

# **The Date of the Martello Tower in Hambantota**

by

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*Abstract*

*The Martello Tower in Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka is the sole example of this fortification type in the country. It is a two storied, round gun-tower on a small hill, designed to be used as a defence structure. Although many agree that this is a British construction, the precise date of this tower was not known mainly due to the lack of records and the fact that several dates between 1796 and 1803 were proposed by various authors. The first mention of its existence was a record from 1806. This paper attempts to present documentary evidence for the date of the construction of the tower. According to records, the construction of the Martello Tower in Hambantota commenced after September 1804 and it was still under construction by May 1805. The construction of the tower was an idea of Major General D.D. Wemyss, Commander of the Forces in Ceylon, who ordered Lt. William Gosset of the Royal Engineers to construct a round tower to accommodate fifty people. It is evident that this tower was not used by the British for defence from the attacks of the Kandyans in Hambantota in 1803, and in fact, the need for such a defensive structure was prompted by those attacks. It appears that this tower has not been tested for enemy attacks.*

## **Introduction**

The Martello Tower in Hambantota town in the southern Sri Lanka is the sole example of this fortification type in the country. It is a two storied, round gun-tower on a small hill, which was designed to be used as a defence structure against attacks from the landside, and the ocean, and also to protect the small harbour of this coastal town. The tower was first used as a fort, and later, it came under the Public Works Department. It is said that it was used for military purposes during World War II. The tower was restored in 1999, and was used as a fisheries museum. It was expected to be handed over to the Department of Archaeology recently. The tower is said to be 25 feet in height and 120 feet and 4 inches in circumference with a diameter of 38 feet. It has 4 feet thick walls, which is less than the standard thickness of walls of a Martello tower<sup>1</sup>.

The origin of the name and the adoption of these towers as a defensive measure by the British are attributed to a round tower at ‘Mortella’ Point in Corsica, which was garrisoned by the French. The British troops were amazed by the remarkable defence functions of the tower during the battle (or the siege) of San Fiorenzo in February 1794. British forces who were impressed with the tower’s strength and the resistance it showed, conducted a thorough study on it. Its defence properties prompted the British to adapt it to their own military strategies after 1796. The name Martello is an anglicised form of the French word ‘Mortella’, where such a tower was first observed. The British built a number of such

towers in Cape Town, Nova Scotia in 1796, in St. Helena in 1797 and in Minorca in 1798. The earliest towers in Ireland were built in 1804 and in England in 1805 and more than one hundred were constructed along the south coast of England in 1805-1812<sup>2</sup>.

### **Suggested Dates of the Tower**

The exact date of the construction of the Martello Tower in Hambantota is not firmly established due to the unavailability of records. The suggested dates for the tower vary from the Dutch times to the British, with more scholars suggesting a period between 1796 and 1803, and certainly prior to 1806.

The popular belief was that the tower was erected by the Dutch who controlled the area in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it is also often suggested as a work of the Portuguese<sup>3</sup>. A poem from a Sinhala language booklet in verse, *Hambantota Lakara*, published in 1916 describing Hambantota city mentions that the Martello tower was a Dutch fortification. It further says that Malay troops stationed there captured the Kandyan Sinhalese who reached the southern coast to obtain salt from the salterns situated in the area<sup>4</sup>.

Brohier first suggested that the tower could be a 'memorial of Dutch occupation' and agreed that it may be 'half caste' as Bennett would have once mentioned<sup>5</sup>. However, Brohier later attributed 'the tower dates to early British Times'<sup>6</sup> after he published the diary of a

tour by Alexander Johnston while on a Supreme Court Circuit in 1806.

On Monday 17<sup>th</sup> November 1806, Johnston wrote:

... Shortly after passing the Maha Leway [sic] we arrived at Hambangtotta [sic] at about 11 A.M. stopped at the Commandant's House. ... Went to look at Mr. Smyth's house the collector built at his own expense, saw the house intended for a hospital but not covered in, went over the Tower built by Captain Goper of the Engineers<sup>7</sup>.

Abeyawardana stated that it was a British endeavour, based on the above mentioned Johnston's account, but he dated it to 1796. In addition, he observed that it was constructed prior to establishing the Martello Towers in Britain, i.e. in 1804. He also mentioned that the Kandyan attack in August 1803 was repulsed from the tower. However there is no source to this effect<sup>8</sup>.

Nelson mentioned that the tower was built by the British shortly after 1796 and stated that the only action it saw was related to the attack of 1803. Taking Brohier's reference of Captain Goper's involvement, Nelson stated that Captain Goper was an elusive figure at the time<sup>9</sup>.

Paranavitana and De Silva mentioned that "... although commonly called a Dutch fort, [MartelloTower] was in fact built by the British. It garrisoned a MartelloTower, a revolutionary defence

concept, on a small hill above the bay.” and added it was constructed “shortly after 1796”<sup>10</sup>.

In his detailed article on the tower, McCall concluded that the tower “was put up after 1803 but certainly before 1806”. He was the first to mention of this possibility, although he did not provide specific evidence to arrive at a definite date. However, he also mentioned that it is feasible to suggest that the tower is the fort mentioned by Cordiner during his tour to Hambantota in 1802<sup>11</sup>.

With the above mentioned sources, it is evident that there is no consensus on the date of the tower among these various authors, among whom almost all agreed that it belonged to the British times.

### **Determining the Exact Date of Construction**

The objective of this paper is to establish the date of construction of this tower, based on authentic records of the British administration. The documents available at the Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) show the commencement of the construction of the tower. The evidence for this includes letters written by various officials to the Secretary to the Government and to the British Governor, Frederic North, under whom the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka were administered from 1798 to 1805. Copies of these letters are available in the diaries of various departments of that Government.

On 20<sup>th</sup> August 1804, Lieutenant William Gosset of Royal Engineers and Engineer in the Southern District wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Military Board mentioning that he was ordered by the Commander of the Forces to have a round tower built at Hambantota. This letter was ultimately forwarded by the Military Board to the Secretary of the Government. It says:

The Commander of the Forces has ordered me to have a round tower built at Hambantotte [sic] to contain 50 men, I have estimated the expense [sic] of this building at five thousand Rix Dollars<sup>12</sup>.

It seems that this proposal was approved by the governor. On 4<sup>th</sup> September 1804, Gosset requested the Acting Secretary to the Government a sum of 1,000 Rix Dollars as an advance for the “work which is ordered to be erected at Hambantotte”<sup>13</sup>. This advance payment was approved by the Governor<sup>14</sup> and on the 6<sup>th</sup>, the Acting Secretary to the Government sent a letter to Alexander Wood, the Deputy Pay Master at Galle ordering to pay the sum<sup>15</sup>.

Meanwhile, on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1804, John D’Oyly, the Agent of Revenue and Commerce of Matara District, forwarded to the Secretary of Government, a letter from Gosset requesting a supply of material “for the erection of a round tower at Hambantotte [sic]”. These included 20,000 bricks, 20,000 tiles, 40,000 paving tiles, 50 lasts of *chunam* (lime) etc<sup>16</sup>. The request was approved by the Governor and D’Oyly was informed on 10<sup>th</sup> September<sup>17</sup>.

There are records related to the construction of the tower. Some of the diaries include lists of bills titled “Extra Military Expenditure” submitted by the Military Board which were forwarded to the Secretary to the Government for the sanction of the Governor. These bills include expenses for “extra charges” in the Engineer Department of Hambantota from October 1804 to May 1805, as given below:

<b>Expenses</b>	<b>RDs.</b>	<b>Fns.</b>	<b>Pice.</b>
Extra militray expenditure – Defences 1804 October: Works of Hanbangtotte (a Tower) <sup>18</sup>	32	8	0
Extra militray expenditure – Defences 1804 November: Works of Hanbangtotte (a Tower) <sup>19</sup>	376	6	0
Extra charges etc in the Engineer’s Department of Hambangtotte for November 1804 (Bill No. 729) <sup>20</sup>	616	0	0
Engineer Department of Hambangtotte for January 1805 (Bill No. 86) <sup>21</sup>	460	2	0
Extra artificers etc employed in the engineer department on the Tower erecting at Hambangtotte in March 1805 (Bill No. 283) <sup>22</sup>	231	11	0
Extra artificers etc employed in the Engineer	335	0	0

Department at Hambangtotte for May 1805 (Bill No. 380) <sup>23</sup>			
Expenses incurred on the Engineers Dept. of Hambangtotte in May 1805 (Bill No. 404) <sup>24</sup>	2,238	2	1

Some of the above mentioned bills directly mention the tower at Hambantota. “A Tower” is mentioned in October and November 1804 and “Extra artificers etc. employed in the Engineer Department on the Tower erecting at Hambangtotte” are found in March 1805.

The amount of these bills totalled 4,290 Rix Dollars, 5 Fanams and 1Pice. We cannot precisely state whether this was the total expenditure of the Hambantota tower due to following reasons: the materials provided by John D’Oyly, if he did so, may not have been included in this; there could be other expenses included in the above mentioned bills; the possibility of duplication of expenses mentioned in the two records for November 1804; and the possibility of more expenses for the tower after May 1805. The record type referred to here is not available after May 1805, as the new governor introduced a new system of record keeping.

Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the construction of the tower commenced in either September or October 1804 and it was still under construction in May 1805. The date of completion is not given in these documents.

## **The Necessity for the Tower**

As the above mentioned sources indicate, it appears that the initial idea of the tower in Hambantota came from the Commander of the Forces in Ceylon. Major General David Douglas Wemyss held this post since early 1804, replacing Major General Hay MacDowall. It is recorded that Wemyss took part in the battles with the French and was engaged in the battle of San Florenzo in Corsica as a Lieutenant Colonel<sup>25</sup>. This shows that he probably had the experience on the importance of the tower at Mortella, which is credited with the origin of the Martello Towers. Wemyss left Sri Lanka in 1806, and he was promoted to a General's rank in 1819.

Lieutenant William Gosset of Royal Engineers was the Engineer at Galle who was responsible for the construction of the tower in Hambantota. Before the construction of the tower, he was engaged in repairing the Fort at Tangalle, which was destroyed by the Kandyans, and the cost of it was RD 10,000<sup>26</sup>. He left Galle for work at Tangalle in July 1804 and was in Hambantotte in October 1804. He became a Captain in 1809 and a Lieutenant Colonel in 1816<sup>27</sup>. It should be the name of this officer, Gosset, which was either miswritten by Johnston when writing his diary or misread by Brohier as "Goper" and which mistake was followed by others.

Hambantota was an important position for the British who controlled the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka during the period concerned. This was due to two

main reasons: the threat from Kandyans who occasionally visited the area to collect salt, and the important location of the small harbour of the city. The entire area was a flat and open terrain and the sole defence at that time appears to be the old fortifications built by the Dutch. Without any defensive structure, the threat to Hambantota was well understood by the British.

The existence of a Dutch fortification is supported by a few records. In 1800, William Orr mentioned the “Hill of Hambantotte” which appeared to him “as an excellent location for a fort, much preferable to Tangalle.” due to its central situation to the salterns, being on a raised ground and the availability of water<sup>28</sup>. J. Pendergrast, Resident and Commanding Officer at Hambantota, requested for more cartridges, and later a fieldpiece to protect “the House, and any other government property at Hambantotte” in February and March 1803. There is no mention, however, of a fort or a tower.

The most important source is a letter from the Secretary to Government to Pendergrast, written in July 1803 highlighting the weaknesses of Hambantota. A vessel was hired by the government and anchored off Hambantota in order to move the garrison to Trincomalee, on the wake of an attack by the Kandyans. Reflecting Governor North’s wishes, it is stated that the Governor hoped “that precautions will not be required and that no attack will be made on Hambantotte which cannot easily be repelled by the force already there”<sup>29</sup>. It

clearly shows the defence weaknesses which existed at Hambantota.

Meanwhile, Cordiner mentions of a Fort during the Kandyan attacks of 1803, but it could be the remnants of the Dutch fortification<sup>30</sup>. A letter written by the Secretary of the Military Board to Governor Frederic North, mentioned that some covering has been erected in January 1804 for the troops at Hambantota<sup>31</sup>.

The threat to Hambantota did exist and the Kandyans attacked Hambantota on two occasions following their war against the British after the British invasion of Kandy was defeated in 1803. The first attack took place on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1803<sup>32</sup> and the second on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1803<sup>33</sup>. These sieges lasted for several days, but the troops under Ensign Pendergrast were able to thwart both these attacks, with Malay forces stationed at Hambantota and additional support from other forces and ships. Meanwhile relief forces were sent to Hambantota under Ensign Riddle from Tangalle on the first occasion and under Captain Beaver from Katuwana during the second occasion.

Kandyans attacked the Hambantota area again in February 1805. Although they were able to march towards Hambantota, the British forces marched ahead and defeated Kandyans at a distance of 8 miles from Hambantota<sup>34</sup>.

These attacks by the Kandyans demonstrate the need for a defensive structure at Hambantota by the time

of 1804, which requirement was fulfilled with the Martello Tower.

## Conclusion

According to the available records, construction of the Martello Tower in Hambantota commenced after September 1804. Records further suggest it was still under construction by May 1805. It is evident that the construction of the tower was the idea of Major General D.D. Wemyss, Commander of the Forces in Ceylon, who ordered Lt. William Gosset of the Royal Engineers to construct a round tower to contain fifty people.

It is obvious that this tower was not used by the British to defend from the attacks of the Kandyan in Hambantota in 1803, and actually the need for such a defensive structure was prompted by those attacks. It appears that this tower has not been tested in the battlefield.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup>McCall, M.K., The Martello Tower in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, *The Fort*, 1999, Vol. 27, pp. 143-157

<sup>2</sup>Sutcliffe, Sheila, *Martello Towers*, David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1972, quoted in McCall, M.K., The Martello Tower in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, *The Fort*, 1999, Vol. 27, pp. 143-157

<sup>3</sup>Brohier, R.L. *Seeing Ceylon* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Colombo: LakeHouse Investments, 1981, p. 203; Nelson, W.A., *Dutch Forts of Sri Lanka*, 1984, p. 69. (Edinburgh: Canongate)

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<sup>4</sup>De Silva, Lionel W., 1916, *Hambantota Lakara*, p. 29, poem 152.  
The poem says as follows:

“පහන්ගෙය’සල දිසි - ඉජ්නේරු කන්තෝරුව

පෙර ඕලන්ද ජනසින්ගේ මුරපලකි

නිරතුරු සුසිහි කටයුතු එබල කොටුවකි”

<sup>5</sup>Brohier, R.L., Vestiges of Dutch Occupation in the Hambantota District, *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union*, 1929, Vol. 19 (1), pp. 21-27

<sup>6</sup>Brohier, R.L., *Seeing Ceylon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Colombo, LakeHouse Investments, 1981, p. 203

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, The Supreme Court on Circuit in 1806 – Alexander Johnston’s Diary of a Tour, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, 1945, Vol.36, pp. 70-79

<sup>8</sup>Abeyawardana, H.A.P., *Heritage of Ruhuna*, Ruhuna Development Bank and Central Bank of Sri Lanka: Colombo, 2001, p. 99-100

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, W.A., *Dutch Forts of Sri Lanka*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 1984, p. 69-70

<sup>10</sup>Paranavitana K.D. and de Silva R.K., *Maps and Plans of Dutch Ceylon*, Central Cultural Fund and Sri Lanka Netherlands Association: Colombo 2002, p. 57

<sup>11</sup> McCall, M.K., The Martello Tower in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, *The Fort*, 1999, Vol. 27, pp. 143-157

<sup>12</sup>Gosset to Kankey, *Sri Lanka National Archives (SLNA) 7/21*, p. 443, 29-8-1804

<sup>13</sup>Gosset to Plasket, *SLNA 7.21*, p. 456, 5-9-1804

- <sup>14</sup>Plasket to Wood, *SLNA* 7/21, p.459,6-9-1804
- <sup>15</sup>Order, *SLNA* 7/57, No. 1106, 06-9-1804
- <sup>16</sup>D'oyly to Plasket, *SLNA* 7/21, 10-9-1804, p. 466
- <sup>17</sup>Plasket to D'oyly, *SLNA* 7/57, No. 1131, 10-9-1804
- <sup>18</sup>Hankey to Atbuthnot, *SLNA*7/22, p. 72, 14-1-1805
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA*7/22, p. 72, 14-1-1805
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA* 7/21, p. 836, 15-12-1804; *SLNA*7/22, p. 72, 14-1-1805
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA*7/22, p. 134, 12-2-1804
- <sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA* 7/22, p. 338, 26-4-1805
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA*7/22, p. 440, 29-5-1805
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, *SLNA* 7/22, p. 482, 19-6-1805
- <sup>25</sup>*The Royal Military Calendar or Army Service and Commission Book*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Vol II, 1820, p. 91
- <sup>26</sup>Hankey to North, *SLNA* 7/22, p. 48, 14-1-1804
- <sup>27</sup>*The Royal Military Calendar or Army Service and Commission Book*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Vol V, 1820, p. 128
- <sup>28</sup>William Orr's Report on Mahagampattoo *SLNA* 7/3, pp. 525-26, 17-10-1800
- <sup>29</sup>Arbuthnot to Pendergrast, *SLNA*, 7/54, No. 791, 13-07-1803
- <sup>30</sup>Cordiner, J., *A Description of Ceylon*, Tisara, Dehiwala, 1980, p.138

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<sup>31</sup>Secretary Military Board to Frederic North, *SLNA*, 7/22, pp. 48, 14-1-1804

<sup>32</sup>*Ceylon Government Gazette* (CGG), No. 83, 21-09-1803

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, No. 87, 19-10-1803; General Order by the Government, *SLNA*, 7/55, n. 281, 17-10-1803

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, No. 163, 27-2-1805