

UNIONDALE, WESTERN CAPE - TOWN GUARD FORTS OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR (1899-1902)

History

It is clear that Uniondalers felt confident that they were far removed from the war zone, even after receiving news that the Boer commandos had entered the Cape Colony and were percolating down to the west and towards the coastal plain. The British military authorities were also remiss in not advising towns such as Uniondale and nearby Willowmore to look to their defences. Even Dr R Morrow, in his account of his time spent in Uniondale in 1901 as a locum while the District Surgeon was taking a holiday, states that he was assured in December 1900 before leaving Cape Town that the Boers would not come so far south.

Commandant Gideon Scheepers and his commando attacked Willowmore on 19th January 1901, following the second Boer incursion into the Colony, but the Town Guard of 320 white and coloured men put up a spirited resistance. As a result, Scheepers moved on towards Uniondale more speedily than he would have if he had taken Willowmore and been delayed by the usual looting. For Uniondale it was too late to make the necessary preparations to repel the commando, and those with transport left the town during the night of the 19th or early the following morning; those who remained stood around exchanging views, and the coloured people sat silently in their small homes anticipating the worst.

The Boer "outposts" (scouts) were reported in the surrounding hills at 11 am on 20th January and the Scheepers' commando of about 50 men rode into Uniondale around mid-day. The telegraph operator sent off a quick message to his head office announcing the arrival of the Boers, and then left taking his equipment with him. The commando was met by the Resident Magistrate as it rode into the town, and demanded and received the keys of the Courthouse and the Jail. The Boers then seized all the usable horses.

Dr Morrow came across Scheepers as he entered the hotel; the latter had a bundle of letters taken from the post office and was sitting reading them. Morrow went through to his District Surgeon's offices, then later returned to the hotel where he met Scheepers' adjutant and great friend, Free State lawyer Judge Henry Hugo. Hugo invited Morrow to the bar to take a drink with him, which the doctor did not dare refuse. This would be an occasion where, in more settled times, the 'loyal toast' to the Queen would have been proposed and accepted; but not on this occasion! However Morrow's Irish "fertility of resource" came to his rescue and he spoke up "Well! Captain Hugo, the only toast I can in the circumstances offer you is the wish that you may never trouble a doctor."

That afternoon the Boers let any white prisoners out of the jail and replaced them with the magistrate, the jailer and the English Church Minister. The Boers that evening sang

hymns, drank coffee and spent time in the company of the local girls. The following morning (21st January) at breakfast in the hotel, where the Boer officers were enjoying their meal, a messenger arrived and asked to speak urgently to Scheepers, and very quickly the commando saddled up and left Uniondale in some haste as the British relieving force was firing from the surrounding hills into the town.

The British force of Mounted Infantry under command of Lt-Col W H Williams entered the town just before 10 am. The first priority was to break the three prisoners out of the jail, which was quite an undertaking and was said to have taken them a day and a half. Soon after, a town commandant was appointed and a Town Guard formed (at last) and speedily "rendered the town a small fortress". On the 22nd January Williams moved out towards the Oliphants River, leaving a garrison in the town. Later in his account, Morrow writes "The Boers are at a farm six miles away. The captain of the Town Guard doubles the outposts. Scouts are sent out. Water and ammunition are quietly sent up to the little forts." So it appears that the forts were built shortly after the Scheepers brief occupation of the town, possibly still in late January 1901. The Boers made another attempt to take the town but, when fired on from the forts, they retired; the Town Guard slept in the forts that night.

Dr Morrow's impressions of his time in Uniondale are easy reading and entertaining. Unfortunately for the historian, he gives no dates as his account is not in the form of a diary. At the start of his account, Morrow states that "the engagement will be for four or, if necessary, five months" and he appears to have arrived 10 or 11 days before the Scheepers incursion of 20 January 1901, so around 9 or 10 January; thus at the latest, if his locum went according to plan, he would have left the town around 10 June.

Taffy and David Shearing, in their book on Scheepers, state that the Uniondale Town Guard "later peaked at 46 Whites and 95 Coloureds", i.e. a total of 141 men, with B W Edmeades elected as captain and C C Markotter as lieutenant.

At 4 am on 1 June 1901 Scheepers again attacked Willowmore, which was defended by a garrison numbering 263 men. Willowmore, probably because of its successful defence of the town in January, does not seem to have followed Uniondale's example in building a series of small stone forts in the surrounding hills. So when Scheepers arrived again, the commandant, Captain R Diespecker, had to content himself with forming a series of 'defensive posts' around the periphery of the town; the nature of these posts is not explained. From these posts, another stout defence was mounted with the outer posts, manned by the Native Contingent, sustaining the most casualties. By 11 am firing had ceased and Scheepers' commando broke away towards Aberdeen. Scheepers had probably heard that Uniondale was now defended by forts and decided not to go that way this time.

There were Boer engagements near Uniondale in August 1901, but the main action was nearer to Avontuur, on the old Thomas Bain Pass over the Witberg or Zondag-se-

Berg, which at that time linked Avontuur with Uniondale (near the southern end of the present-day Uniondale Poort, which was only made into a proper road in the 1920s.) Here the Scheepers' commando clashed with the 10th Hussars on 18th August, the Hussars being badly mauled.

The forts

I first visited the prominent Uniondale fort (which I refer to in this account as 'Fort 1'), in September 1998. Declared a National Monument on 10 December 1976 in the Government Gazette, the declaration notice (No 2413) states that "four similar structures were built at the time..." and "These fortifications differed considerably from other forts in the Karoo and along the West Coast." I have also read another account stating that six forts were built, so there is some doubt about the true number. Since my first visit, I have had in mind another period in Uniondale to identify and record the other forts.

So in April 2013, Alwyn du Preez and I (both of us being members of the S A Military History Society, Eastern Cape Branch – SAMHSEC) speedily reserved 3 days to travel from Port Elizabeth to Uniondale to research and carry out field work to establish how many forts had been built and what remains to be seen. We found four of the five (or six) forts, all built to the same approximate design, with the following features:

- (i) roughly circular to slightly oval in plan.
- (ii) a covered entrance about 600 - 700 mm wide, protected by a concentric screen wall built outside the entrance to form a narrow access passage the same width as the entrance (a design which one commentator has termed "snail shell").
- (iii) the walls rising to a height of about 2 metres above the inside floor. They are vertical internally, with a pronounced batter (slope) on the outside, giving a wall thickness of about 800 mm at the base and tapering to around 500 mm at the top (Fort 4).
- (iv) widely-splayed loopholes at about 1.0 to 1.3 metre intervals near the walltop, the opening being about 450 - 600 mm wide inside and tapering originally to an external opening about 100 - 150 mm, with a sill about 1.4 metres above inside floor (Fort 4 only).
- (v) the wall construction is of local natural stone ('koppie klip') set in what is usually termed 'mud dagha' or 'veld dagha' (mortar); this usually comprises crushed termite mound and small stones to which water and sometimes lime were added (I have not had the mortar of these forts analysed for chemical composition), giving a strong and durable mortar.

The locations of the four forts we recorded are shown on the accompanying map.

Fort 1

GPS co-ordinates S33° 39.6' E23°08.0'.
Elevation (above mean sea level) 860 m.

This is the largest of the four forts we recorded at Uniondale, measuring 6.2/6.7 metres diameter internally, with an entrance passage 3.5 m long. The 1 metre-wide entrance is, unusually, away from the town; this may be because the attacks were to be expected from the direction of the town (NW), but most likely because the entrance to the SE was covered by Fort 2 on the same koppie.

This fort was much restored by local enthusiasts in 1976 and, despite being declared a National Monument in December that year, there appears to have been little if any supervision by the National Monuments Council over this restoration. This resulted in the loopholed top of the circular fort wall being rebuilt in four courses of brickwork (using what appear to be sun-dried bricks), with a topping of natural stones; this in itself is honest and not a bad idea because at least it does not try to fool visitors into assuming this is original masonry, and it may have been planned with this in mind. Whether any evidence existed of the loophole arrangement prior to this restoration is not known, so the present appearance must be regarded with suspicion (but it may have been copied from Fort 4). A second restoration was planned in 1998, in time for the centenary of the War, but this was never carried out.

During my visit in 1998, the circuit of loopholes and walltop was complete, but subsequently the top section of the wall circuit looking towards the town has been demolished by vandals, presumably to improve the view for the 'vertically-challenged'; there remain 4 complete loopholes on either side of the entrance. Also at that date, the NMC badge and descriptive plaque were mounted on a sloping concrete plinth near to the end of the screen wall by the entrance, but these metal devices have since been 'recycled' by metal thieves.

Around the outside of the W and S sides of the fort a revetment in unmortared stone standing about 1 metre high represents the edge of a platform built to level the site for the fort. This feature can be seen at several forts around the country, and was quite normal on rocky and uneven sites (a good example is evident surrounding almost the full circuit of the exterior of the large Town Guard fort at Jansenville, Eastern Cape).

Fort 1 is the most easily accessible of the 4 forts, being reached by a gravel vehicle track off the R339 tar road to Avontuur via Uniondale Poort, and is advertised to visitors by the Municipality as an historic landmark and viewpoint. It appears to have been the most important lookout post in Uniondale during the Anglo-Boer War, and is the closest one to the town.

Fort 2

GPS co-ordinates S33° 39.7' E23° 08.0'.
Elevation 858 m.

This is the smallest of the forts, measuring 3.0/3.5 m across internally. The entrance with its screen wall faces NW, i.e. towards Fort 1. Unfortunately all walls have been demolished/fallen down to between 0.3 and 1.5 m above outside ground level (internal

heights are difficult to gauge, due to the presence of thick vegetation and fallen wall stones). This fort commands the entrance to Uniondale Poort, a likely direction of attack by the commandos from the direction of Avontuur.

The remains can be viewed by walking from Fort 1 towards and past the high electronics mast, a distance of about 150 metres.

Skanse

Whilst in this area, it is interesting to note that there are two groups of large rocks, each set in a semi-circle, on the E lip of the koppie and a third double-group at the NE angle, which were probably skanse, each of which could give protection to a couple of riflemen. This was a wise move as it would be crucial to watch the valley below, which would have provided easy access for invaders from Uniondale Poort to filter around this prominent defensive location and attack the town from the E. Again a few metres E of Fort 1 there is a similar line of rocks, perhaps set as a screen for close defence of the fort.

Fort 3

GPS co-ordinates S33° 38.9' E23° 08.5'.
Elevation 819 metres.

This fort is unusual in being the only one constructed out of thin slabs of shale, a flaky form of compressed clay which delaminates and disintegrates easily on weathering; it was normal for stone for these forts to be collected off the ground (or even quarried) close to the site as, particularly in this case with difficult access, it was expensive and time-consuming to cart rock to a fort site. In addition to this and probably due to the material used in its construction, the interior of the fort is filled to the walltop with stone rubble. The walls rise to between 1.7 and 2.0 m in height externally, with the entrance and screen wall in the usual position towards the town; the entrance passage is 0.7 m wide and the entrance splayed from 400 mm wide at the inside to 650 mm in the passage. The fort measures 4.0/4.2 m across internally, with a wall thickness at the present walltop of 600-700 mm. The upper parts of the walls and all loopholes have been lost, and there is also much masonry rubble around the outside of the fort.

Access to this fort is quite difficult through thick bush, from a business yard near the turn-off to the golf clubhouse.

Fort 4

GPS co-ordinates S33° 38.6' E23° 07.5'.
Elevation 862 metres.

This is the best-preserved of the four forts recorded so far. The walls are built out of good-quality red-yellow sandstone, with the usual mud dagha for mortar, and the fort measures 4 6/5.0 metres across internally. The walls stand to a maximum outside height of 2.8 m towards the town and 2.0 m inside; they are 800 mm thick at the base

and 500 mm at loophole level. Five loopholes have survived to the E of the entrance and three and a half to the W; they are widely splayed to the inside and of similar dimensions to those in Fort 1, which were probably copied from Fort 4. The wall sections to the N and NW have been lost down to 0.3 m above the floor inside. The 700 mm wide entrance with its screen wall face the town; the wall is low so that a defender at the loophole W of the entrance can fire over the wall. A curious feature is the foundation of an extension to the screen wall running in the opposite direction (anti-clockwise) for about 2 m, which may have been an error on the part of the builders or possibly represents the outer wall of a platform designed to level the site for the fort (see Fort 1).

Access to this fort is not difficult; from the junction of the main road through the town with the N9 highway to Willowmore (where a petrol station and shops are being built at Mooiuitzicht), we crossed the N9 and followed the disused wagon track up and onto the ridge, then followed a dirt road to the left to reach the fort, a total distance of about 2 kilometres.

The other fort/forts

Nobody we consulted in the town could tell us the location of the 5th (or 6th) fort. We checked out a turn-off from the N9 (almost opposite the junction with the main road through the town, on the Oudtshoorn side), but it turned out to be the municipal rubbish dump! We then drove out on the N9 towards Oudtshoorn for 6 kms and, from the road, checked out two prominent koppies N of the road, marked on the 1:50 000 survey map (3323CA Uniondale) with heights of 810 and 814 m and, whilst engaged in this, a bakkie drew up near us driven by the owner of this land who forbade us to enter. By this time, we were running short of the time we had allotted so could search no further.

Possible locations of an additional fort(s), apart from the above, are considered to be:

1. Near the Coloured township at the S end of the town, most likely close to the N end of the old Bain Pass to Avontuur.
2. To the N of the town, going out on the Willowmore road where it passes through the koppies (perhaps near the trigonometrical point No 208, marked on the survey map with a height of 866.1 metres.

If further sites are found, we do not expect to discover anything more exciting than the foundations of a fort.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this was an interesting and worthwhile exercise. Uniondale is situated in a beautiful part of South Africa and fortunately, unlike many such towns, has not grown markedly since the Anglo-Boer War to obliterate the evidence of the forts.

I am especially grateful to my friend Alwyn du Preez for accompanying me on this field trip, for his cheerful company and for his helpful suggestions.

I am also happy to acknowledge help and advice freely given by various residents of Uniondale, especially Mr Carol Trehearn and the librarian at the Public Library.

References

'Uniondale 1901 – A Memento of the Anglo-Boer War' by R Morrow, BA, MB, ChB, Univ Dublin (Printed impressions of his service as a locum District Surgeon in the town during the first half of 1901, courtesy Uniondale Public Library).

'Uniondale in die Orlogsdae' (single typed sheet, author and date unknown, also lodged in Uniondale Library).

'n Dorp ontdek' by Petra Grütter (article in Afrikaans published in *Sarie Marais*, 25 Augustus 1976, on the restoration of the main fort and watermill.) Supplied by South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), Cape Town.

'Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave' by Taffy and David Shearing (Cape Commando Series No 2, privately published, 1999, 240 pages).

I shall be particularly pleased to receive any further information on Uniondale's forts that may come to light, to give a fuller account of this matter.

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Report by Richard Tomlinson after his visit to Uniondale 25 September 2013
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UNIONDALE TOWN GUARD FORTS – PHOTOGRAPHS, APRIL 2013



FORT 1 Interior showing loopholes (behind Alwyn) and entrance on right



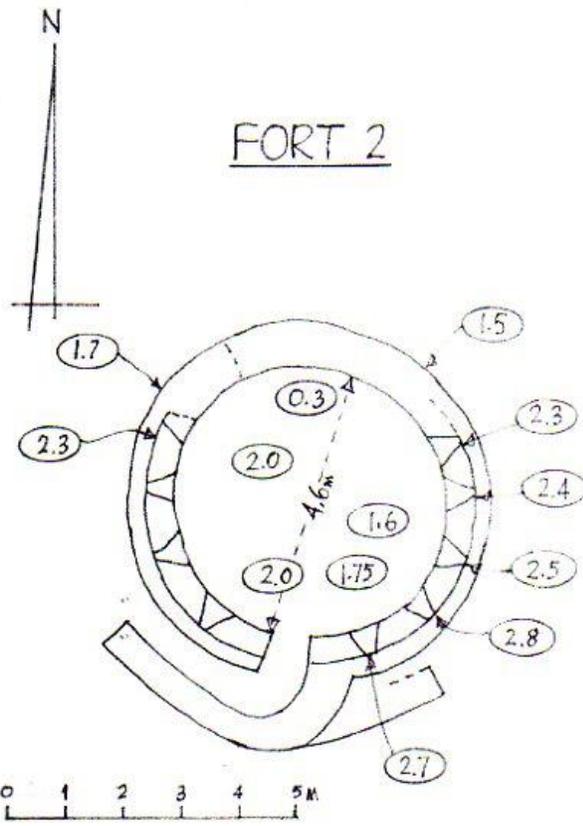
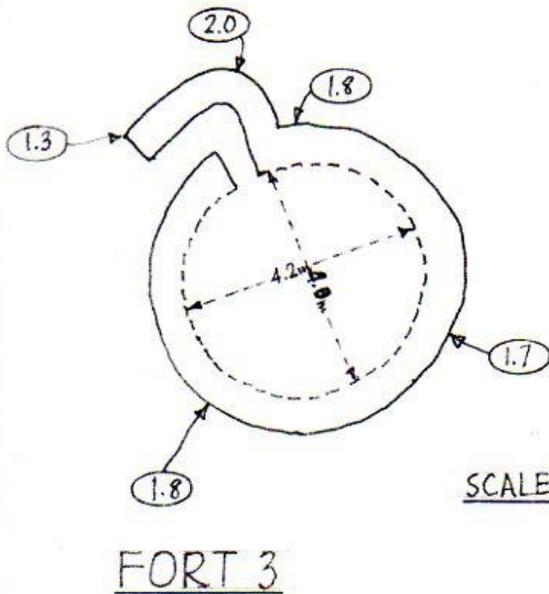
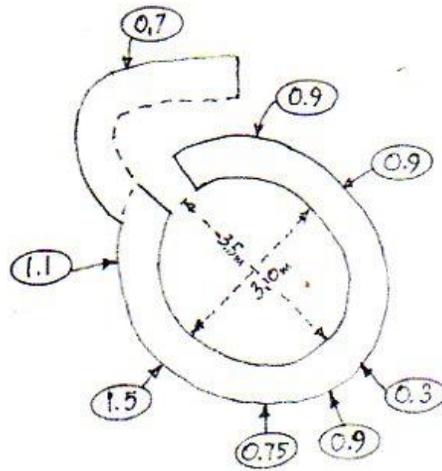
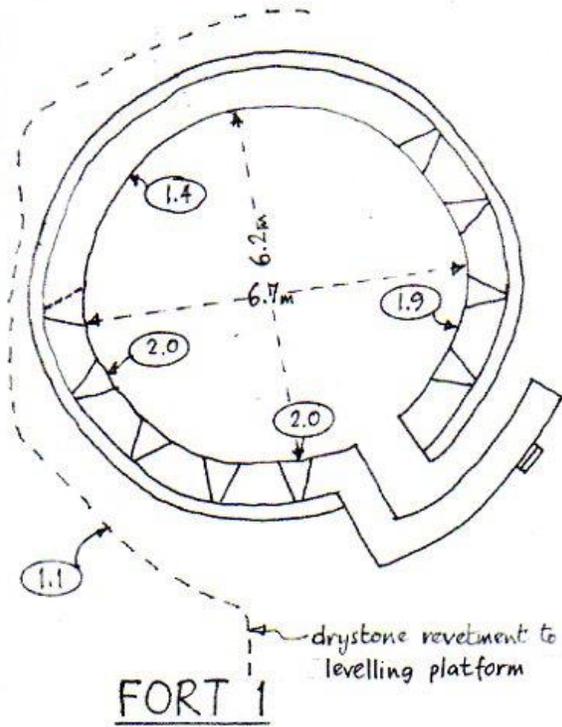
FORT 2 Exterior looking south



FORT 3 Author inside the fort, with screen wall on right



FORT 4 Alwyn measuring inside the fort

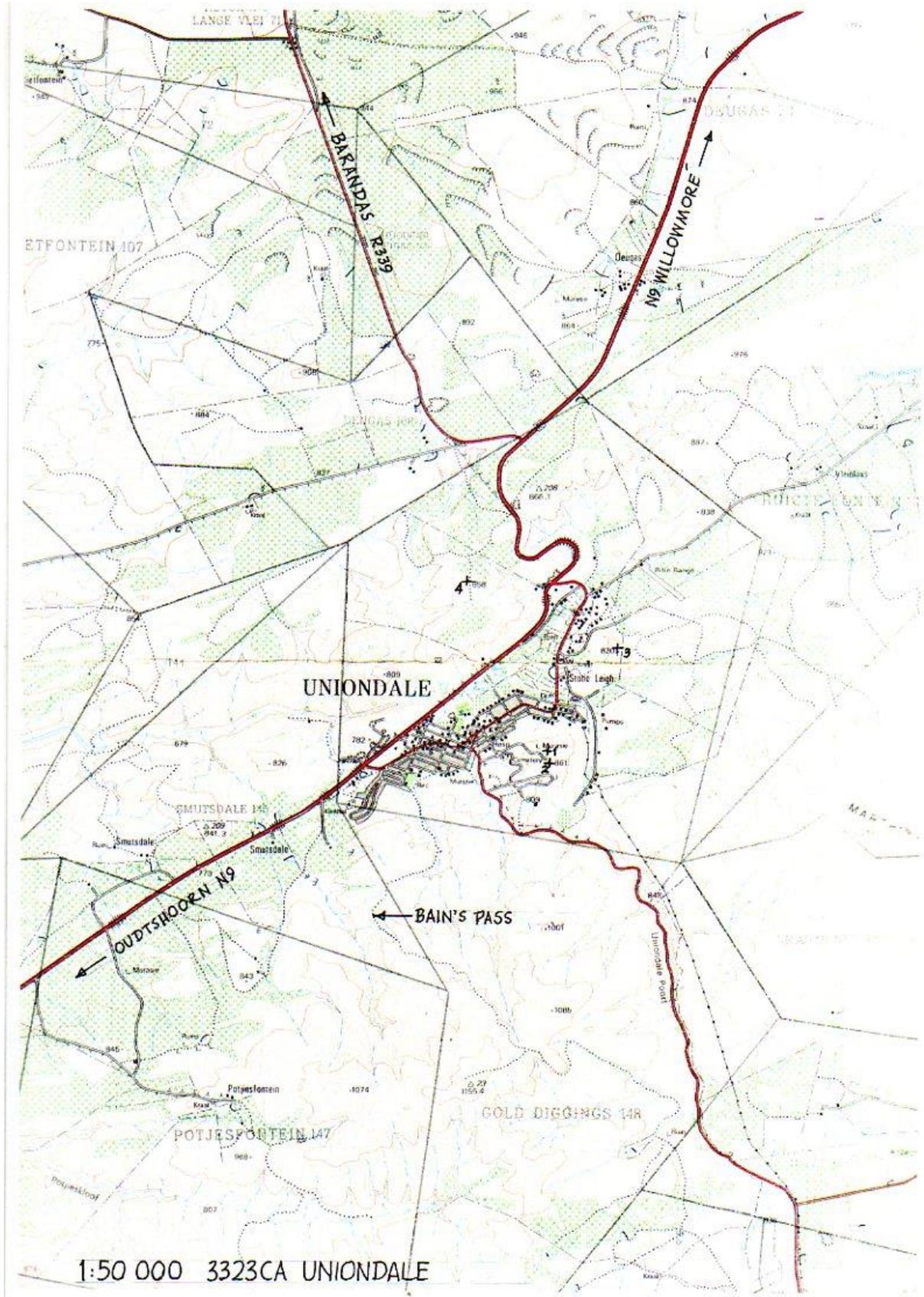


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UNIONDALE FORTS (1901)

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April 2013

Report by Richard Tomlinson after his visit to Uniondale 25 September 2013
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MAP SHOWING LOCATION OF UNIONDALE FORTS

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