

■ **RELIC:** Heroes' welcome for team which takes artefact back to the Orient

Historic bell returned to Chinese homeland

by **Matt Dickinson**
The News

A GROUP of big-hearted people from Portsmouth have been given a heroes' welcome in China after handing back a historic relic.

Chinese government officials rolled out the red carpet to welcome eight people from the city who masterminded the return of the Dagu Bell.

The 130-year-old artefact has been given back to China, 105 years after being nabbed by British sailors and brought back to Portsmouth.

It now sits in a specially-built museum in Tian Jin, a huge port 100 miles north of capital Beijing.

The bell was taken as a war trophy on June 17, 1900, by the crew of HMS Orlando who had been fighting in the Boxer Rebellion.

It had guarded a fort on a river entrance, and would be rung out to warn of approaching enemy soldiers.

After being brought back to Portsmouth it decorated the Orlando monument in Victoria Park until the Second World War, when a quick-witted gardener stopped it from being melted down to make bombs.

It then languished in storage until being discovered by the director of Victoria Park Arts Lodge Mark Lewis.

Together with Kam Ip, the chairman of Portsmouth's Chinese Association, he helped restore the bell before the city council agreed to hand it back to its mother country.

Mr Lewis, 37, from Nelson Road, Southsea, joined trans-



Victoria Park Arts Lodge director Mark Lewis, pictured above on the Great Wall of China, was part of the team which returned the Dagu Bell, below right

lators and enthusiasts from the city for the memorable trip.

He said: 'It was amazing – a real eye-opener.'

'The Chinese people were so happy to see this bell back – it caused quite a storm.'

'There was loads of TV from all over the country at the museum opening, with firecrackers going off all over the place.'

After landing at Beijing on

October 24, Mr Lewis' group was whisked up to Tian Jin by government escorts.

They enjoyed five days of hospitality before the museum opening ceremony.

Officials were so grateful for its return they have made a cast-iron replica for Portsmouth, which will be ready next spring.

Mr Lewis, who also took in the famous Great Wall of China four hours drive away,

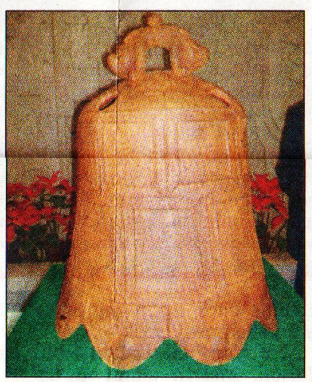
added: 'They were incredibly friendly people.'

'The replacement we are getting is actually better than the original – we were very taken aback.'

Mr Ip said: 'The people of Tian Jin were so happy to see the bell back.'

'It will certainly improve the friendship between the UK and China.'

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Research reveals a family connection

MARK Lewis discovered an amazing family connection with the Dagu Bell during his research into the artefact.

In 1860, 15 years before the bell was cast, his great

great grandfather Thomas Lane helped storm one of the very forts that it would eventually protect.

He was a soldier in the 67th Hampshire Regiment fighting for Britain's interests

during the Opium Wars, and was awarded the Victoria Cross for his efforts.

Mr Lewis said: 'It has opened up a chapter of family history that I never knew about.'