

Historic Despatch brickfield chimney is being restored

■ PE engineer fulfilling his father's dream as 1882 structure is rendered stable

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A HISTORIC chimney that fed the kilns that baked the bricks that built many of Nelson Mandela Bay's finest buildings is being restored to its former glory.

Built in 1882, the 30m-high chimney rears out of the veld on the northern perimeter of Despatch between the railway line and the Swartkops River.

The soil contains a rich clay layer, which is why the chimney was built here, said Despatch Museum chairman Attie Pretorius.

"The town of Despatch did not yet exist but the potential of the area was recognised by an early settler of Norwegian extraction called Southerberg.

"The clay was used to bake the bricks to build the chimney, and the chimney then became part of a booming manufacturing plant."

Designed by architect William Kent, it is one of just three examples of his "industrial revolution era" chimneys left in the world. The other two are in England.

It was connected to several tunnels and the kilns were built at the end of the tunnels. The chimney created the draft which kept the kiln flames roaring, Pretorius said.

"This was the first and one of the biggest brickfields in the region and the bricks were top quality.

"Many of the oldest and finest buildings in Port Elizabeth CBD are built from these 'Despatch patent' bricks.

"Bricks were 'despatched' from here on the railway line, which was already in place, down to PE, and to all parts of



DESPATCH BEACON . . . Contractor Pieter Theunissen (left) and Despatch Museum chairman and former town clerk Attie Pretorius are two of the role players, together with the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality and Ivo Huisman Engineers, involved in the restoration of the historic Despatch chimney. Picture: FREDLIN ADRIAN

collapse, scaffolding had to be specially designed to stand independently of it.

Once the scaffolding was up, the main job was to fill the holes, but it was not simple. Work began at the beginning of October, under the supervision of contractor Pieter Theunissen.

"The concrete around each hole had to be routed out and replaced with reinforced concrete. The bricks were not standard, so we took a long time finding bricks that at least were the same thickness. They had to then be 'tied in' to the surrounding bricks that were still in a good condition."

Crumbling and loose bricks in a number of other places also had to be laboriously removed and replaced.

The envisaged next phase is to improve the chimney's foundations. In 1962, ugly concrete "wing walls" were erected to do this. But they did not do the job and also made the stately chimney look rather like a cartoon spaceship. If more funds can be found, and this phase is approved, the wing walls will be removed and another more effective and suitable way found to underpin the foundation.

The aim is that the restored chimney will be a tourist destination. A plaque will be erected describing its history and related events. In 1899, for instance, the chimney was extended to the full height it is today.

The cost of the restoration, close to R1-million, is being covered by the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality.

the country. This is probably where the town got its name."

In 1903, after a severe flood, the brickfield was abandoned. The bush crept back but the chimney stood firm. It was struck by lightning on a number of occasions, however, leaving several gaping holes.

By the 1950s, heritage activists were calling for it to be restored but costs and the difficulty of the job prohibited this.

In the 1970s, Hannes Huis-

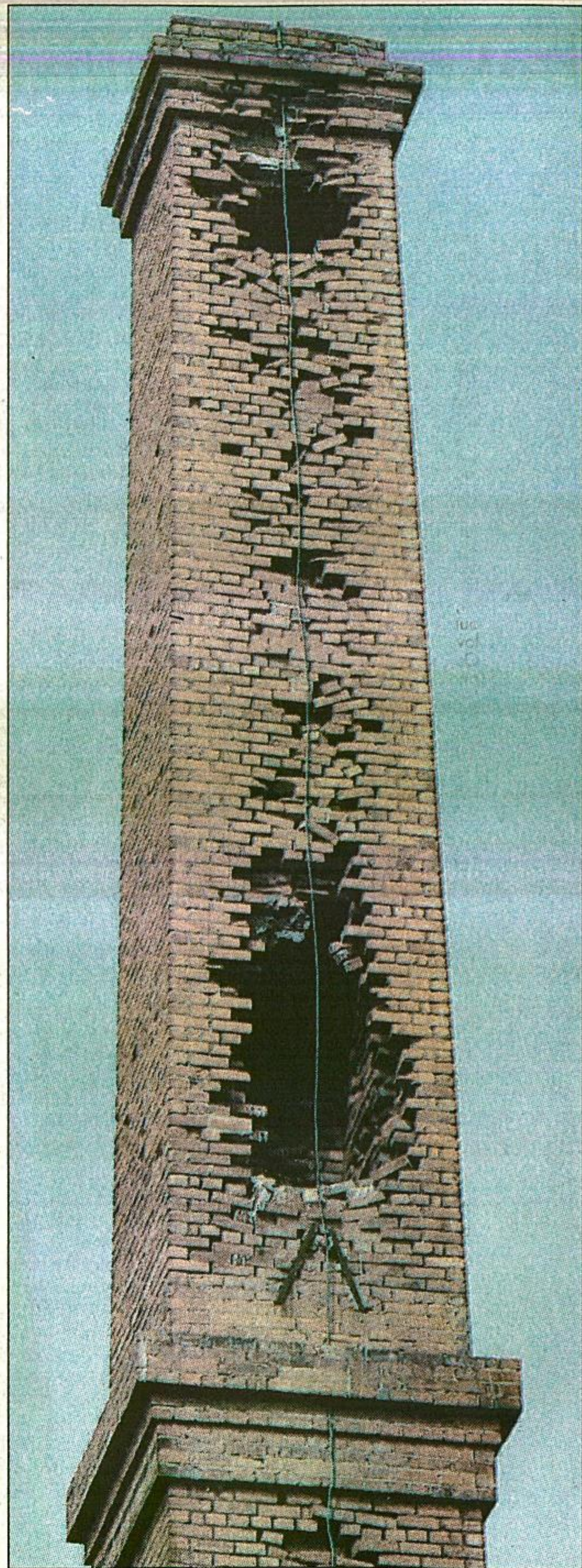
man, a board member of the Port Elizabeth Museum, campaigned for something to be done. The problems remained insurmountable but, 30

years later, his son Ivo, a PE-based consulting engineer, is leading the team that is finally getting the job done.

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Kobus Vosloo, who has been handling the project for Huisman's office, said the height of the building and its instability had made the restoration work sensitive and dangerous.

Because there was a danger that the chimney might



WEATHERED . . . Pock-marked by age and lightning strikes, this is what the Despatch chimney looked like before restoration started. Picture: IVO HUISMAN