

The late David Smith's Collection of Zulu Artefacts for Auction

By Ian Knight

My conversations with David Smith usually went along familiar lines. They were usually prefaced with a rumour on the grapevine that there was some interesting Zulu artefact new on the market, a nicely carved status-stick, perhaps, or a particularly fine necklace. Having an occasional interest in collecting myself, I'd make some inquiries, find out what it was and who was offering it, only to find that usually, by that time, it had been sold elsewhere. The antiques trade is remarkably discreet when it comes to revealing a client's identity, so for a while I would have no clue where it went. Then, a week or two later, I'd get the inevitable email or a call from David - 'Hello Ian, guess what I've just got ...'

David, a former Royal Marine, was certainly a most assiduous collector. I'm not sure when he began, but his interests were varied and his collection was already huge by the time I met him. He had a genuine passion for the history of the Anglo-Zulu War, but more than that he had an interest in the peoples of southern Africa and their art and material culture. Every so often we would meet to talk about his latest finds, and he was as enthusiastic talking over something pertaining to the finer points of the battle of iSandlwana as he was extolling the virtues of a beautifully wire-bound Shona knife from Zimbabwe. Although he had acquired some of his finest pieces at public auction, he had secured much of it, often with the help of his partner Roberta 'Bobbie' Welham, from a network of contacts among the dealers in London's Portobello Road. Some of his pieces were of such international distinction that he was invited to loan them to an exhibition of Southern African art staged in South Korea. Although he was always happy to discuss his latest finds, it's fair to say that I only began to understand the full extent of his collection after he sadly passed away, and Bobbie was left with the question of what best to do with it. For a while she loaned in to the *AZWHS*, who at least had the facilities to store it, and it subsequently formed the basis of a number of *AZWHS* events.

Yet the collection had no permanent home, and between exhibitions it had been stored in a secure lock-up, out of public view, and so earlier this year Bobbie decided that the most fitting way to remember David's legacy was to make his collection available to other collectors. After some discussion it was decided to offer it to the well-known specialist militaria auction house, Wallis and Wallis in Lewes, to sell, and Bobbie invited me to advise them on cataloguing it. Although I had seen it on display in the *AZWHS* exhibitions, seeing it laid out ready for collection by Wallis' did make cataloguing seem a hugely daunting task. The carved sticks and *amawisa* - knobkerries - alone covered one entire table, and then there were spears, shields, powder-horns, beadwork, and dozens of different snuff containers. I had never been asked to give an opinion on so large a collection before, and I wondered how on earth I might avoid that old auctioneers' cataloguing cliché, 'Lot so-and-so - Another, similar!'

In fact, once the collection was safely housed at Wallis' offices, the first task was to group it together by type - by necklaces, shields, sticks, spears and so on. Then it was simply a question of working through them, singling out the more obviously special items as individual lots, and then grouping the more common or - terrible word! - ordinary ones together in a bundle of several per lot. Some gems immediately stood out, including a number of fine Zulu and Xhosa necklaces made from claws or teeth interspersed with beads, and a very fine heavily beaded apron in the characteristic style of the Ndebele people of the old Transvaal. It took me more than a day to catalogue the sticks alone, many of which were Zulu 'status sticks', staffs carried by men of rank and influence. These included one long staff with carved blade and projections very similar to examples looted by the British from the homestead of *inkosi* Sihayo kaXongo at the beginning of the Anglo-Zulu War and now in the Regimental Museum in Brecon. Like them, it was probably a trophy brought back to the UK by a British soldier. Dark-wood staffs decorated with entwining snakes around the length of them were a popular motif among high-ranking Zulu men, including King Cetshwayo himself, the snakes representing the protection of the ancestral spirits, the *amadlozi*; David's

collection included not one but several, each - since they were all individually made - with the snakes represented in different ways. There are dozens of *amawisa*, the heavy rounded-headed clubs the Afrikaners, and the British after them, called knobkerries. At least one, beautifully worked and decorated with wire binding, has so large a head that it appears to be a type described in South African collections as an executioner's weapon - and certainly it doesn't take much to imagine how effective it might be! Some are magnificently finished whilst others are rough affairs for every-day protection, and some have the shaped heads which suggest they are of Xhosa or Swazi origin, rather than Zulu. Much the same is true of the collection's selection of spears which vary from beautifully crafted, finely bound stabbing spears to more ordinary throwing spears. One pair of stabbing spears, probably Swazi, have similar carvings at the butt, and are bound with the most exquisite wire-work. And along the way there are some surprises - one item, which appears to be a rather crude wood and cheap metal representation of a gun, actually 'breaks' to reveal a concealed knife-blade!

Some of the items are clearly of historical importance. Among the Zulu and Swazi shields is one which is clearly an *umbhumbhulozu*, a Zulu regimental pattern dating to the 1879 war, whilst one of the spears has the legend 'Ulundi 1879' carved into the haft, presumably by the triumphant British soldier who had just liberated it. A group of several light Xhosa throwing spears, which clearly belong together, include one with the inscription 'King Williams Town 1877', thereby linking them to the Ninth Cape Frontier War (1877-78). There are a number of axes, including several with the half-moon blades of Shona design, and which are widely held to typify the shape of the weapon across southern Africa.

Along the way there are items belonging to *izangoma* - spirit diviners - including hollow animal horns, stopped up at the end, which were once used to carry ground medicines, and collections of bones and charms. There are wooden head-rests, Bushman weapons, Masai gourds, a fine Shona knife, boxes of stunning Zulu and Xhosa beadwork., and carvings from elsewhere in Africa.

All in all David's collection is likely to be the biggest of its type offered for sale for many a year, and whilst the prize pieces are expected to command high prices, the sheer volume of material is likely to mean that there will be plenty of bargains available. At the time of writing Wallis and Wallis are hoping to stage a special sale on - and the choice is deliberate! - Wednesday 22 January 2014.

It took me over a week to work through the bulk of the collection cataloguing it - there are over 200 lots in all, many of them including more than one item - and such was its extraordinary variety that I managed to find something different to say about almost every lot. Then again, I haven't quite finished yet - there are still all the snuff containers to go! Zulu ones, Shona ones, round ones made from gourds, decorated with wire or beadwork, at least one linked together with wooden chains in the style particularly favoured by Zulu men - and all of them, in their way, as individual as the other items in this remarkable collection.

Roberta Welham with Adrian Greaves and Ian Knight of the AZWHS at one of the exhibitions of David's large collection of Zulu War artefacts.

