



Jan van Riebeeck in his own words

Contents – July 1652

First attempt by the Commander himself to see Robben Island almost ended in tragedy! Who were Jan Planx and Gerrit Dirckssen and why were they sentenced? Read all of this and more in this Edition 6 of "Jan van Riebeeck in his own words" – written 370 years ago. Welcome to all our new subscribers. Remember to forward a copy to your friends. If you prefer the Old Dutch version with Afrikaans notes, request your copy [here](#).

All the best,
Rian Maartens (Executive Editor)

This newsletter is extracted from:

"JOURNAL KEPT BY THE SENIOR MERCHANT JAN ANTHONISSEN VAN RIEBEECK¹ WHO SAILED AS COMMANDER WITH THE SHIPS DROMMEDARIS, REIJGER AND GOEDE HOOPE² FROM TEXEL FOR CABO DE BOA ESPERANCE IN THE SERVICE OF THE GENERAL UNITED DUTCH CHARTERED EAST INDIA COMPANY UNDER THE CHAMBER OF AMSTERDAM³"

Who was Jan van Riebeeck and what is the source? See the detailed introduction [here](#)

How did the Atlantic winds detour the trip between Amsterdam and Cape Town?

See a detailed article by P. Serton, [here](#)

1 – 31 July 1652

JULY 1652

Primo Fine, calm weather with a light breeze from the S.E. which made Senior Merchant Riebeeck decide to sail to the Robben Island¹ in one of the Biscayan sloops, accompanied by the skipper of the yacht, to inspect the island's situation and conditions with a view to having seals hunted there in due course. But on nearing the island, we found such heavy surf from the north-western sea breaking on the beach, that it was impossible to approach the shore with any craft; so we immediately decided to return. When we reached about halfway between the bay and Robben Island, we struck a rather stiff wind from the S.E. blowing straight from the bay, so that there was grave risk of being driven out to sea before the strong wind and of never reaching land again or getting out alive. If the S.E. wind (which fortunately the Almighty caused to cease) had continued blowing, we should to all appearances have been in great danger of being lost with the sloop, for, on account of the aforesaid surf, there was no place on the island where one could land. But the Lord most remarkably ordained that the wind should cease and, praise God, we arrived home safely in the evening from as grave a peril as has probably ever been endured.

3rd Very fine, warm, sunny weather with no wind, so that the work on the fortifications etc. proceeded with reasonable speed. There were again some whales in the bay.

Have also sown some wheat and barley to-day to see whether they will grow.

1. This was Van Riebeeck's first attempt to visit Robben Island, and—as will soon be seen—it nearly ended in disaster.

Summary:

- Unsuccessful attempt by the Commander to visit Robben Island
- Jan Planx and Gerrit Dirckssen sentenced
- Growth of wheat
- Snares laid for game
- Variety of seeds sown
- Death of Chief Surgeon's wife
- Garden inundated
- Baboons seen
- Scarcity of sheep and cattle

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4th *Idem* fine, warm weather with no wind; whales in the bay.

5th Likewise.

6th Also good weather with W. wind.

7th Overcast sky with gentle N.W. breeze.

8th Fine, bright, sunny weather, wind as yesterday. Have once more had some carrot seed sown in the soil prepared for it. These 7 or 8 days of dry weather have again made the ground so hard that picks and mattocks can hardly penetrate the surface. This makes the digging of the moats and the filling up of the points and the ramparts slow and irksome work.

To-day Jan Planx, arquebusier on the yacht *Goede Hoop*, for having wilfully and petulantly defied the captain, was condemned and sentenced by the Council to fall from the yard-arm and receive 50 lashes, as can be seen more fully in the sentence-book under to-day's date¹.

9th Fine, sunny, calm weather and many whales in the bay. To-day the aforesaid sentence was read out and executed. *Item* the cadet Gerrit Dirckssen of Elssen², for insulting the skipper of the yacht, was condemned to receive 100 lashes and to do sentry duty with 6 muskets for one whole day, as can further be read in the sentence-book under this date³.

Last night the cadet Nicolaes Pieterssen Venlo, who had been ill, departed this life without leaving a will; he was buried this evening.

10th Lovely weather and wind as yesterday. The sentence passed yesterday was executed.

11th Drizzly and rainy weather with W. wind. Many whales in the bay.

12th Windy weather from the W., fairly strong during the night.

Sunday 13th Fine weather, wind variable but mostly S.E.

Noticed to-day that the wheat sown on the 3rd instant is already coming up. Hope that together with other crops it will grow well, and provided it is not blown down by the strong wind, it looks as if there is a reasonable probability of its doing so. Have also transplanted two fine beds of cabbage, which also seem to be thriving reasonably well.

14th and 15th Weather and wind *ut supra*. Again noticed many whales in the bay. Went to the Soete River⁴ to-day, approximately 1½ miles from here beside the

1. Cf. C.J. 780: Sentences, 1652—1697, pp. 1—4. C.A. Jan Planx's offence was that he had not hesitated *sich seer stoutelijck met barse woorden tegen den opper Coopman Jan van Riebeeck ons opperhoofd alhier te opposeeren*. *Ibid.*, p.1.

2. There is an *Elsen* in Belgium, in the Dutch province of Overijssel, and in the Rhine province of Germany. It is not clear to which of these places the Journal refers. It may even be *Elsighem*, a city in the province of East Flanders; or *Elseneur*, a seaport on the Danish island of Zealand.

3. See C.J. 780: Sentences, 1652—1697, pp. 5—6. C.A.

4. What is here called the *Soete Rivier* (*Sweet or Fresh River*) is actually the Liesbeek River, or, more correctly, its lower course. From the fort one first reaches the lower course of the Salt

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Table Mountain and beyond the Salt River, where we saw many harts and eland, which had been observed before. Resolved to set traps to try and catch them as, owing to their wildness, they are not to be reached with firelocks.

16th Drizzly and humid weather with W. winds. Have sown a fine bed with white peas, some cauliflower, salad, other potherbs, and radish which grows excellently here and of which we already have some nice ones; likewise asparagus, found growing wild and transplanted, of which we have a fair abundance on the table every day. Our chervil seed, however, is spoilt as nothing is coming up; likewise the parsley which is also growing poorly; but we hope that our crops will thrive better in the new ground we have found which looks much more fertile than the first. May the Almighty grant this. In the meantime we are proceeding with all possible energy to get our fortress into a state of defence and our dwellings fit for habitation, as to date we have been making shift with tents of old sail-cloth.

17th Fair, sunny weather with variable winds and strong surf on the beach, from which it is to be presumed that there is not such good weather at sea but that there are or must have been fairly strong winds. Several whales in the bay. It was so cold during the night that ice had formed¹.

To-day at the Verse River² beside the Table Mountain about 1½ miles from here, the haunt of many eland, harts and steenbok, we laid sixteen snares of six-strand line spun across deep narrow pits dug in such a way that when the said animals go to the river to drink they can hardly avoid being caught and falling into them. This proved to be the case, because on the

18th in the morning, the weather being fine and calm, we went to the snares before the break of day and found nine of them broken to pieces and one completely carried away; so presuming that the line used was not strong enough, on the

19th weather and wind being as before, we laid snares with twelve-strand line, but on the morning of the

20th found 4 of these also pulled to pieces; the rest were submerged by the rain which fell during the night accompanied by a strong W. wind.

Put some wheat, barley and marrow-peas into the ground to-day, also some other

River, i.e. below the place where the Liesbeek flows into the Salt River. That is why the Journal states that the Soete River was reached "beyond the Salt River". The distance of a mile-and-a-half, mentioned here, is given in Dutch (German) miles. It would be about six English miles, but it is of course an approximate distance; in reality it is considerably shorter. See February 1652, note 1; and April 1652, note 1. The Soete River must not be confused with the little river alongside which the fort was built, and which flowed from the mountain through the valley to the sea. This was also called the *Fresh* or *Sweet* River. See p. 20, note 3.

1. . . . *dese nacht soo cout geweest dat het natuijrl: ijs gevrosen had*—literally: this night it was so cold that it froze natural ice. Then, as now, ice at the Cape would have been an exception; consequently we find that its appearance is very seldom mentioned in the Journal.

2. *Fresh River*—the Soete River of the 14th and 15th.

seeds of potherbs, etc. It is a joy to see how beautifully the green peas¹, large beans, radish, salad, beetroot, spinach and other vegetables are shooting up, and also the wheat and turnips sown close to the fort; likewise the cabbage which we transplanted to lovely rich soil about one musket-shot from us between the two little fresh rivers². Here we are busy with great zeal preparing soil for more seed in order, with God's blessing, to have abundant produce for the necessary refreshment of the return ships from India by the time they arrive.

Sunday 21st Fine, humid weather, favourable to growth; N.W. breeze. Can clearly see that the plants are thriving well in this humid weather and are shooting up readily.

22nd In the morning it began to blow very hard from the N.N.W. with fairly heavy hail and rain showers. It increased to such an extent during the day that the yacht could with difficulty ride at anchor in the roadstead, so that we were quite apprehensive of misfortune and not a little pleased that, as aforesaid, we made the *Drommedaris* depart so early. For with these N.W. winds such heavy and huge seas break at the very place where the heavy ships usually anchor in the bay, that they could not possibly be held by anchors or cables but would in all probability be driven on to the shore or the rocks. Our sloops, which are so light and were each moored to a good grapnel, were driven ashore and we had much ado to get them on dry land. At this time of year, therefore, ships can hardly touch at the Cape without danger.

The tide was so high that the water came right up to some of our tents and into the kitchens, although these are in the green veld quite high up from the beach.

In the evening the chief surgeon's wife died³. He himself has just recovered from a severe illness and his little girl is still very ill, likewise quite a number of our soldiers and sailors, some of whom, however, are improving a little. Hope that Almighty God will stay His striking hand and henceforth keep us in health. Amen.

During the night the stormy weather increased, with the heaviest downpour imaginable, as a result of which, on the

23rd (the weather having calmed down somewhat) found all our hard work done in the new garden completely flooded and all our crops submerged and spoilt. It was very sad to behold, as we had several beds sown and planted with wheat, barley,

1. *erten sonder schellen*—i.e. peas without shells. Afrikaans: *dop-ertjies*. Apparently *erten sonder schellen* were so called to distinguish them from *grauw erten* (marrow-peas or field peas) and *peulerten* (sugar peas, chick-peas or chickling vetch).

2. Two little rivers with fresh water (in contrast with the brackish water of the Salt River). These were the Fresh River—at the mouth of which Van Riebeeck anchored at the time of his arrival (p. 20, note 3)—and another little rivulet not far from there, which also flowed down to the sea. Cf. Charts 36 and 48, C.A., on which these rivulets, with the gardens between them, are clearly shown.

3. The wife of Adriaen de Jager, first senior surgeon at the Cape. Cf. p. 70, note 1.

peas, cabbage and other field and garden crops, some of which had grown so well that they were a pleasure to see. There had been such a heavy downpour that at several places the land looked like a sea, as the rivers could not hold all the water. There was half a foot of water in our storehouse and the fort at various places inside was also inundated; the moats round the fort (into which not a drop of water could otherwise come) are quite filled by the rain. A strong wall of clay and heavy stone about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet thick and 8 feet high, intended for a kitchen, has completely collapsed as a result of the heavy and excessive infiltration of water. The fortification works, however, which have been built up with sods and on which we are still daily working energetically, have, praise God, remained solid and firm, and it is also hoped that it will remain so, as all possible diligence has been applied to do good work which will last. May the Almighty grant us His merciful blessing to that end. Amen.

The weather remained humid all day with fairly strong W. wind though not as strong as yesterday. It continued in the evening with rain until midnight; then it began to blow from the S.W. much harder than ever before with heavy hail and rain, which beat down and destroyed most of the remainder of our fine growth of crops and potherbs, etc.

24th Severe, rainy weather with heavy rain showers and intense cold, so that little could be done on the fortifications and the little yacht was in grave danger of parting from her anchors and running on the shore.

As we were burying the surgeon's wife this afternoon we saw many large baboons in various troops, on the lower slopes of the Table Mountain, but we could not get near them as they were too agile.

25th and 26th Still the same unsettled, stormy, cold, inclement weather from the W., so that one would hardly chase a dog outside; but on the

27th the weather was exceptionally fine, with bright warm sunshine, but bitterly cold at night, and quite calm. Again saw many baboons feeding at the foot of the Lion Mountain, very big and horrible to look at.

Last night another soldier, named Hendrick Ertman, died and was buried to-day.

The last 5 or 6 days the mountains have been completely covered with snow at several places¹; but on the

28th, 29th and 30th Sunday with continual calm, warm and bright sunny weather much snow melted. During these fine warm days, have again prepared some soil and have sown peas, turnips, carrots and other potherbs close to the fort on high, dry, soft, sandy ground. The turnips and carrots sown at the same place at the beginning of this month are coming up very well. Hope that Almighty God will

1. Snow on the mountains towards the interior, e.g. those in the vicinity of Stellenbosch (which are visible from the Cape), is quite a usual winter occurrence. Snow on Table Mountain would have been—just as to-day—comparatively unusual.

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grant good fruit in due course and will in future protect the crops from the bad weather. Amen.

During these past bad, wet, inclement days about 8 or 10 persons have again gone to bed sick. We can give them nothing better than a little warm wine, as to date we have not seen a single head of cattle or sheep. Hope, however, that in the coming month the people of Saldania will come down with their cattle and that we shall then be able to barter a good number from them for the refreshment of our men on land here as well as those from the ships, which are now soon expected. We shall be able to supply all the ships with vegetables, of which, notwithstanding the bad weather, we have a fair supply in a state of maturity.

Ultimo Have begun to entrench the garden—which had been swamped and is now dry again—on the upper side with a furrow and small dike, in order thereby to divert excessive water in future, as it has been proved that the small rivers cannot hold all the water but that with heavy rains the water overflows on all sides. This work will successfully prevent future flooding of the garden.

Mostly drizzly weather to-day with quiet, variable but mostly N.W. winds; many whales in the bay.

Next Edition...

August 1652

Highlights to look forward to:

- New garden laid out
- Observation regarding winds
- Occupation of fort
- Failure to catch game
- Meeting of the council
- Abundance of fish caught

Final Words...

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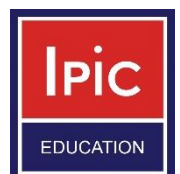
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