

MFENGU BEACH LABOUR AND PORT ELIZABETH HARBOUR DEVELOPMENT, 1835-1870

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In the 1980s, especially with the motor industry in the doldrums, it is difficult to visualise Port Elizabeth as the centre of the South African economy just over a century ago. On the other hand with strike action now common place, it is perhaps easier to accept the town as the site of South Africa's first strike by Black workers 140 years ago. These two seemingly unrelated observations in fact have a direct bearing on Port Elizabeth harbour development in the half century before 1870. A series of strikes by Mfengu beach labourers at a time when Port Elizabeth exports were booming revealed the vulnerability of the method of landing and shipping goods in use at the time. Thus there was a determined effort to improve facilities and make the port less dependent on beach labour.

The result was the disastrous breakwater scheme between 1855 and 1867. The breakwater was too big to accommodate lighters and too small for ships. The problem was fortuitously solved when the breakwater's inner basin was rendered useless by silt during a flood in 1867. As a result the entire structure was dismantled at great cost (1869-1884), which in turn made the authorities very cautious about further enclosed harbour schemes. Thus it took another 50 years before the present harbour was built. In the meantime Port Elizabeth had to be satisfied with a system of jetties constructed between 1869 and 1902. The failure of the breakwater scheme, however, was by no means a victory for the Mfengu beach labourers because their power was broken by the influx of other tribes on to the Port Elizabeth wage-labour market, especially after the Xhosa cattle-killing tragedy of 1857.

WOOL BOOM

As early as 1844 Port Elizabeth was considered by locals to be "the most important spot in the colony — not the Liverpool, but the New York of the Cape."¹ The claim might have been premature but within ten years Port Elizabeth's exports had eclipsed Cape Town's while her total trade did so in 1856. On average 70% of Cape exports and 50% of her imports went through Algoa Bay during the 1860s. Port Elizabeth's rise to economic prominence was purely as a result of the massive increase in Cape wool exports which rose from 98 000 kilograms in 1835 to 16,9 million by 1870. Wool exports made up 75% of Cape colonial produce exports by 1860, reaching a peak of 82% in 1868.

Wool exceeded all other Port Elizabeth exports of colonial produce for the first time in 1843. Within ten years wool made up 90% of her exports, reaching a peak of 95% in the early 1860s. The million kilogram mark was first surpassed in 1847, five million in 1856 and ten million in 1863.² This massive expansion took place because Port Elizabeth was the natural place of export for the Cape's premier wool producing districts (compare the diagrams).

LANDING AND SHIPPING

As a result of the massive boom, Port Elizabeth's exporters would have been hard pressed to get the bales of wool loaded on to the waiting ships at the best of times. Their task was made even more difficult by the fact that there was no harbour. Everything had to be landed on or shipped from the open beach. The actual method remained virtually unchanged between the town's establishment in 1820 and

1870. Everything was loaded into surfboats which had to negotiate Algoa Bay's notorious breakers. These boats were propelled between the roadstead and the shore by means of a system of warps or ropes. The cargoes were manhandled into or out of the beached boats by labourers who, depending on the tide, had to wade through the shallows. The artist Thomas Baines best describes the operation:

These surf-boats were large and strongly built; their bows were broad and well formed, but their sterns seemed barely three feet in width, and from the upward slope of the bottom, to facilitate their running on the beach, not much more than half that depth; and a crowd of Fingoes [sic], dressed in a piece of sack or gunny bag sufficiently large to protect their shoulders from the sharp edges of their burdens and decorated with beads, brass rings, and native amulets, were filling them with ox horns. As each boat completed her cargo six or eight fellows jumped on board, and laying hold of the line which led between the 'horns' of her stern and stern post, began to haul her out, the spray flying from her broad bows in a dazzling mist to the height of more than twenty feet as each successive breaker dashed against her, and forming so beautiful a picture that I could not resist the temptation to add it on the spot to my other sketches.³

The process was extremely arduous and labour intensive. A photograph taken in the 1860s shows how three or four labourers carried a 130 kilogram bale of wool on their heads.⁴ Therefore it is not surprising that labourers prepared to do the work soon realised their bargaining power and pushed up their already relatively high wages. As a result, in the 1850s, their employers attempted to out manoeuvre them by calling for harbour improvements that would make landing and shipping less dependent on beach labour. The way had been led by the first jetty (1837-1843) which was destroyed in a gale.⁵ Subsequently two private dwarf jetties were built. One by the eminent merchant J.O. Smith in 1844⁶ and the other by the Port Elizabeth Boating Company in 1857.⁷ Although both were too small to have had any real effect on landing and shipping, they did at least demonstrate what might be achieved with more substantial structures.

¹ *Graham's Town Journal*, 31.10.1844.

² Unless otherwise stated, all statistics are derived from the relevant Cape of Good Hope Blue Books.

³ R.F. KENNEDY (ed.), *Journal of a residence in Africa I, 1842-49*, by Thomas Baines (Van Riebeeck Society 42, Cape Town, 1961), p. 18. Baines recorded his description in February 1848.

⁴ It was generally accepted that there were seven bales to the ton.

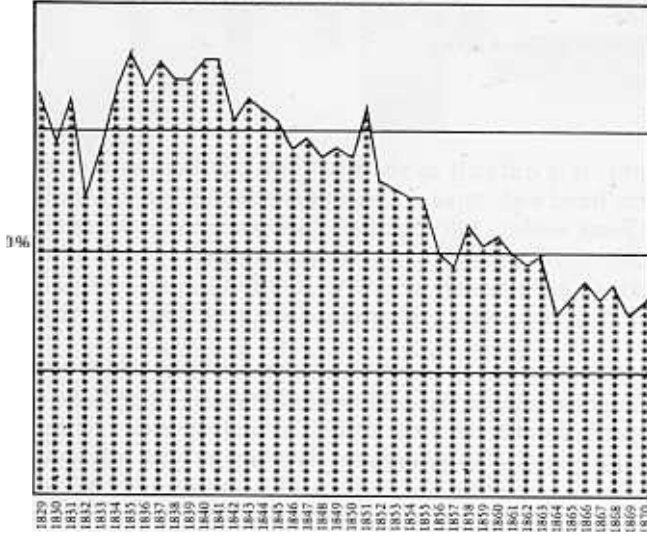
⁵ E.J. INGGIS, *Early Port Elizabeth harbour development* (unpublished paper presented at the Business History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, 1983), pp. 7-9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

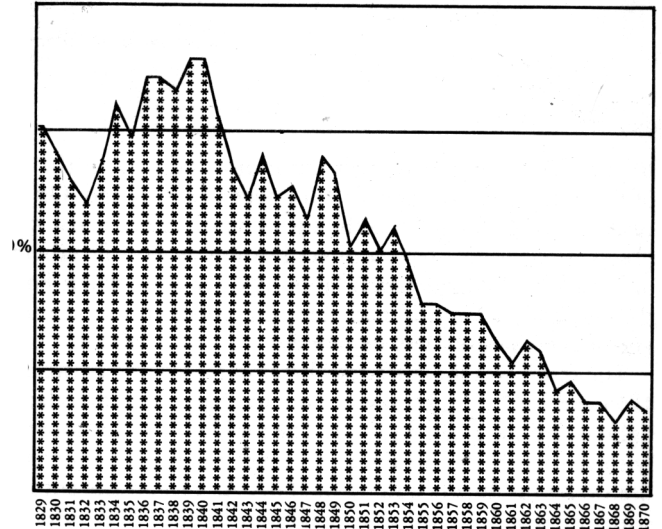
⁷ *Eastern Province Herald*, 27.10.1857.

IMPORTS AND EXPORTS CAPE TOWN AND PORT ELIZABETH, 1829-1870.

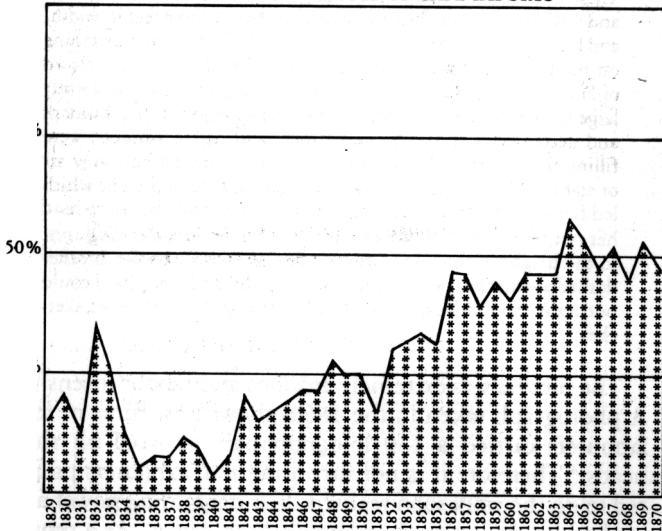
CAPE TOWN'S SHARE OF CAPE IMPORTS



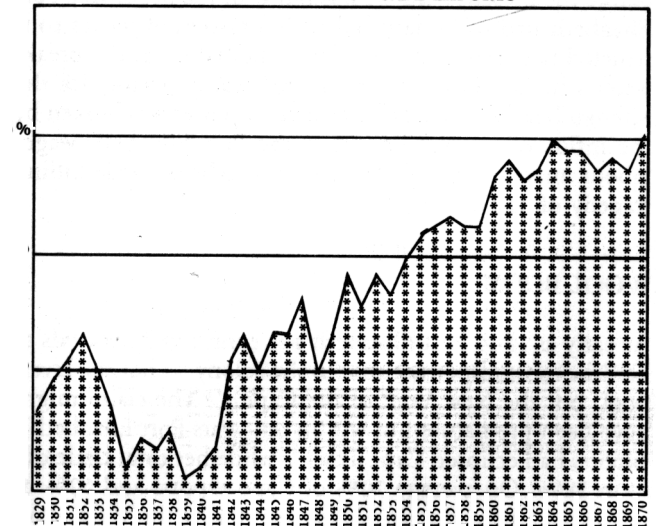
CAPE TOWN'S SHARE OF CAPE EXPORTS



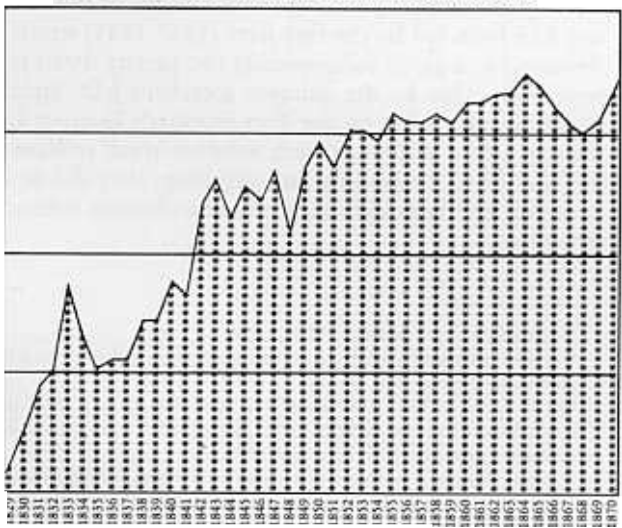
PORT ELIZABETH'S SHARE OF CAPE IMPORTS



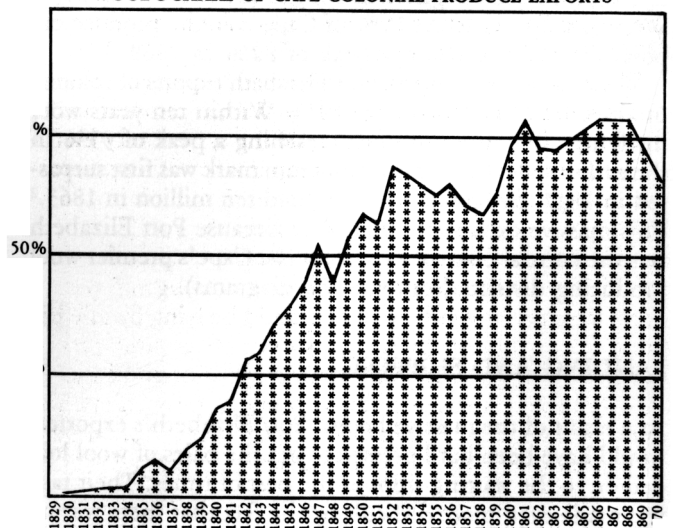
PORT ELIZABETH'S SHARE OF CAPE EXPORTS



PORT ELIZABETH'S SHARE OF CAPE WOOL EXPORTS



WOOL'S SHARE OF CAPE COLONIAL PRODUCE EXPORTS





BOATING COMPANIES

The massive increase in Port Elizabeth's imports and exports saw the control of the landing and shipping operation go through three distinct phases. Initially the work was carried out by government boatmen⁸ who by 1828 had given way to two private boating establishments.⁹ In 1840 there were three: J.O. Smith, W.B. Frames and Mallors & Minter.¹⁰ From the 1840s, however, boating companies were set up to cope with the huge increase in work. The first was the Port Elizabeth Boating Company (1841),¹¹ which was followed by the Eastern Province Boating Company (1846),¹² the Algoa Bay Landing and Forwarding Company (1862),¹³ the Algoa Bay Landing and Shipping Company (Limited) (1864),¹⁴ and the Union Boating Company (1865).¹⁵

These boating companies' work was largely guaranteed because their shares were owned by the various merchants. But in the long term this fact made the system very inefficient. Instead of one boating company handling a ship's entire cargo, each importer or exporter gave his business to the boating company in which he held shares. Thus time and effort were wasted while ships' holds were searched for specific items. In addition, while one boating company's boats were overworked, another's could be lying by idle because their clients did not happen to have anything to be handled. The problem was eventually overcome in 1896 with the amalgamation of the existing boating companies into the Associated Boating Company¹⁶ which was ultimately taken over by the harbour board itself in 1901.¹⁷

THE MFENGU AND BEACH LABOUR

Specialist beach labourers did not exist at the time the 1820

Troops being carried through the surf at Port Elizabeth, 1856.

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT, CAPE TOWN

settlers landed. They were helped ashore by Scottish soldiers of the 72nd Regiment then stationed at Fort Frederick. One author, however, does mention settlers being "carried ashore on the backs of ... strange black men",¹⁸ while other writers and the settlers themselves make no mention of Black beach labourers. As this would have been the settlers' first

⁸ Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town (CA), Colonial Office (CO) 5724, Schedule 330, No. 15: Ward — Government Secretary, 1.3.1825.

⁹ CA, CO 359, No. 102: PE Collector of Customs — Government Secretary, 24.10.1828.

¹⁰ *Graham's Town Journal*, 9.7.1840.

¹¹ No mention is made of the Port Elizabeth Boating Company's formation in the *Graham's Town Journal*. It is first referred to in 1844. The year of establishment is given as 1841 in subsequent share lists published in the press, e.g. *Port Elizabeth Telegraph*, 13.8.1862, and *E.P. Herald*, 7.9.1865 (Supplement).

¹² *E.P. Herald*, 28.11.1846 and 17.4.1847.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.5.1862 and 6.5.1862; *P.E. Telegraph*, 17.5.1862 and 21.5.1862. The company was soon wound up. Its shares were last listed in June 1866. See *P.E. Telegraph*, 8.6.1866.

¹⁴ *E.P. Herald*, 5.2.1864 (Algoa Bay Landing and Shipping Company prospectus).

¹⁵ *P.E. Telegraph*, 10.2.1865 (Union Boating Company prospectus).

¹⁶ G.73-'97 CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Reports by Harbour Boards for 1896* (Cape Town, 1897), pp. 7-8.

¹⁷ G.60-1902 CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Reports by Harbour Boards for 1901* (Cape Town, 1902), pp. 18 and 23.

¹⁸ G. BUTLER (ed.), *The 1820 Settlers — an illustrated commentary* (Cape Town, 1974), p. 99. A painting dated 1841 of Blacks carrying settlers ashore is used to illustrate this. But it is more likely that the picture was based on contemporary scenes adapted to portray the 1820 landing, than on actual settler "hearsay" as Butler claims. In fact the picture is used to illustrate how passengers were landed in 1850 by the *E.P. Herald* (Special Harbour Supplement), 28.10.1933.

contact with Black people, most would have commented on it. In fact they only mention the soldiers. The only Khoikhoi present were wagon drivers.¹⁹ The Reverend John Ayliff specifically mentions that there was only one Black at Algoa Bay at the time of the landing, namely a prisoner in transit to Robben Island.²⁰ Ayliff's fictional settler, Harry Hastings, noted that "the women were carried out of the surf boats by the soldiers of the 72nd, who assisted at the working of the boats."²¹ In addition, the 1828 commission of inquiry report attributed the successful 1820 landing to the skill of the sailors from the *Menai* and the soldiers from the local garrison, rather than the bay's natural advantages.²²

Thereafter as goods shipped through Port Elizabeth steadily increased, Khoi became the chief source of labour for beach work. They were paid about two shillings a day.²³ This situation lasted up to the 6th Frontier War (1834-1835).²⁴ After the war the labour force underwent a radical change when the Mfengu were resettled within the Colony. They had sided with the colonial forces against the Xhosa. In 1837 one group was settled as far within the Colony as the Tzitzikamma, an area totally unsuited to raising cattle. Starvation soon forced many off their allotted land.²⁵ As one farmer put it: "It is difficult to say which predominates, our dissatisfaction at their sudden intrusion adding so much to our vagrant population, or their disappointment in the promised land".²⁶ The problem was even seen as one of the motivations behind the decision by some farmers to participate in the Great Trek.²⁷

These circumstances and high wages, as a result of a labour shortage in Port Elizabeth, attracted the Mfengu to the landing beach. They soon entirely superseded the Khoi who came to be "regarded as a curiosity" on the beach.²⁸ In 1840 a beach labourer earned three shillings a day, almost as much as an artisan, and double what a farm labourer was paid. (See tables 1 and 2). At the time there were over 600 Mfengu living at Port Elizabeth.²⁹ When business was brisk up to 100 were employed on the beach. But, it was complained:

So independent have these high wages made them, that it is always difficult to obtain their services; and in bad or even cold weather, they object to work at all. They are great pilferers, but have one virtue over the Hottentots, whom they have displaced as beachmen — they are sober.³⁰

In 1843 J.C. Chase elaborated on this point:

As savages they are a very intelligent people, extraordinarily attached to money, and temperate or rather sober in their habits. Having hoarded up their wages, they convert them into cattle, and when these accumulate into a sufficient stock, they leave service altogether, to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The possession of this provident and temperate disposition naturally causes them to be much prized by the colonists, so that even where the Hottentots lingered for a time, they have now been thrust out of the market, for if the services of the Fingos are more expensive in cash wages, their sobriety and industry are more satisfactory and profitable; in a word, there is a dependence upon the Fingo which can never be extended to the Hottentots.³¹

The 7th Frontier War (1846-1847) had a disastrous effect on beach labour, for despite a record 25 vessels in the bay during November 1846,

the parties engaged in landing find it almost impossible to bring together sufficient hands for the working of one boat. Many of the Fingos, who are the men employed in discharging the boats, have left for the frontier in order to obtain a share when the DIVISION OF THE NEUTRAL TERRITORY TAKES PLACE, while those still remaining behind, but full of the same idea, have become exorbitant in their demands for pay; and on Monday last they struck for an increase of wages.³²

They were paid 3s 6d for a nine-hour day and six pennies an hour overtime.³³ By December 1846 the shortage of labour was so critical that it was even considered requesting the governor for fatigue parties of Mfengu to be sent to Port Elizabeth to clear the arrears and ensure that supplies were forwarded to the troops. A permanent solution could be worked out later and it was reported: "The beach-parties have been greatly reduced during the war, and the present number of Fingos at command is not sufficient to work one half the boats".³⁴

The return of peace saw the uneasy status quo return to the beach. Everyone, however, had been made painfully aware of the labour problem. Meanwhile wages continued to rise. By mid-1848 it was reported that the authorities intended expelling to Uitenhage any Mfengu refusing to work for six shillings a day. The move was obviously aimed at the beach workers.³⁵



Mfengu beach labourers at Port Elizabeth during the 1850s.

PHOTOGRAPH: PORT ELIZABETH PUBLIC LIBRARY

¹⁹ A. GIFFORD (ed.), *Reminiscences of Richard Paver* (Cape Town, 1981), p. 58; P. GOLDSWAIN, *The settler named Jeremiah Goldswain* (Johannesburg, 1983), p. 7; H.E. HOCKLY, *The story of the British Settlers of 1820 in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1957), p. 46; U. LONG, *The chronicle of Jeremiah Goldswain I* (Van Riebeck Society 27, Cape Town, 1946), pp. 18-20; T. PRINGLE, *Narrative of a residence in South Africa* (London, 1835), pp. 9-10; W.J. and J.S. REED, *Settler memories, Looking Back* 20, 1980, p. 20, and D.E. RIVET-CARNAC, *Thus came the English in 1820* (Cape Town, 1961), pp. 40-41.

²⁰ J. AYLIFF, *The journal of "Harry Hastings", Albany settler* (Grahams-town, 1963), p. 46 (footnote).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²² G.M. THEAL (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony 35* (London 1905), p. 285. The captain of the *Menai*, Fairfax Moresby, supervised the 1820 settler landing.

²³ J.C. CHASE, *The Cape of Good Hope and the Eastern Province of Algoa Bay* (London, 1843), p. 238.

²⁴ *Graham's Town Journal*, 23.1.1835 (Letter from the commandant of Fort Frederick, Francis Ewart, expressing the "warmest thanks to the Hottentots and colored population at large, of this Town and vicinity, for ... the laborious duties they have performed up to their necks in water, landing Government stores") and 9.7.1840.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.10.1837 and 19.10.1837.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.1.1838 (Letter from "An Old Farmer", Uitenhage).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.4.1838 (Uitenhage meeting to formulate a memorial on the subject). For more detail on Tzitzikamma Mfengu see *Graham's Town Journal*, 26.4.1838, 28.6.1838 and 28.2.1839.

²⁸ CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

²⁹ R.A. MOYER, *A history of the Mfengu of the Eastern Cape, 1815-65* (Ph.D., University of London, 1976), p. 290.

³⁰ *Graham's Town Journal*, 9.7.1840.

³¹ CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

³² *E.P. Herald*, 14.11.1846.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.12.1846.

³⁵ MOYER, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

TABLE 1³⁶
COMPARISON OF MFENGU DAILY WAGES³⁷

| | 1840 | 1846 | 1854 | 1856 | 1857 |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| Mfengu beach labourers | 3s | 3s 6d | 6s | 6s 6d | 6s 6d |
| LOCAL ³⁸ (Port Elizabeth) | | | | | |
| — Farm: | | | | | |
| Servant ³⁹ | 1s 9d | 7d | 8d | 7d | 11d |
| Labourer | | | 2s 3d | 1s 6d | 3s 9d |
| — Domestic (male) | 10d | 5d | 7d 1s | 2d 1s | 2d |
| — Artisan | 4s | 4s 6d | 4s 6d | 6s 9d | 7s 2d |
| HARBOUR (Port Elizabeth) | | | | | |
| — Master | 6s 5d | 9s 7d | 9s 7d | 12s 9d | 20s 9d |
| — Coxswain | 2s 4d | 3s 1d | 3s 1d | 3s 10d | 3s 10d |
| — Boatmen | 1s 9d | 2s 4d | 2s 7d | 3s 2d | 3s 2d |
| CAPE | | | | | |
| — Farm: | | | | | |
| Servant | | | 8d | 6d | 7d |
| Labourer | | | 1s 7d | 1s 5d | 1s 7d |
| — Domestic (male) | | | 8d | 9d | 9d |
| — Artisan | | | 4s 11d | 5s 3d | 5s 7d |

TABLE 2
COMPARATIVE WAGE INDEX
(Mfengu wages = 100)

| | 1840 | 1846 | 1854 | 1856 | 1857 |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Mfengu beach labourers | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| LOCAL (Port Elizabeth) | | | | | |
| — Farm: | | | | | |
| Servant | 58 | 16 | 11 | 9 | 14 |
| Labourer | | | 33 | 50 | 67 |
| — Domestic (male) | 29 | 13 | 10 | 18 | 18 |
| — Artisan | 133 | 129 | 75 | 104 | 110 |
| HARBOUR (Port Elizabeth) | | | | | |
| — Master | 213 | 274 | 160 | 197 | 319 |
| — Coxswain | 77 | 88 | 51 | 59 | 59 |
| — Boatmen | 58 | 66 | 43 | 49 | 49 |
| CAPE | | | | | |
| — Farm: | | | | | |
| Servant | | | 11 | 8 | 8 |
| Labourer | | | 33 | 39 | 38 |
| — Domestic (male) | | | 11 | 12 | 11 |
| — Artisan | | | 81 | 80 | 85 |

THE MFENGU AND HARBOUR DEVELOPMENT

In October 1848 when the governor mentioned having Algoa Bay surveyed for a breakwater, he was reminded that something had to be done in the meantime "for facilitating landing, and diminishing to some sensible extent the enormous expense incurred in the Fingo labor employed to carry goods from the stranded surf boats to the dry beach."⁴⁰ Two years later when the feasibility of opening the Baakens River as a boat harbour was being considered, the public was reminded that Mfengu beach labour cost about £6 000 a year. In addition, urbanization and westernization had been taking its toll. "Laterly, through habits of intoxication being very generally contracted by this people, their labor is becoming uncertain and precarious in the extreme."⁴¹ In

June 1852 the Mfengu working for the boating companies struck because the municipality had issued regulations requiring them to work clothed. They submitted the next day after appearing before the magistrate. The demonstration was, however, regarded as indicative of a coming struggle.⁴²

Nudity on the landing beach had always been seen by some as a problem, as one observer put it:

I have no quarrel with the Fingoes ... for they are a money-making and money-keeping people, and, therefore superior to the Hottentot and other of our native tribes. I respect them for these virtues ... but, still, I think, that as WE are forced by the law (to say nothing of innate modesty) ... the Fingoes should also be compelled to pay the same attention to the institutions of the civilized society into which they have been thrown.⁴³

Another point of view was expressed in a local newspaper:

When Sir Henry Young [the lieutenant governor] landed ... the first act of his pen was to write an indignant letter to the civil authority of this town, for tolerating the filthy, abominable, and beastly practice of employing black savages in a state of NUDITY as labourers on the beach.⁴⁴

But local entrepreneurs saw high wages as the most important problem. In 1852 Captain E. Harrington of the steamer *Phoenix* estimated that a jetty would halve the cost of landing goods because of the saving in labour. He had known the labourers to refuse to work on several days when the weather was favourable. His opinion was confirmed by Captain E.H. Salmond of the harbour board who felt that a jetty would considerably reduce "the enormous outlay for labour, and the complete dependence on the Fingoes".⁴⁵ The two boating companies alone paid £7 000 a year in "coolie hire". He calculated that a jetty would save about 30%.

By 1853 there were plans afoot to build a private wharf. The *Eastern Province News* reported:

All parties know pretty nearly the cost of the present Fingoe labor on the beach. By increased landing facilities by means of a Jetty and other works ... labor may be diminished at least to one-half its present amount. But that would be a revenue of £4,000 per annum, or interest of 10 per cent on an outlay of £40,000.⁴⁶

³⁶ Statistics in tables 1 and 2 were compiled from the Cape of Good Hope Blue Books for the appropriate years; see also *Graham's Town Journal*, 9.7.1840, and *E.P. Herald*, 18.7.1846, 7.2.1854, 3.6.1856 and 1.1.1858.

³⁷ If no daily rate was available the following calculations were used based on a six-day week: Monthly: (monthly wage)/26,083 days
Annual: (annual salary)/313 days

³⁸ No local 1846 statistics available so those for 1845 were used. Local wages for 1840 and 1845 are for the Uitenhage district as Port Elizabeth was still part of it during that period. Race is not specified. The 1854-1857 figures are for the Port Elizabeth district itself. "Colored" figures used for local and Cape averages.

³⁹ No breakdown between servant and labourer available for 1840 and 1845. In 1841 Mfengu labourers were paid seven pennies a day plus rations on the farm Cradock Town near Port Elizabeth. See *Graham's Town Journal*, 11.11.1841.

⁴⁰ *E.P. Herald*, 11.11.1848 (Editorial comment).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.12.1850.

⁴² *Eastern Province News*, 22.6.1852.

⁴³ *Graham's Town Journal*, 21.5.1840 (Letter from "Blush").

⁴⁴ *E.P. Herald*, 25.11.1856 (Letter from "Progress").

⁴⁵ Correspondence between the Harbour Board of Port Elizabeth and the Government on the improvement of the port of Port Elizabeth, in CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Annexures to the Votes and Proceedings of Parliament 1854* (Cape Town, 1854), p. 8.

⁴⁶ *E.P. News*, 14.6.1853.

The prospectus of the Port Elizabeth Wharf Company was published in November 1853. In this document it was stated that a wharf might save most of the annual £3000 Mfengu labour costs.⁴⁷ J.H. Clarke proposed an alternative method of saving on such costs by extending the Port Elizabeth Boating Company into a landing and storing company. By building a large store the whole length of Beach Street, goods would only have to be loaded once, thus streamlining the whole process.⁴⁸

Early in 1854 the Mfengu and boatmen struck for higher wages as well as for stopping work at 13h00 on Saturdays. The boatmen wanted 7s 6d a day and the Mfengu six shillings. Local artisans proposed to do the same.⁴⁹ There was such a demand for labour in Port Elizabeth that common masons' labourers were getting as much as four shillings a day at a time that the average Cape farm worker was getting just over a shilling.⁵⁰ The *Eastern Province Herald* saw this as a short term expediency:

The antagonisms of man is often turned into praises of his opponent. This truth we trust is about to be verified on the beach of Port Elizabeth. There the boatmen and Fingoes have struck for an advance of wages to the extent of 50 per cent on what they were previously receiving, and we are of the opinion that if the companies act wisely, they will meet the demand and thereby more speedily correct the error. Labour will rush where wages so high are paid and it will then be in the hands of the employers to reduce the rates as far as they may now be compelled to advance them.⁵¹

At the same time, it was optimistically pointed out, the construction of the proposed breakwater would eventually

Beach labourers loading bales of wool (weighing up to 130 kg) on the landing beach at Port Elizabeth with the breakwater in the background (1860s).

PHOTOGRAPH: PORT ELIZABETH PUBLIC LIBRARY

do away with the need for both boatmen and beach labourers.

In the meantime, as the town grew, many Mfengu were compelled to live northwest of the town near the Swartkops River, far from the town centre. This prevented them from tending their garden plots during the lunch hour. When the artist Thomas Baines landed in 1848 it was not uncommon for the Mfengu to take a three-hour lunch break.⁵² Their gradual removal from the town centre forced them to either work for wages or farm fulltime. Initially the Port Elizabeth Mfengu lived in four areas: at the landing beach itself, at Hyman's Kloof (Russell Road), and in two villages at opposite ends of the town about fifteen minutes walk from its centre.⁵³

Towards the end of 1855 when work was about to start on the proposed breakwater scheme, the harbour board applied for the use of Black labour. The governor, however, could give no assurances and warned the board that it was a bit much to expect other Blacks to be satisfied with as little as one shilling a day if the Mfengu earned up to five shillings.⁵⁴

In mid-1856 the Mfengu struck for 6s 6d a day which they received. The Malay boatmen followed suit and deman-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.11.1853.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.6.1853.

⁴⁹ *E.P. Herald*, 7.2.1854.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.2.1854. See also table 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31.1.1854.

⁵² KENNEDY, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁵³ MOYER, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.

⁵⁴ *E.P. Herald*, 27.11.1855.



ded nine shillings. This once again raised the jetty question: "the community would be rendered to some considerable extent independent of any one particular class of labor".⁵⁵ The immediate problem was that only Mfengu were prepared to do beach work:

Their wages at the present time are exorbitantly high, but they know their power. They have already struck more than once for an advance of wages, and in each case their employers have had to submit to their demands, and were they to strike again the same result must follow, or the business of the port must come to a standstill.⁵⁶

Some Port Elizabeth residents, however, still felt that nakedness was more of a problem than Mfengu strikes. "Since Sir Henry Young expressed his disgust, prosperity has made the town people more callous to the evil".⁵⁷

Local employers were aware that all work at the beach, including breakwater construction, could be paralysed by the Mfengu at any time.⁵⁸ But this soon changed as thousands of starving Xhosa entered the Cape seeking employment after the disastrous cattle killing episode in 1857. Some estimates put the figure as high as 30 000.⁵⁹ The effects were soon felt on the beachfront and it was reported that

since the introduction of Caffre labor [sic] into this Division, there is a manifest alteration in the conduct of the Fingoes, who are said to be tampering much with the former and making them dissatisfied. The Fingoes have the common sense to see they can no longer demand any exorbitant price for their labor, and look upon the introduction of the Caffres as a sort of infringement on their rights.⁶⁰

Mfengu reaction to the introduction of rival labour was eventually stamped out. The Mfengu township at Port Elizabeth was placed under magisterial supervision and two special constables appointed to deal with trouble-makers.

The clothing issue was seen as another infringement of Mfengu rights. A newspaper elaborated on this matter:

Several Fingoes were recently taken up for roaming about the Location in a state of perfect nudity, one of whom declared to the police that before he would wear clothes he would suffer transportation to England; however he sang a different song before the Court ...⁶¹

As employers, the boating companies were put into a dominant position by the increased supply of labour. For example, a Mfengu strike towards the end of 1857 was unsuccessful. According to the *Eastern Province Herald*, these "gentry struck for an advance from 6s. 6d. to 7s. 6d.; and the Boating Companies by a firm resistance to their demands succeeded in reducing the former exorbitant charge to 5s. 6d."⁶² In addition, the boating companies insisted upon "a more regular attendance" by requiring the Mfengu to take only an hour for breakfast and lunch breaks. An attempt by the Port Elizabeth Boating Company to establish a less labour intensive method of handling goods on the beach during 1857 also played a crucial role in these developments:

The building of a jetty by the Port Elizabeth Boating Company has been a very significant hint to these people, that their rule on the beach will no longer be tolerated. We would undoubtedly have them well paid — to work hard ten hours a day in the water is no trifling tax on a man's energies, for which he ought to be handsomely remunerated, and we consider 5s. 6d. a full equitable reward for the services performed.⁶³

The power of the Mfengu beachworkers was thus broken. Although the enclosed breakwater scheme (1855-1867) was a dismal failure and the Port Elizabeth boating companies re-

mained dependent on beach labour for some time to come, competition from other Black labour substantially weakened the Mfengu's bargaining position. Thereafter beach labour was no longer a Mfengu preserve. Another contributing factor to the slackening of the Mfengu stranglehold on beach labour was the granting of freehold land to the Mfengu in British Kaffraria in the 1850s by the governor, Sir George Grey.⁶⁴ A number of the relatively wealthy beach labourers would have been enticed back to agriculture. Most saw beach labour merely as a means to this end.⁶⁵

Although landing goods on the beach remained important right up to the 1880s, the construction of jetties from the 1870s reduced the boating companies' reliance on one landing method. Less labourers were required on the jetties where the work was also less demanding. By 1884 labourers working boats at the jetty were earning one shilling a day less than their beach counterparts while men loading trucks got two shillings less.⁶⁶ On the beach 28 men were needed to discharge a boat — eight in the boat and the rest carrying the cargo ashore. Because there was more room on the beach, the major advantage was that each company could handle more cargo there than at the jetties — up to fourteen boats a day each compared to ten at the jetties. Each boat carried about 25 tons of cargo.⁶⁷

MOTIVATION BEHIND THE MFENGU STRIKES

It would be stretching a point to try and link the Mfengu strikes to any form of trade unionism. They merely assimilated the norms of beach work. Even in the 1820s the boatmen were very well aware of their position of strength. There were frequent complaints that they only worked when it suited them.⁶⁸ This tradition would have been observed and taken over by the Mfengu and used to their own advantage. As already noted, by 1840 the Mfengu refused to work during bad or cold weather. This can hardly be seen as striking since it merely followed local precedent.

The Mfengu were, however, responsible for South Africa's first recorded strike on 9 November 1846 when they struck for higher pay. This was over seven years before the previously supposed first by the Table Bay boatmen in early 1854.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.6.1856.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.8.1856. (Letter from "Mercator").

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.11.1856. (Letter from "Progress").

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* (Letter from "Daniel Doyce").

⁵⁹ M. WILSON and L. THOMPSON, *A history of South Africa to 1870* (Cape Town, 1982), p. 258.

⁶⁰ *E.P. Herald*, 12.3.1858. Fighting between Port Elizabeth Xhosa and Mfengu was not uncommon. It reflected the general hostility between the two tribes. One such fight took place in November 1850. Thirty Xhosa and 60 Mfengu were involved. Constables were eventually called in. Two Xhosa were killed and the rest beaten back and injured. See MOYER, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

⁶¹ *E.P. Herald*, 12.3.1858.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1.1.1858.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20.10.1857.

⁶⁴ MOYER, *op. cit.*, pp. 353 and 396-416.

⁶⁵ CHASE, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

⁶⁶ "Wet" beach work 5s 6d, loading trucks 3s 6d, labourers in boats at jetty 4s 6d, labourers in trucks 3s 6d. See *Report of the Committee of the Harbour Board of Port Elizabeth appointed to consider the best mode of utilising the two new jetties* (Port Elizabeth, 1884), p. 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ CA, CO 359, No. 96: PE Collector of Customs — Government Secretary, 12.9.1828.



Loading ivory at Port Elizabeth, c. 1860.

PHOTOGRAPH: PORT ELIZABETH PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Mfengu were bargaining from a position of strength.⁶⁹ No-one else was prepared to do the work and there was a chronic labour shortage after many Mfengu had left to take up land on the frontier.

Their second strike in June 1852 was for somewhat different reasons. It was in protest against a town regulation requiring them to work clothed. Their third strike in February 1854 revolved around working hours and higher pay. It was also before that of the Table Bay boatmen which only occurred a few weeks later. Therefore it is likely that the Capetonians were merely following suit. The Port Elizabeth strike was a general one which included the beach labourers, the boatmen and possibly local artisans as well. There was a chronic shortage of labour as reflected by the relatively high local wages compared to the Cape average.⁷⁰

The collapse of the Mfengu dominance of beach labour in the late 1850s and the construction of jetties in the 1870s did not see an end to strikes. There were strikes at the beach-front in June 1872, August 1876 and July 1877.⁷¹ All three, however, involved Mfengu. In the 1877 strike 79 harbour board labourers struck for four shillings a day. All five "ringleaders" arrested were Mfengu. They were given the option of a £1 fine or seven days imprisonment.⁷² Thereafter until the end of the century no more strikes were recorded. This is attributed to the last Frontier War (1877-1878) which forced a flood of Xhosa on to the Cape wage-labour market.⁷³ Although wages for beach labour were less volatile than others in the area between 1857 and the 1880s, they followed the same trend. All wages were higher in 1872 than they were in 1858 but all had dropped by 1884.⁷⁴

CONCLUSION

It is clear that nobody benefitted from the first conflict of interests between White employers and Black workers in

South Africa. The boating companies attempted to break the power of the beach labourers by demanding improved harbour facilities. But the resultant breakwater was a disastrous failure. On the other hand, while the breakwater itself had no effect on the Mfengu beach labourers, the coincidental influx of alternative labour did.

As far as harbour development was concerned, the Port Elizabeth harbour board was pressurised into building a scheme which had not been thought through properly. Thus it grew from the original 183-metre breakwater planned in 1855 to a mammoth 317-metre breakwater and 152-metre shield by 1859. The nett result was a white elephant which was ultimately dismantled. In the long run the whole fiasco helped delay Port Elizabeth harbour development by half a century. A start was only made on the present breakwater in 1922.□

⁶⁹ See A. MABIN, *Strikes in the Cape Colony 1854-99* (unpublished paper presented at the African Studies Seminar, University of the Witwatersrand, 1983), pp. 3-5. He outlines three categories of early strikes: (1) workers in positions of strength; (2) workers and deteriorating conditions, and (3) organised workers.

⁷⁰ Mason's labourers in Port Elizabeth, for example, were getting four shillings a day compared to the average wages reflected in table 1. See *E.P. Herald*, 14.2.1854.

⁷¹ MABIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷² *E.P. Herald*, 20.7.1877.

⁷³ MABIN, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴ The strike in 1872 raised beach wages to 6s 6d at a time artisans were getting ten shillings, farm labourers 2s 6d and domestic servants 1s 10d. Compared to 1858 wages this was a relative change of +15%, +40%, +25% and +100% respectively. By 1884 "wet" beach labourers were paid 5s 6d a day compared to the 7s 6d being paid to artisans. Farm labourers were getting 1s 6d and domestic servants one shilling, a change of -17%, -25%, -40% and -14% respectively. See *Report of the Committee of the Harbour Board ...*, pp. 9-10, MABIN, *op. cit.*, p. 6, *E.P. Herald*, 1.1.1858 (Mfengu beach wages), and CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Blue-book 1858*, pp. cc 2-3, ... 1872, pp. cc 2-3, and ... 1885, p. 407 (other wages).