

BUILT ON SHIFTING SANDS?

Some Anomalies in the Chard Maps of Rorke's Drift

By Ian Knight

Among the most iconic contemporary images from the Anglo-Zulu War – like the photograph of iSandlwana with the wagons still on the battlefield, or Fripp's famous painting of the 'last stand' – there is at least one map. Small and neat, published, along with others, in the official history, it has been reproduced countless times and accompanies almost every article on the action at Rorke's Drift, either in its original form or in a modern graphic adaptation. It is of course Lt. John Chard's plan of the defences at Rorke's Drift, and it is widely assumed to be the definitive word on both the buildings and the barricades built to protect them. And why would it not be? Chard himself drew the original shortly after the battle, and at the very least signed off the lithographs – the printed version – which appeared in official documents. And Chard himself should know; after all, not only was he the senior British officer present during the battle, commanding the garrison, but he was of course a Royal Engineer, and cartography would have been among one of his more basic skills.

Chard's maps have formed the basis of all subsequent interpretations of the battle, a fixed point of reference against which all subsequent debates have been tested. In particular, professional and amateur historians alike delight in trying to untangle the confused events of the battle's defining act – the struggle for the hospital – using the floor-plan provided by Chard himself.

But can Chard's maps be relied upon to the degree that such would-be forensic analysis requires?

The answer, unfortunately, is no. There are a number of different versions of the 'Chard map', all officially endorsed by him, and yet varying in small but significant details. Whilst they confirm in all the major respects – the size, shape and positioning of the buildings and the lines of defences – there are small anomalies between them. In themselves these don't amount to much – but misreading them, or simply being unaware that they exist, can be seriously misleading.

Chard's original plan of the battle – his original 'original' – was drawn in pencil with some colour highlights (the defensive lines marked in red, the mealie-bag barricades in yellow and the bush in green), and it was attached to his handwritten which was forwarded by Col Hassard R.E. to the Inspector General of Fortifications at the War Office 12th Feb 1879. This map was the basis of a published version which appeared in the *Royal Engineers Journal* on 1 April 1879, and of at least two lithographed versions, one published by the Intelligence Branch of the Quarter-Master General's Department, dated 1879 (and reproduced in Atkinson's *History of the South Wales Borderers*, 1937) and the other by the Intelligence Department of the War Office, dated March 1881, and published in the official *Narrative of Field Operations*. All the published versions bear a facsimile of Chard's signature, suggesting that he had, at the very least, 'signed them off'. Whilst these two maps are essentially the same there are small difference between these and the *Royal Engineers' Journal* version which appears to be more closely based on Chard's original hand-drawn maps.

In addition to his original report map Chard later produced a series of five hand-written maps (and one panoramic sketch) to accompany a more detailed account of the battle written at Queen Victoria's request. These were not published until the 1970s (firstly in Norman Holme's *The Silver Wreath*, 1979, and subsequently elsewhere) and not only provide – as might be expected – extra information, including a step-by-step representation of the movements of the protagonists, but also useful corroboration when trying to determine where the anomalies lie. The Queen Victoria maps introduce the position of the Engineers' wagon, for example, which is missing from the published official maps, and show the development from two piles of mealie bags in front of the storehouse to the final redoubt.

It is worth noting that Chard's maps are essentially the only maps produced by a qualified participant in the battle; although other participants wrote in later years about the battle, and their publications sometimes included maps, these were not drawn at the time and most are heavily influenced by Chard's maps. Lord Chelmsford's ADC, Lt. A.B. Milne, included a sketch of the post in his summary of the iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift campaigns (see his *Report on Proceedings* for 21st to 24th Jan 1879 ADM1/6486) but this lacks details and proportion, and merely blocks in the relative positions of the buildings and terrain features. Chard's maps are effectively a single source, with no alternatives produced independently by other credible witnesses against which to test their veracity.

So what are the anomalies in Chard's maps, and do they have any significance?

The differences are undeniably small – but that does not make them insignificant.

Perhaps the most obvious differences lie in the presence of an extra line of mealie-bag barricades in front of the hospital. James Rorke's house was built, of course, on the edge of a flat shelf which dropped down about six feet directly in front of his buildings. Rorke presumably chose the spot because, with Shiyane hill behind him, it afforded a good view of the open country to his front, upstream along the Mzinyathi river, and of the line of the Biggarsberg heights; in the evening, he could sit on his veranda and watch the sun go down over a spectacular stretch of Natal countryside. By January 1879 Rorke was dead and his house was owned by the Reverend Otto Witt of the Swedish Mission Society who had leased it to the British Government for the duration of the war – and his house, of course, had been converted into a base hospital for Lord Chelmsford's No. 3 Centre Column. Despite recommendations that it should be fortified, no efforts had been undertaken before 22 January, and when the news broke of the disaster at iSandlwana Lt Chard – the Engineer – had been quick to see the advantages of this rocky ledge, and had run his main line of barricades along the top of it. The barricades were about three feet high, but topping a natural drop as much as six feet high in places they provided a formidable barrier against any attacking Zulus who would, in effect, be facing a barrier some nine feet high.

Yet the ledge across the front of the post was not even, and indeed a careful look at Chard's original hand-written report map suggests that the ground sloped away in front of the hospital for a few yards before ending in a lower ledge. Today, there is no exposed ledge directly in front of the hospital area, but rather a slope which extends almost all the way to the front of the veranda of the present Museum building; it seems likely, however, that this area has been landscaped at some point since the battle, probably when Otto Witt returned to his property and rebuilt his house in the early 1880s. It is even possible that some of the rubble from the old hospital building was used to smooth over any exposed lengths of the rocky ledge. Chard's maps are generally consistent, however, in showing that, although the ground bulged forward and sloped down directly in front of the hospital, this feature did

nonetheless end in an exposed ledge of some sort, although probably significantly lower than the drop elsewhere along the front of the post.

This must have presented a challenge to the defenders when fortifying the post. It was easy enough to build a barricade along the exposed length of the ledge but in front of the hospital the ground did not fit the needs of military defence so neatly - to continue running the barricade along the top of the ledge would mean a forward bulge in the line. There might have been some advantages to this – such a bulge would offer something of a *caponier*, a defensive feature which protruded from a line of fortifications to allow fire sideways down the outside length of that line, and one with which Chard, the professional Engineer, would have been familiar with. Yet there were greater disadvantages – because of the sloping ground, the defenders behind would have been higher than the level of the barricade (rather than on the flat behind it, as elsewhere) and if they stood up during the fighting they would be greatly exposed. Such a bulge would also have allowed the Zulus to curve their attacks around it, to make greater use of their numbers, and perhaps even enfilade the line.

Perhaps this is why Chard's original sketch, and those he produced for Queen Victoria, show only a scattering of mealie-bags along this forward line, rather than a fully-defensible barricade. Perhaps Chard had directed the barricade to be built there – and realised, as the outline was traced, that it was impractical and vulnerable. It's also possible, since Assistant Commissary W. Dunne noted that the barricades were scarcely complete, particularly in front of the hospital, when the battle began, that Chard realised there was no time to construct such a forward barricade properly. Instead he perhaps ordered the work to be abandoned and a new barricade to be built a few feet further back, closer to the hospital veranda. This barricade was certainly more practical, enclosing the minimum amount of ground necessary to secure the veranda, allowing the defenders to fight on level ground, and forcing the Zulus to clamber up over the low ledge and sloping approach before reaching it.

It is significant that in both his original hand-drawn report and the maps for Queen Victoria that the forward barricade is lightly represented, with no suggestion that it was complete; in all of these sketches Chard represents the barricade closer to the veranda as the only feature actually defended by the garrison. Even so, this of course remained the weakest spot in the defences since the ledge was not high enough to break the momentum of the Zulu attacks and they were able to mass in the cover of the outlying garden before launching attacks which rushed right up to the defended barricade. Several times they over-ran the barricade and were driven out at bayonet point until Chard was finally forced to abandon the hospital front and fall back to an improvised dog-leg barricade at the hospital corner.

Yet this nuance is lost in the officially published maps of the battle. Only the version which appeared in the *Royal Engineer Journal*, and which most closely follows Chard's first sketch, shows just a single line of defended barricade in front of the hospital. In both the 1879 and 1881 lithographed maps Chard's sketchy forward barricade has not been ignored – as the Engineer Journal did, and as perhaps it should have been – but rather enhanced. Both maps show two rows of barricades in front of the hospital, with the bulging forward one – which Chard's originals suggest was no more than a few scattered bags – now represented as a fully-fledged line of defence. Had this barricade existed as such, it might have had a significant impact on the course of the battle, for good or ill; however the written accounts accompanying these official lithographed maps do not amend the narrative in any way to take account of it, leaving its presence rather bewildering.

In fact it seems that the exaggeration of this line was simply an error. No doubt the lithographers struggled to make sense of Chard's sketchy representations – is that a barricade or not? – and decided it better to include it rather than leave it out.

In doing so they have confused students of the battle for 140 years since it is these published official maps – rather than Chard's original or the *Royal Engineer Journal's* more faithful copy – which have been the most widely reproduced. Quite why Chard's signature validates these maps remains a mystery, although it may well be that it was simply too difficult and expensive to amend them by the time they were sent to him for approval.

There is another smaller, but equally significant, anomaly, this time regarding Chard's representation of the hospital interior. This was famously haphazard, of course, largely it seems because after James Rorke's death his widow sold the property in 1874 to two settler families, the Surtees and the Stockils; although the two families only remained at the property for four years, selling it to the Swedish Mission, they had in that time altered the interior layout of the house (the later hospital), blocking up some of the interior doors so as to allow each family a greater degree of privacy. At the time of the battle in 1879, there was no interconnecting corridor running through the rooms, and it was necessary to go outside from some rooms in order to get into others.

This of course is significant because the room-to-room fighting during the battle was such a feature of the defence and it has prompted generations of historians to try to work out definitively which defender was in which room, despite the fact that most of those who took part are understandably confused on the subject, often referring to nothing more specific than the size of the room, or whether it faced front or back.

Almost all attempts to reconstruct this aspect have relied entirely upon the plan published in the lithographed maps of the battle. Yet here too these are not entirely consistent with Chard's hand-drawn versions.

True, the basic layout remains the same – two large and one small room at the front of the building, overlooking the veranda, and several smaller rooms at either side and along the back. The lithographed versions helpfully add in the position of the doors and windows.

Even at a quick glance, there are some oddities in the lithographed versions; the front room in the right-hand wing of the house appears to have neither doors nor windows, while one of the interior rooms appears to have a spurious rear wall. These anomalies become more apparent, however, when compared to Chard's original plan, and to the RE journal version, which closely follows it. Here the extra internal wall disappears whilst the enclosed front room is shown to have – as might reasonably have been expected – a door opening onto the veranda.

Yet there is one more – and much more significant – difference; one of the internal doors has disappeared somewhere between Chard's report and the War Department versions. In Chard's original sketches both of the large front rooms appear to have doors leading through to the back rooms' but in the official published version only one (on the right, looking from the front) does so. The point is important because the presence or lack of that door would have affected the movement of both defenders and attackers through the building, channelling the flow of the battle.

So, again, why the difference? Probably, as with the extra barricade, a simple transcription error in the mapping process. And yet it is worth asking the question – just how reliable are Chard's maps in the first place?

Because Chard was a trained Engineer and in command of the post his credentials appear impeccable, yet in fact he only arrived at Rorke's Drift on 17th January, and it is not clear how much time he had spent at the mission before the battle. Certainly his own duties were specific, and were related to the repair of the pont across the Mzinyathi river, which was showing signs of strain from the heavy traffic since the invasion began on the 11th. Chard erected his own tent by the river, and whilst it is quite likely that he visited the detachments at the mission out of courtesy to their officers there is no evidence to suggest he had spent much time there before the 22nd, and he certainly had no responsibilities there prior to the battle. Perhaps Surgeon Reynolds might have invited him to tour the hospital, although a cramped, airless building full of sick and feverish men would hardly have been appealing – and if he did, there is no evidence on the point. Certainly, in his report, Chard states that he had instructed the defenders before the battle to make a free passage between the rooms, and he regretted that they had not done so before the battle had begun – a point which suggests he was aware of the building's defensive limitations. Even if he had inspected it himself, however, rather than take this point on the word of those who knew it better, a few minutes hastily observing on the eve of battle might not have been enough to fix the complexities of its internal geography firmly in his mind.

When called upon to provide a detailed map after the battle, then, Chard would have had to work from its remains; during the battle it had not only been gutted by fire but the surviving walls quickly pulled down after the fighting so as not to provide potential cover in the event of renewed fighting. The lines of the outside stone walls would have been obvious enough, and perhaps the footing of the mud-brick internal walls but anything in the way of doors and window-frames were likely to have been destroyed completely. Chard would then have had to map the building, in detail, from its smashed and obscured shell.

It is possible, of course, that he took advice from Reynolds or others who might have remembered the interior well; it is equally possible that he plotted it as best he could under the difficult circumstances and, with no thought to the way future historians would pore over the results for nearly a century and a half, allowed himself the odd 'best guess', knowing that what mattered to his superiors was a speedy report, accurate in the best details – but that the exact position of a door or window to within a few feet was probably of little concern.

All of which only matters in one respect; if our understanding of the fight within the hospital, of which defender stood where, of who entered or escaped through which room, is based solely upon the various versions of Chard's maps, it is based upon more shaky foundations than we have previously thought, and all such attempts to reconstruct the fighting within in detail are built distinctly upon shifting sands.

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Editor's note; Ian Knight is currently working on a new detailed history of the battle of Rorke's Drift.