FIELD GUN 9168: MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER

Robert Delaney explains how an archaeological approach to the conservation of an Irish Civil War gun is helping to tell its story.

The value of an archaeological approach when working on artefacts with a recent (on the scale of things) though nonetheless historic origin has been well documented in the pages of *Archaeology Ireland*. One project that is currently being undertaken in the Defence Forces' Ordnance Base Workshops (OBWs) has adopted such an approach. Ordnance Corps technicians are working on a Mk II 18-pounder field gun, no. 9168, an ex-Irish army gun that has recently been returned from the USA (Fig. 1).

This gun may have been amongst the first batch of nine 18-pounders that were handed over to the fledgling Free State army by the British during the summer of 1922; if so, it was almost certainly used against anti-Treaty forces during the early months of the Civil War that began when the first 18-pounder rounds slammed against the walls of the Four Courts in Dublin at the end of June that year (Fig. 2). The 18-pounders went on to form an important part of the Artillery Corps' arsenal and they were given a new lease of life at the start of the Emergency, when their timber wheels were replaced with a pneumatic-tyred conversion kit as the corps became mechanised. By 1950, however, the guns had been replaced by the more modern 25-pounder field gun, and later that decade they were sold for scrap as part of a large shipment of arms to the American arms trader Interarmco. Most of that shipment appears to have been sold on to collectors in the United States, and no. 9168 ended up outside a diner near the city of Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a small collection, until the Irish army 'FF' stamp on the breech-ring betrayed its significance. There is no doubt that the gun will become an important artefact in the nation's military history collection when the project is finished.

Above: **Fig. 1—Eighteen-pounder no. 9168 in Virginia, USA, where it had stood for nearly 50 years. The climate and vegetation had taken their toll on what was nicknamed 'the Ivy-Patch gun'** (photo courtesy of Mr Lar Joye).

Left: **Fig. 2—A Mark I 18-pounder (note the distinctive tank fitted to the recoil system above the barrel) being unloaded at Passage West from the *Lady Wicklow*** (courtesy of the National Library of Ireland).

Below: **Fig. 3—The 18-pounder on arrival in OBW. The Irish army grey livery is still visible in places on the barrel and the remains of two of the timber braces are still in place on the shield. The steel wheels were part of a conversion kit that was fitted in 1939 to replace timber spoked wheels.**

Below left: **Fig. 4—The upper part of the gun's breech-ring. The gun's number, mark, date of manufacture and manufacturer's name (William Beardmore and Co.) can be seen, along with the FF stamp that was applied by the Free State army.**

A half-century of lying outdoors in the Virginian climate, where a metre of rain falls annually and the relative humidity regularly rises above 50%, took its toll on the field gun, and a professional assessment considered it to be in an 'extremely poor' state by the time it arrived in OBW (Fig. 3). It was severely corroded in places and all the mechanisms were seized. In the past, Ordnance technicians—who normally maintain and repair an array of modern weapons and weapons systems, including the 18-pounder's late twentieth-century successor—have worked on a number of historic pieces. This project, however, took on a more considered ethos owing to the importance of the gun and the role it may have played in Irish history, and with advice from Lar Joye (then military curator at the National Museum of Ireland, now Dublin Port's Heritage Director) and the Letterfrack conservator Sven Habermann the preservation and conservation of the piece became as important as its restoration.

An archaeological approach

There are only a limited number of historical sources available that can add to the story of a gun like no. 9168. Throughout its service a gun is accompanied by a document known as a history sheet, which is essentially a record of the number and type of rounds fired and of the repairs made to the weapon. Unfortunately none survives for 9168. In fact, only one history sheet survives for the first batch of 18-pounders. For that reason the gun itself, the *material evidence*, must be used to supplement the historical record. As the anniversary of the Civil War and the hand-over of the 18-pounders approaches, the significance of 9168 becomes more relevant, so to augment its story it is necessary to extract as much information as possible from the piece during the restoration/preservation project. There will, of course, be limits to the amount and type of information that the gun will divulge, but already the data accumulated from markings on its many components have shown something about the way the weapon was manufactured.

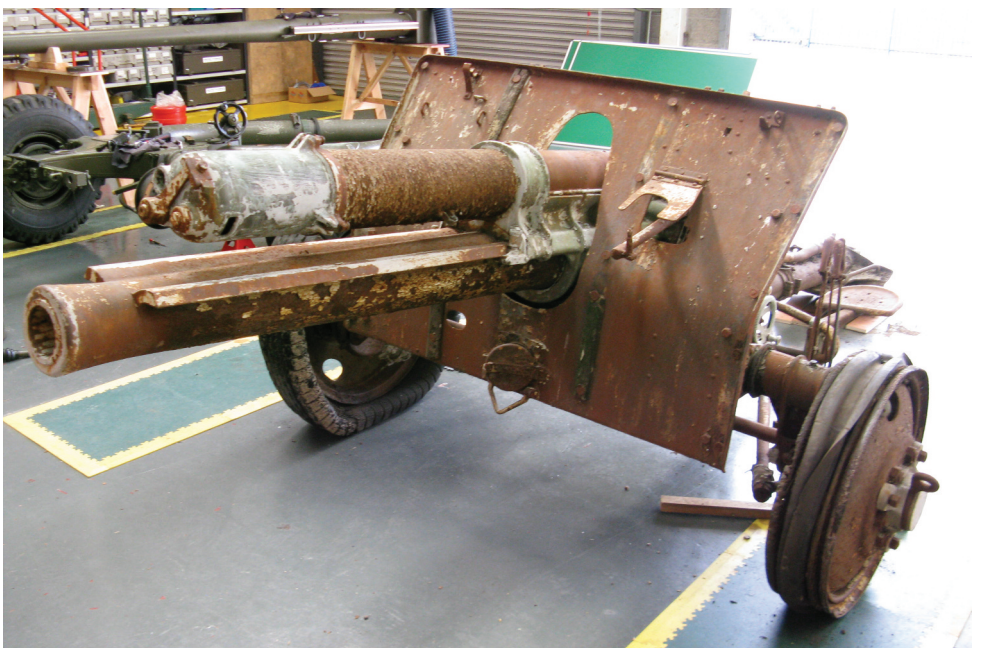
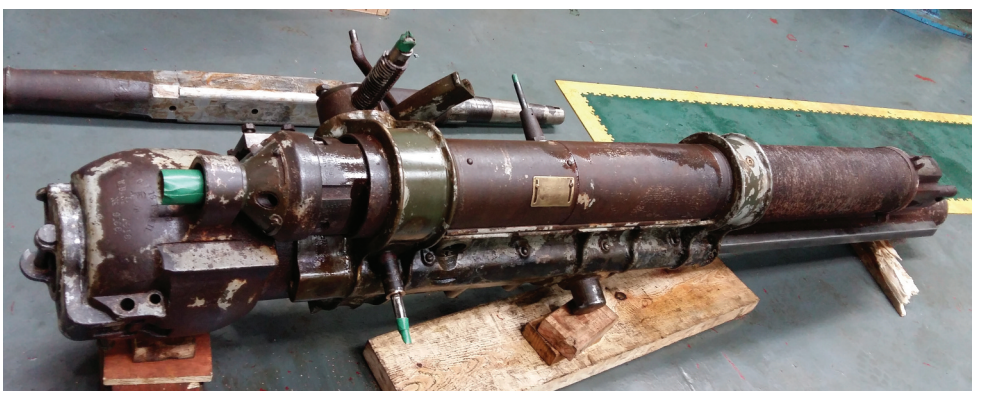


Table 1—The various factories where parts for the 18-pounder were manufactured.

Identification marking	Factory	Place
VSM	Vickers, Sons and Maxim	Barrow-in-Furnace
EOC	Elswick Ordnance Company	Newcastle-upon-Tyne
RGF	Royal Gun Factory	Woolwich
WB & Co.	William Beardmore and Co.	Glasgow
HH & Co.	Hicks Hargreaves and Co.	Bolton

To date, the weapon has been almost completely disassembled. Nearly all of its components are marked with the manufacturer's name and the year of production, and many are stamped with the Reg. No. C14010. At least five factories from all over Britain contributed to the manufacture of the gun (see Table 1) with parts that were produced between 1908 and 1921. Interestingly, the Reg. No. only appears on Vickers, Sons and Maxim parts and it is likely to have been the number used by that factory, but its frequency and appearance on even the smallest parts suggests that it was designated during production. A great number of parts are also marked 'QF 13 Pdr & 18 Pdr', demonstrating the interchangeability of components between both types of quick-firing gun. The range of numbers, letters and symbols stamped on various parts may be connected with the manufacturing process and will require further analysis (Fig. 4).

As the weapon was dismantled, a number of small sections of weld were revealed around the carriage body. This large, box-like structure supports the gun-barrel and cradle and is made of heavy steel plates riveted together. At some stage it must have been considered necessary to strengthen the structure, perhaps when the Martin Parry conversion kit replaced the timber wheels in 1939. This theory is supported by the evidence of a similar section of weld on the axle where the pneumatic wheeled system was mounted. In reality, however, the welds are of such poor quality that they served no purpose, and it is the rivets that have held the piece together since the day of manufacture. A weld securing the breech-block in the breech-ring (the only other weld on the gun) was of a higher quality than those on the carriage body and is the only—albeit rudimentary—sign that the weapon was decommissioned. Ken Smith-Christmas, who first recognised the gun as an Irish piece, has written about the Irish army Lewis machine-guns that were sold as part of the same shipment as the 18-pounders, and he has found that the Lewis guns were decommissioned only after they arrived in the United States. It is likely, therefore, that the 18-pounder's breech was welded around the same time. The weld on 9168 has been removed, and with some perseverance the breech-block, which was completely seized owing to corrosion, has been opened for the first time in 50 years, essentially reversing decommissioning (Fig. 5).



Conservation and display

Something of the high rainfall and humidity levels in Virginia was apparent in the amount of moisture that leached from between the plates on the carriage body even though the body itself appeared dry. If this was not dealt with, corrosion would have continued in this inaccessible part of the weapon, so as part of the general treatment process parts are being desiccated carefully using heat to remove any residual moisture. It is, of course, necessary to paint the steel parts straight away to protect them, and unpainted bare steel parts like the breech-block will be treated with a protective coating. The gun will be painted in the dark green Royal Artillery livery in which it was handed over in 1922 and in which it remained until 1926. For display it will be fitted with timber wheels and appear as it did in 1922. The Martin Parry conversion kit fitted in 1939 was an important part of the gun's history, however, and it will be displayed alongside the gun, painted Irish army grey. Small sections of the original grey paint and even smaller areas of Royal Artillery green have survived on the gun's cradle and carriage, and care is being taken to ensure that they are preserved under the new coat of paint. Sven Habermann has analysed a sample of the original grey paint and found only one layer, which indicates that earlier coats may have been stripped before the grey was applied (Fig. 6).

There were some surprises, too. It has been 50 years or more since an artificer carried out maintenance on the gun, yet some of the internal components in gearboxes and on the road gear were completely untouched by moisture, in near-perfect condition and still

Top left: **Fig. 5—The light shines through the barrel for the first time in 50 years. The breech-block was welded in place, and even when the weld was removed it took a huge effort to get the breech open. The remains of a timber barrel plug had worked its way down between the threads of the breech-block.**

Left: **Fig. 6—The 18-pounder barrel, cradle and recoil system, from the right side. Some of the original Royal Artillery green paint is visible on the upper part of the cradle (left of centre). It took a huge amount of work to disassemble the gun to this stage.**

Left: **Fig. 7—The 18-pounder's elevation gearbox with cover removed. Some of the original grease is still inside. The poor condition of the gun is very apparent.**

Below: **Fig. 8—Fighting in the area of the Four Courts: two Free State 18-pounders in action on Winetavern Street** (NLI NPA ASG 11; courtesy of the National Library of Ireland).

covered with grease (Fig. 7). The timber on the shield did not fare so well, however. Originally there were four of these ash braces to strengthen the bulletproof shield on the front of the gun, but very little remains of them. They were held on with large flat-headed rivets that are still in place. Although it would be easier to replace these rivets along with the new timber slats, the general ethos of the project demands that a less destructive approach be adopted. For that reason the new timberwork will have to be made to fit around the 100-year-old rivets—a considerable task and one that shows the importance of an objective assessment of the artefact for minimising damage and preserving as much of the original piece as possible for display.

Whilst it is true that most of the data retrieved from the practical side of the project relate only to the manufacture of the gun, a number of distinctive features have come to light that might help to pick out 9168 in newsreel footage and photographs from the Civil War period (Fig. 8). As a Mark II 18-pounder it mounted a distinctive type of recoil system. So far it has been easier to use this information to eliminate the operations in which 9168 did not serve. These include the battle for Limerick City and the subsequent engagements around Kilmallock and Adare, as well as the Passage West landings and the fight for Cork City. It is possible to narrow the field further by a typological style analysis of 18-pounder shields. It seems that 9168 and some of the other Irish guns differ from other (possibly earlier) 18-pounders in having the brackets for storing the aiming posts on the upper part of the shield rather than lower down beneath the barrel aperture. Details like this (some may call it rivet-counting) may make a trawl through photographs and newsreel footage worthwhile, while at the same time it is hoped that documentary evidence may make this trawl unnecessary.

Conclusions

Ordnance technicians are not archaeologists and 9168 is a historical rather than an archaeological artefact, but OBW technicians can appreciate the value of applying archaeological research methods to a task such as this project. The practical side and the research side are apparent on the workshop floor and at the research desk, and there are well-established formulae for technicians who are familiar with the collection and analysis of data and the employment of a 'technical' artefact—usually a weapon or weapon part—to uncover material evidence when problem-solving. The advice and guidance from outside experts have been invaluable during the project and help to keep the conservation of the piece as one of the primary goals. As the project enters the rebuilding phase, it is hoped that the gun itself will continue to yield some more secrets and, as interest in the project gains momentum, the combination of artefact and archive might yet uncover the full history of 9168.

References

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