

Scottish ironworks and memorial drinking fountains

by Moray Comrie and Adrian Koopman

AS Britain and her Empire flourished and expanded during the Victorian age, the people of Scotland made a number of significant contributions to life “at home” and abroad. Amongst these was the manufacture of cast-iron structures and their embellishments and their export to the far-flung colonies. Two foundries in Glasgow, the Saracen and the Sun, were the sources of much of this ironwork, and in Natal it was the former that predominated.

The Saracen Foundry

The Saracen Foundry dated from 1850, when Walter MacFarlane, together with two partners, established W. MacFarlane & Co. Ltd and set up a foundry in the lane behind the Saracen Head Inn in Glasgow. Then 33 years old, MacFarlane had been employed by a jeweller, served an apprenticeship with a blacksmith, and then worked for 10

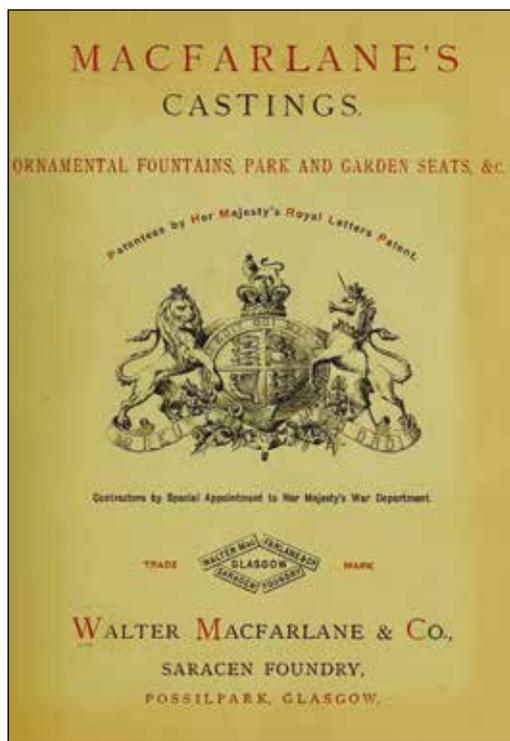
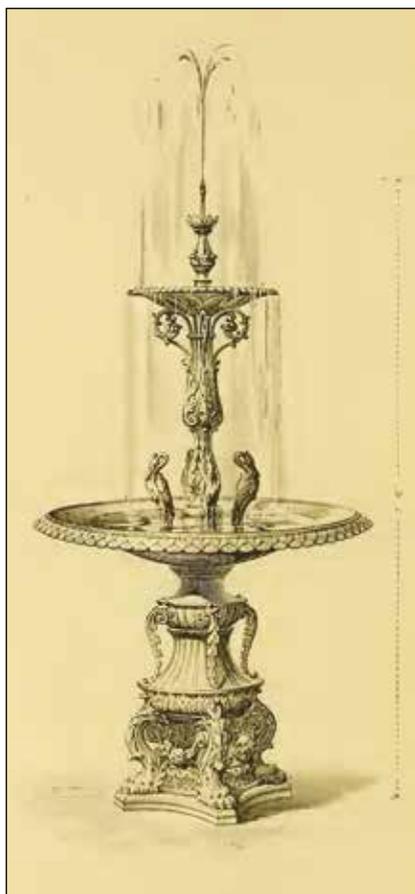
years in a local foundry before going into business on his own account.¹

It was a well-judged venture. In the late 18th century British engineers and architects had begun making structural use of iron, and by the mid-19th century the potential of cast iron for decorative elements had been realized.² MacFarlane’s business grew both rapidly and enormously, and his Saracen Foundry eventually occupied what was in effect an industrial estate (which he called Possilpark) with the foundry itself and accommodation for a workforce that numbered 10 000 by 1891.

A significant contributor to this growth was Mr MacFarlane’s nephew, also Walter, who joined the business as an 18-year-old in 1871, became a partner in 1880, and succeeded to ownership when his uncle died in 1885. If the older man had been a shrewd entrepreneur, the younger

Walter surely epitomized Scottish canniness. The casting process enabled pieces of ironwork in complex designs to be produced in great number and relatively cheaply. Walter MacFarlane II called upon some of Glasgow's best architects to draw up designs and insisted on high quality in the production of castings, which he standardized. He had large showrooms built at Possilpark, and, more significantly for potential clients in the colonies, produced a comprehensive catalogue.

Thus MacFarlane's Saracen Foundry launched into the production of all kinds of pre-fabricated cast-iron struc-



tures and their embellishments and into their export to all parts of the then British Empire. The colonials in their turn were able to procure functional and decorative ironworks, from railings and street lamps to fountains and bandstands, and, since the components were standardized, to page though the catalogue and make their own choices in matters of detail. This they did with enthusiasm. A great many items of MacFarlane's output came to Natal, and while the catalogue would not have used the term "broekielace", many buildings dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries exhibit these pieces of MacFarlane's work.

In this article, as there is not sufficient space to discuss all the various types of ironworks that made their way into the erstwhile Natal during the "MacFarlane era", we will deal here only with three

MacFarlane drinking fountains, all three of which found their way to Durban in the final years of the 19th century. These are the Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain, the Vasco da Gama Drinking Fountain (more commonly known as the Vasco da Gama Clock), and Currie's Memorial Drinking Fountain. We will also make mention of another MacFarlane fountain which is in Pretoria – the Sammy Marks Memorial Fountain, a “sister” of the Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain.

The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain

Still standing today in Farewell Square in Durban, facing the entrance to the City Hall, is the statue of Queen Victoria erected in 1897 to mark her Diamond Jubilee (the “sixtieth year of the glorious reign of our beloved sovereign”, as the wording on the plinth has it).³

No longer present, however, is the Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain, a large Saracen Foundry product erected in Durban ten years earlier to mark the

monarch's Golden Jubilee in 1887. It was placed in Farewell Square in front of what was then the City Hall and is now the central Post Office. Contemporary photographs show both the fountain and the building to have been splendid structures in an elegant setting. The ironwork of the fountain included three heraldic dolphins and three pelicans, and it had two overflowing basins that splashed into a circular collection pond.



The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain



Sadly, when at the end of World War I the Great War Memorial was erected on the site, the fountain was dismantled, the catch pool demolished, and the ironwork was removed and placed on a heap of stones in the children's paddling pools adjacent to what was then known as Ocean Beach and overlooked by the Hotel Edward.

A Wikipedia article on the Saracen Foundry states:

Macfarlane's [*sic*] most celebrated work is the Saracen Fountain in Alexandra Park, Glasgow, which they gave to the city after exhibiting it in the grounds of the 1901 Glasgow International Exhibition. Designed by D. W. Stevenson, and using casts of the



The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain, reinstalled in the beachfront paddling pool

What became of it is uncertain. That area has been remodelled several times over the years. Presumably the remnants of the fountain, its royal significance forgotten, simply rusted away in Durban's corrosive sea air.

The Sammy Marks Fountain

Pietermaritzburg urban geographer Rob Haswell has told us⁴ that the Sammy Marks Memorial Fountain in the grounds of the Pretoria Zoo shows striking similarities to the now disappeared Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain. The Sammy Marks fountain, like the erstwhile Durban one, was assembled from items chosen from the Saracen Foundry catalogue.

figures around his earlier 1878 statue of John Platt in Oldham, the fountain featured in the firm's advertising. Copies were later commissioned and erected in: Town Hall Park, Warrington (destroyed for the war effort, 1942; a model version in silver is in the collection of Warrington Borough Council); and the Sammy Marks fountain in the National Zoological Gardens, Pretoria, South Africa.⁵

This fountain has also been moved from its original location. Lithuanian-born mining magnate Sammy Marks imported it at the end of the second South African War and, when his wish to present a statue of President Kruger to the city of Pretoria was thwarted by the post-war British authorities, donated

the fountain instead. It stood in Church Square for only four years before it was moved to the Zoological Gardens. It was refurbished in 1970 and extensively renovated in 1989, and it was in the attempt to replicate the original colouring that the connection to the other two versions was discovered by the local renovators.



*The Vasco da Gama Drinking Fountain,
with its clock*

Since the Warrington version was melted down and its metal used for armaments during the First World War, the Pretoria fountain survives as a rare, albeit not unique, example of a MacFarlane masterpiece.

The Vasco da Gama Drinking Fountain

More fortunate than the Queen Victoria Jubilee fountain has been the Vasco da Gama memorial drinking fountain, known today only as the “Vasco da Gama Clock”. It too is a good example

of how a distinctive structure could be produced by selecting and combining standardized items from the vast MacFarlane catalogue.

In her book *Port Natal: A Pioneer Story*, Janie Malherbe provides a brief account of the opening of the memorial.

On December 25th, 1897, it was four hundred years since Vasco da Gama had discovered and named the eastern coast of South Africa, to which he gave the name of Natal. It was not till December 23rd of the next year, however, that the Vasco da Gama combined fountain and clock memorial was opened on Point Road by Miss Nicol, daughter of the Mayor, Councillor John Nicol. The clock had four faces which were illuminated at night from the inside by incandescent lamps, with a figure of Samson under the canopy holding an additional lamp. The drinking fountain, part of the memorial, was particularly chosen to commemorate the fact that Vasco da Gama and his men must surely have landed on this protected strip of land to replenish their store of fresh water. Sir John Robinson wrote a long epic poem in honour of Vasco da Gama’s discovery which ultimately led to the birth of Durban.⁶

Although generally referred to as a clock, the structure is in essence a gazebo with a drinking fountain inside it and a four-faced clock mounted on its dome, each of these elements being listed individually in the catalogue. A more detailed formal description of the memorial reads as follows:⁷

400 years after the Portuguese explorer, Vasco Da Gama, sighted land which he named Natal, a memorial drinking fountain was erected as a gift from the Portuguese government to the British Colony of South Africa. The original location of this structure in

1897 was at the corner of Point Road and Southampton Street, Durban, and was later moved to the Esplanade Gardens in 1969.

Casting number 20 is from Walter MacFarlane's catalogue manufactured by the Saracen Foundry in Glasgow, Scotland and sits on a two tier octagonal plinth. The drinking fountain canopy is supported by eight columns with griffin terminals, symbolic of guardians of priceless possessions.

The highly decorated fret detail arches are trimmed with rope detail. Cartouches contained within each lunette offer shields for memorial; a crane, the city of Durban seal, and a stylized 1897. Civic virtues such as temperance were often extolled in inscriptions on drinking fountains. Interior terminals are owls representing guardians of the afterlife. The ribbed dome is open filigree surmounted by four clocks facing east, west, north and south.

The font is casting number 19, a quatrefoil basin supported by a wide base with four lion jamba also acknowledged as guardians. The stanchion and central column are decorated with floral relief. Four tendrils protrude from the column to suspend drinking cups on chains. The capital supports the finial, a statue of Samson.

A plaque attached to the monument states that the memorial was erected by the Burgesses of Durban to commemorate the discovery of this colony by Vasco da Gama on Christmas Day AD 1497.

An engraved stone offers interpretation in English, Portuguese and Afrikaans to commemorate the fifth centenary of the birth of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese navigator and discoverer who named this land Natal. The monument was unveiled on 19 August 1969 by his Excellency the Portuguese Ambassador assisted by the Consul of Portugal and presented to the City of Durban by the Portuguese Club of Natal.

By 2010, the structure was in a state of disrepair and it was decided to restore it prior to the World Cup. The structure is protected under the Kwa-Zulu-Natal Heritage Act as a public memorial.



The Vasco da Gama Drinking Fountain (Photographs by Jewel Koopman)

In the event, this restoration did not take place in 2010, nor has it since, and the protection offered by the Heritage Act has been less than fully effective. The clocks no longer work, the commemorative plaque is no longer on the memorial, and two of the owls have gone missing. Even more distressing is that the font or drinking fountain has completely disappeared. When co-author Adrian Koopman visited the memorial in July 2015, he found in its place a rusted cast-iron drum, about 40 cm high. This had clearly been used for making fires, perhaps to warm the various vagrants sleeping peacefully nearby in the sun. It was not clear whether this makeshift brazier was all that was left of the original drinking fountain.



What remains today of the Vasco da Gama drinking fountain (Photograph by Jewel Koopman)

It appears that the proposed restoration of the memorial in time for the 2010 Football World Cup was shelved because of a lack of funds. The plan was not only to restore the structure, but to move it to a more suitable site. As noted earlier, the Da Gama clock had originally stood at the corner of Point

Road (now Mahatma Gandhi Road) and Southampton Street. Over time this part of Durban's docklands became decidedly seedy, hence the decision in the 1960s to move it to its present site on the bayside lawns and gardens along Margaret Mncadi Avenue (previously known as both the Victoria Embankment and the Esplanade).

Less than 20 years later, however, doubts about the appropriateness of that position were being raised. The eThekweni (Durban) Municipality official website has an undated "Call for Comment on Relocation of Vasco Da Gama Clock and Drinking-Fountain"⁸ which asks for public comment on the relocation of the memorial. It observes:

The 1984 survey of historic buildings and objects noted that the present site was considered inappropriate, as the position was arbitrary with no historical or spatial significance other than possibly the Navy's SAS Inkonkoni building, now the BAT Arts Centre, across the railway tracks. Furthermore mature trees in the gardens tend to obscure clear views of the memorial except for close by.

One option offered is to leave the memorial where it is; the other three are to move it 200 m from the present site so that it is visually linked to the Maritime Museum; to move it as close as possible to the original site at the entrance to the Point Docks; and to move it to a site within the Point Waterfront Area.

Interested parties are invited to submit their comments and suggestions to the director of Amafa aKwaZulu-Natal, but again, no dates are given. The matter is now in the hands of Amafa and the eThekweni Municipality. Presumably the costs of the exercise – dismantling the

memorial, refurbishing it, and erecting it at the preferred site – which were considered prohibitive in 2010, will have escalated further since then, but it would appear that the wheels are moving, albeit slowly.

The Currie Memorial Fountain

Since MacFarlane's cast-iron structures were what today would be termed pre-fabricated and modular, and designed to be shipped readily to clients anywhere in the Empire, it is not surprising that the three large pieces that came to Durban have all been moved at least once. The third to be dealt with in this article is the fountain known as the Currie Memorial Fountain.

There could be some confusion here, as the term "Currie's Fountain" is applied both to a locality in Durban and to the actual ironwork fountain, which is in a different place. It must also be noted at this point that there is some disagreement as to whether the fountain is in fact a MacFarlane product, and we shall return to this shortly.

In the mid-1870s the lack of an adequate supply of water for the town of Durban was becoming a critical problem. The town depended on a motley collection of public and privately-owned wells, hand-pumps and rainwater tanks. Various schemes for sinking artesian wells or piping water from the uMhlathuzana River were under consideration, and arrangements were even made with the Natal Government Railways for water to be brought from the uMngeni River in railway tankers and sold for a penny a bucket in town.

In 1878, however, H.W. Currie, a prominent citizen and three times a town councillor during the three preceding decades, had been given

sole control of boring operations, with access to a £500 grant that had previously been made by the Council. Much to everyone's delight, a well sunk on the flat ground below the Botanic Gardens relieved the town's water crisis by yielding 50 000 gallons daily. The place became known as Currie's Fountain. In 1879 Currie was elected Mayor, only to die in office the following October. Durban's Currie Road still bears his name.⁹

A decade later the Town Council erected a memorial to Currie at the corner of what were then West Street and Point Road, described by Lynsky in his history of the Durban City Engineers Department as "a lamp pillar and horse trough".¹⁰ A more detailed description is that the horse trough has a central plinth bearing the ornate lamp post, around the base of which an heraldic dolphin is entwined. On each side of the plinth stands a boy pouring water from a small urn or jar. Given the placement of these jars and the posture of the boys, the figures are strongly reminiscent of the Manneken Pis in Brussels, and the present authors were once among the many hundreds of Durban lads who nudged one another and sniggered at the sight of them, although the memorial is really entirely decorous.

A plaque in front of the trough reads as follows:

H.W. Currie Memorial Fountain.
Erected in 1889 in grateful remembrance of Mr. H. W. Currie, for many years a Town Councillor and Mayor in 1879–1880, through whose resource and perseverance this town was saved from a serious water famine by the establishment in 1878 of the wells and pumps known as Currie's Fountain at the foot of the Botanic Gardens.

As with the Da Gama memorial, by the beginning of the present century the Currie fountain was in a state of disrepair. Allan Jackson writes in *Facts About Durban – Scottish Ironwork*¹¹ that in 2004 he went to visit the Currie's Fountain Memorial and "found it to be a very sad monument indeed. There were pieces broken off it, one of the figures was leaning at a very odd angle, cracks had appeared, and the paintwork was in a very bad state".

A few months later, continues Jackson, the fountain had disappeared from its corner. His first thought was that it had found its way to a scrap metal dealer, but fortunately it had been removed for restoration. Martin Prange of the eThekweni Municipality Urban Design Department was able to inform

Jackson that restoration work was done at Keith Clayton Welding in Pinetown and that the fountain had been taken apart, sandblasted and aluminium mouldings made to replace the missing pieces. The fountain was re-erected by Gordon Verhoef and Krause in the Botanic Gardens, a very suitable location, as Jackson points out, as this was close to where Currie's original wells had been. His photos taken shortly after the restoration show the fountain (in his own words) "gleaming and resplendent in its new coat of paint".

The Sun Foundry

There remains, however, the matter of whether the Currie fountain is or is not a product of the MacFarlane Foundry. Mole's Genealogy Blog¹² thinks it is,

saying that the Da Gama clock and drinking fountain and the Currie fountain were both made by the Saracen Foundry in Glasgow. Allan Jackson¹³ has seen some papers from the Durban City Architect's Department which also state that the fountain was produced by Walter MacFarlane & Co., but he comes to a different conclusion after tracing a fascinating journey through documentation relating to remarkably similar fountains at St Arvans in Chepstow, Wales, and East Linton in Scotland. A report compiled when the St Arvans fountain was restored in the early years



*The restored
Currie's Fountain*

of this century states that the three fountains – St Arvans, East Linton, and Currie’s Fountain – were made by the Sun Foundry in Glasgow. The pictures of the British fountains certainly support this view. A closer look at the heraldic dolphin on the Currie fountain and a comparison with the heraldic dolphin offered in the MacFarlane catalogue show these to be different dolphins.

The Sun foundry had been established by one George Smith in Glasgow in 1858. George Smith and Co. advertised themselves “Art Metal Workers, Iron Founders and Sanitary Engineers”, and “Artistic Iron Founders”. Rival to MacFarlane’s Saracen Foundry, the Sun also produced ornamental ironwork for buildings, drinking fountains and bandstands, and, like MacFarlane’s, grew and expanded rapidly. Apart from the possibility that it was the source of the Currie fountain, however, the rivalry seems not to have extended to colonial Natal. Perhaps the question of the origin of the Currie fountain could be teased out in the *Notes and Queries* section of a future number of this journal.

Tailpiece

The possible irony of the proposed relocation of the Da Gama Clock has been mentioned, and, if the pun can be forgiven, perhaps there is further irony in all this iron.

As noted above, at the end of the



South African War Sammy Marks had first intended to donate to Pretoria a statue of President Paul Kruger, which he had commissioned earlier from sculptor Anton van Wouw. He hoped to have it erected in Church Square. The recently victorious British authorities, fearing an upsurge of pro-Boer sentiment, refused to allow this, and Marks substituted the fountain for the statue. Much later, in 1956, the Kruger statue was placed where Sammy Marks had intended it to be.

Meanwhile, the reason for the early relocation of the fountain from Church Square to the zoo was concern about the amount of water going to waste in the city centre. At the time of writing, a new variety of political intolerance is threatening the Kruger statue, and a nationwide drought is again causing anxiety about water usage.

NOTES

- 1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saracen_Foundry.
- 2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cast-iron_architecture.
- 3 See Koopman, A. "Statues of Queen Victoria", *Natalia*, 45, 2015, pp. 86–89.
- 4 Personal communication, January 2016.
- 5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saracen_Foundry.
- 6 Malherbe, Janie, *Port Natal: A Pioneer Story* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1965).
- 7 <https://memorialdrinkingfountains.wordpress.com/2013/08/26/da-gama-clock/>.
- 8 www.durban.gov.za/Resource_Centre/new2/Pages/Call-for-comment-on-Relocation-of-Vasco-Da-Gama-Clock-and-Drinking-Fountain.aspx.
- 9 Lynsky, Rory, *They Built a City* (Durban City Engineer's Department, 1982).
- 10 *ibid* p 12.
- 11 https://www.fad.co.za/Resources/scot_iron/scottish.htm.
- 12 <http://molegenealogy.blogspot.co.za/2012/09/heritage-month-vasco-da-gama-clock-and-htm>.
- 13 https://www.fad.co.za/Resource/scot_iron/scottish.htm.