

Guns to the Zulu - *Beningfield and Sons* of Durban.

By Peter Duckers

Writing in October 1878 to Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, the High Commissioner for South Africa, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, made the claim that 'Beningfield and Son were undoubtedly the major suppliers of firearms to the Zulus'.

It is well-known that despite prohibitions on the trade of firearms from Natal into Zululand, large quantities of weapons entered the kingdom, first appearing during the reign of king Mpande. Whatever the legal and practical difficulties were of the gun trade via Natal, there was plenty of scope to import guns and the necessary gunpowder, spares and ammunition into Zululand via the adjacent Portuguese territory of Mozambique and coming through Lourenço Marques and Delagoa Bay. The last-named place apparently became the scene of quite a flourishing beach market, as Zulus came in groups (sometimes in hundreds) to trade guns, percussion caps, gun parts and ammunition for furs, hides and ivory.

The man at the forefront of this trade to Zululand was the famous John Dunn 'the white *induna*' who will need no introduction in this account. Since the earliest days of his rise in favour with Cetshwayo in the 1850s, Dunn had largely controlled the import of guns into Zululand. This trade in weapons to the Zulus increased in the 1860s after Dunn was given initial permission to supply 250 firearms, despite the fact that later applications made by him were refused by the nervous Natal authorities. Dunn easily evaded the prohibition by trading via Mozambique and Lourenço Marques. From 1873 to 1879 it was estimated that Dunn supplied no less than fifteen thousand guns to Cetshwayo. This trade via Portuguese territory was not considered illegal and leading commercial firms in Durban, including Beningfield and Sons, circumvented the ban introduced by the Natal Government by using Lourenço Marques as point of entry. In the process, they earned a great deal of money.

Cetshwayo was not slow to realise the military value of such weapons and was eager to deal with Dunn in the acquisition of firearms. During his coronation in 1873 Cetshwayo had surrounded himself with some six hundred men armed with firearms, backed by Dunn's own 'private army'. Both Hamu and Zibhebhu, Cetshwayo's brothers - as potential rivals - had been denied access to firearms by Cetshwayo until the eve of coronation but this parade of arms was enough to make them profess loyalty to the new king and afterwards Cetshwayo allowed Dunn to sell arms to them and throughout Zululand. Cetshwayo sometimes acted in his own right in the trade of livestock (and other goods) via Beningfields but it was John Dunn who acted as his treasurer and financial agent and dealt with the merchants in Natal and with the Portuguese.

There were plenty of firms dealing weapons into Mozambique which, one way or another, found their way into Zululand and into the system of John Dunn and his agents. To name just a few, Oswald Hoffman, Randles Bros. and the firms of Denzelman and Lippert (later amalgamated), are judged to have imported literally thousands of firearms into Mozambique for onward sale in Zululand in the 1870s. The weapons were imported via Lourenço Marques not only from neighbouring states like Natal or the Transvaal but also from France, Portugal and elsewhere.

The company of Beningfield and Sons, mentioned by Sir Henry in 1878, has an interesting history in its own right. It was founded by Samuel Beningfield (1802-74), a pioneer settler in Natal who, when actually en-route to settle in Western Australia, had arrived as early as 1830 and decided to stay; he is regarded as one of the founders of Port Natal. Like many other settlers who had no farming or agricultural background Beningfield tried his hand at many trades before he found one that succeeded. He was apparently amongst those captured by the Boers in May 1842 during the Anglo-Boer conflict of that year and narrowly escaped being shot; he was nevertheless put into the stocks in Pietermaritzburg for a spot of public humiliation before being expelled.

The Beningfields were assiduous purchasers of land around Durban and were among the first settlers to buy land on the Bluff opposite the Point at Durban's harbour as early as 1841. Apart from dealing via their auction business, they worked as a 'jack of all trades' in the Durban area, arranging the hiring of farm labour, transport and equipment, the leasing of land and property, the export of all sorts of agricultural goods like sugar, rum and arrowroot and even the acquisition of tickets and facilities for travellers. Samuel Beningfield was also a pioneer in the introduction of coffee as a crop, establishing a plantation at Sea Cow Lake near Durban. Like many other Victorian entrepreneurs, Samuel became actively involved in local life. He was a founder of the Natal Agricultural and Horticultural Society, of the Durban Literary Association, the Durban Race Club and the Durban Yacht Club. Unsurprisingly, he became involved in Durban's local politics and became a member of the town's first municipal government as early as 1844 and for a time in 1861 acted as Mayor.

The auction business really began to flourish after 1861, at which time his son Samuel Frank formally joined the firm. They eventually ran no fewer than three separate auction houses in Durban - one specialised in livestock sales (cattle, oxen, horses, and mules), one in land and property and one in general goods and chattels. Their trade in weapons intended for Zululand was actually a product of their livestock auctions. John Dunn would trade or buy cattle and oxen in Zululand, have them herded to Durban and then have them sold via Beningfield's. Acting on Dunn's behalf, Beningfields would then buy up weapons in Natal (and there were apparently plenty to be had even in the 1870s) or in Lourenço Marques and other places in Mozambique and see them shipped into Zululand for Dunn and his agents to deal with.

Beningfield's was very well placed to operate in Mozambique since it had its own 'man on the spot' in the form of Samuel Beningfield's son, the redoubtable Reuben Widdows Beningfield (1844-1912). Reuben Beningfield was a well-known and influential figure in his day, though he has somewhat 'fallen below the horizon' in recent times. For decades he had a trading base near Inhambane in southern Mozambique and was the archetypical colonial adventurer - big game hunter, gold prospector, trader in whatever he could sell (ivory, gold, furs and hides) and explorer. He even ran his own brig, the *Pelham*, which he used to transport all sorts of goods out of and into Mozambique.

It is said that Reuben Beningfield travelled more widely along the coastline of south east Africa than any other European and, more than that, he was a paid official of the Portuguese colonial government. Beningfield worked for the Portuguese in exploring the vaguely-defined western border lands of Mozambique and arranging treaties with local leaders - treaties agreeing trade monopolies or establishing mining rights (copper and gold being the particular draw). He was later a founder and director of the African-Portuguese Syndicate, the Portuguese trading group working in this field. Beningfield is said to have been the first European to meet the powerful chief and founder of the Shongaana state, Soshangane, who became ruler of the extensive Gaza Empire, lying to the west of Mozambique. This meeting is unlikely given the dates, but he certainly

established a good relationship with his successor, Mzila (d. 1884), with whom he regularly stayed at Mount Selinda, and in turn with his successor, Gungunyana. In the end, although Gazaland was taken by the Portuguese in 1895, much of Beningfield's exploratory and diplomatic work came to a halt in the 1890s when he ran into an implacable opponent in the form of the new British South Africa Company (BSAC), which was exploring some of the same areas in the north and trying to arrange its own favourable treaties with local leaders. The BSAC had something which Reuben Beningfield did not possess - a powerful armed force in the form of the BSAC Police. Beningfield withdrew from this activity in the face of BSAC competition but he was appointed to the Portuguese Order of Christ for his services to Portugal, not least for averting on several occasions conflicts between Gungunyana and the Portuguese.

When the trade of firearms into Zululand was finally suppressed in the wake of the Anglo-Zulu War - and ironically it was John Dunn who was put in charge of the process of seizure and blockade - Reuben Beningfield turned his attention to another great source of trade and wealth. In 1877 he had been appointed Emigration Agent in Mozambique for the Natal Government and in the 1880s and 1890s he hired and transported, often in his own ship, literally thousands of labourers from Mozambique to Durban. His agent in Inhambane was Jose Teixeira who in 1888 also became a labour agent for the Natal government. It is said that Teixeira sent agents around Mozambique to use any tactic to encourage men to sign up and that many were actually held in chains in Inhambane before removal. These men - like the indentured labourers then being brought in from India - were found work in farms and plantations around Durban (e.g. the sugar estates at Tongaat), on the Natal railways (Reuben Beningfield being, usefully, a Director of the Natal Government Railways) but the majority were sent straight to Kimberley to become cheap labour in the mines and workings there. It helped that Reuben's brother James, an early pioneer in Kimberley, was a director of the Kimberley Central Diamond Mining Company.

There was some opposition to this system in Natal, with liberal opinion regarding the use and movement of these men as illegal and little more than a new form of slave trade and in fact the Portuguese government actually banned the movement of labourers from Inhambane, but the ban was more theoretical than actual and Reuben Beningfield is said to have paid what we might call 'backhanders' to Portuguese officials to turn a blind eye. Beningfield paid the fees associated with the hiring of each man (passport, transport etc.) who would technically arrive in Durban as a free labourer able to agree his own terms with an employer. For each individual labourer Reuben Beningfield received a capitation grant and he became very wealthy on the proceeds.

There is one ironic twist in all this. At a time when Reuben Beningfield was trading guns into Zululand on behalf of John Dunn and the family firm, he was also a commissioned officer in the Durban Volunteer Artillery (DVA) and he had a long and important career in the artillery, becoming a founder member and later (1884) commanding officer of the Natal Field Artillery (NFA) and regarded as instrumental in the creation of the South African artillery service. He reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the artillery before his retirement in 1900 and then became head of the family auction firm.

When the DVA was mobilised for war service at the outset of the Anglo-Zulu War, it was posted (as intended) to the perimeter defences of Durban, with Reuben Beningfield as second-in-command and as such saw no actual service against the Zulu. But is interesting to speculate that, had the DVA crossed the frontier as part of the invasion force, it is possible that Reuben Beningfield could have been shot at by a Zulu armed with a rifle that he had supplied!