

TWO VICTIMS OF THE WRECK OF THE "BRITISH PEER"*

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ABSTRACT

Human remains recovered from a building site near the coast in the Malmesbury district have been identified as those of two of the crew of the "British Peer" which was wrecked near there in 1896. The remains are described and the evidence provided for their identification.

INTRODUCTION

In November 1991, workers on a construction site at Ganzekraal, a public recreation area on the coast some 60 km north of Cape Town (Fig. 1), exposed two clothed human skeletons. The site foreman notified the police at Darling, who requested the assistance of the South African Museum's archaeologists in investigating the matter. The remains were removed to the Museum for study, and this paper reports the results of the research. At first, nothing was known about the remains, except that they were probably Caucasian and of relatively recent date. However, a farmer in the Darling district read a report on the finds (Cape Times 21 November 1991) and suggested that they could be those of the crew of a ship wrecked at Grotto Point in 1896 or 1897 (F. Duckitt 1991 *in litt.*). The vessel was subsequently identified as being the "British Peer", which was wrecked off Kabeljoubank on the night of 10 December 1896, with the loss of her captain and all but four of her 23 crew (Turner 1988:144). The identity of the wreck and its location were also confirmed by Mr Duckitt (1991 *in litt.*), whose grandfather had been alive at the time of the wreck and had pointed out its location.

There was some initial confusion as to the actual site, as the first report (Cape Times 10 December 1896) stated that the wreck had occurred at Tierfontein (Tygerfontein), a farm immediately adjacent to and south-east of Yzerfontein. The second report (Cape Times 12 December 1896) gave the location as "near the Izerfontein (*sic*) Point", with the Dassen Island light about six miles (9,6 km) away on the beam. The correct location, off Kabeljoubank, was finally confirmed by Messrs Malcolm Turner and Reg Dodds (1992 pers. comms), the latter of whom had dived on the wreck and salvaged some of its cargo and the ship's bell. The report of the judgement of the Court of Inquiry (Cape Times 9 January 1897) gave the location as "near Jacob's Cove" (now Jacobsbaai) and the coordinates as 33.31S; 18.19E

(actually 33.30.20S; 18.18.40E). Figure 2 shows Kabeljoubank and the location of the wreck, the remains of which are still to be seen at low tide, about 9 m below the surface. Mention of the place was also made in the memoirs of Mr Duckitt's aunt, Mary, the daughter of Albert Melck, the owner of Ganzekraal farm. She wrote that "the desolate cape was named British Peer Point" after the wreck (Kuttel Keegan ed. 1991:65). Water-worn building bricks, fragments of china and pieces of bottle-glass, remnants of part of the cargo (Cape Argus 12 December 1896), are to be found among the boulders on the shore nearby; and the remains of a wooden mast lie further away in the vegetation above the high-water mark.

The survivors' accounts of the wreck and the subsequent controversy over the treatment of the survivors, the dead and the cargo, make an interesting item of local history. However, for reasons of space, these cannot be included here; but a comprehensive report (Wilson & Van Rijssen 1994) has been deposited in the library of the South African Museum.

THE HUMAN REMAINS

The two bodies were found on the seaward edge of a dune at the southern end of the bay, about 50 m from the shore (Fig. 1). They had been buried in a single grave about 1,8 m below the present surface, with their heads towards the east and their feet towards the sea. They lay in a fully extended, supine position with their arms by their sides, and had been laid together on canvas and wrapped in an open-weave material like hessian (Fig. 3).

In order to remove the remains, it was necessary to cut through the shroud so as to separate them. At the Museum, the upper covering was removed, and as much as possible of the incorporated sand, before they were X-rayed. The skeletons were examined by J. Kovacs of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, University of Cape Town Medical School. Samples of the clothing

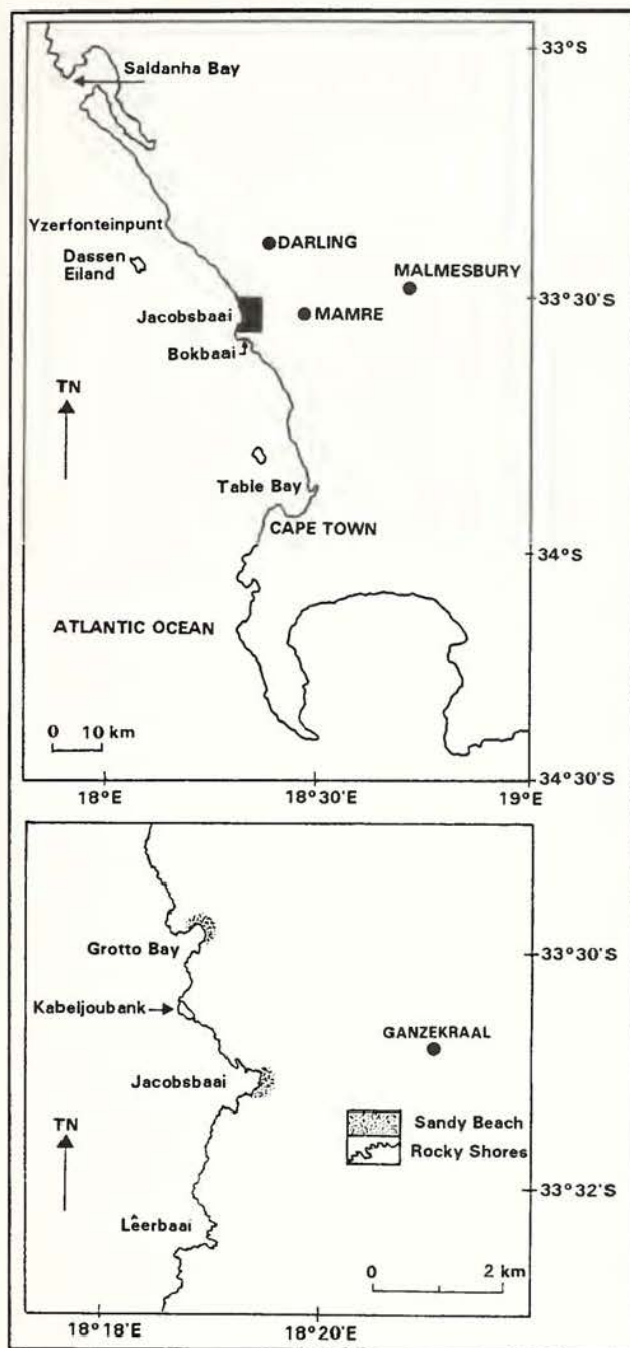


Fig. 1 Maps of the coast between Cape Town and Saldanha Bay showing the location of places mentioned in the text.

were studied by A. Hart, Assistant Curator, Textiles and Dress, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Information from their reports (Kovacs 1992 *in litt.*; Hart 1992 *in litt.*) is incorporated in the following descriptions. The remains are designated 'L' and 'R' on the basis of their position on the left or right of the grave as seen from its foot.

'L'. This skeleton was found intact, but the feet became disarticulated when the sand was cleared away and the boots fell. It was brought to the Museum in this condition. The man had short, curly hair and a full beard, but there was no evidence of a moustache. The right side of the face had been shattered and the front of the right humerus sheared in a tapering cut for some



Fig. 2 Kabeljoubank and the location of the wreck (arrowed).



Fig. 3 The human remains as found at Ganzekraal.

120 mm from the top of the shaft, cutting right through the bone. This suggests that the man had been struck from above by a sharp object. Most of the right maxillary dentition was missing, possibly as a result of the same trauma. The left maxillary incisors and premolars were displaced as a result of overcrowding and the left mandibular molars were absent, probably lost before burial. There was heavy occlusal wear on the incisors and some staining that suggested that the man may have chewed tobacco. X-ray photographs of the torso did not reveal any damage, but the accumulated sand prevented clear definition of the bones. Since the skeleton was still mostly covered by clothing, it was not possible to obtain the measurements necessary for estimation of living stature. However, comparison with the femur of 'R' (see below) suggested that the men were of about the same height. Age at death was estimated at 45-55 years.

The man wore a loose-fitting, collarless, sleeved black jacket or jerkin of herringbone twill that ended at the waist in front. There were impressions of at least two buttons, but these were not present. They were probably made of a material such as casein, since metal and bone survived. There was no evidence of a shirt or other garment under the jacket. Baggy russet-coloured trousers were held at the waist by a leather belt fastened by an iron buckle and had a fly with brass buttons embossed

'G. King Sheffield' at the top and bottom around their circumference (Fig. 4). M. Pearce, Principal Keeper, Applied Art, of the City Museum in Sheffield, advised (1992 *in litt.*) that G. King was one of the partners of the Sheffield firm G. & J. King, merchants and manufacturers, which had been in business since at least 1865. The belt was 65 mm wide and made of a single thickness of leather with two patches stitched on each side of the front (*i.e.*, two adjacent to the buckle and to its left, and two to the right of the last hole on the tongue end). These patches were stitched all round their edges, which eliminates a suggestion that this might have been a money-belt. The feet were encased in ankle-high leather boots, reinforced at the back of the heel, and with ten brass eyelets for laces on each side, but laces were not present.



Fig. 4 Detail of the belt and one of the buttons worn by 'L'.

'R'. This was the first skeleton discovered and the lower limbs were disarticulated and damaged by the digging. Parts of the bones were missing, as were the right foot and the boot that encased it. The skull had also been separated from the body. There was some damage to the upper face, including loss of teeth, but this may also have resulted from the digging. Occlusal wear on the teeth of the left maxilla and mandible suggested that this individual had been a pipe-smoker. He wore a full beard but, as in the case of 'L', there was no evidence of a moustache. Age at death was estimated at 40-45 years. Using the femur:stature ratio of 26.7 per cent devised by Feldesman & Lundy (1988), living stature was estimated to have been 1.82 m.

This man was dressed better than the other. He wore a black, collared twill jacket that reached to his waist in front and had cut-away points. Below this was a waistcoat of dark fabric on which the impression of a button about 20 mm diameter could be seen, but the button itself had disappeared. Under the waistcoat were a cotton shirt and a linen vest, of which all but one of the buttons had disappeared. The button that remained, which was about 10 mm diameter and made of a material like casein, had been preserved because it underlay a clasp made of a copper-silver alloy. This clasp, which may have been for holding money or letters, was fastened to



Fig. 5 The metal clasp found on 'R'.



Fig. 6 Reverse-image X-ray photograph of the torso of 'R' showing the location of various metal objects.

a strip of silk-like material that had no evident connection with the rest of the garments (Fig. 5).

The X-ray photograph of this man's torso (Fig. 6) also shows a number of buckles and buttons that suggest that he may have been wearing overalls or dungarees, although the part of these below the pelvis was missing. Alternatively, they could have been part of a pair of braces. Copper staining on the lowest vertebrae present suggested that a belt may have been worn, but there was no trace of this and it is possible that the stains came from a brass button, corroded fragments of a number of which were found, similar to those on the clothing of 'L'. In two places, on and beside the vertebrae, other

metal objects were indicated, which were found to be small square-headed nails similar to those used in the manufacture of the boots.

Ten small lead pellets were found in the left acetabulum or hip-socket, similar in shape to those used in airguns but unlike any that are manufactured today (H.D. Noli 1992 pers. comm.). Their function is unknown.

The ankle-high boot (Fig. 7) had a separate, decorated toecap but no reinforced heel. The top was closed by three pairs of hooks similar to those found today on hikers' or climbers' boots, followed by five pairs of eyelets. A leather shoelace was still threaded through these. The boot is typical of an English one known as the 'Balmoral', which was fashionable from the 1880s to 1919.



Fig. 7 The 'Balmoral' boot worn by 'R'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Three of the four survivors were carried by the current down the coast to the only place for a considerable distance where there is a sandy beach (Cape Times 12 December 1896). This is Jacobsbaai (Fig. 1) and it is thus probable that some of the bodies of those who drowned were also brought there. The Cape Times and Cape Argus of 12 December 1896 reported that five bodies had been found the day after the wreck and two more the following morning. A correspondent to the Cape Times wrote on 30 December 1896 that the bodies had been buried on an elevation about 60 yards (approx. 55 m) from the shore, which is similar to the location of the two bodies discussed here. The report may, however, refer to the ridge extending southward from Kabeljou-bank, where Mr Duckitt's father told him there were graves of the crew; but Mr Duckitt (1993 *in litt.*) also considered that other bodies would have been buried

close to wherever along the coast where they were washed up. On 4 January 1897, another correspondent to the Cape Times said that a total of fourteen bodies, including that of the captain, had been recovered.

The most compelling evidence in support of the remains being those of crew of the "British Peer" is the 'Balmoral' boots worn by 'R', especially given the limited period that they were in fashion.

The Maritime History Archive of the Memorial University of Newfoundland at St John's holds the original documents relating to the crew of the "British Peer". These are the Agreement and Account of Crew, Foreign-going Ship (Eng. 1) and the Account of Crew and Other Particulars of a Foreign Going Ship (List C). They include full details of the names, ages, addresses and nationalities of the crew; and List C also records who of the crew were drowned and who were discharged. From these, it is possible to suggest that 'R' was the 42-year-old steward, George James Whyte, since he was the only member of the crew in the 40 to 45-year age-group. However, this cannot be taken as a certainty due to the lack of suitable and accessible skeletal parts, particularly the pubic symphysis. Three of the victims, all able seamen, were in the 45 to 55-year age-group: C.P. Oberg, 51; H. Peterson, 48; and Gustav Rumbach, also 48. The identity of 'L' must thus remain in doubt.

On the basis of the foregoing, it is concluded that the remains of the men found at Ganzekraal are those of two of the crew of the "British Peer". Ganzekraal being a public resort, the remains were reburied on the adjacent property, Buck Bay (Bokbaai), owned by the Duckitt family. The location of the grave is on record in the Archaeological Data Recording Centre at the South African Museum.

An extensive article on our research into the wreck of the "British Peer" and its aftermath, published in the Weekend Argus of 16 October 1993, produced a surprising and gratifying response. The article was read by Mr Philip Alston, a visitor from England who had just arrived in Cape Town, who informed us that he was a grandson of Joseph Olsen, the 18-year-old third mate who was one of the four survivors. Olsen, who changed his name to Alston, became a captain at 22 and eventually owned his own fleet of ships, which traded between Britain and India (see Weekend Argus 6/7 November 1993).

Thus, in "communicating technical and academic discoveries to the public in ways that are appropriate and factually accurate" (Miller 1993:58), both Mr Alston and ourselves were rewarded by being provided information we could not otherwise have obtained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the assistance of a great many people. Thanks are due, first and foremost, to Mr Fred Duckitt for putting us on the right track and for the considerable amount of information he provided. We also thank Mr Risely Geldenhuys, the site foreman, and his workers, who

found the remains and assisted in their removal; and Adjutant J.F. Conradie of the South African Police at Darling, who notified us of the find and provided guides to take us to it. Messrs Malcolm Turner and Reg Dodds assisted us with regard to the precise location of the wreck and other information.

Ms Paula Rudkin of Lloyd's of London's library referred us to the Guildhall Library, which now holds many of Lloyd's' marine records, and whose Ms Phyllida Melling provided details of the *British Peer* and told us where to obtain information about the crew. Ms Mary Bridson of the Maritime History Archive, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, arranged the provision of the crew lists. Ms Liza Verity of the Maritime Information Centre, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, provided information about 19th-century seamen's clothing; Ms Avril Hart of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, advised on the clothing found with the remains; and Ms Mary Pearce of the City Museum, Sheffield, provided information relating to the brass buttons.

Ms Rachel Alexander of the Shark Research Unit based at the South African Museum X-rayed the remains and the Museum's Mr Aubrey Byron provided reverse-image photographs of the X-rays. Mr Jonathan Kovacs of the Department of Anatomy and Cell Biology, University of Cape Town Medical School reported on the skeletal remains.

Colleagues in the Archaeology Department, Mrs Vivien van Zyl and Mr Louis Lawrence, made the maps as well as assisting in the preparation of the remains. Messrs Charles Cloete and Brian Pedro of the Museum's workshop made the coffins in which the remains were reburied. We are grateful to Mr Duckitt for providing the reburial site, to Rev Dawid Botha of Darling for conducting the graveside service, and to Museum colleagues Messrs Paul October and Noel Fouten, as well as Louis Lawrence, for their assistance at the site.

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