

## The curious case of Major General C.E. Luard J.P.

By Dr Adrian Greaves

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Members will remember the article from Journal Four, December 1998, entitled *Lt. Col. Durnford – An Investigation*

The article briefly investigated the actions of Colonel Luard who, following the Anglo-Zulu War was commanding officer Royal Engineers in Natal. Luard was certain that there had been a conspiracy, approved by Lord Chelmsford, to blame Colonel Durnford for the loss of the camp at Isandlwana.

In 1885, in an extraordinary twist of fate, Luard heard rumours of a ‘cover up’ involving the surreptitious removal of Chelmsford’s written orders to Durnford from his (Durnford’s) body. Luard cautiously advertised his fears in the *Natal Witness* newspaper and on the 25 June 1885 he received a remarkable reply confirming his fears with evidence of the removal and secretion of the Chelmsford orders from Durnford’s body by Captain Shepstone. Luard’s investigation implicated a number of officials and so he demanded a civil court case to investigate the matter. Luard wrote to Sir Andrew Clarke, head of the Corp of Royal Engineers.

Captain Shepstone is one whose connection with the case must be considered from an abstract point of view. I am only one of a vast number of people who would regard his conviction as a matter most sad in itself, but justice must take its course, &, if convicted he must take on his own head the full consequence of his crime. Something will at all events been done to show what means were adopted to ruin the reputation of as gallant a soldier as ever breathed.

I am

Dear Sir Andrew Clarke  
Yours vly truly  
C E Luard.

The result was that Shepstone eventually agreed to attend a new Court of Enquiry. The Acting High Commissioner in South Africa was quick to see the implications for Chelmsford and wrote to Luard before the Court convened at the end of April 1886,

I have taken measures to limit proceedings and to prevent, I trust, the possibility of other names, distinguished or otherwise, being dragged into it.

This action was clearly taken to keep Lord Chelmsford out of the enquiry. When the enquiry commenced, it was deliberately limited to the investigation of whether or not papers had been removed from Durnford’s body. Various important and critical witnesses were prevented from obtaining leave from the army or the civil authorities and, with no witnesses to cross-examine, and the Court’s blatant disregard of relevant evidence, Luard’s case crumbled. Shepstone was cleared and Luard was obliged to apologise to Shepstone. And there the matter finally rested except that Luard was, according to press reports, recalled to London for ‘political reasons’.

Moving on to August 1908, Luard was an affluent retired Major-General, 70 years of age living with his wife, aged 58 years, at Ightham Knoll, a fine country house in the village of Ightham Mote near Sevenoaks and just 14 miles from the county town of Maidstone in Kent. The couple were pillars of society, well regarded by all and Luard was a noted Justice of the Peace and an active member of the Kent County Council. They had two sons who had both been commissioned in the army. Although one had been killed in Somaliland in 1903, the other was a captain based at Pietermaritzburg. Their neighbours were Mr and Mrs Horace Wilkinson who owned a substantial property with a large wooded area which contained a nine-bedroom chalet building set among fir trees. The Wilkinsons and Luards had been neighbours for some 20 years and all were on good terms.

On the afternoon of 25 August Mrs Luard had gone for a walk with her husband but nearing their home, the general decided to visit the nearby golf club to collect his own set of clubs. Mrs Luard continued to walk home but for reasons unknown, deviated by taking a path which led her via the chalet. On arriving home the general was met by a lady, the wife of the Luards' solicitor, who had been invited by Mrs Luard for afternoon tea. Confused by the non-appearance of his wife, the general walked back to where he had left his wife. There being no trace of her he then walked the alternative route to the chalet in case his wife had fallen asleep there, which had happened before when she had been walking. On entering the chalet he discovered her battered and bloody body on the floor; she had also been shot twice in the head, her gloves had been removed and her fingers were mutilated where her three diamond rings had been removed. The police and the local doctor were called and the body was then removed to Ightham Knoll.

That night the local police, supported by extra officers from Maidstone, protected the chalet and the following morning the Chief Constable attended to oversee the investigation. The woods and chalet were searched but nothing of evidential value was found. Officers from Scotland Yard were immediately involved in the investigation and two bloodhounds, named Sceptre and Solferino, owned by a Major Richardson, were brought in to sniff out the route by which the killer had made his escape. However, the trail apparently went cold at the main road. The identity of the assailant was a mystery.

During the two days that followed some forty officers were employed to look for clues at the chalet and surrounding area and a number were also brought in to control onlookers and the press. At the same time a post mortem was conducted by two independent doctors who confirmed the cause of death as gunshots. At the coroner's inquest a few days later Major General Luard was questioned at length by the jury but was unable to throw any light on what had happened. The jury considered a verdict of suicide but no weapon was found and the doctors discounted the possibility. The final verdict was 'murder by person(s) unknown'. All accounts in the press indicate that the General was devastated by his wife's death and he received much sympathy from all quarters.

The initial inquest hearing into Mrs Luard's death was held at Ightham Knoll on 26 August 1908. Dr Mansfield, who had carried out the post-mortem examination of Mrs Luard, reported that she had initially been hit on the back of the head and that the blow had been of sufficient force to knock her to the ground, where she had vomited. Her killer had then shot her behind her right ear, with a second shot being fired into her left cheek.

Prior to the inquest Luard had been encouraged to write an account of the events of the afternoon of 25 August, about which he was questioned at some length. In describing his discovery of his wife's body he stated that,

I then examined her dress and found that it was torn. Her pocket at the back of the skirt had been torn open. One of her gloves, which was lying near, was inside out, as though it had been torn off. She had both gloves on when she left me. I then looked at her hands, and saw that her rings were missing. She wore all her rings on the left hand, and always wore them, except when she washed her hands. One of the rings was over a hundred years old. It was an heirloom given her by her mother. It was of an old design of mounting.

Luard volunteered that he owned three revolvers. However, he claimed to be unable to remember where he kept his ammunition. London gun expert Edwin Churchill stated that, after examining the two bullets, he had concluded that they had come from a .320 revolver, which had been fired when the gun was no more than a few inches away from Mrs Luard's head. He also said that none of Luard's own revolvers would have been capable of firing such bullets, since his guns were all of much smaller calibre.

The police hoped that the pocket that had been ripped off the dress would lead them to her murderer. However, it was found at Ightham Knoll, on the day before Mrs Luard's funeral, by a maid who was shaking out the sheet in which her body had been carried back to the house from the chalet. It was also hoped that the rings would be sold or pawned and so provide a trail to the murderer, but they were never seen again.

The inquest resumed a fortnight later at the *George & Dragon Inn* at Ightham. General Luard was again questioned and was asked by the coroner if he was aware of 'any incident in the life of the deceased or yourself which in your opinion would cause any person to entertain any feelings of revenge or jealousy towards either of you?' Luard replied 'No' and said that neither of them had ever received letters suggesting that there had been such an incident. He also denied the allegation that his wife had received a letter prior to her death from someone seeking to make an appointment with her. Since Mrs Luard's death, a whispering campaign had been under way that suggested that her husband was the murderer and that the theft of her rings was merely a device to throw the police off his track. Luard began to receive anonymous letters accusing him of the shooting. The volume of these letters and their vitriolic contents apparently persuaded him that he should leave the district and he advertised Ightham Knoll for sale and made arrangements to have the house contents prepared for auction. In the meantime he was aware that his son, having learnt of his mother's death, was returning from South Africa to be with him and would be arriving in Southampton on 18 September.

Luard was invited to stay with Colonel Charles Edward Warde, the local Member of Parliament and brother of the Chief Constable of Kent, Henry Warde. Colonel Warde collected him at the end of the inquest proceedings on 17 September and drove him to his home, Barham Court, near Watlington. The following morning Luard bathed and breakfasted, and then spent some time writing letters to his son and to Colonel Warde. He then walked to the railway line at Teston, hid in some bushes and jumped in front of the 9.09 train from Maidstone West to Tonbridge. He had pinned a note to his coat saying, 'Whoever finds me take me to Colonel Warde'.

On hearing of Luard's death, Colonel Warde went to Southampton and broke the news of his father's death to Captain Charles Luard in the cabin of the steamer on which he had just arrived.

Later it was determined that General Luard had committed 'suicide while temporarily insane'. A full account of the coroner's inquest can be found in the *Kent Messenger* dated 29 August 1908.