

■ **HAND-OVER:** A century on and Chinese artefact returns to where it was taken from

Bell missed meltdown and is on its way home

by Neil Evans
Political reporter

AN HISTORIC handover of a bell to the Chinese nearly never happened – because the artefact was almost melted down to make ammunition.

Only a quick-thinking gardener saved the Dagū bell, kept in Portsmouth for more than a century, being turned into shells or aeroplanes during the Second World War.

The man stored the historic artefact, which came to Portsmouth after being seized by British sailors in Tanggu in Northern China in 1900, to keep it safe.

At the end of the war he dug it out of his hiding place and placed it back on its memorial in Victoria Park, Landport.

His actions meant the bell stayed safe for another 60 years and survived to be handed back to the Chinese at a ceremony this week.

Former Lord Mayor Cllr Elaine Baker, who helped to organise the return of the bell, said: 'At that time everything was being melted down to help the war effort – even the metal railings from outside people's houses.

'If it had not been taken down, then who knows what could have happened?

'It would have been a great shame, because it is a very impressive looking bell.'

The bell was taken as a war trophy on June 17, 1900, by the crew of HMS Orlando.

Sailors on the ship had been fighting in the Boxer Rebellion, an uprising which saw Chinese peasants attempt to throw Christians and foreigners out of their country.

The bell had been hanging



Robin Sparshatt, left, handing back the Dagū Bell to Jiaxing Zhang, Mayor of Tanggu Qu Government

PICTURE: MICHAEL SCADDAN (052809-0189)

Replica will take pride of place in park

ALTHOUGH the bell has been returned to China for good, visitors to Victoria Park might not notice anything missing.

The original bell, now on its way back to the Far East,

will be replaced with a copy.

The copy – about 20in in diameter and weighing a hundredweight – is being built by craftsmen from Tanggu, where the original was taken from.

It will be placed back in the miniature Chinese temple in Victoria Park to complete the memorial.

The bell will cost about £300 to build, and the cost will be met by the Chinese.

from a fort near the river and was used to protect the town and warn of attackers.

Once it came to Portsmouth, it served as a memori-

al to the crew of the Orlando killed while the ship was in the Far East between 1899 and 1902.

The return of the bell to

China has taken more than two years and is part of the Chinese government's plans to return all relics spread across the world to new mu-

seums. Planning permission and permission from English Heritage had to be gained to remove the bell because of its age.

Kam Ip, chairman of Portsmouth Chinese Association, said: 'It is very important that it returns to China as it belongs there.'

'It is in fairly good condition, although a little rusty inside, but it will be housed in a new museum.'

'It is very lucky that it was not destroyed in the war.'

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Return is part of a long campaign by Chinese authorities

CHINA has been campaigning for several years for the return of ancient artefacts taken from the country.

Authorities there have been particularly keen to reclaim those taken between 1840 and the foundation of

the People's Republic in 1949.

There are an estimated £1.67m worth of these items housed in more than 200 museums in 47 countries.

But there are thought to be as much as 10 times that amount which are owned pri-

vately and are not in museums.

The country – which during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s distanced itself from much of its heritage – has set up the China Cultural Relics Recovery Program to

get its historic artefacts back.

Despite advice from UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – that these artefacts should be returned, organisations including the British Museum, the

Louvre and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, have all resisted attempts.

These statements were criticised by Zhang Yongnian, director of the recovery program, who described the refusals as an 'insult.'