

Review of Heritage Assessment of York Farm, near New Hanover, KwaZulu-Natal

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Janet Edmonds of JEC Environmental Services requested that I review the heritage assessment report of York Farm near New Hanover in KwaZulu-Natal. The heritage assessment was undertaken following an application from the owners of York Farm to change the use of the farm from grazing and hay production to crop cultivation. In response to the application, Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali requested a heritage impact assessment that included, among other things, a Phase 1 archaeological assessment and a desktop palaeontological assessment.

JEC Environmental Services contracted Active Heritage cc to undertake the heritage assessment. The title page of the completed heritage assessment report lists Active Heritage cc and Cultural Solutions as joint authors. Cultural Solutions appears to have been primarily responsible for the research and report preparation; Active Heritage presumably sub-contracted Cultural Solutions. I refer to them here as ‘the heritage consultant’. The owners of York Farm requested a peer review of the heritage assessment report, which they say “contains factually incorrect information, and has been written in a biased and unprofessional manner” (Janet Edmonds pers. comm., 7 Sept. 2015).

My review is based primarily on the original heritage assessment report, received from Janet Edmonds on 7 September 2015. Janet Edmonds sent me a revised report on 22 September 2015. My review incorporates the revisions with regard to page numbers and heritage rating. The revised report states that a Phase 2 report should include research relating to the York settlement and living heritage (p.28). I believe that this research is minimally necessary to support conclusions of the kind offered in the Phase 1 report.

An outline of the report

The heritage assessment report is 29 pages long. It opens with a table of contents and an executive summary. Thereafter it introduces the project (Section 2) and provides details of the national and provincial heritage legislation (Section 3; also Table 2).

Section 4 describes the location of York Farm. It includes a brief (but important) comment on the limited grazing potential of the dominant plant species on the farm: *Aristida junctiformis*. This point is relevant to our understanding of the use of the area in precolonial times. Sections 5 to 10 provide discussion of various heritage resources (Sections 5 and 10) and concepts that are potentially relevant for the heritage assessment of York Farm. They establish the conceptual basis for the heritage consultant's argument that York Farm is part of a "multi-layered Living Cultural Landscape" (Section 16, p. 26). Section 11 considers cultural landscapes. Sections 12 and 13 provide some details of the research involved in the heritage assessment, which included a desktop study, a ground survey and telephonic interviews. A rating of the heritage significance of York Farm follows (Section 14), as well as recommendations (Section 15). Concluding points lie in Section 16.

Assessment of the report

The heritage impact assessment is unfocused and overly long. Early on, Section 2 occupies several pages with lists of material drawn from heritage legislation. These details suggest that the heritage consultant is aware of the range of heritage issues. But in my opinion, such information should be summarized in the body of the report, with the detail, if included at all, relegated to an appendix. The competence of such a summary would more clearly indicate the grasp a consultant has of the issues. It would also be more reader-friendly and thus useful to the various users of the report. Note that I do not know whether the heritage consultant was required to format the report in a particular way.

Later, Sections 5 to 10 are simply too general, with little focus on York Farm. It is true that the assessment should take cognisance of the wider heritage context, but, as it stands now, one has to ask what it is that is being given context. Section 11 is worse, with even repetition of a major part of a paragraph on pages 20–21. Despite the suggestion (to me) of its title, Section 11 does not consider the UNESCO guidelines for the treatment of cultural landscapes. Instead, it provides an unnecessarily long, rather rambling definition of cultural landscapes. All these sections could use some heavy editing to enhance their usefulness.

The major problem in the report, however, concerns its failure to examine the few available heritage data closely. Amafa specifically highlighted a concern about archaeological and palaeontological resources. The report omits any comment on the palaeontological potential of York Farm. I suspect though that the proposed development would have little or no impact on

this potential. The heritage consultant's ground survey identified no archaeological sites, possibly because grass obscured the ground surface (p.22). The presentation of existing archaeological data for the wider area is nevertheless vague (Section 5), without any attempt to consider well-established patterns for predictive purposes. There is equally no appeal to basic data of the colonial period that might guide an assessment of York Farm. Yet, we know and can learn from archives enough about settlement and land-use patterns in the past to make reasonably precise predictions about the potential of the farm (see my next section). These predictions are an essential tool for ground survey as they guide the survey and highlight finds that do not conform to the pattern. In the absence of any on-the-ground data, they also have implications for the 'living cultural landscape' argument.

Heritage potential

The environmental circumstances of York Farm are relevant for predictive purposes. The farm is underlain primarily by sediments of the Pietermaritzburg Shale Formation, with dolerite intrusions giving rise to the more broken country in the western part of the farm. The eastern point of York Farm is on the Dwyka Formation (see 1:250000 geological sheet for 2930 Durban). The farm lies in a zone of Ngongoni Veld, which has a low species diversity and provides unpalatable sustenance for grazers (Mucina & Rutherford 2006: 510–11, 779).

Several archaeological sites are recorded for the relevant two 1:50000 map sheets. Sheet 2930BC has 6 sites and sheet 2930AD has 50. These sites cover the full range of human endeavour in the region, from the Early Stone Age through to the Later Stone Age/Late Iron Age. Most of the recorded sites on 2930AD are situated in the Umgeni Valley Nature Reserve and on Hilton College land on the opposite river bank. The concentration of sites in this area is directly a result of focused archaeological surveys and does not reflect reality across the two sheets. Wider research nevertheless shows that wooded, low country in KwaZulu-Natal is archaeologically richer than upland grassland environments. Thus, the area south of York Farm associated with the wooded uMgeni Valley is indeed likely to be archaeologically richer than York Farm itself.

The recorded sites closest to (but outside) York Farm are the findspots for two Later Stone Age bored stones, one on each spot. Records from elsewhere and on sheets 2930AD and BC indicate that Middle Stone Age artefacts probably, and Later Stone Age sites possibly, occur on York Farm. These sites/artefacts might occur as thin, discrete scatters of material (the residues of Later Stone Age hunter-gatherer camps) or as a general background noise (Middle Stone Age

artefacts primarily in secondary context). It is unlikely that these sites would be visible without grass clearance and ground disturbance, and following that, we would be lucky to find one that has research significance. Initially I would be more interested in knowing whether any rock shelters existed on the farm.

The dolerite intrusions raise the possibility that hornfels (metamorphosed shale) occurrences might exist on York Farm. If so, Stone Age 'factory sites' might occur along the dolerite-shale contact, because hornfels is an excellent material for stone-tool production.

As the report notes, pasture on York Farm is nutritionally impoverished. Iron Age farmers typically did not settle in sourveld grasslands until either encouraged or forced to do so in the colonial period (especially post 1850). This pattern of settlement allows us to exclude the probability that Iron Age homesteads were scattered across York Farm in precolonial times. However, Iron Age farmers did use sourveld grasslands for grazing in the spring and early summer. It is therefore possible that residues of cattle posts exist on York Farm, perhaps established by farmers living in the more wooded country to the south in the uMngeni Valley and associated low country. Iron Age sites there date back to AD 600. Related cattle posts would be of real interest, but possibly difficult to identify. Again, these sites would possibly only become visible with grass clearance and, perhaps, ground disturbance.

There are three or four features visible on the Google Earth view of York Farm that might be sites (they would need checking). My feeling is that these features, if they are sites, are more likely to relate to the colonial settlement of York. They might either be the remains of homesteads of African labourers and tenant farmers, or the residues of the settler farmsteads. These structures were built mainly of earth, wood, stone and thatch (e.g. Hattersley 1936: 151), with corrugated iron added later (p.18 of the heritage report). Such sites are of research interest (e.g. Whitelaw 2014). Stone walls are likely to be the most visible residue, if not robbed for building material. They are best identified when grass cover is reduced or burnt.

At this point, a brief history of York is useful. York was established in 1851 by settlers who originated from Yorkshire in England. Most of these settlers were farming folk and they, along with other settler communities from Yorkshire (e.g. Lidgetton) quickly established themselves as the principal suppliers of grain and cattle products to Pietermaritzburg (Hattersley 1940: 24). Butter produced by York farmers even contributed to the export market (Hattersley 1950: 264).

(The grazing strategies of York farmers are worthy of research, given the sourveld of the York area.) At the time in Natal, only farmers in the coastal belt were more productive (Holliday 1890: 16). These early successes proved deceptive, however. According to settler Richard Comins, the soil at York was “not rich”. “The grass was withered in the winter season, and the surrounding country was bare veld, with low brushwood but little water” (Hattersley 1950: 213). Members of the original party from Yorkshire gradually “drifted away” from the area and York village was never completed. In 1863 John Dobie described it as “a town consisting of a blacksmith’s shop” (Hattersley 1950: 256). Other visitors of that time described York as “a sort of village or rather a very scattered collection of about a dozen farms” (Hattersley 1940: 114), and as “a village you might comfortably pass through without knowing anything about it” (Holliday 1890: 16). This change in York’s fortune was probably related to the rapid expansion inland of colonial settlement between the 1850s and 1870s. York, I presume, was unable to compete with other parts of the colony. It is not surprising that its remaining farmers took to wattle from perhaps as early as the 1870s as demand for tannin-rich bark increased (Hattersley 1950: 256; Witt n.d.).

I do not know exactly how York Farm relates to the colonial village of York. It would be worth locating a map showing the distribution of properties that were allocated to the York settlers. In my opinion the heritage report should contain such a map, plus an analysis of it in relation to the York Farm landscape. Such a map is, I believe, an essential tool for the ground survey, just as is an understanding of the varying distribution of archaeological sites.

A living cultural landscape

The report argues that York Farm is a cultural landscape. In my opinion, the argument is not based on any solid data, either in the form of sites of cultural significance, or in a logic of how this specific landscape might have been used in the past, or is used today. This point is especially true for the precolonial period, for which the report presents only a set of vague assumptions and a general model of a ‘tripartite Nguni-speakers nature cosmology’ (Section 9). This model is useful only if it serves to organize data, but as I have already noted, the report fails to engage with known patterns in the archaeological record. Even if it did, I am not convinced that the ‘tripartite cosmology’ model would serve a useful organizing purpose here. Without tangible evidence, York Farm cannot, I think, be considered a cultural landscape of precolonial significance. At most it is perhaps a partial landscape (or landscape fragment) that was used occasionally and seasonally; archaeological discoveries might in future demonstrate this point.

The same is true for the colonial period: stripped of the now-lost York village and without any identified features associated with York, the farm does not comprise a cultural landscape.

The report also argues that York Farm is a living cultural landscape, because it “may very well have Living Heritage Value” (p.25) and “almost certainly forms part of indigenous peoples Historical Memory ... [and] ... the Living Memory ... of the descendants of European settlers” (p.26). This claim comes across as no more than an assertion as it is not obviously rooted in any data. The heritage consultant conducted telephonic interviews with members of various unnamed heritage societies (p.22), but the report provides no details of these interviews, and the voices of the interviewees do not come through the report. In particular, the methodology described (p.22) does not obviously involve anyone or any community that might think of York Farm in terms of the ‘tripartite cosmology’. And similarly, the report provides no indication that people and communities of settler descent value the York settlement heritage. On the contrary, all indications are that these people place far greater value on the income-generation potential of land. Whatever the case, it could be argued that the proposed development of York Farm is perfectly in keeping with the visions of the original York settlers.

This apparent lack of concern for colonial York is perhaps not surprising. The early agricultural endeavour there had a limited lifespan, whereas plantation forests have been a feature of the area for nearly 150 years. I suspect that plantations might feature far more significantly in living and historical memory (as I understand these terms) than the early York settlement, and especially more than anything of the time before 1851. So, on the evidence presented, I do not think that the claim that York Farm is a multi-layered cultural and living landscape of pre-plantation significance stands scrutiny.

Rating

The report states that York Farm is rated Grade IIIA, according to the SAHRA system of field rating (p.24). It is unclear to me what is meant here. Is Amafa currently considering York Farm for Grade IIIA status? Such consideration is not mentioned in the Amafa response to the York Farm BID. Or is the heritage consultant suggesting that York Farm is worthy of Grade IIIA status? If the latter is correct, how did the heritage consultant reach this conclusion? Table 2 (p.24) provides no criteria for assessment and the heritage report does not provide sufficient data to support any valuation.

GPS readings

A minor point: if no heritage sites were identified during the ground survey, what readings were taken to an accuracy of 5 metres (p.23)?

Summary

I think the heritage assessment report of York Farm would be considerably improved if the heritage consultant took cognisance of the issues raised in this review. I summarize the key points below.

1. The report is unfocused, imprecise and unnecessarily wordy.
2. The report contains no comment on palaeontological potential.
3. The report considers archaeological resources, but it fails to present the available information effectively and in a way that demonstrates the heritage consultant's appreciation of the varying distribution of different types of sites across the landscape. Such an appreciation is an essential tool to ground survey and significance rating, as it guides the survey and provides a baseline against which to assess survey results. Note that I am not suggesting the heritage consultant lacks this appreciation, only that it is not demonstrated in the report. As it happens, the archaeological potential of York Farm is thus far undemonstrated, possibly because of grass cover at the time of the ground survey. I believe it could include the following resources:
 - Stone Age factory sites,
 - Scattered Middle Stone Age artefacts,
 - Later Stone Age campsites,
 - Iron Age cattle posts,
 - Colonial period features associated with York village.
4. Some archaeological resources listed here (e.g. cattle posts, campsites, scattered artefacts) might become visible only with vegetation clearance and/or ground disturbance. Ideally, a ground survey should take place when the grass cover is reduced or burnt. Ideally, the owners of York Farm should retain an ongoing awareness of this archaeological potential, while noting that the heritage legislation demands that any operation exposing archaeological and historical residues must cease immediately pending an evaluation by the relevant heritage authority (Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali).

5. The report considers historical resources, but does not do so adequately. Its treatment of the York settlement is too generalized to be useful in this assessment. What is required is a map of the early (1851) properties demarcated, plus any significant alterations during the 1800s. This map and an accompanying analysis in relation to York Farm should guide the heritage consultant's ground survey of possible historical resources on the farm. The map and its analysis would serve a similar purpose to the archaeological predictive model.
6. The report addresses living heritage, but provides no details of the people consulted, the questions asked or the answers received. Indeed, the information obtained does not seem to be in the report. Instead, the report uses either assertions or vague and speculative language for living heritage issues: "may very well", "may pertain to", "almost certainly".
7. On the basis of the information contained in the heritage assessment report, York Farm is neither a cultural landscape nor a living cultural landscape. At most, it is perhaps a partial landscape or landscape fragment, used seasonally or occasionally in precolonial times.

References

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