

AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SO CALLED “WELL” IN THE COURTYARD OF MARTIN MELCK HOUSE: STRAND STREET, CAPE TOWN

Prepared for

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1. INTRODUCTION

An enigmatic semi-circular brick feature in the northern corner of the courtyard at the rear of Martin Melck house (Figure 1) has for many years been believed to be the top of a well. An investigation of the feature has been requested as part of the redevelopment of the building and courtyard for Anglogold.

An initial inspection of the feature showed that while some original fabric was present, the feature had been modified in the recent past to serve as a fish pond. As the feature had been plastered on the inside, it was not possible to comment on whether or not any from of filled in shaft was preserved below. It was decided to conduct an investigation in two parts. Initially, the plaster on the inside of the feature would be removed to see if any shaft could be detected. If this was the case another more extensive excavation would be undertaken as a second study.

As it turned out, after having removed the internal plaster, and underlying internal fill, we were unable to confirm the presence of a well shaft due to a number of other brick features being present in the interior of the semi-circular feature. Following a site meeting with the architect to inspect the features, it was decided to extend the initial study. Part of the extended study necessitated the removal of the upper parts of the semi-circular original brickwork which was impeding inspection of the lower parts of the structure.

This initial study has now been completed and show that the semi-circular feature was never part of a well. A number of observations that will be discussed in the report suggest instead that it may have been constructed as a courtyard feature during the 19th century. No archival study has been requested as part of this study and so we cannot comment on whether the feature has been identified in historic records.

These excavations have been conducted under a permit (80/01/04/003/51) from the South African Heritage Resources Authority (SAHRA).

2. METHOD

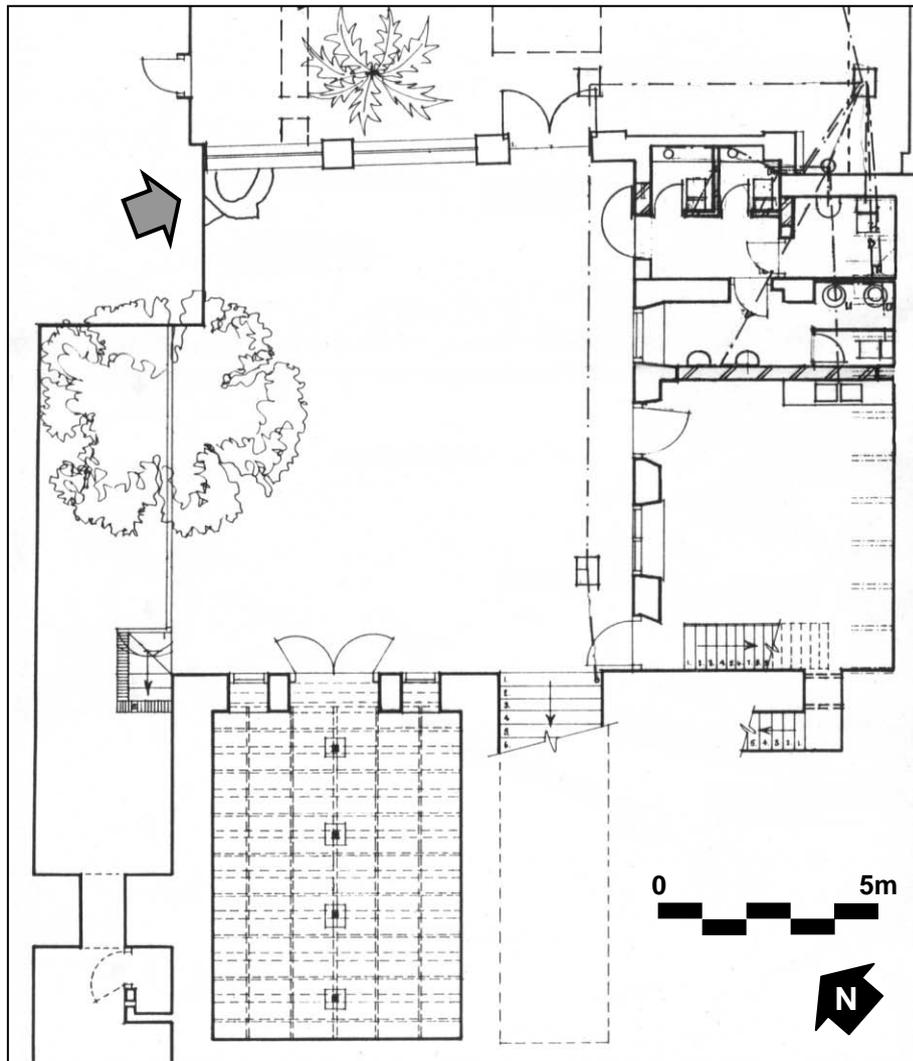
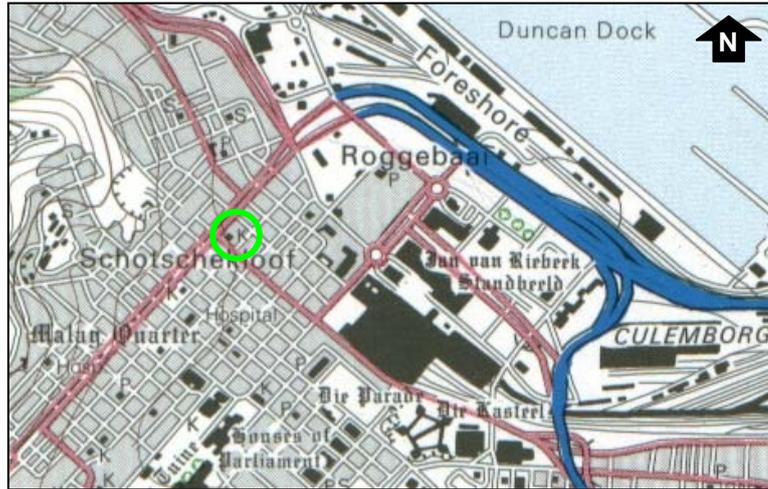
The excavation was documented through the use of digital photography and a written description of the process was kept. A small amount of artefactual material was recovered from the fill and was retained.

3. OBSERVATIONS

Figure 2 shows the structure with the interior plaster removed and external plaster removed from strategic areas where it was necessary to determine if structural components locked together. Various parts of the feature have been labeled to aid discussion. Additional views of the structure can be seen in the 6 photographs at the back of the report and should be viewed in conjunction with Figure 2. The exposed surface brickwork to a depth of three courses on (A) and (B) was recently done using modern cement.

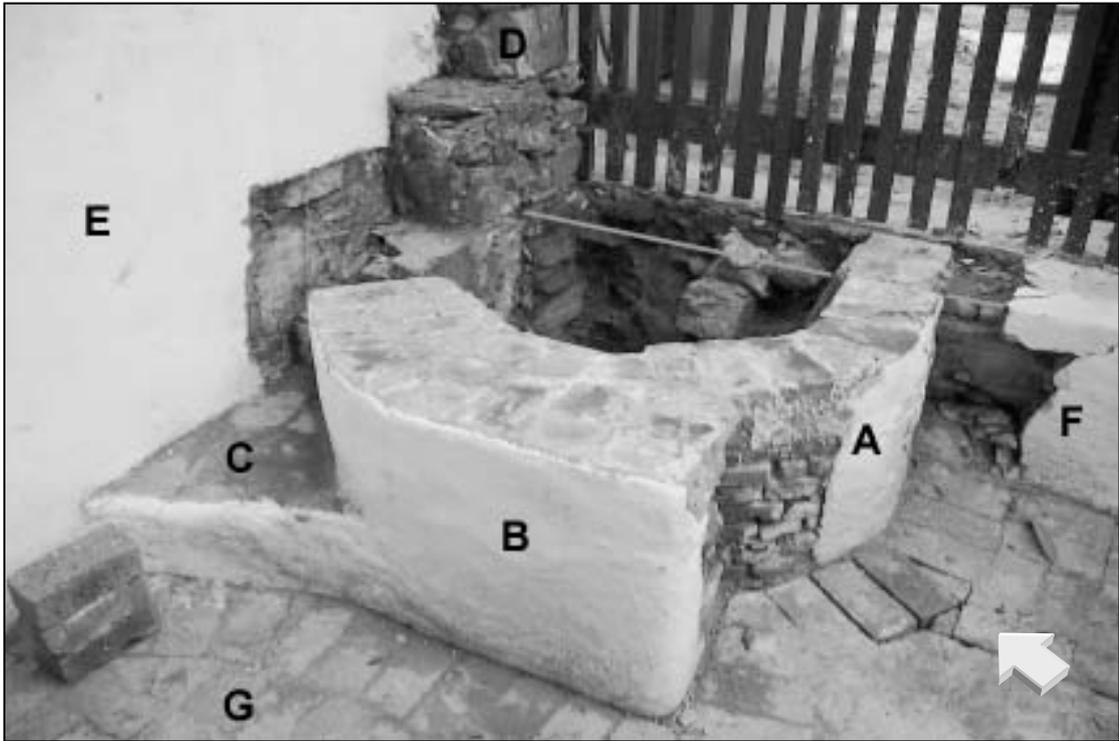
3.1 Semi-circular structure (A)

Initially this wall only appeared to curve around as far as the structure (B). Having removed the plaster that formed the base of the recent pond, and the underlying fill, a few bricks of similar type to those on the courtyard side were exposed. It was still not clear if there was

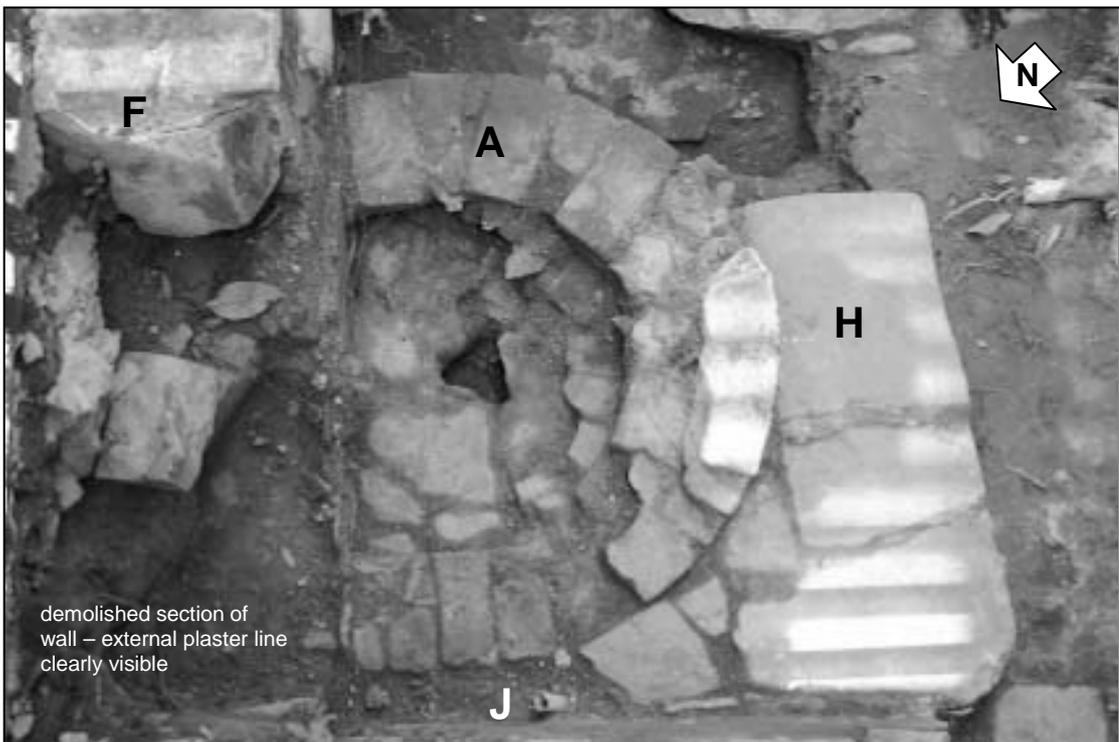


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Location of the “well” in the courtyard of Melck House



- A** Maroon klinker brick structure with lime mortar.
- B** Red sun dried brick structure with mud mortar.
- C** Brick infill.
- D** Stepped stone structure abutting butters wall (E).
- E** Butters
- F** Courtyard dividing wall built with stone and plastered originally with lime plaster. Grey line shows where wall has been demolished.
- G** Modern brick paving.
- H** Original courtyard paving.



2 Structural components of the courtyard feature: Melck House

any link between the few remaining bricks on the west and those on the east as a result of the incorporation of (A) into the later structure (B). When we dismantled (B) it became very clear that a semi-circular structure was present built primarily from red/maroon klinker bricks with dimensions (230x110x42mm), secured with lime mortar. Toward the bottom were also some bricks with dimensions (200x80x45mm). The exterior view suggested that the structure was built entirely of brick, when in fact exposure of the interior showed that rocks and brick fragments had been used in most places and what was visible from outside was mostly a façade of brickwork. The roughness of the construction on the interior suggests that either the feature was never intended to be open on the inside, or, that an earlier, neater construction which had been open, was partially demolished and later rebuilt for a slightly different purpose. The structure is seated on a foundation consisting of a single course of rocks (Plate 6). The base of the feature consisted of a “paving” of stone. The klinker appears to have been laid on top of this “paving” which can be seen projecting below the wall in Plate 6.

The feature was clearly always intended to be semi-circular. This is deduced from the fact that it abuts the stone dividing wall of the courtyard (F). There is no evidence that the two ever locked together, nor is there any evidence to suggest that the dividing wall cut through an originally circular feature. In other words, it appears as if the stone dividing wall is the earliest of the features being discussed here and the brick structure (A) was built up against it. An original structure may have been present here during the 18th century. The lower part of the feature also seems to predate the stone paving (H) which is laid neatly up against the edge.

3.2 Courtyard dividing wall (F)

The courtyard dividing wall was built with stone (local shale) and mud mortar and then finished with lime plaster. Changes in level of the courtyard are clearly seen in that the plastered face of the wall extends approximately 400mm below the present courtyard level. It is not possible to say if this wall had locked into the buttress wall (E) as that area is subsumed within a stepped stone feature (D). Portions of the wall adjacent to (A) have been demolished leaving the outer section of the wall intact. This was probably done when the fish pond was installed. This probably dates to the 18th century.

3.3 Stepped stone structure (D) and Church buttress wall (E)

The purpose of this construction is not entirely clear. Built entirely out of stone, carefully finished edges indicate that it is not the remains of a larger structure. There are four “steps” in all. The dimensions are regular with the height being 330mm and the length 220mm. It was built over the courtyard wall (F) and portions of it can be seen below the stepped feature where (F) is partially demolished. It does not lock into the buttress wall (E) and was clearly built sometime after the buttress was completed as evidenced by a line of plaster that can be seen between the two. It is not clear whether this structure predated the semi-circular feature or if in fact there is any connection between the two.

3.4 Brick wall (B) and Brick infill (C)

A section of wall (B) was added to the complex at some stage. The bricks used in this are very different to those in (A). They are soft, poorly fired and bright red in colour with dimensions (250x125x45). Mud has been used as the binding in this case. As with (A), three courses of modern brick and cement were used in the upper part, and the outer surfaces replastered with modern cement. The purpose of this addition is not clear as it

does not fully enclose the earlier structure nor was there any visible evidence to suggest that it ever had existed adjacent to the exposed wall of a to the south. The brick work had been placed on top of a layer of stonework, which in turn had been placed directly on top of some of the original courtyard paving stones. This configuration would suggest that the courtyard paving was still in place when (B) was constructed. We are uncertain of the date of this construction.

The area between the end of (B) and the stepped structure (D) was filled with soft brick held in place with mud mortar. It partially covered the fourth step of (D).

3.5 Modern brick courtyard paving (G)

This needs no explanation other than making the observation that it is slightly higher than what we believe may be earlier paving (H). We noticed too that when excavating a test hole on the south of the features that an artefact bearing layer was encountered at a depth of approximately 250mm below the bricks and may also mark an earlier level.

3.6 Original stone courtyard paving (H)

This consists of three large shale paving stones abutting the semi-circular feature.

3.7 Lead pipe (J)

A fragment of lead pipe emerges from the wedge of ground between (D) and (A). There is no visible evidence of where this pipe extended to but it is tempting to assume that it may have been leading water to a feature that existed here during the 19th century.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Having completed these excavations there seems to be no physical evidence of a well in this part of the courtyard. Instead the remains suggest that a semi-circular feature of unknown purpose was present possibly as early as the 18th century, which was subsequently modified during the 19th century. We believe that the 19th century modifications may have been to produce a water related feature fed by a lead pipe. The source of the water remains unknown.

5. PROFESSIONAL TEAM

Report
Fieldwork

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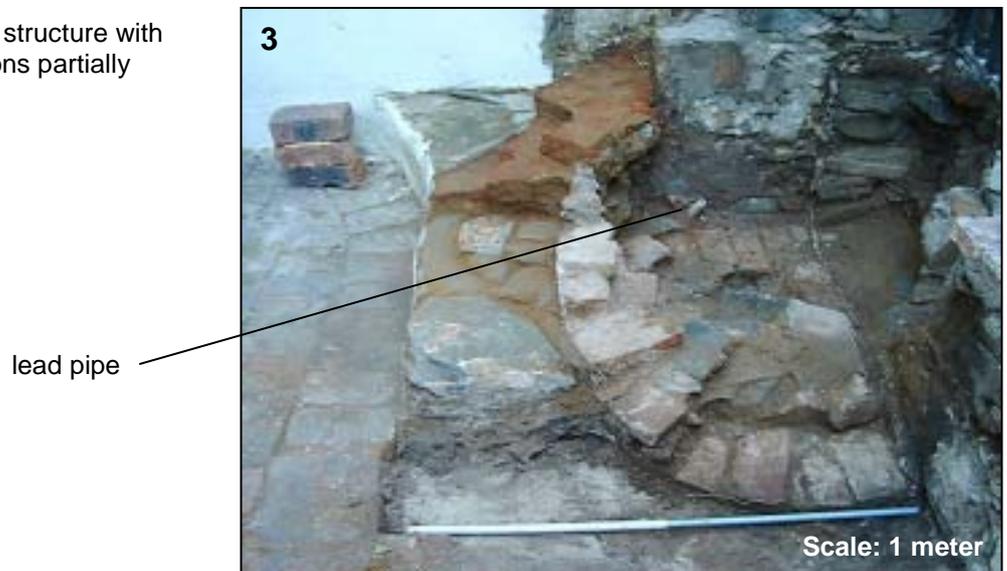
View of the structure looking north.



View of the structure looking west.



View of the structure with later additions partially removed.



View of the structure from above with later additions partially dismantled.



View of the structure from above showing *in situ* paving at right and stonework at the base of the feature.



View of the below ground parts of the structure looking west. In situ paving stones at left.

