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.” 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. 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 stems 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 stem 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.

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. 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. Subsequently two private dwarf jetties were built. One by the eminent merchant J.O. Smith in 1846 and the other by the Port Elizabeth Boating Company in 1857. 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.

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2. Unless otherwise stated, all statistics are derived from the relevant Cape of Good Hope Blue Books.
4. It was generally accepted that there were seven bales to the ton.
6. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
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 settlers landed. They were helped ashore by Scottish soldiers of the 72nd Regiment then stationed at Port 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

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⁸ Cape Archives Depot, Cape Town (CA), Colonial Office (CO) 5724, Schedule 530, 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. Butler, 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.
¹⁷ 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. 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. 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." In addition, the 1828 commission of inquiry 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.

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. This situation lasted up to the 6th Frontier War (1834-1835). 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. 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". The problem was even seen as one of the motivations behind the decision by some farmers to participate in the Great Trek.

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. 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. 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 pifflers, but have one virtue over the Hottentots, whom they have displaced as beachmen — they are sober.

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 Fingoes 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.

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 Fingoes, 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.

They were paid 3s 6d for a nine-hour day and six pennies an hour overtime. 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 Fingoes at command is not sufficient to work one half the boats".

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.
I have no quarrel with the Fingoes ... for they are a money-making
Another point of view was expressed in a local newspaper: 25
Two years later when the feasibility of opening the Baakens
was reminded that Mfengu beach labour cost about £.6 000
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 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
the labour, and the complete dependence on the Fingoes". 43

But local entrepreneurs saw high wages as the most im-
portant 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

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 autho-
ritv of this town, for tolerating the filthy, abominable, and beastly
practice of employing black savages in a state of NUDITY as labour-
ers on the beach. 44

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

June 1852 the Mfengu working for the boating companies
struck because the municipality had issued regulations re-
quiring 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. 47

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. 48

The two boating companies alone paid £7 000 a year in
"cooly hire". He calculated that a jetty would save about
30%.

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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 enor-
mous 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

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, 7.6.1854, 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 jour-
mal, 1841.
40 E.P. Herald, 11.1.1848 (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 Parlia-
ment 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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

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.

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

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

The Mfengu were bargaining from a position of strength. 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.

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 beachfront in June 1872, August 1876 and July 1877. 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. 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. 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.

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. MARBIN, 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 B.P. Herald, 14.2.1854.

71 M. MARBIN, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

72 E. P. Herald, 20.7.1877.

73 MARBIN, 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 3s 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, MARBIN, op. cit., p. 6, E. P. Herald, 1.1.1858 (Mfengu beach wages), and CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, Blue-book 1838, pp. cc 2-3, 1872, pp. cc 2-3, and ... 1885, p. 407 (other wages).