

HERITAGE STATEMENT GARRISON CHURCH ROB BEN ISLAND

1. INTRODUCTION

The heritage statement was commissioned to supplement the permit application to SAHRA in terms of the National Heritage Resources Act, 25 of 1999. Time constraints have not permitted for more in depth research.

2. LOCATION

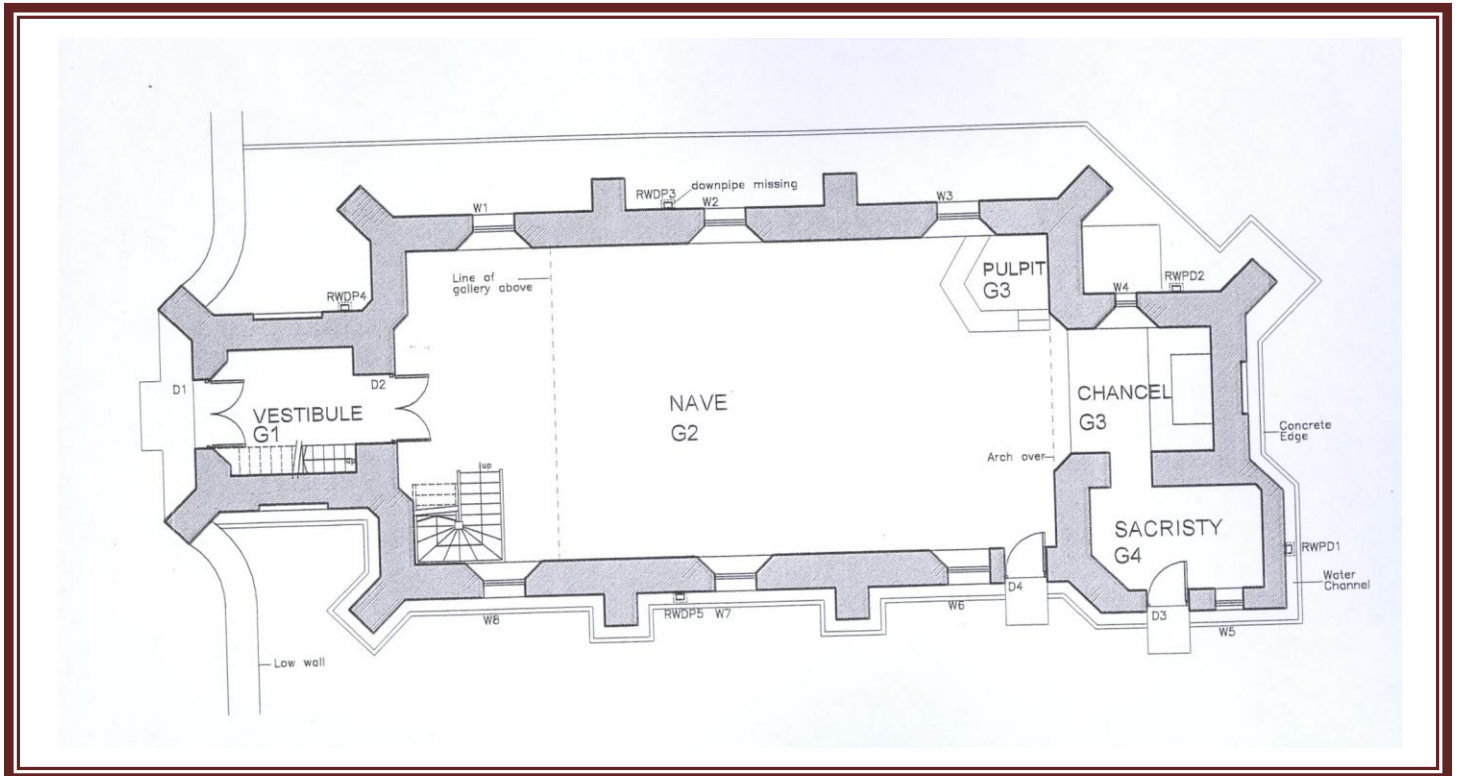
Located in Church Street in the Village Precinct on Robben Island.



3. SITE PLAN



4. FLOOR PLAN



5. DESCRIPTION

EXTERIOR

Approach to entrance

An apron of irregular slate slabs leads to a wide concrete step and a second, narrower one leading up to the front door. Both steps are painted red.

The entrance is flanked on both sides by cannon barrels painted black, standing against the wall at a steep angle, barrels facing down.

Boundary walls

On either side of the front façade is a curved low wall interrupted by a gap for access to a path. The wall continues around the sides and back of the churchyard.

The wall is of plastered masonry; the top is not flat but steeply sloping, no coping.

Path, graves

A path leads from the wall right around the sides and back of the church. It is demarcated by round stones and has recently been resurfaced with loose seashell shale. At the back of the property are several old graves with headstones which have been recorded elsewhere.

Drainage and furrows

Around the building at intervals are square downpipes from the roof. These and their collection boxes are made of lead, painted white. They discharge onto the ground, and water runs to the furrow described below. The middle downpipe on the right has been blocked for some time, and plants are growing in the soil that has collected in the box gutter at the collection box.

A cement drainage furrow runs right around the sides and back of the church, ending on both sides of the church at the front boundary wall. It is at the base of the walls on the right; on the left (shady) side of the church there is a sloping cement apron from the walls to the furrow. From there a round pipe runs under the perimeter wall and under the pavement to discharge into the furrow along the road. On both sides the mouth of the pipe had been closed with a round stone.

Walls and buttresses

Painted white throughout.

Right around the building the walls have a 'hip' below windows.

There are stepped buttresses between bays and splayed at corners, with finials

On the left (the shady side) the paint layers on wall and buttresses are peeling, showing the plaster underneath. Messrs Bowers and Booysen (who had worked here recently) explained the 'masonry coat' applied in two layers to the cement plaster before acrylic paint was applied. Yellow layer of lime.

Chancel: hooded, blind opening at end.

The sacristy (right, rear) is 'infill' between the splayed buttresses.

Tower

Entrance to the church is through the ground floor of the tower, serving as the vestibule.

Above the door is a plaque naming the 'architect' and date, and a clock face.

The square tower has three 'storeys', each very slightly recessed.

Splayed, stepped buttresses at the corners, with double-pyramid finials.

Ground floor: square-hooded front door and square-hooded blind doors

Middle storey: hooded blind round-topped arches on 3 sides

Top storey: similar hooded arches with ventilation openings (sloping slats lined internally with mesh)

On the roof, in a framework, is a bell cast by R J Taylor & Co.

Roof

The double-pitched (shallow angle) roof of corrugated iron covers the nave (main part of the church) with a hip at the chancel end.

Chancel and sacristy have separate, lower roofs, with collection boxes and downpipes.

The tops of the walls are crenellated, with box gutters on the inside.

Openings:

Front door

The formal entrance to the church is through an impressive 8-panelled, vertically divided door.

All panels recessed, with mouldings. Not painted. No fanlight.

Side door to nave

Narrow, low, round-topped, vertical wooden boards in flush frame with hand-made original ironmongery. Not painted. No hood.

Side door to sacristy

Opening of similar shape, similar wooden door of inferior quality (replacement or new?) 2 x 2 rows of iron studs facing out. Not painted. No hood.

Windows

Each bay has a window, all with simple round-headed plaster hoods, following the shape of the windows.

Sacristy has similar but smaller and fixed window. No hood.

INTERIOR

Floors and skirtings

Vestibule: Wooden strip floor with original deep moulded skirting, varnished

Nave: Wooden strip floors with modern plain low skirting painted white. Red runner carpet in aisle.

Walls

Painted white throughout. Near the chancel are several memorial plaques (for the fallen in the First and Second Wars, etc).

Roof and ceiling

Vestibule: Wooden ceiling; hole for end of rope for ringing bell

Nave: The roof is supported by kingposts at every truss; the trusses resemble shallow Tudor trusses, with additional vertical posts. The roof is lined with timber planking; there is no separate ceiling.

Chancel: wooden segmental arch ceiling under double-pitched roof.

Windows

No windows in vestibule.

In each bay: round-headed, upper light 4 x 4 panes with curved panes above, lower 4 x 4 panes, hinged at bottom to allow opening for ventilation. Fine, deep glazing bars (in Georgian style), some have old glass.

The gallery spans across the pair of windows in the rear bay.

At front of nave, above the chancel arch is a pair of small, narrow louvred ventilators, round-topped.

The chancel is blind, but there is a small, narrow window high up on the left

In sacristy: 3 x 4 panes with curved panes above, fixed (does not open).

Doors and openings

Front door: Tall, vertically divided, 8 panels, no fanlight. Interior: broad, moulded door frame. Not painted. Large, old lock with faceted brass doorknob.

Internal door from vestibule to nave: Similar to front door but plainer (new?). Old keyhole surround.

Between nave and shallow chancel: large arched opening at ceiling height.

Between nave and sacristy: arched, narrow opening in wall, no door.

Pulpit

A few very narrow wooden steps lead up to the pulpit with lectern and throne, all made of wood. On the floor beside it is the christening font, a massive stone(?) base with inscriptions and a steeply pointed and faceted wooden cover.

Broom cupboard

In angle of wall on right of door between nave and vestibule, low narrow door painted white.

Gallery

All of wood, steps up from right back of nave; wooden handrail painted white, plain wooden balustrade, also painted, main post from floor to top is original.

Furniture

Vestibule: two plain low benches, an ornate collection box and a plain new one.

Nave: Old pews: 8 on each side of the aisle, with low 'lectern' in front of the foremost pews; some newer ones, shorter and full length.

Sacristy: Functional furniture.

Gallery: Yamaha electronic organ.

Tower: In top floor: restored mechanism for clock.

Lights (electrical) and switches

Vestibule: a single light with a shade of the same pattern as those in the nave

Nave: In each bay there are two pendant lights with large, plain white glass shades.

Under the gallery are two (newer) light fittings: opaque glass balls.

Switches throughout are brass over ceramic, mounted on wooden circle.

Sacristy: Outside: old light over door.

Steps / stairs / ladders

Wooden steps lead from the right back of the nave up to the gallery

Steep, narrow wooden steps lead straight up from an opening in the right wall of the vestibule, becoming a ladder. A trap-door opens upwards onto the roof of the tower.



A FULL SET OF PHOTOGRAPHS IN SUPPORT OF THE DESCRIPTION IS AVAILABLE ELECTRONICALLY ON CD.

6. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE

The Church served as a place of worship from initially for the British Garrison stationed on the Island. By the prison period after 1961 the Church was used for interdenominational services.

7. EXPANDED STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE

7.1. AESTHETIC

The church has a high aesthetic value based on observations and comments from a number of sources.

The Church was described in 1841 as:

“...chaste and neat in appearance, as substantial in formation.”

In the opinion of Hans Fransen:

“This handsome little church is the oldest extant building on the island; it also predates most Anglican churches in the Cape.”

Desiree Picton-Seymour, another respected historical architecture writer:

“The square-towered Cape Gothic church was built in 1841 and is now an interdenominational meeting place. Startlingly white and washed by sea salt, it is one of the prettiest examples of this type of church building.”

7.2. ARCHITECTURAL

The Church is small in scale and represents an early form of the “Cape Gothic” style, plastered and now painted white. It has a square tower above the front entrance on the east and an apse at the back on the west. The tower has diagonal buttresses and crenellations. The three main bayed walls of the main part of the building also have buttresses and crenellations. The windows are round headed and small paned with semi-circular drip moulds. The balcony, altar, pulpit, pews and the open ‘Tudor Style’ roof structure are all made from teak. The bell and clock mechanism was added ca 1872.

Early paintings indicate that the wall panels between the buttresses were pale grey. This both alleviated glare from the sun as well as providing a better height and scale perspective. The Church looks rather squat and appears to lack this perspective in its current white decoration. The cannon on the corners of the front face were restored to

their original place in 2004. Both cannon were mounted on reconstructed gun carriages from earlier restoration attempts.

The churchyard has a few graves dating from the 1840's to the 1870's. One or two of these are surrounded by a low plastered wall with a plain coping. The low plastered, curved walls in front of the church were reinstated to their original position of 1872, in 2004. Prior to this the walls were straight from early restoration attempts.

The garden has undergone major changes since 1872. In the 1940's two large pine trees can be seen between the rectory and the church. A single tree in the NE corner, a clump of allows and some scattered plantings are evident.

7.3. HISTORICAL

The history of the church has been well researched and documented. It was designed by Sir John Bell, The then Secretary to the Government in ca 1840. It was built by prisoners under the auspices of the Garrison Commander, Captain R. Wolfe, in 1841. On 10 October 1841 the first service was conducted by Mr Hough, who held services once a month until a resident chaplain was appointed. The Church was used by the Anglican Church by the people who worked on the island over time. By the 1960's when predominantly white Afrikaans speaking staff came along with the prisons the church was designated interdenominational by the prison authorities.

The Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa [VASSA] visited the island in April of 1983. This was the first time that visitors with an interest in the older more prominent buildings were allowed to visit the island. Their visit was strictly censored to only the Village Precinct. The then National Monuments Council [NMC] had attempted to visit the island in 1973. Prison authorities refused the visit and claimed that the buildings on the island had undergone too many changes for any of them to be historically significant. The predecessor of the NMC, the Historical Monuments Commission made an attempt from April 1962 to have the Church declared a Historical Monument. A trade off between the Commission and the prison authorities provided for the prisons to maintain the church without formal declaration as a Historical Monument. The church had to wait for 1997 to be recognized as part of the larger Robben Island declaration as a National Monument as a prelude to the application for World Heritage Status.

The church underwent a number of renovation and restoration attempts. The first recorded effort was during WWII. This may have seen the removal of the two cannon from their original position and placed on reconstructed gun carriages. More research is needed on this restoration. The architects, Adler Price, noted some of these earlier attempts when work on the church was undertaken by them in 2004. Some debate ensued about the grey tint of the original wall panels between the buttresses by those involved in the restoration. With hindsight the restoration was not appropriate but had become a necessity to prevent further decay to the fabric of the church. The asbestos roof sheeting was replaced in 2004 with coated corrugated iron. The last remains of the lead lining on the box gutters [made out of wood] and the steeple roof was removed and melted into the counterweights for the clock mechanism.

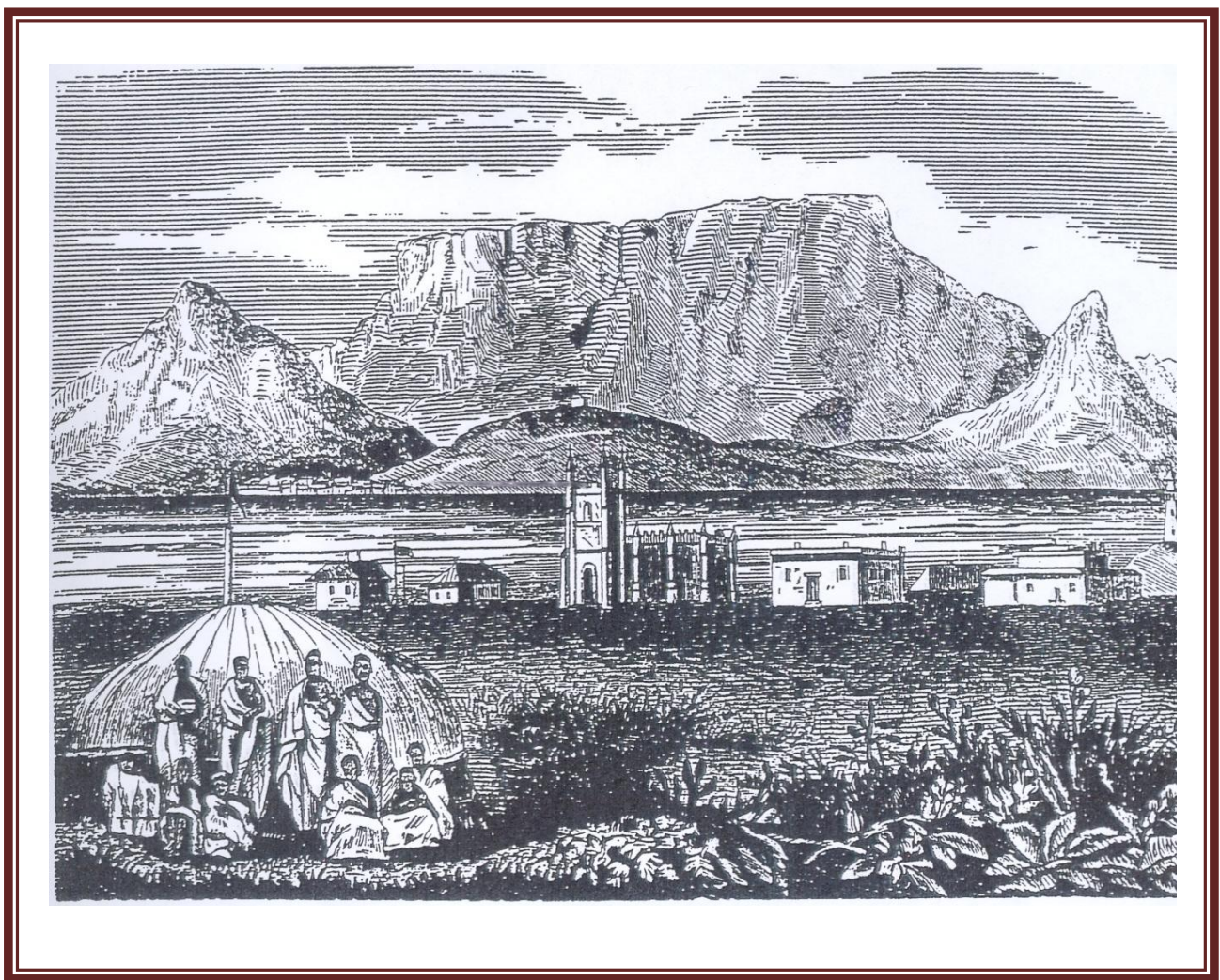


Fig.7.3.1. Church ca 1866 with Xhosa prisoners in foreground.



Fig.7.3.2. Church ca 1877.



Fig.7.3.3. Church ca. 1920's



Fig. 7.3.4. Church streetscape ca 1983.



Fig.7.3.5 ca. 1983

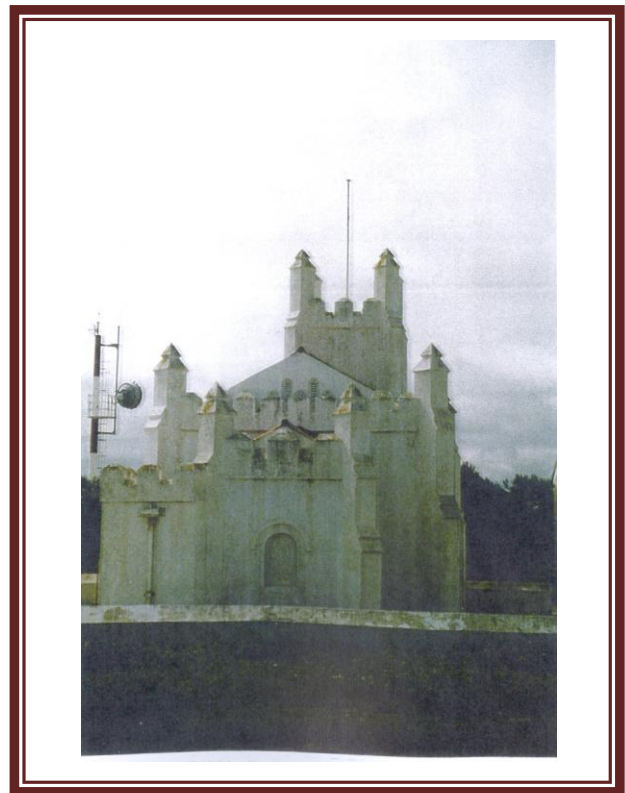


Fig.7.3.6 . ca. 2001



Fig.7.3.7. Streetscape ca. 2011.

7.4. SOCIAL

The church would more than likely have been a focal point at which to socialize for prisoners when the church was built. It would later become the same focal point for the staff of the Garrison, the leper period, WWII and later as its role changed for the prison warders on the Island.

7.5. SPIRITUAL

The church is aligned East to West with the cemetery at the back on the western side. The alignment is as ancient as humans have been preoccupied with the spiritual, death and the afterlife. East at sunrise represents birth, light and enlightenment. West at sunset represents death, malevolence and darkness.

8. PROPOSED CONSERVATION POLICIES

Appropriate minimal intervention. [do as much as is necessary and as little as possible]

Appropriate and sustainable alternate use strategy. [‘use it or lose it’]

Appropriate, effective, efficient and sustainable maintenance.

Use of appropriate construction materials, paint and cladding to fit historic fabric.

Appropriate interpretation and presentation within the associated landscape.

9. PRESENT STATE OF CONSERVATION

The present state of conservation is poor. The church was restored in its entirety in 2004. In January of 2005 problems were already starting to manifest themselves. Paint and plaster were starting to peel from the inside and outside of the walls. The contractor, Bambana, and a paint specialist inspected the church on 10 February 2005. Samples were apparently taken for testing at the CSIR laboratories at the University of Stellenbosch. It was not possible to trace the results of these tests nor to positively confirm that they were carried out. Opinion of the paint specialist, observers on the island and then Environmental Conservation Coordinator, Shaun Davies, point to the use of salt water for the mixing of the plaster as the main culprit.

In our professional opinion the walls were also not sufficiently dried out and cured at the time for a layer of fast drying acrylic paint to be applied directly to the substrate. In other areas it has also been noted that no primer to painted wooden features was used and that in most instances, like the Bituminous Aluminium paint on the malthoid covering of the roof and box gutters, only one coat of paint had been applied.

The windows were painted with a matt thixotropic paint in 2004 of which the lifespan was quoted to be seven years. This is now in need of renewal as in certain parts it is starting to blister and peel. Silicone sealant was also used in certain places between the window frames and the soffits and walls. This was not appropriate in our opinion.

The doors, especially the front door, are down to raw wood in some places from weathering, inappropriate preparation and decoration.

The interior wall on the northern side has suffered from water damage. Poor maintenance by Robben Island Museum saw the gutter on the north face clogged up to such an extent and for a long period of time that weeds had a chance to grow. The resultant damming up of water damaged the crenellation and interior.

The bell and clock mechanism was refurbished and working in 2004. Poor maintenance has seen the clock mechanism seize up and the bell and its housing rusting.

Fig. 9.1. Spalling on buttress.

Fig.9.2. Tower east face

Fig.9.3. Vestibule SE corner

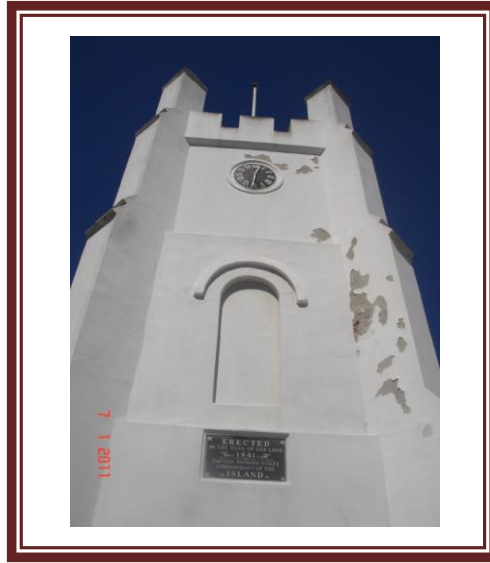


Fig. 9.4. Peeling paint inside tower.

Fig 9 .5. Rear/ west face.

The drainage pipes leading off from the furrows appeared, on a site visit on 17 January 2011 to have been purposefully blocked by large round stones. This is not conducive to the long term

conservation of the building and may have exacerbated the problem with the walls because water has dammed up around the foundations.



Fig.9.6 Blocked box gutter.



Fig.9.7. Interior water damage.



Fig.9.8. Large round stone blocking drainage SE corner



Fig. 9.9. Original beaten lead hopper.

10. CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

10.1. THREATS

Weather and weathering

The sun, temperature variations, wind and rain pose a substantial threat to the church because of the current poor state of conservation of the walls after the 2004 restoration.

Plants

No discernable threat

Animals

Birds may use the tower roof, eaves and gutter hoppers for nesting.

Fire

Bush fires do not pose a significant threat. Human agency inside and outside the church may pose a threat.

Humans

Vandalism, theft and poor or no maintenance by Robben Island Museum and/or the Department of Public Works poses a significant threat.

Pollution

Carbon dioxide from vehicle emissions may affect the fabric in the long term.

10.2. OPPORTUNITIES

Tourism

Tourist buses currently stop outside the church to provide the historical background of the Village Precinct.

Research

While the Church and its history have been well documented there are still large gaps that need to be filled.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

11.1. The interior and exterior of the walls should not be worked on until such time as more thorough research and a better analysis of the problem can be done.

11.2. Only the work specified by the conservation architect should be carried out.

11.3. Consideration be given to reinstate a monthly church service. Some residents have expressed their wish for this to happen.

11.4. The clockwork mechanism and bell must be refurbished and rendered operable.

11.5. The Maintenance Management Plan must be scrupulously followed and monitored by SAHRA.

11.6. Care should be taken that the drain outlets of the furrows are not blocked.

12. REFERENCES

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Indawo Painting and Waterproofing

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