

# The Hen and Chickens Rock: Symbolism, Significance, and the Struggle for Heritage Recognition

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Relevance: Permanent Institution for the History of Surveying and Measurement

## SUMMARY

Historical research in surveying, cadastral systems, and land administration is often a solitary and under-supported endeavour. In the context of pressing global, regional, and local challenges, allocating limited resources to the study and recognition of historical contributions and artefacts can be difficult to justify — particularly when these histories are contested or linked to colonial administrations, systems, or individuals now viewed as part of a problematic past.

This paper examines the significance of what is, to our knowledge, the oldest surviving cadastral property beacon in Southern Africa: the Hen and Chickens Rock. Designated as a boundary beacon in 1658 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), this large boulder is part of a granite formation located near the summit of Wynberg Hill in Cape Town. It likely held cultural significance for the indigenous Khoenkhoen people prior to colonial land dispossession and may have continued to do so during the period when significant numbers of Khoenkhoen lived in the vicinity and served in the military. Its adoption as a cadastral marker imbues the boulder with layered meanings: as a symbol of early land administration at the Cape, of global science and astronomy, and of land dispossession.

The paper documents the process and content of an application to designate the area surrounding the Hen and Chickens Rock as a Western Cape Provincial Heritage Area. Although the application was ultimately rejected without explanation, the effort required a reconstruction of the boulder's intersectional history, an exploration of its contemporary significance, and a justification for its preservation. This reflection underscores the value of documenting and critically engaging with contested heritage in the context of land administration history.

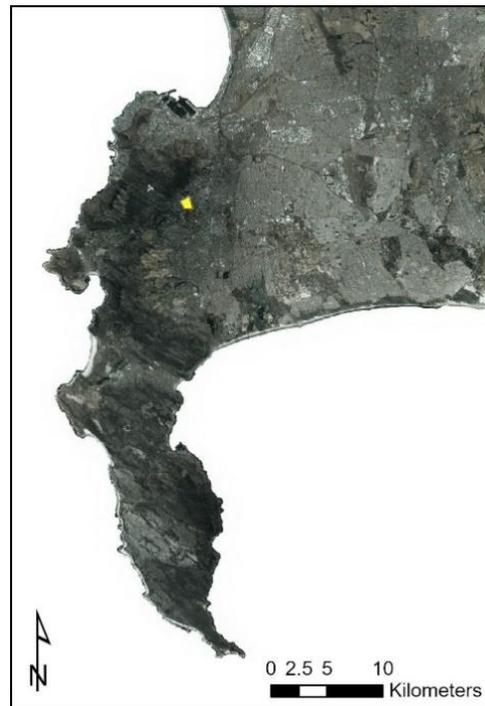
# The Hen and Chickens Rock: Symbolism, Significance, and the Struggle for Heritage Recognition

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the significance of what is, to our knowledge, the oldest surviving cadastral property beacon in Southern Africa: the Hen and Chickens Rock. Designated as a boundary beacon in 1658 by the Dutch East India Company (VOC), this large boulder is part of a granite formation located near the summit of Wynberg Hill in Cape Town.

The primary boulder of the Hen and Chickens Rocks is an extraordinary landmark being a large, weathered-round granite boulder weighing about 220 tonnes (Figure 1). It is located on the eastern slope of Wynberg Hill to the east of the Table Mountain chain in a prominent high geographical position. This feature is surrounded by residential properties within the Southern Suburbs of contemporary Cape Town. The location of the beacon is as follows: 33.9945 degrees South; 18.4512 degrees East. The location is indicated in yellow in Figure 2.



*Figure 1 The Hen and Chickens Rocks Boulder  
(this is the Hen Rock with smaller boulders being the  
Chickens): Circumference  $\approx 17$  m; Radius  $\approx 2.7$  m;  
Height over 4 m; Weight approximately 220 tonnes*

*Figure 2 Locality of Boscheuwel in the Cape Peninsula –  
the Hen and Chickens Rock was adopted as a corner of  
this early farm in*

The paper documents the process and content of an application to designate the area surrounding the Hen and Chickens Rock as a Western Cape Provincial Heritage Area. Although the application was ultimately rejected, the effort required a reconstruction of the boulder's intersectional history, an exploration of its contemporary significance, and a justification for its preservation. This reflection underscores the value of documenting and critically engaging with contested heritage in the context of land administration history.

## **2 METHOD**

This paper follows the style of a reflective narrative. It begins with the process of discovery of the importance of the Hen and Chickens cadastral beacon through prior historical research projects. It then reflects a broader investigation into its intersectional history and former and current significance in order to motivate the submission for provincial heritage status.

## **3 HISTORICAL RESEARCH UNCOVERING THE OLDEST BEACON**

### **3.1 The first 17 freehold farms at the Cape**

Over the past 15 years the locations of the first 17 freehold farms at the Cape, South Africa, have been under investigation. These relate to two key plans compiled at the time:

- Dec 1658 – 14 May 1659 General Plan by Pieter Potter: farms identified by numbers (Figure 3; Figure 4).
- Early 1661 – Nov 1661 General Plan by Pieter Potter (Fisher, 1982) with the farms identified by name of owner(s) and area suitable for cultivation (Figure 5; Figure 6).

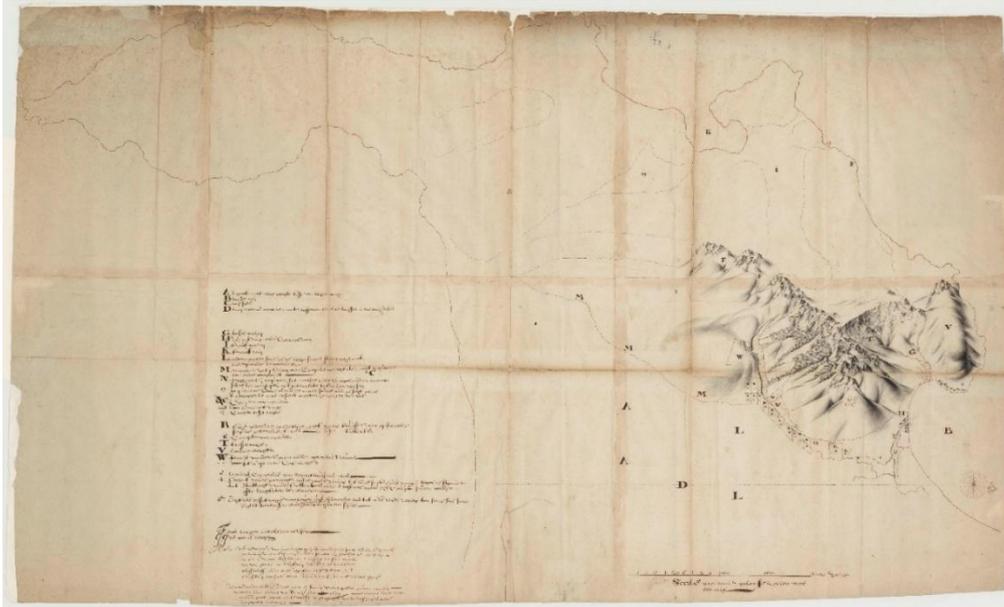


Figure 3 Pieter Potter's general plan of 1658<sup>1</sup>

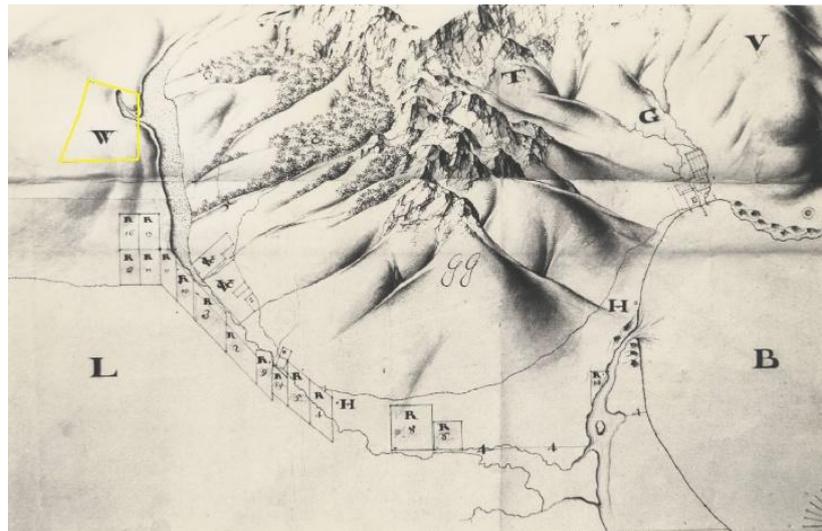


Figure 4 A section of Pieter Potter's general plan of 1658 with Bosheuvel highlighted

<sup>1</sup> The Nationaal Archief, Netherlands, NL-HaNA\_4.VEL\_807

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Figure 5 Pieter Potter's general plan of 1661<sup>2</sup>



Figure 6 A section of Pieter Potter's general plan of 1661.

The original farm boundaries and beacons of Rodenberg and Rouwkoop have been relocated in the suburb of Rondebosch. This work was undertaken initially by undergraduate students in

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2 The Nationaal Archief, Netherlands, NL-HaNA\_4.VEL\_808

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their final year projects – Siebritz and later Van Niekerk – then verified through recalculation and reported in Whittal and Jones (2010). Figure 7 shows the common boundaries and beacons that exist in today’s cadastre.

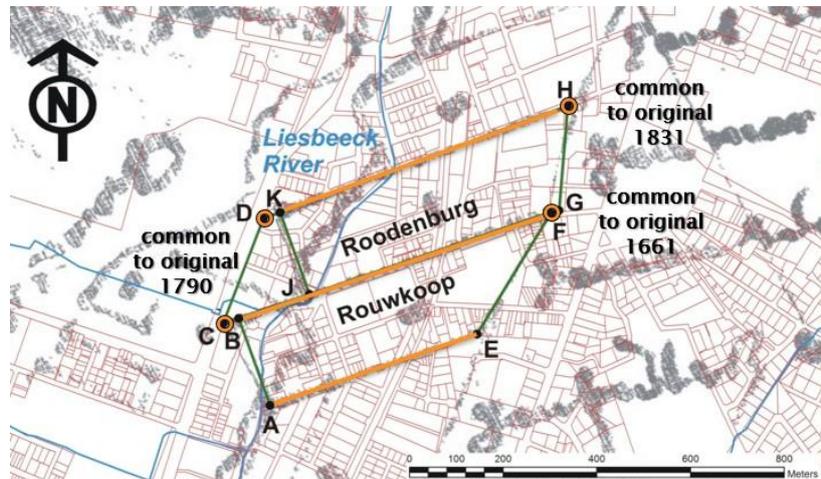


Figure 7 Reconstruction of the farms Rouwkoop and Roodenburg in Rondebosch – the orange boundaries and beacons originally placed in 1657-61 still survive in today’s cadastre

A number of other farms have also been investigated but with only partial or speculative results thus far (e.g. Vineyard, Coornhoop, and Ecklenburg). Later work completed by undergraduate student, Bell, relocated the original boundaries and beacons of Boscheuwel farm, much later renamed Bishopscourt. This work is reported in Whittal and Bell (2015). The significance of this work is the identification of one of the beacons as the oldest known cadastral property boundary beacon in South Africa – the Hen and Chickens Rock (point C in Figure 8 and Figure 9; the left-most beacons in Figures 3-6). This was used as the corner of the farm loaned to Governor Van Riebeeck since 1657 although the first cadastral diagram associated with a formal grant was drawn up in 1685. It is still to this day the original corner beacon of a number of historic farms in Cape Town that have now been subdivided into residential erven. The entire rock would have been considered the original beacon, even though some centuries later a concrete cone and peg provided a more precise location (as can be seen in Figure 1).

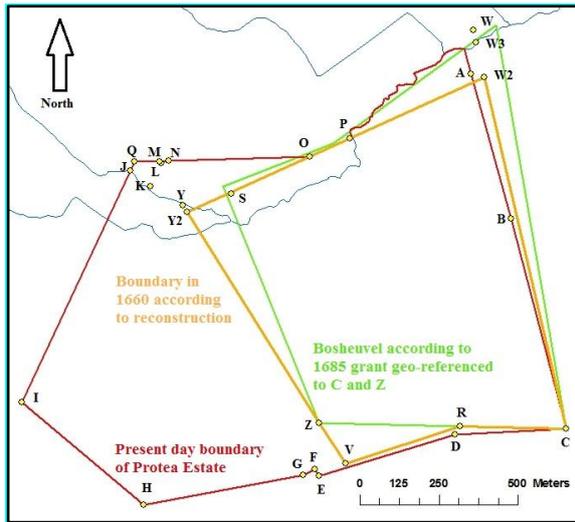


Figure 8: Bosheuvel farm reconstructed boundary according to the 1660 general plan shown in orange.

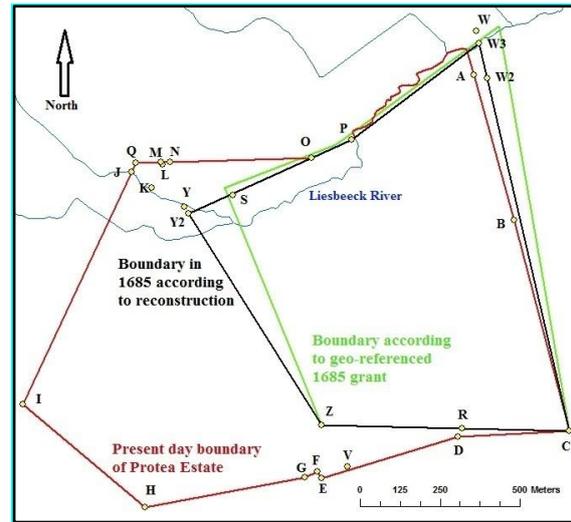


Figure 9: Bosheuvel farm reconstructed boundary according to the 1685 grant shown in black.

In both these reconstructions, Beacon C on the South-East corner is the location of the Hen and Chickens Rock

The significance of the Hen and Chickens Rock at point C in Figure 8 and Figure 9, is explored in section 5.

## 4 OTHER RELEVANT PRESERVED MONUMENTS IN THE WESTERN CAPE PROVINCE

When considering an application for provincial or national heritage preservation, it is important to assess the value of the proposed monument against approved heritage monuments. This section identifies various monuments against which the value of the application may be compared. It is contended that it exceeds the above in worthiness for achieving heritage status – this will be presented in section 5.

### 4.1 Monument in the immediate vicinity – van Riebeeck’s Wild Almond Hedge

From the summit of Wynberg Hill west towards Klaasens Road, is an area reserved for the remains of van Riebeeck’s wild almond hedge. This is now zoned Public Open Space. This area is held under title Deed 14472 16 Oct 1944 by the Commission for the Preservation of Natural and Historical Monuments, Relics and Antiquities – now the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). This Public Open Space does not extend all the way to the Hen and Chickens Rock which is slightly over the crest of Wynberg Hill to the East. However, an access reserve links the Hen and Chickens Rock area to the Public Open Space area. This access reserve is for a municipal water main from the water reservoir managed by the City of Cape Town.

## 4.2 Land surveying monuments with heritage status

### 4.2.1 9/2/072/0002 Northern terminal of Maclear's Arc of Meridian, Klipfontein, Piketberg District

This survey beacon is located at the farm Klipfontein near the town of Aurora north of Cape Town. It marks the most northerly point of the arc of meridian observed by Abbe De La Caille in 1752 to establish the shape of the Earth in the southern hemisphere. He observed a baseline of 12,8 km length, near today's town of Darling, to provide scale to his triangulation network. At the terminal points he measured astronomical observations to fix the latitude difference over the length of the arc (about 1°13'17,3"). His arc of meridian measured 445 505 English Feet – longer than expected leading to a pear-shape for the Earth. This unexpected result was later attributable to uncorrected deflection of the vertical (as pointed out by Sir George Everest). The arc was reobserved, extended and corrected by Sir Thomas Maclear between 1838 and 1840, leading to a new shape of the Earth – an oblate spheroid (ASSA, nd; Warner, 2002).

### 4.2.2 Monument number 9/2/060/0021 Swartland survey beacon, Klipvlei, Malmesbury District

Sir Thomas Maclear reobserved and extended the arc of Abbe De La Caille. He observed a new baseline at Zwartland to control triangulation network scale. The western terminal of is marked with a pyramid-shaped sandstone beacon and a platinum pin (constructed 1840-41).

## 4.3 Early markers and beacons with heritage status

### 4.3.1 9/2/042/0001/002 and 9/2/042/0001/2 VOC Beacon at Geelbek 360, Hopefield district

This beacon is a slate marker set up by Dutch East India Company (VOC) governor van der Graaf in 1785. It marks the most northerly extent of the district at that time.

### 4.3.2 9/2/102/0003 Rock with name engraved and 1682 marking a visit to the interior in search of copper

The information provided by the South African Heritage Resources Agency is as follows:

*On a rock in this area the name of O Slotsbo, IT Rhenius and O Bergh are engraved. On 30 October 1682, a party under the leadership of Oloff Bergh left the Castle to investigate the area from which the Namakwas brought samples of copper-ore the previous year. Bergh engraved his name and 1682 on the rock.*

*Type of site: Spring*

Slotsboo was a government surveyor between 1700-1718<sup>3</sup>. Rhenius and Bergh were officials of the VOC, with Bergh playing a role in early mapping.

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3 S2A3 Biographical Database of Southern African Science

## **5 EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONAL SYMBOLISM OF THE HEN AND CHICKENS ROCK**

Guided by the various sections on the Provincial Heritage Status application forms, the proposal addressed each of the aspects as thoroughly as possible. These are summarized here in two sections as directed in the application forms – types and degrees of significance.

### **5.1 Types of significance**

This section aims to convey the significance of the proposed monument in relation to its historical, aesthetic, spiritual, scientific, technological and social value. The contents of the written proposal are summarized in Figure 10 – Figure 13. For aspects that relate to Khoenkhoen and San culture and use prior to historical records, ascertaining the potential significance cannot be proven and relies on speculative deductions. Even within the historical records, identifying the historic aesthetic and spiritual significance of the Hen and Chicken’s Rock relies on some speculation. For other aspects such as scientific, technological, and social aspects, records of the significance of the Rock is derived from historical records.

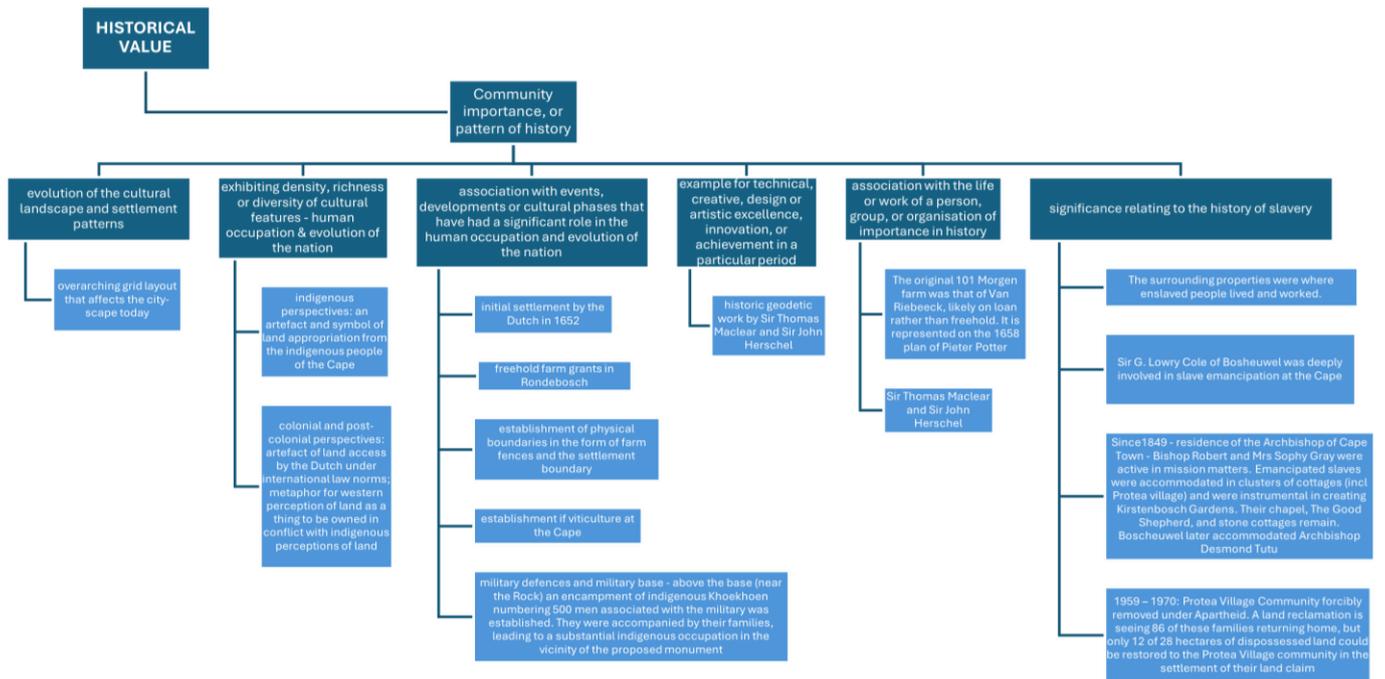


Figure 10 Historical value

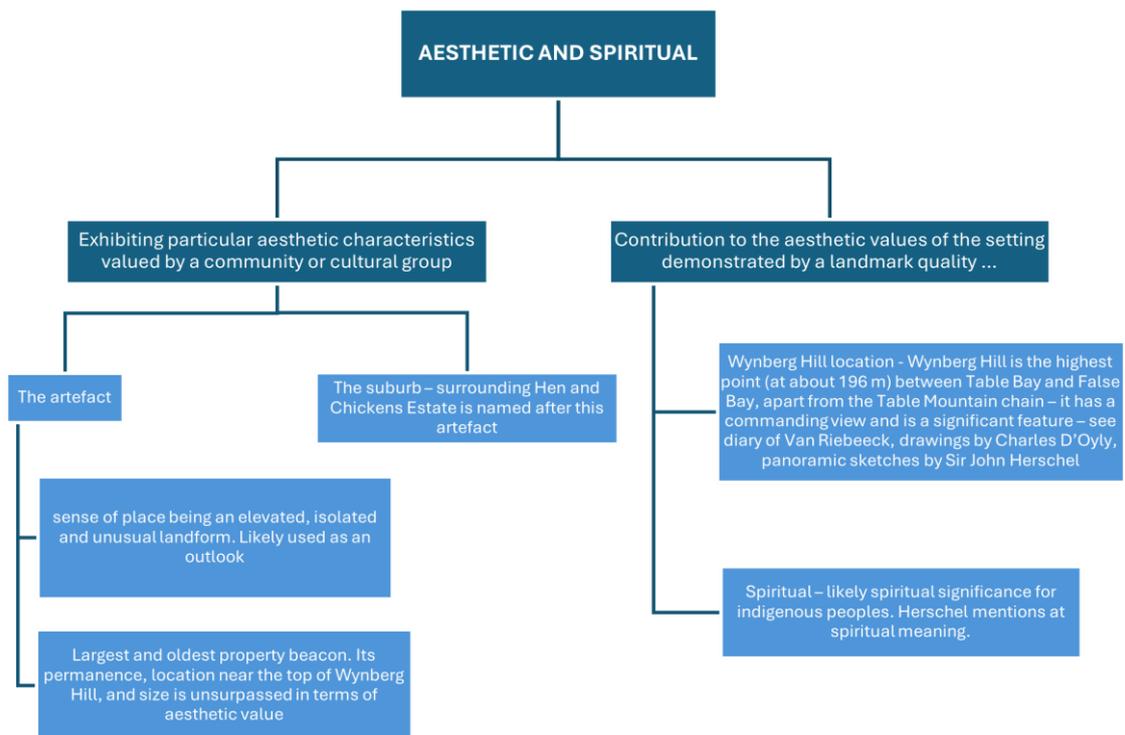


Figure 11 Aesthetic and spiritual value

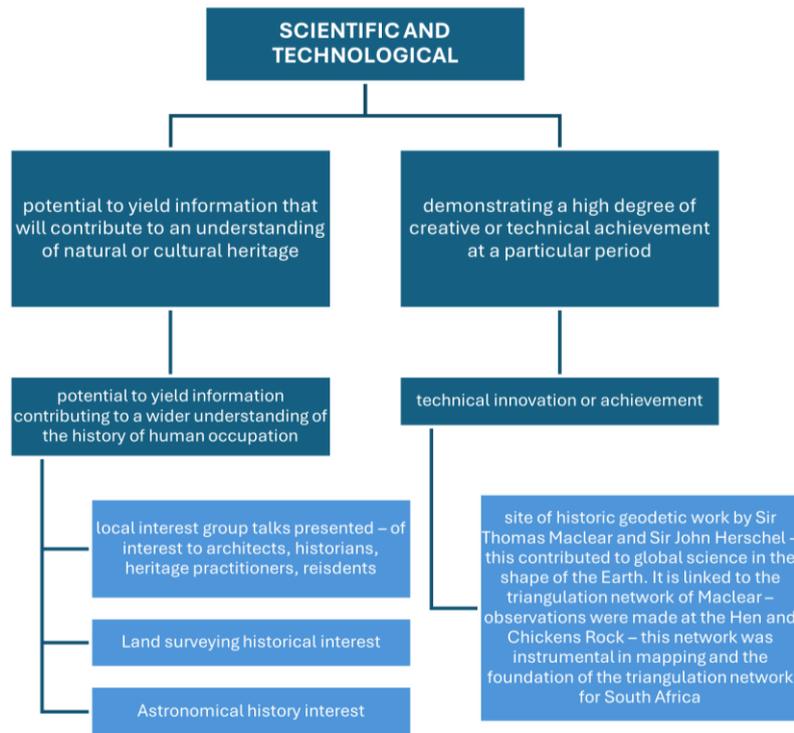


Figure 12 Scientific and technological value

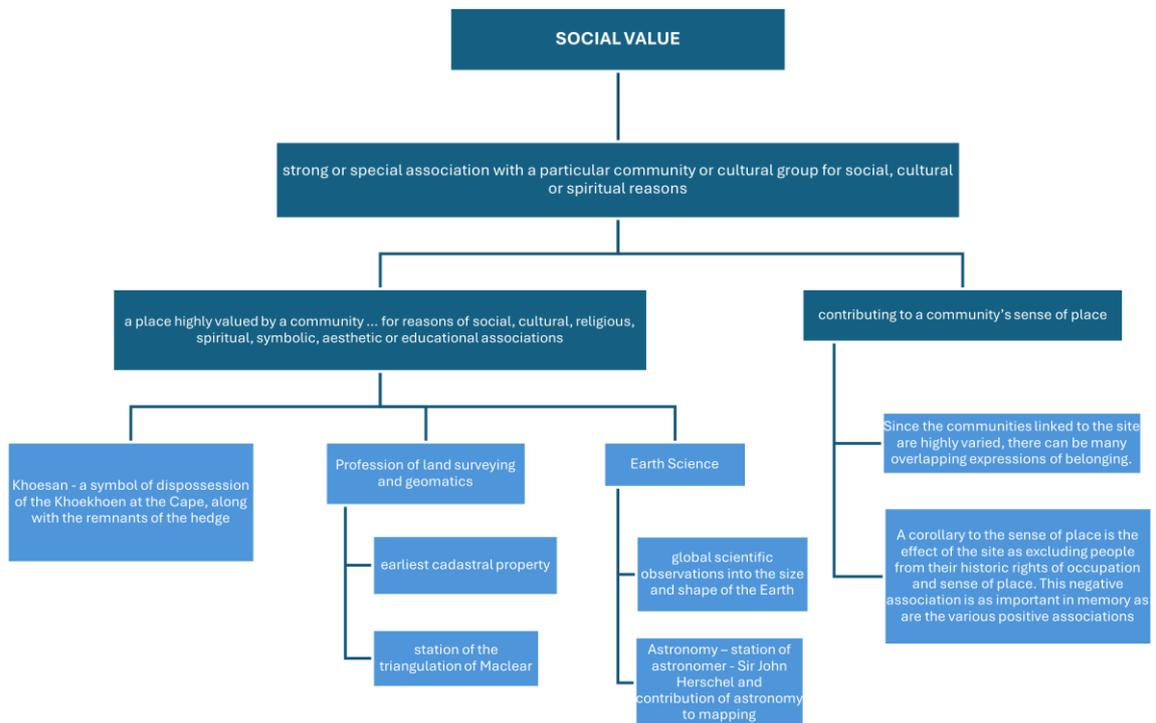


Figure 13 Social value

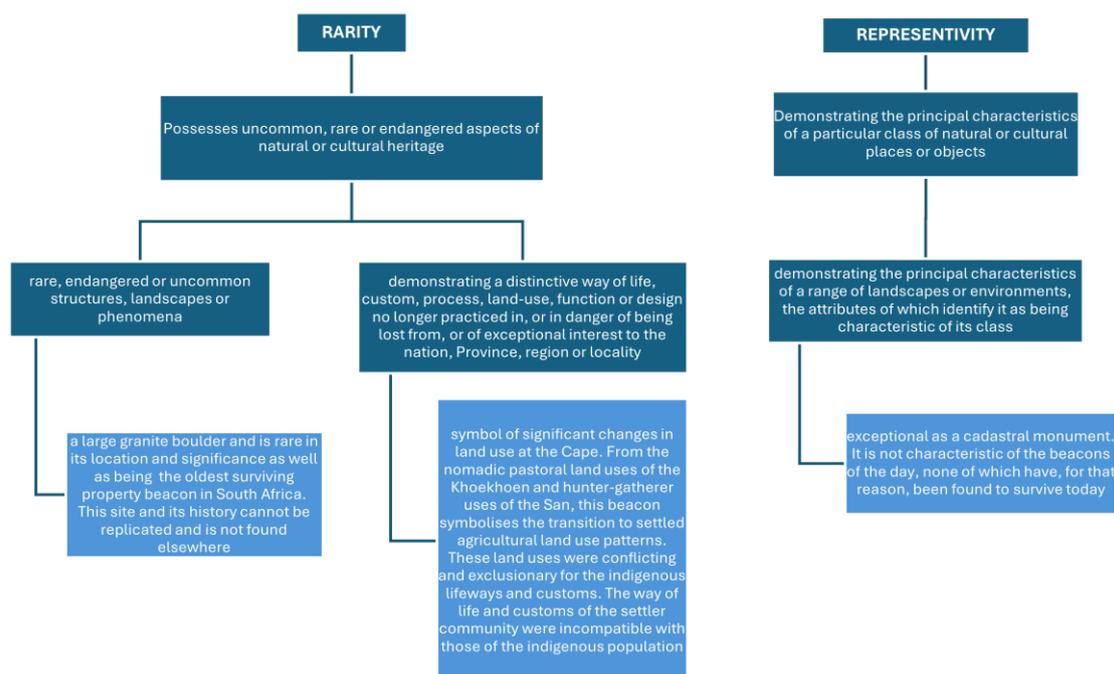


Figure 14 Rarity and Representivity

## 5.2 Degrees of Significance

This section aims to assess the degree of significance in terms of the proposed monument’s rarity and representivity (Figure 14). It is contended that the Rock is unique with none other like it. It is exceptional as a cadastral monument which has led to its endurance over time, unlike others of its period.

# 6 THE PROCESS OF THE HERITAGE STATUS APPLICATION

Apart from the drafting of the motivation document, there are some other aspects required for an application for heritage status of significant monuments.

## 6.1 Deciding whether to apply to National versus Provincial heritage bodies

South Africa is a Republic in which three tiers of government exist – national, provincial and local. These must collaborate in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996. At national level, the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) executes its functions as directed by the National Heritage Resources Act, No 25 of 1999. Applications of national significance would be directed to SAHRA.

At Provincial level, The Western Cape Provincial Government does likewise through their Heritage Western Cape (HWC) which is the Provincial Heritage Resources Agency (PHRA). Applications of provincial and local importance would be directed to the HWC.

Due to the local/provincial nature of the Hen and Chickens Rock and its significance, and the different processes of SAHRA and HWC, it was advised by historian, Antonia Malan, to apply to the HWC.

## 6.2 Property rights holders

It is necessary to identify landowners affected by any declaration of heritage status. The Hen and Chickens Rock (with its more well-defined point being the concrete cone and peg added centuries after first use) forms the boundary (corner) beacon of the properties identified in Table 6.1.

*Table 6.1 All properties associated with the Hen and Chicken's Rocks*

Location in relation to the beacon	Property description	Zoning	Owner
Northwest	Remainder Erf 234 Bishopscourt	Transport 2: Public Road and Public Parking	Roadway - vested
West	Erf 87 Bishopscourt	Open Space 2: Public Open Space	CTCC
Southwest	Erf 300 Constantia	Open Space 2: Public Open Space	CTCC
Northeast	Erf 56370 Cape Town	Open Space 2: Public Open Space	CTCC
Southeast	Erf 66002 Cape Town	Open Space 2: Public Open Space, Transport 2: Public Road and Public Parking	CTCC

Figure 15 shows the location of the rock with relevant cadastral information and the proposed heritage area indicated as hatched. The subdivision of the Bishopscourt Township in General Plan TP164 LD left a lane to the north of the Hen and Chickens Rocks (remainder Erf 234 Bishopscourt). Erf 87 Bishopscourt lies almost due west to allow for an access servitude for municipal waterworks. Thus, to its north and west, the beacon does not bound private property. On the eastern side are public properties for waterworks purposes (Erf 56370 and 66002 Cape Town). A sliver of land (Erf 300 Constantia) immediately to the south of the beacon was subdivided from Erf 299 Constantia in 1969, resulting in an additional boundary beacon placed on the primary Hen and Chickens Rock.

The Hen and Chickens Rock and adjacent boulders (the 'Chickens') also overlap into the private property of Erf 299 Constantia. The existing private property fenceline runs inside of that property boundary thus leaving all rock structures outside their fenced property area (see Table 6.2).

*Table 6.2 Private property on which part of the Hen and Chicken's Rocks may be located*

Location in relation to the beacon	Property description	Zoning	Owner
Southwest	Erf 299 Constantia	Agricultural	ABATHOTHE FAMILY TRUST, Deed of Transfer T6696/2004

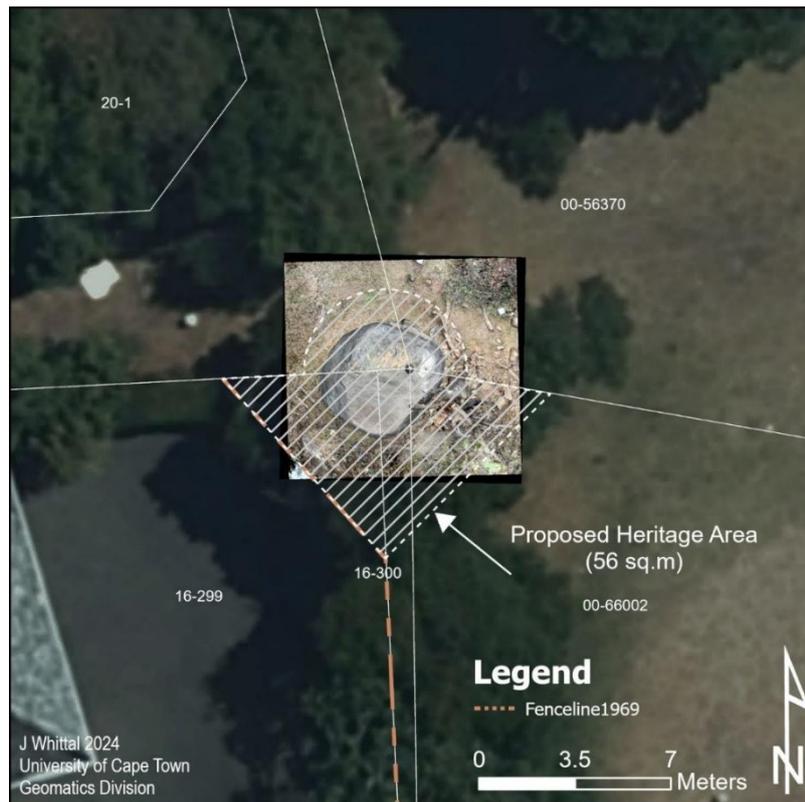


Figure 15: Proposed Provincial Heritage Area (hatched) with cadastral boundaries and the Hen and Chickens Rock. The existing fenceline is indicated in orange – it has been in that location since at least 1969.

The Abathothe Family Trust was consulted in person by visiting residents of the property who are Trustees, and subsequently via WhatsApp with all Trustees. All documentation was provided to the Trustees well ahead of the application and hearing.

### 6.3 National role-players and supporting documentation

At the outset, it is important to establish support for a heritage application. For this application, support was obtained from the following institutions:

- Office of the Chief Surveyor-General, DLRRD
- The Chief-Directorate: National Geospatial Information (of the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development – DLRRD)
- SA Geomatics Institute
- SA Geomatics Council
- International Astronomical Union (IAU) Commission 3 (History of Astronomy)

### 6.4 Property access

The property is under the control of the City of Cape Town Waterworks Department, Wynberg office. This Office was consulted and access was granted to survey the site using theodolite,

EDM, and laser scanning. The Office cleared the area of a large tree overhanging the Rock, to improve visibility. The site is not accessible to the public without permission, being behind locked palisade perimeter fencing.

## **6.5 Surveying and plan preparation**

The applicant has strong affiliations with the Global Digital Heritage Afrika (GDHA) group based at the University of Cape Town. GDHA agreed to laser scan the Hen and Chickens Rock in support of the application, and to document this site in their archive. This scan may be viewed here: <https://globaldigitalheritage.org/model/hen-and-chickens-rock-cape-town-south-africa/>. The preparation of the plan (Figure 15) was undertaken in ArcGIS Pro by the applicant and author.

## **6.6 Local residents and Councilor**

While fieldwork was conducted, a number of informal interactions with neighbours took place. In addition, the Councilor for the area was informed and consulted by email. There is broad interest and support for the heritage preservation initiative.

## **6.7 Historian Antonia Malan**

Historical archaeologist, Dr Antonia Malan, was consulted from the outset. She has vast experience of heritage preservation matters and assisted with the drafting of the motivation document. Dr Malan was also present as an observer at the hearing held by HWC. The author was not able to attend the hearing.

## **6.8 Hearing and Appeal**

HWC held a hearing to assess the application on the 8 November 2024. The author (applicant) was informed about the hearing (and not by the HWC) too late to attend due to prior commitments. The application was rejected without reasons being provided. Dr Antonia Malan was able to attend and reported that the committee felt that there were too many uncertainties in the proposal.

Appeals may be lodged to the HWC Appeals Committee. Since the HWC has as yet provided no formal feedback as to their reasoning for the rejection of the application, despite request, an appeal has not yet been lodged.

# **7 REFLECTIONS**

This paper has reported on the process and content of an application to designate the Hen and Chickens Rock and area immediately surrounding it as a Western Cape Provincial Heritage Area. It reflects the considerable work necessary to prepare the necessary documentation. This involves investigating the intersectional significance of the artefact in order to justify its preservation

In reflecting on the process, the following suggestions may be made for future submissions or an appeal for this case:

- Provide letters in support of the application from a broad range of interest groups.
- Reduce the amount of conjecture in the proposal where possible.
- Hold a public meeting inviting all interested parties to attend prior to submission to HWC
- Clearly align the motivation document with the application forms, making sure that there is perfect alignment of the information presented in both.
- Assistance from the HWC may not be forthcoming. It is noted that the documentation was provided to the HWC contact with a request for assistance prior to formal submission for consideration. This was not forthcoming, while the application was processed as is, without further consultation. It is recommended not to involve the HWC until the application documentation is final.

It was a time-consuming process to apply for heritage status for the Hen and Chickens Rock. However, the process was fascinating and worthwhile, and some lessons have been learned.

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## **BIOGRAPHY - JENNIFER WHITTAL**

Jennifer Whittal is a Professor in the Geomatics Division at the University of Cape Town. She obtained a B.Sc. (Surveying) and a M.Sc. (Engineering) specialising in global navigation satellite systems from the University of Cape Town. In 2008, Jenny obtained her Ph.D. from the University of Calgary applying critical realism, systems theory and mixed methods to a case of fiscal cadastral systems reform. She is a Professional Land Surveyor and lectures advanced surveying and land law. Research interests are land tenure and cadastral systems with specific interest in sustainable development and resilience in land holding for the poor, historical property holding, and cadastral issues in the coastal zone. Jennifer was the past Chair of the Africa Regional Network of the FIG and now serves on the board of the FIG Foundation. Jennifer spearheaded the development of the FIG Mentoring Programme for Africa.

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