

The German Field Gun Affair

From 'Mumming in a North Cotswold Town' thesis by Dr. Craig Fees

The German field gun was offered to the parish council by the War Trophies Commission in 1919: Mr. Ebborn, the chairman of the parish council said as one representing the Upper Ward of the town, he was prepared to vote for the acceptance of the gun. It was a trophy of the war captured by our brave British soldiers. It was in itself evidence of their valour, and although he was not personally enamoured of anything German, in fact quite the reverse, he was sincerely proud of the great and glorious achievements of our soldiers and sailors of all branches of our service. Mr. H. Pitcher said he should like the Soldiers and Sailors Association consulted on the matter. Mr. Howley said from a soldiers' point of view he thought the gun should be accepted. Mr. Ellison: Personally I don't want to see another German gun. The Chairman: I think that civilians would like to see the gun. We should do no harm accepting the gun. Mr. Pitcher proposed that the gun be accepted, and a committee be formed to arrange for a suitable site.

This was unanimously agreed, and Ebborn, Pitcher, Ellison and Howley formed the committee. It was also decided to write to the Chairman of the forthcoming meeting of the Comrades of the Great War, asking them their opinion, and to suggest a site.

The parish council was told at its next meeting that the Comrades had chosen a site next to the Market Hall, and that the County Surveyor had agreed for it to be there. The gun arrived in early February, and stood in the yard of Oliver New's Ivy House while a bed of concrete was prepared for it next to the Market Hall. A month later, on March 6, the gun was installed amidst ceremony. A gun team under former artilleryman Joseph Bennett fetched the gun and brought it to its concrete bed:...Mr. Joseph Bennett said he, as the Comrades' representative, had been asked to hand the gun over to the Parish Council for them to take charge of it for the town, and he had great pleasure in asking Mr. Ebborn, the chairman of the parish council, to accept the gun for him. In his acceptance speech the chairman of the council acknowledged that the gun was ugly, but he emphasised that it was a witness to remind them of the gallant and heroic deeds done by our brave soldiers and sailors. As a badge of honour. That gun would serve to remind those who did their bit, however humble, that they fought to protect the women and England and protect their hearths and homes.

To others, however, he said, it would stand as an accusation: of course all could not go into the service for varied and genuine reasons. But that gun would to some stand as a mark to condemn them for the cowardly way in which they evaded their plain duty. Some suddenly found they had a conscience and refused to go, and so wriggled out of serving. That trophy would remind them that they failed to do their duty. The Catholic Father Bilsborrow gave a speech in which, given the devastation the nation had just experienced, he surprisingly affirmed that there would always be wars. He was followed by the town doctor who, perhaps more surprisingly given the purpose of the event, told his listeners:

Campden's greatest asset was its beautiful architecture, and he thought, as the gun was not a thing of beauty, it need not have been placed in the centre of beautiful surroundings. In his opinion it would have been equally prominent if placed near the chestnut tree, where the pump now stood. The climax of the ceremony was a speech by J.H. Clark who again urged the comrades to force the Government to make the profiteers disgorge their ill-gained wealth, and said those who ought to be better off were the soldiers and sailors, but in so many instances they were worse off through going into military service...His speech and the ceremony were cut short by torrents of rain.

Two weeks later the annual Parish Meeting was asked whether the gun could be moved "to a more suitable site". Joseph Bennett explained that "the site was chosen at a meeting where over one hundred ex-servicemen were present"; this statement (presumably referring to the foundation meeting of the Comrades of the Great War) effectively killed discussion. One morning a month later, however, the gun was found unceremoniously dumped in the cart wash opposite the Almshouses. The parish council had the gun put back in its prepared place, and as a precaution against further "vandalism" had the trail and wheels fixed to the pad with cement. According to reminiscence the wet cement was scooped out during the day by children and shortly before midnight a lot of youths and many spectators gathered round the gun and "some" speeches were made, one saying, "People of Campden, was it your desire to have this gun brought back?" Loud cries of "No". The police constable reportedly emerged from the police station opposite, saw the crowd, was given a warning, and disappeared. The last speaker finished by saying, "We are now about to move this gun under sealed orders to an unknown destination." The gun was then taken off its bed, but had not got far before a wheel came off, but as there were plenty of willing helpers it was soon put on again. This happened more than once afterwards, but nothing daunted their determination, and so with bulldog pertinacity they overcame all difficulties and proceeded past the church some considerable distance down the station road and across the Coneygree, the crowd singing en route. "Na-poo, too ta too, goodbye-e!" The gun was eventually pushed into the mill stream. Though past midnight there were a lot of people in the field. As one expressed it: "It looks as if there was a football match." The mill stream, at this point, was a part of the town sewage system.

At the subsequent parish council meeting the chairman said that if the town wanted the gun back in place then they must call a public meeting; otherwise the nearly £2 cost of retrieving it could not be justified. Nearly a year later, in April 1921, the parish council was told that Lord Sandon of nearby Norton House would like the gun for his grounds if it were available: Mr. Ellison then suggested that it had better be given to Lord Sandon, as eventually the council might be asked to remove it from its present position, as it is likely to cause an obstruction in the mill stream, and it would be an expense to get it out. Mr. Howley said he should support that suggestion. The Chairman: If we do that, at a parish meeting someone may bring the matter up and ask what has become of it. It is for you to decide. If it is given, you gentlemen present must take the responsibility. Mr. Ellison: The gun was given to the

Parish Council. It was taken away twice, so I take it the people of Campden don't want it and we can now do what we like with it. Is the gun to stop where it is till we are asked to move it? The affair came to its close when Lord Sandon, with the blessing of the parish council, had the gun removed at his own expense and also donated two guineas to the Campden War Memorial Fund.

I am not aware of a precedent for the double removal of the field gun by unknown persons. Put into the terms of the Public Meeting, it was a dramatic coup of the chair and an overturning of the Proposition from the floor. The Proposition offered at the installation ceremony contained elements of an outmoded vision of war and the image of a community divided against itself by greed and cowardice. Furthermore, it was a Proposition divided against itself, with a Counter Proposition explicit in Dr. Dewhurst's remarks. Reminiscence underlines the ability of the community opposed to this Proposition to act together with a roguish but earnest playfulness, concealing the identities and plans of those involved in removing the gun from under the noses (and out of the cement) of those who had placed it there. The issues involved are not, in reminiscence, complex: the gun was ugly, it had killed English men, and it was a reminder of a painful war. The concept of the war trophy was not accepted, and "the people", defined by themselves and by the ultimate acquiescence of the parish council, acted as a community to get rid of it.

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