Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa

VASSA Journal

Number 20 December 2008

Revised and reprinted April 2009

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Cover illustration

Pat Kramer at Slingersfontein on the Brakrivier west of Loxton (photo John Kramer).

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VASSA corbelled building survey

This issue of the VASSA Journal is the second in a series dedicated towards recording the corbelled buildings of South Africa. In the previous issue (no. 17, June 2007) we briefly referred to some comparative studies of corbelled structures in Europe, compiled a review of work carried out in South Africa, principally by James Walton, revisited several of these places to assess their current condition, and added some new information about unrecorded sites.

A special VASSA investigation team was set up to continue the exploration and recording of corbelled structures in the Karoo. Pat and John Kramer, Celeste Scholtz Burger and Judy Maguire spent five days in the Loxton area during September 2007, during which time they measured and photographed 15 buildings – some of them new additions to the record. This detailed information will form the foundation of further investigations into the history of these buildings. The photographs were taken by John Kramer.

Judy Maguire has already published a paper in the VASSA Journal which explains how the availability of the easily quarried rocks of the Beaufort Subgroup, combined with a lack of trees, was a key factor in the building of these structures (Building in stone in the Karoo: possible explanations for the restricted distribution of corbelled houses, Vassa Journal, 19, June 2008: 15-30). These are the environmental conditions. More detailed studies of the buildings – their dimensions, patterns of construction - and the associated social history of the area will hopefully lead to a greater understanding of the corbelled buildings in this area of the Karoo.

The team would like to thank Johan and Lindi Scholtz of Elandsfontein and Martin and Mariaan Scholtz of Sakrivierpoort for their hospitality. Special thanks to Martin who spent a whole day showing us stone buildings which we would never have found without him. Joe van Wyk of Rietpoort tracked down information for us, which is much appreciated. Thanks too to all the farmers who allowed us onto their property and, in some cases, gave up their time to escort us to the corbelled buildings on their farms.

Pat Kramer

Martin Scholtz, Judy Maguire, Matty Scholtz, Celeste Scholtz Burger, Pat Kramer and John Kramer (photo John Kramer).
From left to right: Koppiesfontein, Modderfontein, Brakvlei, Boplaas, Slingersfontein and Rietpoort.

3120 Williston 1: 250 000 (2000).
From top to bottom: Leyfontein, Ystervarkpoort, Brakwater, Vanaswegensfontein, Swaelkrams, Silvery Home and Gansvlei.

3122 Victoria West 1:250 000 (2000).
From top to bottom: Onderplaas, Knegsbank and Hartbeesfontein.
3120 Williston 1: 250 000 (2000).
Glossary

Afdak        Lean-to
Ashoop       Ash heap, midden
Drumpel      Raised sill or step at base of door
Kafhok       Chaff / straw shed
Kaggel       Fireplace or stove
Kraal        Animal enclosure
Lintel       Horizontal support across top of door or window
Midden       Refuse heap
Sill         Horizontal stone, wood, etc. across base of door or window
Stoep        Paved area in front of building
Trapvloer    Threshing floor
Veld         Open country
Werf         Farm yard
Boplaas

Farm 216

Boplaas is owned by Dirk Mans. The ruins of two corbelled buildings are situated on a calcrite terrace on a riverbank. They are associated with a well-built stone kraal. There are Late Stone Age tools scattered on the riverbank.

One of the corbelled buildings has half collapsed. The section containing the doorway and two low windows is still standing. Two rows of projecting stones can still be discerned on the roof. The highest point is 3 metres high.

*Front view of collapsed corbelled building – note door opening on left. The large stone slabs in the foreground probably closed the roof hole.*

*Side view, showing door opening and two rows of projecting stones.*
Side view, showing window opening. **From this angle the building looks complete!**

The second building was a stone-built dwelling which incorporated a round corbelled building at the rear. Unfortunately both have now collapsed to a large extent. The house section consisted of a main room with a *kaggel*, a doorway facing east, and two more rooms. The round, corbelled building was entered from the main house through a thick-walled doorway.

*View of building from the front – the collapsed corbelled section is at the rear*
Doorway connecting the corbelled section to the rest of the building, with the stones from the collapsed building beyond.

Close up of the front of the house.
Side view of the house showing collapsed corbelled building at the rear.

Rear of the building showing collapsed round corbelled building on right. The doorway to the rest of the house can be seen peeping out from behind the rubble.
Brakwater

Farm 581

Brakwater belongs to Dries Wiese. In this structure two linked corbelled buildings have been incorporated between more modern rectangular buildings, one on either side. This is one of the few (if not the last) corbelled buildings of which we heard a first-hand record of occupation. The farmer’s father of 70 years visited people living here when he was at school. If he was born in 1938, he would have been visiting in about 1945.

The entire building is on a raised stone foundation, higher in front to compensate for the slope down the hill. The walls of the two corbelled buildings are plastered with mud on the inside. Both have yellowwood ceilings (painted brown) at a height of 1.9 metres. One has a trapdoor into the solder through which the circular stone pattern of the top of the building can be seen. The two corbelled sections have all the usual stone shelves and alcoves. The inter-leading door between the two joined corbelled buildings is 1580 mm high and 700 mm wide, and the wall is 900 mm thick. A door leading between the modern and corbelled section is 1580 mm high and 630 mm wide. There are wooden floors throughout.

One of the modern additions served as a kitchen. There is a line of protruding stones where it joins the side of the corbelled building.

There is a spring about 500 metres away and a large dump just behind the buildings. This contained broken snuff bottles, glass and crockery. There is also a stone kraal wall and the ruins of a square stone building. Late Stone Age stone tools were found in the vicinity.

Front view of the building, with the kitchen wing marked C.
Rear view.

Side view.

Side view showing window into the kitchen.
The join between the two corbelled sections.

Window in building A showing stone wall and lintel.

Window in corbelled building B.
Door into kitchen area of building C. Note projecting stones protruding from the wall.

Interior of kitchen (building C) with the chimney on the right.
Entrance to building A. Note thickness of wall at door, and stones visible where plaster has fallen off.

Wall niche in building A. The ‘shelf’, which extends the entire length of the wall, is a piece of roughly hewn wood (as opposed to the machine-cut wood of the ceiling).
Mr Wiese opens the door to the solder to reveal the original corbelled roof of building A.
Shelf in corbelled building A. The doorway opens into the second corbelled building, B.

Window in back wall of building B, now blocked and invisible from the outside.
Window and door looking through into building A.

Door leading from corbelled building B into 'new' extension.
Brakvlei

Farm 216
(31°29.130' South 21°43.515' East)

Brakvlei is owned by Dirk Mans.

The building on Brakvlei is in association with other farm buildings, including a fine old (deserted) homestead and stone walled kraal. It would appear that the construction of an earth wall – either a dam wall or a diversion wall - has partially impinged on the corbelled structure. It is cracked and wire has been used in an attempt to stop the crack from growing in size. It has been painted white.

It was built on bedrock and the walls are 400 mm thick. The circumference is 17.5 metres and the height is just over 4 metres. The door width is 850 mm and its height is 1600 mm. The drumpel is an additional 200 mm high. The door has a wooden lintel and the wooden door frame contains a door made of corrugated iron. There is no window present, but there are signs of a small window to the left of the door which has been blocked.

The building is rather unusual in that a stone plinth projects round the visible section of the building, but not all the way round. Part is hidden under the earth dam wall and there is no sign of the plinth reappearing on the other side of the front door. This plinth is 790-800 mm high and 430 mm wide.

*This picture illustrates the spatial relationship between the corbelled building, farmhouse, barn with associated stone wall kraal and one of the corbelled buildings on Modderfontein in the distance.*
The farmhouse, corbelled building and dam wall.

Back of the corbelled building with plinth. In the background is the earthen wall clad with stones.

Front view of the building – note that there is no plinth on the right.
Close up of the door with wooden lintel and door frame. Note no sign of the plinth on the right.

Stone barn associated with a stone-built kraal at the back. The lintel and outline of the original door are clearly visible.
Gansvlei

Farm 554

Owned by Jannie and Henk Cloete.

The corbelled building at Gansvlei is situated on the present farm werf in close association with the original farmhouse (now converted into a barn) and the modern house. Mr Jannie Cloete related that his grandmother was born in the original farmhouse in about 1894. When she was older she moved into the corbelled building as a result of a family disagreement. There are stone kraals nearby as well as a water pit, water furrow and small dam.

The outside of the building has been plastered and painted white and it is difficult to see any features. There are no projecting stones at all. From the inside, the signs of at least one blocked window can be discerned as well as a storage niche, which might have been a window originally. In at least one place an iron bar has been cemented into the wall, probably to provide a hanging device. The inside appears to have been plastered all the way to the top, but this is now falling off. There is a stone lintel in the doorway, in front of which is a wooden ‘lintel’, which is probably the remains of a wooden door frame from the time when the building was occupied.
Front view of the corbelled building.

Rear view of the corbelled building.
Inside, the window in the centre of the picture has been blocked with bricks, while to the right is a niche with a stone shelf above it.

View up to the top of the roof. Note piece of iron sticking out from the left of the picture.
Kasteel

Farm 560
(see also page 60, Vanaswegensfontein)

This farm is owned by Dries Wiese. On the werf, quite close to the homestead, are two corbelled buildings. The tops of both have fallen in. The first is very close to the house and is a kafhok with the traces of the round trapvloer still visible. Some of the edging stones are still standing upright. The diameter of the threshing floor is about 13-14 metres.

*Side view of the building, with trapvloer wall visible.*

*A corbelled building on the farm Kasteel. Note the ‘castle’ in the background.*
The second building on Kasteel could only be seen from a distance.
Koppiesfontein

Farm 214
(Kafhok 31°28.261' South 21°43.326' East)
(Stone house 31°30.503' South 21°40.945' East)
Altitude: 3900 ft.

There are two corbelled buildings on Koppiesfontein. One is a *kafhok* associated with a *trapvloer*, and the second, a short distance away, is a stone house with attached round corbelled building. Both are in association with a farmhouse and other outbuildings as well as stone-walled kraals.

The *kafhok* is a round corbelled structure associated with a clearly delineated *trapvloer*. The *trapvloer* has a screed of ant-heap clay and is 14.6 metres in diameter. The wall surrounding the *trapvloer* is in the form of a low parapet, 320 mm high and 430 mm wide. The inner face is lined with flat sandstone plates, and the gap between the inner and outer walls is filled with soil and small rocks.

The building itself has no projecting corbels and is built in two distinctive styles. The lower section up to the height of the door is built of irregular shaped stones which have been well fitted together. The upper section from the point where the roof begins to curve in is built of regular flat stones. The three window openings (little more than ventilation holes) are at the line of the join of the two styles. The circumference of this building is 13.4 metres. The door is 1150 mm high from the lintel to the top of the *drumpel* and tapers inwards, being 820 mm on the outside and 700 mm on the inside. The walls are 400 mm thick. The roof opening is closed by a stone slab and the walls have signs of plastering up to the height of the irregular stone construction. The very top of the roof shows some early signs of collapse.

The building is associated with a modern furrow. There is a graveyard in the distance and a dwelling a few hundred metres away.

*The old farm homestead at Koppiesfontein. A corbelled kafhok is in the veld across the road from this building.*
Another old building on the farm, an interesting square stone building.

Stone kraal walls in the close vicinity.

View of the corbelled kaflhok showing the trapvloer.
Front of the building. Note the smooth sandstone inner face of the trapvloer wall.

Rear view, where the two styles of stone building can be seen quite clearly.
Interior view showing ventilation holes and signs of plaster on lower section of the wall. A roughly hewn branch has been inserted in the wall.

Interior view of upper section and roof hole.

Interior, looking out of the door.
The second building on Koppiesfontein is a ruin. It is in the form of a stone building with a number of rooms attached to a round corbelled building, which is squared at the bottom and round from just above door height. Interestingly, the stone work bears a similar pattern to that of the Koppiesfontein kafhok. The lower walls are stones of all shapes and sizes fitted together, while the upper reaches are built in the more conventional manner. The door has been half-blocked, perhaps to form a window. The windows are also proper windows with lintels, as opposed to the ventilation holes in the previous building.

The rest of the building consists of three inter-leading rooms, one of which was used as a kitchen, where there is a corner kaggel although the chimney has collapsed. One of the rooms is constructed of stone in a similar style to the corbelled section, perhaps by the same builder. There appears to be the remnant of a pediment. The other front room is more finely built.

*Front of the building – note different building styles of the left and right sections. The roof of the round corbelled building is visible just above the join of the two sections.*

*Interior view of the roof and open roof opening.*
Back of the building showing corbelled building attached to more finely-built rectangular building.

Corbelled building where it joins the more roughly built wing. Note partially blocked door, possibly to form a window.
Window in the corbelled building.

Interior of corbelled building.

Close up of the doorway of the more finely built section with wooden doorframe.
Interior of well-built rectangular room.

Side view of rectangular room.

Interior of more roughly built section. Note the stone shelf and what appears to be a blocked window next to the door on the right.
Front view of more coarsely built rectangular section. Note partially blocked window and the stone door lintel, but no sign of a wooden doorframe.

Picture showing join between the three sections: the more roughly built rectangular section, the corbelled building, and the more finely built section with wooden door frame.
Leyfontein

Farm 94
(31°15.701' South 22°36371' East)
Altitude 4600 ft.

Leyfontein is on the Pampoenpoort road north-east of Loxton and is owned by Willie and Sandra Nolte. Willie’s grandfather attended school in one of the corbelled buildings, although he does not recall which one.¹

The complex on Leyfontein is made up of four buildings, three of which are quite close to one another. Also nearby are the remains of two small corbelled buildings which have collapsed. All are built on bedrock. There is a spring close by and stone kraal walls in the vicinity.

Corbelled building no. 1 in the foreground, with numbers 2 (right) and 3 (left) in the background. Note the upright stone to the left of the doorway.

Corbelled building no. 1 is next to the outline of a circular threshing floor (11.8 metres diameter), although the hard surface of the threshing floor could not be detected. It faces northwest. The building has low walls protruding from each side of the front door, forming a small enclosure almost like a little stoep. These two curved protruding walls are 500 mm thick, 2930 mm apart and 1350 mm deep.

The circumference of the building is 13.62 metres. The walls are 400 mm thick, 700 mm wide and 1350 mm high. The outside height of the structure is 2880 mm. There are four openings, each at a height of 1600 mm, one of which appears to have been blocked with stones at a later date.

The hole in the centre of the roof is covered with flat stones.

¹ VASSA Journal 19, June 2008.
A layer of flat stones forms a step (drumpel) while the opening is supported by a large lintel. Note the stonework above the lintel which looks as if an opening has been blocked.

Flat stones cover the roof opening.

Two window openings, viewed from the inside.
This picture illustrates protruding stones, a window opening, and the row up upright flat stones which runs in the direction of corbelled building no. 3, in the distance.

A line of stones runs from corbelled building no. 1 in the direction of corbelled building no. 3.

Corbelled building no. 3 is the most finely built of those in the complex. It stands 3 metres high, has an inside diameter of 4620 mm, and walls which are 580 mm thick. The doorway is 1150 mm high and is supported by a 90 mm-thick stone lintel. There is no stone doorstep (drumpel). There is one window opening (430 mm wide and 470 mm high).
Inside, it appears that another opening has been blocked to provide a shelf. There are other stone ‘shelves’ inside the building. There are signs of smoke blackening towards the roof. The roof hole is covered with flat stones.
Window blocked to form a niche with a shelf.

Field diagram showing dimensions of corbelled building no. 3.
Corbelled building no. 2 is a few metres behind no. 3. It is made up of a small round corbelled building, the door of which opens into a rectangular low stone structure which is 1.6 metres high. The whole complex is quite roughly built, with none of the refinement of no. 3 and, as a result, it was quite difficult to obtain accurate measurements. The corbelled building is low (inside measurement 1840 mm, outside measurement 2500 mm) and it has no window openings. The door opening tapers inwards and is 700 mm wide on the outside and 520 mm wide on the inside. The walls are 520 mm thick.

There is an extensive dump in close proximity.
Building no. 2

Field sketch of building no. 2

The rough sketch above shows the basic shape of building no. 2. The length of the rectangular section (A) is 4.84 metres. A small walled-off area within the rectangular area (B) is 1.4 metres wide and 1.1 metres long. There appears to be the remains of a blocked window in this section (C). The width of the opening into the whole structure (D) is 600 mm.

Blocked window, indicating that the rectangular structure was once much higher.
A fourth building lies roughly 200 metres away, directly opposite the spring. The building has a squared base with round corbelled roof which has a flattish top, now covered with a sheet of corrugated iron. A rectangular stone building with a new corrugated iron roof is attached. Again, it is built on bedrock. Large protruding rocks have been integrated into the building alongside the front door to form convenient seats. The inside walls show remnants of plaster. Wooden window and door frames as well as the iron roof indicate modern usage, possibly for storage.

The section of the building with the round roof is 3.02 metres wide and 3.32 metres long. The walls are 550 mm thick. The height inside from floor to top of roof is 3.4 metres. The *afdak* section is is 2.4 metres wide and 3.55 metres long.
Back view of building no. 4. This area is a huge midden.

Two views of stone fittings inside building no. 4. A long narrow shelf is built into the back wall, and below it is a triangular shelf. On the floor is a raised stone platform covered with a huge stone slab.
Sketch from notebook showing dimensions of no. 4.
The third inside wall. Note the huge stones at the bottom of the wall; these are part of the bedrock.

Stone kraal wall at Leyfontein.
Modderfontein

Farm 216
(Building 1: 31°34.523' South 21°55.835' East)
(Building 2: 31°29.082' South 21°42.762' East)
Altitude 3900 ft.

Modderfontein is owned by Dirk Mans. There are three corbelled buildings within easy walking distance of each other, two on Modderfontein and the third on the adjoining farm, Brakrivier. There is a large stone-built kraal (still in use) and scattered *ashoop*.

*The two corbelled buildings on Modderfontein are close to each other. The third, on Brakrivier, is a couple of hundred metres off to the right. Note the kraal walls.*

*Second corbelled building in relation to the kraal walls. The first, smaller building is just out of the picture to the left.*
The first corbelled building on Modderfontein is quite small, measuring 2.4 metres high outside and 2.2 metres high inside. The circumference is 12.2 metres and the inside diameter is 2.66 metres. The walls are 360 mm thick. The doorway is 1540 mm high, and the outside width is 580 mm and inside is 430 mm. There is a stone lintel over the door. There are a few scattered projecting stones just above the height of the door. The exterior has been plastered and painted white. The inside walls do not appear to have been plastered and huge flat stones cover the hole in the roof. There is no door.

*Smaller of the two corbelled buildings surrounded by gravel and next to the road to the farmhouse.*

*Rear view of the smaller building.*
The second corbelled building is larger than the first. It is 4 metres high and has a circumference of 17.8 metres. The door is 1880 mm high, measured from the top of the drumpel, and the width on the outside is 830 mm. There are two small windows. There is a continuous row of projecting stones at a height of 2.22 metres. The outside has been plastered and painted white, in an attempt by the farmer to preserve the building, which is used as a storeroom at present. A modern wooden front door has been fitted.

Inside, the lower section has been plastered up to a height of 2 metres, although this is now falling off. There is a roughly hewn branch running from wall to wall across the back, at a good height for hanging things. There are also stone shelves at eye level and two wall niches. The floor is an earth floor. One large flat stone covers the hole in the roof.
Back view with the first building in the background.

Roughly hewn branch inserted into the walls at each end to form a hanging device.
Close up showing wall niche, stone shelves and plastering on lower half of the building.

View of the roof.
Rietpoort

Farm 238
(31°40.261' South 21°58.740' East)

Rietpoort is owned by Joe and Mossie van Wyk.

There are two corbelled buildings on the farm. They are situated next to one other and close to the farm house. Both are painted white. There is a spring which delivers thousands of litres of water every day, even during periods of drought. The dump is spread over a wide area.

The corbelled buildings have modern additions. Joe van Wyk’s father added interior brick fireplaces and exterior chimneys to both of them in the 1980s. He also put in cement floors and built the little walled extensions at the front of each. One of the buildings is badly cracked and leaning to one side, although Mr Van Wyk has now taken steps to stop this from deteriorating any further. In fact, Mr Van Wyk still houses members of the family in these buildings on big occasions when accommodation is at a premium on the farm.

View of the front of the two buildings set in a neatly gravelled area. The building on the left is listing to the right.

The building on the left is 3 metres high and has a circumference of 19 metres and door width of 1100 mm. The building on the right has a circumference of 15.8 metres and the doorway is 1000 mm wide. The height of this building is 1.8 metres.
Rear view showing chimneys added in the 1980s.

Close up of the window.

Interior with modern fireplace and cement floor.
View up towards roof opening showing four beams of roughly hewn branches with each end inserted in the wall.

Widow and wall niche.

Hide draped over one of the cross beams suggests a possible use of the cross beam. The hide had been used as a mat.
Silvery Home

Farm 496

Two buildings on Silvery Home could only be seen in the distance, but they are exactly as described by James Walton.
Slingersfontein

Farm 491

Slingersfontein is owned by Tienie Dumas.

The corbelled building is associated with the remains of a stone wall kraal, furrow system, wind pump and reservoir. There are two stone buildings built with machine-cut stone close by. One originally had a Karoo-style parapet roof and the other has gable ends. A sizeable midden (asshoop) covers a huge area surrounding the corbelled building.

The bullet-shaped corbelled building is tall (5 metres) and has a steeply pointed roof. There are three distinct rows of projecting stones. The present door faces east and is lined with machine-sawn planks. There is a door slab outside.

A door on the north-east side has been filled in, as has the window. There are two stone shelves above this window. The building has been plastered inside, right up to the height of two crossbeams set high up in the walls. These appear to be roughly worked tree branches. The floor is of earth and the drumpel or door step is four stones deep. The hole in the top of the roof is covered with a piece of metal. Both the inside and outside plastering is peeling off, but one can still see that the inner plastering is quite coarse while the outside plaster is of a finer texture. The walls are 700 mm thick. The door tapers inwards: 1000 mm wide on the outside and 940 mm on the inside.

View showing spatial relationship of the three structures.
View of building built with machine-cut stone. This was probably a homestead, although it is now converted for use as a barn. There are still signs of the Karoo-style parapet roof.

Front view of the barn. The position of the original front door can be seen just to the left of the barn door.

View of end wall of the barn, showing blocked windows.
Second barn building, also built of stone but plastered.

Corbelled building at Slingersfontein.
View of hole in roof (no covering) with two rough poles. Note rough plaster falling off the wall.

Stone shelf. Note more complete (later?) plastering of lower section of the wall.

A row of stones runs diagonally from bottom left of picture towards the wind pump. It possibly marks a furrow.
Swaelkrans

Farm 562

Corbelled building on Swaelkrans, seen from a distance.

Stone kraal in the vicinity of Swaelkrans.
Vanaswegensfontein

Farm 560
(see also page 24, Kasteel)

This ruin is on one of the farms owned by Dries Wiese. Mr Wiese says that a map dated 1843 indicates that there was a big pear tree on this spot, which means that the tree must have been planted long before 1843. He describes the building as a shepherd’s cottage. It is a rectangular stone building with a collapsed round corbelled building attached. Two building styles are visible.

*Front of the building from a slight angle. The collapsed section is the ruin of the round corbelled part of the structure.*

*Side view. The wall on the far left is the remnant of the round corbelled building.*
Rear of the building. Note the two distinct styles of stone construction.
Vlieefontein / Vliege Fontein

Farm 214
(32°09.347' South 22°01.579' East)
Altitude 3600 ft.

This farm is now part of the Karoo National Park near Beaufort West. Mr Martin Scholtz of Sakrivierpoort related that a massacre of a settler family by ‘Bushmen’ took place close by. (See note on page 66.)

It is situated in rather rugged country in a valley on the edge of the escarpment. There is a river about 60 metres from the corbelled building and there are associated stone kraals. Late Stone Age tools are scattered in the vicinity as well as a few grindstones.

The building is 3 metres high with a circumference of 15 metres. The door height is 1620 mm and it tapers inwards, the outer width being 1000 mm and the inner width 720 mm. The walls are 540 mm thick. The internal width from the door to the back wall is 3.4 metres and the inner height is 3.340 metres. There are two windows and two ventilations holes, the latter at a height of about 2 metres. There are a few projecting stones more or less at the same height as the door lintel. The roof opening is covered by flat stones.

Inside, the walls have been plastered and seem to have been painted white. There is also a stone shelf and a wall niche.

View of back of corbelled building with stone walls to the left. The Harmse family was buried at the foot of the hill in the background.
View of front of the building illustrating the rugged landscape.

Close up of the front of the corbelled building.
Side view, with a partially blocked window. Note the projecting stone on the left.

Back of the building.
Interior, showing two windows and plasterwork.

Window, wall niche with overhead shelf and ventilation hole at the top.

The roof opening covered with flat stones.
Stone with a grinding surface.

Note by Nigel Amschwand

Mention was made of this building in a book by Alan Mountain entitled *The First People of the Cape* published by David Phillips. On page 32 it states that in 1843 seven members of the Harmse family were murdered on the farm and that a commando led by Martinus Bezuidenhout retaliated and killed the ‘bushmen’. No reference was given in the book but the author referred me to the submission made to the then National Monuments Council. The context of the story makes one think that they were living at the corbelled house, but documentation at SAHRA suggests differently.

The NMC file at SAHRA is number 9/2/010/14 and among other documents contains:

- Copy of the Government Gazette entry for 19 August 1977 declaring the building a National Monument. The building - Corbelled Hut Berg en Dal Beaufort West - is situated on portion 6 of the farm Vliege Fontein which is part of portion 3 of Brandewyns Gat (Beaufort West District farm 214).
- Copy of a letter dated 17th September 1968 from Mrs Hilary Shearing to the Honourable Dr Hilgard Muller [Foreign Minister in B.J. Vorster’s cabinet] mentioning the corbelled house and that it was the winter place of Boers from the Nuweveld, reputedly during the 18th century. (Transcript below).
- Copy of an undated letter from a Mrs Shearing to Mr Hofmeyer of the NMC stating that she had looked up the history of the corbelled building (she does not state where) and says that it was built by Gabriel Gerhardus Krugel about 1854 and it was one of three or four houses that he built in the locality and that it was occupied up until 1916 by a bywoner Hendrik Hurter, his wife and three children. It also mentions the mass grave of the Harmenses. (Transcript below.)

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2 Nigel Amschwand tried to find out where Mrs Shearing looked up the information mentioned above. Judy Maguire reports that Mrs Shearing cannot remember.
Transcript of Mrs Shearing's letters (with original typos)

The Honourable Dr Hilgard Muller,  
Houses of Parliament,  
CAPE TOWN.

Dear Sir,

On the farm Waterwal in the Beaufort West district which is the property of the Van Zyl Brothers is a very interesting stone house.

It is a one room circular stone house with a perfect beehive type of roof made also of stone. It is by repute Eighteenth Century and was the winter house of the Nuweveld Boers when they trekked down from the mountain in the winter. On this farm are also the graves of the Marmes family who where murdered by Bushman in 1843. These Harmes people were trekking through and were apparently murdered in their sleep. Amongst the party that went out and took vengeance was a Bezuidenhout of Slagters Neck who was banished to this area. His descendants still live near by at a farm called Brandewynsgat. The Van Zyl's feel that both these places should be recognized and I offered to help.

We would be so grateful if you could bring these places especially the Round House to the attention of the Historical Monuments Commission so that they may be preserved for prosperity.

Yours faithfully,

Hilary Shearing (Mrs)

National Monument's Council,  
Cape Town NMB 6970

Dear Mr Hofmeyer,

Thankyou for the information on Clyde House. Here is the picture of your kitch monument. I hope that something can be done before all the summer tourists start to giggle.

I looked up the history of that corbelled house on Krugel's Claim and this is what I have. It was build by Gabriel Gerhardus Krugel in about 1854. He was the grandson of Willem Krugel who was banished from the Cape Colony for his part in the Slagter's Neck rebellion. (Gerhardus's father was Andries Krugel who was a disappointed trekker. He didn’t like all the adventure and came back home again to die and was buried on Grootfontein. His grave stone I checked with the Archives.)

The corbelled hut was occupied as recently as 1916 by whites when Hendrik Hurter, a bywoner, lived there with his wife and three children. This information I got from one of the children Mrs Marais who still lives in Beaufort West.

The name of the builder I got from Mr Hendrik Marais who used to drive Mr Kootjie Krugel (Gerhard’s last surviving son) to town. He said that each time they past the corner he heard the story all over again, as well as the point that he build it just before he married. Gabriel liked making corbelled houses because he build 3 or 4 at various spots.

But even more interesting is that nomore than 300 yrs away is the mound of ground that covers the massacred Harmenses. These were about 8 or 9 in number who were trekkeing from the Nuweveld. Apparently in their sleep they were all murdered by bushmen. The bushmen were led by a tame bushman, known to the community, who had gone wild. The bodies were only found perhaps a week or so later. No attempt was made to bury them. They were just covered up as they lay. A commando led by Marthinus Evert Bezuidenhout 1813-1870 rode into nearby Plattekloof and wiped out the bushmen. From time to time the odd femur or so is dragged out, but the locals keep an eye and pop … [line missing from copy].

When did it happen? I checked the index at the Archives and all I have seen is single deaths. I haven’t got any further. The story puts the deaths as before the building of the corbelled hut. I presume such a ting would have been reported to a magistrate? I do feel that when you have dealings with Mr Jan van Zyl perhaps something should be done about a suitable inscription for the Harmenses?

Yours Faithfully,  
Taffy Shearing (Mrs)

My husband has only just put a new spool in his camera, will send you a pic of the kitch monument as soon as he takes it out.

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3 Clyde House, 25 Donkin Street, Beaufort West.
Ystervarkpoort

Farm 139

Ystervarkpoort is on the Pampoenpoort Road north east of Loxton, and is owned by Hentie Wiese.

Mr Wiese is proud of a corbelled building that is close to the main house, so he has fixed it up. Modern doors and windows have been installed and the roof has been plastered and painted white. A white fence has been erected around the building. It is currently used as a storeroom.

However, on the same farm there is another corbelled building. It is some distance from the farmhouse, next to a dam which is fed by a spring. This building has a squared base with round roof section. The roof section shows some signs of disintegration. Attached to the corbelled structure is a rectangular stone building which is much lower. Inside the circular building are two thick pieces of wood protruding from the wall, and wire has been strung between the two. There is also a stone shelf. The roof opening is closed with flat stones. There is a dump nearby.
Front view of the second building.

Side view of the rectangular section. Note the line of huge stones.
Back view of the building. Note blocked window on left.

Side view showing blocked door
Blocked doorway from outside (left) and inside (right).

Interior view showing blocked door on right and blocked window opening in the centre of the back wall.
Two huge pieces of wood built into the wall. Each of the blocks of wood has a wooden stake through it. A piece of wire is strung between the two blocks and there are numerous roughly fashioned wire hooks hanging from this strung wire.

Close up of one of the wooden blocks with a roughly hewn stake pushed into it. A hook made from a piece of wire hangs from it.
Stone shelf.

Roof opening closed with big stones.
Corbelled buildings in the Onder-Roggeveld

Nigel Amschwand

In my travels in the Onder-Roggeveld I have come across three farms where they have corbelled buildings. Not all farms in this locality have been visited, so perhaps more corbelled structures exist.

The presence of corbelled buildings within a few kilometres of each other is surely not a coincidence. However, the building styles of each are different. The shapes at Onderplaas and Knegsbank are dissimilar (the latter being more tapered) and the structure at Hartbeesfontein is constructed of larger flat stones. This leads to the conclusion that the concept and not the builder were common to all.

Onderplaas on Brakkefontein

Calvinia Farm 893
(31°46.6' South 20°06.4' East)

This belongs to Willem (Wimpie) Steenkamp who resides at the farm Matjesfontein about 16 km west of Middlepos. The farm complex at Onderplaas comprises a modern house, a T plan house probably dating from the earlier part of the 19th century, three corbelled buildings and various farm buildings. The T plan house is lived in by the farm supervisor Moos and his family and I did not go inside.

The T plan house at Onderplaas.
Two of the corbelled buildings are situated on a ridge to the left rear of the T plan house. Each one has a low stone walled area outside the doorway. The buildings are (I believe) too small to be used as family dwellings and were perhaps used as store rooms for grain or perhaps cooking as both show traces of soot inside although this may have come from later occupancy. Mrs Steenkamp was told by her father-in-law that oral tradition is that they were used by shepherds to live in whilst guarding their flocks in the 1700s(!). She also mentioned that her husband’s great grandfather had instructed that these buildings be preserved, together with the poplar trees growing alongside the river. Originally the buildings were plastered with clay but this was later repaired with cement by her father-in-law because the rain had caused the clay to fall off. Presently they are both used as playrooms by Moos’s two younger daughters.

This photograph shows the two buildings on the ridge at Onderplaaas. The two buildings are very similar in size and construction.

The interior of the building on the left in the previous photograph.
The third building is situated in front of the house although at some distance. This building is unusual as it has an intermediate floor with two doorways, one above the other.

The intermediate floor shows signs of heat from a fire below but not excessive charring. A possible reason for this is that it may have been used as a smokehouse with the meat being laid on the floor of the upper part.
**Knegsbank**

Calvinia Farm 1146  
(31°45.15’ South 20°3’ East)

This large T plan house is situated by the side of the road from Middelpos to Calvinia, which passes through what used to be the Veldcornetcy of Bloemfontein. The property was registered to Adriaan Louw in the third quarter of the 18th century and visited by Thunberg and Masson during their third botanical exploration of the Cape.

The house appears to have been built in various stages and is now a ruin. At the rear of the tail is a corbelled building. It has a low doorway and what appears to be a small opening on the opposite side. It is unfortunate that the stonework around this opening is collapsing so it is hard to determine if this aperture is intentional. From its size it could have been either a store room or a cooking place, but the low doorway would have been inconvenient for either purpose.

*The stone buildings at Knegsbank.*
These photographs show the low doorway into the structure at Knegsbank, and what may have been an opening on the opposite side.
Hartbeesfontein

Calvinia Farm 1146
(31°51' South 20°2.50' East)

On another Louw farm in the Onder-Roggeveld, there is a well that has a corbelled cover. It lies some 500 metres below the dwelling. This shelter encloses steps leading down to the water level. As the photograph shows, it is in ruinous condition.