Notes and News

The South African Ox Wagon and its Place in our Urban Heritage

As Recorded in Early Photographs

Is there any more iconic image in South African history than the ox wagon? The wagon is to be found in paintings and drawings going back to the time of Van Riebeeck and subsequently captured on film, once photography came into being. The wagon was an entirely local invention. "The first South African ox-wagon was not an importation—it was strictly a home product. What is more, it derived from a meeting of cultures—the wagon from the new white settlers and the oxen from the indigenous population, the Khoi-khoi," wrote Jose Burman.[1]

The wagon was also for many months the homes of those who travelled in them. A detailed and very evocative description of what they carried was given by Edward F Sandeman in his 1880 account: *Eight Months in an Ox-Waggon: Reminiscences of Boer Life*.

> Our waggon was eighteen feet from end to end, and four feet six inches broad, fitted fore and aft with a large box running across the entire breadth. The front box formed the fore seat, with a foot-board in front. From the end of the front box to the end of the waggon ran a treble canvas tent supported with strong circular ribs, and this was our home and shelter for many months. In the front box we kept the smaller cooking apparatus (which was in constant use), our knives, plates, spoons, salt, pepper and various condiments, and whatever meat, bread, etc. we were eating at the time; also our carpenter's tools, cleaning rods for the

[1] Jose Burman, *Towards the Far Horizon: The Story of the Ox-Wagon in South Africa* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1988), 13.

Fig. 1-1. Bullock waggon, George district
Source: George Pape photo album in the possession the Author

guns, cartridges, matches and tobacco; in fact, it formed a receptacle for anything which did not have a fixed place of its own. The back box we filled with small stores of candles, jams, pickles, coffee, sugar, and rusks, so as not to be obliged to apply oftener than necessary to the large packages in the interior, which necessitated a partial unpacking of the whole waggon. Along the outsides we hung on hooks, or fastened, the spades, saws, and pick-axe, the poles for our tents, and a table—or rather the board which, supported by two brackets, formed a table—our frying-pan

> and gridiron, and the triangle sticks to hang the kettle from. Underneath the waggon, hung our kettle, cooking-pots and lantern, tins of anti-friction grease for the axles, and anything which either from its dirty nature of size, was unfit for the inside. A waggon before it is properly packed is "chaos'"in perfection, and takes a very long time to put ship-shape."[2]

The wagon became emblematic of early settlement and the development of the economy, since until the arrival of the railways it was the main mode of transport. There is a beautifully illustrated article on many aspects of the wagon and its development by the author and artist Graham Leslie McCallum, which can be found online.[3]

There is another side to the ox wagon, which cannot be ignored. "*Met die kreun van ossewa—Ruis die stem van ons geliefde, Van ons land Suid-Afrika*" were perhaps the most memorable words of our former national anthem. It also had a darker symbolism. The ox wagon also appears in the symbol of the *Ossewabrandwag*, the neo-Nazi organisation that was established to commemorate the centenary of the "Great Trek" in 1939. At the site of the Battle of Blood River sixty-four bronze wagons were erected as a memorial to the battle of 1838 and it is today contextualised with the Ncome Monument and Museum Complex on the opposite bank. The political importance of the wagon is indisputable. So too is their role in transport.

However, the principle aim of this brief article is to show how the ox wagon shaped South Africa's towns and villages. The wide streets were often constructed to accommodate the large turning circles required by the oxen and these dimensions are reflected in urban architecture to this day. It is said, for example, that the city of Bulawayo's streets were 120 feet wide specifically to accommodate Rhodes's desire to turn a full span of oxen.[4]

[2]Edward F Sandeman, *Eight Months in an Ox-Waggon: Reminiscences of Boer Life* (London: Griffith and Farrran, 1880), 51.

[3]Graham Leslie McCallum, *The Cape Wagon—Form Follows Function* [online resource] https://grahamlesliemccallum.wordpress.com/2016/07/14/the-cape-wagon-function-follows-form/ (accessed 13 July 2023).

[4]Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991), 496-497.

Fig. 1-2. Ox wagon in High Street near Dundas Bridge in Grahamstown
Source: George Pape album in the possession of the Author

These albumen photographs show the wagon and the oxen that pulled them in a variety of settings. Among the earliest is one showing Cape Town's Adderley Street. Originally called Heerengracht Street in 1850, the city's main street was changed in honour of Charles B Adderley, the British member of Parliament who supported the Colony's successful campaign against British plans to turn the Cape into a convict station.[5] The photograph not only shows a wagon with oxen in the foreground and ships on the docks in the distance, but what Hans Fransen described as the "glorious double-storey townscape of central Cape Town" that was to be lost when prosperity

[5]Adderley Street, Cape Town, *South African History Online*, accessed 18 February 2024 https://www.sahistory.org.za/place/adderley-street-cape-town

brought Victorian commercial architecture at the end of the nineteenth century.[6]

Fig. 1-3. Early Adderley Street with ox wagon and glimpse of Table Bay
Source: Photograph in the possession of the Author

Other ports were dependent on the ox wagon as a means of reaching the interior. Both Port Elizabeth and East London were hubs from which the wagons took cargo deep into the interior. The arrival of the 1820 settlers from Britain led to the decision to abandon Port Alfred at the Kowie River mouth as a possible port and to concentrate instead on the development of Port Elizabeth.

[6]Hans Fransen, *Old Towns and Villages of the Cape* (Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball, 2006), 44.

Therewith an increasing flow of traffic with the interior became focussed on Port Elizabeth, and increasing numbers of ox wagons rumbled along the main street that connected the landing place with the roads leading inland, to Grahamstown and other districts to the north.[7]

In 1854 it was reported that 4,000 wagons brought loads of wool into Port Elizabeth during the three shearing months, with a further 2,000 wagons entering with other goods.[8] The city must have been packed with the animals, their drivers and the products they brought.

Fig. 1-4. Main Street, Port Elizabeth
Source: George Pape photograph album in the possession of the Author

[7]Keith Beavon, "Factors affecting the growth and form of Port Elizabeth, 1820 – 1963: A Study in Historical Urban Geography" in Hilstan Lett Watts (Editor), *Focus on Cities, Proceedings of a Conference organised by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Natal, Durban, 8th-12th July 1968*, Institute for Social Research, 1970, 162.

[8]Jon Inggs, "Liverpool of the Cape: Port Elizabeth Trade, 1820- 70" *South African Journal of Economic History* 1, 1 (1986): 96.

Jon Inggs concludes that it was only with the discovery of diamonds and gold in the interior, and the expansion of the rail system that these ports went into decline, and with it the role of the ox wagons.[9] Yet even after the railway was constructed in the 1870s linking the two ports, the ox wagon continued to fulfil this function.[10] It was only the expansion of the rail system and the scourge of rinderpest that finally did for the wagons, although as late as 1905 the Cape Government Railways estimated that it was losing 45,000 tons of potential freight to its wagon competition in the eastern Cape.[11]

Fig. 1-5. Wagon crossing drift in eastern Natal
Source: Photograph in the possession of the Author

[9]Inggs, "Liverpool of the Cape," 98.

[10]Gordon H Pirie, "Slaughter by Steam: Railway Subjugation of Ox-Wagon Transport in the Eastern Cape and Transkei, 1886-1910" *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 26, 2 (1993): 320.

[11]Pirie, "Slaughter by Steam," 324.

At first the establishment of the Hopetown and Kimberley diamond diggings led to a sharp upturn in the demand for wagon transport. Thousands poured from Algoa Bay "heading for the drifts and especially for the new pontoons built for crossing the Orange River."[12]

Fig. 1-6. Wagons in Pretoria, 1890's
Source: Photograph in the possession of the Author

The main square around which the city of Pretoria was built was designed specifically to accommodate the ox wagons the farmers brought for the quarterly *Nachtmaal (*or celebration of communion). Marthinus Wessel Pretorius, the first President of the South African Republic (later the Transvaal) gave instructions that it would be made extensive enough to accommodate the many wagons and tents that would be erected around the square during the service.[13] Once again, it was the turning circle of the oxen that was critical. "In 1875 A H Walker, a qualified land surveyor, re-measured the erven

[12]Dennis Neville, Beatrix E Sampson and Clavil Garth Sampson, "The Frontier Wagon Track System in the Seacow River Valley, North-Eastern Cape" *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 49, 160 (December 1994), 69.

but he could not improve on Du Toit's measurements. Streets were made eighty feet wide to allow for an ox wagon to turn around."[14]

With the outbreak of the Second South African War in 1899, "initial Imperial optimism over the ability of the Colony's single track rail lines to sustain an abnormally large wartime freight traffic was not long in crumbling." The increasingly unreliable rail service saw a sudden scramble by the military to marshall sufficient ox-drawn wagons and mule trains to keep the troops supplied. This resulted in urgent auxiliary recruitment and a burgeoning of the black role in the war.

> ... African participation in the South African War was of some considerable scale, depth, and tenacity, [and] is no longer a particularly remarkable or novel finding. We now know that Africans generally were not passive spectators of "the white man's war," and that their reactions and initiatives had a distinctive bearing on the course of the struggle between imperial and republican camps.[15]

While it has not been possible quantify precisely how many African and "Coloured" transport drivers were recruited, Peter Warwick has estimated that any given time during the war there were 14,000 in the field.[16]

The wagons were needed not only to provision the troops in the field with food, water and medical necessities but also with munitions. The terrain was rough in every possible sense and frequently the unarmed transport drivers were caught in the crossfire between Boer and British troops. Limbers or gun carriages were sufficiently sturdy to transport the massively heavy artillery required in the field, including the legendary 2,500 kg Long Tom guns, purchased from the French manufacturers Le Creosot by the Boer military leaders. Sixteen to twenty oxen were required to pull these guns. One of the four

[13]Elizabeth Yolanda van der Vyver, A Critical Interpretation of the Temporal Impact of Landscape, Space and Power on the Built Environment of Church Square. Thesis (PhD), University of the Free State, 2018, 46.

[14]Van der Vyver, Critical Interpretation, 49.

[15]William (Bill) Nasson, "Moving Lord Kitchener: Black Military Transport and Supply Work in the South African War, 1899-1902, with Particular Reference to the Cape Colony" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 11, 1 (October 1984): 25.

[16]Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 21.

Long Toms the Boers had purchased was destined for the Ladysmith war arena ahead of the Siege.

Fig. 1-7. Moving a 155mm Creusot Long Tom gun to Ladysmith, 1899
Source: Photograph in the possession of the Author

Finally, there is Market Square in Johannesburg, round which the city was laid out. The square stretched from Rissik Street in the east to Sauer Street in the west, bordered by President and Market streets. Lucille Davie wrote that:

> The eastern portion of the square became a produce and general dealers' market, while the western half was a cattle market. By 1895 shops, offices, and banks appeared on its perimeter. In 1888 a market house was built, and together with a shelter housing the town's first fire-fighting apparatus, it was the first building in the space.[17]

[17]Lucille Davie, "Joburg's Market Square Defined the Town" [online resource] *Heritage Portal,* (9 February 2018), https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/joburgs-market-square-defined-town (accessed 17 February 2014).

Fig. 1-8. A profusion of wagons in Market Square, Johannesburg
Source: Photograph in the possession of the Author

Into this space poured the wagons, drivers and traders upon whom the city came to rely. It must have been a busy area, with much business being done, to the huge benefit of a shrewd operator, Stefanus Papenfus, who took it over from the city.

> At first only a few wagons came each day; however, with the great purchasing power of Johannesburg, the market grew. After eight months a turnover of £50 000 had been achieved of which Papenfus reaped £5,000 against a modest £250 which accrued to the Gezondsheids Committee: which received 0.5% per annum of the turnover out of which it was expected to run the thriving young town. Within a year Paul Kruger complained that the Market Master in Johannesburg was making more money than the President himself.[18]

It was a familiar story. The wagons and the activities that they enabled played a key role in shaping the streets and squares of South Africa's towns and villages. Much has been lost to the changing urban landscape produced by the road systems introduced to facilitate transport by car, bus and lorry. But beneath the surface of our urban environments, it is still possible to find the permanent imprint of their predecessor: the ox wagon.

—Martin Plaut

Burchell's Drawings at the National Library of South Africa (Cape Town Campus)

Abstract

Museum Africa has more than 300 sketches and paintings by William John Burchell (1781-1863), the famous naturalist and traveller. The National Library of South Africa has a small book of seventeen of his field sketches. They are dated from 14 October 1814 to 5 April 1815. All but one of the sketches are views from between Mossel Bay and Stellenbosch drawn during his return to Cape Town from the Kalahari. They fill a gap in the pictorial record of his return journey, the narrative of which was omitted from his *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*.

Keywords

William John Burchell; sketches; artworks; National Library of South Africa; Museum Africa

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The naturalist, William John Burchell, is well known for his four-year trek through southern Africa and his contributions to natural history, ethnography and mapping of the region.[19] In 1817, he provided a laconic summary of his entire journey in an announcement of his forthcoming books on his

[18]"Johannesburg's Early Markets" *Heritage Portal (*16 August 2017) [online resource] https://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/johannesburgs-early-markets (accessed 17 February 2024)

[19]Roger Stewart and Brian Warner, "William John Burchell: A Multi-Skilled Polymath" *South African Journal of Science* 108, 11/12 (2012): 45-53 [online resource] http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i11/12.1207.