

THE BATHURST DEFENCE COMPLEX 1820-1864:

Magazine, Star Forts on Battery Hill and St John's, "The Citadel"

by Rod Hooper Box

This is an enhanced version of the talk delivered on behalf of 'Historic Bathurst' at the Powder Magazine during the LAHS visit of October 2022. Unfortunately, it is not secure to store actual artefacts in the structure, therefore brief information regarding the posters placed inside is included at the end of this article.

During May 1820 Sir Rufane Donkin (Acting Governor 1820-1822) selected a site, closer to where he had placed the various settler parties than Graham's Town (which had been Governor Lord Charles Somerset's choice), upon which to establish a township and administrative centre. From this chosen site it seemed possible to act promptly and effectively in protecting the line of settler locations. Captain Charles Trappes, 72nd Regiment (Duke of Albany's own Highlanders), was appointed magistrate. Land surveyor Knobel then drew up a plan for public and private occupation - approved on September 9th 1820 - named in honour of Lord Bathurst.

It was later realised that:

'Bathurst is extremely unfavourable for defence against such an enemy as the Khosa [sic]. It is embosomed in the immense thicket which lines the banks of the Kowie River, thus affording secure cover to the enemy until a few yards of the dwellings of the inhabitants. Independent of this, the mode of warfare adopted by the enemy was judiciously planned - their operations were well organised, and their proceedings accurately and boldly executed; appearing at distant points, and making demonstrations of attack, where ever there were any inhabitants to intimidate or property to seize; and then to retire into the fastnesses of the immense bushy ravines which intersect the country, was a system well calculated to tire out the patience and wear out the strength of the most persevering and enduring troops'. (Robert Godlonton).

The two forts built on the hill did, however, command approaches, and formed points from which patrols could be sent out. During three frontier wars it was St John's Church that secured the safety of the settler families. Together the forts and the church formed a life-saving defensive complex.

The images inside the Bathurst Powder Magazine include Port Elizabeth (Gqebehra)'s Fort Frederick's magazine; and barrel vault ceiling construction. There are notable differences of wall height and building width, but clearly the magazines are essentially the same - standard, not unique. The key point is that there is no flammable wooden construction holding up the roof, as a ceiling built of continuous arches is self-supporting. Gunpowder (correctly "black powder") exposed to fire will surely explode. At times, up to 600 pounds of powder were reportedly stored in the Bathurst magazine.

In *The Lower Albany Chronicle (Part 1 1806-1825)* Morse-Jones' earliest reference to the military installations on the hill is November 9th 1820. The building of barracks had begun on the site originally allocated for the church. By 30 November a company of the 72nd Duke of Albany's Own

Highlanders was stationed at the Post, along with a company of the Cape Corps in the land below (to the north). These were 'Hottentot'[sic] Cavalrymen, later re-designated Cape Mounted Riflemen.

In December 1820 the Scots were replaced by the 6th Warwickshire Regiment of Foot and a powder magazine was being prepared. There must have been a simple earthen parapet and ditch around the magazine - obviously under guard at all times - but no plans of such an early outline have been found.

During September 1821 Donkin inspected the barracks which were to the east and west of the magazine. These were wattle and daub, by no means permanent structures.

In 1837 James Alexander wrote *'there used to be a gun above Bathurst, and another at Kaffir Drift Post; and when the Kaffirs [sic] made a foray about the former, the gun being fired and answered, turned out the patrol, and the marauders were intercepted.'*

On Somerset's return, in February 1822 - in anger at having been countermanded - he ordered the magistracy be removed from Bathurst to Graham's Town. By 1823 the Bathurst Post garrison had been reduced to a Sergeant and a small party.

Settler Jeremiah Goldswain bewailed, *'Wile the troops and the govemment department and head Quarters was at Bathurst they people was doing well but as soon as they was removed, Bathurst was forst to be derset by tradesmen and labours.'*

Security-wise, Bathurst dozed on until late December 1834 when a Xhosa invasion swept through Albany and 'demolished in one short week the entire labours of fifteen years, wantonly murdered upwards of forty of the peaceful inhabitants,' reported missionary William Shaw.

St John's Church, despite its unfinished state, became the centre of refuge for settler families from the surrounding locations. Lieutenant Edward Forbes, 75th (Stirlingshire) Regiment of Foot, with a company of troops, brought a small supply of arms and ammunition from Graham's Town. They patrolled the locality, initially on foot, then some on horses - attempting the recovery of stolen cattle. After three days the settlers were evacuated to Graham's Town on the orders of Colonel Henry Somerset.



On 6 January 1835 Harry Smith arrived in Graham's Town, disapproved the abandonment of all Posts, and ordered immediate reoccupation. On January 12, Lt Forbes, with a party of mounted volunteers, returned and made the church the strongpoint: earthworks were built around the church, and the windows were blocked up. The war then moved away from Albany as D'Urban (Governor 1834-1838) and Smith counterattacked, crossing the Kei into Hintsa's country. D'Urban, touring the 'old Colony' to place it in a state of defence, arrived in Bathurst on 8 July 1835 with Colonels Somerset and Thomson (an engineer), Lt Williams (also an engineer) and Capt James Alexander, 42nd Highlanders (Black Watch), Aide-de Camp to D'Urban.

Figure 1: Sir Harry Smith

Alexander wrote, *'Next morning we were up at an early hour; and proceeding to the long hill above the village, laid out two redoubts (small star forts), and broke ground. We were also directed to enclose the handsome stone church with a parapet and ditch.'* The west star fort was built to surround the 1820 powder magazine.

In 1838 Lt-Col Griffith Lewis, Cape Commanding Engineer, had reckoned:

*'It required 150 men for Bathurst's defence. Enclosed barracks for two companies of infantry, and one of mounted men should be on the plain below the forts to form a connected defence with them and the redoubt around the church. Between these works would be sufficient space for the neighbouring population to find refuge. The star forts should be **revetted**¹ with stone and equipped with two pieces of ordnance, 24-pounder howitzers placed on traversing platforms.'* Governor D'Urban was in full agreement.

From Capt Selwyn's statement of 1838 about the temporary and permanent buildings for troops, it appears Lewis's recommendations had been executed:

*'Bathurst has two field works on the heights commanding the village (of 60 feet square with **redans**²), enclosing accommodation for one sergeant and 30 rank and file, a cookhouse, a guardroom and a small powder magazine built of stone. The huts of the Cape Mounted Riflemen were placed about 875 yards below the redoubts, offering accommodation for one sergeant, 34 rank and file, and 27 horses. The officers hired cottages. Except for the stone powder magazine ... all the buildings were of wattle and daub. By April 1838 the huts in the redoubts were in a tolerable state, but those of the CMR were beyond repair. Those of the forts built in winter when the sap was down were in good condition.'*

The next defence of Bathurst was during the 7th Frontier War, which broke out in April 1846. At that time Capt Fielding of the 78th Highlanders (later re-designated Seaforth's) was in command at Bathurst.

Almost immediately after the outbreak of the 8th War (Christmas Eve 1850), a wagon left Graham's Town under escort with arms for Bathurst Post. Later Col Somerset issued 60 rounds (two pounds) of powder, with a proportionate amount of lead, to settlers in the area.

By March 1851 about half of the Bathurst herds had been taken. Settler Thomas Stubbs described how thefts in Albany increased when troops were in the mountains. Consequently, Lt-Col William Eyre, with 300 men of the 73rd Regiment of Foot (Perthshire), and 70 CMR were diverted from the Amatolas to be based in Bathurst. There were also 250 Fingoes [Mfengu] from King William's Town.

In September 1852 Jeremiah and Eliza Goldswain had to walk around the church yard for the burial of their son, killed near Mansfield, because the high wall and ditch around the church in the war of 1834-35 still existed. Gunpowder and muskets were stored in the church tower until 1854.

Bathurst fortifications were abandoned in 1864: the occupation of eastern lands had created security.

1 Revetment - the masonry, generally of stone, on outer face of a rampart.

2 Redan – a triangular extension; a two faced projection forming a salient angle, as in a star fort.

Snippets re key people involved with the defence of Bathurst:

Lord Charles Somerset (1767-1831), Governor of Cape Colony 1813-1826. Second son of the Duke of Beaufort, he grew up at Badminton House (**see photo below**) - one of the great country houses of the world (more than 100 bedrooms, the frontage of the house is 240 metres). No wonder he thought Government House in Cape Town's Gardens was 'a dog kennel'. What he thought of Ngqika's kraals when he visited in 1817 and 1819 is best left unprinted. He died in Brighton.

When Charles Somerset was 17, his father bought him a commission in an infantry regiment. In 1788 he eloped with 16-year-old Elizabeth Courtenay. Seven years later, by purchase, he became Lieutenant-Colonel of the Coldstream Guards. As Governor he acted as the 18th century aristocratic autocrat that he was, unchanging within changing times.



Figure 2: Badminton House, childhood home of Lord Charles Somerset

Henry Somerset (1794-1862)

He was Sir Charles' first born son - a beneficiary of nepotism to such a degree that his level of competence has been blurred by the resentments towards him of some key players.

At ten years old he was appointed Page to the Presence of the King and may have lived at St James Palace. He was commissioned as a Cornet in the 10th Hussars in 1811, promoted to Lieutenant in 1812 and fought in the Peninsular War (1808-1814), which included a number of cavalry charges. While a Captain and ADC at Waterloo (1815) he had two horses killed under him and another three wounded.

In 1818, after his marriage in Boulogne to Frances Heathcote (after whom what is now Port Alfred was named) he was posted to the Cape. When he was sent to the frontier as Deputy-Landdrost early February his brother Charles' appointments superseded Stockenström's prospects, causing lifelong difficulties between the families.

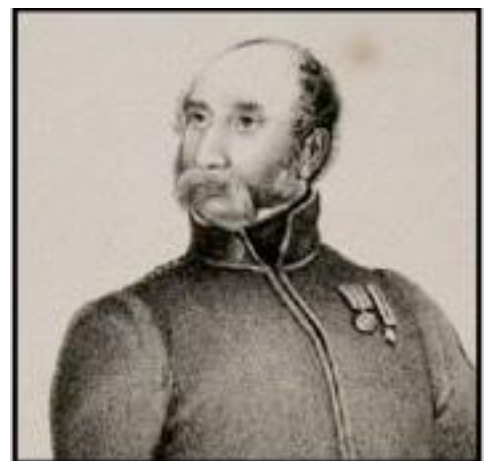


Figure 3: Henry Somerset

Relations between Henry and Acting Governor Donkin descended to threats of whipping and court martial over the rights of usage of a team of mules! This partly explains the later more than frosty reception Donkin received from Lord Charles on his return from leave in 1819.

In 1825 Henry Somerset was appointed Commandant on the frontier, and in 1828 Colonel of the Cape Mounted Riflemen. His brother joined him in the regiment, as in time did some of his sons as officers. Troopers, mostly 'Hottentot'[sic] or 'Cape Coloureds', called him 'father'. Rumour had it that this was literally so. In time two of his daughters married subsequent Colonels of the regiment.

Over a 33-year period, including four frontier wars, he had contributed to the defence of the Colony. He was considered an ass by D'Urban and Harry Smith, yet his departure was regretted by many. In India, 1855-1860, he became Commander-in-Chief at Bombay. He retired to England, but died of pneumonia in Gibraltar during a visit in 1862, and is buried there, with honours.

Sir Rufane Shaw Donkin (1773-1841); (Scottish heritage, originally Duncan)

His father, a General, bought an Officer's Commission for Rufane when the latter was aged five. By 1794 he had served in the West Indies, in Belgium, and under Cathcart in Denmark. Under Wellington, he served with distinction in Portugal and Spain during the Peninsular War of 1808-1814, taking command of a brigade of three Portuguese regiments which he led to victory at the Battle of Porto, and later at Talavera. From 1810 to 1813 he served in the Mediterranean command, including Catalan expeditions under Lt-General Frederick Maitland. In 1815 he married Elizabeth Markham (born 1790) and she accompanied him that year to India where, as a Major-General, he fought in the Mahratta War of 1817-18. He was made Knight Commander of the Bath (KCB) as a reward. Elizabeth died within three years of arrival in India, leaving a boy of eight months. She was Donkin's *'most perfect of human beings.'*

Donkin, landing at the Cape on his way back to England, having been granted sick leave to recover his health and spirits, met Somerset, who thought him ideal to act as Governor (1820-1821) in his absence:

'He is a man of talent and pays me the compliment of saying he shall pursue precisely the line I have adopted in every branch of the administration.'

Donkin did the opposite, why is not always clear.

Settler Thomas Phillips described him as *'absolutely deranged at times since the death of his wife.'*

Nevertheless, he planned and supervised the placing of the settlers; considered Bathurst to be a more convenient 'capital' for Lower Albany than Graham's Town. Militarily, he moved the site of Fort Willshire. Somerset, on his return to Government house, refused to see Donkin, entering by one door as Donkin left by another. They never met again. For the rest of his life, Donkin continued discrediting Somerset - mainly accusing him of lacking financial restraint.



Figure 4: A mature Sir Rufane Donkin

In 1832 Donkin married Lady Anne Maria Elliot, became a Member of Parliament (1832-1837), was appointed Surveyor-General of the Ordnance in 1835, and became a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and of The Royal Society. In 1841, his son having recently died, and his health deteriorating, Donkin hanged himself. He was buried with his first wife's embalmed heart (how his second wife felt about this is unknown).

Charles Michell, designer of St John's Church, the 'Citadel' and centre of defence

Born in England in 1793, his family moved to Lisbon where his father was a Captain in the Portuguese navy. There Charles spent his boyhood, becoming fluent in Portuguese, Spanish and French. In 1810, then only 17 years old, and thanks to the influence of his father's cousin, Rufane Donkin, he joined the British army in Portugal. The following year he was appointed Captain and was placed in command of a brigade of artillery. He served until the defeat of Napoleon, taking part in the siege of Badajoz and the battles of Vittoria and Toulouse.

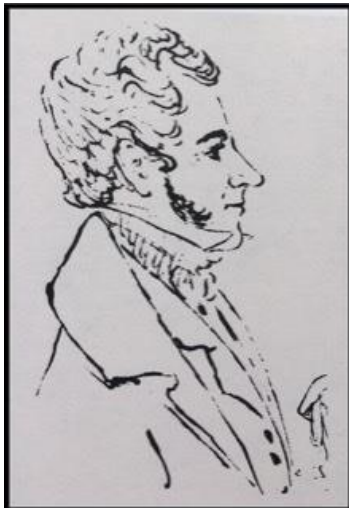


Figure 5 Charles Michell

There he fell in love with a schoolgirl, Anne d'Arragon, the daughter of a retired French officer. Her parents opposed the match, so they eloped and were married in October 1814. According to Michell's son-in-law James Edward Alexander (whom he got to know while on campaign with D'Urban and Harry Smith during the 6th Frontier War of 1834-35), Michell propped a ladder under a window of the convent where Anne was at school, whereupon she climbed down to him, and off they went. The marriage lasted a lifetime.



Figure 6: Cape Recife Lighthouse

Michell became a multi-talented man: soldier, musician, artist, caricaturist, linguist and architect - as well as amateur botanist, geologist, zoologist and ethnographer.

He was the first Surveyor-General and Civil Engineer of the Cape. During his 20-year period of office, perhaps more than anyone else, he laid the foundation of South Africa's present system of roads (including those across the Cape Flats) and mountain passes (including Sir Lowry's Pass and Michell's Pass in the Western Cape). He also helped establish lighthouses (Cape Agulhas and Cape Recife near Port Elizabeth) and harbours, land surveying and cartography.

In October 1829 Michell and Sir Lowry Cole inspected the proposed site for the Anglican church in Bathurst. Using his knowledge of the site, Michell designed a church with estimated building costs of 1000 pounds. This was a large sum for the area, hence the delay in starting construction work, which began in March 1832. St John's is a masterpiece.

Michell took early retirement due to ill health, brought on (it was thought) by overwork. He died in 1851 of 'apoplexy' (a stroke) in England; his wife died two years later at only 54. Their marriage had been an ongoing romance.

Sir Benjamin D'Urban

Son of a doctor, he was born in 1777 and bought into the 2nd Dragoons in 1793, as Cornet. He served in the Netherlands and West Indies; in 1795 he returned to England in command of the remnant of his regiment. During 1803 he was appointed Superintendent at the newly established Royal Military College. In 1805 he exchanged into the 89th Regiment and was promoted to Lt-Colonel. During the Peninsula War he reconnoitred in five-and-a-half months almost 3,500 km of central Portugal - an entirely strange country and during an inclement season. His maps, on a scale of four miles to one inch, allowed Wellington to traverse previously unknown countryside. Such detailed work perhaps partly explains why, during the advance on Hints's country, Harry Smith called him '*Sir Slow*' - while Harry lived up to his name as '*Hurry, Whackalong, Smite.*'

In Spain D'Urban had '*acted with distinguished bravery, as a leader,*' having participated in nine battles and sieges, which had '*added to his merit as a painstaking and highly efficient staff officer.*' He emerged from the war as one of Wellington's 'Band of Brothers' - sent out to administer and protect Britain's greatly expanded Empire. First he served as Governor in the West Indies, later as Governor of what became British Guiana. Both had been slave colonies.

As Governor of the Cape 1834-1838, the most important task confronting D'Urban on his arrival at the Cape was the implementation of the Slave Emancipation Act of 1833. His instructions were to introduce a new constitution which provided for government through a legislative council and an executive council - for the first time colonists were to be given a share in the legislative process. This he did while also implementing the emancipation of the slaves in 1834.



Figure 7: Image of Hints, by Michell

The 1834 Xhosa invasion of the Colony was followed by a counter-attack led by D'Urban, assisted by Harry Wakelyn Smith, during which Paramount Chief Hints was killed, and the Province of Queen Adelaide declared. Secretary of the Colonies Lord Glenelg reversed the decision, damaging D'Urban's reputation. He was dismissed partly because of a dispatch he wrote which was grossly insulting to Lord Glenelg. In a *volte face* Glenelg in May 1837 expressed complete confidence in D'Urban's military handling of the war of 1834-35.

His wife of 46 years died in 1843. Leaving the Cape in 1846 he took up command of the British forces in Canada, holding this position until his death in 1849 in Montreal. He had been a capable, conscientious, dedicated and hardworking servant of the Crown.

General Sir James Edward Alexander (1802-1885)

General Sir James Edward Alexander served as Aide-de-Camp to Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban during the War of 1834-35. Alexander's *Excursions in Western Africa and a Narrative of a Campaign in Kaffir-Land* is considered by many to be one of the finest descriptions of that war. Published in 1837 in two volumes, and reprinted in 1840, Book Two includes engravings by Michell, and information on how Alexander (with his future father-in-law Charles Michell), 'shirts off,' marked the outlines of a number of forts of differing shapes and sizes. These forts were built in a matter of days. (When it came to the marking out of the star forts on Bathurst's Battery Hill, Michell had by then moved on to Port Elizabeth to plan the defences of that town.)



Figure 8: James Alexander

Fascinated by Southern Africa and its inhabitants, Alexander wrote of "Kaffir-land"[sic] as 'a tract of South Africa highly favoured by nature ...which realizes all we have read of Arcadia,' He later led an exploratory expedition into Namaqualand and Damaraland (both in modern Namibia), for which he was knighted in 1838. An indefatigable traveller and prolific author, Alexander served with the 14th (Buckinghamshire) Regiment in the Crimean War, 1855-56. (In this time the Commander of the British forces was Fitzroy, brother of Lord Charles Somerset). In 1856 Alexander raised the second battalion of the Regiment, which, as a Lt-Colonel, he commanded in New Zealand in 1860. Alexander also commanded the troops at Auckland during the Second (1860) and Third (1861-72) New Zealand Maori Wars.

In a notable non-military capacity, he was responsible for the preservation of Cleopatra's Needle, one of two granite obelisks erected at Heliopolis, Egypt, c1475 BC. He had much to do with its transport to London in 1877, where it was placed on the Victoria Embankment the following year. A specially designed cigar-shaped container ship, called the *Cleopatra*, was used to convey this priceless treasure. It was built by the Dixon brothers and when finished was an iron cylinder, 93 feet long, 15 feet wide, and was divided into 10 watertight compartments. A cabin, bilge keels, bridge and rudder were riveted on, and to everyone's delight ...she floated!

ARTEFACTS

In lieu of vulnerable items such as weaponry and uniforms, informative posters cover the interior walls of The Powder Magazine. The main groupings are:

On the left (north) interior wall: historical context regarding the defence of the Cape Frontier, 1811-1853. The focus is on the Bathurst Defensive Complex - touching on the 1820 building of the magazine and barracks, and later developments (Star Forts - Forbes' redoubts) during the 6th Frontier War of 1834-35, the 7th War of 1846-47, and the 8th War of 1850-53 (Umlanjeni's War). At all times St John's Church was the centre of defence, through to the 1864 abandonment of 'Bathurst Post' on Battery Hill (so named in 1835) when peace was thought to have been permanently established.

The second grouping of posters, on the back (east) wall touches on developments and events further east, as the colony expanded. These posters describe the design and nature of the Posts, Towers and

Forts (some of occupation, others of communication), why they were built, where sited, how they related to the broader trends of frontier history, and how their existence affected the lives of Xhosas, Khoi, Dutch (Boer), British settlers, missionaries, and soldiers. Included is reference to the panic building of forts during the 'Cattle Killing' mania of 1856, and the 9th War of 1879 (the Gcaleka War). **The third group of posters, on the right hand (south) interior wall** describe the weaponry used during the wars - including the effectiveness, or otherwise, of assegais, knobkieries, muskets, rifles, swords and cannons.

Pay us a visit.

Enhance your knowledge of our fascinating and bloody past. Be inspired by the magnificent site. Pause and absorb the spirit of place. Listen mindfully, you may hear echoes through time - of church bells ringing an alarm, whistles as cattle are herded off, bugle calls and the roar of muskets.

About the Author:

Rod Hooper-Box graduated with a major in History from Rhodes, under Prof Winifred Maxwell, at one time a LAHS President. Since then he has balanced a career in Management Development and Innovation with a passion for the past, particularly Frontier War fortifications. He is, or has been, a member of the SA Military History Society, the Antique and Black Powder Firearms Association, the Transvaal Muzzle Loaders, Historic Bathurst, and of course LAHS.

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