

Traces On The Pavements; Reflection on an Anglo-Zulu War Tour of London

By Ian Knight

One thing that always strikes me, on visiting one of the big Victorian cemeteries in London like Brompton, is just how quickly earthly renown fades. Space was in short supply in the great sprawling metropolis in the nineteenth century, and walking down the neat pathways that run between the cemetery blocks the graves seem to crowd against one another on either side, striving to stand out and be noticed in ways which often seem curious or downright bizarre to modern sensibilities. The people buried there had stature and influence in their day, and their families were confident enough that the achievements of their dear departed were sufficiently lasting to justify the expense of these impressive crypts and memorials to remember them. Yet it seems now that they were wrong; just a few generations later and, apart from the odd poet, artist or military hero who has left a wider trace on history, their names are forgotten, largely unnoticed by the modern life hurrying by. They are ignored by the joggers, locked by their headphones into a world of their own, by the office workers taking a short cut too or from work, and by the young mothers wrapped up in their children. In the midst of death we are in life, as it were, and perhaps that is how it should be, for attitudes change, and perhaps we see now that our individual legacies amount to rather more - or less - than the sum of these cold stones.

I was in Brompton cemetery with a group of people who had been on my Holts tours to the battlefields in South Africa, and we were looking for Lord Chelmsford's grave. One of the pleasures of leading tours to the historic sites in Zululand over the years is the gentle snowballing of new friends, of tour veterans who have kept in touch with me and each other, have attended talks and exhibitions together, and swapped stories with veterans of other tours. Most of this group were the 'Class of 2011', with a smattering of the 'Class of 2010', and from our conversations since had come the idea of an 'Anglo-Zulu War Tour of London'. And, whilst it was never going to be quite as impressive as standing in the shadow of iSandlwana hill, the idea is not as daft as it first sounds. Those who made their mark in Zululand in 1879 and survived went on to live out their lives at home or around the British Empire, whilst those who never came back have left a crop of memorials in parish churches across the country. Many of these are too scattered to fit into an overnight itinerary - the most we could all manage - but in London, the great hub of Empire, they are concentrated rather more than elsewhere.

It had been a while since I last called in on Lord Chelmsford, and I might have struggled to find him had not one of the group been there recently. He lies with his wife in the Thesiger family plot, and his tomb is perhaps more modest than one might expect, with none of the overblown military symbolism which characterises the graves of so many high-ranking Victorian soldiers, and is rather overshadowed by more imposing memorials nearby. And yet, as we chatted about his career after the defining events of 1879, and about his ultimate demise, we were all aware, I think, that Lord Chelmsford is still remembered and discussed today whilst those around him are not. Curiously, we noticed as we were about to leave that close by - and looking rather conspicuous with a smart newly-renovated cross - lies the grave of the doyen of Victorian war correspondents, William Howard Russell. Russell, of course, had made his reputation exposing the logistical horrors of the Crimean War in the 1850s - where Lord Chelmsford had served as a subaltern - and was nearing the end of his active career by 1879, but he had nonetheless added his considerable weight to the press criticism of Lord Chelmsford that had piled up by the end of the Zulu campaign - even in death, it seemed, he was keeping an eye on him.

There are a good many other military graves in Brompton cemetery, but I was keen to take my group to that of Joseph Farmer who, as a Lance-Corporal in the Army Hospital

Corps, had won the Victoria Cross at the battle of Majuba in February 1881. Majuba was the climactic battle of the Transvaal Revolt which marked the end of the period of British expansionism - of the policy of Confederation - which had also brought about the Anglo-Zulu War. Farmer had been present with the British force on top of Majuba hill when the Boers attacked. He had been tending the wounded at a casualty clearing station which had been established in a hollow in the centre of the summit. When the Boers over-ran the British perimeter, Farmer had stood up and waved a white bandage as a flag of truce, 'never dreaming', as he said afterwards, 'but that even a 'savage' foe would have respected such a signal'. But the Boers continued to fire on the hospital detachment, and Farmer was shot through his arm. 'But I've got another arm!', he said cheerfully, and took up the bandage with that, only to be shot again, this time through the elbow. He survived the battle - though it left him with 'little respect for the Boers gentleness, innocence, and natural simplicity ...[but] great respect for their accuracy as marksmen' - and his gallantry was recognised by the award of the VC. When he died in 1930 a slab of sandstone was cut from the summit of Majuba and shipped to England, and it now forms his headstone. Although rough-hewn - and certainly, on a bright English autumn evening, it seemed a long way from southern Africa - it is, in its way, more impressive than Lord Chelmsford's polished slab.

We could have stayed exploring Brompton cemetery for longer, but next on our schedule was Chiswick Old Cemetery, and the grave of one of the VC heroes of Rorke's Drift, Fred Hitch. Hitch - who had famously won the award for continuing to distribute ammunition to the defenders despite a terrible gun-shot injury which had smashed his shoulder - had worked as a cabbie in later life and his funeral in 1913 was a public event. Chiswick Old Cemetery is a bit of a hike, now, from the nearest tub-station, but Hitch's grave is well worth the effort. Raised by public subscription, his monument is a tall stone with the shape of the Union Flag carved into it, and on top a representation of a Foreign Service helmet. Sadly, because of the attention it has attracted, the grave has suffered a little from vandalism over the years - some of the bronze adornments have been stolen, whilst the original helmet first lost its replica bronze 24th Regiment shako plate and was then removed itself. The current helmet is a replacement.

From Hitch's grave we walked the short distance to 62 Cranbrook Road, the house where he was living when he died. This has now been marked with one of the famous 'blue plaques' from English Heritage which is in itself an interesting insight into our changing times. Thirty years ago I contacted the then-Greater London Council to inquire whether they would consider putting up plaques to commemorate personalities involved in the Anglo-Zulu War but was told that there was not believed to be sufficient public interest, and indeed that Victorian colonial wars were considered in any case to be problematic. It's a different body responsible for that decision now, of course, but it is interesting how mainstream interest in the Anglo-Zulu War has become in the meantime, and how more accepting we are of our colonial past.

The last call of the day was another blue plaque - this time in Melbury Road, in rather more up-market Kensington, on the house where King Cetshwayo stayed during his visit to London in August 1882. The king's visit was, of course, a major factor in his political rehabilitation after his defeat, and there was considerable public interest in his visit. Crowds gathered to see the man who had humiliated the British Army at iSandlwana, and instead of the scowling savage depicted in the down-market press at the time they saw a man of considerable presence and regal dignity, smartly turned out in European clothing. Although it was by this time getting dark, we stood on the pavement outside the house where crowds once gathered to cheer the king when he appeared on the balcony there. This blue plaque was only added in recent years, and is one of only two in London commemorating significant black figures, the other one being to the rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix. Interestingly, the house was already the recipient of another plaque - the Pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt had lived there for a while thirty years before it played host to the exiled Zulu king.

Melbury Road was our last stop of the day but we had scheduled a visit to Woolwich the following morning. Woolwich, of course, has a long association with the British Army and indeed was the base for the Royal Artillery from the early years of the nineteenth-century

until 2007. Although the old Royal Arsenal has been largely demolished - and what remains has been turned into rather smart flats - there is still a strong Army presence in the area including barracks and married quarters, and indeed it was here that Drummer Lee Rigby was so brutally murdered recently in the street. As we explored the area we couldn't help but be aware of squads of soldiers practising mortar and machine-gun drill on the open spaces on either side of Repository Road.

I was particularly keen to take the group to an impressive memorial to Royal Artillery participation in the Anglo-Zulu and 2nd Afghan Wars which once stood in Repository Road. A large stone slab bearing the names of the dead, it was decorated by bronze representations of Zulu and Afghan weapons on either side. Leading them to roughly the area where I remembered it, however, I was taken aback to find no trace of it. We asked some helpful soldiers at a guard-house nearby, and a quick phone call revealed nothing more than it had been moved!

The mystery was solved at our next, and final, port of call, the Royal Artillery Firepower museum, where the curator knew the story. Apparently, shortly after the RA moved their Headquarters and barracks to Larkhill, on Salisbury plain in 2007, they took the memorial with them! Bizarre as it seems to uproot what was obviously a very hefty object - and which had stood there for more than a century - it was perhaps a wise decision, given the sensitivities which conflict in Afghanistan now engender. Indeed, in its quiet way, the story perhaps underlines the fact that the conflicts of the nineteenth century have cast long shadows before them, and continue to influence events to this day.

Firepower is an excellent modern museum, purpose-built to house a large collection of guns of one sort or another which chart the history of British artillery from the earliest times until today. Of course the Anglo-Zulu War forms just a small part of that history, but the exhibits on display are fascinating nonetheless. There is a dark blue cloak belonging to Major Stuart Smith, the senior officer of N/5 Battery, killed at iSandlwana. The cloak was rolled and strapped to the back of Smith's horse, and whilst Smith was apparently riding his spare, a Sgt. Costellow RA escaped on Smith's horse. During his flight the Zulus flung spears and shot at Sgt. Costellow, and several of these struck Smith's cloak - the rips can still be seen in the fabric. There are also items which once belonged to the Prince Imperial - who had trained at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich, and held an honorary commission in the RA - and an impressive Zulu shield in the colours of the uThulwana ibutho, looted from the royal homestead at oNdini. There is also a 9 pdr RML gun of the type used in the later stages of the war (the guns at iSandlwana were 7 pdr barrels mounted on the same 9 pdr carriage).

Perhaps one of the most poignant spots connected with the war currently has no memorial to mark it, however. On the plaza outside the main entrance to Firepower, close to the dock on the Thames which flows alongside, are two small guard-houses. It was here that the Prince Imperial's body was landed on English soil after it was brought back following his death in Zululand on 1 June 1879. It was brought up the Thames and landed at the quay-side, and taken into Guardhouse No. 5 where the coffin was opened and the remains were formally identified by representatives of the Bonaparte family. The coffin was then sealed up again, and placed on a gun-carriage to be taken past lines of soldiers to a funeral at the Empress Eugenie's home at Camden Place, in Chislehurst. The Prince was initially laid to rest in the Catholic chapel there, but later Eugenie had a mausoleum built for the purpose at Farnborough Abbey in Hampshire, and both the Prince and his father, Napoleon III, were subsequently moved there.

A cold autumn wind had blown up by the time we had finished photographing the guard-house, and the sky was grey and overcast. As we drifted away, back to the tube to disperse to our modern lives, a sombre mood had settled over us. We knew that we had only touched upon a small part of this history still remembered in the UK, and I think we all had a feeling that, for all its cinematic colour and dash, for all the thousands of miles that separate London from Zululand and the 134 years that have passed by since, the Anglo-Zulu War was a war like any other, and that the web of loss and heartache spread half the way around the world, and was no less painful then than it is now.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 1). Lord Chelmsford's grave in Brompton Cemetery, London.
- 2). The grave of L/Cpl. Joseph Farmer VC.
- 3) At the grave of Fred Hitch VC.
- 4). Hitch's house in Cranbrook Road, Chiswick.
- 5). The Anglo-Zulu War cabinet in the Firepower Museum.
- 6). A 9 pdr RML gun at Firepower - the standard field gun of the 1870s.
- 7). No 5 Guardhouse, where the body of the Prince Imperial was formally identified following its return to the UK.