SHIPWRECKS OF GROTTO BAY AND SURROUNDS

Grotto Bay is a place of exceptional natural beauty, but its significance reaches beyond the landscape we see today. It is also part of a coastline with a rich cultural and maritime history.

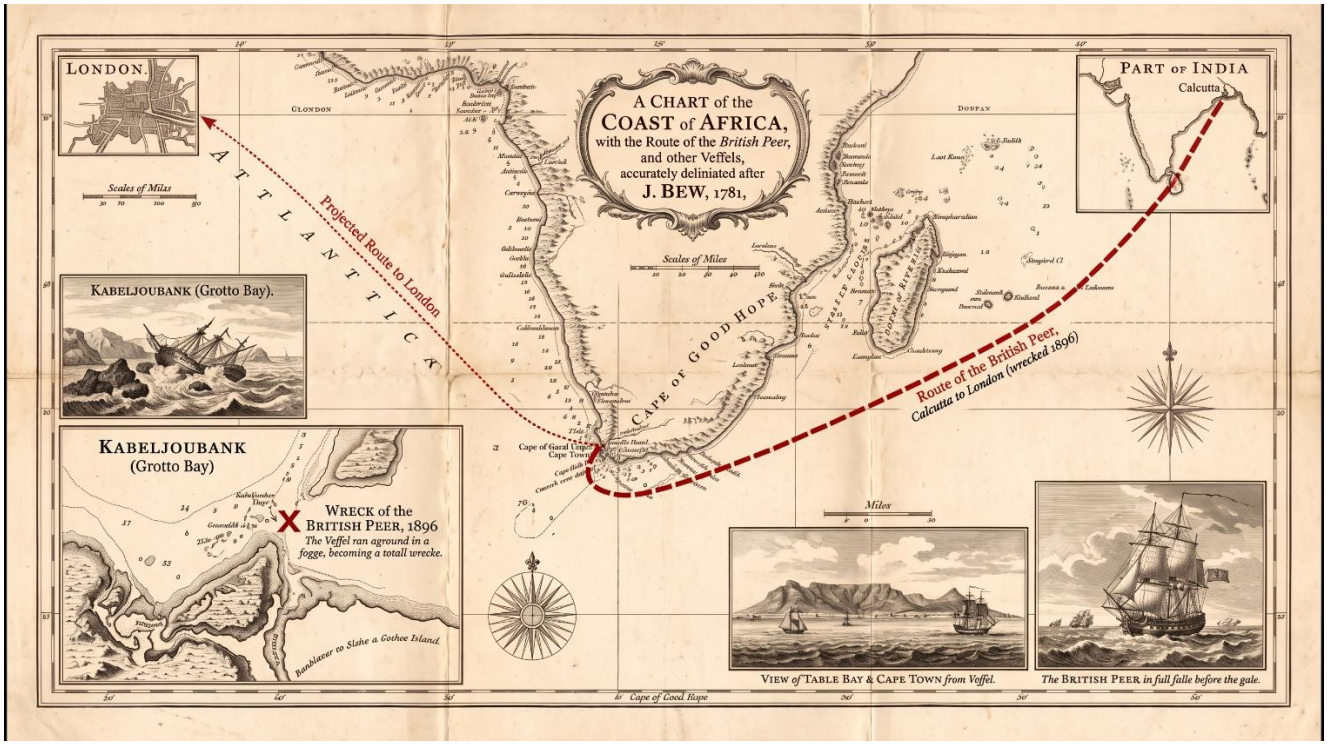
Long before the modern residential estate was established, people depended on this coast and its surrounding land for food, travel and livelihoods. Over time, farms, grazing areas, water sources and coastal landing places became part of the network linking Cape Town with the northern West Coast.

For centuries, ships passed these shores on journeys to and from the Cape. Many reached their destinations; others were lost to the sea. The dunes, wetlands, beaches and coastal vegetation that remain today form the setting for these stories and connect the present landscape with the events that unfolded here.

The dunes, wetlands, beaches and coastal vegetation that remain today form part of the physical landscape within which these events occurred. The landscape holds the memory of our heritage.

CLOSE TO HOME, THE BRITISH PEER – 1896

One of the most compelling stories in Grotto Bay's maritime history is that of the *British Peer*. On 10 December 1896, the vessel was wrecked off Kabeljoubank, near Grotto Bay, while travelling from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to London. There were 23 people aboard, and only four survived. This account is documented by *M.L. Wilson and W.J.J. van Rijssen in "Two Victims of the Wreck of the 'British Peer'," published in Southern African Field Archaeology, volume 3:10–14 (1994)*; the paper had been accepted for publication by the South African Museum in December 1993.





Painting by Joseph Semple of the British Peer, dated 1865. The vessel as launched on her maiden voyage in January 1865.

According to *Harland & Wolff's ship-list* yard information, the B*ritish Peer* was lengthened by approximately 30–32 feet in 1878, increasing her cargo capacity.



The British Peer - Cape Times December 1896

The archaeological investigation reported the wreck at approximately the following coordinates: **33°30'20"S, 18°18'40"E**

The investigators also recorded that remains of the wreck could still be seen at low tide. Yet the story of the *British Peer* did not end with the sinking.

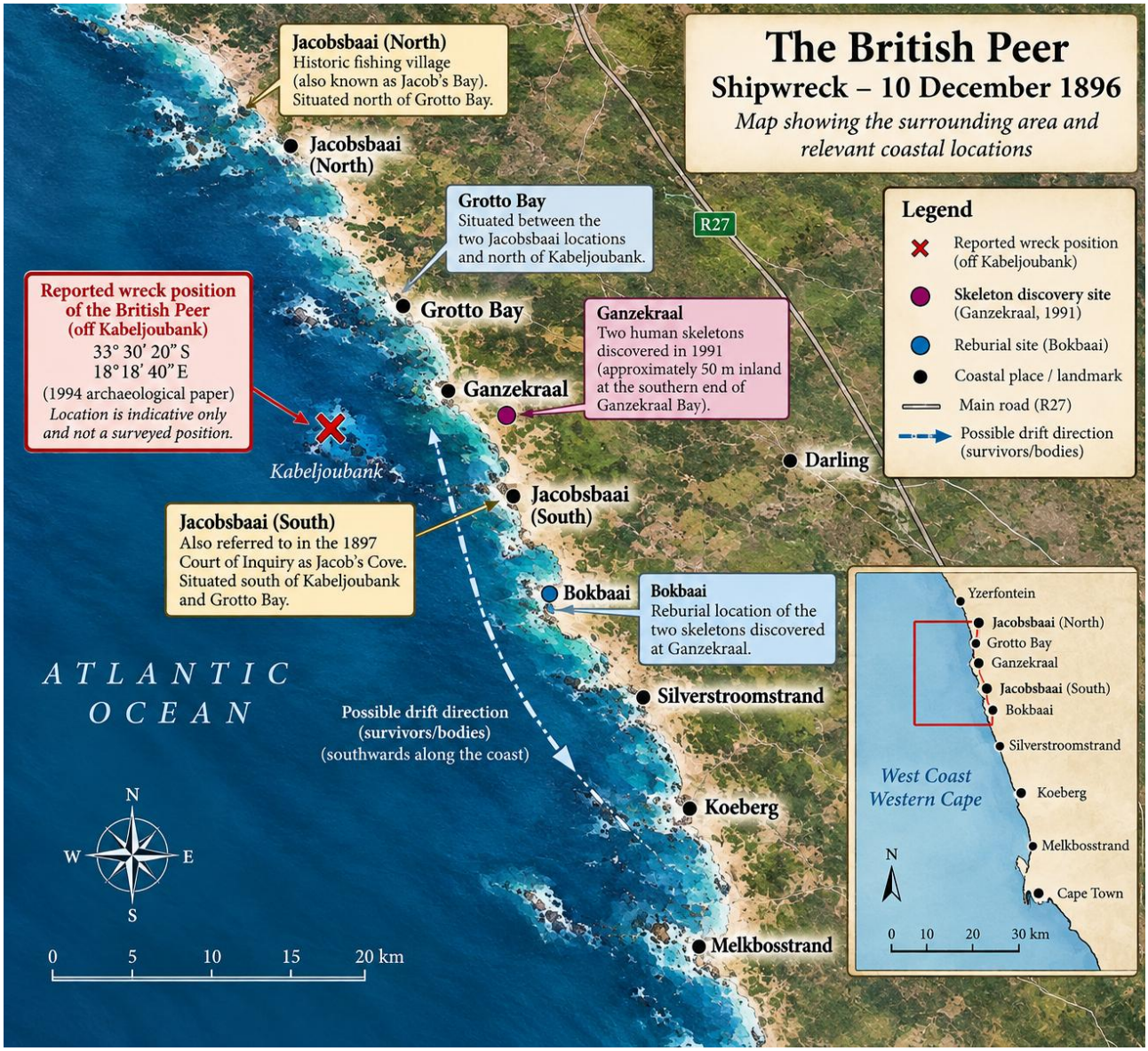
In November 1991, nearly a century after the disaster, construction workers discovered two human skeletons at Ganzekraal. Archaeologists subsequently investigated the find and concluded that the remains were likely to be those of two crew members who had died in the *British Peer* wreck.

A *Cape Times report dated 12 December 1896* stated that three of the four survivors had been carried by the sea current along the coast to Jacobsbaai (also called Jacobs Cove), where a sandy beach offered a place to come ashore. This account takes on added interest when read alongside the regional locality map in the *June 1989 Planning Motivation Report for Township Application: Grotto Bay Modder River 721*. That map labels Jacobs Bay immediately south of Grotto Bay, close to Ganzekraal. Taken together, the sources raise the possibility that the current may also have carried some of the bodies of those who drowned onto this stretch of coast. The possibility is worth noting, but the newspaper report does not establish that bodies came ashore or were buried at Jacobsbaai.

Among the items considered during the archaeological investigation was a Balmoral-style boot, a form of footwear associated with the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is consistent with the period of the wreck, but cannot by itself identify the deceased; its significance rests on how it fits with the wider archaeological and historical evidence.

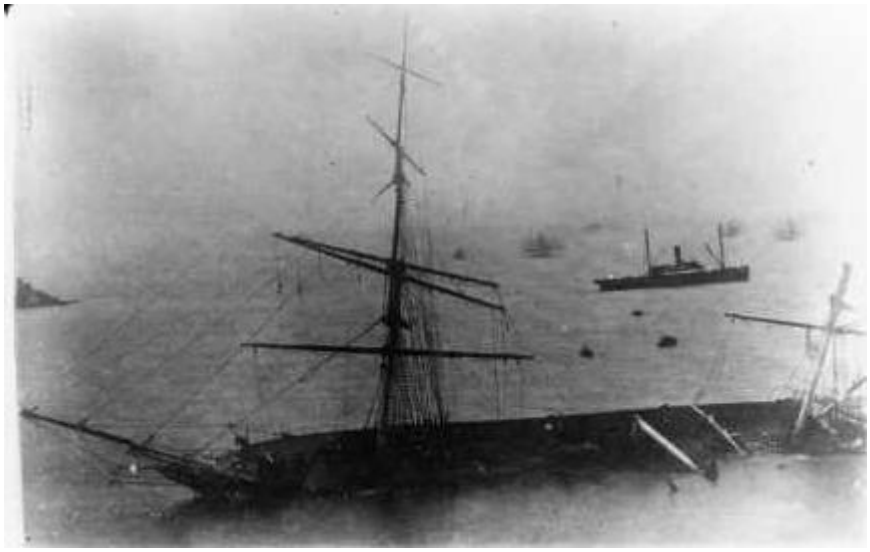
The archaeological account places the discovery site at the seaward edge of a dune at the southern end of Ganzekraal Bay, approximately 50 metres from the shore and about 1.8 metres below the surface. The investigators considered the two people likely to have been crew members of the *British Peer*. The remains were later reburied at Bokbaai.

It is important to keep the locations and the evidence distinct. Ganzekraal is the documented site where the two skeletons were found; Bokbaai is their reported reburial place; and Jacobsbaai (also known as Jacobs Cove South of Grotto Bay) appears in the contemporary newspaper report as the place where survivors came ashore. The 1989 locality map helps one understand the relationship between these coastal places.



Wilson and van Rijssen refer to the archaeological investigation and to the *Cape Argus of 12 December 1896* for descriptions of material found on the shore. The reported remains included water-worn building bricks, fragments of china, bottle glass and the remains of a wooden mast.

When archaeologists returned to the area almost a century later, they found water-worn bricks, pieces of china and bottle glass among the rocks near the wreck. The bricks from the *British Peer* have been collected as memorabilia by locals in Grotto Bay over time and can still be found on a shelf in their homes. A section of the ship's wooden mast also remained in vegetation above the high-water mark. These observations are recorded in *Wilson and van Rijssen's 1994 paper in Southern African Field Archaeology, volume 3, : 10–14*.



The British Peer - Cape Times January 1897

The accompanying photographs and contemporary newspaper material help illustrate the wreck and the surviving evidence of the ship and its cargo.



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



Fig. 3 The human remains as found at Ganzekraal.



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



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

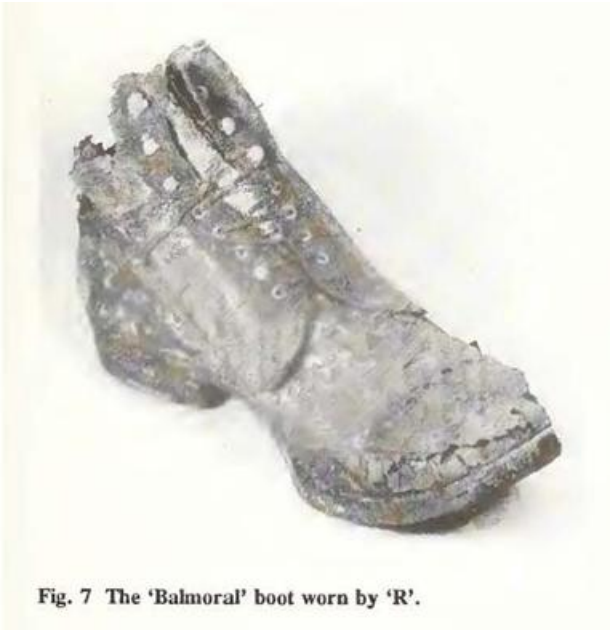


Fig. 7 The 'Balmoral' boot worn by 'R'.

US Journals - Southern African Field Archaeology 3:10-14 1994 (M.L. Wilson & W.J.J. Van Rijssen) – South African Museum accepted for publication December 1993 – "Two Victims of the Wreck of the "British Peer" – (References Feldesman, MR & Lundy, JK 1988 - Journal of human evolution 17:583-596, Kuttel Keegan, F & Mary Melck Kuttel – Ganzekraal: a West Coast Year & Cape Town Chameleon Press. Miller, D 1993 – Southern African Field Archaeology 2:57-58. Turner, M 1988 – Shipwrecks and Salvage in SA. Wilson, ML & Van Rijssen, Wjj 1994 – The Wreck of the British Peer on the Cape West Coast in 1896

What was she carrying?

The British Peer was carrying a general cargo for the Cape rather than one specialised commodity. The surviving accounts list a varied consignment that included liquor, cork, candles, gunpowder, pianos, baths and bathroom fittings, and building materials.

Together, these goods suggest a mixed cargo of trade items and building supplies intended for the Cape.

THE ORIGINAL NEWSPAPER RECORD

Contemporary newspaper reports provide an important record of the wreck and the confusion that followed as people tried to establish where the vessel had been lost.

The sources cited in the archaeological investigation include *Cape Times* — 10 December 1896, *Cape Times* — 12 December 1896, *Cape Argus* — 12 December 1896, *Cape Times* — 9 January 1897

The earliest newspaper accounts did not agree on the precise location. The first report placed the wreck at Tierfontein, while later reports used different descriptions. The Court of Inquiry, reported in the *Cape Times on 9 January 1897*, referred to a location

near Jacob's Cove. The later archaeological investigation identified the wreck off Kabeljoubank.

THE COURT OF INQUIRY

According to the *Cape Times of 9 January 1897*, a Court of Inquiry into the loss was held on 7 January 1897. The inquiry found that the loss of the ship had been caused by reckless navigation on the part of the master.

THE WIDER MARITIME LANDSCAPE

The story of Grotto Bay's maritime heritage forms part of a wider history of the surrounding coastline. Looking south towards Bokbaai, the evidence broadens from one shipwreck to a landscape shaped by farming, trade, settlement and seafaring.

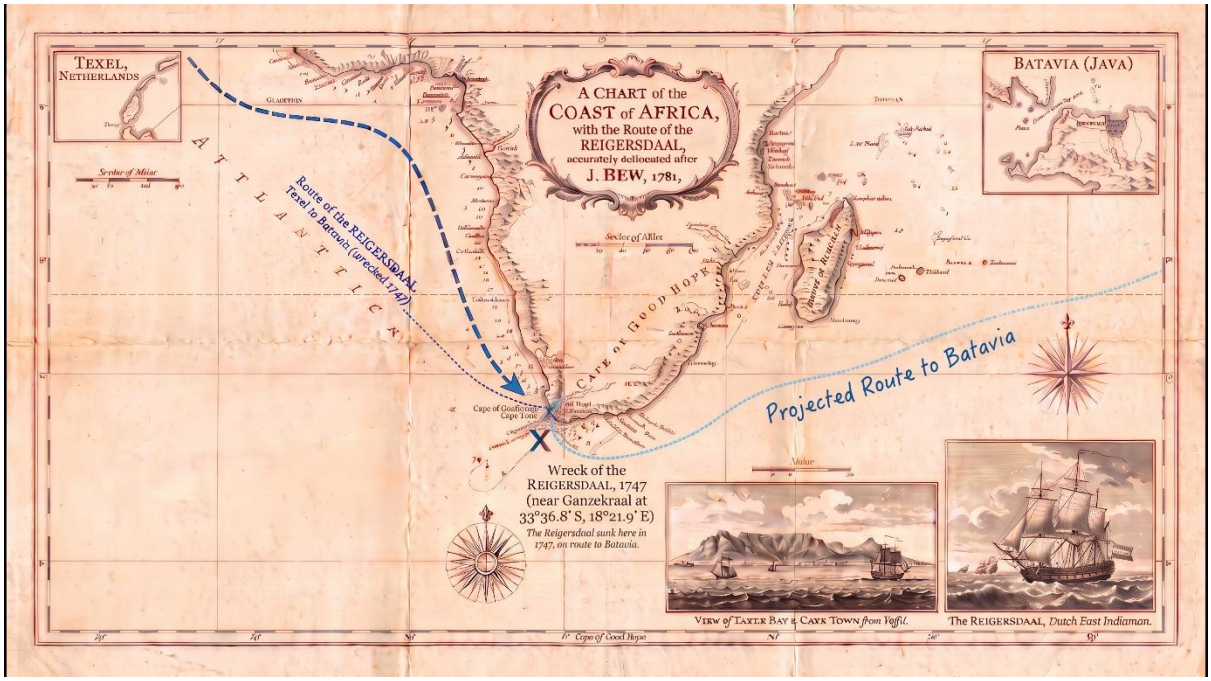
Bokbaai's history is documented in detail by historian *Dan Sleigh in Bokbaai, the Farm and its People*.

Sleigh's work describes a landscape associated with pre-colonial occupation, historic farms and graves, lime production, Dutch and British shipping, shipwrecks and the families who lived and worked along this coast.

The *CapeNature Bokbaai Nature Reserve Protected Area Management Plan 2023–2033*, drawing on *Winter and Baumann (2017),* traces the written history of the area to around 1652, when it served as a maritime replenishment station and agreements existed between the Dutch East India Company and the Indigenous people of the land. The area was later divided into properties, including the farm of Bokkerivier. The farm was used for cattle and was subsequently rented to the Van Reenen brothers, established contract butchers who grazed livestock there and also produced lime. As Cape Town expanded, building lime was in great demand and was made by burning seashells. Robben Island had initially supplied shells for this purpose; when that source was depleted, Bokbaai became an important alternative. Lime production at Bokkerivier is recorded from 1811 to 1827, and lime from the farm may have been used in buildings in Cape Town, including the Company's Gardens *(Winter & Baumann, 2017).* The same management plan records that the *Isabella*, used to transport wheat—particularly from Groote Post—was wrecked at Bokbaai in 1819. The property passed into private ownership in 1846 and was held by the Duckitt family from 1870 to 2001. The family farmed sheep while also helping conserve the land. In the 1970s, an attempt was made to include the farm in a Coloured Group Area, but the property's architectural and natural significance contributed to its declaration as a National Monument, following public debate *(Winter & Baumann, 2017).* Bokkerivier was acquired by a German developer in 2001; after his death in 2010, it was placed on the market. The Mapula Trust purchased the farm in 2015 and developed an environmental education centre

there in 2017, recognising the property's historical and biodiversity value. *(CapeNature, Bokbaai Nature Reserve Protected Area Management Plan 2023–2033.)*

THE REIGERSDAAL AT GANZEKRAAL – 1747



Sleigh also records the Dutch East India Company vessel *Reigersdaal* (also spelt *Reijgersdaal* and in other variants), which was wrecked in the wider Ganzekraal–Bokbaai region, and discusses graves associated with its sailors. In an interview with *Tycho Maas on 1 February 2018*, Sleigh explained that the wreck formed part of his archaeological research and that approximately 50 sailors were buried near the river mouth.

The *Reigersdaal* departed Texel on 31 May 1747 under the command of Captain Johannes Band, also recorded as Bant. She never completed her voyage to Batavia, being wrecked off the South African west coast on 25 October 1747, in the vicinity of Ganzekraal and Dassen Island, north of present-day Cape Town. The recorded wreck position is approximately 33°36.8' S, 18°21.9' E. According to the wreck records *(De VOC Site Reigersdaal – also Reijgersdaal, Reigersdael, Rijgersdael,Rijgerdaal)* , the vessel carried 297 people, although 125 had already died during the voyage before the ship reached the Cape. This would leave approximately 172 people alive on arrival in the vicinity of Dassen Island. The source cited in the report records only 17–18 men as surviving the wreck, while the contemporary *Council of Policy minutes* record that 20 survivors reached the Cape *(Council of Policy Minutes, C125, 1747)*. The difference

between these figures is retained here because the sources do not give a single consistent total.



The image above is a reconstruction, as no known portrait of the Reigersdaal is available.

What was she carrying?

The *Reigersdaal*'s most valuable cargo was silver coin. The vessel carried eight chests of silver, described as amounting to approximately 3,200 marks of Mexican silver. The research cited in this report estimates that this represented roughly 29,000 Mexican silver coins, principally pieces of eight—Spanish or Mexican eight-real coins.

Silver was not the only cargo aboard. The wreck records also list approximately 30 tonnes of lead ingots, six bronze VOC cannons, firearms, provisions—including barrels of pork and beer—and the equipment and stores needed for a long VOC voyage.

The silver was being transported on behalf of the VOC Chamber of Zeeland to Batavia. The eight chests represented a substantial shipment of bullion intended for the VOC's Asian trading operations.

The story of the treasure continued after the wreck. Within days, one money chest washed ashore containing four bags with 3,610 silver coins. After the wreck was located in 1979, divers recovered thousands more coins, including many eight-real pieces dating from the 1730s and 1740s.

The treasure from the shipwreck, Reijgersdaal (1747) – Lalou Meltzer – Translation help from Mrs. L Szapiro, Dr C. Pama, Dr C. De Wet (Verbatim copy, Politieke Raad, Dag Register 1744 – 1750, Cape archives, VC26)

De VOC Site Reigersdaal – also Reijgersdaal, Reigersdael, Rijgersdael,Rijgerdaal

Bouw	*gebouwd in 1738 voor de Kamer van Amsterdam op de VOC-werf in Amsterdam*
Gebruik	*in gebruik bij de VOC vanaf 1738 tot 25/10/1747 (vergaan, Kaap de Goede Hoop, Saldanhabaai; Zuid-Afrika)*
Lengte	*145 voet*
Laadvermogen	*425 last (850 ton)*
Bemanning	*265-297 koppen*

A



FIGURE 29: Artefacts from the *Reigersdaal* (1747).
A: Buckle .
B: Buckles, shot and hook.
C: Silver (top) and pewter (bottom) spoons.
D: Cannon at South African Naval Museum, Simon's Town.
E: Silver pillar dollar.

Actual Recoveries from the Reigersdaal A: Buckle B: Buckle, Shot and Hook C: Silver and pewter spoons D: Cannon Currently at SA Naval Museum – Simons Town E: Silver Pillar Dollar *(Dutch Shipwrecks of South Africa – Prepared by Lesa la Grange, Breige Williams, John Gribble, Mertijn Manders, Leaon Derksen, Will Brouwers – 2023 South*

African Heritage Resources Agency)



Fig. 1 Silver cob, 8 reales, Potosí mint, Felipe V, 1733, assayer mark YA. Obverse and reverse. *

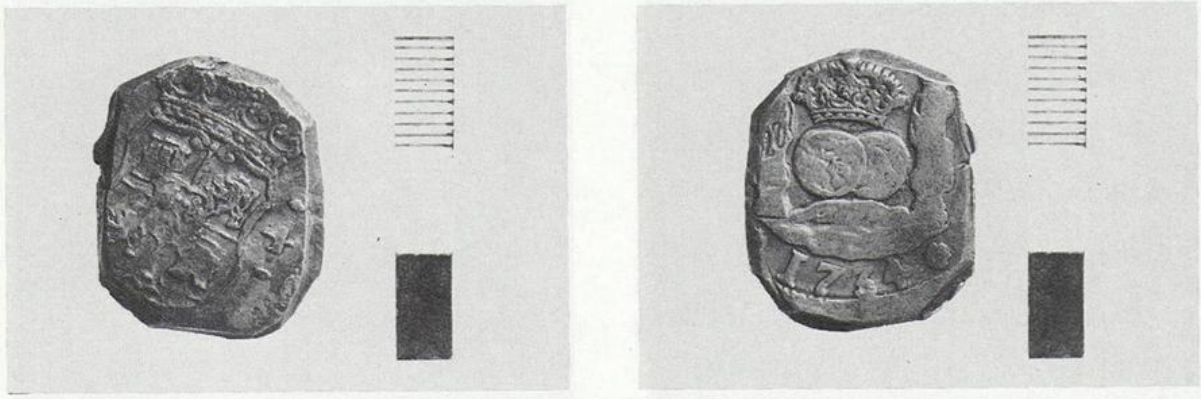


Fig 2 Silver cob, 4 reales, Guatemala mint, Felipe V, 1734, [assayer mark J]. Obverse and reverse.

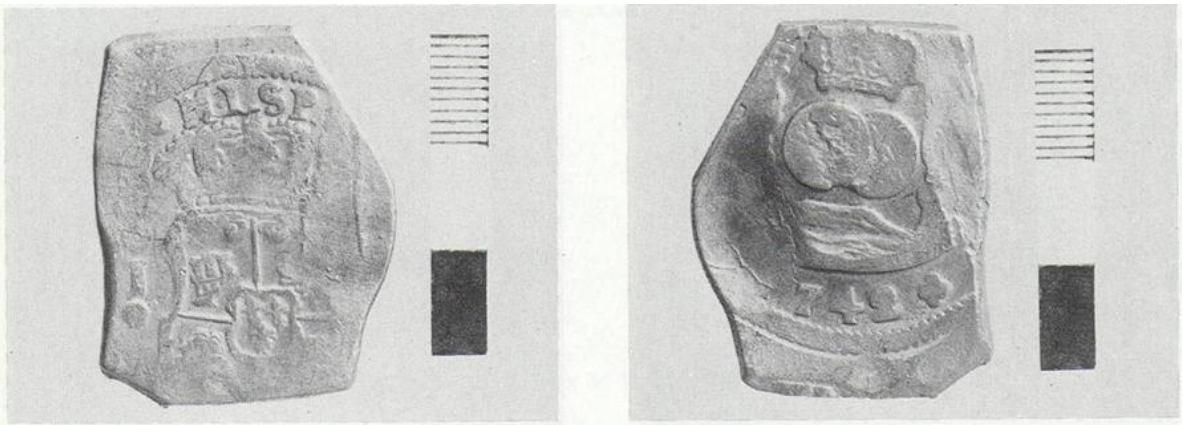


Fig. 3 Silver cob, 8 reales, Guatemala mint, Felipe V, 1742, assayer mark J. Obverse and reverse.

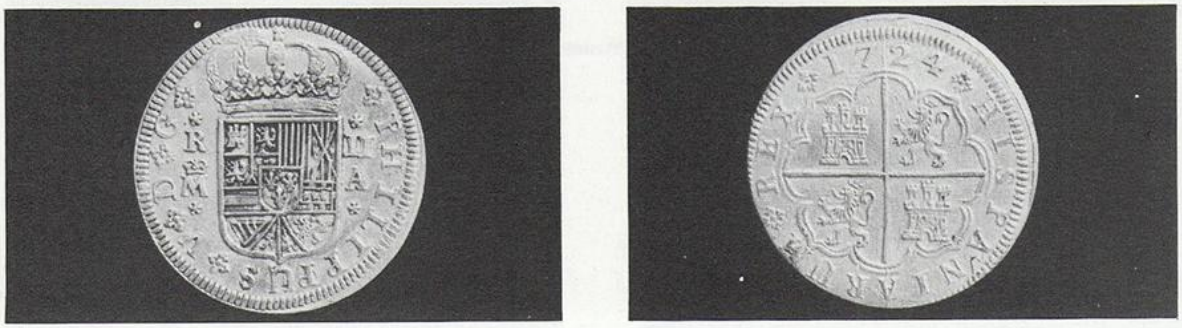


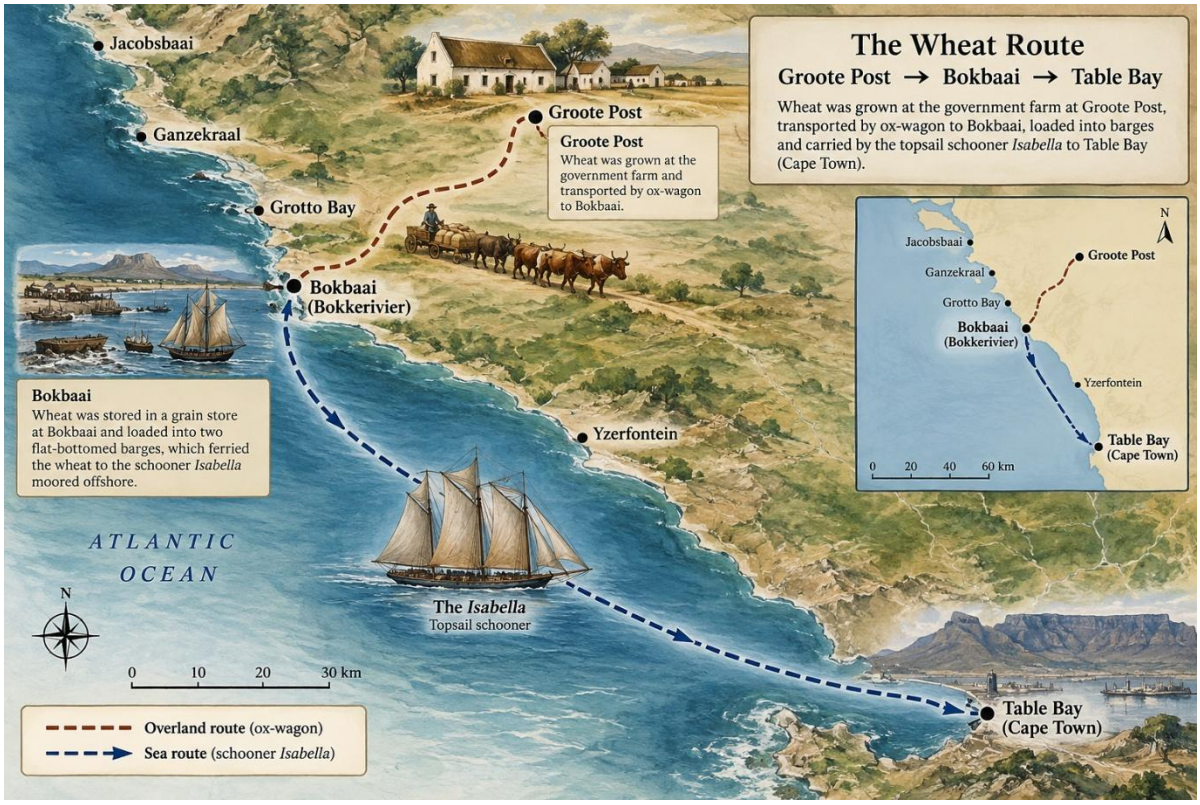
Fig. 4. Silver, milled, 2 reales, Madrid mint, Felipe V, 1724, assayer mark A. Obverse and reverse.

((The treasure from the shipwreck, Reijgersdaal (1747) – Lalou Meltzer – Translation help from Mrs. L Szapiro, Dr C. Pama, Dr C. De Wet (Verbatim copy, Politieke Raad, Dag Register 1744 – 1750, Cape archives, VC26)

THE ISSABELLA AT BOKBAAI – 1819

In the early nineteenth century, Bokbaai was more than a quiet, isolated cove. It served as an agricultural loading point, linking inland farms with shipping routes to Cape Town.

During the Second British occupation of the Cape, wheat grown at the government farm Groote Post was transported to Bokbaai. There, two flat-bottomed barges were used to transfer the wheat to the *Isabella*, a topsail schooner. One barge could be loaded from the shore while the other lay alongside the schooner to unload its cargo. Mooring buoys and anchors had been installed outside the cove to support this operation. From Bokbaai, the wheat was carried by sea to Table Bay, making the *Isabella* part of an early West Coast agricultural supply chain.



In April 1819, the I*sabella* was wrecked at Bokbaai, bringing this chapter of the coastal trade to an abrupt end.

Captain William Long left behind a particularly valuable record: a labelled sketch of Bokbaai showing the reported position of the wreck, the anchors and mooring buoys, the landing place, the flagpost and buildings around the bay.

The *Isabella* was later replaced in this service by the sloop *Buck Bay Packet*.

Today, the *Isabella* wreck remains part of Bokbaai's less visible maritime heritage. Its story recalls a time when this stretch of the West Coast connected agricultural production with the movement of goods to Cape Town. *(Doug Jeffery Environmental Study – Bokkerivier 733, Malmesbury Heritage Impact Assessment)*