

News

# Middelburg heritage group seeks location to relocate historic Anglo-Boer War blockhouse

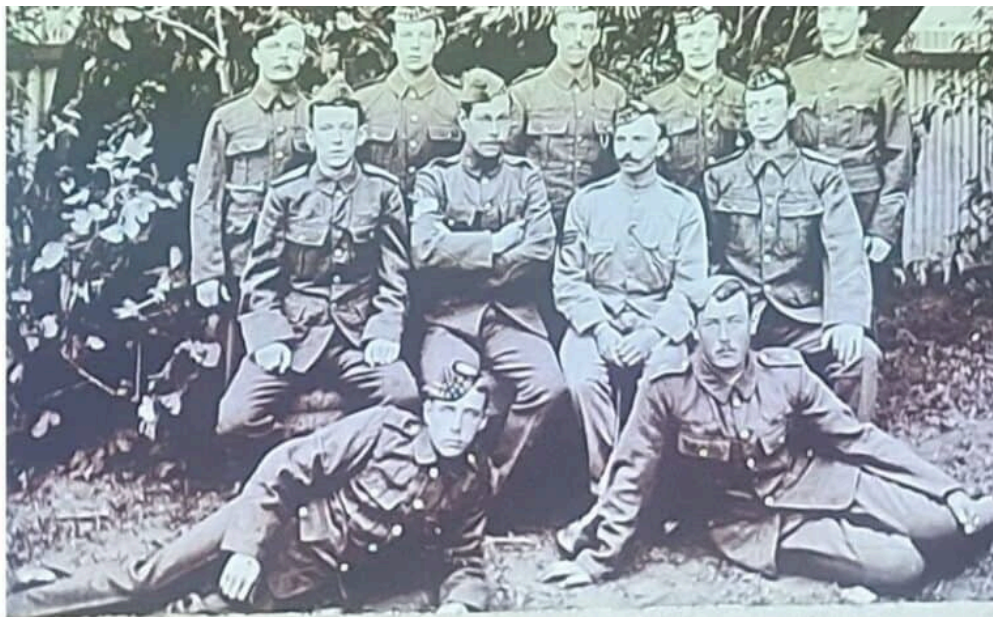
Local enthusiasts hope to bring a prefabricated Rice Pattern fort back to the area, provided a secure spot can be found to protect it from vandals.

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Tobie van den Bergh

2 minutes read



📷 The Royal Engineers Headquarters office staff during the Anglo Boer War. PHOTO: Supplied

The Middelburg Heritage Association is investigating several potential sites across the town to house and preserve a rare Major Rice Pattern blockhouse.

Simon Green, who is knowledgeable about blockhouses, confirmed to the Middelburg Heritage Association that he knows of a Rice Pattern blockhouse that could be moved to the town.

According to Rudi van Wyk, chairperson of the heritage association, there is also a blockhouse in Ermelo in which homeless people are currently sleeping in.

## Search for a suitable site

The main challenge facing the association is finding an appropriate location for the structure.

Unfortunately, the blockhouse and cannon post, after which Kanonkop is named, have deteriorated over the years to just a pile of stones. The foundations are still visible.

However, it would be foolish to move the blockhouse to the original site due to vandalism.

The corrugated iron sheets and other materials will be stolen just as quickly as they were put up.

Because the production of the Rice blockhouse took place near the Middelburg Station, it would have been ideal to move the blockhouse there.

However, the future of the station is uncertain at this stage.

Another possible site could be near the old church at HTS Middelburg.



The Rice block house near Kanonkop. PHOTO: Supplied

## Preserving local history

The heritage association is investigating all possibilities before taking the next step to move the structure.

According to Theo Ligthelm, there are still a few blockhouses left that need to be moved to conservation points.

“There is an opportunity to move such a Rice Pattern blockhouse, which was built here, back to Middelburg and preserve it together with a zinc roller as an example of innovation. Middelburg Heritage is currently trying to get the project off the ground and is looking for a suitable location for exhibition.”



A Rice blockhouse. PHOTO: William Martinson

## Designed for rapid deployment

Realising that thousands of blockhouses would be needed, Lord Kitchener resorted to prefabricated forts. Several prototypes were constructed, but the one developed by Major S. R. Rice was adopted. Kitchener's strategy was to divide the country into small areas during the Anglo-Boer War by fortified lines, preventing the Boers from crossing from one area to the next. It would be possible to move British columns by train into areas of Boer activity and attack them.

At the end of the war, there were over 8 000 blockhouses of all different types. Some 50 000 men were deployed to guard all the blockhouses.

The length of blockhouse lines covered up to 6 000km.

Most of the 441 masonry blockhouses were constructed between December 1900 and the early part of 1901. They were erected at important points, such as railway bridges, railway stations and towns.

The first metal blockhouse was built in Nelspruit in January 1901.

By February, Major Rice had developed his circular corrugated iron blockhouse. The circular design provided good all-round visibility, and the lack of corners did away with the need for wooden posts.

The steel door to the blockhouse was sheltered by another piece of corrugated iron. The Major Rice blockhouse could be erected in six hours by six men.

Each blockhouse was surrounded by a stone wall. Trenches were dug and stone sangars erected. This allowed the garrison to get in and out and fight from the prepared defensive position.



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