

Fieldwork report: Isandlwana 2000, (KwaZulu Natal, South Africa)
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Introduction:

The battle of Isandlwana on 22nd January 1879 is considered by many historians to be the worst defeat ever of the British army by a native force. Not only was it extremely rare for the British army to suffer any setback at this time, such a defeat was also considered as almost impossible and therefore ultimately embarrassing for the British empire, especially due to the very nature of the defeat by natives. The universal question asked was, “how could a trained and professional fighting force of some 1,400 men, armed with the ‘best’ weaponry available to the most powerful empire be annihilated by a tribal nation armed with spears and shields?”

The very nature of such a defeat, in which nearly all of those 1,400 soldiers were killed, has understandably captured the imagination of the public, from 1879 to the present. This is evident through the 1879 publications of *Punch* to the immense interest in films such as *ZULU* (1963) and *ZULU DAWN* (1979), as well as publications such as Donald Morris’s *Washing of the Spears* (1965) and the recent *Anglo Zulu War Historical Society* journals, to name but two written sources.

Therefore the very first archaeological investigation on the slopes of Isandlwana (August 14th –September 12th) is a momentous event, and as predicted, attracted much media attention, (all South African main newspapers and BBC radio 4) not to mention the competition ‘*Earthwatch*’ (the main fundraiser and organiser) for volunteers to take part in the project. As the principal investigator, Dr. Tony Pollard of Glasgow University implied, the nature of this investigation is dealing with events which were the very last moments of approximately 1,400 lives, as well as thousands of Zulu casualties, and is therefore not only topical, but also very sensitive. It was with this in mind that the archaeological investigation was initiated, not necessarily to revolutionise that which is known about the Anglo-Zulu war, but perhaps to shed light on events which are still not thoroughly understood.

Regarding battlefield archaeology as a whole, battlefields differ from other areas traditionally looked at by archaeologists in that where a house may indicate how, when and why someone lived, a battlefield often indicates how, when and why somebody died. Similarly, through the various approaches to the study of archaeology ranging from, for example, the cultural-historical approach to the post-processual, studies tend to look at congruence and co-operation such as the spread of agriculture or the building of the pyramids, and therefore the study of battle is a new dimension in the repertoire of archaeological investigation. The principal differences between history and archaeology are also highlighted in an investigation of this nature, as with many battles involving defeat, the defeated often covered their trail in order to protect their reputations. Such a cover-up is known to have occurred after Isandlwana, by the unprecedented awarding of 11 Victoria Crosses at nearby Rorke’s Drift, and the official re-drafting of original orders found at Isandlwana. Therefore the benefit of archaeology on this project is that it deals with artefacts which will hopefully speak for themselves.

The archaeological investigation of battlefields was pioneered in the United States, with the best-known work being that conducted at the battle site of Little Bighorn in 1984-85 (Scott et al. 1998). The use of Ballistics, GIS, EDM, physical anthropology, metal detecting and geophysics were all employed allowing a vivid picture of the unfolding battle to be created – procedures which, except for ballistic tests, were employed at Isandlwana. Thus, the aims of the project included:

- (1) To subject a variety of sites including battlefields, campsites and homesteads to a detailed topographic survey using EDM and surveying equipment in preparation for display on S.E.E. (Surveying and Engineering Environment – 1993) and LISCAD Plus. These are surveying programmes which process data to make a map. AutoCAD Lt is also employed as a computer-aided design which is more detailed than 3D mapping.
- (2) Where invasive investigation will enhance the research value of the survey work, limited archaeological excavation will be carried out.
- (3) The veracity of historical accounts of the battle will be tested, as well as providing both black and white perspectives on the battle, moving away from the traditional anglocentric representations of the battle.
- (4) The project will promote local interest in sites and include the collection of oral histories and folklore related to these sites. How do people living on and near these sites today view them and the past they relate to? This work will situate the past within the context of the present.
- (5) Investigation of Zulu homesteads will make a valuable contribution to the understanding of Zulu life and the social organisation in the 19th century, with a few such sites directly related to the period of the Anglo-Zulu war previously excavated.

- (6) Any archaeological evidence for earlier activity on the study site will also be subject to scrutiny, and through this way the project will make a valuable contribution to the understanding of the prehistory of the region.
- (7) In the longer run, an important product of the work will be a management plan which will facilitate the display and conservation of sites in the future, many of which are currently under threat from urban development, agriculture (cane growing) and road building.

Methods and Results:

The principal methods of investigation included field-walking, metal detecting in grids of 30m², excavation, surveying using EDM equipment, geophysics (resistivity and magnetometry), *in situ* forensic analysis of the cairn contents and planning of all items which were to be moved or disturbed. Unfortunately, within my 3-week attendance, I did not manage to complete all these aspects, although I did cover the vast majority. Because of the nature of the site, various procedures would not have been suitable such as widespread trenches due to the hardness of the South African soil or a full forensic analysis of the bones due to the permission granted by the South Africa heritage body, Amafa, which stipulated that bones were not to be removed from the site. The permission also stipulated that the only cairns allowed to be investigated were those threatened by erosion, such as those about to fall into an enlarging donga (watercourse).

Due to the nature of the site, e.g. the topography, vegetation cover or nature of event that was believed to have taken place there, it was necessary in the eyes of the principal investigator to subject certain areas to single methods. Another reason for this was the fact that there were only 4 weeks for the whole investigation to take place (for the year 2000). For example, the main camp area was subject to metal detecting, while the Zulu homesteads had a section excavated through them. What was common to the whole site was that it was initially analysed through both vertical and oblique aerial photography, to see if any features could be distinguished, such as the homesteads. Following this, geophysics were employed (magnetometry and resistivity) to test the homesteads. However, this was done largely in the summer of 1999, and therefore I was unfortunately not involved.

Area 1: Possible site of Royal Artillery guns and British front line.

This was the main area for metal detecting survey that I supervised from days 9-10 and then 13-21. The principal method involved marking out a grid 30m² in an area believed by the accompanying historian, Ian Knight, (who writes widely and authoritatively on the Anglo-Zulu war) to have had significance in the battle. In this case it was believed we would find the extent of the British firing line as well as the location of the artillery, so as to test extant theories on the location of both. The grids would then be divided into lines running parallel to each other at 2m intervals. The detector would then sweep a metre either side of the line, being guided by a person at one end of the line. A digger would then accompany the detector to excavate any finds. I undertook all of these tasks, as we generally rotated tasks within the group every 2 sweeps. If the item turned out to be rubbish, it was removed to behind the grid, yet if it was indeed something relating to any of the outlined aims, e.g. a Martini-Henry cartridge case, it would be flagged, later to be surveyed in using the EDM. If there was any uncertainty regarding the era or function of an item, it was flagged regardless, subject to analysis by the historians. The EDM measured its position relative to a known trig point, (which was a marker on the top of Isandlwana), measuring its height, triangulated position and distance from the measuring point. This was then entered onto the S.E.E. or LISCAD Plus programmes (which were the forerunners of G.I.S.).

The items found were then bagged simultaneously to the surveying, (the corner posts of the grids were also surveyed) so that they could be cross checked and then identified on the S.E.E. or LISDCAD Plus programmes, in order for the finds to be looked at contextually. A 'small find' number, grid number and project code were then added onto the bag, as well as a brief description to aid subsequent interpretation, (small finds indicated by a triangle, grids number in a square, the project being indicated by the code IS00). In order to achieve continuity, the grids were kept in line so that a cross-section of the firing line could be observed. Had a random grid method been employed, there would be no order, and consequently the results would not reveal the true extent of artefacts. Some 5 grids were completed under my supervision moving in an easterly direction, including one grid to the south in order to trace an estimated find. The results from area 1 were diverse, both regarding age and function, for example:

- (a) 1x chamber pot of the type used by 1879 British officers.
- (b) 3x Martini-Henry cartridge cases.
- (c) 1x modern 9mm bullet.
- (d) 1x .32 bullet.
- (e) 1x buckle from braces worn by soldiers.
- (f) 3x ammunition box straps
- (g) Approximately 50 nails of a variety of sizes (95% were bent at 90°)

- (h) 2x large plough pieces.
- (i) 1x enamelled mug of type used by 1879 British army.
- (j) 1x horseshoe
- (k) 1x large chain of approximately 1ft.
- (l) A large quantity of rusted iron of various dimensions of unknown age.
- (m) A large quantity of modern scrap metal including cans, tubing and domestic rubbish.

The aim of the grid that I was working in was to trace the firing line as well as the relative position of the artillery, which was employed to support the advanced line of infantry. Therefore the finds from these grids were extremely valuable in re-evaluating the current understanding of the front line's position. If one looks at area 1, it is clear to see that the cases were found in their highest concentration further forward than the firing line. However, the evidence of artillery such as the chain, horseshoe, (etc) could indicate that the believed position of the guns were in fact correct, i.e. able to command the dead ground to the east of Isandlwana. Yet perhaps one of the greatest contributions that the metal detector surveys did in area 1 was to destroy the myth of an ammunition shortage such as was portrayed in the film *ZULU DAWN* and in Donald Morris's *Washing of the Spear*. This was primarily achieved because of the quantity of ammunition box remains, ranging from box straps to foil handles and potential foil itself, located right up to where the new firing line position was found. This therefore substantiates the theory promoted by the *Anglo Zulu War Historical Society* that there was no shortage of ammunition, and it was the use of black powder cartridges which impaired visibility thus allowing the Zulus to advance upon the front line. It is however important to stress that this was only the first official and widespread archaeological investigation at Isandlwana and therefore these results are only preliminary, and firm conclusions can only really be sought at the end of the predicted 5 years of investigation when a more contextual picture can be viewed.

In addition to my finds, the other metal detecting group on the eastern slope of Isandlwana, (area 3) included some seven 1/24th regiment buttons in a row some 8cm apart which are believed to have been from a tunic which was discarded post battle as a Zulu trophy. The relevance of this find to area 1 is that it is known that the Zulus looted the battlefield immediately after the battle, and the tunics were of great interest. Therefore, within area 1 it is interesting to note the position of the chamber pot so far out on the firing line – maybe this was also a discarded trophy.

Area 2: Zulu *Umutzi* to front of camp.

This zone was where a Zulu *Umutzi* (homestead) was located. It was chosen out of the 3 that were in its vicinity (one either side at approximately 5m intervals) possibly because it was the central one and therefore could potentially include artefacts discarded from all 3. The purpose of excavating the *Umutzi* (which I participated in from days 4-8) was to ascertain whether it was pre- or post-battle, (it was known that some homesteads were there during the battle as they were shelled by the British because they sheltered the Zulu advance). Pre-excavation, the *Umutzi* was believed to be post-battle, but following the excavation, analysis of the site by the experts Ian Knight and Ian Castle, it was suggested that it might indeed be earlier. All 3 *Umutzis* were approximately 10m in diameter, and had a raised circumference of 30cm high and 30cm wide.

The method we employed was to cut a section some 30m by 1m on the N-S axis so as to reveal any structures, or artefacts that may shed light on its age. The main problem encountered was the hardness of the soil i.e. even a blow with a mattock was hardly sufficient to disturb the soil. Despite this, three holes were slowly made using trowels and the mattocks, as well as shovels and spades which, when some 1ft down (to the underlying bedrock), were knocked through to create a clean section. The spoil was also checked for finds. Two outer wall foundations were found, directly underlying the raised section, consisting of large local rocks laid side by side. Directly in the centre, a hearth floor was found which was made in the traditional Zulu manner of using dried cow dung, polished down to make a hard floor. This was reddish brown in appearance.

Finds were few and far between in this trench, but included a metal bolt and nut, as well as a metal ring, (not jewellery), as well as a few beads from jewellery. Interestingly, a child's plastic coat hanger and 2 plastic bags were also found at the *Umutzi's* base, therefore suggesting that the site may indeed be much younger than the battle. It was suggested by Ian Knight and other experts that the Zulus are very careful with their possessions and are likely to take all of them with them when they move *Umutzi*, therefore few artefacts would be expected. What is likely is that they moved from this *Umutzi* to one of the others, transferring the roof and all of their possessions. The trench was then surveyed in using the EDM, as were the relative positions of the artefacts to allow further analysis within a contextual framework. Regarding the excavation of this trench, it was, as I have mentioned earlier, only the first of many years of excavation and therefore really only towards the end of the programme can realistic conclusions be reached as to the *Umutzi's* function and era. However, at this preliminary stage I would emphasise the modernity of this particular *Umutzi*, although the difficulties we experienced with the hardness of soil may also have been an important feature in 1879 i.e. why the British did

not entrench themselves. This is however only speculation, and besides, the summer climate differs considerably from that of winter such as with rainfall level and resulting vegetation cover.

Area 3: Main British camp.

This area was very similar in practice to that of area 1 in that metal detector surveying was conducted. This covered most of an area that had over the previous week been burnt as part of the winter firebreaks in preparation of the summer's natural fires. Therefore the ground was clear of the tall grass that was proving to be a hindrance in the other areas such as area 4. The ground here was also a lot softer than that of area 1 and therefore the ground was quicker to cover than elsewhere, (normally 3 grids were completed in each area per day i.e. some 2700m²). The same grid organisation and procedure were completed, revealing a plethora of different finds when moving in an easterly direction. For example, numerous caches of nails (again bent at 90°), what is believed to be an entire ammunition box (including nails, straps and hinges - except for the wood, which would have decomposed), the metal remnants (i.e. buttons), of a 1/24th tunic as mentioned above as well as a number of Martini- Henry cartridge cases. Once again, a large quantity of discarded metal rubbish was found, including the infamous ring-pull and drinkcans of which Isandlwana is now brimming full.

This area was picked, not only because it was burnt, but also because it was believed to have been where the camp would have been located (on its right side), as well as where the British soldiers would have retreated to once the Zulus had got amongst them. Because of the enormity of the site, it was necessary to employ a degree of probabilistic sampling to choose the areas. Therefore the fact that the vegetation in area 3 had been cleared through fire meant that it was ideal from both a historical and practical point of view.

Area 4: Black's Koppie.

I worked on this area on day 11, while some of the finds were being processed from area 1. This area consisted of metal detector sweeps in the normal 30m² grids, moving in an easterly direction down the slope of Black's Koppie. Some 4 grids were completed here in order to ascertain the extent of the southern most edge of the camp on Isandlwana. The ground here was particularly hard, therefore requiring an extra amount of diggers. As area 1 was not being swept whilst area 4 was investigated, another metal detector was made available, therefore speeding up the discovery process, (the operators started at opposite ends, gradually moving towards each other). The finds included 2 Martini-Henry cartridge cases, one 1/24th buckle (complete), and a large quantity of discarded modern metal such as cans and toothpaste tubes.

Ian Knight and Ian Castle were not convinced that these results were indeed evidence of the most southerly edge of the camp due to the limited finds which were more representative of retreating soldiers firing a few rounds behind them as they ran. What it may have been more representative of was the area directly behind the camp, as items such as tent pegs would have been expected to be unearthed had it been the camp. As this was only a provisional area, i.e. it was not an area subject to probabilistic sampling, it could therefore be considered as a test area. Therefore only firm conclusions can be made, in my view, if another set of grids were sampled to the north of the road, parallel to it, whereby ascertaining if area 4 had been too southerly. Similarly, another set of grids could be conducted to the east of area 4, perhaps moving along the N-S axis determining whether area 4 was instead behind the main camp, as is predicted.

Area 5: Conical Koppie, beyond British front line.

The aim of this section of the Isandlwana area revolved around the significance of the Conical Koppie throughout the battle. It was known, as I have mentioned briefly above, that there were numerous *Umutzis* nearby Isandlwana, and in area 5 there were approximately five, as well as some 3 cattle kraals - none of which are used today. Typically an *Umutzi* has dimensions similar to those described in area 2, while a cattle kraal is roughly square, with sides of between 20m and 30m. Local rock (sandstone) was then piled to approximately 3 feet high, and some 3-4 large stones thick. The method employed was to field-walk in a group of approximately 6, some 2m apart, sweeping the area attempting to find both artefacts and hidden *Umutzis* in the long grass, (I contributed to this on day 5). The *Umutzis* in this area were those which had been shelled by the British. The finds were predictable, once one had walked to the Conical Koppie we found the 5 *Umutzis* and 3 cattle kraals, although no other artefacts were found. This has been attributed to the fact that area 5 has been heavily used for agricultural purposes i.e. mealie (maize) production, and is therefore ploughed regularly.

Area 6: Cairns along Fugitives' Trail.

Area 6 was in the realms of physical anthropology rather than pure archaeology, although archaeological methodology was employed. The physical anthropologist, Julie Roberts of Glasgow University Archaeological Research Department worked on the remains from the cairn labelled as area 6 in Fig 1. The remains had to (as mentioned above), remain *in situ*, thus forcing a field interpretation to be made. From these results, Roberts aimed to ascertain the health and mode of death of those remains at the time of their death. Because the cairns had to be disturbed, they had to be drawn vertically, photographed vertically and obliquely and then surveyed in

using the E.D.M. Once this had been completed, the cairn, which was under threat from an ever-enlarging donga, could be dismantled, thus revealing the remains.

Area 7: Possible British front line.

Again this was a metal detecting area in which I worked on the morning of day 11, although it was being investigated throughout the whole 4-week period. It was designed to ascertain the extent of the homesteads, as well as viewing whether there was an intensity of ammunition where the firing line was previously thought to be. The survey of this area was conducted in the same manner as previously, although it tended to progress more slowly than elsewhere because of the concentration of rocks. The principal artefacts found were large agricultural implements such as nails (about 40), iron sheeting (some 30cm²) and Zulu beads for jewellery (4 beads made in the traditional manner), although ammunition was found (some 8 cartridge cases and one flattened bullet). This is believed to represent where 'last stands' were being made by retreating soldiers as the Zulus came amongst their ranks. For example, behind one sweep was made over 2 large rocks with stones built up between them. Here a modern 9mm cartridge case was found, which is believed to be connected to the local power struggle in the nearby village where over the last 4 years, the last 3 tribal leaders have been killed – some have been sniped from the nearby fields. However, another sweep behind the same rock revealed a concentration of some 5 Martini-Henry cartridge cases – inferred as representing where a soldier in 1879 had temporarily sheltered, sniping at the advancing Zulus, after which he had probably been killed. As for the flattened bullet, perhaps this was fired at close range, and hit either a Zulu or a rock.

Conclusion:

As I have already stressed, this year's investigation was only experimental, i.e. it was the first of many years of archaeological investigation at Isandlwana, thus only the most basic of interpretation can be made on the artefacts found at this stage. As the areas of investigation have already been subject to a degree of interpretation, I aim to offer a concise and contextual view of what these preliminary results mean under this heading.

Whereas the firing line had previously been thought to have occupied ground extending in a broad arc from the northerly section of Isandlwana to Durnford's Donga following analysis of the location of bullets and cases, I would suggest that, instead, the firing line was extended from the northern section of Isandlwana, covering the ground towards the Conical Koppie, and would have only reached Durnford's Donga following the British retreat. This would be logical from a tactical point of view because if the firing line was this far forward, it would be able to cover the dead ground to the east of Isandlwana, which the previous position would not have achieved. I believe that the false image of where the firing line was found is largely due to the relative positions of the cairns, i.e. they are some 500m behind the actual line. This is primarily because when the burial party returned some 4 months following the battle, as the remains had been subject to scavenging and weathering, the bones were collected up and reburied communally, i.e. closer to the camp. This therefore gives the impression that many soldiers were buried where they stood, which was therefore incorrectly assumed to be the firing line.

With regard to the ammunition shortage, I would suggest that this was a myth, as there was ample evidence of ammunition boxes reaching the front line, as well as high concentrations behind the line, suggesting that the soldiers had ample access to ammunition at all stages of the battle.

With regard to the retreat, it can be seen where most British soldiers were killed, as they are indicated by cairns. However, as mentioned above, many remains were re-buried communally and therefore the cairns are not especially accurate. The direction of retreat (in fact it was probably more of a rout) was determined by the relative position of the Zulus whose right horn (from Shaka's *horns of the buffalo* technique) was advancing behind the western side of the mountain, while the left horn was preventing a retreat to the south of the camp. Therefore the only escape route was over the saddle (between Isandlwana and Black's Koppie i.e. over the Waggon Park) and down the fugitives' trail – this is where the cairn was being excavated. (Area 6) In fact, most British soldiers were killed on the saddle, and down the trail.

In terms of pre- and post-battle habitation, the preliminary excavations of the *Umutzi* in area 2 revealed that there was most likely habitation post-battle due to the nature of artefacts found. Similarly, the quantity of metal waste found over the whole site, such as cans, ring pulls, tooth past tubes, modern nails (etc) indicate that there has been a high degree of use over the last 121 years. However, the find of an Acheulean (1million years old) field of tools (100m²) indicates far earlier habitation, although it is not known for how long this area was in use.

Therefore, in terms of the original aims of the project, these were accomplished in full. The topographic survey can be completed, thus creating the most detailed map of the site ever created. The artefacts found from the metal detecting can be entered onto this for subsequent interpretation, as can the details of pre-and post-battle habitation. Due to the success of this year's investigation, *Earthwatch* support should continue, which will hopefully facilitate many years of detailed investigation at Isandlwana. This year's archaeological investigation has not revolutionised existing theories on the battle – this is not to say that in future years this will not happen, but as predicted, has precipitated the questioning of many 'known' aspects of the battle as well as offering a new angle on the interpretation of events.