

Unique bid to dig up painful past

By **BOBBY JORDAN**

● For some it’s the ship that caused all the trouble – a reminder of a painful past, buried somewhere in the beach sand of Table Bay.

For maritime archaeologist Bruno Werz the Dutch ship Nieuw Haarlem, which he is convinced he has found, planted the seeds of a shared future.

He has launched a unique survey to find out if South Africans want him to dig up a ship that dumped a group of white castaways in the Cape almost five years before Jan van Riebeeck arrived. If his project gets the thumbs-up, he wants locals to get involved – to help rewrite history.

Werz has been searching for the Haarlem for 30 years. A test excavation in 2019 yielded a few potential artefacts, sent for lab testing at Wits University.

But his discoveries in the Dutch archives are possibly more significant – a diary of one of the castaways contradicting the colonial narrative of conflict between the earliest European visitors and indigenous communities.

Unlike the centuries of bloodshed that followed Van Riebeeck’s arrival, the shipwrecked crew of the Haarlem engaged peacefully with local tribes for about a year, trading and calling each other by their first names. The crew’s experience – captured in the diary of merchant Leendert Jansz, and redacted by Werz in his 2017 book *The Haarlem Shipwreck* – was largely responsible for Van Riebeeck’s subsequent mission to establish a permanent base in the Cape. It paints a picture fundamentally different to Van Riebeeck’s published views on “hostile natives”.

By contrast, Jansz said of his early encounters with the locals: “We believe strongly that the farmers in this country, when one would shoot their cattle and take these away without payment as no justice was to be feared, they would not be one hair better than these indigenous people. We, of the aforementioned ship, testify very differently in this matter, as after we had been there for approximately five months, the indigenous people came to the fort (that had

Archaeologist wants to involve locals in search for Dutch shipwreck



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been constructed for our defence) in all friendliness to barter and they brought cattle and sheep in quantities. Also, on one occasion the first mate, the carpenter and the corporal ... went as far as to where the houses of the indigenous people stood ... They were received and treated in a friendly manner by the aforementioned inhabitants, who could have beaten them to death as they were in their hands, should they have been inclined to cannibalism (as has been suggested by some).”

Werz wants to reignite the spirit of the shipwreck survivors by involving local communities in his work – a unique approach to archaeology that so far appears to have support. In 2019 he reached out to Cape Flats schools to teach them about the Haarlem project. Now he wants to make it a shared project – thereby encouraging a more balanced view of history and not the top-down



An artist’s impression of the wrecking of the Haarlem. Pictures: Supplied



Bruno Werz with an artefact he believes is from the Haarlem, at the site in Table Bay where the ship is thought to have foundered in 1647. Picture: Esa Alexander



A map showing where the wreck is believed to be located. Graphic: Nolo Moima

Riebeeck being a celebrated colonial hero when in fact, despite his misgivings about indigenous communities, he was found guilty of dishonest conduct during his professional service. “The [Jansz] report also states that to run the Cape expedition a good and honest officer was needed – but Van Riebeeck turned out to be different. If somebody else had been in command, history could have turned out very differently.”

“He [Van Riebeeck] was a company servant who had earlier been reprimanded for illicit trading in the East [and] was ordered back to the Dutch Republic where he was tried, discharged and then reinstated about two years later,” Werz wrote in his book. “It is clear from his comments that Van Riebeeck was not as positively inclined towards the indigenous people as Jansz. He states that: ‘These are completely untrustworthy, but a brutal gang that live without any conscience.’”

Werz hopes his survey of local interest in the wreck will provide the necessary cross-cultural mandate to take the next step – retrieving the wreck from beneath the sand.

The South African Heritage Resources Agency is aware of his intention to restart on-site work. “We are always happy to hear about prospective research and shall keep an eye out for any permit applications coming our way,” said head of maritime archaeology Lesa la Grange.

Converting chaos into electricity

By **HENDRIK HANCKE**

● When Kobus Steyn’s contract to run a power station in the Philippines came to an end last year, instead of renewing it he decided to return to South Africa to pitch in where he could to help his embattled former employers.

And, with more than 30 years of experience since his early days as a junior engineer at Eskom, he was well-equipped for the job.

Steyn grew up in Sasolburg. “My father worked for Sasol, and when I was about three years old, he resigned and started working for Eskom at Highveld, a power station that has since been demolished.”

When he was “about six”, his father moved to Arnot power station, where construction had just started.

Steyn had a choice of two bursaries after finishing high school in 1981. “One was from Eskom, and the other from Sasol. The Eskom bursary had more value, so I decided on that.”

After his University of Pretoria studies in electronic engineering, where he specialised in control systems in his final years, Steyn joined the army for two years before starting work at Kendal power station as a young engineer in 1988.

Last year, some 35 years later, he returned to Kendal after a three-year stint in the Philippines – this time as the man in charge.

“We have six units,” he said. “Currently four are running, with two on long-term planned outages for maintenance. Our current energy availability factor is 46%. I have been here now for a year and two months. When I arrived, chaos reigned. There were multiple crises every day. And I’m not talking about Mickey Mouse crises – serious stuff.”

“We talk about a multiple-unit trip when two or more units trip. In my experience, this is something that will happen maybe once in five years at a power station. In my first four months at Kendal, we had seven incidents of



Kendal general manager Kobus Steyn in front of the power station where he started his Eskom career more than 30 years ago. Picture: Hendrik Hancke

this magnitude. I have never seen something like that in my career.”

The loss of multiple units is problematic. “If you lose three or four units at the same time, it will take you four or five days to get all of them back on load.”

New problems kept mushrooming.

“While you are trying to stabilise these units, something else will go down. We spent most of our time in firefighting mode. You could never go sit and just do planning if emergency situations kept popping up.”

But experienced hands make light work.

“It helps that I know this station intimately, and I’ve always been willing to carry more risk on a higher level than my team,” Steyn said. “At one stage, we had an issue getting coal into the station, and the advice from our engineers was to take our five operational units down.”

“I denied the request, telling my people to keep them running until they trip. By the time we had new coal, we had only lost one of the units [owing to] a trip.”

He is still not sure how many of his earlier problems were caused by sabotage.

“I can tell you that so many things going wrong in such a short space of time has been unprecedented in my career of more than 30 years. You do sometimes have a ripple effect, where something that goes wrong affects another part of the station, causing an issue

there that spreads further. But what I experienced here was something else.

“I remember specifically one incident where we had 15 things go wrong that could not have been influenced by each other in any way. These were not caused by any ripple effect. I am talking about separate incidents preventing us from bringing in coal, water and oil. This couldn’t have been coincidental.”

The basic condition of the station was very poor. “It was dirty, so when something went wrong it was sometimes difficult to find the problem.”

The impact of dirt on a power station’s operations can be critical. “To give you an example, some of the gears in our mills use a specific type of grease. Because the plant was not cleaned properly, ash got into this grease. Ash might be very fine, but it is composed of about 65% aluminium oxide, so it is very abrasive,” he said. The ash contaminated the grease used to lubricate the mills, leading to serious breakdowns.

“We lost quite a few mills for this reason.”

But things are changing. “My first priority was to find stability amid all the chaos. We needed space to breathe and plan. After that, we had to get some key people who were not performing out. This has been an ongoing process, but we are slowly starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”