

THE BATHURST POWDER MAGAZINE PROJECT by David Forsdyke

Below: Aerial view of Powder Magazine
(Photo: Howard Butler)



Constructed in 1820, the Powder Magazine is probably the oldest building in Bathurst. This small stone building was once the core component of a military camp which was originally established as an outpost of the main base at Grahamstown while the new town of Bathurst was being developed. The site on which it stands was designated for a church on the first plan drawn up

by Johannes Knobel. However, its strategic position on top of the hill overlooking the proposed town was of more importance to the army and it grew into a considerable complex of fortifications and barracks in the following 15 years in response to the fluctuating security conditions of that time.

The small stone building constructed by the Royal Engineers was the centre of this outpost. The walls are approximately 60 centimetres thick with a domed ceiling. It was large enough to contain 275 kg of gunpowder, 60 muskets and 7000 rounds of ball ammunition. It was probably surrounded originally by a rampart of earth and wood. All the other buildings were crudely made of “wattle and daub” or mud and sticks, to be more precise.

The 6th Frontier War which started in 1834 forcibly demonstrated the strategic importance of Bathurst and the urgent need to strengthen the position. In July 1835 towards the end of hostilities, Governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban together with a group of senior officers visited the Post. They were entertained overnight by Captain Edward Forbes, the Officer commanding the southern districts, and his wife. On the following morning the Governor marked out two redoubts on the ridge near the post and construction started immediately. They were star-shaped earth works and were to be named Forbes' Redoubts but this seems to have applied in practice to only the eastern one. Each “star fort” was to be equipped with a field gun and the ridge became known as Battery Hill.

The barracks for the troops continued to be in wattle-and-daub huts. Even while they were occupied these huts required constant maintenance and they quickly disappeared when the army finally abandoned the position in 1854. The earthen wall around the Powder Magazine has been almost completely eroded but the ramparts of Forbes Redoubt are still visible under dense bush.

The bicentenary of Bathurst in 2020 was to have been the year that these early fortifications were once again made visible and available for visitors. The Powder

Magazine had suffered the effects of long neglect with a small fig tree growing through the roof and the door much damaged by vandalism and the weather. Unfortunately the Covid pandemic seriously disrupted the planned restoration activities by Historic Bathurst. However, once all the necessary permissions from the provincial and municipal authorities had been obtained, various volunteers have made efforts to improve the situation.



Left: Repairs to roof
(Photo: Tom Barrett)

At the beginning of 2020 alien invasive plants, mainly Lantana, were threatening to choke the access paths and to block the views over the surrounding country. A group convened by Victor Challis cut out much of the offending vegetation in the area of the Powder Magazine. The 200-metre long path from

there to the newly rediscovered, and remarkably well preserved, Forbes Redoubt was cleared by 2 men employed by Historic Bathurst. Wally Hill carted away many loads of plant material.

Right: Ficus sapling growing out of roof (Photo: Tom Barrett)



Later in the year Andre Malan applied his building expertise to remove the fig tree and its extensive root system from the roof. This required much deeper surgery than expected but already the scar is blending into the old structure. The repair of the door presented some interesting problems. Apparently, the original padlock had been replaced by unknown persons who had been using the building for their own purposes. Once this illegal lock had been removed it was possible to start planning the necessary repairs to the door and the interior. We were extremely fortunate to have the assistance of Martin Courts, a fully qualified professional carpenter and recent resident of Bathurst. He, together with David Forsdyke, stripped the old door and replaced the damaged components, including parts of the frame and the National Monuments plaque. It would be pleasing to say that the door is now back to its original condition but it became obvious that this was not the first restoration effort and it is not possible to say what the original was.

There is still work to be done inside the Powder Magazine where Historic Bathurst intends to create an interesting and informative display. Resident military historian, Rod

Hooper-Box has produced a series of posters covering all the relevant details and these will be available for viewing on request. It is also intended that the layout of the star forts will be marked out on the ground. But as a very well-used foot path runs through the site and with the prevalence of vandalism, a suitable technique for this has still to be found. The Powder Magazine was gazetted a National Monument in 1974.

Below: new door and sill (Photo: David Forsdyke)



REFERENCES:

Morse Jones, E. *Lower Albany Chronicles*. Volume 2 for the dates 8th and 9th July 1835 (relating to the visit by the governor Sir Benjamin D'Urban and colleagues in July 1835)