

Mercer's Grave Restoration

Alexander Cavalié Mercer 1783 -1868

Mercer is arguably the most famous junior artillery officer in British history, and certainly the most quoted on the topic of Waterloo. After a frustrating military career during the height of the Napoleonic wars, he achieved his destiny at Waterloo where, in 1815, he led his six-gun 'G Troop' Royal Horse Artillery to fame.



Jake, Matt & Gary (the men who did the heavy lifting) beside Mercer's newly restored grave on 10th June 2015

A paper by Robert Pocock, images from the personal collection of Robert Pocock, published by CampaignsandCulture.com

As remarkable as his exploits were, he received true renown only after his death when his son published, in 1870, "Mercer's Journal of the Waterloo Campaign". The finest witness account of the Waterloo campaign, his two-volume Journal is now much admired, quoted and debated by historians and enthusiasts alike.



Until recently, the only known portrait of Cavalier Mercer

Cavalier Mercer has a memorial, the wonderful stone commemorating G Troop RHA on the Waterloo battlefield, today the focus for so many photographs. We also have his grave in Exeter, which before we got involved was in a really sad state.

The Mercer Grave Restoration project is the start of creating a Legacy to stand for the next 100 years, by restoring the grave, erecting a nearby information sign, then achieving a fund to care for his grave for the next 100 years.

If we can build upon and sustain the knowledge of Mercer's fascinating life and achievements, whilst getting to the truth on some of the myths and controversies that have grown up around him, then we will create a legacy fit to stand for another 100 years. In doing so we can also progress our understanding of the Royal Horse Artillery at Waterloo, and the lives of the men in those dramatic times.

Mercer's achievements are legendary. By far the most junior and inexperienced RHA troop commander at Waterloo, he has become the most celebrated. Often credited with turning the tide of the massed French cavalry attacks in his sector, he famously used his own initiative, both for better and for worse, ignoring the instructions of the Duke of Wellington, at one point almost sweeping him off his horse!

Born in 1783, he lived to the ripe old age of 85, never retiring, a full General and the second most senior artilleryman in the country, behind Field Marshal Ross. He is buried in the City that he chose as his home, Exeter. Although he eventually rose to the rank of General, his true fame was as 2nd Captain, commanding 'G Troop' throughout the Waterloo campaign and the subsequent march on Paris.



Strytem Chateau today, Mercer's billet 200 years ago

On 16th June 1815, having marched all day in sweltering heat, Mercer's six-gun horse artillery troop arrived too late to participate in the Battle of Quatre Bras, but the next day it distinguished itself with the cavalry rearguard, retreating through apocalyptic weather storms. During the afternoon of 18th June 'G Troop' were called into the thick of the fighting near the centre of the line. There they achieved conspicuous success, repulsing repeated charges by French heavy cavalry until evening brought both total victory and total exhaustion.

Today the position of Mercer's G Troop is marked in a prominent position on the allied ridge with a fine memorial, here being admired by HRH Prince Charles accompanied by the current Duke of Wellington:

Mercer's Journal vividly portrays the countryside of Belgium, the architecture, his colleagues, the local populace and the sensations of battle. It mentions his old dog Bal and his little horse Cossack, who both accompanied him on campaign. The Journal demonstrates the many qualities of its author, his culture, sensitivity, humour, professionalism, bravery, honesty and compassion.

After Waterloo Mercer twice served in British North America before being appointed commander of Dover Castle. Many of his fine watercolours are now treasured by Canadians as an early record of their nation's history.

Commissioned into the Royal Artillery at the age of 16, Mercer fondly recalled his early visits to Exeter. By 1850 he had established a home on the edge of Exeter at Cowley Cottage, Cowley Hill. His sister Theodosia lived nearby in Elm Grove Road. Their father, General Alexander Mercer of the Royal Engineers is buried in Exeter Cathedral. Mercer his grave with his sister, who made it to 98. Both are buried at St David's Church, Exeter, Devon.

We found Mercer's grave in a few years before the Waterloo 200 Anniversary. With much excitement, we set about ensuring that the grave, which had fallen into a dilapidated state, was able to stand the test of time. Besides completing urgent work now, we want to ensure that it could sustain the next 100 years before a fresh generation marks the Waterloo 300 commemorations.





Mercer's grave is made from the beautiful but susceptible Portland Limestone (think St Paul's Cathedral, the Cenotaph and the stone used by the Commonwealth Grave Commission). This stone was fashionable at the time, but does erode. In 1985 the church helpfully recorded the inscriptions, but even then, less than 100 years after Mercer's sister's death, there were gaps, errors and guesswork required to fill in the blanks. Through careful research we got the wording right, received the permissions we needed and got going.

The Waterloo Association, The Royal Artillery Charitable Fund & Royal Artillery Association, Exeter Historic Buildings Trust, G Para Battery RHA and the Exeter Civic **Society** all kindly pledged contributions to the Mercer Grave Restoration project totalling £2,655 so that the work could commence, and soon we were underway.

The stonemason team from Williams & Triggs achieved wonders, a few curious onlookers and these images witnessed the heroic struggle as both brain and brawn

triumphed in shifting these precious but alarmingly heavy stones. The initial work gave a tantalising glimpse of the beauty of the Portland stone beneath the grime.



Not since 1826, when St David's unwittingly became the centre of the first grave-robbery case in England has there been such activity. Surgeon William Cooke, requiring bodies for medical science, faced prosecution for the felony of removing linen from the body, whereas removal of a body was, at that time, simply a misdemeanour!

Besides the stone cleaning and repair, the inscriptions have also been refreshed. Portland stone weathers heavily and without this work the wording would have been lost forever. Mercer shares his grave with his sister Theodosia who lived within sight

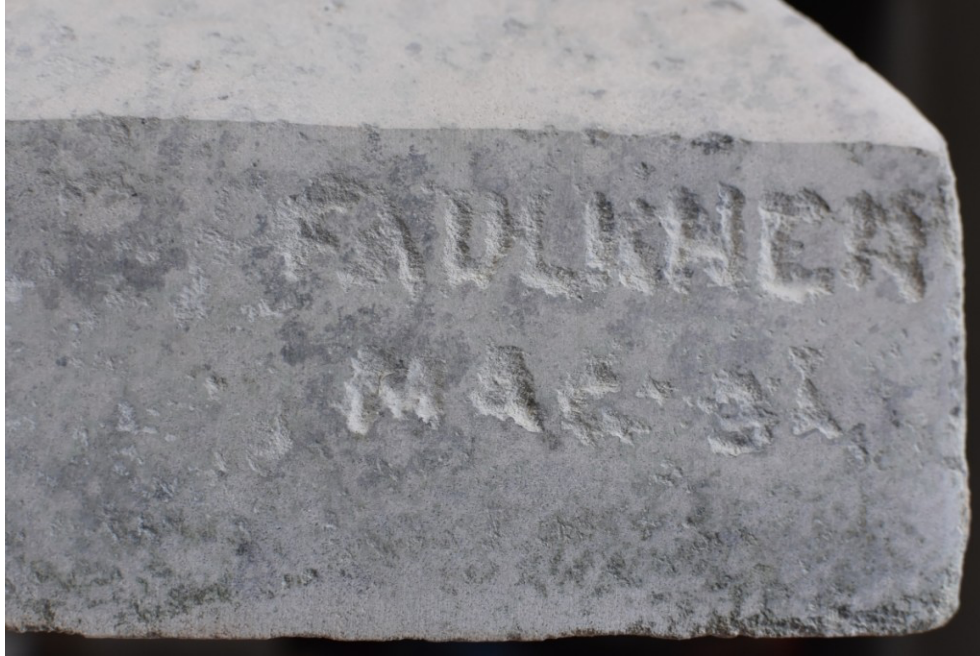
of the church, and died in 1881, thirteen years after Mercer. This image reveals the condition of the inscriptions once the top stone was removed:



Now here is a real craftsman at work. Peter is re-carving the inscriptions by hand in the original script. This is the other side of the grave to Mercer's wording, showing Theodosia. Wouldn't it have been wonderful to know brother and sister first hand, they clearly got on very well!



The Portland stone is wonderfully bright, and this is really very fine quality Portland; often Portland is riddled with fossilised shell but Mercer was buried with the real deal. We even know the name of the stonemason who carved the original Mercer stone, as he inscribed his mark “Faulkner, Mason”.



A few weeks later the stones returned revealing the true beauty that lay underneath the grime. Detailed adjustments to the top stone:



Applying the lime mortar:



The magic that is Fairy Liquid:



The very next day, Mercer's new look was being admired by Capt Luke Denby-Hollis of the current Mercer's G Troop RHA and Reverend Tom Honey, planning the graveside service for 11am on 18th June.



People Power is a wonderful thing, and many generous tour guests who joined Graeme Cooper and I on tour at Waterloo in 2015 kindly contributed to the completion of this work. As Mercer would have said as he sung out at Waterloo, intoxicated by success, before almost striking the Duke of Wellington (by accident!) with his sword: “Beautiful! – beautiful!”

On 18th June 2015 today’s Artillerymen took part in remembrance services across the country beside the graves of officers and men who served with the Royal Regiment of Artillery at Waterloo. The service repeated the Waterloo100 event in 1915, with wreaths of laurel and red roses charged with blue cornflower or blue iris.

At Mercer’s freshly restored graveside stood today’s men of Mercer’s G Troop RHA, now part of 7 Para, still based in Colchester, from where G Troop commenced their epic journey in 1815. If only I could have been in two places at one time, as I had touring commitments over at Waterloo!

The event has echoes of Mercer’s own personal ceremony on each Waterloo anniversary when he selected laurel leaves and roses from his own garden to adorn the French lance that he was given the day after the battle.

The following photos courtesy of William Pattinson:





The Reverend Tom Honey officiated. The service included the words: “For their courage and bravery shown during the Battle of Waterloo, For perseverance in the face of danger, For putting others’ lives before their own, We will remember them.”

A few more photos courtesy of Pamela Coleman:



Moving indeed. The event secured coverage on TV, and hit the local and regional newspapers, one of which also carried the novel idea that the dashing Hussar Major General Sir Hussey Vivian of Waterloo fame was the inspiration for the fictional Poldark!

We have since added an information board at the site, and arrange the professional cleaning of the grave each year in June before the Waterloo anniversary so that the great man (and his sister) are looking spick and span for his day of destiny.

If you would like to view Mercer's grave, share a little history, perhaps also visiting the Cathedral to see where Mercer's father is laid, I will be very happy to meet you, just ask.