

Digging up ancient cannon balls

GARTH KING

Martin and East Main Road upgrade workers on Friday January 23, who were busy in a trench, found a little mound of ancient cannon balls directly in front of the False Bay College, Main Road, Muizenberg entrance.

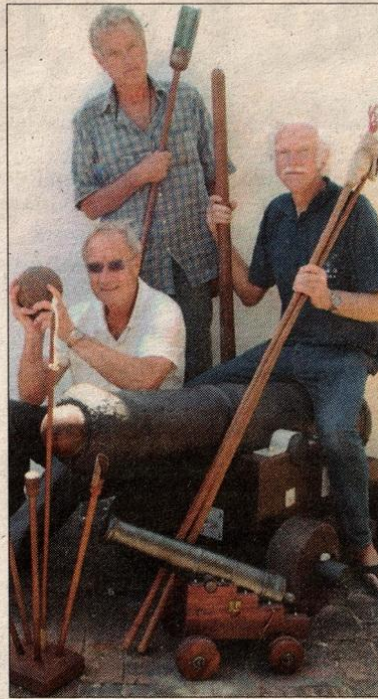
The find was quickly noted by Corner Surf Shop owner, Peter Wright, nearby, who happens to be a local history enthusiast and member of the Cannon Association of South Africa.

The find included six six-pounder army balls and one 24-pound navy ball.

The Echo went to the site last week and met with Mr Wright, George Hill, chairman of the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society and Chris Taylor, vice-chairman of the society.

The site of the find was roughly between the old British Military Camp (established after the Battle of Muizenberg in 1795, now the site of the Muizenberg Bowling Club) and the famous Farmer Peck's Inn (now the site of the False Bay College/Cinnabar block), where soldiers in the 1800s no doubt enjoyed good British-style ales.

The find was about 1.5m deep and the balls were handed over by Martin and East and consultant Chand Environmental Services for safekeeping to the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society, who have oversight over Het Posthuys and the Rhodes Cottage Museum along Muizenberg's Historical Mile.



■ With part of the recently found cannon ball stash are, from left, George Hill, chairman of the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society, Chris Taylor, vice-chairman and Peter Wright, member of the Cannon Association of South Africa.

Mr Taylor told the Echo that the 24-pounder ball was used by the navy, and not the army, due to the massive weight of the cannon required to fire it.

"The little six-pounder balls on

the other hand were used largely by the army, with some used by the navy on small vessels. Six-pounder guns (army style with big cart-wheels) were useful when firing on troops, but useless when firing on a ship bigger than a dhow, since the balls bounced off solid timber like peas from a peashooter."

He said the balls found could be Dutch or British, they could be linked to the aftermath of the Battle of Muizenberg or to the British Camp or to events in subsequent years.

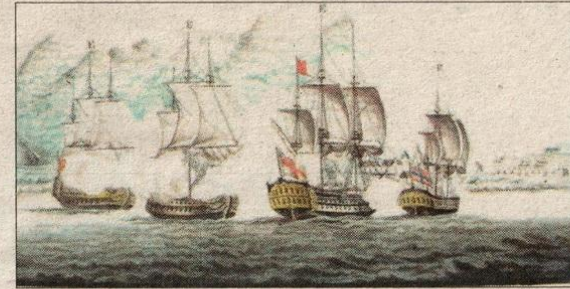
"We are unlikely ever to find out. All we know for certain is that they date from 1795 to about 1850 and are a fascinating link to our forgotten past."

Mr Taylor said he believed that the balls were at some point just dumped at the spot when the camp was being decommissioned.

Both Mr Wright and Mr Hill are long-time Muizenberg residents and for decades have been deeply interested in the history of Muizenberg and its cultural importance for South Africa.

The cannon ball find has injected even more enthusiasm for local heritage into them.

"Once the Main Road upgrade is completed in Muizenberg we will have 30 more parking bays for tourists along Historical Mile for visitors keen to explore our heritage treasures here," said Mr Hill. "Muizenberg is the 'Gateway to a Cultural Coast' and we look forward to ever-increasing numbers of people engaging the past."



■ A depiction of the Battle of Muizenberg, 1795.

Battle of Muizenberg 1795

CHRIS TAYLOR

August 7, 2015 will mark the 220th anniversary of the Battle of Muizenberg, fought between the Dutch defenders and British invaders on August 7, 1795, over the ground between Rhodes Cottage and Surfer's Corner.

Four British warships took part in the action and fired somewhere around 1 000 cannon balls.

A few of these have been recovered and put on display, one in the foyer of Checkers, Muizenberg and several in Het Posthuys, Muizenberg.

Directly after the fight, the Dutch began a retreat to Wynberg, marching over Zandvlei and through Retreat, which is how the name came about.

The Dutch surrendered at Wynberg about six weeks later and the First British Occupation

began.

The British established a military camp in Muizenberg, roughly where Muizenberg Park and the Muizenberg Bowling Club are today, and it existed until about 1910, with a short break between 1802 and 1806 when the British handed the Cape back to the Dutch.

The Battle of Muizenberg and the following advance were insignificant military actions (few died on either side), but which had enormous consequences.

This little action resulted eventually in English becoming the main official language. English law and government was established, slavery was abolished, trade boomed, and over time a vigorous new country emerged.

● Mr Taylor is the vice-chairman of the Muizenberg Historical Conservation Society.