything happened a fatigue party under Lt. Edgar Anstey, 1/24th, was sent out to work on the road. Quite where is not specified, yet in view of the concerns expressed about the road ahead after Chelmsford’s departure it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that it was sent to work on one of the points to the east of iSandlwana – forward from the camp – where the track crossed the Nyogane stream and its tributary dongas. It is true that the empty supply wagons were due to return via the Manzimnyama road to Rorke’s Drift later that day – and presumably back again, when they had collected the supplies – but it is difficult to see how further improvements to the Manzimnyama crossing might still have been urgent enough, on a road which had already been repaired on the way through, to demand attention when a much bigger movement forward was in the offing. It is interesting to note, too, that at Rorke’s Drift, late on the evening of the 21st, Lieutenant John Chard, RE, had received orders ‘to say that the men of the RE, who had lately arrived, were to proceed to the camp at Isandhlwana’ (3). Being uncertain whether this order included himself, Chard had loaded his men – a corporal and three sappers, together with his driver – into his Engineers’ wagon and had set out for iSandlwana on the morning of the 22nd. Chard himself was riding a horse and, being faster than the wagon, went on ahead; although he noted that ‘the road was very heavy in some places’, he made no mention of encountering any work parties at the Manzimnyama or anywhere else and instead reported to the Headquarters tent at iSandlwana. Here he was told that his men were required but that he was not, being needed instead to supervise the pont at Rorke’s Drift, and after staying long enough to see the early appearance – and retirement – of the Zulus on the iNyoni escarpment he set off back down the road. Here he met first Durnford and his command coming in the opposite direction, and then his own wagon. ‘At the foot of the hill’, he recalled, ‘I met my men in the wagon and made them get out and walk up the hill with Durnford’s men. I brought the wagon back with me to Rorke’s Drift.’ (4).

Why had Chard’s men been needed at iSandlwana that morning? They had not, after all, been needed on the 20th, when the Column negotiated the road through the Manzimnyama valley – in fact the implication is that, like Anstey’s road party, they were needed to prepare the road ahead in response to the imminent advance of the entire column. It is also worth noting that Chard did not deliver them to any parties working on the road behind iSandlwana – he mentions none – but rather into the camp itself.

In any case, is there any evidence that either of these parties – or any others – were working on the roads when the battle actually began? Certainly not Anstey’s. It will be remembered that early on the morning of the 22nd, several thousand Zulus had appeared on the lip of the iNyoni escarpment, within sight of the camp. Pulleine had ordered his men to fall in, ready for an attack. One of the survivors, Pte, G. Bickley of the 1/24th band, was quite specific about Lt. Anstey’s party;

One of the NNC came in soon after and in my hearing reported himself to Col. Pulleine as having come off picquet, and obtained permission to bring in some of his men from the rear of the hill behind the camp. About this time a second mounted messenger was sent out to bring in a party working on the road under Lt. Anstey, which came in some $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour afterwards. After waiting under arms for some hour and a half to two hours the men were dismissed with orders not to take off their accoutrements. Very shortly afterwards we had been dismissed we heard very heavy firing from the hill on the left where the Basutos had been sent, and immediately the 'fall in' sounded the 2nd time...(5).

Anstey's party, then, had been withdrawn to the safety of the camp in response to the first appearance of the Zulus and before the discovery of the main impi. According to Mackinnon and Shadbolt's 'The South Africa Campaign 1879' the men seem to have rejoined their companies; Anstey, it suggests, was seen fighting with Mostyn's F Company, his own company, and his body was later discovered among a clump of dead far down the 'fugitives' trail'. And given that Chard's men only arrived in camp at about 10.30 AM – between the first Zulu appearance and the main attack – it seems improbable that, with the limited time and the fresh awareness of a Zulu threat, they could already have been deployed anywhere on the road, whether behind or in front of iSandlwana, before the battle began.

So if there is no evidence to support the myth of a fatigue party overwhelmed at the Manzimnyama drift, who then might the cairn beside the current bridge commemorate? Is it anything to do with the battle at all?

One final point needs to be made before offering a solution. At the time of the battle, the track did not cross the Manzimnyama where it does today. The old road curved a little further south, and crossed through steep banks about a hundred metres below the present drift – traces of the track can still be seen there, and it's not difficult to understand why it was considered a difficult crossing for a large number of ox-wagons. If the cairn related to men surprised and killed on the banks, why were their bodies moved so far away from the existing track to be buried?

That change in the course of the route seems to have occurred in 1888, perhaps in connection with the growth of European traffic which followed the establishment of the St. Vincent's Anglican Mission at iSandlwana in 1880.

The mission story, indeed, is the key to the true identity of the cairn. At the end of the war, the British had divided up Zululand among thirteen compliant chiefs. King Cetshwayo's loyal guardian of the border, inkosi Sihayo, was deposed and his territory given instead to the chief of the Tlokoa Sotho, Hlubi kaMota. Hlubi was a firm ally of the colonial authorities in Natal and, indeed, had served on several occasions as an enforcer for Natal's Secretary for Native Affairs, Theophilus Shepstone. Hlubi had commanded his mounted followers during the Bushmans' Pass debacle in 1873, and had served again during the invasion of Zululand where he had fought under Durnford at iSandlwana. In moving from Natal to Zululand, Hlubi had established his homestead quite literally on the ruins of Sihayo's old home and, to stress his connections with the white world, Hlubi had been keen to establish a mission presence in his new territory. In December 1879 Bishop Macrorie of Pietermaritzburg had held a service on the iSandlwana battlefield and among the small group present were Hlubi and an old friend of his, Charles Johnson. Johnson was a lay preacher who had known Hlubi during the Bushmans Pass affair and had preached among Hlubi's followers at a mission called St. Augustine's in their location under the Drakensberg mountains in the mid-1870s. Macrorie decided to build upon this connection by appointing Johnson as a missionary in the iSandlwana area, despite the fact that Johnson would not be ordained until 1881. After some false starts, Johnson eventually began building his mission at the foot of the iNyoni escarpment immediately north of iSandlwana hill. At first he called it St. Augustine's, after his first mission to Hlubi, but with the arrival of a newly-appointed Bishop of Zululand,

David McKenzie, it was soon renamed St. Vincent's, since the battle of iSandlwana had taken place on St. Vincent's Day. Not long afterwards McKenzie moved Johnson to a new post in the Batshe valley, closer to Hlubi, and the church that would subsequently be built there was named St. Augustine's.

The establishment of these churches represented a significant expansion of Anglican activity in an area of Zululand which had hitherto been closed to them all. For the mission community themselves – a handful of clerics and volunteers at each settlement - it meant considerable hardship. Johnson's first mud-brick house at iSandlwana had been washed away, the remains of Zulu dead had to be collected and buried from the site of his church, and the church itself could only be completed by cannibalising debris still lying on the battlefield. Their lives were also, at the beginning at least, entirely dependent upon the goodwill of the Zulu people who had only recently been conquered. It also meant travelling about through a landscape which was not yet adapted to European settlement – the only roads were the old traders' tracks, upgraded along the invasion route by the military, and moving between the various mission outposts often meant riding across rough terrain in all weathers.

And this, it seems, was the cause of a tragedy which had nothing to do with the battle of iSandlwana, but was the origin of the cairn by the modern Manzimnyama bridge. In January 1889 a Rev. John Simon Morris, who was staying at St. Vincent's, was returning there from a visit to St. Augustine's. There had been heavy rain over the previous few days, and most of the rivers were full. At about 11 AM on the 13th a young man named Bertie Hughes arrived from St. Vincent's to escort Morris – who had not been feeling well for some days, 'being very delicate and consumptive' (6) – back to iSandlwana. Both Morris and Hughes were new to the country, Hughes having apparently only arrived a few weeks before as Bishop McKenzie's pupil; Margaret Johnson, Charles' wife, thought him 'a nice, gentlemanly boy, about 15, but very tall' (7), 'who had always longed to be a missionary' (8). Hughes stayed at St. Augustine's only long enough to partake of some milk and cake and then started back with Morris as the two were worried about further rain. Indeed, Margaret Johnson noted, not long after they had set out the rain came on again.

The following morning was a Sunday and Charles Johnson held early communion at St. Augustine's as usual. Then, according to Margaret,

Two boys from Isandhlwana were in church, and on coming out, gave C a note from Bishop. A dreadful shock awaited us, in the news it contained. On crossing the Batyi [Batshe] River yesterday Mr M and B.H. had some difficulty, it having risen, but on reaching the Amanzimnyama they found a roaring torrent suddenly come down, with heavy rain higher up. They did not know enough to be aware that it is highly dangerous to attempt to cross a river in this state, so plunged in; Mr M got across somehow, and arrived at Isandhlwana; poor Bertie Hughes was carried down, his saddle gave way, and his horse got out, but he himself (poor boy, it seems so awfully sad!) was found down the river, cast out on the bank much bruised, quite dead. The Bishop's note said they were to bury him, this morning. One can hardly realise it, when he was here only yesterday, quite well. (9)

It was left to Morris himself to explain the details of the tragedy;

When we started home from St. Augustine's, a neighbouring station some 12 miles off the weather was fine, we had to cross three rivers to get home, the first of which we considered the most dangerous, we crossed that without much difficulty; the next river called the Amanzi-mnyama, 'Blackwater', is within twenty minutes ride of home when we got to it, it was a boiling torrent. I went first to see what could be done, but my horse was carried off his feet, and had it not been that we were swept against a huge piece of rock I would have been lost; however, I got ashore again and

determined to try and get shelter at a Kraal. But young Hughes, my companion, would not hear of it. He said that I should catch cold in my wet clothes and get ill again, we were so close home that we ought to try again. I turned back, but first went down stream to look for a better stream if possible, none could be seen, so we both came back to the drift again. I told Hughes to stand while I went upstream, I had not gone fifty yards when I heard a great struggling of a horse, I looked round and I saw Hughes' horse on the other side, but the poor fellow himself in the water. I dismounted and stripped heavy gear at once and ran down the stream, those who know what running down the bank of a South African stream will know what I mean when I say that I do not know how I managed to run. Nothing could be seen of dear Hughes, although I searched for over an hour, I went into the stream, went down the stream about a mile but saw nothing. I then gave him up and determined to get home if possible. I got back to my horse which had not moved from where I left it, I mounted and crossed. How I crossed I cannot say, for it was God's hand alone that carried me over. Some natives on the opposite bank stood speechless in wonder, and did their best to help me after I crossed. I still had another river to cross, and that was done with less trouble. I got to the station soon, about 4.30, and the Bishop at once instituted a searching party. The body was found about three-quarters of a mile down stream, with a cut on the head, which showed that he must have been whirled against a piece of rock and stunned at once. The horse I picked up when riding home, without a saddle; in the struggle the girth must have broken. As you may imagine, I was quite knocked up, but I am thankful to say that I suffered very little, a huge bruise on my side, and a little loss of sleep were all I suffered. The Bishop was much distressed as you may suppose. The body was put in the Church for the night, and buried immediately after early celebration. It was the most impressive service I have ever witnessed, all more or less showed signs of sympathy. Hughes is the first white man who has been buried here. He was a most excellent young fellow, well prepared and full of mission work. It is a loss that we cannot recover. How thankful I ought to be no one knows, for it has been a miraculous escape, it was Providence only that helped me over. All this more certainly points out to me that men going out for Mission work ought to be familiar with water. We all think that Hughes must have got giddy mid-stream and swerved in the saddle and so the girth gave. The rush of water was quite enough to do this to anyone not accustomed to water. I feel the loss very much, for he was my particular friend and charge; he slept in the same hut, and we were great friends. His unselfish thought for my health made him cross, for he thought if one horse crossed the other would follow. (10).

Although Hughes was buried not on the banks of the Manzimyama but at St. Vincent's, a cairn was placed above the spot where he fell, and mounted with an iron cross. Later that year William Smyth, another missionary, referred to both the 'new road' and the cairn when he wrote that

I am responsible for the sacraments at St. Augustine's and the outstations. There are ten out-stations where regular Sunday services are held. One week my horse had to carry me 150 miles. The new road through the drift was deep in mud. I found a grave [sic] with an iron cross, in memory of Bertie Hughes. (11).

That iron cross was still in place until about 1990 but has since disappeared; with it, it seems, has gone the small story of the small tragedy of the loss of fifteen year-old Bertie

Hughes, subsumed now by the growing mythology by the far greater tragedy of the battle of iSandlwana so close by.

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Footnotes;

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CAPTIONS FOR ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1). The cairn on the banks of the Manzimnyama, photographed c. 1990, with the cross mentioned by Smyth still standing on it.
- 2). The site today; the Hughes cairn can just be seen immediately to the left of the current Manzimnyama bridge, in the long grass on the bank above the stream. Note the proximity to iSandlwana.
- 3). The cairn today; a number of loose stones on top of the cairn have been rebuilt and whitewashed, thereby suggesting an association with the whitewashed cairns on the battlefield itself.

