Our Bennebroek Adventure

By John Goldsmid and Belinda Huse

The Wreck of the Bennebroek

The *Bennebroek* was a 340 ton Dutch 'fluit', 145 feet long and built by the VOC in their Amsterdam shipyard in 1708.

She sailed on her maiden voyage from Texel in the Netherlands on 7 May 1709 for Ceylon via the Cape of Good Hope with 225 souls on board and arrived in Cape Town on 6 September 1709. She then left Cape Town on 29 October and arrived in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in February 1710. She spent nearly three years trading in the region including a visit to the VOC settlement in Bengal (now Bangladesh).

The *Bennebroek* sailed from Ceylon on 20 December 1712 with 150 souls on board on her return voyage. She carried a cargo of silk, spices, timber, tea and a consignment of oriental porcelain. She was part of a fleet of five vessels en route to the Netherlands via the Cape of Good Hope.
Two weeks after leaving Ceylon the vessels encountered a storm and the *Bennebroek* was separated from her consorts. One month later at an estimated latitude of 31 degrees south, she encountered yet another storm and lost two of her masts.

On 16 February 1713 she was caught on the lee shore somewhere between the Fish and Kowie Rivers, struck rocks and filled at once. Two hours later the ship broke apart and many drowned. Fifty seven Europeans and twenty black convicts and slaves made it ashore. They spent four days at the wreck site and then, as the vessel was completely broken up, decided to walk to Cape Town. They had recovered five guns, powder, lead, salt meat and pork.

Five days later they stopped by a broad stream – perhaps the Fish River. The non-swimmers had to return to the wreck site, where there were only seventeen European and nine black people left. However, the rest decided to carry on to Cape Town.

By the 26 Feb 1713 the non-swimmers has reached the wreck site. Thereafter they traded iron and copper from the wreck with the locals and lived on milk, beef and grain. However, on the 6th June they tried to get to the Cape again, this time trying an inland route only leaving behind the three Europeans and one black person who were too young or too weak to walk.

After twenty nine days, they returned again to wreck site as their provisions were exhausted. Sadly, they found bloodstained clothing and nothing else of the four who had been left behind. They then lived among the locals who supported them for over eighteen months. On 17 August 1714 they were at last found and picked up by a small trading vessel, and sailed to the Cape, trading along the way.

Four sailors chose to remain with the local people together with an eighty year old French

survivor from a previous wreck that had occurred thirty years previously, whom they had met on their second attempt to cross the Fish River. Of the original group who had remained at the Fish River, only a Malabar slave made it to Breede River, and he was then sent to the Castle in Cape Town on 26 Feb 1714. His entire journey took a whole year. In November 1714, a new attempt was made to find the survivors and retrieve the cannon and anchors, but after six months nothing was found. The wreck was thought to be located on the 31st parallel.

In 1985 Peter Sacks tried salvaging the wreck but it was reported that nothing of the vessel was found. He did however find a large badly damaged bronze muzzle loader cannon and six breach loading swivel guns bearing the VOC monogram. A few fine porcelain pieces were also found but heavy seas had destroyed rest. We never discovered the exact position of the wreck.

Our search for the Bennebroek cargo



Figure 1: John Goldsmid and Belinda Huse with some of the items they found

The search for *Bennebroek* cargo was an adventure for us. We began to pick up shards between the rivers and down towards Bigha. Our fascination with blue and white pieces stems from a small matchbox containing five tiny shards of Chinese porcelain which ignited our passion to find more. So began our Bennebroek adventure.

We have walked hundreds of kilometres over the last sixteen years, and this has produced some 6 000 pieces of china. These items may be from more than one wreck, but this does not bother us. We have not delved too deeply into sources – that is up to the experts. We just have a love of searching. Spotting, finding, bending down and picking something up, with a squeal “found a piece” is always exciting, whether a tiny shard of a few millimetres or a piece the size of a hand.

As we started finding more and more pieces, we wanted to understand more about their origins. We were fortunate to find an expert, Valerie Esterhuizen, in Pretoria. Every piece we found was recorded, photographed and sent to Valerie for her records and comments. Through her we learned that much of the china that we had found came from the Kanxi period, but she identified a lot of pieces from earlier periods and other regions as well. A small sample of what we have collected is shown in Figure 1.

Display



Figure 2: A small sample of what was collected



Figure 3: Pieces of special interest

There are two pieces of special interest (Figure 3). The first is a very small almost intact statue of a Dutchman riding a tiger, and after prizing out a few grains of sand, it has a still-functioning whistle. The second is a lion's foot from Korea.

Many of the items that we found way back in alcoves between the dunes are in good condition. They were probably washed up hundreds of years ago and remained under the sand and so were not exposed to wave action or the sun. It is only under certain conditions that the dune moves, and these pieces are temporarily exposed.

A particularly interesting statuette was also found together with other statuettes and many heavier bottoms of crockery in one location. All are still sharp and mostly retain their original glaze. The china found on the tide lines, while mostly retaining its colour and pattern, has often lost its glaze coat and sharpness due to wave and sand action.

We have spent sixteen years collecting a variety of small consignments but recently have continued to discover new exciting evidence.

The likely origin of the china on the Bennebroek

Through investigations, and by lucky coincidence, a post was picked up by a Dutch professor in the Netherlands, Christian Jorg, who identified a certain piece of china in our collection as part of a dinner plate decorated with the armorial crest of one Jacob Pelgrom, a Frenchman, once Director General of Bengal, and the head of the Batavian tax office. He was an avid collector of porcelain china from the entire region.

Jorg has suggested that in 1713 Pelgram was very ill and he decided to ship his entire collection back home to the Netherlands. This consignment was shipped on the *Bennebroek*, which explains the vast variety of china found around Hamburg.

Another interesting find is the bricks. The Dutch, unlike other shipbuilding nations, followed their own rules, and being astute traders did not use the conventional ballast materials of the time. The VOC had their own brick fields in Amsterdam and used these bricks for ballast on the outgoing voyages. They were used to build warehouses and administrative or defense buildings in their colonies. New York has many examples of these bricks still today, all originating from VOC ballast. These bricks can also be found at the Castle in Cape Town. The location of the ballast bricks and the concentration of the well-preserved porcelain shards has, we believe, led us to the wreck's location.

Our cottage bears testimony to our hundreds of hours of beach combing along this pristine piece of coastline. Every wall is decorated with flotsam and jetsam gathered off the beaches, including fishing tackle, sea beans, paper nautiluses, old bottles off ships, huge chokka boat light bulbs and buoys.