

CAPE TOWN'S TIME-GUNS

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Although a great many articles have been written on the subject of Cape Town's noon gun (the official terminology is 'time-gun') most of the writers have not had access to the Lion Battery Fort Record Book and the existence of more than one Cape Town time-gun has only recently been recorded.

By 1807 a noon gun was fired regularly from the Imhoff Battery on the seaward side of the Castle.¹ On 4 August 1902 the noon gun was fired from Lion Battery on Signal Hill for the first time.² The battery was built because of fears of war with Russia and had been armed with two 9-inch Rifled Muzzle Loading guns by 1891. Lion Battery was remodelled in 1911.³

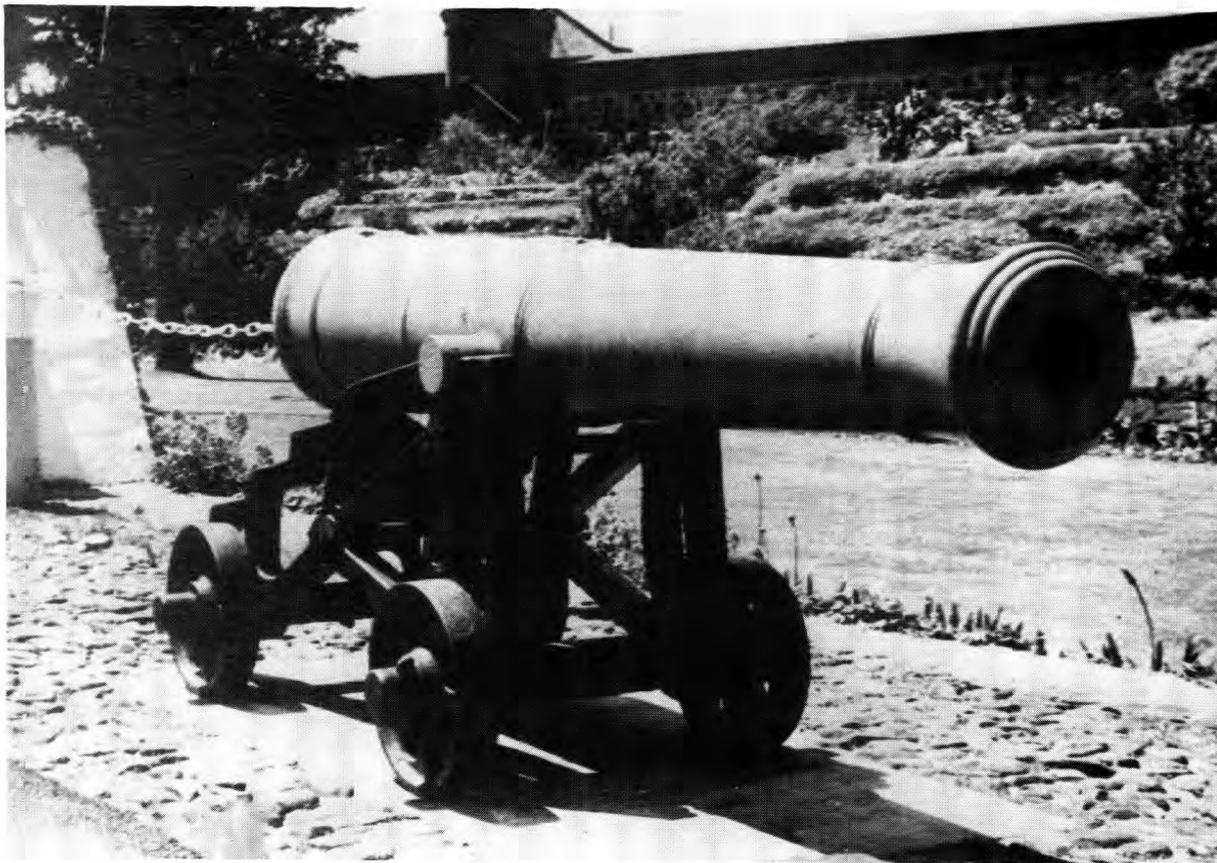
The original time-gun was one of the means by which ships in Table Bay 'could determine the error and rate of their chronometers'⁴ and has not always been fired at noon. In 1864 the gun

was fired by electrical impulse from the Royal Observatory for the first time.⁵ Today the time pulse is transmitted by the Observatory (now the South African Astronomical Observatory) along a Post Office line to Lion Battery.⁶ On 26 August 1865 the time signals were given at 'the instant of one o'clock.'⁷

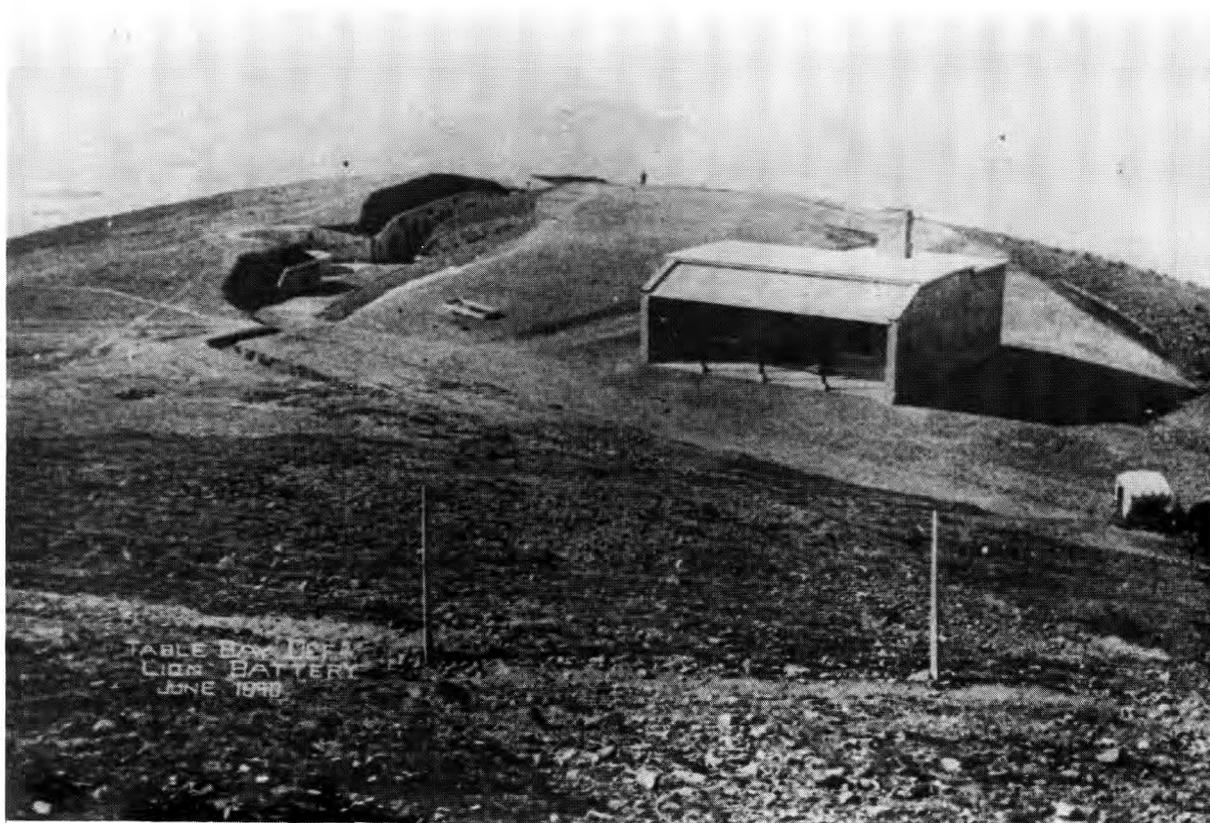
On 14 May 1918, the Mayor of Cape Town, Councillor (late Sir Harry) Hands instituted the mid-day pause.⁸ The boom of the noon gun became the signal for a two minute pause during which all activity in the Mother City came to a halt whilst all bowed their heads 'in silent prayer' and remembered those at the Front.⁹ The mid-day pause was retained until 17 January 1919 but was revived during the Second World War.¹⁰ The broadcasting of modern time signals on 6 February 1925 made Time Calls and the noon gun unnecessary but the latter was retained at the request of the Municipality of Cape Town.¹¹



*The Imhoff Battery on the seaward side of the Castle in Cape Town
(Cape Archives Collection)*



Former time-gun Number 54 outside the Lioness Gateway at the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town



Lion Battery in June 1890



Lion Battery on VE-day 8 May 1945. Lt G.H. Morton is fourth from the right on the 6-inch gun

Although its boom is well known relatively few people have seen the gun. In 1982 a colour photograph of the time-gun was published on the front cover of the 1981/82 Cape Peninsula Telephone Directory and a short documentary film was made by the SATV *Uit en Tuis* team in 1982.

Cape Town's present and former time-guns are 18-pounder smooth bore muzzle loaders which bear the monogram of HM King George III (1760–1820) on the second reinforce of their barrels. The letters W and Co on the left trunnion indicate that the guns were cast by Walker and Company, Fort Montague, Nassau, Bahamas.¹² Until 1982 the Cape Town time-gun was mounted on a garrison standing carriage which was the army's equivalent of the wooden naval carriage. At present the spare gun at Lion Battery and the two guns outside the Castle are mounted on garrison standing carriages.

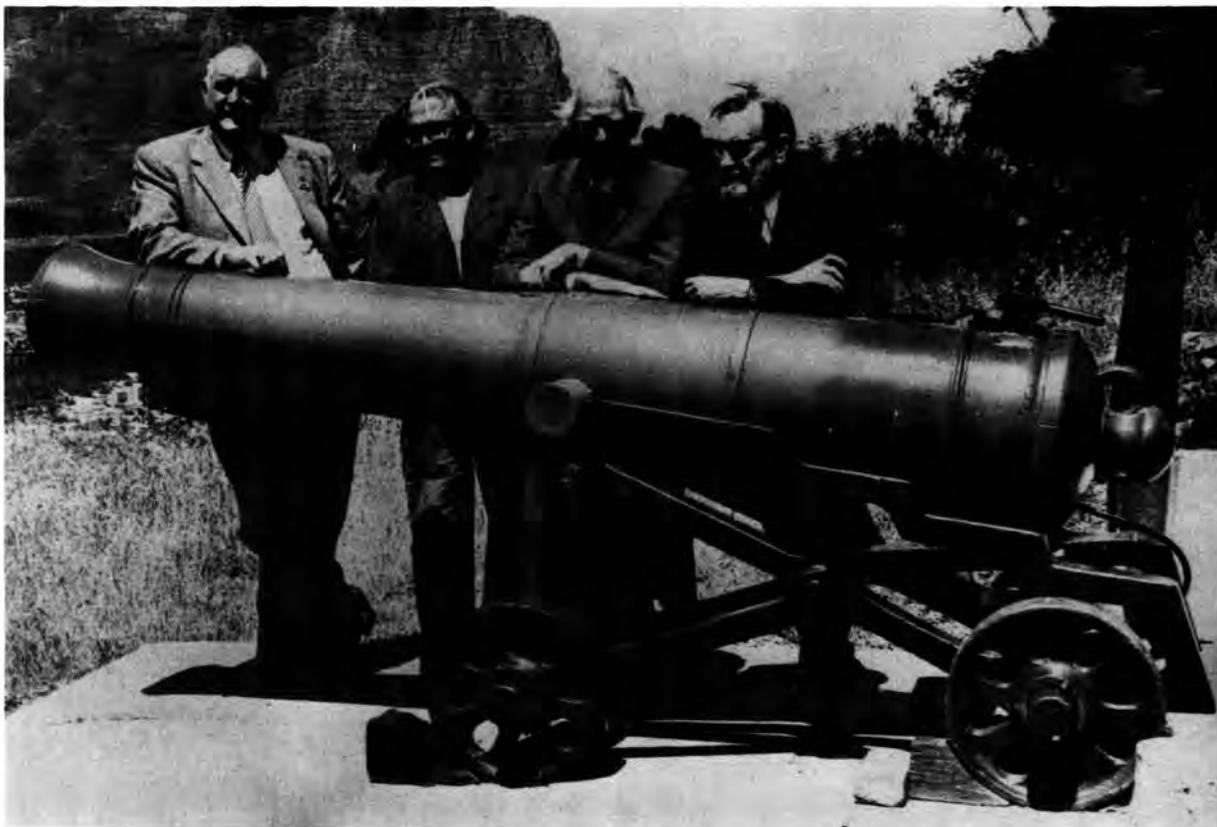
The recent discovery of the memoranda of examination of four of Cape Town's time-guns has made it possible to record the periods when the guns were in use and their present whereabouts. Unfortunately the information contained in the files is incomplete. There is no memorandum of examination in respect of time-gun Number 54 although a letter dated 13 April 1926 reveals that it was then in the Castle Ditch. It was recommended that the gun be exchanged to

replace time-gun Number 17 which had been 'rendered accidentally unserviceable through one of the re-venting tools having broken in the "vent chamber", the removal of which was impracticable.'

The Annual Report of Examination of Ordnance (Army Form G875) dated 25 September 1923 in respect of Lion Battery reveals that gun Number 54 was the time-gun and gun Number 249 the spare gun. A note in the Memorandum of Examination of gun Number 249 records that the time-guns at Lion Battery had been exchanged for two others at the Castle after 12h00 on 24 June 1924.

In October 1980 Mr G.H. Morton, who was Battery Commander of Lion Battery in 1945, revealed that the former time-gun on the Castle side of the Lioness Gateway at the Castle (Number 54) had been moved there secretly in 1945 after becoming unserviceable during a re-venting accident. The gun which it replaced was moved to Lion Battery to serve as the time-gun. The memorandum of examination for gun Number 54 cannot be traced.

The guns are probably held in affectionate regard by all except those who live within the blast angles of Lion Battery and should have a special place in the hearts of those who paused at noon during the First and Second World Wars.



Four of the men responsible for firing Cape Town's time-gun posed alongside time-gun Number 249 on 22 October 1980. From left to right: WOI H.J.R. Kokott, PO N.J. Claassen, Mr G.H. Morton and Capt Frank Robb.

The writer is indebted to WOI H.J.R. Kokott for the memoranda of examination from which the above records were compiled, to Mr G.H. Morton for the details of the secret time-gun exchange and the photograph of the battery taken on VE-day and to the Cape Archives for the photograph of the Imhoff Battery.

Footnotes

1. *Lion Battery Fort Record Book (Army Book No 360)*.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. B. Warner, *Astronomers at the Royal Observatory, Cape*, Cape Town, 1979, p. 47.
5. *Lion Battery Fort Record Book (Army Book No 360)*.
6. Mr M.W. Feast, Director, SA Astronomical Observatory, letter to *The Cape Times*, 22 August 1980, p. 10.
7. B. Warner, *op cit*, p. 64.
8. P. Joyce (Ed), *South Africa's Yesterdays*, Readers Digest, 1981, p. 299.
9. *The Celebration of Peace August 2-5, 1919, Official Programme*, Cape Town, p. 33.
10. P. Joyce, *op cit*, p. 299.
11. B. Warner, *op cit*, p. 115.
12. M. Peterson, *History under the Sea: A Manual for Underwater Exploration*, Washington, 1965, plate 37.

ORDNANCE SMOOTH BORE 18-PDR 42 CWT

Period in use as Time-Gun Shown on Memoranda of Examination	Registered Number of Gun	Remarks and Present Location where known
January 1910 – February 1911		Described as spare time-gun. 20 or more rounds fired every month except January 1910.
July 1918 September – November 1920 January 1921 September – October 1922	249	Rounds fired in January 1921 = 2. Spare time-gun on 25 September 1923. Rounds fired = 4.
25 September 1923	54	Cape Town time-gun. The memorandum of examination cannot be traced. Gun now on Castle side of Lioness Gateway at the Castle, Cape Town.
October – December 1923 January – June 1924	249	Rounds fired in June 1924 = 20
25 June 1924 – October 1925	17	At the Castle on 10 January 1924, Removed to Lion Battery 25 June 1924. Rounds fired in June 1924 = 5. Rounds fired in October 1925 = 16.
October 1925 – November 1926 December 1928 – May 1931	32	
November 1933 – May 1934	32 249	Both guns shown as having fired the same number of rounds.
June 1934 – December 1935 February 1938 – 4 December 1941	249	Number of rounds fired December 1941 = 4.
December 1941 – December 1944	32	Number of rounds fired December 1941 = 24. Now outside the entrance to Wynyard Battery, Fort Wynyard Street, Green Point.
February 1946 – 8 January 1948	249	Became the spare time-gun in 1982. Now at Lion Battery on a garrison standing carriage.
January 1948 – 30 November 1949	330	After a period as the spare gun it was mounted on a modern carriage and became the time-gun again in 1982.
No further details recorded.		

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Command.