



The sandbags in the dig site

Concrete blocks help preserve heritage site

Die Kelders Cave, also known as Klipgat Cave, just outside of De Kelders in the Walker Bay Nature Reserve, is one of the most important cultural assets in the Western Cape. The remains found in the cave date back to between 65 000 and 85 000 years, at a time when the ocean was at a distance of around 5 km from the cave. Such early remains have been found in only three South African sites and in the Middle East.

The cave was first excavated under the direction of Franz Schweitzer in 1969 to 1973. Schweitzer found the first evidence that later Stone Age sheep-keeping Khoikhoi pastoralists were already living in the Western Cape 1600 to 2000 years ago. He also discovered 2000 year-old-pieces of pots that the Khoikhoi or their San-Hunter gatherer antecedents had discarded amongst the stone and bone artefacts and remains of the shellfish, fish and other animals

they had eaten in their cave campsite.

In 1992, a joint venture led by Fred Grine (State University of New York at Stony Brook), Richard Klein (Stanford University), Curtis Marean (State University of New York at Stony Brook) and Graham Avery (Iziko, South African Museum), funded by the National Science foundation in the United States of America, was established to extend the original excavation.

Three years later the renewed excavations had significantly enlarged the artefactual and faunal samples from the inadequately sampled and less intensely excavated lower middle Stone Age layers, increased general understanding of the complex site formation processes within the cave and enlarged the hominoid sample from the middle Stone Age deposits.

The investigations of the middle Stone Age fauna document a large mammal community. These include Eland, Southern Reedbuck, Southern Springbok, Blue Antelope, Bontebok, Hartebeest, Black Wildebeest and Quagga. Also present



are the extinct Cape Zebra and the giant Long Horn Buffalo. Large carnivores, likely to have been abundant during the middle stone age include Lion and Leopard, while the deposits document the presence of Brown Hyena. The region is also historically rich in smaller mammals.

In summary, the combination of shelter, provided by the cave, fresh water from the springs, a rich marine environment, combined with a diversity of terrestrial foods makes the Die Kelders Cave network an attractive location for regular prehistoric settlement.

During and after the 1992 – 1995 excavations, the sections were protected with sand bags filled with sieved sediment. Damaged plastic bags were replaced or re-arranged on a two year basis by Graham Avery, Archaeozoologist, Natural History Division at Iziko South African Museum and Wilfred Chivel, a local businessman. The long term goal, however, was to achieve a more permanent solution.

For this purpose, Deon Geldenhuys, manager of the Walker Bay Nature Reserve, managed to secure some Lotto funding,

L18 blocks easily follow cave contours





which is now part-paying for the development of the site. With the permission of the Western Cape Heritage Agency, Braam Auret, Consulting Civil and Structural Engineer hired by CapeNature to manage the project, decided that the sand bags would be carefully removed and replaced with Terraforce L18 retaining blocks, as specified by the consulting engineer.

A further stipulation by Auret was that a "Terraforce recommended Contractor" be appointed to carry out the works. Cape Wall CC was approached by Nizaar Construction CC and subsequently appointed. The decision to use the Terraforce L18 block was based on its medium size; thus giving the flexibility of accommodating small radii. A further consideration was the ease of material handling.

Due to the archeological and historical significance of the excavation, great care had to be taken to maintain the integrity of the original excavation. With this in mind, Paul Collins of Cape Wall CC decided to employ a small team, consisting of a supervisor with three of his most experienced workers. This strategy ensured strict quality control throughout the contract. The project was closely monitored by Dr. Avery,

whose input was most valuable, informative and fascinating.

The logistics of this contract were challenging; some 2,200 blocks had to be transported by hand down 200 steps, then across a boulder strewn beach and finally through two caves, the first of which was guarded by a particularly aggressive hive of bees which resented the invasion of their privacy.

Says Collins: "this project was by far the most challenging and rewarding of my career to date, the result was a tribute to great team work from all of the players. I would like to thank Nizaar Construction for their contribution in overcoming the logistical nightmare of delivering the blocks to the work site and finally to my team of Nathan Nel, Livingstone, Joseph and Washington whose sensitivity and awareness of the Klipgat project were invaluable."

Collins feels that the project was a good example of how government, at all tiers, consultants, contractors and local people can collaborate to achieve the preservation of natural heritage, with positive results. Dr. Graham Avery agrees:



Windows were left to show dig layers



A walkway was added for visitors

"I've had very positive reports about the result from Dr. Janette Deacon, Chair of Heritage Western Cape, and Wilfred Chivel who has assisted me with the maintenance of the bagged walls since 1996. Both are impressed and I think we'll have more positive responses as more people see the result."