Exhumation of seventeen (17) Graves on the Farm Rietfontein in Muldersdrift and Reburial at the Muldersdrift Cemetery in the Johannesburg Metro

CLOSEOUT REPORT

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DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

AHSA Pty Ltd is an independent consultancy: We hereby declare that we have no interest, be it business, financial, personal or other vested interest in the undertaking of the proposed activity, other than to be remunerated for work performed, in terms the National Heritage Resources Act (No 25 of 1999).

DISCLAIMER

All possible care was taken to identify and document heritage resources during the survey in accordance with best practices in archaeology and heritage management. However it is always possible that some hidden or subterranean sites are overlooked during a survey. AHSA will not be held liable for such oversights and additional costs thereof.

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Value (ICCROM, Rome)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. Seventeen (17) graves were exhumed from the farm Rietfontein in Muldersdrift north of Johannesburg at GPS coordinates: 26° 3'22.44"S, 27°51'37.86" E. The graves were located on a pedestal of earth 11 m high and 25 m in diameter left for the graves in the middle of an old earth mining quarry. Keeping the burial ground under such conditions had become untenable.
- 2. The earth pedestal was wearing away due to progressive natural processes of weathering and erosion. A couple of fault lines could be seen on the eastern and western sides of the island which would eventually lead to collapse. Signs of undercutting weathering and a visible overhang developing on the east side of the pedestal were further worrying signs of instability. In light of these factors the preservation of the graves could no longer be guaranteed.
- 3. A brief history of the site is given here based on oral accounts of family members, in spite of fading collective memory. It was an ancestral burial ground of parents, grandparents and other members of an extended family working on the farm Rietfontein where they were allocated a nucleated residential area. There were a number of households with the Letsholo line forming the historical nucleus of the community. A few of those buried at the site had died when an accidental fire ripped through the densely packed houses, this probably happening while they were sleeping. Evidence of fire burns could be seen in at least three skeletons exhumed. There is no information as to when this happened, but we can reasonably estimate a 20th century date.
- 4. The graves were excavated in September and October 2021 and the remains relocated to Muldersdrift Cemetery, 5 km northeast of the original site.
- 5. The following table is an inventory of the graves and contents:

6. Table of graves and contents

Grave No	Orientation	Description	Grave contents
8 Sep 2021			
RTF 01	EW, head west	Cairn marking	White polythene sheet wrapping. Coffin appears to have an iron sheet frame, which is heavily rusted and weathered. Decomposed human bones with indications of exposure to a fire.
RTF 02	EW, head west	Child grave with cairn marking. 2 water glasses placed on of the grave, sherds of glass.	White polythene sheet wrapping. No human remains. No other grave goods found
RTF03	EW, head west	Cairn marking and some ceramic bricks and headstone. 3 glass bottles and 3 nearly complete ceramic plates placed on top of the grave.	Remains in white polythene sheet wrapping, and blanket. Remains of an iron sheet frame of the coffin heavily rusted. 6 rusted copper coffin handles.
RTF04	EW, head west	Cairn marking. 1 glass bottle on top of the grave.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to have been the coffin frame found. No human remains. Soil and the coffin remains taken for reburial.
9 Sep 2021			
RTF05	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Broken glass, pear-shaped iron jar, partial rusted with cream paint	Nothing was found, soil collected.
RTF06	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Broken glass on top of the grave	Nothing was found. Soil collected.
RTF07	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Nothing was found. Soil collected.
RTF08	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Decomposed human bones. Rusted iron coffin handle and parts of the coffin frame.
RTF09	EW, head west	Cairn marking, wire fencing, tree growing on the grave	Rusted iron sheet which appeared to be the coffin frame found. White polythene sheet lining of coffin or corpse wrapping. Human bones representing an adult.
RTF10	EW, head west	Marked with a few stones.	Nothing was found. Soil collected.
10 Sep 2021			

Grave No	Orientation	Description	Grave contents
RTF11 Maria Pilane	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Grave of Maria Pilane as indicated by a buried name tag. Rusted iron sheet which appeared to be the coffin frame found. Aluminium coffin cover screw found
RTF12	EW, head west	Cairn marking with iron rich clasts.	Decomposed human bones.
RTF13	EW, head west	Remains found at the base of the pedestal as a result of weathering and sliding of soil from the edge of the pedestal	
RTF14	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Green water glass, glass sherds on top of the grave.	Decomposed human bones.
RTF15 Monica Letsholo	EW, head west	Cairn marking with some stones buried in the top soil. Green water glass.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to the coffin frame found. Corpse was wrapped in a white polythene sheet. Decomposed human bones with indications of exposure to a fire. Grave identified as that of Monica Letsholo who died in a fire accident as an accidental ripped through densely packed houses at a workers compound. ¹
RTF16	EW, head west	An active anthill on the bottom side of the grave. Stones buried in the top soil.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to be the coffin frame found. Polythene sheet lining of the coffin and wrapping around the corpse. Full skeleton in an extended position. Humerus with 4 black plastic armbands. Signs of fire burn.
RTF17	EW, head west	No visible surface marking. A few stones buried in the top soil. Iron axe head, a small bottle with inscription "Chamberlain" a popular prophylactic remedy in the past.	No human remains found. Soil collected for reburial

¹ Mr Boy Themba, family member, pers. com. October 2021.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The graves at Rietfontein Farm were exhumed in accordance with the wishes of descendant family members. The affiliated families were satisfied with the cooperation and support received from the landowner, Wearne Aggregates (Pty) Ltd. The original site of the graves is therefore now at the disposal of Wearne Aggregates.

The graves will soon be allocated formal graves numbers after which an addendum will be prepared and attached to this report. Installation of headstones and formal dressing of the graves will be undertaken after the rainy season in order to allow for settlement of the grave fill.

Earthworks around the graves significantly impacted the setting of the graves and to an extent collective memory. It is therefore possible that some graves are lost in family memory and were missed during the ground survey conducted prior to the exhumations. If it happens that human remains are exposed during future earthworks, SAHRA or the provincial heritage resources must be conducted and a heritage expert called to evaluate the finds.

ABBREVIATIONS

EIA Environmental Impact Assessment

GPS Global Positioning System

PHRA Provincial Heritage Resources Authority

NEMA National Environmental Management Act

NHRA National Heritage Resources Act

SAHRA South African Heritage Resources Agency

SAHRA BGGSouth African Heritage Resources Agency Burial Grounds and Graves

OHS Environmental Control Officer

SAPS South African Police Service

WAC World Archaeological Congress

1. INTRODUCTION

AHSA Archaeological and Heritage Service Africa was appointed by Wearne Aggregates (Pty) Ltd to carry out exhumations from seventeen (17) graves on the farm Rietfontein in Muldersdrift, Johannesburg at GPS coordinates 26° 3'22.44"S, 27°51'37.86" E. The graves were located on a pedestal of earth 11 m high and 25 m in diameter. The pedestal was left in the middle of an earth mining quarry with hardly any servitude reserved around the graves. This would have happened before enactment of the National Heritage Resources Act No 25/ 1999, since when a 100 m buffer has been enforced around graves and burial grounds. Keeping the burial ground under such conditions by whatever argument was therefore untenable. The pedestal has been wearing away due to progressive natural processes of weathering and erosion. A couple of fault lines could be seen on the eastern and western sides of the island which almost certainly were leading eventually to collapse. Signs of undercutting weathering and a visible overhang developing on the east side of the pedestal were further worrying signs of instability. In light of these factors the preservation of the graves could no longer be guaranteed.



Figure 1. Google Earth map shows an area extensively mined gravels and sand in the midst of which is a pedestal of earth retained due to the presence of 17 graves on the top



Figure 2: Close view of the earth pedestal



Figure 4: Close snapshot from the east shows a developing overhang and undercutting erosion. Some fault lines can be seen at the top of the pedestal, warning signs of physical stress, and possible eventual failure and collapse



Figure 5: The graves on top of the pedestal marked by stone cairns

2. OBJECTIVES

In view of the condition of the burial ground, and considering that Wearne Aggregates planned to continue mining operations at the site, it was necessary to apply for a permit in terms of Section 36 of the National Heritage Resources Act to exhume the remains and reinter them in a formal cemetery.

3. LEGAL CONTEXT AND MANAGEMENT CONTEXT

3.1. The National Heritage Resources Act (No 25 of 1999)

Section 36 of the NHRA provides for the protection of certain graves and burial grounds. Graves are generally classified under the following categories:

- (i) Graves younger than 60 years;
- (ii) Graves older than 60 years, but younger than 100 years;
- (iii) Graves older than 100 years; and
- (iv) Graves of victims of conflict
- (v) Graves of individuals of royal descent
- (vi) Graves that have been specified as important by the Ministers of Arts and Culture.

We are further to this mindful of public sensibilities about the sanctity of graves and burial grounds whether they are protected by the law or not.

3.2. The National Environmental Management Act (No 107 of 1998)

Section 2(2) of NEMA, the National Environmental Management Act (No 107/ 1998) state principles of sustainable environmental management as they relate to the welfare of communities regarding their physical psychological, developmental, cultural and social interests.

3.3. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (No 108 /1996) Section 31 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act (No 108 /1996) provides guarantees for the rights of cultural, religious and linguistic communities.

3.4. The Vermillion Accord on Human Remains

Adopted in 1989 at WAC Inter-Congress, South Dakota, USA, the Vermillion Accord is an international code of ethics on the handling of human remains and therein are 6 principles:

- 1. Respect for the mortal remains of the dead shall be accorded to all, irrespective of origin, race, religion, nationality, custom and tradition.
- 2. Respect for the wishes of the dead concerning disposition shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful, when they are known or can be reasonably inferred.
- 3. Respect for the wishes of the local community and of relatives or guardians of the dead shall be accorded whenever possible, reasonable and lawful.
- 4. Respect for the scientific research value of skeletal, mummified and other human remains (including fossil hominids) shall be accorded when such value is demonstrated to exist.
- 5. Agreement on the disposition of fossil, skeletal, mummified and other remains shall be reached by negotiation on the basis of mutual respect for the legitimate concerns of communities for the proper disposition of their ancestors, as well as the legitimate concerns of science and education.
- 6. The express recognition that the concerns of various ethnic groups, as well as those of science are legitimate and to be respected, will permit acceptable agreements to be reached and honoured.

4. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Heritage legislation places an onus on the developer to identify, inform and engage with the next-of-kin of the deceased and any other interested and affected persons in matters concerning the treatment of graves and human remains. The object of consultation is for the developer and the affected persons to reach consensus on the handling of human remains under these circumstances.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical process to integrate social concerns to development planning where it is likely to have direct or indirect impacts on livelihood and the social, emotional or economic welfare of communities. In accordance with minimum standards an inclusive and transparent stakeholder involvement process was undertaken to provide all key stakeholders (in particular the families affiliated with the graves) an opportunity to contribute their opinions to the exhumation process. Due to regulations gazetted to deal with the Covid-19 global pandemic it was not possible to invite family members for a plenary meeting. One-on-one engagements and telephonic contacts were preferred instead.

4.1. Stakeholder consultation and participation process

- One-on-one interviews were held with representatives of the affected families.
- Public Notices were placed at the entrance to Wearne Aggregates site offices at Rietfontein Farm and at the burial ground.
- A newspaper advertisement was placed in the Krugersdorp News circulating in the area during the week of 5-12 November 2020.
- Representatives of the families prepared affidavits consenting to the exhumations, which were signed under oath at the Muldersdrift Police Station.
- Representatives of the families signed consent forms giving a green light for the archaeologist to undertake the exhumation and reburial. See Figures 6-7 for evidence of notification and the communication with stakeholders



Figure 6: A public notice was published in the Krugersdorp News and a similar noticed placed at the burial ground



Figure 7: Family members in attendance during the exhumations

4.2. Results of the public participation process

A common understanding was reached to move the graves to a safer site, i.e. a municipal cemetery, as their preservation on the pedestal could not be guaranteed in the long-term. No public objections were received concerning the proposed exhumations. An application for exhumation was subsequently lodged with SAHRA Burial Grounds Unit; it was approved and a permit was issues.

4.3. Ritual performances

Pre exhumation rituals were held at the site in August 2021.



Figure 8: Family members perform pre-exhumation rituals at the burial site in August 2021

5. EXHUMATIONS, GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Exhumation commenced on 8 September 2021 on which day four graves with cairn markings were excavated and the remains lifted. On 9 September six graves were exhumed. On 10 September the first phase of the exhumations was completed with the excavation of four graves also with cairn markings, bringing the total to 14 graves. As collective family memory was fading, there was uncertainty as to the number of individuals who were buried at the site. An archaeological ground survey undertaken proved helpful in locating two more graves with partially buried stone cairn markings, and a possible but doubtful third grave, which brought the total number of graves to seventeen (17). Work was completed on 11 October 2021 when the three identified areas were probed and two skeletons were retrieved from two graves, while nothing was found in the third shaft.

Family representatives who were invited expressed satisfaction in the manner in which Wearne Aggregates conducted itself with regard to their customs and beliefs. As their ancestral graves had been moved to a formal cemetery there were no further issues with to be raised with regard to disposal of the original site.

The exhumation procedure was monitored by a senior archaeologist and an assistant also a qualified archaeologist.

To provide a brief history of the site, this was an ancestral burial ground of parents, grandparents and other members of the extended family working on the farm Rietfontein where they were allocated a nucleated residential area. There were a number of households with the Letsholo line forming the historical nucleus of the community. A number of those buried at the site had died when a fire ripped through the densely packed houses, this probably happening while they were sleeping. Evidence of burning could be seen in at least three skeletons exhumed. The above outline is based on accounts of family members, in spite of fading collective memory. There is no information as to when this happened, but we can reasonably estimate a 20th century date.

Graves were marked with piles of stones (cairns), and in some cases there were grave goods placed on top of the cairns (water glasses, an iron jar, ceramic plates and small

glass bottle of prophylactic remedy, axe head etc.). All the individuals were buried in coffins with a white polythene sheet lining. It appears that for a number of individuals that the corpses were further wrapped with a white polythene sheet. It is believed that it became necessary to take this extra precaution for the victims of the accidental fire. It has been difficult to figure out the relationship between the iron sheet and the coffin. From the archaeological evidence it has been postulated that the coffins had a metal frame and copper handles. In large part the iron sheet frame had rusted. Other grave goods included blankets and in one instance an iron sheet appeared be covering the coffin. The remains were found at depth of 1.5 m to 1.7 m. In grave No RTF15, the coffin was laid at a depth of 90 cm. Grave goods were retrieved together with the human remains for reburial. Concerning grave No RTF13 located on the northern foot of the pedestal at GPS position 26° 3'22.58"S / 27°51'37.52"E, these were displaced as a result of collapse of a chunk of earth from the pedestal (Figures 9-10).



Figure 9: The graves were arranged in 2 rows which became clearly visible after they had been excavated

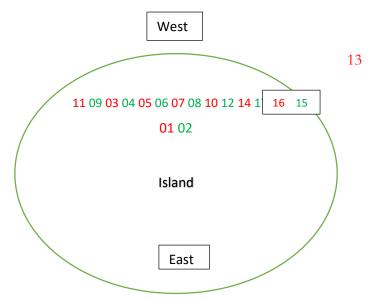


Figure 10: Layout of the burial ground (not to scale)

6. INVENTORY OF THE GRAVES

Table 1: Inventory of the graves and their contents

Grave No	Orientation	Description	Grave contents
8 Sep 2021			
RTF 01	EW, head west	Cairn marking	White polythene sheet wrapping. Coffin appears to have an iron sheet frame, which is heavily rusted and weathered. Decomposed human bones with indications of exposure to a fire.
RTF 02	EW, head west	Child grave with cairn marking. 2 water glasses placed on of the grave, sherds of glass.	White polythene sheet wrapping. No human remains. No other grave goods found
RTF03	EW, head west	Cairn marking and some ceramic bricks and headstone. 3 glass bottles and 3 nearly complete ceramic plates placed on top of the grave.	Remains in white polythene sheet wrapping, and blanket. Remains of an iron sheet frame of the coffin heavily rusted. 6 rusted copper coffin handles.
RTF04	EW, head west	Cairn marking. 1 glass bottle on top of the grave.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to have been the coffin frame found. No human remains. Soil and the coffin remains taken for reburial.
9 Sep 2021			
RTF05	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Broken glass, pear-shaped iron jar, partial rusted with cream paint	Nothing was found, soil collected.
RTF06	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Broken glass on top of the grave	Nothing was found. Soil collected.
RTF07	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Nothing was found. Soil collected.
RTF08	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Decomposed human bones. Rusted iron coffin handle and parts of the coffin frame.
RTF09	EW, head west	Cairn marking, wire fencing, tree growing on the grave	Rusted iron sheet which appeared to be the coffin frame found. White polythene sheet lining of coffin or corpse wrapping. Human bones representing an adult.
RTF10	EW, head west	Marked with a few stones.	Nothing was found. Soil collected.

Grave No	Orientation	Description	Grave contents
10 Sep 2021			
RTF11 Maria Pilane	EW, head west	Cairn marking.	Grave of Maria Pilane as indicated by a buried name tag. Rusted iron sheet which appeared to be the coffin frame found. Aluminium coffin cover screw found
RTF12	EW, head west	Cairn marking with iron rich clasts.	Decomposed human bones.
RTF13	EW, head west	Remains found at the base of the pedestal as a result of weathering and sliding of soil from the edge of the pedestal	Shreds of white polythene sheet, human bones collected.
RTF14	EW, head west	Cairn marking. Green water glass, glass sherds on top of the grave.	Decomposed human bones.
RTF15 Monica Letsholo	EW, head west	Cairn marking with some stones buried in the top soil. Green water glass.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to the coffin frame found. Corpse was wrapped in a white polythene sheet. Decomposed human bones with indications of exposure to a fire. Grave identified as that of Monica Letsholo who died in a fire accident as an accidental ripped through densely packed houses at a workers compound. ²
RTF16	EW, head west	An active anthill on the bottom side of the grave. Stones buried in the top soil.	Rusted metal plate which appeared to be the coffin frame found. Polythene sheet lining of the coffin and wrapping around the corpse. Full skeleton in an extended position. Humerus with 4 black plastic armbands. Signs of fire burn.
RTF17	EW, head west	No visible surface marking. A few stones buried in the top soil. Iron axe head, a small bottle with inscription "Chamberlain" a popular prophylactic remedy in the past.	No human remains found. Soil collected for reburial

² Mr Boy Themba, family member, pers. com. October 2021.

7. REBURIAL AT MULDERSDRIFT CEMETERY

The first batch of fourteen individuals were buried at Muldersdrift Cemetery (location: S 26°00'38.4" E 027°52'39.6") on the 10 September 2021 with the attendant traditional rituals performed by four elders and one young man. The last three exhumations were also reinterred at Muldersdrift Cemetery on 11 October 2021. The graves will soon be allocated formal graves numbers after which an addendum will be prepared and attached to this report. Installation of headstones and formal dressing of the graves will be undertaken after the rainy season in order to allow for settlement of the grave fill.



Figure 11: Traditional rituals performed after reburial at Muldersdrift Cemetery on 19 September 2021

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Seventeen graves were excavated at Rietfontein Farm and the remains relocated to Muldersdrift Cemetery. They were exhumed in accordance with the wishes of descendant family members. The affiliated families were satisfied with the cooperation and support received from the landowner, Wearne Aggregates (Pty) Ltd. The families do not claim any further association with the original site, which is now at the disposal of Wearne Aggregates.

The graves will soon be allocated formal graves numbers after which an addendum will be prepared and attached to this report. Installation of headstones and formal

dressing of the graves will be undertaken after the rainy season in order to allow for settlement of the grave fill.

Earthworks around the graves significantly impacted the setting of the graves and to an extent collective memory. It is therefore possible that some graves are lost in family memory and were missed during the ground survey conducted prior to the exhumations. As a standard precaution, if it happens that human remains are exposed during future earthworks, SAHRA or the provincial heritage resources must be conducted and a heritage expert called to evaluate the finds.

9. PHOTO CATALOGUE OF FINDS



Figure 12: RTF01 Cairn marking



Figure 13. RTF01 Polythene sheet coffin lining



Figure 14: RTF01 Polythene sheet coffin lining. Iron sheet coffin frame



Figure 15: RTF02 Cairn marking



Figure 16:RTF02 Drinking glasses on top of the grave



Figure 17: RTF02 No human remains, soil collected



Figure 18: RTF03 Cairn marking with ceramic bricks



Figure 19: RTF03 Glass bottles and ceramic plates placed on the grave



Figure 20: RTF03 Polythene sheet coffin lining, blanket placed over the coffin, copper coffin handles



Figure 21: RTF04 Cairn marking



Figure 22: RTF04 Glass bottle placed on the grave



Figure 23: RTF04 Iron sheet coffin frame



Figure 24. RTF05 Cairn marking



Figure 25: RTF05 Broken bottle and iron jar grave soil on top of the grave. No human remains found



Figure 26: RTF06 Cairn marking



Figure 27: RTF06 No remains were found

Grave RTF07



Figure 28: RTF07 Cairn marking



Figure 29: RTF07 No human remains found. Soil and grave goods collected for reburial



Figure 30: RTF08 Stones buried in top soil



Figure 31: RTF08 Sieving in search of bones



Figure 32: RTF08 Decomposed bones mostly fragments and metal coffin handle



Figure 33: Human bones retrieved for reburial



Figure 34: RTF09 Cairn burial, tree growing on the grave, wire fenced



Figure 35: RTF09. Polythene sheet coffin lining or wrapping of the corpse. Iron coffin handles. Adult skeleton



Figure 36: RTF10 Cairn marking



Figure 37: RTF10 Glass bottle retrieved from topsoil, decomposed skeleton found



Figure 38: RTF10 Cairn marking



Figure 40: RTF10 Polythene sheet coffin lining or corpse wrapping



Figure 41: RTF10 Tag with the name: Maria Pilane, aluminium coffin cover screw, nail, and metal sheet frame of coffin



Figure 42 RTF11 Cairn marking



Figure 42: RTF11 Screening to retrieve small bones



Figure 43. RTF12 Decomposed and fragmented human bones

Grave No RTF13, on the northern foot of the pedestal. Displaced as a result of a collapse on the edge of the pedestal



Figure 44: RTF13 A collapse from an overhand occurred with the grave contents falling to the foot of pedestal



Figure 45: RTF13 Human bones retrieved on the foot of the pedestal



Figure 46: RTF13 Shreds of polythene sheet and human bones retrieved



Figure 47: RTF13 Another view of the bones and polythene sheet retrieved



Figure 48:RTF14. Cairn marking, stones buried in topsoil.



Figure 49:RTF15 Green drinking glass placed on the grave



Figure 50: RTF14 Human bone fragments retrieved



Figure 51: RTF15 Cairn marking, stones partially buried in topsoil



Figure 52: RTF15 Drinking glass on top of the grave



Figure 53: RTF15 Polythene sheet lining of coffin



Figure 54: Decomposed skull fragments



Figure 55: RTF15, bones with signs of fire burn



Figure 56: Skeleton lifted with the polythene sheet wrapping



Figure 57: RTF16 Headstone and anthill



Figure 58: RTF16 Polythene sheet lining of the coffin



Figure 59:RTF16 Polythene sheet wrapping of the corpse



Figure 60: Skeleton lying in an extended position



Figure 61: Humerus with 4 black plastic armbands



Figure 62: RTF16 Decomposed skull



Figure 63: RTF16 Iron sheet possibly the coffin frame and copper handles



Figure 64: RTF17 Grave without a visible surface marking. A few stones buried in topsoil on a portion furthest from the camera



Figure 65: Iron axe head, a small bottle with inscription "Chamberlain" a popular prophylactic remedy in the past



Figure 63: Nothing found in the grave

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr Boy Themba, family member.

Mrs Makatse Letsholo, family member.

Mr Titus Moshimane, Undertaker, Moshimane Exhumations.

Mr Ronald Kruger, Occupation Health and Safety (OHS) Officer, Wearne Aggregates.