

Artillery Clerks' Association Celebrates Silver Anniversary

As a vibrant and active branch of The Royal Artillery Association, the Artillery Clerks' Association reached a significant milestone in 2023 with a celebration of its silver anniversary.

The Association Committee started planning for this anniversary over two years ago; from the outset the Committee made a conscious decision to swap confetti and cake for a newly commissioned piece of silverware and creating lasting memories.

About the Artillery Clerks

The designation of "the Artillery Clerks' Section" was first made under Army Order 54 of 1903 and remained in force until the establishment of the Adjutant's General Corps in 1992. Having proudly served the Royal Regiment of Artillery for 83 years, the cohort of Artillery Clerks were required to change their cap badge and allegiance, and complete their individual service chiefly within the Staff and Personnel Support arm of the newly formed Corps.

All Artillery Clerks were enlisted primarily as Artillerymen before being selected to assume the vital administrative and personnel support duties within the various Headquarters, Field and Training Regiments of the Royal Regiment of Artillery. They served with loyalty and personal pride, supporting and sustaining others as enthusiastic members of the Gunner family around the world in peacetime and on active service.

From after World War Two, the status of Artillery Clerk was only bestowed on soldiers in the Royal Artillery who attained the educational and clerical grades in the rank of Sergeant through to Warrant Officer Class 1, and this became the norm from the 1950s. This unique privilege served to create a special bond which exists to this day.

The Artillery Clerks' Association was formed at the Royal Artillery Barracks, Woolwich Garrison, on 7th March 1998. Providing a focal point for its members, it is essentially an old comrades association of former Artillery Clerks, either serving or retired, promoting comradeship among its members as well as emotional and financial support to members and widows in need. Each year the Association holds reunions in the UK and Germany.

The new silver centrepiece -- from flash to bang

At its AGM of 2022, the Association members unanimously decided that the most fitting way to provide a permanent and visible commemorative reminder of the Association

and, at the same time, honour the service of the thousands of Artillery Clerks since 1903, would be to commission a silver centrepiece to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Association and 120 years since the inception of the Artillery Clerks' Section in 1903.

After collating all the ideas which flooded in from Association members, the Association Committee started to create a concept design. A small project team was formed, and an ambitious fundraising campaign targeting Association members, grant-giving trusts and foundations was launched. The project team took delivery of the new silver centrepiece on 11th June 2023, a few days before it was unveiled by Lt Gen Sir Andrew Gregory KBE, CD, DL, Master Gunner St James's Park, on 24th June 24, at the Association's annual reunion dinner held in the Royal Artillery Warrant Officers' and Sergeants' Mess at Larkhill.



In his letter of thanks to the silversmiths, the Association Chair wrote: “The Association is indebted to you and your team – we have successfully worked together to create a centrepiece which has given the Association the wonderful opportunity of adding further to the heritage of the Royal Regiment of Artillery - something that is very close to our hearts.”

Reunion weekend

On Thursday 22nd June, a small party of Association members decided to kick off the weekend of celebrations in London by meeting initially for pre-dinner drinks at the warm and welcoming Union Jack Club bar, close to Waterloo Station,

In contrast, a short distance away, in the heart of Covent Garden, the party adjourned for dinner at the iconic Sarastro Restaurant in Drury Lane, famous for its opulent décor and flamboyant food. The energising ambience encouraged several to ‘throw some shapes’ on the dance floor, which may have come as a bit of a shock to the other much younger patrons that evening (names of those involved have been withheld to protect the innocent!). The evening was rounded off with an obligatory visit to another pub in Covent Garden before regrouping at the convivial and somewhat cheaper bar at the Union Jack Club for nightcaps.

In line with the usual reunion weekend programme, the party reconvened the next day at the Royal Artillery Warrant Officers’ and Sergeants’ Mess at Larkhill, joining forces with the majority of Association members who assembled to launch the weekend celebrations in earnest. Many had travelled from overseas to attend this unique anniversary weekend: Peter and Rose Gauci from Malta, Rich and Rikke Nichol from Denmark, Ian Constantine from Brittany, Steve Beard from the Isle of Man, and Ron Holmes and Hauke Michelson from Germany.

Friday night in the Mess is, for many, the highlight of the weekend as comrades enjoy the opportunity to catch up and chat as only old gunners can; to renew friendships going back many decades; to recount anecdotes of service life in the Sixties through to the present day. Marty Hester, one of the senior members, recalled at length his experience of service in the Korean war! As always, the Mess staff were very welcoming, friendly and courteous.

The absence of service accommodation in barracks due to a refurbishment project did not adversely affect attendance. Many stayed overnight in various hotels and guesthouses close to Larkhill. Roy Deal, the Reunion Secretary, earned his spurs by

providing the 'recce' transport to and from the hotels with his usual efficiency and an ever-present smile.

Saturday morning was taken up by a guided tour of the Officers' Mess and Regimental Silver, expertly narrated by 2nd Lt Christian Hedicker RHA. It was a fascinating and highly educational, not to say entertaining tour, which kept everyone enthralled; Christian's efforts were very much appreciated. Any future tours will ensure that a close eye is kept on Hauke after his attempts to reclaim some German artefacts from the silver collections.

The unveiling

The reunion dinner was preceded by the unveiling of the new silver centrepiece by the Master Gunner St James's Park. The Association Chair, Lt Col Joe Falzon, started by thanking the project team for their outstanding professionalism and the members and honorary members who supported the project with their donations. In particular, he highlighted the individual contributions of Maj Paul Corker (Treasurer), former WO1 (SSM) Andy Tibble (Secretary and Co-ordinator), former SSgt Robbie (AC) Astick (Trust Fundraiser) and former SSgt Leo Lyall (Artist and Designer).



The Association Chair added that the project team worked in close and harmonious collaboration with the creative team and professional craftspeople of Silver Lady to turn the original ideas, aspirations and vision into reality. Without a doubt, Leon Lyall takes full credit for the outstanding original designs which incorporated the many proposals from Association members. These designs were the foundation for what is now a striking and impressive centrepiece. The Chair concluded by highlighting the fact that the centrepiece, among other features, keeps alive the memory of several former Artillery Clerks.

The unexpected and much appreciated success of the fundraising appeal means that the Association was able to donate £1,000 from the surplus funds to the Royal Artillery Charitable Fund – the Association's charity of choice.



Presentation of a cheque for £1000 by Mr Roy Deal to Col Matthew Carter RAA

The accompanying photographs clearly show that the silver centrepiece is quite simply stunning. This sentiment was echoed by our special guests: The Master Gunner St James's Park, Lt Gen Richard Nugee CB, CVO, CBE (Hon. President), Lt Gen Sir Freddie Viggers KCB, CMG, MBE, DL (Past Hon President), Maj Gen Peter Currie CB, CBE (Past Hon President), Lt Col Andrew McDermott MBE (CO 14 Regt), WO1(RSM) Gemma Begley (RSM 14 Regt) and WO2(BSM) Ryan Zietsman (BSM 34 (Seringapatam) Bty – the Associations' affiliated Bty).

The silver centrepiece now provides a permanent commemorative reminder of the Association and the service of its members, especially the value and high regard with which Artillery Clerks were held by their fellow Gunners, officers and soldiers alike. This singular historic flagship will be securely housed, displayed and maintained with other regimental artifacts in the Royal Artillery Warrant Officers' and Sergeants' Mess at Larkhill.

The dinner

Befitting the occasion, this was the first reunion dinner to which partners were invited. The ladies were most welcome and ensured conversation flowed freely on a whole range of topics. As we always expect, but never take for granted, the food and wine supplied by the Mess staff during the evening was first class and reminiscent of many a Sergeants' Mess dinner night of the past. A special mention must go to the Mess staff both in front and behind the scenes who do so much every year to make our reunion weekends and dinners so enjoyable.

Our thanks also go to the Sandhurst Band Musical Quartet who played during the meal. They did an excellent job, providing a wide and varied programme of music, with a fantastic rendition of the post horn gallop as a particular highlight.

Following the Loyal Toast and toasts to the Ladies and Absent Friends, we were treated to some entertaining speeches from our Association Chair and the Master Gunner St James's Park before retiring to the bar to finish off a remarkable evening.

In all, a total of 62 Association members, guests and partners sat down to enjoy a splendid dinner which was a very fitting celebration of our 25 years as an Association and provided us with a night to remember for a very long time, with, of course, a spectacular silver centrepiece.



There were many highlights worth mentioning from the weekend:

Mike Hutchinson, a former member of the Rocket Troop in 2nd Fd Regt, particularly enjoyed his visit to the Congreve Room in the Officers' Mess. In one of the many coincidences we encounter so much in the gunner family, one of our Past Hon Presidents, Maj Gen Peter Currie, was also Mike's Commanding Officer when Mike was

Chief Clerk 12 AD Regt; and a 2nd Lt when Mike was Gunner Clerk in 2 Fd Regt in the early Seventies.

The announcement that the Association Standard would be paraded at the Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall on 11th November 2023 was the icing on the cake, confirming the high standing and prestige of the Association.



It was good to see nine of the members who attended the first dinner in 1998 gather again for a group photograph 25 years later – they were (front row): Leon Lyall, Marty Hester, Joe Falzon (Chair), Dave Stotan, Dennis Norris; (back row): Michael Regan, Mick Grenham, Ron Holmes and Geoff Hyatt.

Finally, thank you to all the original members who created the Association for the indelible mark they left 25 years ago and for the values they instilled, which current members have kept true in their working and retired lives throughout these years.

We now look forward to the next 25 years of our Association and to Larkhill 2024 for our next reunion weekend.

**Authors: Former WO1 (SSM) Mike Hutchinson and SSgt (AC) Robbie Astick
July 2023**