

Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA)  
Report on the survey of a site on Robben Island  
situated south of the Dog Unit (Robert Sobukwe House)  
between Murray's Bay and Murray's Road

Prepared for  
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Robben Island, 2013 (Google Earth)

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April 2013

## EXECUTIVE SUMMERY

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In March 2013 Dr Ute A Seemann was appointed to survey a site on Robben Island for historical/ archaeological surface remains. The Department of Public Works proposes to erect a Sewage Package Plant at this site, which is bounded to the north-east by Murray's Bay beach, north by the Dog Unit (the main living quarters renamed Robert Sobukwe House), to the west by Murray's Road and to the south by the Robben Island village proper. The site is heavily disturbed by sewerage and fresh water underground pipes, three sewage pump stations, electrical underground cables, wooden poles, the remains of a brick and cement structure, alien vegetation, rabbit holes and -tracks etc . In addition it has been used as a sports-, training- and recreation ground for more than a hundred years.

No remains of visible historical/archaeological features or portable artefacts were found.

**Recommendation:** The site to be released for further development.

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## 1. THE BRIEF

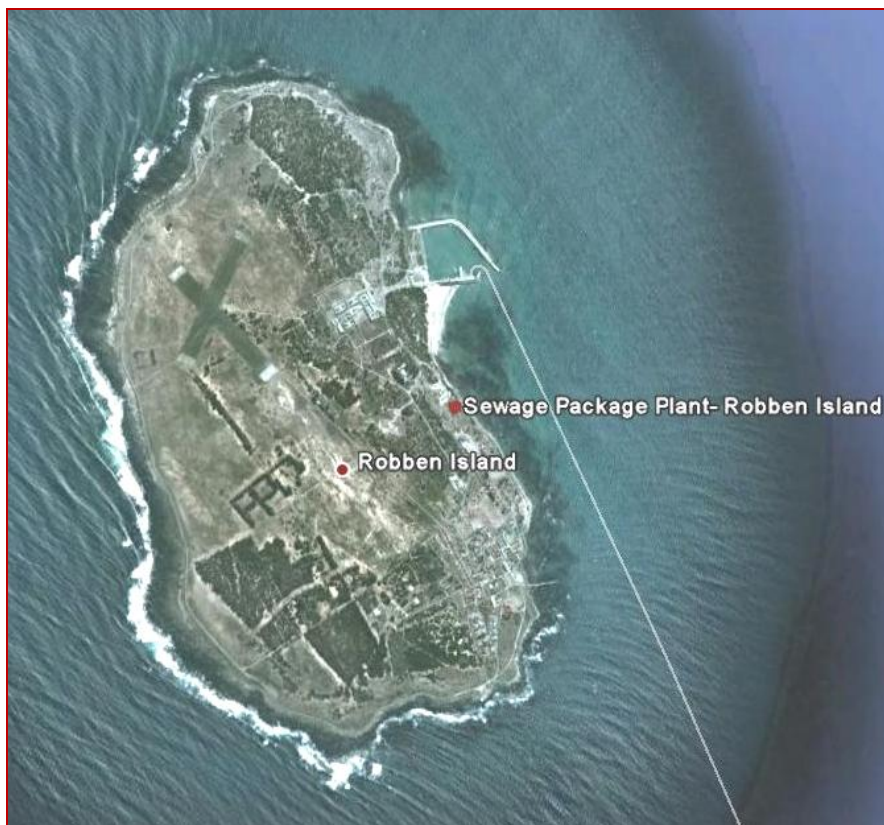
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At the request of WSP Environmental (Pty) Ltd, Ms Surina Brink and Ms Jacqui Fincham, on behalf of their client, the Department of Public Works, Dr Ute A Seemann was commissioned to survey a site on Robben Island south of the Dog Unit buildings (Robert Sobukwe House) for historical/archaeological features. The Public Works Department plans to built a Sewage Packing Plant near the present concrete sewer pump stations.

## 2. BASELINE DESCRIPTION

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The basic co-ordinates of the site are approximately 33°48'20"S and 18°22'40"E. (Fig. 1).



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Fig. 1.  
Google map of  
Robben Island,  
2013.

The area under consideration is covered by alien vegetation, mostly bluegum and *manatoka* trees, local *fynbos* scrub and some ground cover which is able to tolerate the limestone soil. The site is heavily disturbed by sewerage and fresh water underground pipes, three sewage pump stations, electrical underground cables, wooden poles, the remains of a brick structure and cement platform, remains of fencing material, rabbit holes and –tracks etc . In

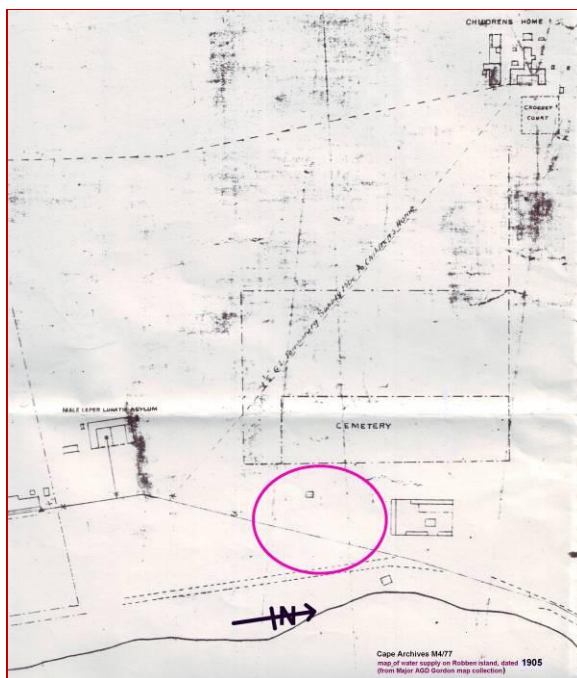
addition it has been used as a sports-, training- and recreation ground for more than a hundred years.

### 3. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

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The historic background of the site has been extensively documented elsewhere<sup>1</sup> and needs not to be repeated here. Suffice to say that – in the context of this report – the Dog Unit, a former dog quarantine station was founded in 1893, kennels and living quarters for the staff were built. During WWII these buildings served as staff quarters for South African female military personnel stationed on the island, known as the SWANS.

In 1905 a freshwater pipe was laid from the windmill near the children's home of the leper colony to the vicinity of the dog kennels (Fig. 2). It seems that up to 1931 three small mortuary buildings were situated below Murray Road (Fig. 3, circled in pink), marked as due for demolition later that year. Murray Road was and is the main thoroughfare from the landing place / the harbor facilities (from 1942 onwards) in Murray's Bay to the Robben Island village proper. The harbor had been commissioned to facilitate the erection of military installations from the start of the Second World War.




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Fig. 2  
Supply and fresh water distribution,  
Robben Island, dated 1905 (Reference:  
Cape Archives M4/77)

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<sup>1</sup> Deacon, Harriet. 1992. *The Island, a History of Robben Island 1488 to 1990*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip & Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape. This book is a well balanced account of the island's history.



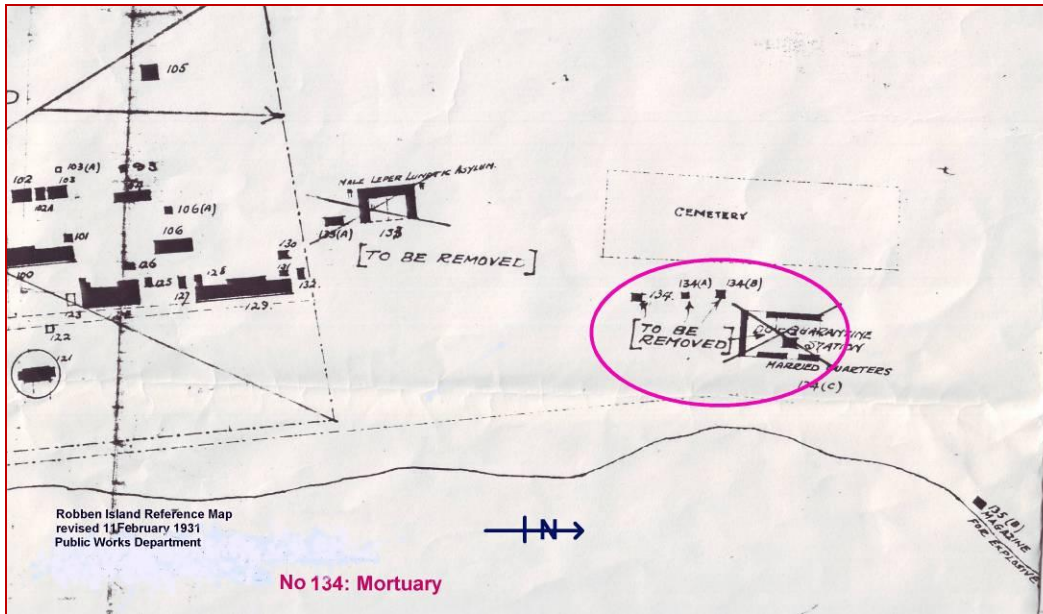


Fig. 3  
Map Robben Island, dated 1931. The mortuary buildings listed as 134, 134a and 134b were to be demolished, circled in pink. (Reference: Public Works Department).

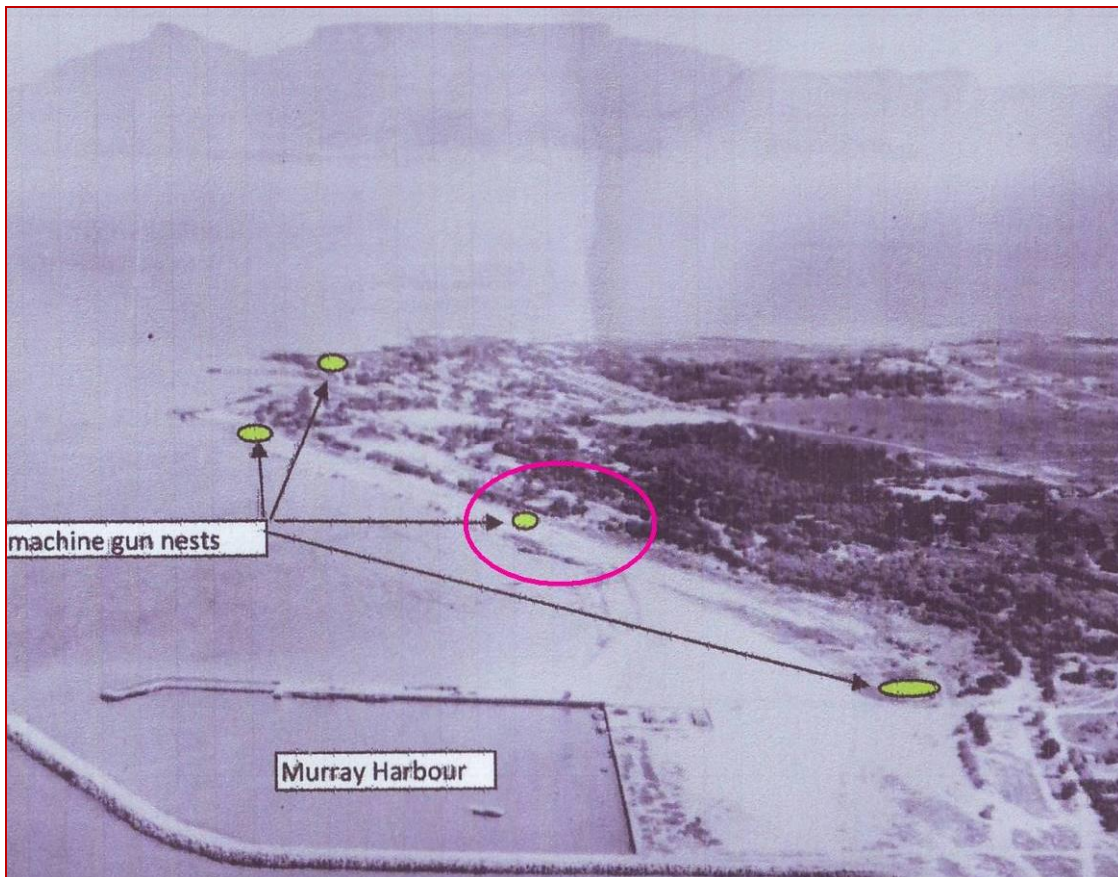


Fig. 4.  
Aerial photograph Robben Island dated 1942. Site under investigation circled pink. (Reference: photograph In possession of Mr Andre vom Hagen)

In the above aerial photograph, taken in 1942, the location of a machine gun nest is highlighted, and is situated close to the beach in the area under investigation. It is described as "Machine Gun Nest No 3 – five gun bunkers, armed with Bren machine guns with effective range of 550m and maximum range of 1,690m, rate of fire 500-520 rpm."<sup>2</sup> The military left the island in about 1945/6.



Fig. 5  
Aerial photograph, dated 1974. The survey site is marked in pink, and was probably used as a sports field recreation ground.

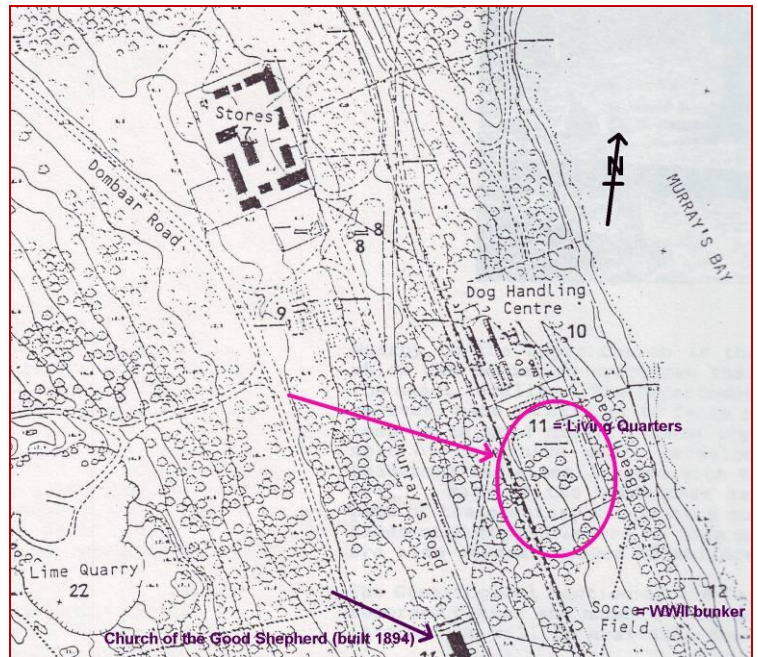


Fig. 6  
In this 1993 survey map areas of archaeological interest are marked as  
11 – Living quarters for the staff of the Dog Unit  
12 – remains of WWII bunker, outside of the area under investigation.  
(Reference: Patricia Riley. 1993. Conservation Survey of Robben Island. National Monuments Council).

#### 4. SITE SURVEY

The site was visited by myself and my assistant Ms Andrea van Onselen on 20 March 2013. No restrictions to the survey were encountered.

The results of the survey are listed in Figure 8 below. Only three land marks were noted.

<sup>2</sup> Map and Schedule of WWII Structures & Defences on Robben Island (1935-45). In the possession of Mr Andre vom Hagen and Col Lionel Crook, SA Legion, Rosebank).





Fig. 7  
The survey area (Google, 2013). The survey path is marked in green.

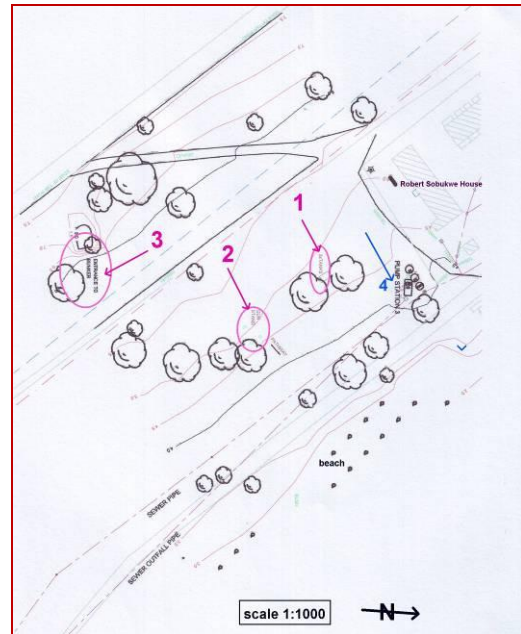


Fig. 8  
Survey map, 20 March 2013 (Reference: EFG Engineers (Pty) Ltd).  
1. Fresh water tanks  
2. Concrete platform and brick pillars, unidentified.  
3. Remains of concrete WWII bunker / look-out point.



Fig. 9  
Panorama of the site under investigation, facing east: to the left – in the back - the three concrete sewage pump stations, center: 3 fresh water tanks on a platform, to the right an electrical distribution box, wooden poles.  
Note the primary gravel roads and paths.





Fig. 10.  
View to the north. In the back Robert Sobukwe House. Note the degraded *veld* and the remains of the fencing area.



Fig. 11. The fresh water tanks in the survey. They are of no historical value.



Fig. 12. Degraded *veld* below a *manatoka* tree.



Fig. 13.  
Unidentified concrete platform and brick pillars, but definitely NOT of WWII vintage



Fig. 14.  
Outlined in pink: row of bluestone paving stones, unidentified.

## 5. RECOMMENDATION

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IMPORTANCE OF THE FINDS: NIL

SIGNIFICANCE: NIL



Fig. 15.

Position of the proposed Sewer Package Plant, 2013. (Reference: WSP Environmental (Pty) Ltd).

RECOMMENDATION: PERMISSION FOR THE EXCAVATION OF TEST HOLES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEWER PACKAGE PLANT TO BE GRANTED.

## 6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Deacon, Harriet. 1992. *The Island, a History of Robben Island 1488 to 1990*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip & Mayibuye Books, University of the Western Cape.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We thank the following persons for their advice and assistance:

Major ADJ Gordon for supplying WWII maps and discussion of WWII military installations on Robben Island, and advising us that the small concrete platform with two brick pillars found on the site was NOT a gun emplacement,

Col LA Crook, SA Legion Rosedale Complex, supply of WWII maps and confirming Major Gordon's impression.

Cdr Mac Eoin Bissett, Naval Museum, Simon's Town

EFG Engineers (Pty) Ltd, James Marais for the survey map dated 20 March 2013.