

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE HARBOUR AREA: ROBBEN ISLAND

Prepared for

Robben Island Museum

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Archaeology Contracts Office of the University of Cape Town was contracted by the Robben Island Museum (Heritage department) to undertake a heritage impact assessment of the Murray Harbour Precinct. This includes the portion of land to the east of the Prison, the harbour area, penguin walk area, and vegetated zone to the south of the Harbour (Figure 1). Planning is in progress to open the area to tourists visiting the island. It is envisaged that tourists will be able to wander freely around the precinct whereas access to the rest of the island is strictly controlled under supervision of guides. It was therefore necessary to establish if there were any objects or places of heritage significance that could be impacted by their actions. In addition to assessment of potential impacts, the ACO also revisited areas of possible archaeological significance with a view to establishing target areas for future archaeological research.

2. METHOD

The assessment commenced with re-familiarisation of relevant historic maps housed in the Cape Archives. Re-appraisal of this evidence with Dr Harriet Deacon (Robben Island Museum) supported the conclusion reached by previous researchers who had attempted, by overlaying historical maps, to establish the probable location of early DEIC settlement on the island. Indications are that the main DEIC settlement lay just south of the existing Murray's Bay harbour very close to the coast. The coastline has altered in the recent past due to not only the construction of the harbour, but also sediment build up to the south of the harbour as a result of changes it caused to the depositional environment. Due to this factor, and the inaccuracy of many of the historic maps, it has not been possible to pinpoint the location of the early settlement, but rather determine a broad target area (see Figure 1). Having done this, the next step was to visit the island and search the relevant areas. This was done by three ACO members who walked transects throughout the precinct, paying specific attention to searching any areas indicated as being potentially sensitive by the map research.

3. RESTRICTIONS

In some areas visibility was impeded by virtually impenetrable stands of alien vegetation. Complete coverage of some areas, especially to the south of the harbour wont be possible until this is thinned.

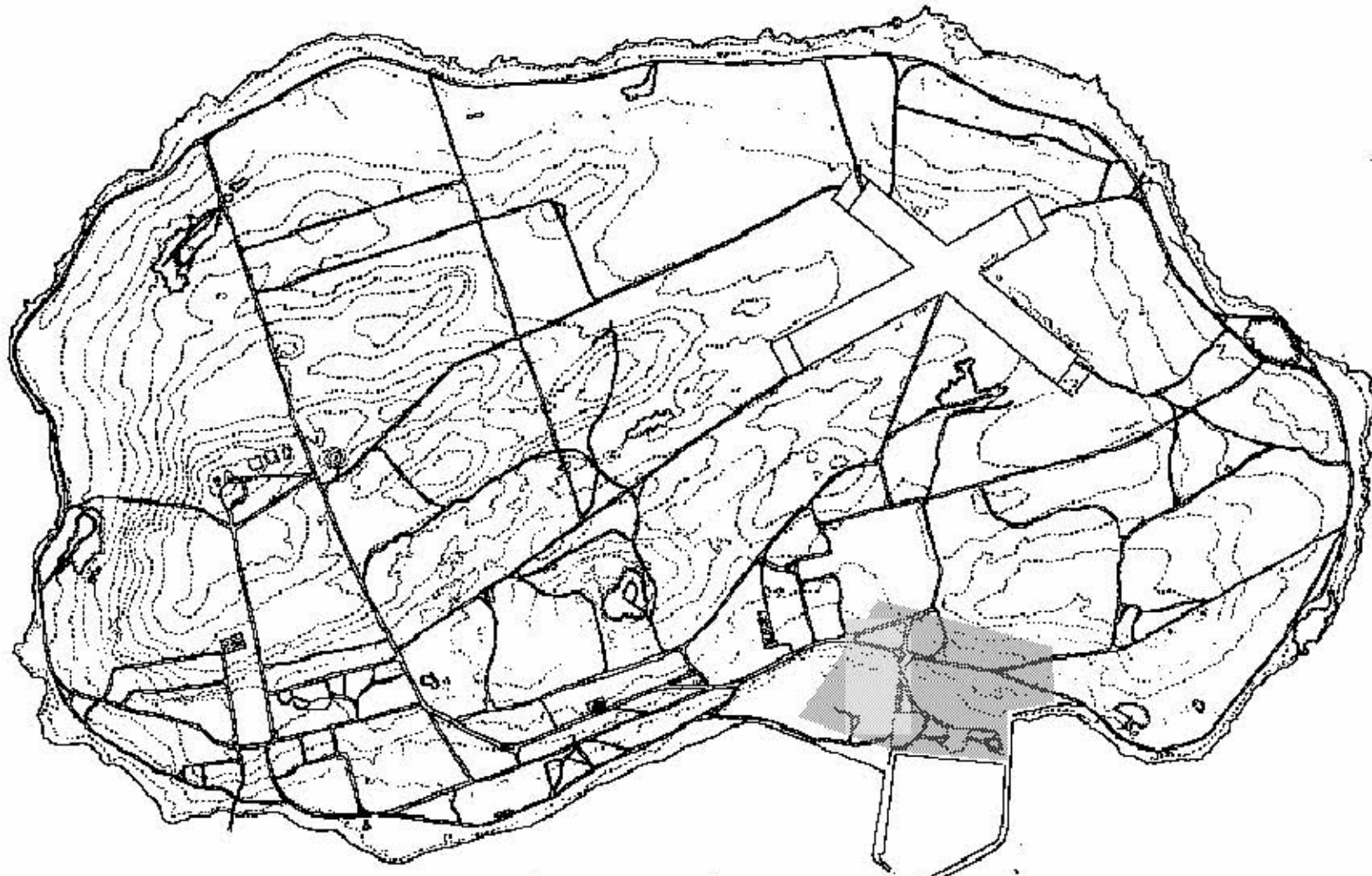
4. FINDINGS

A baseline assessment of the island was completed in 1998.¹ Several areas of archaeological potential were delineated, one of which was at Murray's Bay. Despite revisiting the area and searching it as closely as possible, we made no further observations other than those indicated in the 1998 baseline assessment.

4.1 Murray's Bay early settlement

In terms of settlement on Robben Island, Murray's Bay has played a key role. Historical records indicate that a "cave" which existed in the area, was used for shelter by passing sailors and early settlers. Later, Murray and his family who started a whaling operation at the

¹ Hart, T and Halkett, D. 1998 Baseline archaeological assessment of Robben Island. Unpublished ACO report prepared for Environmental Risk Services.



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ROBBEN ISLAND HARBOUR PRECINCT



18th century settlement target area



Search area



end of the 18th century used the cave for temporary lodgings². It is also quite likely that in the 17th century, Herry (Autshumato), leader of the "Cape Men" and his group of followers also focussed their activities on the sheltered Murray's Bay coastline where they could collect mussels and limpets off the easily accessible rocks.

The island's only sheltered bay, was the location of an extensive VOC outpost, which researchers have estimated lay just back from the shoreline immediately south of Murray Harbour. Details of this complex are shown on a map of 1785³ as well as on Robert Jacob Gordon's⁴ painting of the settlement. At present this area is heavily vegetated with aliens and appears to have been used as a picnic/recreation area by correctional services staff.

A site inspection has shown no trace of any caves in the area of Murray's Bay. The cave, if it existed at Murray's Bay, was probably a calcrete overhang destroyed or filled in during the construction of the harbour in 1940. Several alignments of quarried stone and scattered boulders in areas heavily overgrown with alien vegetation immediately south of the harbour may be remnants of structures from the 18th century. The submarine monitoring post south of the harbour is built on a mound, which predates WW2. Within this mound is evidence of earlier stone wall footings of an as yet unidentified structure. Very little artefactual material was observed apart from 2 sherds of oriental porcelain.

4.1.1 impacts

Unfortunately, the area in the vicinity of Murray's Bay has been subject to extensive impacts in the past. The first of these was the construction of the 18" tramway, which follows the existing asphalt main road. This required construction of an embankment which would have destroyed or covered foundations of previous structures. The second major event that took place was the construction of Murray's Bay harbour in 1940. This involved both a cut and fill operation as well as major land reclamation which would have had negatively impacted archaeological material. The construction of a WW2 facility and building of submarine detection cables has also resulted in impacts to earlier material. It is also possible that construction of the existing prison would have effected some aspects of the archaeology of the VOC period.

The only stone wall alignments we have found to date are mostly hidden in thick bush and are very unlikely to be impacted by visitors. There is very little surface archaeological material that is likely to be impacted by souvenir collectors, trampling or theft.

4.1.2 Mitigatory measures

No mitigatory measures are required for heritage purposes provided that people do not wander into the bush south of the harbour. The bush is very thick and any child wandering into it may become disorientated and lost very quickly. From this point of view it is best that the bushy areas remain restricted until marked paths are established. This will also have the effect of protecting the small amount of early fabric that we have identified.

4.1.3 Management and future research potential

A broad pattern of archaeological test excavations will be necessary to establish the extent and condition of any sub-surface archaeological material. If it becomes apparent that wall foundations are present, it will be necessary to control the growth of vegetation so that damage to wall footings can be minimised. An obvious initial target area is the section of

² Deacon, H. 1996. The Island. Cape Town: David Phillip Publishers

³ Caart van 't Robben Eiland. CA M1/902

⁴ Rijksarchief, Den Haag, Nederland TOPO 120

walling visible in the mound of the WW2 facility. If this can be excavated and identified, it may provide a reference point for locating other structures indicated on early maps.

4.2 Other finds in the Murray's Bay area

4.2.1 Railway material

The artefactual material visible on the surface of the precinct is very robust, and industrial in character. It consists of at least two sets of bogey wheels from a standard gauge railway track, several lengths of steel track, twisted and bulldozed out of context. Although not mentioned in any published accounts of the island, it appears that a second railway system (besides the early tram line) was built during WW2 to assist in the construction of the harbour and transporting of building materials for the war effort. The wheels of a rail truck, sleepers and railway line have been observed in bushes near the new power station. Further remains of a railway mounted crane and lengths of track lie in thick bushes close to the penguin colony walkway while remains of mounted track are still visible on the north breakwater of the harbour. A number of wooden railway sleepers have been used for *ad hoc* repairs to the rifle range on the western side of the island. The gauge of the track is the standard 3'6" Cape gauge used throughout southern Africa. It is quite probable that a small steam locomotive operated on the island during the war years.

4.2.1.1 Impacts

No impacts from tourists are expected. The material is too robust to be moved or collected as souvenirs. Impacts that may be expected result from the corrosive effects of the saline environment on the unprotected metal.

4.2.2 Machine gun post

The WW2 machine gun post close to the entrance to the harbour is unlikely to be affected by tourists. Its interior is not accessible at present, however we noted that that the entrance tunnel is collapsing in places and this will have to be made good. Long term management could involve clearing the interior of the feature, and repairing the entrance tunnel so that visitors can safely enter the site and experience the interior.

4.2.3 Artillery

Due to its robust construction, the WW2 cannon at the entrance of the prison is unlikely to be impacted. Natural forces are taking its toll on the artefact, which will have to be maintained periodically. Future management could involve researching the specifications/history of the gun and erecting a storey board to this end.

4.2.4 Naval gun shells

The traffic island in front of the prison is cordoned with cannon shells. These are currently in a state of disarray compared with previous years. The use of these objects for decorative purposes is a reflection of the attitude of the prison authorities which needs to be continued to be acknowledged. The spatial arrangement of the shells must be properly maintained. The shells are also valuable items (in certain circles) and not particularly common. Although it would be very difficult for a tourist to remove one of these (they are very heavy), it would be possible to smuggle such an item off the island in a vehicle. An audit should be made of these items and their situation should be checked from time to time.

5. CONCLUSION

It is unlikely that the archaeology or heritage resources of the Murray Harbour Area will be impacted by allowing tourists to wander freely in the area. There are no obvious archaeological deposits, fragile ruins or easily transportable objects in the vicinity. There is potential to develop the heritage aspects of the area by setting up signage to explain some of the visible features such as the WW2 cannon and machine gun post. Ultimately the archaeological potential of the area could be developed further to enhance the interest content of the precinct.

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