

FORT'S OF MONTAGU

The bulk of information contained in this article comes from a report compiled by Richard Tomlinson, 51 Main Road, Walmer, Port Elizabeth, 6070. (Tel: 041 581 2108) in October 2007. The report is to be found in the Montagu Museum Archive.

Extract of letter from Richard Tomlinson to the Montagu Museum Manger

I am enclosing the information on the forts which I accessed in 1996 (Cogmanskloof Fort) and 2007 (the 5 Town Guard forts so far discovered), I must emphasize that Mike Worthington-Jones was really the one who explored these 5 forts (and guided me around them); he and his wife May ran the 7 Church Street Guest House, where I stayed on this trip. Mike obviously had some help from local historian Heinie Heydenrych (1938-2021), whom I also called to see during my visit; his phone number at the time was 023 614 1364, but I have had no contact with him since 2007 and don't know if he is still alive.

The forts of Montagu can be split into two categories:

- 1. The single fort built during the Anglo Boer War by the British forces.**
- 2. Those built and occupied by the Montagu town guard.**

The British Fort

The British Fort which is a national monument is situated in the Cogmans Kloof Pass R62 which links the towns of Montagu and Ashton in the Western Cape.

The Kloof is named after the Cochaquas people who are mentioned by Jan van Riebeck in his records as early as 1652.

The Cochaquas came to the Ashton/Montagu area in 1700 - but around 1760 they trekked further towards the Orange River. Over the years the colonists misspelled their name as *Cochemans* and *Cockemans*. Later it became the *Cochmans* or *Cogmans* - eventually it became *Cogmans* - as in **Cogmanskloof**.



*View eastwards towards the rock
tunnel with the fort perched on
the rocks above*

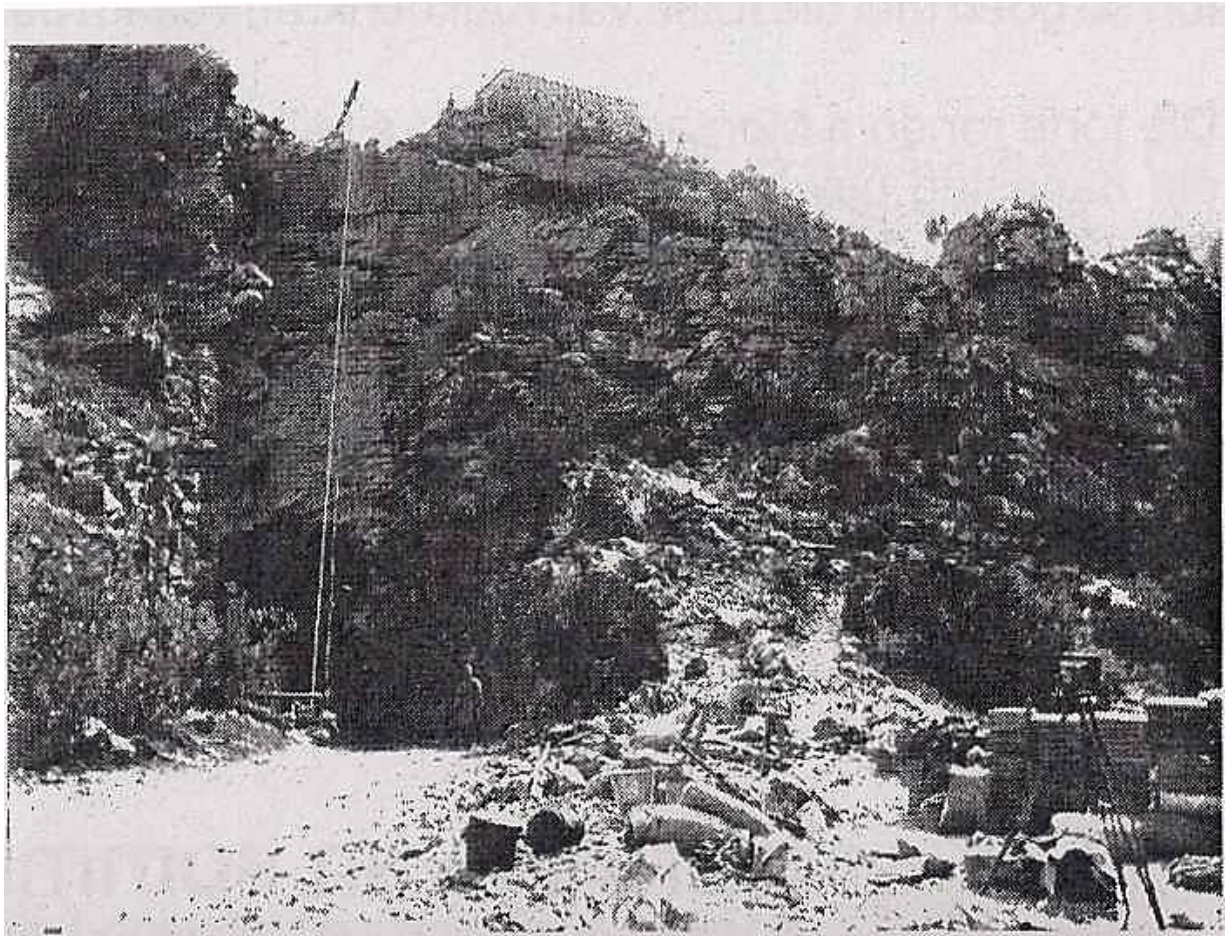


View during Flooding



Pictures: Heritage impact assessment 2012

An unusual aspect of the construction of this fort is a photograph “found in the collection of the Montagu Museum, it shows a scene at Kalkoenkrans/Kalkoennes (name of area where fort was built. Both names are used) with the tunnel below and the British Fort on top during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. The photograph is undated but the year must have been 1901. It shows a pulley device to the left just before the tunnel, obviously meant to hoist up building materials or other supplies. Near the pulley platform in the road stands a kilted soldier with his firearm and in the right foreground can be seen a camera on a tripod, other equipment and what looks like building supplies. To the right of the fort a number of small human figures can be seen. Although the fort never seems to have had a roof, something looking like branches or thatch is visible on top of the walls. It is possible that some form of material was placed on a rough pergola to provide shelter against the sun for the soldiers inside.



*Construction Work on the British
Fort*

We know that the fort was built in 1901 and not 1899 (as the sign on the Ashton side of the tunnel says). This is confirmed by an unpublished MA thesis on the guerrilla war in the Cape Colony during the War. The author correctly states that the peace in the southern and western districts of the Colony was shattered when Republican forces with the support of Cape rebels started to conduct raids. This caused panic among the British military commanders which led to the decision to build a series of forts in different strategic passes in the Western Cape in

order to block/monitor such troop movements.

Martial law was declared, also applying to Robertson and Montagu. The commandant who was appointed to administer martial law was **Lieutenant-Colonel Sidney** of the Royal Field Artillery. Together with other officers Sidney inspected the roads and passes along which the enemy could move should the Cape Colony be threatened by forces of the Boer Republic or rebel commandos. Sidney was responsible for the design and building of the fort in Cogman's Kloof and it was named after him. Fort Sidney was built by William Robertson, a stonemason from the town of Robertson. The site affords excellent views of the old road, constructed by Thomas Bain in 1873-77, on both the Ashton and Montagu sides; the tunnel through Kalkoenkrans was blasted through only in 1879 and widened in 1931.

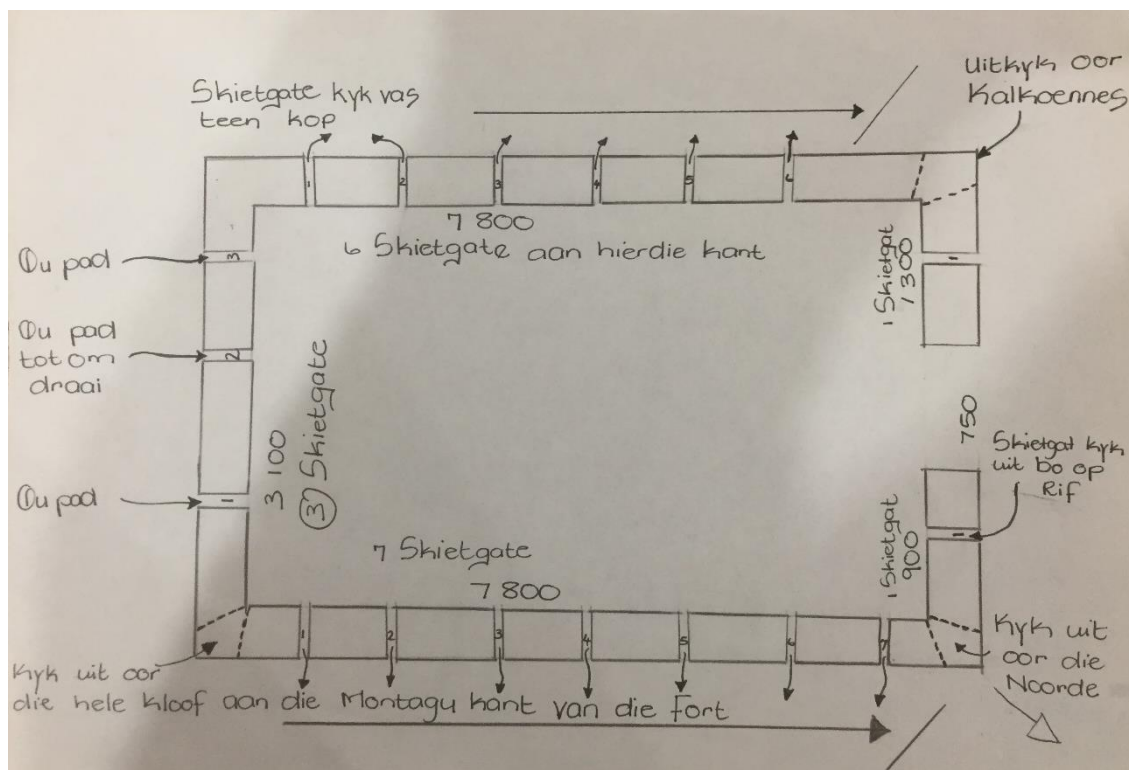
The fort was manned by a company of the Volunteer Battalion, Gordon Highlanders, under the command of a Lieutenant Forbes. These Highlanders were survivors of the battle of Magersfontein near Kimberley [11 December 1899] where the Highland Brigade suffered a huge defeat and their commanding officer, General A. G. Wauchope, lost his life.¹



Volunteer Battalion, Gordon Highlanders. Only identified person is C.O. Lieutenant Forbes in slouch hat 4th left middle row.

Picture: Montagu Museum

The Fort Built of mortared stonework and perched high on a prominent rock (Kalkoenkrans) above the R62 road, three kilometres south of Montagu, it measures 9.3 x 3,8 metres outside. It has a simple entrance opening at the west end and 21 small loopholes formed at intervals in the masonry (without steel plates), including in three of the angles. The loopholes are 700-800 mm above the modern concrete floor and the 400 mm thick stone walls reach a height of about two metres inside the building. The south wall is reinforced on the outside with a projecting plinth 200 mm wide in the same material, which rises up to just below the loopholes.



Floor plan of Fort Sidney

Picture: Montagu Museum

Inside the fort, near the south-east corner, is a roughly circular mortared stone platform (400 mm high), together with a drainage channel and hole at the base of the adjacent east wall, which seems to indicate the presence of a water tank with its overflow arrangements and hence a roof; it is certainly hard to imagine the Tommies' carrying water up the ninety or so steps to the fort from the water wagon in the roadway below or the river on a daily basis. It would have been a simple (and most necessary) matter to cover the fort with a wood frame and sheet of canvas, to protect the men against the harsh sun and to catch rainwater and guide it into the tank. It is not known how much this small building has been restored or rebuilt,

but the present simple entrance would most certainly have been protected from direct rifle fire by a masonry screen wall either internally or externally ²



Interior Fort Sidney

1 This information is taken from two articles by Montagu resident and researcher Heinie Heydenrych, titled 'Fort Sidney under construction' (published in a local newspaper, date unknown) and 'Fort Sidney and the tunnel in Cogmans Kloof.'

2. This description of the fort is from site notes taken at the time of my first visit in January 1996, and the subsequent entry in my article 'Britain's Last Castles: Masonry blockhouses of the South African War, 1899-1902', published in *Military History Journal*, Volume 10 No 6, December 1997, page 217. This fort does not qualify as a blockhouse, as it was not roofed, but I included it in this article as it shared certain features with the blockhouses.

GPS coordinates S33° 48.18' E20° 05.67'.

Elevation above mean sea level 235 metres (at road level 197 metres).

Compiled by: Richard Tomlinson, Port Elizabeth, 2015

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An interesting discovery

(The letter below has been retyped due to poor quality of copy found in Montagu museum archive)

Copy of a letter to His Worship the Mayor, Montagu dated 14/01/62, from **Major C.R. Wolhuter** and son, 34 White Street, Robertson

Dear Sir, whenever I pass through your pleasant town I wonder whether you have

a complete history of the FORT on top of the tunnel? If not I thought it will be of interest to you and future generations to know the facts.

Early during the Anglo-Boer war Martial Law was proclaimed in certain areas. Robertson and Montagu were included. A Commandant was appointed to take over the administration of Martial Law. These Commandants were generally Imperial Military Officers of high rank.

The appointment for this area was the Hon. Lieutenant Colonel Sidney of the Royal Field Artillery, He, together with other officers, inspected the roads and passes through which an enemy may advance if the Cape Colony was invaded by the Republican or Rebel Commandoes.

He was responsible for the design and construction of the Fort on the tunnel. It was built by William Robertson, a stone mason of this town (Robertson). The Fort was manned by a company of the Volunteer Battalion Gordon Highlanders commanded by Lt. Forbes. These Highlanders were remnants of the survivors of the Battle of Magersfontein, where the Highland Brigade suffered a severe defeat and their Commanding Officer, General Wauchops lost his life. **I was at the time of the occupation of the Fort a young Bugler in Warren's Mounted Infantry, stationed at Robertson and often visited the Fort. To the military units, this Fort was known as SIDNEY FORT in honour of the local Commandant.**



COLONIAL DEFENCE FORCE.

DISCHARGE CERTIFICATE.

This is to Certify that No. 544 Rank Sugler
 Name C. R. Wolhuter
 has this day been discharged from WARREN'S MOUNTED INFANTRY.
 He was enrolled on the 1st March 1901
 His conduct and character while in the service has been Very Good

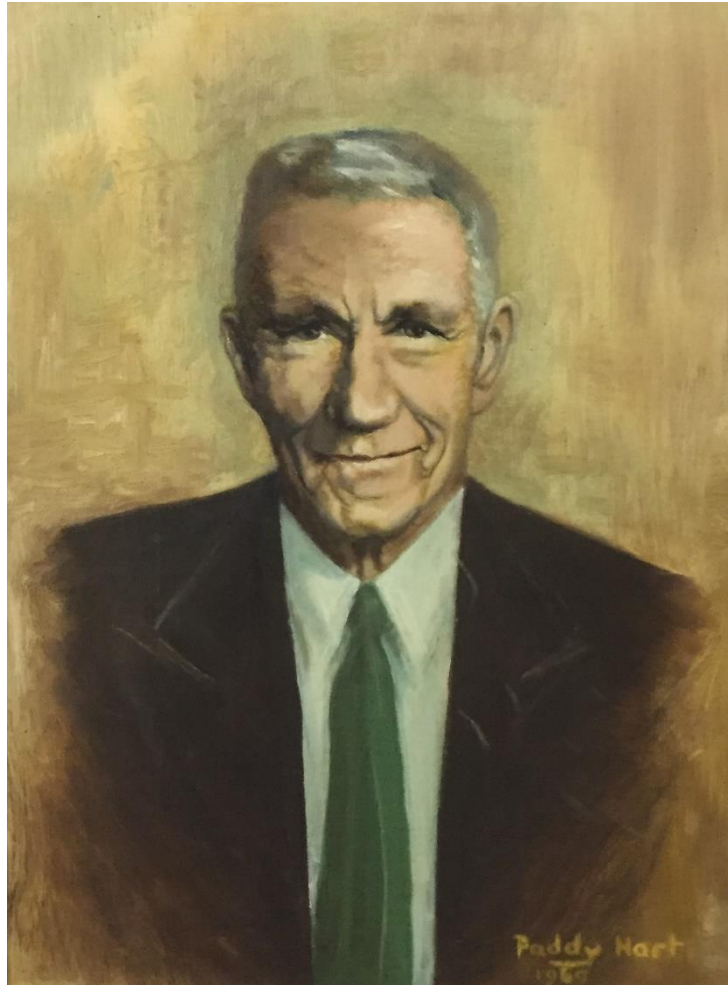
PAID SPECIAL WAR GRATUITY

DESCRIPTION OF ABOVE-NAMED MAN

Age 17 Height 5ft 4in Complexion Fair
 Marks or Scars on face or body None Capt. Paymaster Z. Branch.
 Place Worcester C.R.S.S.

Date 20.7.01 Signature [Signature] Major O.C. Depot.
 WARREN'S MOUNTED INFANTRY.



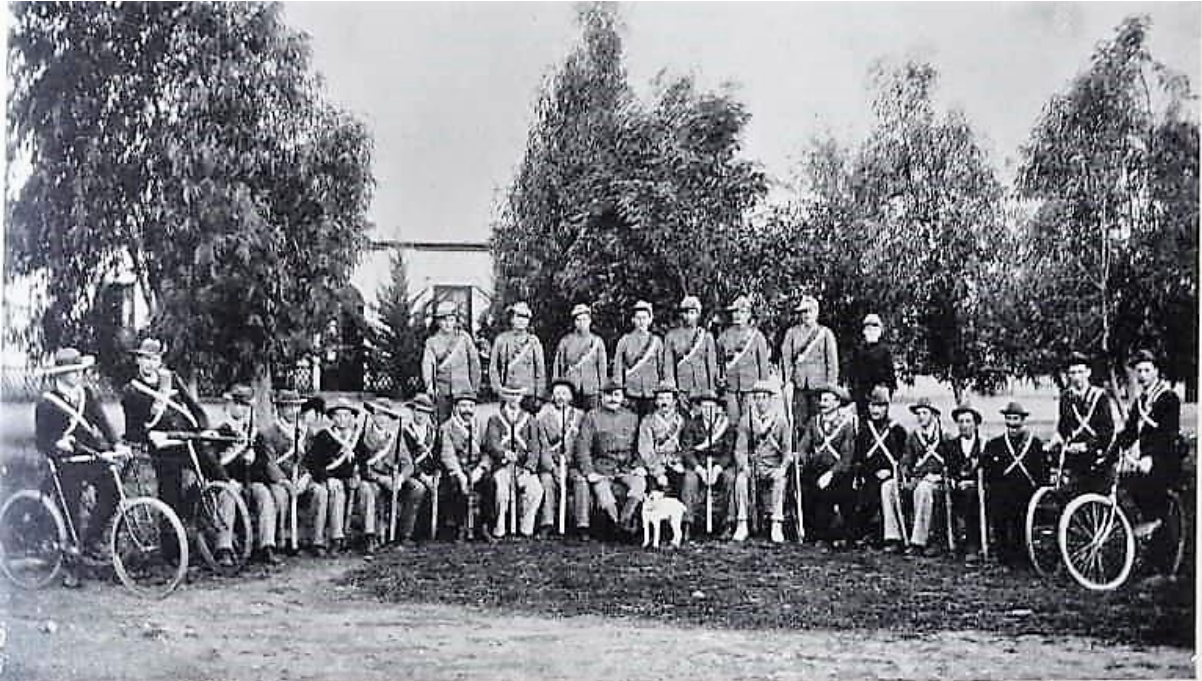


Major C.R. Wolhuter

Pictures/Documents: Robertson Museum

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Forts built and manned by the Montagu Town Guard



Photo, M. C. Le Roux

MONTAGU TOWN GUARD

*Officer Commanding, also Commandant of the Town—Captain S. W. Robinson, R.H.A.
Officer Second in Command—Lieutenant Stanhope Baynes.*

According to Richard Tomlinson's research in 2007 five Town Guard forts were located and recorded, but there could have been more; He refers to a statement by Esther Hofmeyr Montagu resident, whose house was commandeered by the British during the War, stating that there were 9 forts (this could not be verified when this article was compiled). Richard was able to visit and check out several other koppies (specifically Kanonkop, both to the south of the cannon and the hilltop, the next ridge to the east, and the top of the koppie on which Que-Si-Sana is built on the east side of the R318 Koo Valley road), and found no sign of fortification on any of these.

Note: Local Montagu resident Johnny Verreyne reported the existence of a 6th Town Guard fort called Pootjieskloof. See more information about this finding in this article.

He comments on the 5 forts he recorded as follows (see his plan drawing which follow):

Nature Garden Fort.

Located on the koppie between The Nature Garden and the refuse dump, to the south of the R62 Barrydale road.

GPS co-ordinates S33° 47' 33.5" E20° 07' 59.3" Height 297m.

This fort appears to have fallen or been demolished down to the lower courses of stonework (about 0.7m above ground level) and I understand was rebuilt by a local farmer so as to be visible still from the town. As a consequence, no loopholes (rifle ports) have survived, but at least the ground plan or layout is visible; the letter 'e' plan shape gives a protected entrance, which prevents an enemy from firing directly into the main part of the fort. The only other notable feature is the large stone slab threshold in the entrance.



Nature Garden

TV Mast Hill Fort.

Located on the highest point of the prominent koppie to the east of the town, on which a number of electronic masts have been erected, and about 10m east of the main mast.

GPS co-ordinates S33° 47' 15.6" E20° 08' 34.1" Height 371m.

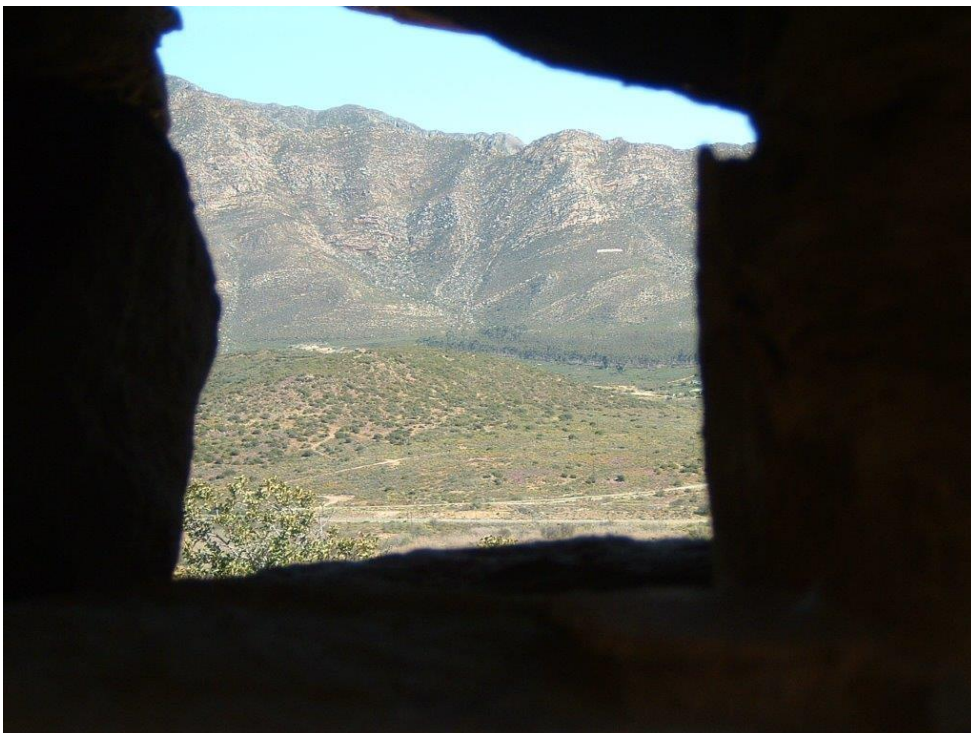
Only scanty foundations 0.7m thick remain of this small circular structure, the only one of the forts found to have been circular on plan. It measures 5m in external diameter, and the walls remain to a maximum height of 0.6m. Abutting the south-west side there appears to be a straight stone wall face 2.2m in length, the purpose of which is unknown. The small size and unusual plan of this structure suggests that it may have been built as an ancillary lookout post to Knipes Fort, to command the roads to Barrydale and Touws River.



Pictures Cameron le Roux

Knipes Fort.





Knipes Fort

Located towards the north end of the ridge which culminates in TV Mast Hill, commanding the road to the Koo Valley and the alternative route to Touws River.

GPS co-ordinates S33° 46' 58.7" E20° 08' 21.1" Height 304m.

This is the best preserved of the forts immediately surrounding the town. The main section measures 6.0 x 4.1m, with an entrance lobby to the south-east giving offset doorways to protect against direct fire into the fort by the enemy. The walls are between 0.65 and 0.75m thick, and stand to what was probably their full original height of about 2m, except for the upper parts of the entrance lobby walls and the adjacent section of the east wall, which have been reduced in height. Sufficient of the structure remains to the full height to preserve 12 loopholes, 3 of which are angled at the corners. The walls are built of "veld rocks", i.e. those which are generally found lying on the surface of the ground, as distinct from quarried rocks; a mixture of earth and small stones has been used to fill in between the rocks. An interesting feature of the masonry above the three surviving corner loopholes is that it has been chamfered or angled at 45° to each wall face, instead of coming to a right-angle as in the masonry below. A mixture of what appears to be clay and lime has been used to point the masonry inside the loopholes, which gives a very neat appearance, and the loopholes are angled downwards.

Thank you to Capedry Montagu for the preservation of Knipes fort

Bergsig Fort.

Located midway up the koppie at the north-east corner of the town above the suburb of Bergsig, commanding the Koo Valley and alternative Touws River roads from the west side. Mr. Heydenrych Montagu Historian accompanied me to this fort, to show me its location.

GPS co-ordinates S33° 46' 37.7" E20° 07' 46.2" Height 306m.

Only the foundation courses of the walls of this fort remain to a maximum height of 0.8m above outside ground level. They enclose a main area measuring 5.65 x 4.0m externally, with an entrance lobby on the uphill (north) side; it was not possible to recover the complete ground plan of the lobby without moving many fallen rocks, which time constraints did not permit. From the large number of fallen rocks both inside and outside the fort, it is clear that the fort has suffered from the attention of vandals, situated as it is so close to the town.



*Bergsig 2021
Sadly this site has been
badly vandalised*

Ouberg Pass Fort

Located 10km out of the town on the alternative route to Touws River, measured from the turnoff opposite Bergsig on the A318 Koo Valley road; it is midway up a koppie to the left of the road. The fort commands a long straight stretch of the road from Touws River from a clifftop in an easterly direction and mostly keeps the road in sight around towards Montagu.

GPS co-ordinates S33° 46' 39.9" E20° 13' 23.0" Height 369m.

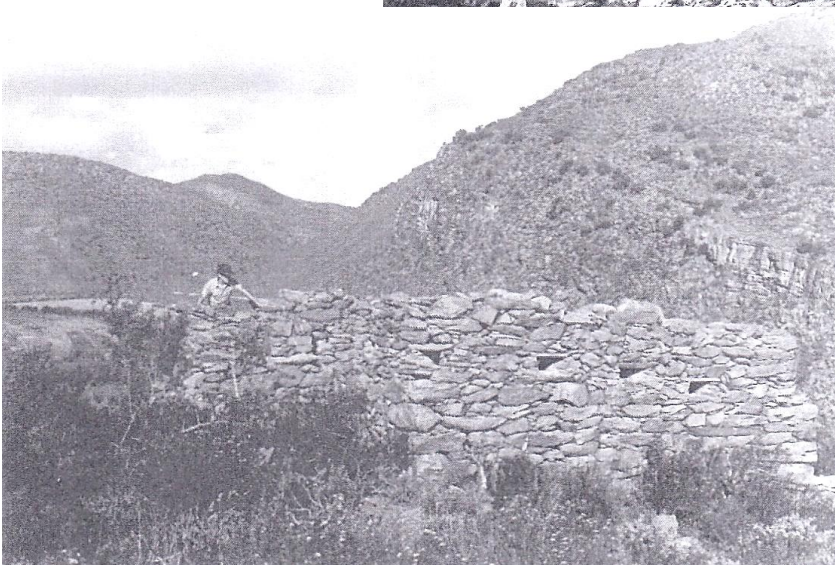
This fort is the best preserved of the five, probably because it is located so far from town. The walls enclose a main area measuring externally 6.15 X 4.95m, with a small entrance lobby on the uphill (north) side with the usual offset doorways; they are 0,65 to 0,75m thick and survive to probably their full height of about 2m, except again around the entrance lobby where it was not possible to recover the complete plan where the masonry has fallen away. 16 loopholes have survived in the full height sections of wall, 3 being on the corners with the chamfered angles and other features that I described on Knipes Fort; one at the north-east corner on the

Ouberg Pass Fort Gallery





Pictures: Mike Worthington-Jones



Pictures: Montagu Museum

main fort had to be skewed considerably to reach the inside corner. As the fort is built on a site which slopes down to the south, the builders found it necessary to step the loopholes down progressively in the east and west walls so as to maintain an even height above the ground.

Pootjieskloof Fort

The site of this fort was visited on 29/12/21. The site is situated in the Pootjieskloof gorge on the downside of the Pootjieskloof dam. It is assumed that the original Barrydale road went via this gorge and the fort was positioned to watch this entrance to Montagu. It is also situated next to what must have been at one stage a mountain stream. How this fort communicated back to Montagu is a topic for discussion



Standing on the site of the fort there is a commanding view of the gorge. The arrow indicates the position of the road.



Possible remnants of the old fort. According to local information the fort stone work was dismantled and used elsewhere on the farm.

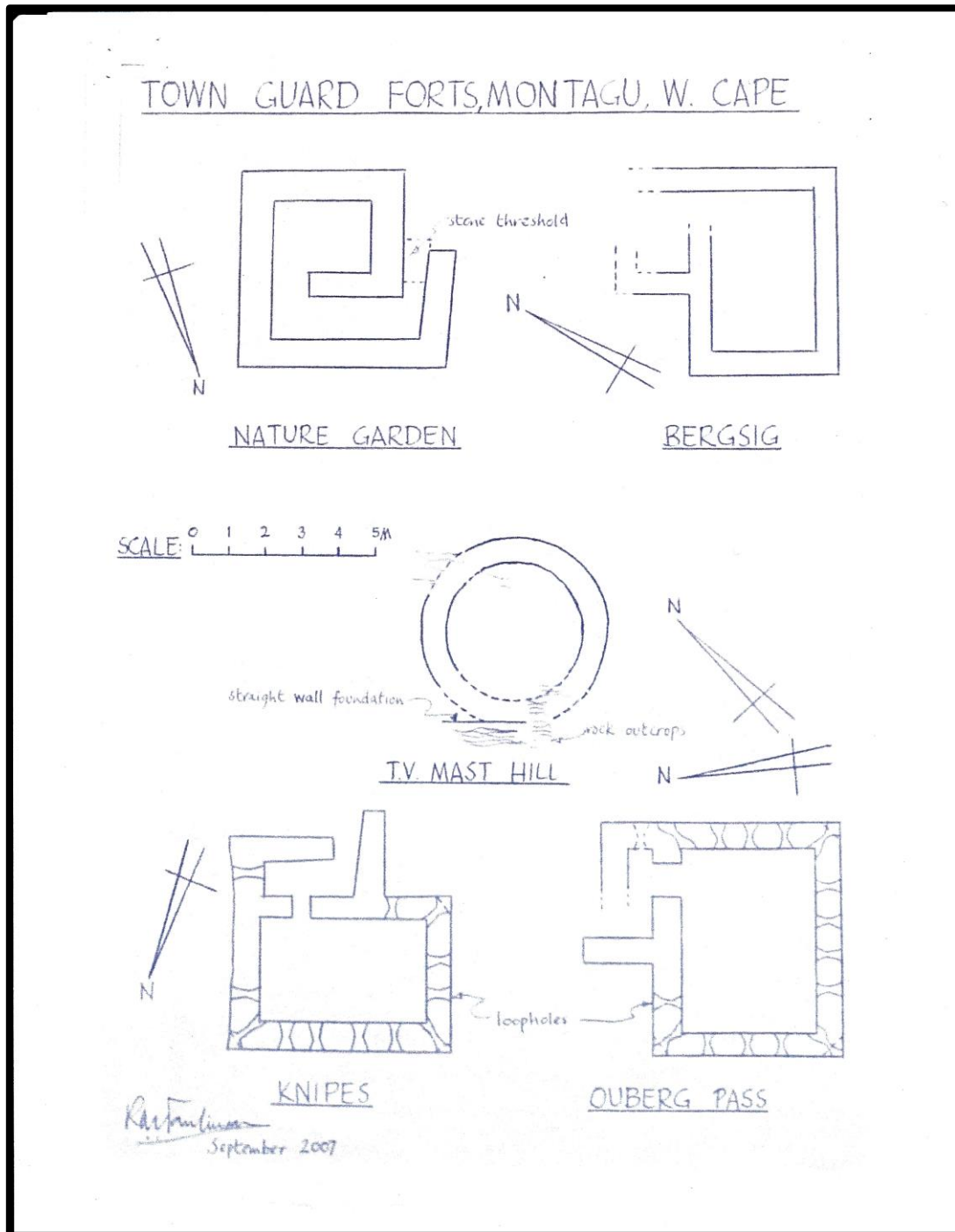
Comments: Richard Tomlinson

The five Montagu Town Guard Forts are an interesting survival from the Second Anglo-Boer War, even in their incomplete state. The 4 rectangular examples show a variety of plan shapes within a standard design framework, (as will be noted by looking at my plan drawing), which indicates that the builder did not slavishly follow a fixed layout. They are quite sophisticated in their construction the walls being neatly built in random-coursed stonework, with plentiful use of 'galleting' (wedging smaller stones in between the rocks to give an even wall face); in particular, the finish to the loopholes and especially the corner ones is notable. The use of a mixture of earth and small stones as a sort of mortar between the rocks in what is essentially a drystone wall construction is common to other forts of this type that I have seen, e.g. those guarding Port Elizabeth's water supply in the Van Staden's Gorge. The protected entrance arrangements are simple and would no doubt have been effective in the event of an attack.

I saw no evidence of the use of tents for overnight accommodation near the forts, probably because four of them were so close to the town that the defenders could be relieved with ease; I understand that the fifth fort, at Ouberg Pass, has a large cave higher up the koppie which could have given this protection. It must be emphasized that this type of fort generally was not roofed over, although the troopies may have erected a temporary cover of tree branches and grass. The garrison for each fort is likely to have been of the order of a non-commissioned officer (NCO) and 4 or 5 men, with perhaps several more at Ouberg Pass, as it is so far from the town.

It is often stated that forts from this and other wars “never fired a shot in anger”. This is invariably true; but an important purpose of a fortification is to act as a deterrent and, if it wasn’t attacked, it did its job! General Jan Smuts visited Jansenville in the Eastern Cape in 1921 and commented “It’s 20 years ago that I was in this area, when I had to bypass your town. On that occasion I would very much have liked to have called in for a chat and a cup of coffee, but for your highly armed fort and impenetrable noors.”(Smuts is here referring to the time in October 1901 when he kept his commando well clear of Jansenville, whose substantial Town Guard fort still crowns a hill on the north side; “noors” are a particularly vicious type of thorny cactus). A commando led by Commandant Gideon Scheepers is known to have raided Barrydale and reached within 25km of Montagu; the Shearings write “They stopped at Warmwater on 1 September (1911, slept at a farm now called Scheepersrus and rode on towards Montagu. But they heard it was garrisoned and the Town Guard was standing to arms. Nothing for them there. They turned north-west at Derdeheuvel...” (Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave by Taffy and David Shearing, Cape Commando Series No 2, 1999). So the Town Guard and forts here definitely provided a deterrent.

I believe these forts are a small but significant part of the historic heritage of Montagu and South Africa. It will be interesting to see if any further forts can be found to bring the number up to the possible 9 mentioned by Esther Hofmeyr.



Note: Venues visited by Montagu Stories may be on private property and any attempt to visit sites must be made with the permission of property owners.

Let wel: Plekke wat deur Montagu Stories besoek word, is moontlik op privaat eiendom en enige poging om terreine te besoek, moet gedoen word met die toestemming van eienaars.