

BATTLEFIELD TOUR 2018

By Ian Knight

Last month I led a two-week tour of the battlefields on behalf of travel company The Cultural Experience. This is essentially a tour that Ian Castle and I developed back in about 1990 and which I later ran for Holts Battlefield Tours, who had independently developed their own itinerary with the AZWHS' very own Dr Adrian Greaves. Over the years my tour has been tweaked with quite a bit of input from Paul Marais – our ground agent and local guide - and I remain proud of the fact that it is still the only comprehensive tour of the sites connected with the war of 1879 which takes in all of the battlefields as well as many incidental sites along the way. Holts Tours are sadly no longer with us, and Paul and I now run the tour for The Cultural.

I've often been asked if I get bored telling the same story on the same sites each time and the answer is a resounding 'no'. For one thing I would need to run the tour a good deal more often than that for it to become repetitive; and for another it is in any case never really the same twice running. Although I have various stories I like to tell on the sites I don't work to a script and the stories tend to unfold differently each time, not least because over the period of the tour one gets a sense of one's audience, of the things they know and don't know, or find interesting or don't. The level of knowledge in a particular group often varies from, at one extreme, people who have only ever seen 'that film', and have been motivated by a desire to find out something of the history behind it, to people who have spent a lifetime studying it and are, for the first time, in a position to walk the ground. In my early days with Holts we often had many retired Army officers who had formed the basis of Holts' market demographic from their early days pioneering tours to the Western Front battlefields in Europe; nowadays we have rather less retired Majors but instead a good core of men in their late fifties who were turned on to the story by early exposure to the film Zulu! And just recently we have had quite a few authors along, from Kevin Brazier, who specialises in the history of the Victoria Cross, to James Mace, an American novelist writing fiction about the war and, on this trip, Kate Birbeck, who has recently published a biography of one of the Imperial officers who survived iSandlwana, Captain Alan Gardner.

In addition to the company, the tour offers me an annual opportunity to visit all the sites and see how they are coping with demographic change in KwaZulu-Natal, with shifting attitudes towards heritage issues, and with the ebb and flow of international tourism. For the most part access to the sites has improved with the long, bumpy dirt roads which characterised the explorations of my youth steadily giving way to modern tarmac roads, albeit with a fair scattering of potholes. Some things never change, including the immutability of the weather – this year, travelling in South Africa's autumn, we generally had warm, dry days, and only towards the end did the cloud close in, typically marring our main day at iSandlwana with drizzle and mist! Over twenty years certain trends have become evident, however; there is, for example, a general increase in population on many of the sites. Since a portion of the battlefield of iSandlwana was fenced off and declared a protected site in 1993 the village immediately outside the fence – which ironically stands on a crucial part of the battlefield

which it was not possible to include within the reserve – has grown considerably. Until recently, looking out from the balcony of the rooms at Isandlwana Lodge in the evening, once the sun had set over the battlefield not an artificial light could be seen; two years ago, however, the iSandlwana village was connected to the national grid, and now in the evening a sprinkle of lights come on among the huts of the village. The twenty-first century is inexorably catching up with iSandlwana.

The Hlobane battlefield has changed over the years too. For many years the dirt road giving access to the summit was maintained by the coal-mine which burrowed into the southern flank of the mountain. Now the mine has closed and access to the lower slopes is past a series of dilapidated and often abandoned mine buildings and the road itself is no longer maintained. It's unlikely now that even the most adventurous 4x4 vehicle could make its way up to the top although it does provide a handy route for parties of walkers. For years I used to walk my groups up the track and across the flat top of the mountain to the Devil's Pass at the far end – and then back again. Atmospheric and exhilarating as it is, this walk was not without its challenges; it's a long way, for a start, particularly on a hot day (someone described it last year as 'walking across a frying pan') and twice in recent years we have been caught by an unexpected thunder-storm overtaking us on the summit. Having watched the lightning strike the ground less than a hundred meters away from an exposed group more than once I am a little more wary of leading this walk than I used to be, and indeed this year we opted to walk to the top and limit our explorations of the summit to the eastern end of the mountain. And this proved a surprisingly successful change since it encouraged more in the group to come along, and it made for a more relaxing experience with time to sit and view the countryside, and chat over aspects of the battle from the vantage point of the summit's extraordinary views.

Nor have all the changes been bad. It is usually the victors, of course, who erect monuments on the sites of their iconic battles, and so it was in Zululand. Donald R. Morris ended his ground-breaking study of the war, *The Washing of the Spears* (yes, I know it's dated now, but ..!) with a poignant reference to the plaque on the Ulundi monument erected 'In Memory of the Brave Warriors Who Fell In Defence of the Old Zulu Order' which was, in the late 1960s, the only memorial erected to the Zulu dead. Well, it certainly isn't now and since 1993 Zulu representation on the battlefields has grown steadily. At iSandlwana there is a memorial to the Zulu dead based upon the design of the iziqu 'bravery bead' necklace while at Rorke's Drift there is a strikingly beautiful monument in the form of a bronze leopard (representing Zulu royalty) recumbent upon a pile of fallen war-shields. At the other sites, too, memorials have sprung up, often drawing on the symbolism of a Zulu shield, and listing the amabutho and their commanders who fought in particular engagements. And this year we noticed distinct improvements in this regard over last year. On Hlobane, the graves of two of Wood's staff members, Captain Campbell and Mr Lloyd, killed in the fight, have historically been the subject of a mystifying degree of vandalism and on last year's tour we noted that both Campbell and Lloyd's stone cross (which had been replaced several times over the years) and a new Zulu memorial had been knocked flat, together with the stone support for an interpretation panel. Yet this year, despite the remoteness of the spot, we found all had been replaced – although the interpretation panel itself has not yet been restored. In Eshowe, the monument that stands on the spot where King Cetshwayo died in 1884 had suffered repeated damage, the result presumably of now standing on a small traffic island in the middle of the

road; since last year, however, the old battered stone monument has been replaced by a ground-level plaque which is, hopefully, less likely to come into contact with passing traffic. Similarly, the standing Zulu memorial at Nyezane battlefield had been knocked down only eighteen months after being erected, but has now been replaced with one at ground level. And King Cetshwayo's grave, in the remote Nkandla district, is not only easier to approach due to a new modern road built to service the controversial palace of ex-President Zuma nearby, but the grave itself has been cleared of undergrowth and neatly fenced off.

There was, indeed, evidence across the sites of renewed attempts at interpretation with new explanatory boards appearing at Gingindlovu and elsewhere. This is, one assumes, in anticipation of the 140th anniversary, which falls next year.

Other developments are perhaps more ambiguous. On our last day at Isandlwana Lodge we noticed a truck pulling off to the side of the road onto an open patch of ground between the battlefield perimeter fence and the dongas where the Zulu centre massed during the battle. This is an area the present Zulu king, His Majesty King Goodwill Zwelithini, has decided to erect a new Royal palace upon. The palace will be a relatively small affair – six or seven buildings – and it will be used principally by His Majesty and his guests during commemorations and ceremonies on the battlefield. The decision to build a palace there reflects the importance His Majesty places on the iSandlwana site as an iconic symbolic of the resistance staged by successive Zulu kings in defying colonialism. The area lies outside the preserved area, although it is on a crucial part of the battlefield, lying as it does between the British firing line and the Zulu positions opposite. An Environmental Impact Assessment approved the development despite the discovery of human remains in the area.

So, it seems, the battlefields, as they approach their 140th anniversary, are entering yet another new phase in their history. Quite how the future will treat them it remains to be seen, although personally I look forward to exploring them with like-minded people for – hopefully! – many years to come!