

REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATION OF THE OLD SCRAP HEAP - ROBBEN ISLAND

Prepared for

**Robben Island Museum
Heritage Department**

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Prepared by

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1. INTRODUCTION

The baseline archaeological study of Robben Island, undertaken in 1998 by the Archaeology Contracts Office, identified the old scrap heap as having the potential to contain items relating to the period during which the prison was in operation. At the time, certain items were observed in and around the fringes of the scrap heap which justified the decision to recommend that it be subjected to careful clearing to allow identification and retrieval of items for museum display purposes. The location of the site is shown on Figure 1.

While it would appear that initially this locality had been utilised for the disposal of scrap metal of various types, the fringes have more recently seen the dumping of both building rubble and household rubbish. Amongst the recently dumped materials are substances such as paint, diesel and sump oil, some in containers which due to rusting of drums and degradation of plastic containers, has leaked into the soil.

What was perhaps a fairly innocuous scrap metal heap has now turned into a source of pollutants. The intention to put the removal of the entire heap from the island out to tender, has necessitated that the recommendations of the baseline archaeological study be carried out.

2. METHOD

The presence of numerous large, heavy objects in the scrap piles meant that the job required major mechanical intervention. The RIM arranged the use of the digger/loader stationed on the island to assist with the process. The ACO supplied personnel to supervise the operation and to retrieve any items which were deemed to be of interest. The mechanical excavator was utilised to sift through the scrap piles by moving them from one area to another within the dump. In this way we were able to look at material located at the bases of the scrap piles.

3. BACKGROUND

The scrap heap was accumulated in a locality which was previously utilised during the prison period for the production of concrete items, primarily we believe, for casting square concrete blocks for the protection of the island's harbour breakwater. The location of the site, close to the point where the breakwater joins the coastline would seem to reinforce this conclusion. Items relating to this process have been identified and the remains of concrete surfaces and brick structures are preserved below the scrap piles. While it has not been the task of this investigation to investigate the background history of the locality, interviewing of former prisoners will I am sure confirm this deduction.

4. OBSERVATIONS

On the whole, the yield of artefacts with display potential from the dump was disappointing. Some items that had been seen during our initial assessment could not be relocated. This applies particularly to a box of old correctional services uniforms and hats. We understand that these may have been rescued by museum staff prior to our having undertaken the study.

Most of the items on the dump (apart from the more recently dumped refuse) date to the prison period and as such constitute artefacts. Practically though, these cannot all be retained. Old cars made up a large part of the scrap content.

Given the volume of scrap in the dump, a relatively small selection of items was rescued.



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5. COMMENTS

By the time the sorting process was completed I had still not been supplied with a storage location. On the last day of the work, I therefore had to make the decision to place the items that had been recovered into a temporary storage area in the old prison which lies immediately adjacent to the scrap heap. This storage location is not locked.

As the items had to be moved without the aid of machinery, only the smallest items could be placed into storage. Large items, were left in the scrap yard and marked with brightly coloured plastic strips. These heavy and bulky items, and the smaller items in temporary storage, should be moved by the museum as soon as possible, and to facilitate this process, a large enough permanent storage area must be identified.

6. TEAM

Overall supervision and report
Assistants

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Peter Nilssen
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