

Among the many items housed at the Royal Engineers Museum at Chatham is a collection of items that have become known as the Durnford Papers. Among them are letters, maps and accounts all relating to Isandlwana and Colonel Anthony Durnford's role in the battle. Also there is a bundle of orders belonging to Durnford which were found by Trooper A. Pearse, Natal Carbineers, at Isandlwana and deposited in the Museum in the late 1880s. But what happened to the rest of the orders belonging to the late Colonel? We know Durnford received at least two other more important orders. The first was sent by Lord Chelmsford and the second by Colonel John Crealock.

Here is the first missing order.

Dear Durnford,

Unless you carry out the instructions I give you, it will be my unpleasant duty to remove you from your command, and to substitute another officer for the commander of No. 2 Column. When a column is acting SEPARATELY in an enemy's country I am quite ready to give its commander every latitude, and would certainly expect him to disobey any orders he might receive from me, if information which he obtained showed that it would be injurious to the interests of the column under his command. Your neglecting to obey my instructions in the present instance has no excuse. You have simply received information in a letter from Bishop Schroeder, which may or may not be true and which you have no means of verifying. If movements ordered are to be delayed because report hints at a chance of an invasion of Natal, it will be impossible for me to carry out my plan of campaign. I trust you will understand this plain speaking and not give me any further occasion to write in a style, which is distasteful to me.

This letter was received by Durnford on 14 January. Durnford, acting on his own initiative on information he received from local spies, had taken his column down from their encampment on the hills above the Thukela to the river in anticipation of a rumoured Zulu attack. Chelmsford, surprised and angered by this move, sent Durnford the above order.

The second and most important order received by Durnford on the morning of 22 January states,

You are to march to this Camp at once with all the force you have with you of No 2 column – Major Bengough battalion is to move to Rorke's Drift – as ordered yesterday.

2/24: artillery & mounted men with the General I Colonel Glyn move off at once to attack a Zulu force about 10 miles distant.

If Bengough battalion has crossed the River at Hands Kraal it is to move up here (Naugwane valley)

This order was written by Colonel John Crealock and then copied into his order book. It was taken to Durnford at Rorke's Drift by Lieutenant Smith-Dorrian.

Durnford moved his column to the camp at Isandlwana at 10:30 am. The camp was under the command of Colonel Henry Pulleine; Pulleine had orders to defend the camp. At around 11:30 Durnford left the camp to stop the Zulus from cutting off Lord Chelmsford's force. His men ran headlong into the advancing Zulu Army. In less than two hours after it was discovered, the Camp at Isandlwana was destroyed and over 1,500 men, including Durnford, were killed.

In the immediate aftermath of the defeat, Crealock claimed to have ordered Durnford to 'Take Command of the camp'. As the new camp commander, Durnford inherited the orders to defend the camp. When at 11:45 Durnford left (Chelmsford claimed) he was disobeying orders and weakening the garrison. Had the orders been followed then there would have been no disaster, claimed Chelmsford. As Lord Chelmsford would say in his speech in Parliament about the camp at Isandlwana

In the final analysis it was Durnford's disregard of orders that brought about its destruction.

The orders in question therefore should still have been on Durnford's person. A pocket knife was later found in his pockets, a treasure to any warrior, clear evidence that Durnford's body had remained untouched since death, apart from the removal of his watch on the morning of the 23rd by Dr Thrupp. Let us now view an account from a Mr. Forbes, who was present with the burial details in May.

In a patch of long grass, near the right flank of the camp, lay Durnford's body, the long moustache still clinging to the withered skin of the face. Captain Shepstone recognized him at once, and identified him yet farther by rings on the finger and a knife with the name on it in the pocket, which relics were brought away. Durnford had died hard-a central figure of a knot of brave men who had fought it out around their chief to the bitter end. A stalwart Zulu covered by his shield lay at the Colonel's feet. Around him almost in a ring lay about dozen dead men, half being Natal Carbineers, riddled by assegai stabs. These gallant fellows were easily identified by their comrades who accompanied the column. Poor Lieutenant Scott was hardly at all decayed. Clearly they had rallied round Durnford in a last despairing attempt to cover the flank of the camp, and stood fast from choice when they might have essayed to fly for their horses.

What then happened to the orders?

What was not mentioned by the author of that piece, and perhaps not witnessed, was Captain Shepstone removing a packet of papers from Durnford's coat.

Evidence

The following week the *Natal Witness* published the following statement.

Once the papers and maps found on Durnford's person had been removed, a pile of stones was heaped over the body.

The *Natal Witness* had received its information from a telegram from a Mr Alfred Davis. Davis had been at Rorke's Drift when he had heard about the mission to bury the dead. He had borrowed the uniform of a sick trooper and accompanied the column. He found his brother's body at the same place as Durnford's and taken from his brother's pockets a letter from his sister showing how little the remains had been touched. Davis had then ridden to Ladysmith where he gave over the information to a friend who in turn sent the telegram to the *Natal Witness*.

When Durnford's close friend, Francis Colenso, (or Nell as she liked to be called), saw this, she took it and showed Captain Shepstone. Shepstone denied finding papers saying that had there been any they would have gone down to her along with the knife and the rings. Francis believed him and the matter was dropped. However the day after the burial, Surgeon Longhurst of the King's Dragoon Guards described the burial of Durnford's body, and the fact that as well as the two rings and a knife, 'A Letter' had been removed from the body.

Anthony's brother, Edward, heard of this and wrote to Francis Colenso to make further enquiries'. When Francis challenged Shepstone that Longhurst had seen him remove papers, Shepstone replied;

Longhurst's statement, as regards papers, is a deliberate untruth. I took no papers of any kind from Col. Durnford's body, nor were any taken in my presence.

Shepstone added that he couldn't have taken any papers, because there was no coat on the body, therefore, no where to store them. In another letter to Durnford's brother, Longhurst wrote

I am confident that he had on a blue coat.

He also added that

Captain Shepstone searched the body, and I saw him distinctly take from it two finger rings, a pocket knife engraved with your brother's name on the metallic handle, also a packet of letters from his coat pocket.

Not just Longhurst but members of Durnford's force remembered him wearing a coat that day. A separate witness who helped rebury Durnford's body in October confirmed that he was wearing a coat.

What were Shepstone's motives for taking the papers?

Captain Shepstone was the officer commanding the Natal Carbineers. Perhaps he had never forgiven Durnford for accusing his regiment of cowardice at the Bushman's River Pass incident. Or perhaps he blamed Durnford for the death of his brother George. Far more likely was that Shepstone was looking for promotion or a bribe from Lord Chelmsford. The packet that Shepstone took almost certainly contained the quickly-

scribbled order from Colonel Crealock on the morning of the 22nd of January. Had such a document fallen into the hands of Durnford's supporters, such as his friend Francis or his brother Edward, then Chelmsford's claim that Durnford disobeyed a direct order to 'Take Command of the Camp' at Isandlwana prior to the battle, and that this was the chief reason for the defeat would have been proved to be a lie. Lord Chelmsford had the most to lose; it seems highly unlikely he wouldn't have played a direct part in the documents destruction or concealment.

Shepstone attempted to cover his tracks. He removed and destroyed from the file of the *Natal Witness* the issue from the 22 May and again when it was printed in June, the telegram about papers and maps being removed from Durnford's body.

When Nell Colenso viewed the file she was told that Shepstone had borrowed it to look up something from the Zulu war. She saw that both issues of the telegram had been removed from the file, apparently with a knife.

In 1885, Colonel Laurd heard a rumour that Durnford's orders had been stolen from his body. He wrote his fears in the *Natal Witness*. He received a reply to the effect that Papers and Maps had been removed prior to burial, he could find nothing more. On the 22 January of that year he wrote a very detailed letter to Sir Andrew Clarke of the Royal Engineers, with all he knew. The result was that Shepstone was forced to attend a Court of Enquiry. Several of Laurd's best witnesses were refused leave from the army, and the case against Shepstone crumbled. There the matter has rested.

Found on the field of Isandlwana on the 21st of May, by Trooper A. Pearse Natal Carbineers and Surgeon Charles Gubbins was Durnford's portmanteau. Both men took papers from it. Francis, on Edward Durnford's behalf placed an advertisement in the *Natal Witness* about papers relating to Colonel Durnford. Gubbins sent his papers directly to Francis. Harriett Colenso wrote that,

Gubbins's parcel contained nothing bearing on the events of that day at Isandlwana.

What could Gubbins's papers have been?

Most likely the papers that Gubbins's had found were private letters from Francis to Durnford. It was clear that Francis was in love with him, but Durnford was unavailable for marriage. His wife had left him more than 10 years earlier and a divorce was not the 'done thing' in the Victorian Army. Whether or not they consummated a relationship is not known. These papers were certainly not important as they would have been sent to the RE Museum as we will see later.

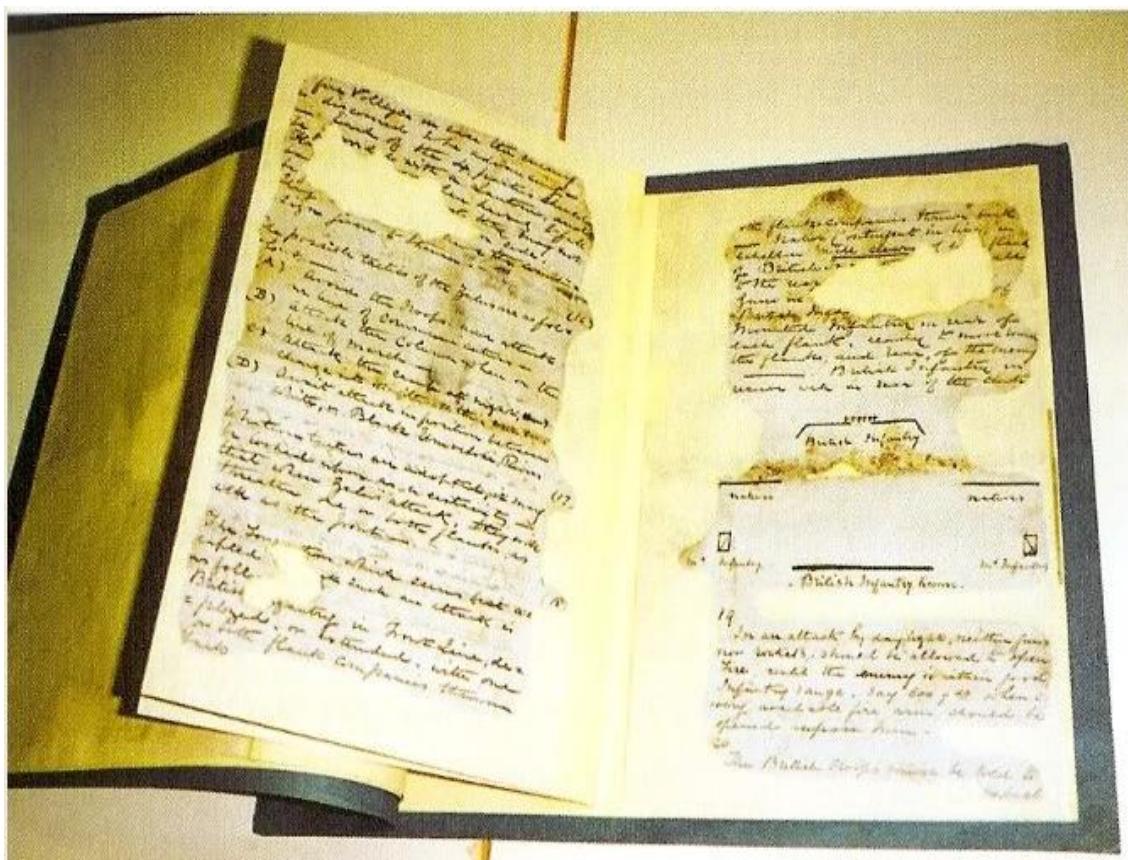
Pearse's find

The most important find came from Trooper Pearse. What he had taken away was two documents. The first was Lord Chelmsford's order dated 19 January. This order makes it clear that Durnford's column was to co-operate with No. 3 column, not as part of it. It can

also be safe to assume that given this order and not receiving a specific order on the morning of the 22 January, that there was no reason for Durnford to think he was supposed to take command at Isandlwana.

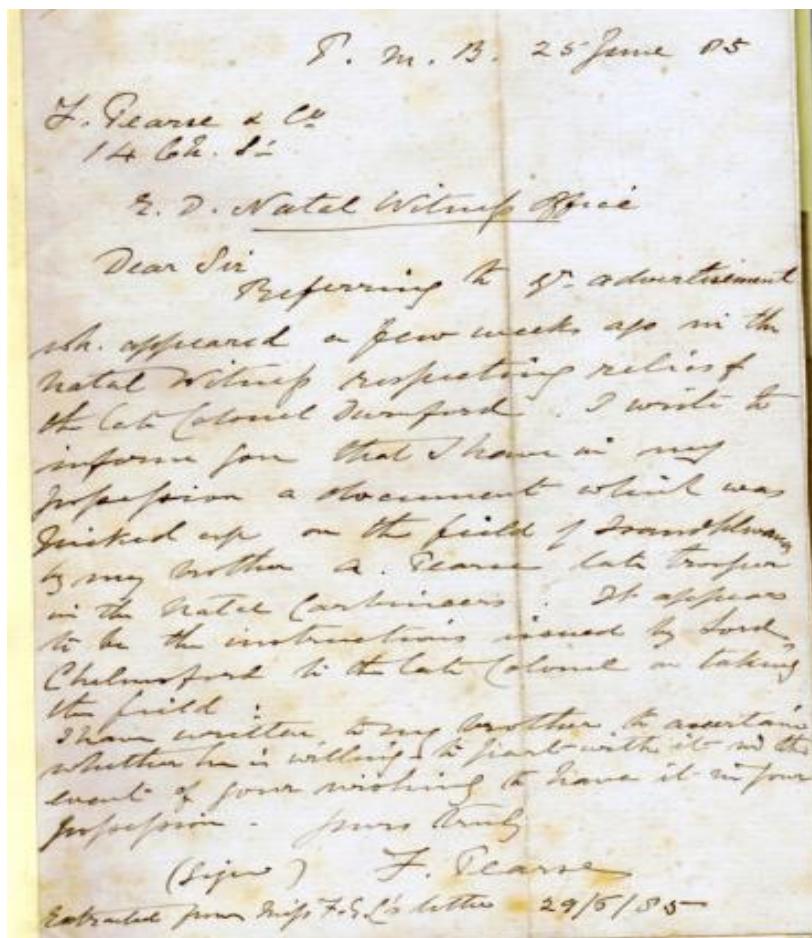
The second set found was a document called 'Orders to Column Commanders'. These orders solve the question of why Colonel Pulleine deployed his men so far from the camp. Until their discovery, there had been no mention of them. Most unsurprisingly, Lord Chelmsford never mentioned them; they would have vindicated Pulleine of the blame of having his men so far from the camp, and thus allowing the Zulus to out-flank and surround the position.

These are pages 4 and 5 of the Document found by Trooper Pearse.



Pearse's brother sent the following letter to the Editor of the *Natal Witness* in June 1885.

F. Pearse's letter to the editor of the Natal Witness.



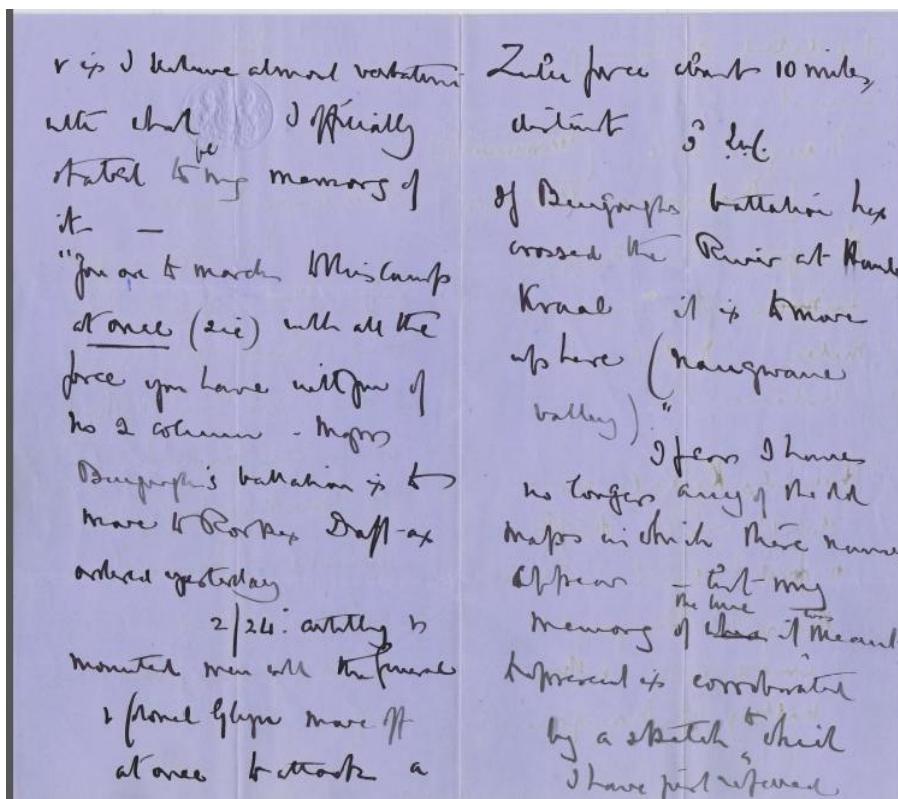
Dear Sir,

Referring to yr. Advertisement wh. Appeared a few weeks ago in the Natal Witness respecting relics of the late Colonel Durnford. I write to inform you that I have in my possession a document which was picked up by my brother A. Pearse late trooper in the Natal Carbineers. It appears to be the instructions issued by Lord Chelmsford to the late Colonel on taking the field. I have written to my brother to ascertain whether he is willing to part with it in the event of your wishing to have it in your possession.

None of these orders could be opened or read in 1885. The papers had been on the field from the 22 January to the 21 May. They were stuck together with rain, blood and where folded up inside a partially rotted envelope. It seems most likely that the papers

were then passed on to Francis Colenso who placed them inside Durnford's trunk and forwarded them to the RE Museum. The trunk arrived in 1886. They lay undiscovered in their archives until 1955 when David Jackson came across them; it was not for over 30 years before they could be safely opened.

Back in 1879, Durnford was never cleared of disobeying orders to take command at Isandlwana. Even though the order was copied in to Colonel Crealock's notebook which was later recovered from Isandlwana in June. The book was given to Crealock who kept it quiet. That is until 1886 when he replied to a Major Jekyl at the War Office by stating the exact wording of the order he had given. There was no mention of taking command, but this information was kept secret at the time, and has only recently been discovered.



Page 2 of Colonel Crealock's letter.

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(Naugwane valley)

I am grateful to Adrian Greaves and Julian Whybra for helping me with my many questions on this subject and to Amy Adams at the RE Museum for sending me photos of the Durnford papers.

Sources used.

RE Museum at Chatham, Durnford Papers

Soldier of the Queen issue 60 March 1990 by Jackson and Whybra

Anglo Zulu War Historical Society

Zulu by Saul David

Zulu Victory by Ron Lock and Peter Quantrill

Isandlwana by Adrian Greaves

Archibald Forbes of *The Daily News*.

Letters from Longhurst to Edward Durnford

Letter from Mr Statham to Francis Colenso, 6 Mar. 1883.

Colenso Papers KZN

Letters from Captain Shepstone to Francis Colenso

A separate witness, D.B Scott to Edward Durnford, 20 Aug. 1882

Letters from Harriet Colenso

Letters from Charles Gubbins