

**Photographs**  
**by the**  
**Photograph School of the**  
**Bengal Sappers & Miners**

Photographs taken in Afghanistan during the Campaigns of 1878-79 and 1879-80

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## **Introduction**

### **The Photograph School of the Bengal Sappers and Miners**

The photographs catalogued here were taken by the “Photograph School” of the Bengal Sappers and Miners (BS&M) during the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-1880. This war took place in two distinct phases; the Photograph School was involved in both phases, but was only ever in the northern sector of Afghanistan. Late in our study of their photographs we came across a printed list; “Photograph School, Sappers & Miners: Photographs taken in Afghanistan during the campaigns of 1878-79 and 1879-80.”<sup>1</sup> This lists 64 photographs taken in 1878 -79 and 89 photographs taken in 1879-80. This might not represent all that were ever taken, but it has tallied well with what we have been finding, with one or two exceptions.

In the Second Anglo-Afghan War there are three main sources of photographs: those by a civilian professional photographer, John Burke; those by the Bengal Sappers and Miners; and those by Sir Benjamin Simpson (who should not be confused with the artist for *The Illustrated London News*, William Simpson, and was in the Kandahar region only). In addition, there exist some photographs by a photographic firm, Bourne & Shepherd, which were taken during the first phase in the Kurram valley and at the Peiwar Kotal on the Afghan border. This catalogue is solely dealing with the photographs taken by the Bengal Sappers and Miners.

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<sup>1</sup> National Library of Scotland, Acc. No. 6837: Dundas of Ochertyre family papers (Michael Allan Collection) 7. Photographs of scenes of Afghanistan during the campaigns of 1878-1880.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Royal Engineers appreciated the advantages of photography as an adjunct to survey, as a record of engineering work, and as a means of copying maps and plans. The earliest use of it by Royal Engineers on a campaign was in the Crimean War, but no trace of the photographic work undertaken there appears to have survived.<sup>2</sup> Photography was taught at the School of Military Engineering at Chatham from 1856, after four non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the Royal Sappers and Miners had been given instruction in London.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear when a Photograph School was first established with the Bengal Sappers and Miners in India, but in the late 1860s three NCOs from the school at Chatham were sent to India to photograph an eclipse, so it may have been some time after that.<sup>4</sup>

The group from the Photograph School of the Bengal Sappers and Miners that went on this campaign probably consisted of one or two British NCOs, with Indian assistants, from the main base of the Bengal Sappers and Miners at Roorkee. The first specific mention of them comes in a RE Institute paper dealing with the first phase of the war:

*“The photograph school accompanied the Corps throughout, and a number of views, &c., were taken, which appear to have been generally appreciated.\* There was some want of energy in this department at first, but it afterwards worked satisfactorily.”*

*“\*These views were shewn at the Annual Exhibition of Photographs in London, 1879.”<sup>5</sup>*

The “want of energy” may have been partly alleviated by advice from the experienced civilian professional photographer, John Burke, who also travelled in the northern sector and who took many photographs in similar locations as those taken by the Photograph School. John Burke’s photographs had a much wider circulation than those of the BS&M, as they were catalogued by him and placed on sale at that time; they are well known and documented. At least one of the BS&M photographs, taken at Jalalabad [RE 029], is unlike the others and has all the attributes of one of Burke’s photographs, as if he was there giving advice. In two other group pictures, taken in Jalalabad, [RE 032 and RE 033] the arrangement of the people shows clearly the sort of instruction that might have been given by J. Burke. In general, the improved quality of the images taken during the second phase of the war could reflect Burke’s advice.

The exhibition, referred to in the footnote above, was the annual exhibition of the Photographic Society of Great Britain, held in London in October-November 1879. A note in *The Royal Engineer Journal* at that time explains that, in addition to photographs from the School of Military Engineering that were being exhibited:

*“Some very fine photographic views taken by the R.E. in Afghanistan, were received by the Secretary of the R.E. Institute too late to have them framed and sent in for hanging, but they were mounted and sent to the exhibition to lie on the table. They consist of a series of some 50 views of Jellalabad and the neighbourhood, and of the Khyber Pass.”<sup>6</sup>*

An album of their photographs in the National Army Museum has on its cover “*Photographs taken during the First Afghan Expedition Nov 1878 to June 1879 by Q.M. Serg. White, B.S.&M.*”<sup>7</sup> White gets a further mention in an article about the operations of the Bengal Sappers and Miners in the Gandamak area in the autumn of 1979.

<sup>2</sup> John Falconer, 'Photography and the Royal Engineers', *Photographic Collector*, Autumn 1981, pp. 33-64.

<sup>3</sup> Connolly, T.W.J., *History of the Royal Sappers and Miners*, RE Library Edition, Chatham 1992, Vol. II, p.169.

<sup>4</sup> Head, Sir Francis B., *The Royal Engineer*, London, 1869, p. 223.

<sup>5</sup> *RE Institute Occasional Papers*, Vol. IV, 1880, Paper 11, “Engineering Operations of 1<sup>st</sup> Division, Peshawar Valley Field Force, 1878-79”, p. 161.

<sup>6</sup> *The Royal Engineers Journal*, Chatham, November 1<sup>st</sup> 1879, p. 213.

<sup>7</sup> National Army Museum album PHO 1979-04-79.

*“Conductor White, in charge of the photographic department, took some views of the country, but his work was interrupted owing to a telegram from Lieut-General Sir F. Roberts from Kabul, directing the photographic equipment to be sent to Kabul, in order that views might be taken of the Bala Hissar and the Sherpur cantonment.”<sup>8</sup>*

‘Conductor’ was a rank given to some warrant officers of the Bengal Sappers and Miners when they were deployed on civil works. It might be that, because of the unusual nature of his work on this campaign, he was given this rank then. He and his team must have moved to Kabul in November 1879.

Joshua Duke, a surgeon serving in the war, wrote in his book, *Recollections of the Kabul Campaign*, that some of his illustrations had been drawn “from photographs taken by No. 7 Company of Sappers and Miners at Kabul”. We have no evidence that 7 Company had its own photographic equipment but, as it was at first the only company of the Sappers and Miners in Kabul, it is highly likely that the team from the Photograph School was billeted with them and came under their administrative control.

The use of photographs as a basis for engravings was very common, as many of Burke’s photographs show. Several were published by *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* in the form of very detailed engravings, as the reproduction of photographs in larger quantities wasn’t possible at this time. In addition, the artists could emphasize important details in the engraving which were hardly recognizable on the photograph and omit marginal parts. This fact becomes clearly visible in the drawings made after photographs of the BS&M, published in his book by Duke. [RE 077, et al.]

As mentioned above, there were some 153 photographs on the Photograph School’s printed list of photographs from this campaign. There are also a few others, not on the list. This is not much, compared to the 381 pictures taken by John Burke in only part of the time that the BS&M Photograph School was present in the field. But Burke’s sales could pay for the cost and transport of so many plates; it is doubtful that the Sappers and Miners could be so profligate. There is, however, some inconsistency in their coverage; some of the well-documented work done by the RE units, like the construction of the bridges at Jalalabad [RE 036, 037] and the installation of telegraph lines (except the rolls of telegraph wire on RE 028), are hardly covered, whereas other activities, like the bridge at Safed Sang [RE 047-051] and the road construction along the Kabul river [RE 007-012], are present.

Tracking down a sample of each of the photographs has been a challenge. Some of the pictures have not been found as an original photographic print in any collection, but only in a published form in books, like RE 051 printed as a plate; f.p. 440, in the *Abridged Official Account*. On the other hand, we discovered that some prints which did – at a first glance – look identical, were in reality two different views, taken from slightly different positions, like RE 004-1 and RE 004-1 a.

Major, later Lieutenant Colonel, E. T. Thackeray, V.C., Royal Engineers, was appointed Commandant of the Corps of Bengal Sappers and Miners in September 1879 and was with them in the second phase of the war, until he was seriously wounded in late December of that year. He was invalided home to England. While recovering there he assembled a number of plates from the BS&M Photograph School and published them in a book: *Views of Kabul and Environs from pictures taken by the Photograph School of the Corps of Bengal Sappers and Miners*, 1881. The quality of the printing in this book is excellent; many photographs are even clearer there than the original prints in albums. Thackeray, however, was working (and fighting) on the road to Kabul and it seems possible that he never got to that city before he was wounded. This may account for the fact that some of the descriptions of the plates in his book are misleading.

<sup>8</sup> *RE Institute Occasional Papers*, Vol. VI, 1881, Paper 8, “Memorandum on Operations of the Bengal Sappers and Miners at Gandamak & Jagdalak, Afghanistan, in November and December 1879”, p. 155.

The BS&M photographs were also used in some semi-official documents such as *The Second Afghan War 1978-80, Abridged Official Account*, 1908. In addition, at least four confidential albums were assembled, labelled *Cabul Defences*, or something similar, containing plans of all the fortifications that had been erected in 1880, illustrated by BS&M photographs. Here, the importance of the photographic medium becomes apparent, as it does not only provide a clear impression of the situation, but gives also a proof of the quality and extent of the work which was done.

Given the fact that the original negatives were large size glass-plates, voluminous, heavy and fragile to handle, it is quite possible that only a selection found its way to Britain and the large bulk of other negative plates remained in India at the main base of the BS&M at Roorkee. It is questionable, however, if *any* plates came to England. Most of the albums at Chatham probably belonged to officers who had been serving in India. The original negative plates might have all remained at Roorkee, with only prints being sent to England. Thackeray in his introduction says that “the views have been printed by the Autotype Company from photographs taken by the Photograph School ...” could it be that these were taken from prints? After almost 130 years, it was impossible to find traces of any original glass negatives in the RE archives at Chatham – we have not even tried to search at Roorkee, as, with the climatic conditions prevailing in India, they would not have survived.

Thackeray was, however, by no means the only officer to be given copies of the BS&M photographs. Several other officers had copies of the photographs and put them into their private albums. The photographs in such albums vary in quality, due to deterioration with age. Some of these albums are in the British Library, the National Army Museum, the Royal Artillery Museum (and doubtless elsewhere). There are a number of albums in the collection of the Institution of Royal Engineers, Museum, Library and Archive at Chatham. It is these Chatham albums that have been the main source of this study, together with the *yellow album* kept at the Stiftung/Foundation Bibliotheca Afghonica (SBA) with a set of pictures in good quality from the first phase of the war. A set of the BS&M photographs, taken in Jalalabad, are glued on the empty versos of the lithograph plates in the book, *The Defence of Jellalabad*, published by General Sale after the first Afghan war, which is also in the archive of the SBA.

An important source of some BS&M pictures, several of which were not found elsewhere in our search, is in the private collection of Bryan Maggs, a partner of Maggs Bros, Antiquarian Booksellers in London. His collection, which included some views, several of groups of officers and soldiers and a set of pictures of mountain artillery, has very largely filled our gaps and we are most grateful for his co-operation. Another very useful source, which included some pictures of the mountain artillery, including one not in the Maggs collection, was in the Royal Artillery Museum and we are grateful to the Royal Artillery Historical Trust for their courtesy in allowing us to use these.

We are also grateful for the help we have had from John Falconer at the British Library and, most particularly, for the unstinting assistance that we have had from the Secretary and staff of the Institution of Royal Engineers at Chatham. This is largely an analysis of their collection from that campaign. We are, however, also grateful to those who responded to our advertisements in the *Royal Engineers Journal*, by drawing our attention to items in their family archives. Like any such study, it is never finished and further comments will be welcomed. The preferred contact is:

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## **The First Phase of the Second Anglo-Afghan War: Nov. 1878 to June 1879**

The Second Anglo-Afghan War started after the reception of a Russian Mission by the Afghan Amir Sher Ali Khan, whereas a British Mission had been stopped in the Khyber Pass, while on its way to Kabul. Forces were assembled to advance on three different routes. The Photograph School was on the northern route, marching with a column under General Sir Samuel Browne that started in November 1878 from Peshawar. This column advanced through the Khyber Pass to the Ali Masjid Fort, which forms a block at one of the narrowest points of the pass. A night march to outflank the fort got seriously delayed but the Afghans evacuated the fort anyway and an advance right through the pass to Dakka became possible. After building-up a base at Dakka Fort, an advance was made to Jalalabad, improving the road on the way. The main force settled in the Jalalabad area for the winter.

At the same time, a column under Major General Roberts advanced from Kohat up the Kurram Valley and took the Peiwar Kotal, where he consolidated his force as winter drew on. In the South, Lieutenant General Stewart had a more difficult time assembling a force and its transport, and it was not until early January that they had advanced through Quetta to Kandahar.

Meanwhile Amir Sher Ali Khan had left Kabul, dying shortly after in Mazar-e Sharif. His son, Muhammad Yakub Khan, succeeded him as Amir. In the spring of 1879 there followed lengthy negotiations with Yakub Khan at Gandamak, (where the remnants of the retreating British forces had had their historic last stand in 1842). Several of the BS&M photographs are of the Gandamak area. The *Treaty of Gandamak* was signed in May 1879, granting permission for a British Mission to be based in Kabul in return for an increased subsidy. In the North, the British forces withdrew, but retained possession of the Khyber Pass and the Kurram Valley.

The war was thought to be over, and a British mission under Sir Louis Cavagnari went to Kabul, where it was based within the Bala Hissar, the large fortress-palace of the Amir.

## **The Second Phase of the Second Anglo-Afghan War: September 1879 to September 1880 in Kabul, September 1879 to April 1881 in the south**

In early September 1879, the British Residency compound in Kabul was sacked by rioting Afghan soldiers, and everyone in it was killed. In retaliation, the British decided to send a strong force to Kabul. Major General Sir Frederick Roberts took charge of a column that advanced from Kurram to Kabul. Having overcome opposition on the way, the entry into Kabul was not opposed, and Roberts occupied the Bala Hissar with part of his force. On arrival in Kabul, Yakub Khan abdicated and Roberts found himself effectively in charge of the capital area.

The Photograph School appears to have arrived in Kabul in November 1879. Photographs were soon taken of the ruined Residency and the Bala Hissar. Following the explosion of powder-magazines within the Bala Hissar, Roberts decided to move his whole force into the Sherpur cantonment on the north side of Kabul, which had been under construction by Amir Sher Ali Khan. Rapid work was needed to make Sherpur defensible. In late December, Roberts' force was besieged there but a spirited defence drove the opposition away. With the arrival of a reinforcing brigade, Roberts re-occupied the Bala Hissar and took control of Kabul again. He then set about constructing defences around Kabul and improving the more direct route down to the Khyber. These works came under the direction of his commanding Royal Engineer, Lieutenant Colonel Æ. Perkins.

In the South, Lieutenant General Sir Donald Stewart had re-occupied Kandahar, but he could not undertake an advance to Kabul until reinforced in late March. His force had a stiff fight on the way but arrived in Kabul in early May. Stewart was senior to Roberts and assumed supreme command when he arrived in Kabul.

At the end of April, the government in London had changed and the incoming administration, concerned with the costs of the campaign, gave instructions to bring the war to an end as soon as possible; meanwhile all military works were put on hold. After lengthy negotiations, Sher Ali's nephew, Abdur Rahman Khan, was accepted as the new Amir of (northern) Afghanistan.

The British planned an orderly withdrawal to start in early August, but suddenly they had an unforeseen crisis to cope with at Kandahar, where the British garrison was under siege following the defeat of a detached force at Maiwand by Afghan forces from Herat, under Ayub Khan, another contender for the throne. Stewart gave Roberts the command of the Kandahar Relief Force. After Roberts had made his famous march to Kandahar and relief of the siege there, he marched down to India, leaving a garrison in Kandahar that was not withdrawn until April 1881.

At Kabul, once Roberts had left on his march, Stewart continued with his original plan and withdrew the remaining troops, which would have included the BS&M Photograph School, down through the Khyber Pass. By early September 1880 the last elements of the Northern Afghanistan Field Force were clear of Afghanistan.

### *Phototheca Afghánica*

Some years ago, Paul Bucherer-Dietschi, the Director of the Afghanistan Institute in Switzerland, set up a series of studies, under the title *Phototheca Afghánica*, to safeguard, catalogue and interpret old photographs that had been taken in Afghanistan. These studies have been an important addition to the archiving and understanding of material relating to Afghanistan. In 1995, Paul Bucherer made the first catalogue of the photographs taken by the Bengal Sappers and Miners during the Second Anglo-Afghan War of 1878-80 that were in the archives of the Institution of Royal Engineers at Chatham in England. In doing so, he was able to compare the photographs with other visual sources, such as the drawings in the *Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic* from that period, and to add explanatory articles and plans.

This current work is a revision of that earlier catalogue. In the meantime *Phototheca Afghánica* developed to an internationally recognized scientific research project, which is supported by the Swiss Federal Office for Culture and co-operates with several institutions. Its aim is:

- to explore all kinds of pictorial resource material related to Afghanistan;
- to identify and describe pictorial documents on Afghanistan;
- to support all kinds of research on Afghanistan, based on pictorial resources; and
- to provide access to pictorial resources on Afghanistan and its history by creating a publicly accessible website on the internet.

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