

GETTING YOUR HANDS DIRTY

– HISTORY FIELDWORK

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Introduction

Much emphasis has been placed in the recent past on the need for education to relate to the real world. But how does one do this in History, which is about the past. One of the fields where I believe this is still possible is in the area of heritage. Heritage is what survives in the present and raises obvious questions of preservation and interpretation for living generations. I believe strongly that it is in this field that it is possible to engage learners in an active and dynamic relationship with the past.

The project I will be describing in this paper is one I initiated while I was teaching at Maritzburg College in the 1980s. It may be that a project of this nature would be very difficult to replicate at the current time, as the project was extra-curricular in nature and involved work on sites which were a great distance from the school, involving expensive and time-consuming travel. This said I believe many of the basic ideas behind the project are possible to replicate provided one aims at a more modest outcome. Furthermore I believe that the range of skills that a project like this engages makes it of enormous value in the general education of learners. Some of the skills which I found emerging from this project went far beyond the normal skill set of the historian of collecting, evaluating and interpreting data and included model making, mapping, tree identification as well as inter-personal skills such as working in teams.

The way in which the idea for what I called the Special History Project first germinated was in many respects unusual. I had been reading up in the *Times History of the War in South Africa* on Louis Botha's Second Invasion of Natal and decided to visit the battlefields of this September 1901 conflict

in December 1982. It was on the top of Italeni Mountain, where a British graveyard had been vandalised, that I came up with the idea of involving the boys of Maritzburg College, the school where I taught for fourteen years, in the restoration of the Itala and Fort Prospect battlefields. The success of this venture led on to other similar ventures. I must confess I was driven by the enjoyment that both the boys and I experienced rather than any formal desire to research different learning modalities.

The Special History Project operated at its highest intensity between 1983 and 1987. I will now turn to a brief account of the individual projects tackled by the Special History Project.

Individual projects by the Special History Project

Itala Post and Fort Prospect

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, the original idea of setting up a school project aimed at on-site restoration of a heritage site came to me as the result of a visit to the two battlefields of Itala Post and Fort Prospect in the Babanango area of KwaZulu-Natal in 1982. At the time of my visit, both sites were in a state of extreme neglect and were unmarked and uncelebrated.

The battles were part of Louis Botha's so-called Second Invasion of Natal and both occurred on September 25, 1901, when Botha sent out forces commanded by his brother Chris Botha and brother-in-law Cherry Emmet to attack British defensive positions.

The work itself started in 1983 and involved the following aspects:

- Restoration work, primarily to the grave enclosures, which were overgrown and required re-fencing. In the case of the grave enclosure on the summit of Italeni all the metal crosses were missing and these were replaced using surplus crosses obtained from Ladysmith;
- Production of a booklet giving details of the two battles for local distribution;
- Erection of signposts to the two sites.

In the case of this project, it is gratifying to note that all aims were successfully achieved.

Wynne Hill and Intombi

Wynne Hill was the site of one of Sir Redvers Buller's attempts to break through to Ladysmith, while Intombi was the site of the neutral hospital established about five kilometres from the centre of Ladysmith. Both sites were dealt with over a single weekend in 1983. In both cases the work involved the restoration of graves. In the case of Wynne Hill it consisted of the de-rusting and painting of metal grave markers, while Intombi also involved the repair of marble crosses that had been vandalised and the clearing of the entire cemetery.

Hlobane

The Battle of Hlobane took place in March 1879 and was part of the Anglo-Zulu War. Hlobane is a large, flat-topped hill about 20 kilometres east of Vryheid in KwaZulu-Natal. The battle developed from the British decision to launch a surprise attack on the AbaQulusi people, who were allies of the Zulus. Owing to the stiff resistance put up by the AbaQulusi and the unexpected appearance of a large Zulu impi, the battle turned into a flight for the British forces, with the action at the Devil's Pass at the western end of Hlobane particularly famous as the place where Sir Redvers Buller (commander of the British forces during the early stages of the South African War 1899 – 1902) won his Victoria Cross (VC).

During an initial reconnaissance with two colleagues, I discovered that a cross erected in memory of two members of Sir Evelyn Wood's staff, Ronald Campbell and Llewellyn Lloyd had been dug up and was in a poor state of repair and a monument to Piet Uys, who had been killed at the Devil's Pass was missing completely. As part of the restoration process, the cross was loaded up in our vehicle and taken back to the school for restoration work.

Based on what we had discovered we set ourselves the following aims:

- Restoration of the Campbell and Lloyd cross;
- Re-erection of the cross and clearing of grave enclosure;
- Creation and installation of a monument to Piet Uys at the Devil's Pass;
- Construction of a model for display at some suitable site.

Once again all our aims were achieved.

Wonder and Ngotshe gold mines

Work on these two gold mines that were situated close to the Pongola River in incredibly rugged country in what is now the Ithala Nature Reserve commenced in 1985 and continued through to 1987. Of the two mines, the older is the Wonder Mine (1909 to 1939), while the Ngotshe Mine operated from 1946 to 1971. Because of its more recent establishment and operation both the owner of the Ngotshe mine and its manager were still alive at the time of the project and were able to provide valuable insight into the working of the mine. Both mines were what are called adit mines, in other words they accessed the reef which has been folded into a near vertical position by means of horizontal passages cut into the hillside.

Needless to say without the co-operation of the Natal Parks Board, this project would have been quite impossible for a number of reasons, not least because the Wonder Mine was only accessible with four-wheel-drive vehicles.

Project aims

The aims of the Special History Project tended to develop in stages over the three years that the project was in operation. Briefly they were:

- Survey the mines
- Research the mines leading to the production of a brochure;
- Clear trails through the bush to all the key areas at the mines;
- Research and if necessary paint machinery and equipment;
- Develop a walking trail to the mines. This would identify good examples of the many indigenous trees along the trail and would also have some interpretative material on early iron mining by the indigenous people as the trail started where there were clear indications of early mining in the banded ironstone strata.

The massive scale of this project made it impossible for us to say that we had achieved all our objectives to the same extent as the earlier projects. Nevertheless, the park continued to make use of the material we had developed and to take tourists to the mines for many years after the project had come to an end.

The establishment of a core of enthusiastic “history workers” meant that I was able to deploy the Special History Project to assist in creating the school

museum for the school's 125th anniversary in 1988. We also created a model of the defences of the Platrand outside Ladysmith as part of another minor project.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is worth noting at least some of the many positive spin-offs from the work of the Special History Project.

- It provided a wonderful sense of engagement. Learners became really involved with the past;
- It explored and developed a huge range of skills in participants. These included practical skills as diverse as fixing engines, carrying out surveys, making models, fencing grave enclosures and clearing trails, as well as the more academic skills such as research and the production of brochures;
- Although it was not restricted to learners studying History, it did wonders for popularising the school's history department, which was recognised for its dynamism;
- Some useful product was left behind at least for a few years.

Although, as I mentioned earlier in this paper, the project in the form described would be difficult to replicate, there is no doubt that there are opportunities for heritage work along these lines in the local environments in which many schools find themselves.

