



VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE SOCIETY OF SOUTH AFRICA
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VASSA NEWSLETTER

MAY 2026

APRIL EVENTS

A most unusual **Talk** was presented by Serai Dowling who described how the tidal pools along the coast within and near Cape Town came to be and how they affect the well-being of bathers.



Tidal pools in False Bay (photos Keith Dowling).

Serai is a Cape Town-based writer, researcher, and photographer and the author of *A Guide to Tidal Pools of the Western Cape* and *A Guide to Wild Swimming in the Western Cape*, both of which explore the cultural, ecological, and experiential dimensions of South Africa's water landscapes. Fancy a dip? She leads guided tidal pool and wild swimming experiences through her platform, *Tide & Seek*, and is actively involved in civic ecology initiatives focused on urban greening and biodiversity in Cape Town.

She first described the origins of some of the tidal pools, their construction and social history, and their distribution round the Cape peninsula's coast between Blouberstrand and Strandfontein (currently under renovation by the City). The second part of the talk explored the deep significance of the pools in the context of past (and continuing) unequal access to public space, as they provide accessible, safe and shared entry points to the sea. Even deeper significance relates to the role of 'blue spaces' (the equivalent of 'green spaces') that aid in de-stressing and mental well-being.

The April **Outing** took place on 9 May when about 25 Vernackers gathered for an adventure at the City Hall. Led by Marc Smith, Rebecca and Christoffel Smalberger, we began by crowding into the lift to ascend to the attic to view the Attic Exhibition - Cape Town Civic Collection. What a surprise - a bright, open modern space with really excellent graphics and exhibits which tell the story of Cape Town. These objects had been scattered in storerooms, offices and cupboards. Now they are available for the public to see. Rachel gave a brief explanation of her favourite exhibits and then we wandered around at our own pace. Then we were led on a “mystery” tour of the City Hall as doors were unlocked, curtains opened and lights switched on for us to see the wonderful craftsmanship throughout the building.

Then on to the Mandela Cape Town museum which consists of excellent prints detailing Mandela’s life and his relationship with Cape Town. It had the possibility to be dull, but it definitely was not, especially as explained by Marc.

Finally, a group photo at the Mandela Statue on the balcony overlooking the Grand Parade. All in all an excellent morning and our special thanks to Marc, Rachel and Christoffel who gave up their Saturday morning for us.



Left: Welcome to the City Hall. Right: Exploring the Mayor’s Parlour, which was created especially for the Royal Family visit in 1947.



Left: Nelson Mandela exhibit entrance. Right: Strange civic treasures included wood preserved from the ‘slave tree’ in Spin Street, and a silver lighthouse presented to Captain Robert Granger (of Granger Bay) who saved all nine crew from a shipwrecked whaling boat by rowing out into the storm.

THE ORIGINS AND FUTURE OF HARRINGTON SQUARE, CAPE TOWN

Harrington Square is on the eastern side of the City Bowl, on the border with District Six, and has fronts on Caledon, Canterbury and Harrington streets. Except for three small land parcels, it is owned by the City. The site is zoned as Utility and is not part of restitution land for District Six.

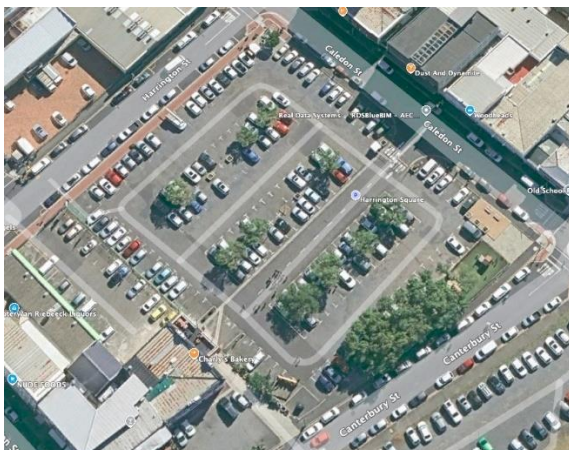
The transformation of Harrington Square from a built-up urban block into the open parking and civic area we recognize today was not a single event, but a result of mid-20th-century urban decay and subsequent "slum clearance" policies. Historically, the block was densely packed with late-Victorian and Edwardian-era residential and commercial buildings, typical of the East City's fringe.



Densely packed Victorian and Edwardian period buildings demolished to make way for Harrington Square (courtesy John Kramer).

The shift toward an open space began in earnest during the 1960s and 1970s. While Harrington Square technically sits just outside the formal boundaries of the District Six forced removals, it was heavily impacted by the same urban planning philosophies of the era. Many of the original structures on the square were demolished as part of "urban renewal" programmes. These often targeted older, high-density blocks in the East City that were deemed dilapidated or "blighted". By the late 1970s, the physical structures had largely been cleared, leaving a vacant lot that was subsequently paved to serve the growing need for inner-city vehicle storage.

Earlier this month, the City of Cape Town called for public comment on the "renewal and reshaping of Harrington Square". The City intends to renew the area to make it "multi-functional, more accessible, safer, and inviting to the public while optimising the parking area for clients visiting the local businesses". Eddie Andrews, Deputy Mayor and Mayco member for Spatial Planning and Environment, said Harrington Square and the immediate surrounding area "have immense potential as civic spaces". "We want to reimagine these assets and see how they can be used to uplift the area, lead urban regeneration, and also strengthen the connections between the surrounding neighbourhoods."



However, there are some objections to the City's plan. At the first public meeting on the future of Harrington Square, housing activists called on the City of Cape Town to transform the square, currently a parking lot, into housing, and business owners at the meeting said they had concerns about loss of parking for clients.

Watch this space!

CHAIR MAKERS AT THE CAPE

The provenance of a BW van Dyk chair

Extracts from a blog by Thys Hattingh, 13 April 2026

(<https://towerwatraandebrede.blogspot.com/2026/04/the-provenance-of-b-w-van-dyk-chair.html>).

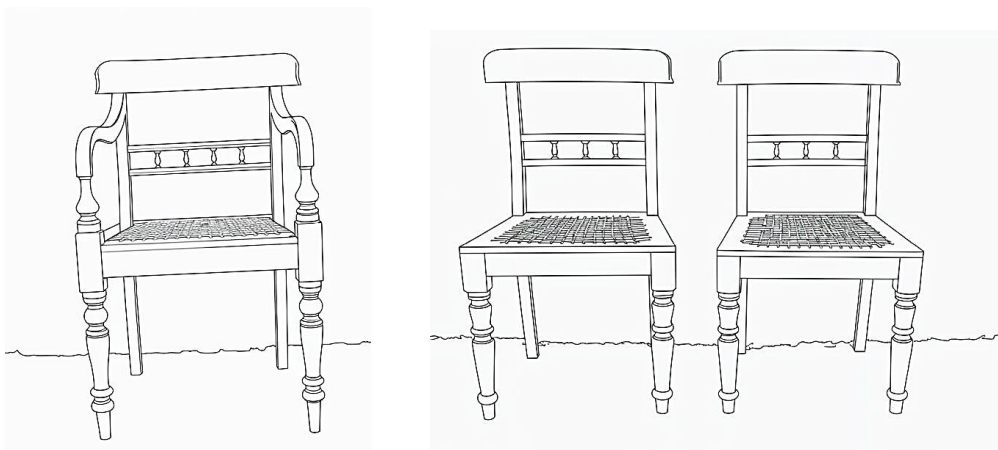
This is the story of Burger Wynand van Dyk, the carpenter of Barry Street in Robertson. His craft reflects a legacy stretching back more than two centuries to the earliest days of European settlement at the Cape of Good Hope. He was the great-great-great-great-grandson of Joost Pietersz van Dyk (1666–1718).

Two Van Dyk brothers came to the Cape in 1686 as soldiers in the service of the VOC. They stayed and worked in the timber and carpentry trade. Over the generations the family, now also farm owners, spread to the region of Robertson, Caledon and beyond. In 1934 Burger Wynand van Dyk (1867-1938) made a will to ensure that his carpenter's tools would pass to his son and grandson, specifying that they could not be sold and would remain in the family. In doing so, he safeguarded a tangible piece of heritage, echoing the generations of Van Dyks who had learned, adapted, and passed down both names and skills.

At Towerwater there is a collection of eight BW van Dyk chairs, with “worn arms and steady frames”. A series of blogs tell the story of their discovery and provide a detailed description of their “anatomy”.



Set of BW van Dyk chairs.



Left: Carver chair. Right: Side chairs.

Evidence of woodworking in deceased estate records

Antonia was teaching ceramics to UCT Hons students recently and looking at household inventories, one of which was a list of the possessions of the VOC master woodcutter at Paradijs (Newlands Forest) (Cape Archives MOOC8/13.28 - 1768). (He was appropriately named Salomon Bosch.) Antonia thought she knew that document well, but no! The class was discussing furniture and room functions when one of the students noticed that there were lots of chairs in the inventory. That is not unusual for 18th century homes, but when she actually counted them - in the house, in the attic, also at Kirstenbosch – it came to a total of about 50. That really is a lot. So they decided that Bosch, and / or his team, must have been making chairs on the side.

There were carpenter's tools in the inventory and a carpenter / joiner's bench. A public auction of his possessions took place and the list records that the chairs were mostly sold as lots of 12 or 6 items (MOOC10/9.48 – 1768). Unfortunately, neither document says what wood they were made of.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Purchaser</i>	<i>Price (Rixdollars)</i>
12 stoelen	Goris Middelkop	7.2
12 stoelen	Mons. Schott	7.4
12 stoelen	Mons. Riga	9.0
12 stoelen	Jacob Kamp	9.3
6 stoelen	D'E. Hassing	6.0
6 stoelen	Lourens Cornelissen	4.5
6 stoelen	Adolf van Coller	5.1
2 stoelen	Christiaan Persoon	2.0
6 stoelen	Marten Baartman	12.3
7 stoelen	de Weduwe Mulder	7.1
stoelen	d'E. Hassing	11.2
6 stoelen	d'Weduwe Bosch	3.0

This discovery prompted a closer look at Burgert Pietersz van Dyk's inventory (MOOC8/4.59 – 1721), mentioned in Thys's blog, which was recorded at the *buitenpost* Leewehoek on the Paardeberg. There were two carpenter's chests, 55 *jatij planken* (imported teak), 1 *bos Javaanse rottangs* (for caning seats), 3 *timmermans dissels* (adzes), another carpenter's chest, various saws and tools, and evidence of barrel making but not furniture. However, in the record of the auction of his estate (MOOC10/2.24), there was evidence of some woodwork for a *ledikant* (4-poster bed) and some for a *rustbank* and a table, and an unfinished hearth mantel. Curiously, 4 *balken* (beams) were purchased by juffrouw van Dijk – his daughter?

<i>Item</i>	<i>Purchaser</i>	<i>Price (Rds)</i>
1 kist met timmermans gereetschap	Bartholomeus Gulik	1: 1/2
eenige houtwerk tot een ledikant	Jan Valk	3:3
eenige houtwerk tot een rustbank en een tafel	Johannes Kraeij	2:1
12 jate planken	Claas van Wieligh	1:7
12 jate planken	Victor Sprinkmeijer	2:2
9 jate planken	Victor Sprinkmeijer	1:4
12 jate planken	Jan Gerritse	2:3
12 jate planken	Jan Gerritse	2:4
12 jate planken	Victor Sprinkmeijer	4:--
12 jate planken	juff:w Van Dijk	4:4
6 jate planken	Jan Gerritse	2:1
1 ongemaakte schoorsteen mantel	Otte Ernst van Graen	0:5
2 balken met een gording (beams with a purlin)	Daniel Crainouw	3:--
2 balken	Daniel Crainouw	2:4

2 balken
2 balken

juff:w van Dijk
juff:w van Dijk

3:3
3:5

TWO MORE CORBELLED BUILDINGS LOCATED

In April Pat and John Kramer, Judy Maguire and Nigel Amschwand set off on another trip into the Karoo to locate corbelled buildings. Unfortunately, it had rained before we arrived and some roads had become impassable and some of our plans had to be abandoned. Nevertheless, we were able to record two corbelled buildings. Both were originally dwellings with windows, shelves and beautifully laid stone floors.

It took a while and many phone calls to locate Bonza. It is situated right on the border of Bonza and Rosenhof farms, so passing farmers had seen it from the road but confused the name of the farm. To make matters worse, the farm's name had changed from Kafferskraal to Bonza, so maps were no good. Could this be the missing corbel on Rietaar, which is in the vicinity and which the current owner claims does not exist (maybe it has collapsed). Then there is Ysterkop just up the road, also with a rumoured corbelled building, but the gate was locked. We only got to Bonza as a result of Judy Maguire's lengthy phone calls with the owner and even then we were lucky as the whole town was in Carnarvon for an annual agricultural meeting.



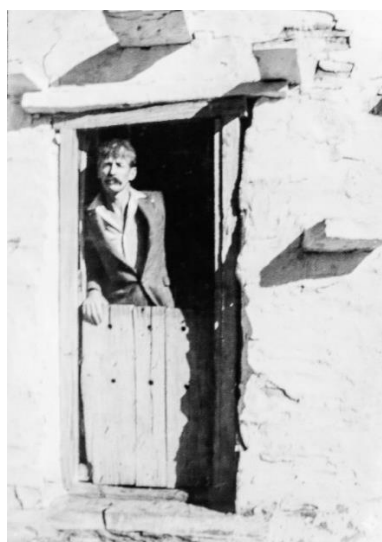
Bonza.

Biesiespoort had been on our radar for many years - it has an absentee owner (lawyer in Clanwilliam) and has been beautifully preserved as the family's holiday farm. Once again Judy came to the rescue as she coincidentally sat next to the owner at a heritage meeting in Clanwilliam! How lucky was that? We had nicknamed this building 'the hedgehog' and have a photograph taken in 1937 of the family sitting on the projecting stones on the building. Biesiespoort was one of the large corbelled buildings which had a "back door" which would have led out onto the kookskerm and ashoop. A curtain would have divided the building into two halves, effectively creating two rooms.

Both buildings had beautifully laid stone floors and perfect corbelled roofs with *in situ* roofstones. (Photos: J.Kramer.)



Biesiespoort: the corbelled buildings team in 2026 (left) and the Erasmus family in 1937 (right).



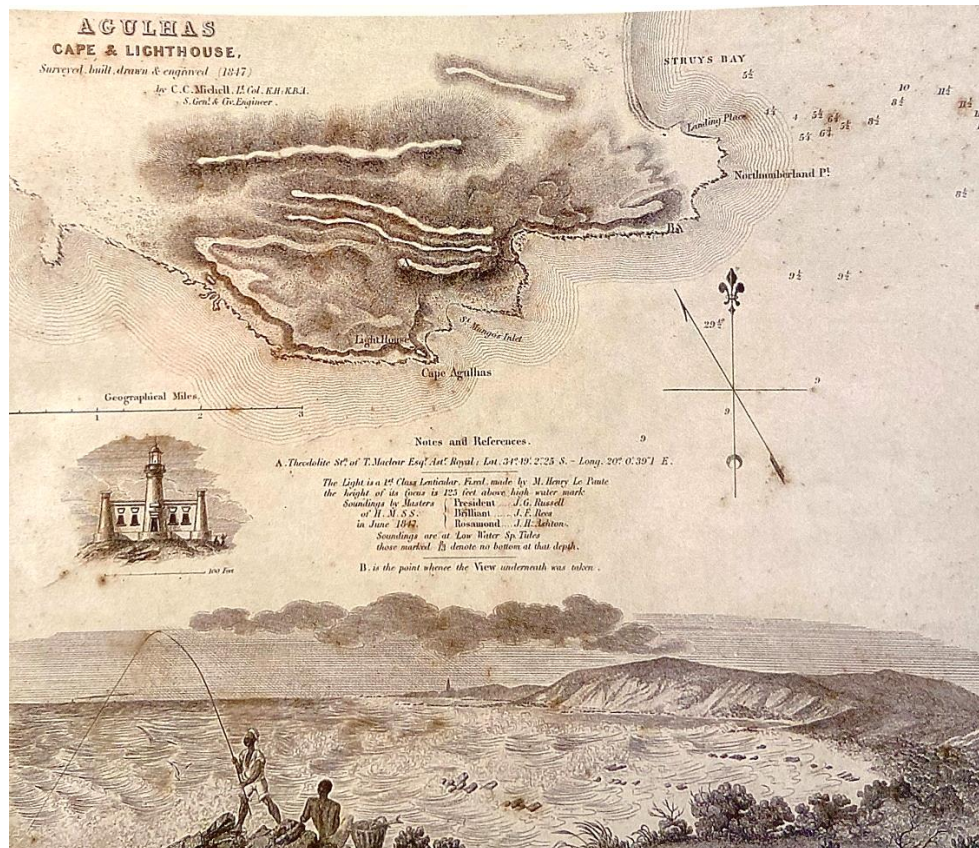
A young Gawie Fagan standing at the back door of Biesiespoort all those years ago (left, and Judy Maguire in the same position in 2026 (right).

THE CAPE AGULHAS LIGHTHOUSE

Those of you who remember the Cape Agulhas lighthouse as a rather isolated building, the interior of which included a museum and café, are in for a huge surprise should they visit the site today. The lighthouse still stands proud on the headland site that was selected by Charles Michell in 1837. The tower is 27 metres tall and visitors may climb the 71 steps to the top. Recently nearly R92 million has been spent on transforming the surrounding area into a tourist-friendly experience, which combines the historic lighthouse with the southernmost point of Africa.

Behind its existence is the story of Major Charles Cornwallis Michell, an extraordinary man who left a mark on the Cape, not least of which is the Cape Agulhas lighthouse. Not only did he design the lighthouse, but he was instrumental in driving the project forward despite objections to the cost. He was appointed surveyor-general at the Cape in 1828 (having probably heard of the post through his cousin Rufane Donkin), at the same time holding the positions of superintendent of public works and

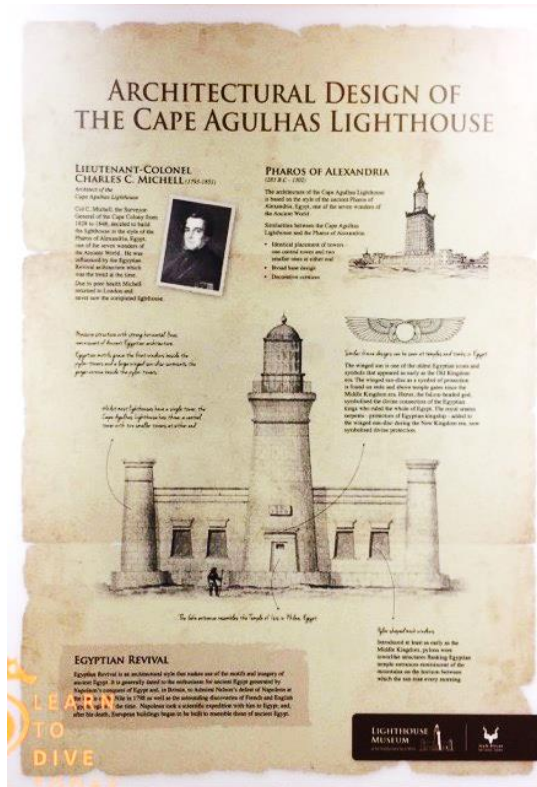
civil engineer. The surveyor-general's duties included taking charge of the detailed surveys needed to produce a good map of the Colony, improving passes and roads and accurately surveying the Colony's border. He was an outstanding architect, designing various churches such as St. Paul's in Rondebosch and St. John's in Bathurst. He suggested improvements to Table Bay Harbour and designed lighthouses at Mouille Point, Cape Agulhas and Cape Recife.



Michell's sketch.

It is thought that he viewed a lighthouse at Cape Agulhas as a counterpart of the famous lighthouse (or Pharos) of Alexandria, but, this romantic vision aside, the fact is that the number of shipwrecks at Cape Recife and Cape Agulhas was alarming and these "disasters received wide publicity and increased public clamour for lighthouses. Michell visited Cape Agulhas in 1837 in order to survey for the most suitable site. The one he finally chose was an isolated hill about 81 metres above sea level 'at the extreme end of the promontory'. The question, however, remained, who was to pay for the work?" After much toing and froing between Cape Town and London it was decided that the British Treasury would pay half, less what had been collected by private subscriptions so far, and the Cape Legislature would pay the balance and see to the upkeep.

The lighthouse was designed in the so-called Egyptian Revival style, which had gained considerable popularity in France as a result of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign. In England, Egyptian style architecture 'suggested strength, solidity and durability'. Mitchell's design comprised a central tower with two flanking turrets on the seaward side, linked by the residences of the lighthouse-keeper and his assistant. The Egyptian motifs appear firstly from the four front windows in the form of pylons (or battered columns) and secondly, from the large winged sun-disc which surmounts the gorge-cornice of the main entrance (now removed).



Left: A sketch of Michell's ideas, including a faint image of the large winged sun-disc which was over the door at the base of the tower. Right: The restored lighthouse.

Once the go-ahead was given for the construction, Mitchell had to arrange for the purchase of equipment for both the lighthouses at Cape Agulhas and Cape Recife and travelled to Paris to purchase the lenticular apparatus from the renowned lighthouse engineer, Henri le Paute. While there, he placed an order for lanterns as well, although in this he exceeded his authority but fortunately, the Treasury agreed to pay.

Mitchell was a multitasking individual who spent his time at the Cape frantically busy with various projects, including the printing and issuing of the Colony's first postage stamp, which his friend Charles Bell designed. His drawings and sketches are now renowned, although he was a well-known artist in his days at the Cape. On the more eccentric side of his character, he kept a large collection of reptiles, including a boa-constrictor which Mrs Michell stuffed after its death!

Mitchell left the Cape much improved as a result of his presence here. He returned to England in 1848 and died in 1851 the very day Cape Recife lighthouse was opened. Unfortunately, he also missed the switching on of the Cape Agulhas Lighthouse light on 1 March 1849.

Bibliography: Much of the information in the article was extracted from *The Life and Work of Charles Michell* by Gordon Richings published by the Fernwood Press in 2006.

The building was declared a National Monument (now Provincial Heritage Site) in 1973 and in 2016, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) identified the lighthouse as a deserving prominent historic engineering project and International Historic Civil Engineering Landmark. *Wikipedia*.

VREDENBURG FIRE

Just when we thought “fire season” was over, a devastating fire broke out at Vredenburg on the Winery Road between Somerset West and Stellenbosch, destroying the estate’s newly refurbished wedding venue.



<https://www.vredenburgmanor.com/>.

THE ENGLISHMAN'S GRAVE MYSTERY

Travellers up the Pakhuis Pass near Clanwilliam might have wondered about the story behind the Englishman’s Grave on the side of the road. ‘Sunshine Simplicities’ on *Facebook* has written the following explanation.

The Mystery of the Englishman’s Grave: A Tale of Two Resting Places

For three decades, a devoted sister named Eileen made an arduous annual pilgrimage from England to the rugged landscapes of the Pakhuis Pass in the Western Cape of South Africa. Her journey was fueled by a deep sense of loss and a commitment to honour her brother, Lieutenant Graham Vinicombe Winchester Clowes, who had fallen during the Anglo-Boer War. Every year, she would navigate the long route to Cape Town and then travel by wagon over the challenging mountain pass

to lay fresh flowers at a solitary grave. However, a poignant historical irony defined her devotion. Unbeknownst to Eileen, the grave she tended with such care was empty. Her brother was never buried beneath the monument she visited, and the true story of his final resting place remained hidden for over a century.

The events leading to this confusion began on January 30, 1901. Lieutenant Clowes was a member of the British forces during a time when the Pakhuis Pass served as a critical and heavily disputed artery into the interior. As the Boers moved toward the West Coast and subsequently retreated, the area became a theatre for skirmishes. The Gordon Highlanders were stationed at the Brandewyn River, not far from what is known today as Elizabethfontein farm. Just a day prior to Clowes' death, a clash had occurred in the pass as Boer forces retreated from Clanwilliam. Captain Robert Gordon was ordered to lead a three-man patrol toward Calvinia to scout the road. As they neared the crest of a hill, they were ambushed. Lieutenant Clowes was killed instantly, while Trooper Clark suffered a fatal stomach wound and Captain Gordon managed to escape despite being shot in the foot.

Because the area was a zone of active conflict, Clowes' body was not recovered for two days. When he was finally found, he was given a hasty burial in a rough grave located directly next to the road where he fell. The lieutenant hailed from a wealthy family, and following his father's death in 1900, he had inherited a significant estate. His brother, wishing to provide a dignified final resting place, arranged for a substantial stone monument to be constructed. However, coordinating such a project from England proved difficult. The family relied on local contractors who, in the absence of direct supervision, built the monument alongside a newer section of the road. It was a more convenient and less costly location for the builders, but it was not where the young officer actually lay.

This historical error persisted until 2020, when the truth finally surfaced. While surveying a route for a new mountain-bike track near Traveller's Rest farm, Jas Strauss and Edu van Rijswijk stumbled upon a small mound about two kilometers away from the well-known Celtic cross monument. It was a simple, hastily constructed site with a cross made of stones laid out on the earth. This, it turned out, was the actual grave of Lieutenant Graham Vinicombe Winchester Clowes. While local oral history from elderly retired farmers had long whispered about a "real" Englishman's Grave, its precise location had been lost to time and the shifting geography of the pass.

Today, the original monument remains a popular stop for travellers on the R364 near the Wupperthal turn-off. Though Eileen never knew the truth, the gnarled stump of a tree she planted still stands as a testament to her devotion. The site is now beautifully maintained by the children of Elizabethfontein Primary School, ensuring that the memory of the fallen soldier and the devotion of his sister continue to be honoured in the heart of the Cederberg.





Left: The gnarled remains of the tree planted by Eileen. Right: The official grave.

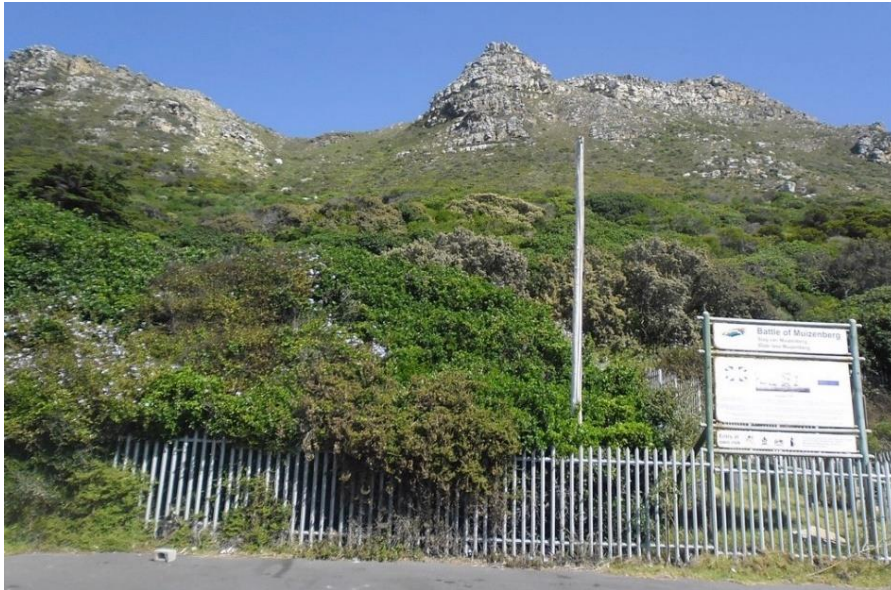
THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BATTLE OF MUIZENBERG IS RECOGNISED

The City of Cape Town has quietly announced that the Battle of Muizenberg site had officially been proclaimed a Provincial Heritage Site. This rather abandoned looking piece of land saw a vital role in South Africa's history played out.

SAhistory.org.za describes the action as follows: Given the turmoil in Europe and the importance of the Cape sea-route to India, the British Government sent a fleet of seven Royal Navy ships under the command of Vice-Admiral Elphinstone to secure the Cape as a refreshment station and as their gateway to the East. That fleet arrived off Simon's Town in early June, 1795. The Dutch troops in Simon's Town pulled back to their fort in Muizenberg while the British sent a delegation through to the Castle in Cape Town. It was suggested that the Dutch should hand over the Cape to the British. This was rejected and the British delegation returned to Simon's Town.

The site of the Dutch fort at Muizenberg is the land immediately adjacent to where Sir Abe Bailey's home, Rust en Vrede, was later built. This was a very clever selection for the siting of the fort, as it is in a situation where any persons passing from North to South would have to go just below the fort. The mountain in this area comes down fairly steeply to the sea and it would have been difficult to pass on the mountain side of the fort. The one disadvantage was that it was in range from the sea. On the 7 August the British made their move. They began marching with infantrymen and sailors from Simon's Town towards Fish Hoek and Kalk Bay, with the aim of attacking the fort in Muizenberg. At the same time four of the Royal Navy ships set sail from Simon's Town and anchored parallel to the coast, more or less opposite where Bailey's cottage stands today. At about 2pm they released a bombardment of cannon balls at the Dutch Fort.

It is believed that the heavy bombardment lasted about 30 minutes. It didn't take much for the Dutch to realise that they were outgunned and they hastily abandoned the fort and retreated towards Zandvlei and the Retreat area. (Hence the name 'Retreat'). In September a large British support force arrived and the Dutch surrendered.



The unobtrusive, almost invisible site of the battle (photo Capepointroute.co.za).



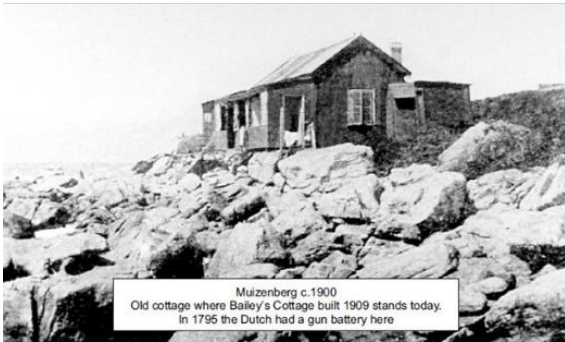
Remnants of the original embattlements (photo Capepointroute.co.za).

The Battle of Muizenberg site is not open to the public, but guided tours can be arranged through the [Muizenberg Historical Society](#).

A number of cannon balls have been recovered over the years. *Heritage Portal* reported that a cannonball, found in a St James garden was handed over to the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society in 2014. Historians have calculated that this cannonball was fired from the main gun deck, port side, of *HMS America*, between the hours of 12.30 and 4.00 pm on 8 August 1795. It did no damage.

Of special interest is that the ball was found where it fell, above Ley Road St James, not far below Boyes Drive. The cannon fire was directed at the ground around Bailey's Cottage and Casa Labia, so the ball was way off target and much too high. This neatly illustrates the point that often misfires meant the cannon only went off some seconds late, when the ship had rolled on the swell, and the gun was no longer pointing at the target.

Bailey's Cottage was designed by Baker & Masey's practice and built in 1909 for Sir Abe Bailey. It replaced a simpler structure that had been built on a rocky promontory that served as an 1802 military gun battery.



Left: The original cottage c.1900 (Cape Town Heritage Foundation). Right: Bailey's Cottage (Artefacts / Muizenberg Heritage).

FARM ENTRANCE GATES

A small selection of the many humorous farm entrance markers seen while travelling in the Karoo. (All photos: J. Kramer.)



Left: Rietvlei – wishful thinking. Right: Koekemoer – a friendly welcome.



Kruisrivier – this is what you do when there are no scrap metal dealers around, use a wreck as a decorative feature.



Stoeifontein – a very graceful entrance.



Kromkolk / Spinnepokkraal - an important landmark - take correct turn and you end up at the farm, but take the other turn and you will end up on a precipitous pass which takes you straight down off the escarpment.

*Compiled by Pat Kramer & edited by Antonia Malan - publications@vassa.org.za.
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