

INITIAL TRIAL EXCAVATIONS

**PROPOSED REDEVELOPMENT OF
ERF 172912, THE VASCO DA GAMA TAVERN SITE,
GREEN POINT**

Prepared for

StyleProps 120 cc

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Introduction

The Archaeology Contracts Office was asked by StyleProps 120 cc to conduct a trial excavations on the newly consolidated erf 172912 (formerly erven 526, 527 and 528) Green Point, Cape Town, the current site of the Vasco Da Gama Tavern. The site is located one block east of Somerset Road at the intersection of Schiebe and Alfred Streets, adjacent to the BP petrol station. It is directly opposite the new residential high-rise 'The Rockwell', formerly the site of a major archaeological excavation which saw the relocation of several thousand informal graves of unknown persons of a variety of cultural affiliations, including possibly slaves (informally known as the Prestwich burials). The proposed project envisions a four-storey building to be used as offices, commercial space and restaurants. The existing building may be retained and integrated into the new design, however the developer is considering the possibility of full demolition. Research by Halkett and Finnegan (2008) indicates that the building was originally constructed some time before 1860.



Figure 1 The Vasco Da Gama Tavern (photograph taken from Alfred Street). The alley is reached through the door on the left, and the off-sales where the archaeologist is standing.



Figure 2 Location of the study area

Given that it was anticipated that human remains would also exist under the Vasco Da Gama Tavern, establishing the depth at which these remains were buried was critical to identifying the impacts that the development proposal would have. Remains that were buried at less than 1 m depth are likely to be impacted by construction of footings for the new structures, which will require up to 1m depth.

Trial Excavations

Two evaluation trenches were opened for the excavation team at designated sites on the property. These were in the narrow alley between the buildings and the neighbouring BP service station, and in an area on the Alfred street side of the building in a small room that formally served as the off-sales. Due to the confined spaces available, each of the two

excavations were confined to not more than 1 square meter in extent.

The developer organised removal of the upper concrete floor level and some of the upper deposits below the floor. All measurements are taken from the underside of the concrete floor. One test pit, VA09, (Plate 3) was situated in the alleyway to the south of the tavern building. The second test pit, VB09, (Plate 4) was situated in the old off-sales section. Both trenches were excavated by hand, using a team of four archaeologists under the supervision of Mr Tim Hart of the Archaeology Contracts Office of UCT. Excavation proceeded in spits, although the stratigraphy was duly noted and recorded where significant. Schematic diagrams were drawn in plan to a depth of 1 m from the underside of the concrete floor level in both trenches, and a schematic diagram was also drawn of the east facing section of VA09.

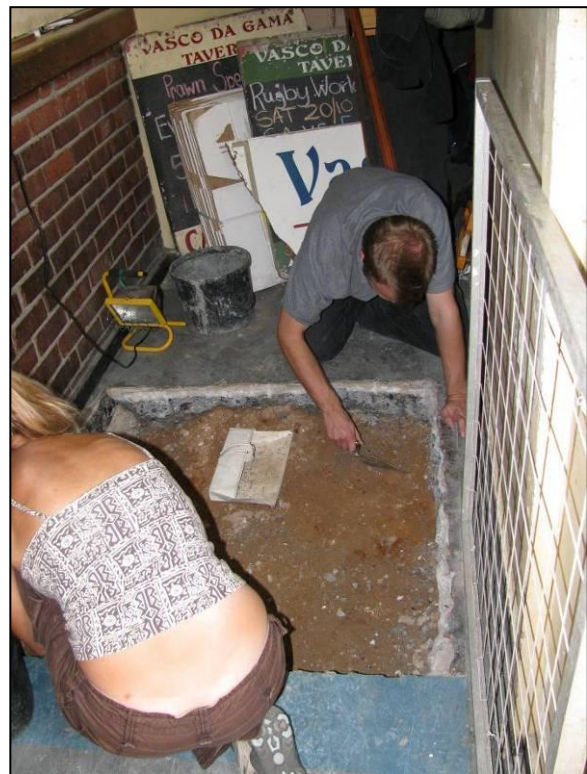


Figure 3 Excavation VA09 (left) and excavation Vb09 (right).

Restrictions

The Vasco Da Gama is a working pub and restaurant so excavations were restricted to very limited areas that were not affected by the normal daily business of the Pub.

Considerations of time and location resulted in only very small trenches being opened. In excavation VGA09 a ceramic sewerage pipe restricted the size of the excavation to literally half of that initially envisaged, making for very cramped working conditions for the archaeologists.

Since both excavations were set against standing walls of the building, foundation trench disturbance had taken place to a depth of at least 800 mm. It was only once this depth had been achieved, were in-situ 18th century deposits reached. In compliance with the conditions of the excavation permit, our task was to establish whether human remains were to be found within 1m depth of pavement level. Any human remains that were found were not removed from the site.

Trench VA09

Trench VA09 was rectangular in shape and oriented east-west. The dimensions of the trench were constricted by the walls of the alley to the north and south and by the threshold of alley to the east (leading to Albert Road) and a set of old slate steps to the west.

The concrete flooring was lifted by the developer and an old, disused sewer pipe running along the southern baulk was removed. This layer comprised the makeup layer for the concrete floor, the broken sewer pipe and animal disturbance in the form of a rat's nest. Artefacts recovered from this layer included modern bottle glass and caps as well as food waste in the form of stew bones. Within this layer, at a depth of 30cm from the underside of the concrete we encountered a second sewer pipe also running east-west. This pipe was intact and possibly still in use. Due to logistical considerations of time and space, it was decided to excavate to the north of the pipe. At a depth of 36 cm, we uncovered the first of two sandy layers. The first consisted of fine, pale yellow, sterile sand that was loose and friable and contained no inclusions. The second layer, at 52 cm, was a disturbed deposit, composed of fine, pale yellow sand with inclusions in the form of grit orange grit and small pieces of red brick rubble and dust. This layer contained bone, bottle glass and bottle caps.

At 83 cm there was a distinct change in the deposit to a band of fine, pale silty sand that was similar to the overlying deposit, but lacking the same evidence for disturbance. This deposit was devoid of artefactual material, but did contain inclusions in the form of noticeable quantities of finely crushed marine shell fragments.

The next stratigraphic layer was encountered at 96 cm from the concrete. This deposit was apparent as a 4cm band of dark, firm, fine-grained sandy silt with no shelly inclusions. The artefacts from this level included a piece of hand-painted porcelain, c. 18th Century, and a pipe stem likely to be Dutch and therefore of a similar age. This deposit capped yet another layer of fine, loose pale sand that was found at 100cm from the concrete. 5cm into this deposit, at 1m from the concrete, a circular feature was revealed. The deposit within the feature was clearly burnt, and contained both fire blackened periwinkle and bone as well as 18th Century ceramics and a pipe stem. The deposit became increasingly fine, with fewer inclusions. Careful excavation of this deposit uncovered a human cranium at a depth of 110cm (about 950 mm below pavement level). We excavated a further 5cm in

order to establish the orientation of the skull. Despite finding several nails in the west and south walls of the trench, in such narrow, restricted confines, we could not draw any significant conclusions about how they relate to the cranium; however they are likely to result from a coffin. Due to restrictions in space it was not possible to continue beyond im from pavement depth.

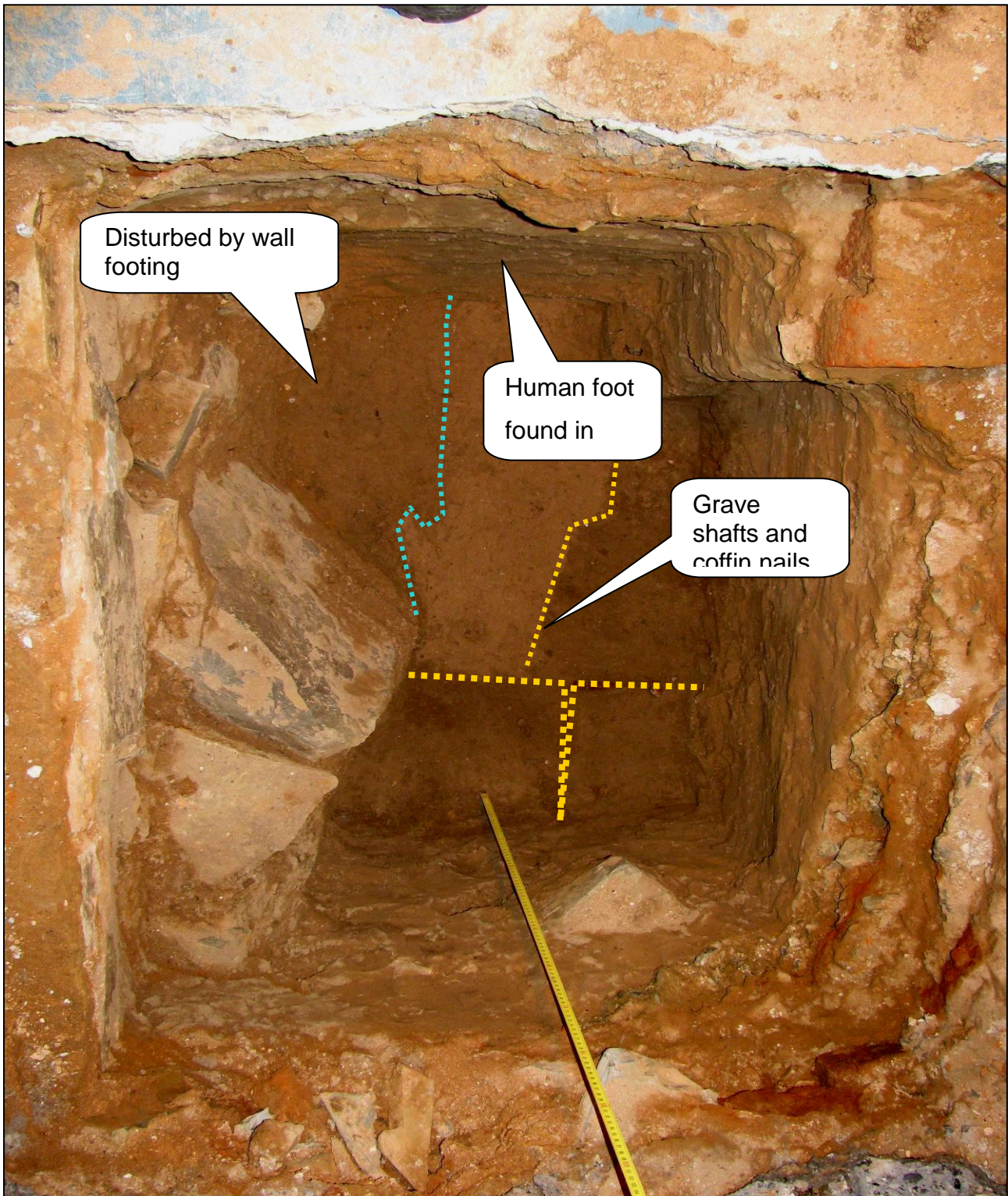


Figure 4 Excavation VB0. Detail depicting locations of burial shafts.



Figure 5 Excavation VA09. Human cranium exposed.

.Trench VB09

The second trench, VB09, was opened in a small area in the off-sales off Alfred Road.. Again location was constrained, but the area was big enough to allow a 1x1m square test pit. All measurements are taken from below the concrete floor level.

The pit was dominated by a slate structure that ran along the eastern baulk. The structure comprised a row of vertical slate slabs topped with level slabs to form a faced course. Below this step, towards the north east were further stacked and leaning slate slabs that appeared to be a culvert or drain. A small brick pillar stood in the south west corner of the trench. VB09's upper deposits were very disturbed and contained numerous large slate blocks.

The degree of disturbance meant that it was difficult see the interface between deposits accumulated against the two structures and the deposits disturbed by their construction cuts. Below the upper deposits, in more uniformly sandy layers, the construction cut for the slate feature and the brick pillar were both easily visible. The construction cut for the brick pillar was not much larger than the feature itself. The fill was very dark and silty, and didn't contain any finds. The fill of the construction cut for slate structure comprised a mixed deposit, containing a coffin handle as well as several human vertebrae and ribs. This fill was darker than the surrounding deposits, but not the same colour or composition as the back fill of the brick pillar. Several pale sandy deposits with varying quantities of fragmentary shell inclusions were cut by the construction trench. The lowest of these contained an articulated foot, at a depth of 750 mm from the floor level exposed at the section.

The trench was excavated to a depth of 1050 mm from the underside of the removed concrete, and at this depth, several different deposits were clearly observable. Three different deposits were visible along the west baulk. One was in the south west corner, just north of the brick pillar and roughly the same dimensions, comprising very dark silt with substantial white flecking. A second deposit extended out the west baulk north of the flecked deposit, and seemed be aligned northwest-southeast. It was lighter in colour and without any flecking. The third deposit ran from west to east along the northern baulk and was truncated in the east by the culvert. Two nails were found in situ at the interface between these two last deposits, while a third was found in the north baulk. A second dark deposit with white flecking was visible to the east of the trench, but it was not possible to ascertain its relationship to the culvert or the similar looking deposit north of the brick pillar. The cuttings represent at least 3 cross-cut burial shafts, indicating human burials. These were not exposed as the archaeology indicated that they were in-situ.

Findings

Trench VA09

The stratigraphy suggests that the mixed upper deposits were the makeup layers for the concrete floor and truncated the layers of sandy deposit that would seem to be backfill of the trench cut for the extant pipe. Below these modern, anthropogenic layers, we begin to see multiple layers of sand. While they each differ slightly from the next in colour or texture and quite obviously in the presence and nature of their inclusions, these layers seem to reflect the natural dune accumulations of the site. These deposits were very familiar to us as they echoed observations made at the Rockwell site in 2003-05. The discovery of the cranium at the bottom of the trench, at 1100 mm, indicated that there are in-situ remains at a depth of about 950-1000 mm below pavement level.

Trench VB09

Although VB09 was larger than VA09, disturbance due to the two structural features, namely the slate culvert and the brick pillar, and original cutting for the taverns foundations reduced the degree of resolution we could obtain from the deposits.

The backfill of the construction cut for the slate culvert contained a high proportion of human skeletal elements. This indicates that the culvert and foundation trench was cut into deposit that contained a human burial/s. The bones recovered were predominantly thoracic - vertebrae and rib fragments - indicating that the culvert probably cut through an articulated, *in-situ* burial. This view is supported by the discovery at a significant depth, 750 mm from the underside of the concrete layer, of a re-deposited (?) articulated foot. The trench was dug to a depth of 1050mm. At this depth, the features visible can be assessed as grave shafts even though no *in-situ* burials were located. The presence of coffin nails, seemingly in-situ, at the interface of two grave shafts supports this argument, and indicated that the bodies lie within a few centimetres. Judging by the pattern of cuttings visible, possibly three individual burial shafts exist within the single 1x1m trial excavation.

Conclusions

Human skeletal material was encountered from a depth of roughly 650 mm below pavement level with very clear evidence of dense burials at a depth of 900 – 1000 mm (and beyond) below pavement level. Both trial excavations which were very limited in size were positive for human remains. It is anticipated that human remains will be encountered throughout the site, and at levels shallower than 1000 mm close to the eastern side (downslope). This in turn means that it will be incumbent on the proponent to engage with the procedures as indicated in the regulations of the National Heritage Resources Act

(1999) as well as the spirit of the ministerial decision that was issued with respect to the disinterment of the Rockwell remains, which applies to similar finds in the Green Point area. Furthermore, the diversity of opinions and perceptions of heritage significance that became manifest during the public process for the Prestwich Burials applies equally to the Vasco Da Gama site – namely a place of exceptional social, heritage and scientific importance. This factor will need to be addressed by the project heritage assessor (Mr Chris Snelling) in the overall statement of significance for the Vasco Da Gama Tavern.

Suggestions

- Public consultation should be carried out by competent professionals

If a permit is applied for and issued:

- It is suggested that archaeologists dig the footings for any footings or foundation.
- Any human burial encountered will be disinterred, (as with the Rockwell, human skeletons will not be divided, but removed as complete sets).
- Human remains, as per the ministerial ROD will be interred at the Prestwich Memorial on Somerset Road.
- It is strongly recommended that SAHRA permit the analysis of human remains and any associated material as per the spirit of the Vermillion Accord and the ministerial ROD.
- All findings be incorporated into the Green Point Burial Ground Project (funded by the National Lottery Development Fund).

Excavation Team

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