

THE AMSTERDAM BATTERY: A LATE 18TH CENTURY DUTCH MILITARY INSTALLATION IN TABLE BAY*

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* Accepted for publication September 1992

ABSTRACT

The partial excavation of the Amsterdam Battery yielded data pertaining to the construction and occupational phases of the fort and people who were stationed or visited there. The archaeological results verify and complement the archival documents. Three stages in the construction and modification of the Amsterdam Battery were identified. The first stage is represented by the original Dutch yellow clay floor. The second stage consisted of a sand/bog iron floor level, representing the remodelling phase of the early 1850s. A third, uppermost floorlevel of soft brick rubble and cement can be assigned to the 1890s, when a last attempt was made to modernise the battery.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Amsterdam Battery was one of a string of coastal defence works erected along the shores of Table Bay to protect the Dutch settlement and later the English Colony of the Cape against a possible attack from the sea. When in 1806 the English forces advanced from Blaauwberg on the other side of Table Bay during the second occupation of the Cape, the heavy defence works of the Castle and the Amsterdam Battery were a major factor in deciding the direction of this invasion.

The Amsterdam Battery was built between 1781 and 1786 when the Cape settlement was over 100 years old. During this time it had grown from a small military village and supply station for the ships of the Dutch East India Company (hereafter referred to as the VOC) to a town of just under 20 000 people.

As the settlement prospered, its value as a gateway to the East increased enormously. In the second half of the eighteenth century however, the maritime power of the Netherlands and the VOC declined. The influence of their rivals, mainly the English East India Company, increased however, creating the need to improve defences.

The coastal defence provided by the Castle (built between 1666 and 1676) was considered adequate until the Dutch Governor van Imhoff visited the Cape in 1743. His report resulted in far-reaching changes being implemented (Chavonnes, 1918). The only other defence work already in existence was the Chavonne Battery, built between 1715 and 1726, also known as Waterkasteel. During 1743 a fort, known as Fort Knokke was built to the east of the Castle. A line of batteries and redoubts, connected by a network of breastworks and

trenches, called the Sea Lines, was erected during the following years between the Castle and Fort Knokke. These included the redoubts Elizabeth, Helena, Charlotte, Tulbagh and Riebeeck. In the mid 1750s the Imhoff Battery was added to protect the face of the Castle. Between the Castle and the Chavonne Battery on the dunes of Rogge Bay a small earthen fort, called the Heeren Hendricks Kinderen or Groote Battery had been erected in 1744. This was the forerunner of the Amsterdam Battery and it is recorded that six guns were mounted on it (Mentzel, 1784).

A few days after the outbreak of the fourth Sea War in 1781 between the Netherlands and England, the VOC Directors (Heeren XVII) ordered the Political Council at the Cape to remodel and modernise the Heeren Hendricks Kinderen Battery, which had fallen into disrepair. The battery was to be totally reconstructed and renamed the Amsterdam Battery according to an undated plan (given as 1725 by the Cape Archives) which was amended in 1780 by Col. P.H. Gilquin (Cape Archives, E3505) (Fig. 2).

Work on the Amsterdam Battery commenced in 1781, directed by Lieutenant Colonel P.H. Gilquin, an English engineer in the service of the VOC, who was director of fortifications in Table Bay.

By 1786 the Amsterdam Battery's casemates had been built and clad with dressed stone to form the front ramparts. These faced the sea, with embrasures for the armament of 66 twenty four-pounder cannon and 6 twelve-pound mortars (Cape Archives, plan M1/337). These embrasures on the right hand flank (facing the sea) were bricked up after 1803 and made into windows to ventilate the rooms which were then used to house the convicts (Fig. 3).

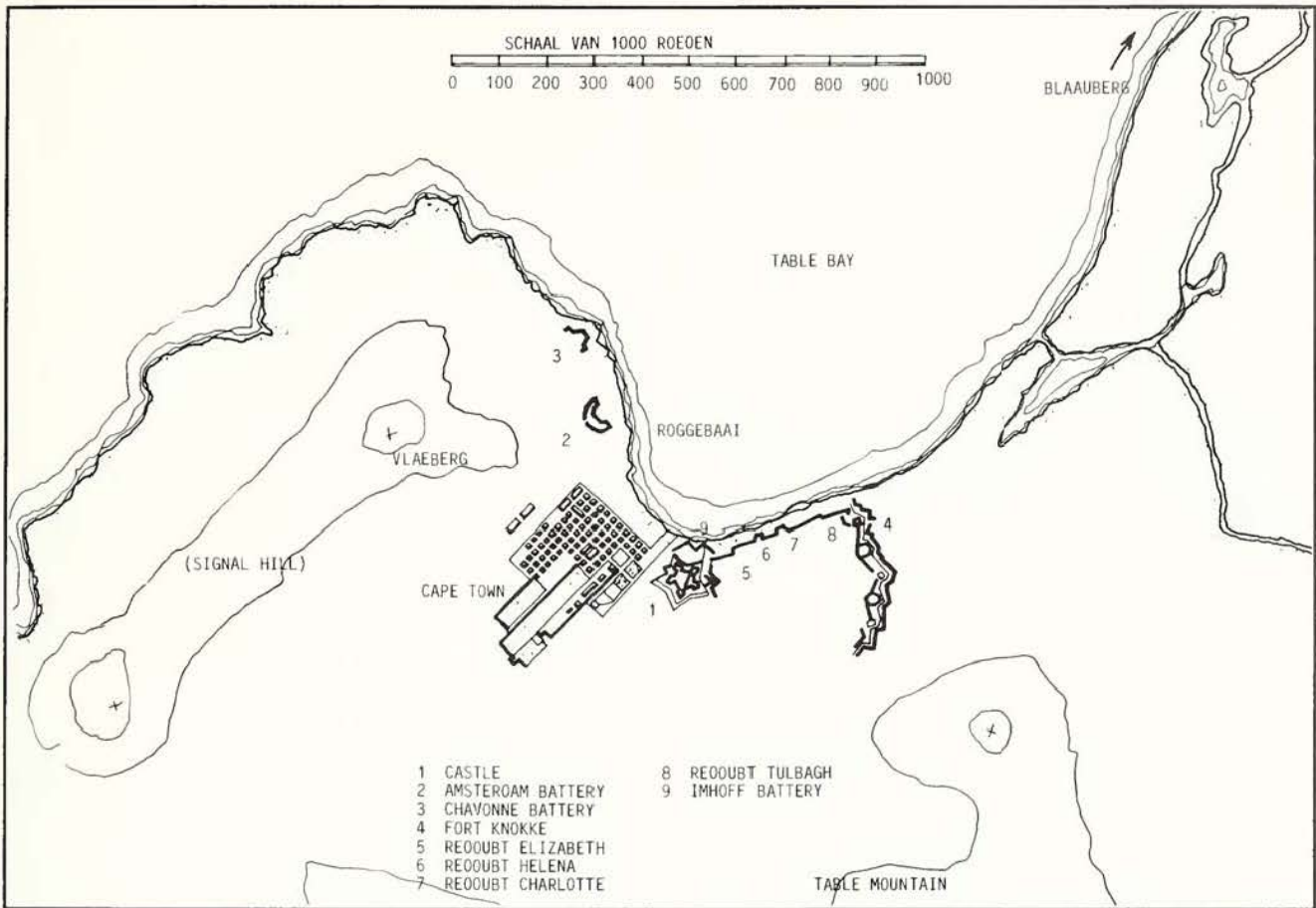


Fig. 1. Plan of Cape Town, 1790 (redrawing after a map from the Cape Town City Council, City Planner's Department, Land Survey Branch).

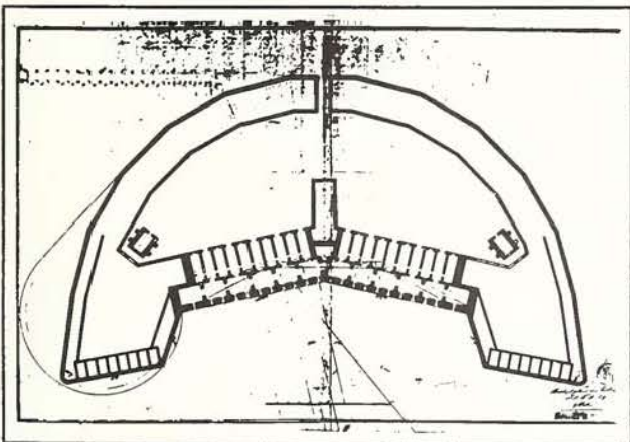


Fig. 2. Plan of the Amsterdam Battery, 1791 (Cape Archives, M/1084).

The guns were mounted on the upper floor of the casemates, the lower floor was to have cellars and corbelled ceilings for storage of cannonballs and for housing about 200 gunners. The walls were over 2 feet thick. Arched teak doors led into the bomb proof chambers. In the body of the front rampart were two rooms used for the storage of explosives. The roofs were strengthened with iron bars, and in one corner of each

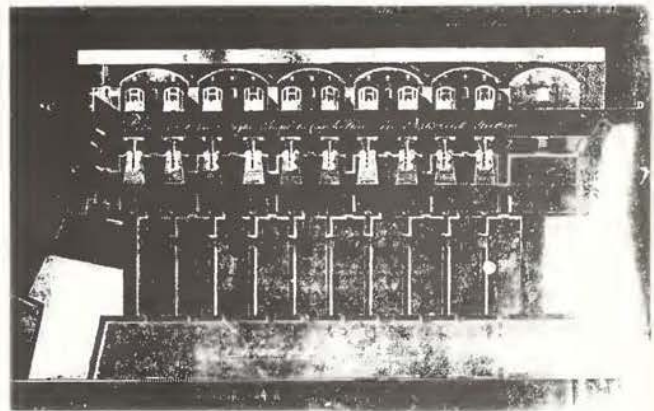


Fig. 3. Frontview and section through the casemates of the Amsterdam Battery, ca 1790 (Cape Archives, M/1359)

was a circular well or "shoot" (hoist), serving for communication with those in the magazines beneath and for raising ammunition (De Smidt, 1910).

Two powder magazines of massive construction were located in the courtyard. The doors were arched "being turned in concrete and constructed of yellow or Batavian bricks" (De Smidt, 1910). The outer walls of the powder magazines were buttressed with small ventilation

apertures between the buttresses.

The entrance to the battery was from the rear and just wide enough for a Cape Cart to pass through it. The inner rampart wall was continued around the powder magazines where it was higher in order to protect them from artillery fire. The rear rampart walls had been built very low, about one to two meters high and their width was adequate for the installation of mobile cannons if required. "The crest of the rampart rose to 57,5 feet and the cannons were 41,5 feet above the median waterline", noted de Smidt (De Smidt, 1910), (Fig.4).



Fig. 4. Amsterdam Battery, frontview, 1870, showing the original gun ports (Cape Archives M1/851).

The finished battery was, according to surviving records, an excellent example of late eighteenth century defence works, where military architecture and the knowledge of ballistics combined to make a forceful architectural statement.

In 1791 Captain L.M. Thibault, a French engineer in the service of the VOC and later the British Colonial Administration, devised a plan for remodelling the Amsterdam Battery (Fig. 5). This was the first of many. The projected Dordrecht/Kerkhoven entrenchment (Cape Archives, plan M1/1081) was to run from the rear of the battery up the Vlaeberg. These plans were, however, evidently never carried out.

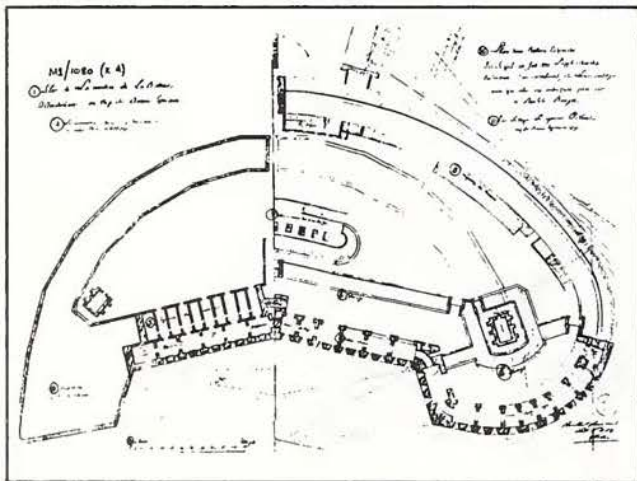


Fig. 5. Proposed remodelling plan of the Amsterdam Battery, L.M. Thibault, 1791 (Cape Archives M1/1080).

During the last years of the Company's rule the economy declined drastically and a large part of the garrison was withdrawn from the Cape. In 1795 a British force took command of the Castle, having advanced from the direction of Muizenberg, mindful of the strong defence works around Table Bay. This was the only time

that the Amsterdam Battery saw action when Admiral Elphinstone sent HMS Echo around the Peninsula to sound out the defence works.

By 1806 over thirty forts, batteries and redoubts had been built to protect the Cape Peninsula. During and after the transitional period no money was spent on the upkeep of the batteries and forts in Table Bay. By 1827, with the world at peace, many of Cape Town's defence works had become obsolete and were partly or wholly dismantled in order to reduce expenses. However, the Amsterdam Battery was amongst those spared. The only addition to the defence works in Table Bay during the British period was Craig's Tower on Milnerton beach, built in 1795/6.

By 1838 the casemates on the northern side of the Amsterdam Battery had been converted to powder magazines to hold the Colony's military supplies. The Amsterdam Battery's gun powder continued to be stored in the powder magazines in the courtyard.

The first comprehensive remodelling phase of the Amsterdam Battery seems to have taken place after 1849. It is documented by a building plan with interior stockading (Fig. 6). The right flank of the fort was converted into a convict station. Since the beginning of the century the casemates had been used as cells for military offenders. They now housed the overflow of convicts from the Breakwater Prison and the Chavonne Battery.

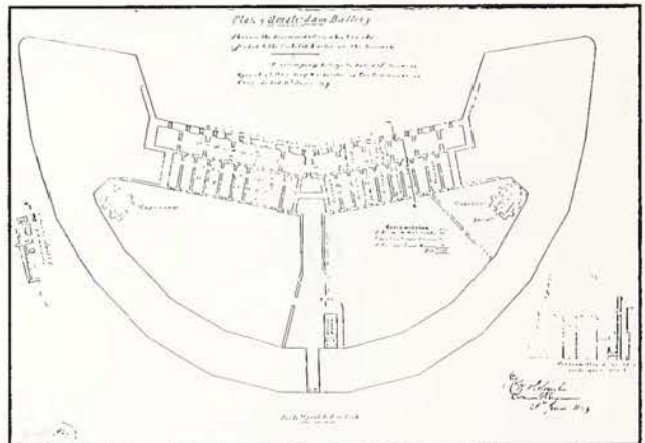


Fig. 6. Plan of proposed works, converting the right flank of the Amsterdam Battery for the reception of 300 convicts, 1849 (Cape Archives CO 585).

The Amsterdam Battery was taken over by the Cape Volunteer Artillery as their headquarters in the early 1850s. The gunners occupied the left flank of the fort and trained throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century on the Amsterdam Battery's guns. In 1862 modern 7-inch 6.5 ton RML guns on sliding carriages were mounted on top of the outer flanks of the front ramparts (Commander W.M. Bisset, SAN, pers. comm.) (Fig. 7).

The Amsterdam Battery Reserve was seen as an obstruction to the further development of the Table Bay commercial harbour area. Roads and buildings encroached upon it (Fig. 8). Although it had begun much

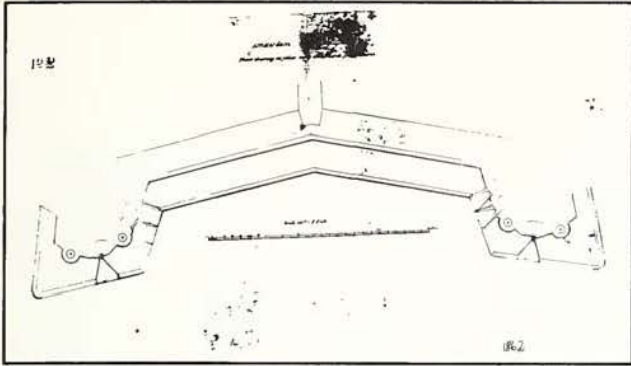


Fig. 7. Plan of the Amsterdam Battery showing newly constructed embrasures for the 7-inch 6.5 ton RML guns on sliding carriages, 1862 (Cape Archives M1/59).



Fig. 8. Amsterdam Battery, ca 1890 (Cape Archives, AG 6045).

earlier, the dispute between the civilian and military authorities as to the future use of the land and fortifications thereon, broke out in earnest. The matter was not, however, resolved for another twenty years. In the meantime the land in front of the Amsterdam Battery was reclaimed by the deposition of surplus material from the breakwater quarry. Dock Road was extended to run between the Amsterdam Battery and the sea and a railway line was put through.

In 1905 the War Department handed the Amsterdam Battery Reserve over to the Cape Town City Council. The guns were sold for scrap as were the beautiful teak vaults and windows. Although it was thought that the original loopholed walls were no longer effective against modern artillery, 3 charges of dynamite failed to make an impression upon the front rampart walls. About three quarters of the fort was destroyed between 1905 and 1912.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

The excavation

The remains of the Amsterdam Battery are situated at 11-13 Port Road, Cape Town (Fig. 9). Development proposals for the Cape Town's waterfront/old harbour area which included the Amsterdam Battery locality began to emerge in 1987. The University of Cape Town Archaeology Department saw the need to establish the

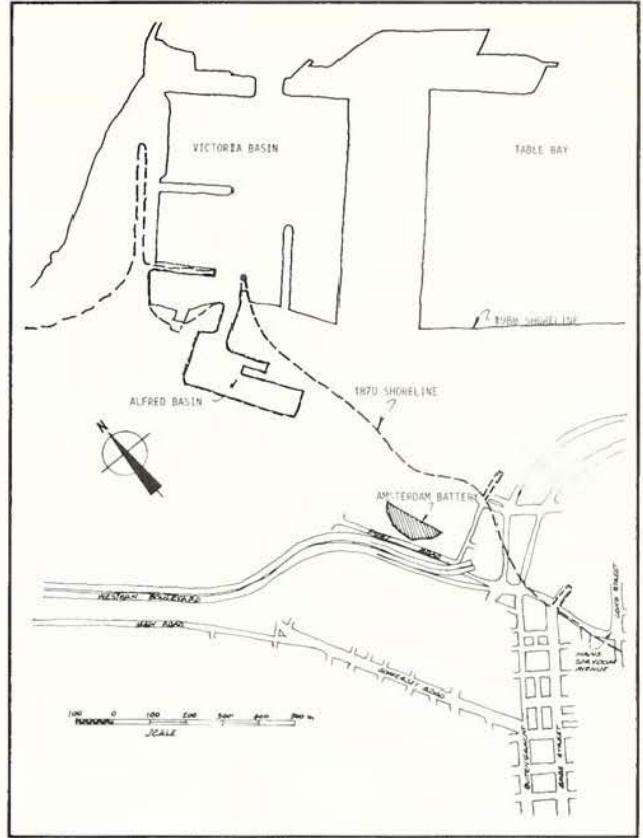


Fig. 9. Location of the Amsterdam Battery, 1988.

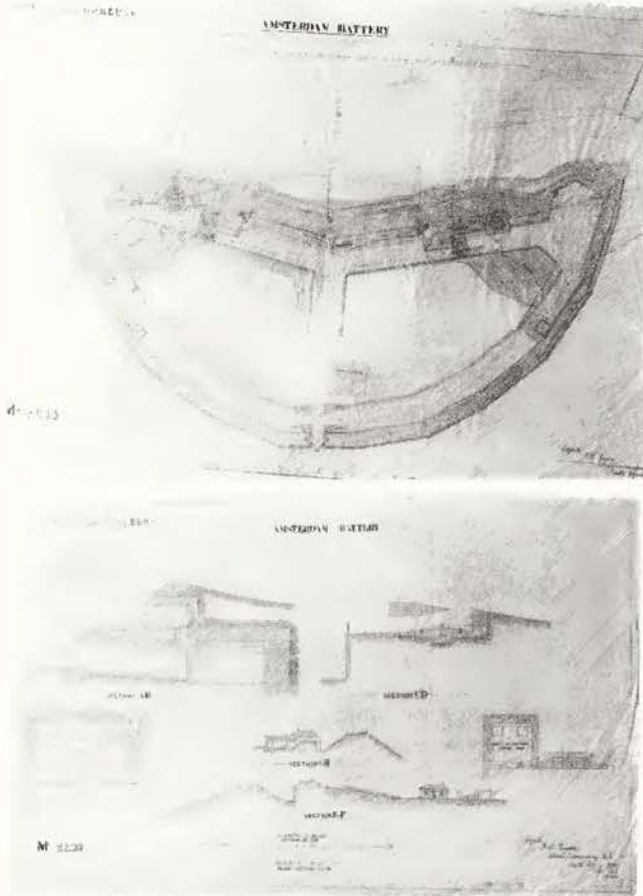


Fig. 10. Amsterdam Battery (a.) and section drawings (b.), 1895 (Table Bay Harbour Board, TAF 82 & TAF 83).

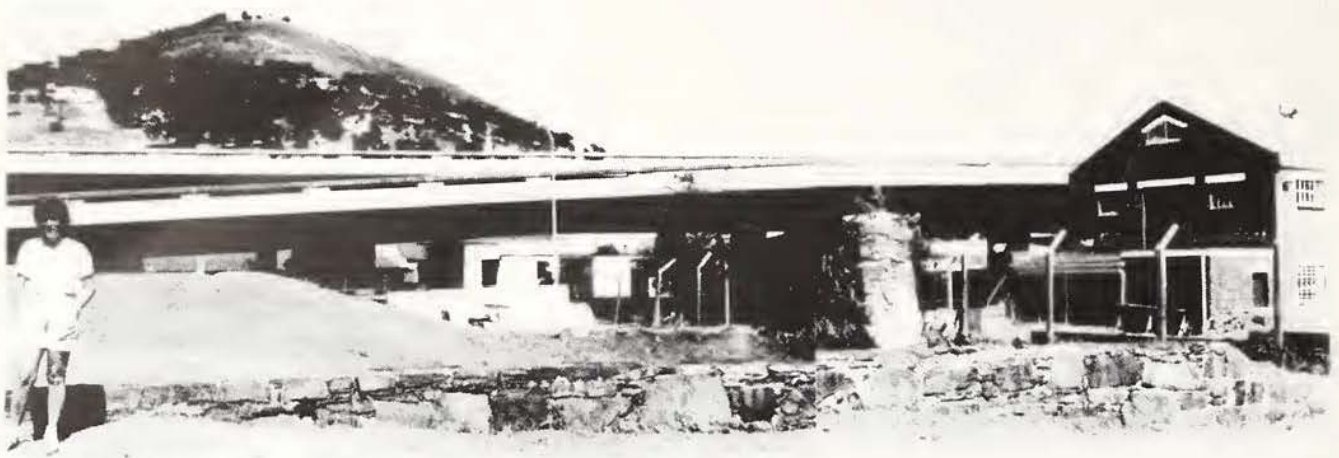


Fig. 11. Amsterdam Battery, entrance and back ramparts, 1988.

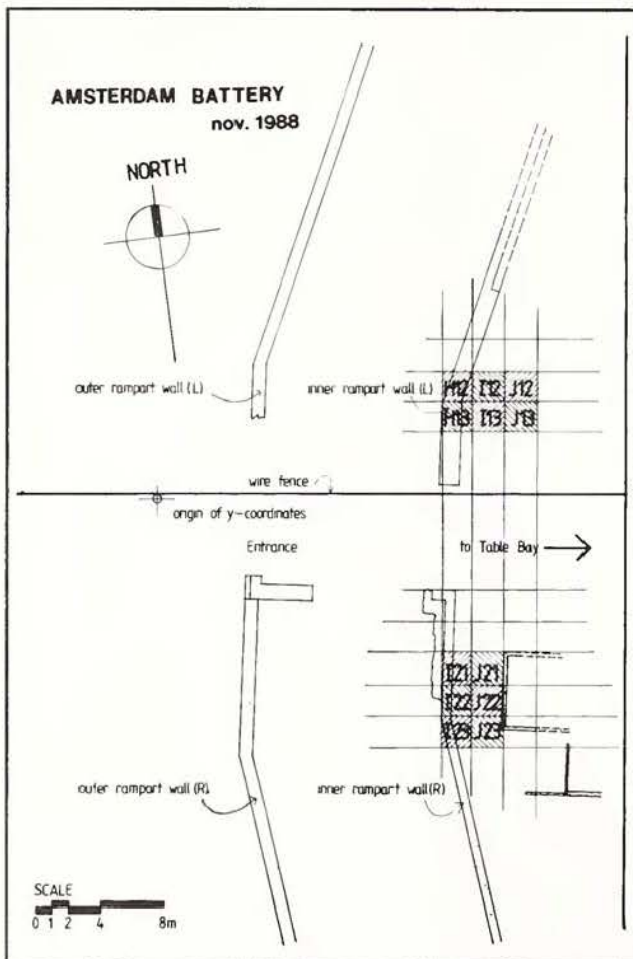


Fig. 12. Excavation Area.

historical and archaeological potential of the site and allocated the project to the writer.

From an architectural drawing by the Royal Engineers in 1895 (Fig. 10), the caretakers house, the back ramparts and the entrance were located (Fig. 11). It was decided to excavate between the caretaker's house and

the right hand rampart wall and inside the ordnance store on the left hand rampart wall (Fig. 12). A grid system of 2 metre squares was established. It was expected that, being confined spaces, these areas would be rich in artefacts. As it turned out the caretaker's house area yielded far fewer artefacts than were expected.

The remains of a posthole, cobbled area, a large ash heap with some horse and mule shoes as well as nails seems to indicate a smithy or its dump in the area between the caretaker's house and the inner rampart wall at the most recent occupation level. Some iron parts of a Cape cart were also excavated.

STRATIGRAPHY

Three distinct floor levels (Fig. 13) could be distinguished throughout the inner courtyard area:

Unit 1

The lowermost unit was a 'yellow clay floor' of 0,25 to 0,40 m thickness. This was laid on the original beach sand level with the foundations of the rampart walls. Yellow clay floors were a common feature of Dutch building practise at the Cape (M. Hall, University of Cape Town, Department of Archaeology, pers. comm.). Although artefactually almost sterile a clay pipe dated to 1775-1790 was found on the foundations on the inner rampart wall.

Unit 2

Overlaying the yellow clay was approximately 0,05 m layer of beach sand. This was followed by a floor level, securely dated to 1852-1854 by uniform buttons indicating that it was a new surface laid down during the remodelling phase of the early 1850s. The floor level of 'sand with pebbles', consisted of grey-brown sand with an abundance of bog iron (ferricrete) nodules, found in riverbeds and on the slopes of Table Mountain. Remains of a cookhouse area between the caretaker's house and the inner rampart wall were exposed. The remains of a water pipe dated to before 1860 (E. Paetzold, pers.

comm.) were also located.

Unit 3

A third, uppermost floor level, of yellow stamped earth with soft brick rubble, possibly from demolished store houses, can be assigned to the end of the nineteenth century. This unit was the richest in artefacts particularly in the ordnance store area. The nature of the artefacts, two shale platforms/paving, a groove and water run-off channel along the wall, a circle of upright stones holding a nail e.g. attests there to the use of the area as workshop/store rooms. On the right hand side of the battery a large quantity of fencing material was recovered. Subsequently, further archival research revealed that the excavation had stopped just short of the convict area (Fig. 6).

Unit 4

At the workshop area the layer 'yellow stamped earth' was overlain by a hard worn cobbled floor of small beach cobbles and sand.

Unit 5

The courtyard area of the Amsterdam battery was more or less filled with rubble up to the height of the inner rampart walls. This had accumulated since about 1905 when the battery was abandoned. The artefacts for this unit are all dated to the twentieth century.

No remains of the Battery Heeren Hendricks Kinderen have been found so far. It might be reasonable to assume, in keeping with common practise at the time, that the builders reused the dressed stone from the earlier fort for the rampart walls. In addition the excavation area was possibly too small to cover a sufficient area and cut across earlier remnants of this feature.

It was not possible to locate the Amsterdam Battery's rubbish dump, which could have provided valuable clues about the people working and living there.

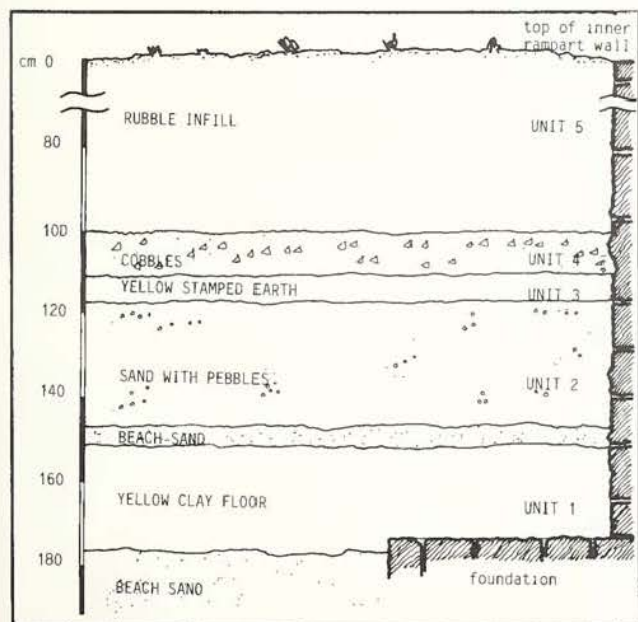


Fig. 13. Schematic diagram of excavation units and layers.

ARTEFACTUAL REMAINS

Glass

85 % of the glass fragments came from bottle glass of carbonated beverage, beer, wine and some case bottles. All the bottle glass was imported. Wine glass and cut-glass fragments suggest that persons of higher status such as officers stayed at the fort. The majority of the glass was collected from the two upper layers and can therefore be assigned to the second half of the nineteenth century (Lastovica & Lastovica, 1982).

Ceramics

Most of the porcelain and other ceramics collected were of inexpensive ware imported from England; a few Chinese porcelain fragments were recovered from the lower units. Layer 'sand with pebbles' of unit 2 contained the most reliable and consistent collection of ceramics and porcelain, all dated to 1820-1860 (Fig. 14). This date is also confirmed by military artefacts .



Fig. 14. Ceramics from Unit 2, layer 'sand with pebbles'.

Bone

Over 90% of the bone sample was of sheep. The soldiers were fed on mutton for breakfast, lunch and dinner (Theal, 1908). Very little beef or pork was served and then only the poorer cuts. Some remains of small game and birds were recovered: a rabbit, small antelope and a heron or stork were amongst the total sample from all occupation levels. Fish was poorly represented, each excavation unit contained a single snook.

Clay pipes

In the lowest unit, layer 'yellow clay floor', at the foundations of the inner rampart wall near the caretaker's house, a Dutch claypipe bowl dated to 1775-1790 (Duco, 1982) was recovered. In unit 3, layer 'yellow stamped earth' an Irish pipe stem marked *CORK S* on both sides was found. This was a type of pipe stem manufactured before 1860 (Ayto, 1979) .

Bead and coins

In the second unit, layer 'sand with pebbles' one glass trade bead, dated to the early 1850s, was collected. It is round, of aqua/green colour, with shining lustre (Karklins, 1985).

Two coins, both from the upper unit 3, 'yellow stamped earth' were recovered. One was a 1918 George V Half Penny and the other a 1894 Queen Victoria "tickey", or three pence.

Military artefacts

The most important finds are two brass officer's uniform buttons, one from the 2nd and one from the 89th Regiment (Ripley, 1971) (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15. Uniform, shirt and blazer buttons from units 2 & 3.

The 2nd Regiment of Foot (Queens Royal) or Anglo-German Legion passed through Cape Town in 1853 and 1854 (Cape Archives, CO 641). Brinton (1977) mentioned them stationed in the Colony from 1852 to 1860. As the button was recovered from the top of the lowest unit, 'yellow clay floor', the earliest remodelling phase of the Amsterdam Battery could be dated to 1852.

The 89th (the Princess Victoria's) Regiment of Foot button from unit 2, layer 'sand with pebbles' with makers name: Firmins, London on the back, was worn by officers from 1855-1866 and by other ranks from 1855-1871. Brinton (1977) writes that the full regiment was stationed in Cape Town from 1856 to 1857. In 1857 part of the regiment remained behind, while the majority of officers and men embarked for India. The evidence of the buttons provide a *terminus post quem* date of before 1857.

Several cartridge cases were collected from unit 2, 'sand with pebbles' and unit 3, 'yellow stamped earth' in both excavation areas. From unit 3, 'yellow stamped earth', there was a .45 rifle cartridge case for an Enfield rifle, which was in use from about 1861-1900 (Cape Archives, CO 780, 25.7.1861). A .45 cartridge from unit 2, 'sand with pebbles', was fired from a Martini-Henry rifle, first issued in 1854 and used up the early 1870s

(Cape Archives, CO 956, 19.11.1872).

One Sam Browne Belt loop, several brass shoe eyelets, a badge pin, an eyelet from inside a pith helmet, several plain blazer and shirt buttons, a few artillery shell parts, lead shot, part of a brass cartridge case and office stationary completes the collection. They were all recovered from unit 3, 'yellow stamped earth'.

The military artefacts therefore date to the second half of the nineteenth century. Manufacturer's marks and the arrow sign on the cartridges and other material point to War Department property. No remains of any military gadgets from the Dutch period were recovered.

Miscellaneous artefacts

A broken ostrich egg shell fragment was recovered from unit 2, layer 'sand with pebbles', dated from 1850 to ca 1890. This supports the possibility that the fragment originated from a Khoi-San person living or working in the Amsterdam Battery.

Various artefacts connected with the supply of gas and gas lamps, water, surveying, office stationary and writing on slate boards were excavated from unit 2, layer 'sand with pebbles' and unit 3, layer 'yellow stamped earth'. They are all dated firmly to the second half of the nineteenth century.

One small Christmas tree bauble in glass, a pink mother-of-pearl lady's blouse button and a small porcelain hat of a lady figurine in unit 3 are not unexpected in a military establishment.

SUMMARY

With this project I was able to verify, on a practical level, that the documentary and artefactual evidence is an adequate reflection of the chronology and the range of activities at those parts of the Amsterdam Battery that survive.

Evidence for the three development phases of the Amsterdam Battery was highly visible in the various units excavated in the courtyard:

Phase 1: a 'yellow clay floor', built in 1781, a common feature of Dutch building practise. This layer is almost sterile.

Phase 2: layer 'sand with pebbles', dated to 1852-1857 was necessitated by the remodelling phase to accommodate a large number of convicts and upgrade the battery.

Phase 3: layer 'yellow stamped earth' can be assigned to the 1890s, when a last attempt was made to modernise the Amsterdam Battery.

Finally, the uppermost unit relates to the period after the dismantling of the Amsterdam Battery, i.e. after 1905. The artefacts from layer 'rubble infill' are all dated to the twentieth century. The range of artefacts excavated and the independent dates they produced are compatible with those provided by documentary evidence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on my BSc (Honours) dissertation in archaeology at the University of Cape Town. I should

like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Martin Hall and volunteers, students and members of the Archaeological Society for their assistance. Jan Seemann contributed the drawings. I also thank the many others who assisted with my historical research and helped with the analysis of the artefacts.

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