

## **The origin of the Maiwand Lion Sculpture, by William Gill, August 1880**

### **AFTER MAIWAND**

On 20th August 1880, William Gill embarked on his next mission, initially by rail to Brindisi in southern Italy and thence by ship to India and Afghanistan. It was prompted by news of the British defeat at Maiwand, less than a month earlier.

*Left Charing Cross by the 4.30 train, went to Dover in company of Beaumont and English who are engaged in boring the Channel tunnel. Met Mrs English at Dover.*

*Drove up to 4 Victoria Park where Mrs Ormonde lives with her daughter Mrs St. John. Dined with them so as to be able to take the latest news to Candehar [Qandahar]. Was glad to be able to show Mrs St. John my defence of her husband in 'Vanity Fair'. [Lt. Col. Oliver St. John had fought at Maiwand and was subsequently appointed political agent for southern Afghanistan.]*

*Left this house at 9.30 after a pleasant dinner. Got on board well before the mails and passengers. I had ordered a private cabin a week ago. The night was glorious, a fresh cool wind and brilliant moon. There was a little sea but I settled in comfort, as Dover cliffs grew dim and I left England with all that it holds.*



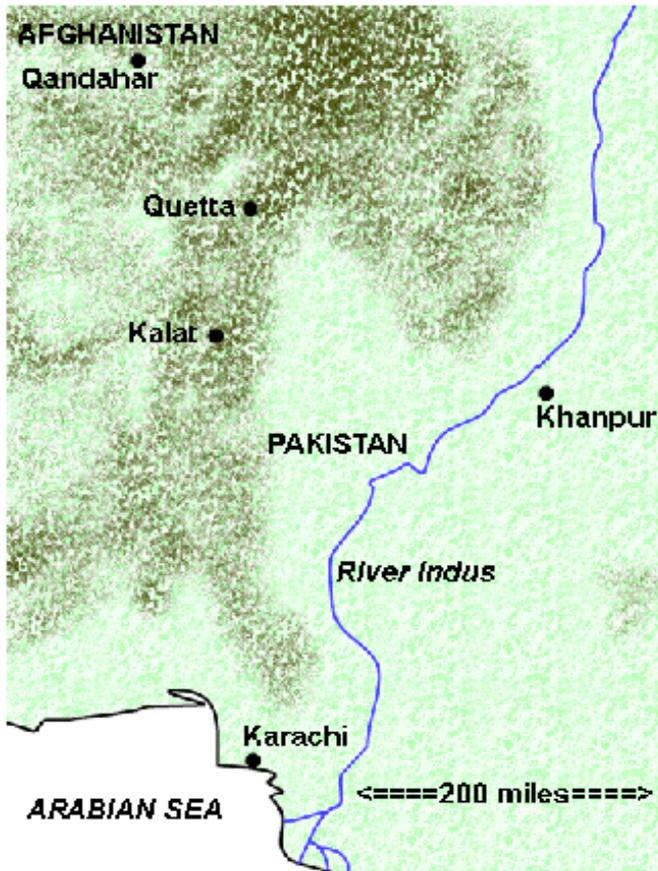
*Dover, 1880*

So, what had happened at Maiwand? Early in July 1880, Brigadier George Burrows had led two brigades, together comprising some 2,700 British and Indian troops, from Qandahar in southern Afghanistan. This was to support 6,000 supposedly pro-British Afghan tribesmen in suppressing a rebellious attempt to usurp the pro-British Amir of Afghanistan. But most of the tribesmen mutinied and on 27th July, a little north of Kushk-i-Nahku, the battle of Maiwand took place. 2,566 British and Indian forces were defeated by ten times as many Afghans. The British suffered 1,123 casualties, most of which were fatalities.

Although grossly outnumbered, and with many young recruits who had not completed weapons training, the British and Indian soldiers fought with extraordinary bravery. They inflicted more than 7,000 casualties on the Afghans, who took a week to clear the battlefield of their dead. The young soldiers of the 66th Regiment of Foot, later the Royal Berkshires, fought to the last man. They are commemorated in Berkshire's county town, Reading, by what is said to be the largest lion monument in the world, a 31 foot long sculpture by George Blackall Simonds.

The survivors took refuge at Qandahar, 45 miles from the battlefield, and were subsequently besieged by the Afghans. But, by the time William Gill reached Quetta, 120 miles to the southeast, General Sir

Frederick Roberts had relieved Qandahar after an epic march of 320 miles in 23 days with 10,000 men from Kabol (Kabul).



Map showing Indus valley with parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan

Looking for useful employment, Captain Gill joined the ‘well-conducted but almost bloodless’ expedition of Sir Charles Macgregor against the Maris in what is now Pakistan. Macgregor was an old Afghan hand, quartermaster general of India and the compiler of the Gazetteer of Central Asia. William Gill served him as a survey officer and was mentioned in despatches. Macgregor wrote:

*Gill came out to Quetta, just as my brigade was going off, and I was very glad to take him with me. He undertook and carried out in the most conscientious manner a survey of the country we went over, and though this was of itself a sufficiently laborious task for any man, he was always ready to lend a hand where he could be useful; he did many times prove of great assistance to me, and in my Despatch I mentioned being specially indebted to him.*

*...He was a great favourite with the whole force, and I am sure I have met few men of whom I have had such a high opinion. As a subordinate I know how reliable he was, and I always felt that if his day ever came he would not shine less as a commander.*

On 25th September 1880, only two months after Maiwand, Captain Gill wrote of the Afghan view of the battle:

*They say that the defeat of Khushk-i Nakhud (Maiwand) was all but a victory. Ayub Khan [the rebel Afghan leader] wrote a letter, and it said it was the most desperate battle ever fought in Afghanistan; the letter was far from being boastful. There is no doubt that if ---- had not kept the cavalry under fire for hours doing nothing, and thus demoralised them, they would have been able to charge, and so counteract the attack of the Ghazis on our left flank.*

Eleven days later, on 6th October, Gill was at the railway at Kotali, on the hills between Quetta and Sibi, construction of which was abandoned when the news of Maiwand arrived:

*There is about a mile of railway laid here, and a locomotive stands on it which the Maris tried to destroy. They have, however, burnt all the woodwork of it, and the few carriages that were there. The scene of desolation is really shameful. Here is a photograph book, there a dozen or so novels, the remains of a printing press, the telescope of a theodolite, half a box of cigars (spoilt); a packet of letters picked up by St. V.; Colonel L's chest of drawers, or rather the remains of it, lie on the ground; broken wheelbarrows, chairs, tables, wash-hand-stands, strew the ground. The General looted a pewter pot. And the amount of stationery and printed forms everywhere is astonishing; they fairly litter the road for miles.*

Next day they reached the scene of nearby fighting:

*We continue our march down the river; the scene of wreck and ruin being more apparent than ever; broken carts and wheelbarrows; broken-open cartridge-boxes and cash-boxes, old portmanteaus, quantities of books – novels, books of poetry, the 'Polite Letter Writer'(!), mathematical tables, engineers' books, — and then the scene of the fight with a couple of grinning skulls to remind one of the disgraceful disaster.*

Five days later, on his brother Robert's birthday, 12th October, William Gill was near Kalat-i-Kila in the Central Brahui mountains, about 80 miles south of Quetta. Untypically, he indulged in a bit of looting:

*I found a table lying about, everyone had gone, and all their property. It was a table I did not recognise, and was smaller than most. This was a sore temptation. Good people say you should resist temptation. I did not even try. I am a bold bad man! I bid the muleteer put the table on top of my box. It is a beautiful table; I am a thief and I feel no remorse whatever. I took the table to camp; I asked several people if it was theirs (carefully selecting those who would I knew reply in the negative). Then I felt my bosom swell with pride at the excess of my honesty! Anyhow, I've got the table and intend to stick to it. If anyone claims it, I shall swear he's a liar. I shall ask him if he wants to impugn my honour, I shall look fierce and draw my sword!*

Five weeks later, near the end of his duties with Macgregor, William Gill was on the edge of the Thar desert in the Indus valley:

*Get up at 6 and started about 7. The air was very fresh but very damp, owing to the proximity of the mighty stream of Indus. ... We determined to ride straight in and breakfast at the Railway Station, Kahnpur. I never enjoyed a ride more; of course it was over the perfectly flat plain, but after the dreary descents of Baluchistan, the plain of Bhawalpur looked a very garden, though people from India look on it more or less as a howling wilderness. There were nice villages ensconced in trees, large Ber trees, Babuls, and date-palms – plains of rich green grass; sugar-cane, khets, and rice fields spoke of peace and a peaceful quiet rule. It was indeed refreshing, and quite raised our spirits to see the fine large villages, the ryots at work with their ploughs, the many travellers on the roads, all of whom salaam, or give a pleasant answer to the usual enquiry of 'how far off?' The very droning of the Persian wheels, monotonous noise though it may be, was pleasant enough, for it spoke of irrigation and fruitful fields, industry and prosperity.*

After the Mari mission, William Gill still had some leave. Without rest, he set out on another daring solo journey. On 4th December 1880, he embarked at Karachi in Sind, now part of Pakistan, on the Arabian Sea at the northwest edge of the Indus delta, and sailed through the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz to Bandar-e 'Abbas in southern Persia. He then travelled overland northwest across Persia via Sirjan, Kerman, Yazd to Tehran, and then east to Mashhad, where he had been with Baker in 1873.

William Gill hoped to reach Marv in Turkmenistan. However, Russia was in the process of acquiring this territory and Nicholas de Giers of the Russian foreign ministry complained to London about the presence of English officers on the frontier. Gill was therefore recalled to London.



*The Kremlin, Moscow*

He returned via Russia, leaving Tbilisi, Georgia on 24th March, reaching Moscow on 28th March and arrived back in London on 1st April 1881. Typical of Gill's precise approach, this was the very day on which his leave expired. Tired though he may have been, he dined with his family that night, having of course advised them by telegraph of his impending arrival.

This article is compliments of a now defunct website, Hadland/Gill:

## **Maiwand Lion – Forbury Gardens, Reading**

The Maiwand Lion, shown in this pre-1910 postcard, is named after a small village in Afghanistan, where 328 men from the 66<sup>th</sup> (Berkshire) regiment died on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1880. This was during Britain's last major military involvement in Afghanistan before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

The Battle of Maiwand was part of a British campaign to stop Russian influence in Afghanistan, as this threatened British control of India. In 1880 British and Indian troops stationed in Kandahar were sent to oppose an army led by Ayoub Khan, the brother of Afghanistan's deposed ruler. The British force, led by General Burrows, had to secure the Maiwand Pass in order to stop Ayoub's advance on Kabul.

Burrow's force of 2,565 men was slowed by high temperatures and a baggage train of 2,500 animals carrying supplies. Ayoub had over 6000 men, the advantage of local knowledge and good strategic positions. Despite British attempts, their lines were broken and the majority of the British were forced to retreat in disarray to Kandahar. Casualties were high with 44% of the British forces killed.

The battle inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to base Doctor Watson in his Sherlock Holmes books, on the Regiment's Medical Officer. Watson describes in "A Study in Scarlet" how he was shot while attending to a fallen soldier at Maiwand.

The 31-foot lion was sculpted by George Blackall Simonds, and unveiled in December 1886. The pedestal was originally faced with terracotta but was refaced with stone in 1910.

Text - compliments of Reading Museum.