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PLYMOUTH – The Guernsey cannons were a symbolic gesture; you could argue a ceremonial one. They symbolized two nations coming together after conflicts rent them asunder – a child reunited with its parent.

The warlike nature of the cannon was transformed into the peaceful nature of a communal pipe – a long, metal peace pipe, if you will.
The story begins with the Pilgrim Separatists who brought cannons with them to the New World to protect the colony. They were positioned at the plantation’s fort on what is now Burial Hill.

Time passed, and those cannons wound up melted down and transformed into more useful tools during the Revolutionary War, to help America cut ties with the Mother Country where they were forged.

In 1920, England’s Honourable Artillery Company sent two more cannons to Plymouth as a gesture of friendship to honor the 300th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower.

Today, one of these two remains, lurking behind glass in Pilgrim Hall Museum. Cast in 1545, the minion, as it was called, is crowned with a Tudor rose and the initials “MR” for Maria Regina, to honor Queen Mary.

A plan is afoot to recast the second cannon for Plymouth’s 400th Commemoration in 2020.

Lt. John Mitchell of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts said his group is working with the Honourable Artillery Company of London to complete this project.

Deputy Commander Jeremy Wall and Staff Officer Sylvia Wall of Britain’s Honourable Artillery Company paid a visit to Pilgrim Hall Tuesday to view the minion cannon, on display there, and to prepare for its annual ceremonial parade with its sister organization Monday in Boston.

So, who and what are these companies?

In 1537, King Henry VIII created the Honourable Artillery Company through royal charter to help keep the peace. It is the second oldest military corps in the world. Then, in 1637, Massachusetts Bay Colony applied to England for a similar charter, and was granted it in 1638, when the charter was signed by Gov. John Winthrop.

Mitchell explained the relationship between the two groups.

“The original militia within Mass. Bay Colony was unorganized and they didn’t have specific leadership,” Mitchell said. “One of the things the Honourable Artillery Company specialized in was training. The members of the Ancient Honorable Artillery Company, at that point, were all previous members of the Honourable Artillery Company of London, who were in Mass. Bay at the time.”
Jeremy Wall noted that the London company rolled constabulary duties into its fold after World War I when a climate of unrest descended on London.

“So, basically, after the first World War, a lot of soldiers came back and there were riots and disorder in the streets,” Sylvia Wall said. “So Lord Denbigh (who was colonel commandant of the Honourable Artillery Company) said, ‘Alright, we need to develop a police force,’ and rallied a call for all these returning soldiers to go out on the street and keep civil obedience. That’s where the police force of the Honourable Artillery was born 100 years ago and this year is our centenary anniversary.”

“We fall under the organization of the City of London Police,” Jeremy Wall added. “We are generalist police officers. This is just in addition to those duties, so we’re all fully warranted police officers and we do all of that, but we do this as well. We give the Honourable Artillery Company special attention.”

Both companies have been active since their inception, Mitchell explained, and have worked together over the years on various projects, joining one another in ceremonial events, such as the one in Boston Monday, and other programs that keep their shared history alive and breathing. They have been in contact with one another for years, he added, but the Revolutionary War cast a bit of a pall on the relationship that chilled it until 1909 when the two groups reunited.

“It’s OK; we’re over it,” Jeremy Wall said, as the room broke out in laughter.

“It took them a while to get over it and to become friends with the Ancients again,” Mitchell explained. “Of course, our history – our origins – don’t exist without the Honourable Artillery Company of London.”

Pilgrim Hall Executive Director Donna Curtin noted that the latest collaboration between the two companies is a revisiting of these cannons. In 1920, as was stated, the Honourable Artillery Company of London facilitated a gift of the two cannons from a castle in Guernsey to Plymouth.

Guernsey is one of the Channel Islands and what is known as a “self-governing British Crown dependency.” A saker (a cannon type) and a minion cannon from this Guernsey castle were given to Plymouth in 1920 for the 300th anniversary commemoration, since the original cannons the Pilgrims brought over had long since gone. These two cannons dated to the 16th century and seemed an appropriate gift. In time, the saker was sent
back to Guernsey, and its sister cannon, the minion, remained behind in Plymouth where it is currently behind glass at Pilgrim Hall Museum.

“Because of the fact that the minion is here, the plan would be to replicate the saker,” Mitchell said. “Then you would have two original cannons back in Plymouth. The plan is to cast this in bronze in the hope you’ll get a thousand years out of it.”

Mitchell noted that funds have already changed hands and a foundry in the United States located for the casting. He said he’s working with the executive director at Guernsey castle to develop a 3D image of the saker cannon so it can be replicated exactly.

This collaboration is partnering with Plymouth 400 Inc. to make the town’s 400th Commemoration all the more enriching, historic and, well, friendly. This commemoration of the Mayflower landing in Plymouth is a coming together of voices – from the Wampanoag to the Pilgrim, to the English to the American to the Dutch. Leaders of the various 400 groups concur that the aim is for harmony – a chorus of love among nations that will echo down the ages.

For these history buffs, cannons can, indeed, be transformed into peace pipes.