

IT'S

Chinese joy as

The Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Portsmouth visited China last year, taking back to its home a bell that had been removed as a war trophy during the Boxer Uprising.

In fact, the story goes back to the 1860s, when the Chinese Empire was in terminal decline, with a corrupt administration trying to lead a vast country that was rich in silk, opium and other commodities.

Britain and the other "Great Powers" wanted to trade with China as it had many valuable products especially opium, which was in high demand in the West, but China didn't want to trade.

With a country that was reluctant to deal with these western 'invaders' - and the traders becoming increasingly pushy and demanding, war broke out in the 1860s - the first of the Opium Wars.

Britain with her huge Navy and global Empire, along with her allies, were better placed to fight the Chinese with her much larger but inferior forces who were only equipped with archaic weapons.

The Western forces decisively won the Opium Wars and there are many accounts of heroism from both sides.

For example, on 21 August 1860 Private Thomas Lane, from the 67th Foot, part of the Royal Hampshire Regiment, together with Lieutenant Nathaniel Burslem, displayed, 'great gallantry in swimming the ditches of the North Taku Fort and attempting, during the assault and before an entrance had been effected by anyone, to enlarge an opening ...'

For this they were both awarded a Victoria Cross (VC), Britain's highest military honour.

Massive trading concessions were demanded by the British, which included opening up China to trade, the establishment of trading posts like Shanghai at major ports and the development of railways.

European trading posts were also governed under their own laws, rather than Chinese.

It was around this time that the infamous sign appeared over a European compound in Shanghai, reading, 'No dogs or Chinamen'.

The inability of the Chinese

Emperor to resist the "Great Powers" in their expansion into China - and the increasingly bullish tactics being employed by the Westerners - led to the development of anti-European secret societies.

Among the most well known was a group called I-ho-ch'uan, which translates as the "Righteous and Harmonious Fists". They became better known as the "Boxers".

The Boxers were very violent and killed many western missionaries and civilians, along with Chinese Christian converts. They also raped western woman and destroyed property in increasing numbers.

By 1900 the killing and sabotage

by the Boxers had grown into open revolt. The troubles threatened the lucrative trade between the West and China, so the West decided to act.

Britain, Italy and the United States anchored warships off the Chinese coast near Peking, attempting to use gunboat diplomacy to force the Chinese to quell the uprising. Forces from France, Germany, Austria, Russia and Japan were also dispatched.

In June, a combined allied force marched on Peking. The Dowager Empress, T'zu-hsi, decided to send imperial troops to support the Boxers.

A full scale war was looming, so reinforcements were sent.

captured at the North-West Fort, Taku. The bell was hung in place there in 1902.

It remained part of the memorial in Victoria Park for near forty years.

During the Second World War, the authorities seriously debated melting down the bell for armaments.

The park keeper at the time didn't want the bell destroyed so decided to bury the bell in the park without telling anyone its location.

It seems that in the aftermath of the world conflict no one remembered to replace the bell and it wasn't until 1960 that the *Evening News* started asking questions about the bell's location.

After a fruitless search in Milton Park, the bell was eventually located in a shed in Victoria Park itself and restored to its former position.

In the late 1980s or early 1990s, someone tried to take the bell from the monument and unfortunately broke the top.

To prevent any further damage, Portsmouth City Council decided to remove the bell and store it for safe-keeping.

'I've been asking the council about the bell's whereabouts now for the past five years,' says Mark Lewis, Director of the Artful Dodgers.

'They weren't sure where it was, thinking that maybe it was in

The rebellion was ruthlessly suppressed in a series of military engagements.

One of these was the capturing of a series of forts at Tanggu, Tianjin. These fortifications were designed to guard the river leading to Peking. They were overcome in June 1900.

A large bell hung in one of the forts and when it was captured by the British forces they decided to bring the bell back to Portsmouth.

The sailors of HMS *Orlando*, a Portsmouth-based ship, who brought the bell back, thought it should be used as part of a memorial to their dead comrades.

The memorial was built in a Chinese style to hold the bell

Stamshaw Park.

'About eighteen to twenty four months later, which is three years ago now, I actually found it in the greenhouse in the middle of Victoria Park - strangely, it had a broomstick hanging out of the top.

'I didn't really know what it was at the time, so we put it in the lodge in the fireplace for the general public to see in the gallery. We then began our research.'

There were two Chinese girls working at their broadcasting studio at the park and they were able to translate the transcriptions on the side of the bell and to contact the Chinese bell museum.

About eighteen months later (roughly a year ago), a Chinese delegation got in touch with Mark and his team, saying that they wanted to come over and take a look at the bell.

When they arrived in February 2005, Mark was actually on holiday, but he was told after that the bell was in fact one of the most important bells in China's history.

Indeed, it was so important that the Chinese government were planning to build a new museum in which the bell would be the main feature.

'Before we knew it, the council had jumped on the bandwagon and taken the bell back,' said Mark.

'There was a big "handing back" ceremony with the Lord Mayor, with twenty people from China visiting for the presentation, including TV stations and so on.

'In return, the Chinese delegation invited us over to China and that's where I've been for the last two weeks.

'There was an amazing, grand ceremony as the bell was given back and we were treated like royalty.'

One of the conditions of the return of the bell was that the Chinese made



a replica of the bell, which has been completed and should be picked up in April. 'It looks one hundred times better than the original!' says Mark.

The replica will be put on back view at the memorial in Victoria Park, so that once again the enchanting structure will be complete.

Recently lost cultural artefacts have become a hot topic, with China calling for the return of cultural relics housed in overseas museums, including antiquities plundered during war.

The Chinese government estimates that around a million Chinese treasures are kept in more than two hundred museums in forty-seven countries, many of them from its imperial past. The

Tangu Bell was just one of these.

There has already been a book written about this phenomenal story, documenting everything from the history of the bell to e-mails sent from Mark and his team to China and vice versa.

The strangest part of this whole story is that, after a lot of research, it turns out that Mark's great-grandfather had in a small way been

fought in the Opium Wars, the results of which led to the Boxer Rebellion.

'He fought over there and even won a Victoria Cross and six other medals for his bravery,' says Mark.

'The story of the bell is an amazing one, to say the least. It has a chequered history, it was almost been destroyed, it's been lost and found again, but ultimately its destiny is to remain in China in its rightful place.'

The handing back of the bell was a gesture of peace and goodwill from the people of Portsmouth and an attempt to try and set up some cultural and economic exchanges with China.

'We've been successful with this,' says Mark, 'and hope to continue our strong relationship with the Chinese delegates for many more years to come.'

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