

Guns of St Helena

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The Guns of St Helena are a dramatic physical symbol of the Island's extraordinary history as a fortified Island. Settled in May 1659, as a place of rest and refreshment for vessels on the final leg of the return voyage from the East Indies, the Island had exceptional strategic importance. The brief period when the Dutch seized the island in 1672 has echoed down the years. First, the East India Company and then the British, after the Island became a Crown Colony in 1834, were at pains to ensure that there were no further invasion attempts.

The Island's soaring cliffs and rugged terrain offers natural defences with relatively few navigable landing places. Generations of defenders added batteries. Some like eagle's nests, with many in almost inaccessible places and at dizzying heights. At the time of the incarceration of Napoleon Bonaparte, between 1815 and 1821, St Helena was the most heavily defended place in the world. This of course was the reason why it was felt to be the only place Napoleon could be safely held.

Where there are batteries there are guns and many were left in situ as the cost of removing them exceeded their value. Opposite and on the next 2 pages are shown only a few of the huge number of cannon still on the Island. Some have already corroded beyond redemption but many are capable of restoration provided action is taken soon.

Only those who visit this very special Island truly appreciate the wealth and range of historic treasures here. The cannon are just one example of irreplaceable artefacts visibly wasting year after year.

Ladder Hill Guns



Ladder Hill Guns: *Type: Elswick Mark VII wire breech loaders with a six inch calibre. Dated 1903. Maximum range with full charge and 30° elevation 25,000 yards. Standard naval and coastal defence guns for 50 years.*

Contrary to local myth these guns are not from HMS Hood (unlike the two 5.5' guns on Ascension). They were ordered in 1902 to help guard the Boer prisoners, but did not arrive

until after they had left. Active until the late 1940s, local oral history is that they were fired once at a German submarine which was rash enough to surface within range during WWII . Another local story is that the Graf Spey used to pass by St Helena whilst ravaging South Atlantic shipping and had been directed by Hitler to leave St Helena alone because he admired Napoleon. The gunners manning these weapons wanted to take a pot shot at the pocket battleship but were banned by the then Governor who feared that the Graf Spey would sit outside the range of these guns and blow them and the island to pieces. There were two more Elswicks on Munden's emplacements.

Courthouse Cannon



Courthouse Cannon. Type: 18 pounder garrison gun on cast iron carriage with a four inch calibre Date: c1795

There were six of these in the Parade directly inside the Arch in the Jamestown Line. Four were taken for metal during the Second World War. The gun carriage bears the name "John Sturges & Co". There is a shortage of interview rooms in the courthouse immediately behind the cannon and on "Court Days" clients can be seen meeting their

representatives sitting on the cannon wheels.

Saddle Battery Cannon



Saddle Battery. Type: Iron 12 pounders on cast iron carriages: four and a half inch calibre Date: one gun is dated 1794 on trunnion end, number 1462 on the other end.

These are some of the most magnificently mounted guns overlooking Rupert's Valley. They look about ready to fire and given the inaccessibility of their position, which involves a scramble along the ridge from the Rupert's Valley access road, it is no wonder no-one thought the scrap value was worth the effort

of removal.

Castle Entrance Mortars



Castle Entrance Mortars. Type: brass mortar, 23" long. Four and half inch calibre. Date: early 19thC, markings worn off

Original purpose unknown. Described in Ken Denholm's Book "An Island Fortress" as "Salute Cannon". They have only been in this location since c1957. Were previously (1920s) outside the Courthouse.

Jamestown Line Cannon



Jamestown Line Cannon. Type: 24pounder garrison gun of six inch calibre dated c1795. GR crest, B or R on trunnion, WP on barrel

A List of Guns for 1825-36 compiled by Lieutenant G.W. Melliss credited James Line batteries with 64 guns, consisting of 43 Garrison Guns, 12 Carronades, 5 Mortars, and 4 Howitzers. Today at the old Fort there are just 4 guns still standing at the embrasures of the East Battery.

Un-sited Cannons



Un-sited Cannons - Jamestown Seaside. Type: Iron 24pounder with six and a half inch calibres and around ten feet long. Date: 1760-1800

These nine guns rescued mostly from Banks's Battery c1995. They had been lying on the platform for some 100 years but were in danger of being lost to the sea due to erosion. Some had already gone. One of these has been rescued from Bank's Beach and is seriously corroded.

They are of mixed origin, mostly with George III monogram but one with EIC bale mark on the trunnion ends. In desperate need of restoration and intelligent display. It is planned to mount two vertically in the new Museum Visitor Centre display hall. A fifth from this group is mounted at the Middle Steps on the Wharf.

(These cannons are currently – Jul 2013 - lined up outside the Museum under the process of preservation)

Signal House Gun



Signal House Gun Type: originally a light horse-drawn field gun with three inch calibre. Date: c1880

Probably used during the SA War of 1880-1881. Originally mounted on a horse drawn carriage. The brass elevation control screw still operates. It was used c1900 as a signal gun hence the name of the house. There is a photo of it taken in 1949 in the National Geographic Magazine, August 1950, with Charles Smith, the last Boer living on the Island.

Lemon Grove, Sandy Bay Cannon



Lemon Grove, Sandy Bay Cannon Type: Iron 12 pounder on iron carriage with four and a half inch calibre. Date: 1794 (dated on right trunnion end, number 1486 on left end)

This cannon stands in splendid isolation, commanding the road up from Sandy Bay Beach. It is the lone survivor of four on this battery, presumably retained as a signal gun. Originally the cannon would have commanded a considerable length of the very steep road and one would have sympathy with anyone attempting to climb that hill raked with fire from defending cannon.

Upper Munden's Guns



Upper Munden's Guns. Type: Armstrong Rifled Muzzle Loader (RML) with calibre of nine inches and weighing over 12 tons. Date: 1880s Range: three miles.

There are two of these guns lying on Upper Munden's and they fired lugged projectiles, the lugs engaging in the rifling of the barrel to spin the shell. They were a late generation of muzzle loaders effectively reintroduced when improvements in gunpowder meant that the breach loaders then prevalent could not withstand explosive force which is the reason why these guns have the additional metal over at the back. Made redundant when the 6" BLs arrived in 1903. There are two more on the rocks below Munden's, along with some earlier guns, abandoned after attempts to remove them as scrap metal during WWII.
