

BEHIND THE NEWS NATIONAL HERITAGE

The return to China of the Dagu Bell, stolen by British sailors during the Boxer rebellion, is the last chapter in a bizarre story spanning more than a century, writes *Peter Simpson*

A tale tolled

The marauders scurried ashore during the rising heat of an early summer morning in 1900 and beached their landing craft on the muddy flats of the Pei Ho River near the treaty port of Tientsin, known today as Tianjin (天津).

Sentries stationed at the southern Dagu Fort ran for the bell tower and began sounding out foreboding peals to warn locals and soldiers alike that, once again, the barbarians had invaded. This time they had some warning, unlike in the 1850s, when the British came amid the shock, awe and hail of artillery shells and gunfire in the second opium war.

The Dagu Bell continued to ring its urgency; the suppression of the Boxer rebellion had begun.

Mobilised by the warning, the Boxers managed to engage the enemy – but long-term resistance was futile against the might of the eight-nation fleet made up chiefly of British, American, Russian and French warships, which had anchored offshore in an overwhelming show of power to force the Chinese rebels into submission.

These unforgiving armies of empire would eventually push their way to Peking, force further contracts and concessions from a yielding dynasty and humiliate the Chinese once more.

And the bell, cast 16 years before as an early warning system, was carried off by jubilant British sailors from the battle cruiser HMS Orlando, high on adrenaline and in the mood for souvenir collecting.

The 105kg brown bell was off on an adventure that would span more than a century of turbulent history, on both sides of the globe.

It was to be lost and found several times, bring together several lives, offer up an amazing twist of fate and then, earlier this month, be returned home to Tianjin among much fanfare as a token

of peace and co-operation between Britain and China.

That the remarkable tale of the Dagu Bell can be told at all is thanks to an inquisitive, struggling English artist.

For five years, Mark Lewis searched for the bell that had once hung from an elaborate Victorian memorial to war dead in a leafy park in the southern English town of Portsmouth.

His curiosity was piqued after he took over the old park lodge that he's since made into a popular art gallery in the heart of the historic naval city – the seat of Lord Nelson, and from where the British set sail to paint much of the world pink 200 years ago.

"I kept asking the park keepers and council what happened to the bell that once hung at the HMS Orlando memorial," says the 37-year-old, who was brought up in the city.

"All I got was shrugs, 'don't knows' and 'good lucks'. No one knew of its whereabouts or its history."

What intrigued him were the Chinese characters engraved on the fascias of the oriental-style memorial that also listed the names of those killed at sea in the Far East during a three-year mission a century before.

Then a chance visit to the gardener's greenhouse revealed an unusual find. "I noticed the brooms poking out of this huge rusty bucket. I then realised it was the bell," Mr Lewis says.

He commandeered several men to lift and move the heavy, 650mm-high, 600mm-around bell into his gallery, and phoned Portsmouth University to find Chinese students who could identify the engraved characters.

A student doctor from Beijing, Fan Hui, told Mr Lewis the eight character inscriptions on the upper part of bell read: *feng, tiao, yu, shun, and guo, tai, min, an*. Literally translated, it meant: "Have favourable weather, timely rain and wind; hope all goes well and the



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country remains stable, the lives of the people be happy and peaceful."

On the lower part, another sentence read: "This bell was made in 1884 at Hai Kou Da, in memory of Yue Wei Yi."

Yue Wei Yi was a revered senior Chinese general who bravely fought in the second opium war against the English and French, and sacrificed his life in the 1859 Dagu campaign.

There had been widespread resistance to the 1858 Treaties of Tientsin, which permitted foreign missionaries to enter the interior, allowed foreign legations in Beijing and opened 11 more ports to foreign trade.

In June of 1859, English and French troops attacked the Dagu Battery. Yue Wei Yi led his army and successfully beat back the invaders.

But not for long. In August, the British alone returned with a stronger army and demanded Yue Wei Yi's surrender. He refused, saying he'd protect the Dagu Battery and China to his death. He and more than 1,000 soldiers died in the subsequent battle.

Several years later, Lee Hong Zhang, the leader of the westernisation movement, oversaw the construction of stronger coastal defences. He advocated the use of a warning bell, and ordered the Dagu Bell to be cast and used as a memorial to the general.

China remained at the whim and mercy of foreign powers, and in 1898 Britain secured the 99-year lease of Kowloon and the 25-year lease of Weihaiwei to counter the Russian occupation of Port Arthur.

Germany, Italy, France and Austria-Hungary also gained concessions, further fuelling Chinese resentment of foreigners. Secret Chinese societies sprang up, most notably the "Righteous Harmonious Fists", called Boxers by the foreigners. They began persecuting the most visible foreign manifestation: missionaries and converts.

The Boxers operated with considerable sympathy from the Imperial Court.

As chaos spread, the foreign legations appealed for help and the eight-nation fleet – including the British bat-

tlecruiser HMS Orlando and its bell-stealing sailors – stood off Tientsin in 1900, preparing to invade.

The captain of HMS Orlando and 10 of his crew were killed, and the Dagu Bell was hung as the centrepiece to their memorial in Portsmouth.

There it remained until the outbreak of the second world war, when the park keeper had the bell buried to save it from being melted down for armour. Portsmouth was flattened by the Germans, and in the confusion of the Blitz, the bell's secret location became lost.

Then, in 1947, a young gardener, Norman Henwood, digging out an old compost heap, struck metal with his shovel.

"I thought it was an unexploded bomb and it gave me grey hairs," recalls Mr Henwood, now in his late 80s. He called his foreman, who gingerly dug away soil to reveal not German, but Chinese characters.

Over the next 50 years, the bell was re-hung, dismantled, stored for safe keeping, misplaced and re-hung several times as park keepers came and went.

It was displayed in the late 1990s, before once again being taken down and neglected in a dusty corner – used as a broom holder until Mr Lewis' sleuthing paid off in 2003.

Once discovered, Mr Lewis, with the help of the Portsmouth Chinese Community Association, set about returning the Dagu Bell to its rightful owners.

It was listed and classified as a second-grade artefact by English Heritage, the British government's statutory adviser on the historic environment.

Planning permission from Portsmouth City Council and permission from English Heritage were applied for, lawyers engaged and a flurry of e-mails, letters, pleas, negotiations and talks led to a high-ranking mainland delegation arriving in Portsmouth in the summer to take formal re-ownership and arrange shipment home.

The successful repatriation is a matter of great pride and has reinforced the mainland's determination to regain other treasures stolen by invaders.

Rong Xinhai, the deputy mayor of Tianjin who headed the committee that oversaw the bell's return, has written a book called *The Return of the Bell*, about what has been hailed as the first major success for the China Cultural Relics Recovery programme.

"Both China and the UK have suffered shame over this bell. Its return represents justice, goodness, dignity, peace, friendship and understanding. The bell's return will open a new page in the China and UK relationship," he tells the *South China Morning Post*.

"The Dagu Battery is one of the nation's cultural historical sites, and the Dagu Bell is one of our most important cultural artefacts."

The Tianjin municipal government recently built the Dagu Museum and Mark Lewis was flown over to help open its showcase exhibit earlier this month.

The mainland has made a copy of the bell that will be sent to Portsmouth in March.

But the story of the bell doesn't end there. It has one last twist.

"Last August, I was at a family reunion and was talking with an aunt about the bell," says Mr Lewis.

She informed him his great-great grandfather, Thomas Lane, a member of the Hampshire Infantry Regiment, had won a medal for his part in a war in China. "I started to investigate and went to the regiment's museum in Winchester. I still find it hard to believe what I found out," Mr Lewis says.

Private Thomas Lane, 24, an Irish immigrant, was awarded Britain's highest medal for gallantry – the Victoria Cross – for his part in the attack on Dagu Fort in 1859, in which he was severely wounded. He swam a ditch and attempted to enlarge a hole in the wall of the fort, through which the British eventually entered and forced General Yue Wei Yi's troops to surrender.

"It's eerie, but I believe I was meant to find the bell and have it returned," Mr Lewis says.

RING BACK THE LOST RELICS

The return of the Dagu Bell has injected fresh impetus into China's ongoing campaign for the return of ancient artefacts.

And the handover last week set a precedent for Britain and other nations holding an estimated US\$3 million worth of known items in more than 200 public museums in 47 countries.

It's believed this is the first time Britain has handed over a "war trophy". But some say this is the tip of the iceberg, with an

estimated US\$30 million in relics being held in private collections.

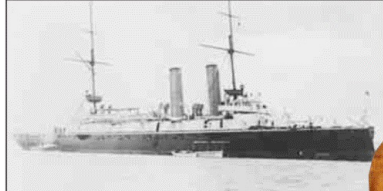
China distanced itself from much of its heritage through government-approved vandalism during the Cultural Revolution.

With that period now viewed as a mistake, and as revenues from tourism balloon, the Chinese authorities are keen to reclaim those items taken between 1840 and the foundation of the People's Republic. The China Cultural Relics Recovery Programme has been

given the task of retrieving the nation's historical artefacts.

Repeated calls from the UN's world heritage organisation, Unesco, that items like the Dagu Bell should be returned, have fallen on deaf ears at such prestigious institutions as the British Museum, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

"Such rejections and refusals are an insult," said Zhang Yongnian (張永年), the director of the recovery programme. *Peter Simpson*



The Dagu Bell (above) is back where it started, in Tianjin (top); the HMS Orlando (above left), whose sailors stole the bell, and the war memorial at Portsmouth (left), where it once hung. Photos: Imaginechina, SCMP Picture