

# *Industrial Archaeology At Aapravasi Ghat: Goods, Ports And People Histories*

*Dr Diego Calaon, Archaeologist*



Figure 1: Excavation works in the warehouse © D. Calaon

Between November 2010 and January 2011, an archaeological excavation was carried out in the warehouse where the future Beekrumsing Ramlallah Interpretation Centre (BRIC) will be set up. In the 19th century, the warehouse was located in the proximity of the “Hospital Block” and nearby the “Immigrants’ sheds” of the Immigration Depot. The excavation represents an exceptional opportunity to investigate the topography and material culture of a key area: it deals with the part linking the landing place of the immigrants, as shown in the maps dated 1857, and the Aapravasi Ghat as a former Immigration Depot.

The archaeological investigation allows to recover walls, floors and structures in use between 1834 and the 1920s: these were exactly the same structures, adjacent to the narrow strip of coast, where the Indentured labourers made their first steps when they arrived in Mauritius. More than 450 000 immigrants were called to work on the Mauritian estates and half of them settled on the island. The area excavated in the warehouse was one of the first places seen by the future Mauritians.

The stratigraphy of the archaeological excavation permitted to better understand the history of the waterfront facing the Aapravasi Ghat with greater precision (fig. 1). The archaeologists have a privileged viewpoint through the investigation of the archaeological layers preserved under the warehouse’s floor giving a precise chronology. Three main archaeological phases characterised the area: the first one is linked with the construction of the French dock, made by M. De Tromelin in 1771-1783; the second represents the transformation of the dock in a “Port Slip” during the first half of the 19th century; the last phase corresponds to the construction of the warehouse, used to store the sugar designated to be exported on the same boats which were used for the transportation of indentured immigrants.

The French dock (or a dry dock) was rectangular (35 metres length, 15 metres width). The sides were built with

strong walls made by well squared blocks. According to its dimensions, it was used to restore medium and large ships. An old map dated 1758 shows the presence of the mouth of a stream exactly under the excavated area: the dock was dug taking advantage of the natural depression created by the watercourse.

The dry dock was also provided with two stone stairs, used by the woodworkers to repair the ships. During the British occupation, the dock was filled up and transformed in a Port Slip, or rather in a more elaborate structure for dredging the vessel. The slip was very similar to a “Patent Slip” and it assured the possibility to quickly hauling the vessel on shore, caulking and repairing the bottom and top sides (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Simplified 3D model of the Port Slip in 1856 © D. Calaon

Thanks to the port slip (or marine railway), it is possible to take a boat out of the water during one tide, make the repairs and return the boat to the water on the next tide. The port slip consisted of an inclined level which extended into the water, and a wooden carriage (or cradle) onto which a ship was floated. The ship was then attached to the cradle and hauled out of the water up on the slip.

The carriage was hauled up and lowered away in the water using a mechanical winch. The carriage was dragged on iron rails. The archaeological excavation allowed to recover

the squared stones which were used as bottom part of the way, and it was also possible to find many iron trails which testify the presence of the rails. A great number of metal objects (nails, tools, iron bars etc.) and many pitch and colour drops cover the soil nearby the slip way. A lot of post-holes witness the use of scaffoldings for reaching and repairing the high parts of the hull.

The slip was used up to the half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: in 1850, the new Immigration Depot was completed and the slip area was converted into a warehouse. The whole area around the port slip was reshaped. According to the plan, a new larger site for the reception of the immigrants was established. At the same time, on the other side of Trou Fanaron bay (Taylor Smith area), other two port slips were built near the two dried docks, still in use today.

The slip was certainly used up to 1856-59: a topographic map records that the slip was in use in 1856, while in 1859, a development project shows the area of the former port slip, is overlapped by the rectangular shape of a new warehouse. In 1860-61, the warehouse was built and was in use. The transformation of the area in a sugar warehouse is not only accidental. There was a general urban plan which designed the East side of the Trou fanaron bay for the Indentured arrivals.

While the port slip was in use, the landing place for the immigrants was probably a jetty in front of the Depot. After 1860 the landing place was at the end of the road which passes between the warehouses and leads to the city centre. From this point, a special path was reserved for the Immigrants: they turned left, they passed in front of the warehouse and then they reached the emblematic “steps” of the Apravasi Ghat which introduced them into the Mauritian colonial labour system (fig. 3).

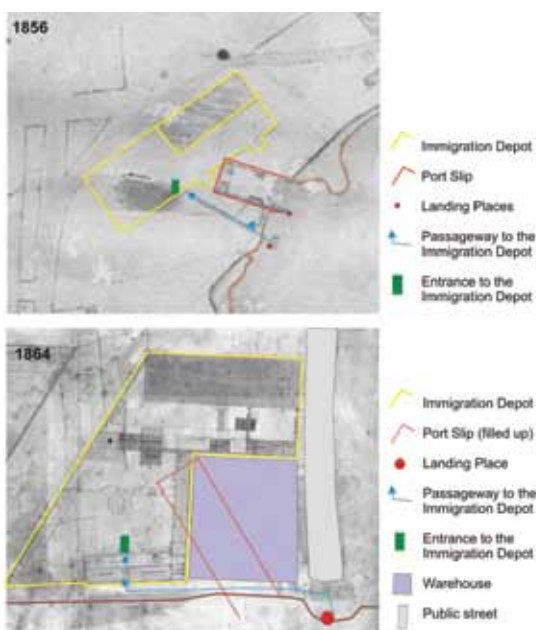


Figure 3: The passageways to the Immigration Depot: 1856 and 1864

As easy as they were able to reach the Immigration offices, the sugar stored in the warehouse was loaded onto the same ships which carried the immigrants: immigrants and sugar were both “trading goods” for the shipping companies. For some seasons, the slip was not in use, before the construction yard of the warehouse was set up. The excavation documented a phase in which all the iron structures (winch, rails etc.) were spoiled and the area was left open and out of use. In this lapse of time, the slip became a dumping area and an extraordinary archaeological level was dug up, full of the daily objects literally thrown away by the people who lived and worked nearby.

For the Archaeologists, this was an opportunity to catch a picture of the material culture of Port Louis in the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Broken glasses, ceramics, metals, tiles and bricks considered as waste in the past, are now objects and important records for the reconstruction of past societies. The majority of the archaeological finds are glass fragments (more than 1,000): bottles, cups, cruets, windows glass. Many of them are fragments of small bottle, probably perfume or drug’s bottles (fig. 4).



Figure 4: Drug’s bottles, stoneware and glass © D. Calaan

In fact, the area is just at the back of the hospital block and it is most likely, the people who worked there eliminated their waste in the empty area where the port slip is located. Also that some ceramic objects could be interpreted as medical pot, for ointments, creams or medical powders. Among the metal finds is half the part of scissors, which could be a medical tool. At a first sight, the percentage of “western” (French or British) ceramic objects compared to “Indian” or “African” ones is impressive: only 1% of the ceramic assemblage can be assigned to an eastern (or Indian) production. The 99% is represented by European products, used by British officers and by the sailors.

This data shows exactly the opposite situation, in terms of percentage, of the people present in the area: thousands of Immigrants and few Europeans. It is easy to explain the reason of this disproportion: the Immigrants were only in transit, and probably they did not carry with them many items. They brought only personal belongings, and among them some oil lamps for religious purpose: the fragments of these lamps are the breakable tangible elements which describe exactly the difficulty of being Indentured Labourers arriving in the island (fig. 5).



Figure 5: Indian oil lamps © D Caloon

The overall picture given by the analysis of the archaeological excavation is quite interesting. The newcomer Immigrants were immediately involved in the Colonial Economic system of the island: they started to use the European objects available in the market and they will continue to do so in the future (as excavation at Trianon has shown in 2010). Their cultural identity was moulded also by the objects of the Global Colonial System, which is in a way still visible nowadays in Mauritius.

## An insight of the Immigration Depot in the mid 19th century: Indentured labourers at the Depot

Christelle Miao Foh, Research Assistant

The Aapravasi Ghat Immigration Depot stands for the only remaining example of the “Great Experiment” initiated by the British Colonial Government in 1834 to evaluate the viability of a ‘free’ system of recruitment after the abolition of Slavery in the British Empire. This article will look at the different stages of which an Indentured Labourer had to undergo at the Depot.



Ticket with photograph.  
Source MNA/RA  
1750/LR 3176/  
(1864)

### Newly arrived immigrants

Upon the arrival of the ship at Trou Fanfaron, the immigrants were brought on the upper deck where they washed themselves. The Immigrant Inspecting Officer from the depot together with the peons examined and distributed clothes to the immigrants.

Once in the depot, the newly arrived immigrants were seated in the yard for inspection by the Protector of Immigrants. They were counted and questioned to ascertain whether they had any complaint. Should there be any; an enquiry was conducted by the Protector. Afterwards, they were registered and were provided with an immigrant ticket with information on the latter. After the registration process, the immigrants were brought together into bands to be sent to the sugar estates. The immigrants who came with their families were kept together in various bands. Single women were placed into the band of their choice.

The newly arrived immigrants were not allowed to go out of the depot without permission from the Protector. According to the Order Council No. 18 of January 15 1842, the Indentured Labourers could only sign a contract after a 48 hour stay ashore. During that period, those who were sick were sent to the Civil Hospital. The expenses for treatment were incurred from the immigration funds. At the expiration of the 48 hours, the hospital expenses were credited to the employers at the rate of twenty-five cents per day for each individual.