

An Eighteenth-Century Prussian Cannon from Plymouth Sound

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{Editor's note: It is probably an open question which side of the national line dividing Cornwall from Devon, below the waters of the Sound, this cannon lay when it was found. However, the Society's declared support for properly-recorded underwater activity of the kind here described, and Mr McBride's previous contribution to our pages, both justify inclusion of this most interesting report.}

IN SEPTEMBER, 1972, a group of three Plymouth sub-aqua divers—Peter Dyer, Roger Mackey and Keith Faye—were diving from an inflatable boat in 45 feet (13.5 m.) of water over a flat, sand-covered bottom in Plymouth Sound. Noticing a long, vague but regular outline just breaking the surface of the seabed, one of them dived to investigate and digging a trench alongside the object uncovered a small ornate bronze cannon.

The item having been marked with a small surface buoy they were towing, a brief search of the immediate area was made, but apart from two small outcrops of rock, one bearing the signs of concretion, the seabed was covered in deep sand. Realizing that the next bout of rough weather would almost certainly bury the cannon again, they marked the position in which it lay, obtained a lifting bag, and recovered the cannon using a larger boat.

A brief preliminary inspection showed the gun carried two crests, one a crowned cypher with the initials *FR*, the other an eagle with what appeared to be a sword in the right claw. The following morning the find was declared to the Receiver of Wrecks and publicized in the local press.

Reading the description of the gun, Peter McBride realized it was probably Prussian and possibly linked with an 18th-century wreck on which he had collected information. He contacted the three divers and formed an archaeological group to develop research on the cannon, and carry out further surveys of the site.

The cannon is a bronze three-pound cannon without dolphins. The bore is 2.94 ins. (0.075 m.), and the length is 4 ft. 10 ins. (1.485 m.)—see Fig. 17. On recovery, it was found fully charged, with wad, cartridge, and ball.

The weapon has been identified as a Prussian light field gun of the reign of Frederick II (the Great), King of Prussia, 1740-86, and was probably cast between 1750 and 1780. It is typical of German pieces of the period known as *regimentstuck*. These were normally three or four pound cannon which accompanied infantry in the field. They were light enough to be manoeuvred to the rear by a single horse, or man-handled for short distances.

The decorative royal cypher bearing the initials *FR* (*Fredericus Rex*) in prominent relief beneath the Prussian royal crown, and the inscription overall 'ULTIMA RATIO REGIS' ('The last argument of a king') verify this. The use of this motto dates from 1613 and apart from Frederick the Great was used by other rulers, including Louis XV of France (1715-1774) (see *Buchman, 1957,476*).

The crest on the chase shows a magnificent eagle in flight with a sword in the dexter claw. Above this, again the Prussian crown and the incomplete motto 'PRO PATRIA'. The missing word from the motto is probably *GLORIA*. Although some of the detail has been eroded and is indistinct, this is a royal badge commonly found on Prussian cannon of the period.

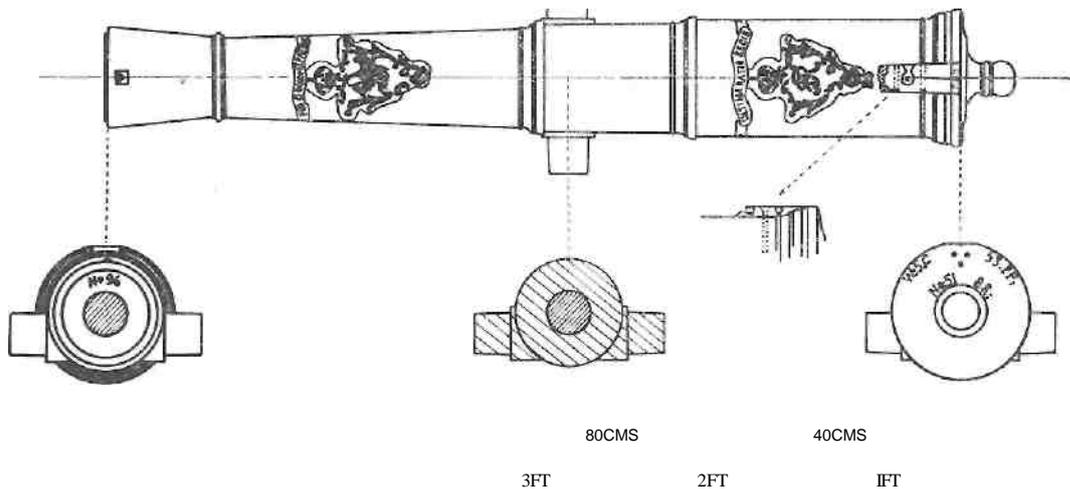


Fig. 17
Prussian Cannon from Plymouth Sound

Frederick the Great was a great statesman and exceptional military leader who revolutionized the artillery of his kingdom. On 21st April, 1759, he wrote to his brother Prince Henry saying, 'Don't forget your great guns which are the most respectable arguments of the right of kings' (Hogg, 1970, v, 103).

A raised vent block with a rear centre line of direction is fitted on the breech just forward of the base ring, whilst the muzzle carries a small acorn front sight at the highest point. Both appear to have been added after casting. Close examination of the line shows that it veers away and to the right of the foresight. This was probably to counteract a defect in the alignment of the bore, a common fault in the pieces of this time (Muller, 1768, 44).

Behind the base ring, level with the rear of the vent block, a triangular pattern of three small holes has been drilled in the face of the cascabel. These were probably for recessing an adjustable rear sight (Fig. 17). Two small holes, in parallel, also pass through the side of the block, in front, and behind the vent hole. This arrangement was for the purpose of mounting and fixing the flintlock percussion firing mechanism which about this time had become a reasonably common practice in naval gunnery. These were first introduced into the Royal Navy in 1755 when the Admiralty ordered their use on all quarter deck guns.

The trunnions are not marked, but there are integrally cast cheek pieces between these and the barrel of the gun. These were designed to give better bearing surfaces against the carriage side members.

The cascabel carries a wealth of detail. The marks 'W5C and '53PF' refer to the German weight of the gun (PF—*pfund*, 'pound') while the figure '51 BR' is the batch number of the metal from which it was cast.

The final detail on the cannon is the number '96' which is engraved both on the mouth of the muzzle and the base of the royal cypher.

Systematic visual and metal detector searches of the area have produced no further evidence of wreck or magnetic anomalies indicative of a wreck site associated with iron ammunition.

It would not have been unusual for a vessel of the period to be carrying the odd military cannon, but a three pound gun would only be relevant to a very small vessel such as a yacht or privateer.

Documentary research is continuing into known wrecks of the period in the Sound, but it would be unwise at this stage to offer any conclusion as to whether it came from a wreck or is an isolated item lost overboard in bad weather or other circumstances.

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