

Mid Month Visit – April 2022

Last month's 'Mid Month Visit' described my trip down to Dundee travelling along the old road to Durban – as opposed to using the N3 highway. There are many places of interest along the old road which have an association to the South African War (1899-1902), but sadly much of this heritage is being taken away from public viewing, more on this subject a little later on. I made reference to O'Neill's Cottage and Laing's Nek last month. Well, neither are accessible to the public at the moment, and hopefully something will be done about this sad state of affairs.

The trip was to commemorate the Relief of Ladysmith and was organised by Pam McFadden of 'Talana Museum fame'. The Saturday morning started off with an unplanned stop at Wasbank, which was the site where the Voortrekkers had laagered, before the Battle of Blood River. It was on this site that on 7 December 1838 the Voortrekker leaders, Pretorius, Landman and Cilliers, formulated the 'The Vow' and it was taken for the first time. The Vow related to the Battle of Blood River, which was fought on 16 December 1838, where approx. 400 Voortrekkers made a promise to God that if He gave them victory against approximately 20 000 Zulu warriors, they would honour that day forever as a Holy Day in remembrance of what God had done for them.

We then made our way to Platrand to get an overview of the layout of Ladysmith and an appreciation of where the Boers were positioned around the town. Time didn't permit a full tour of the extensive battlefield spanning 2km, covering Caesar's Camp and Wagon Hill, but the Burgher Memorial, for those who hadn't experienced it before, was a good starting point for the two day tour.

The memorial was unveiled in 1979 in honour of 781 Burghers who died during battles in Natal in the South African War (1899-1902). The six 'hands' that reach upwards represent faith, and the seventh, which points downwards, symbolises that it was 'here' that it all took place.

The communal crypt in the centre contains the remains of 310 re-interred burghers.



Picture: The memorial from a distance with the crypt and memorial stones in the foreground



Our next stop was the Clouston Garden of Remembrance where many of the memorials from battlefields in the vicinity have been relocated. It is fairly well kept with a number of sheep and goats who appear to keep the grass at an acceptable height for access to the various memorials.

We then went to the Chieveley Cemetery which was the original site of a Military Hospital during the Battle of Colenso. It was the burial place of Field Marshal Lord Roberts' son Lieutenant Freddie Roberts, and thank goodness this memorial has been relocated.

Pat Rundgren, our Tour Guide, recorded the following in a communiqué after the tour – *"Further to our visit to Chieveley last weekend, it is rather a sad indictment of our society that the Commonwealth War Graves Commission has had to resort to replacing the iron crosses on the graves with a blob of something or other that reminds me of a ball of elephant dung. This has been done to make them as unattractive and unappealing as possible, so as to deter people from stealing them. However, I saw Ray Heron up Spioenkop yesterday and he tells me that someone is now breaking them instead."*

The 'blob of something or other' that Pat refers to is a small concrete slab with a marble plaque indicating the name and regiment of the person buried there.

I noticed some of the marble plaques were cracked – probably by stones having been thrown at them. Very, very sad indeed. Having visited World War 1 cemeteries in Europe, this is a huge embarrassment.



Picture: A section of the Chieveley Cemetery



We then went to Colenso to view the positions of the guns that were captured by the Boers.

Sadly I will leave it to the readers, from the adjacent photograph, to decide whether their up-keep is in accordance with their importance, and their importance as a tourist attraction – and I do understand that not everyone is interested in battlefield tourism.



Picture: A 'gun position' is visible on the left hand side of the picture

After viewing the gun positions we proceeded to the Ambleside Cemetery which is the burial site of soldiers of the 5th Irish Brigade who were killed in the Battle of Colenso. The Irish Brigade had been detailed to cross the Thukela River well up stream of the town but were misled by their guide and ended up in a loop of the Thukela where they came under devastating small arms fire from the Boers. This cemetery is well looked after.

On our way back to Dundee we travelled via Tugela Heights where we stopped off at a number of cemeteries along the way.

One of these cemeteries was at Onderbookspruit.

We then made our way to Pieter's Hill, passing Wynne's Hill, Harts Hill and Railway Hill. With time not on our side, and the build-up of rain clouds, we made our way back to Dundee.



Picture: Onderbookspruit Cemetery

Sunday morning started with a visit to the Rietfontein Farmhouse, which has only recently been opened to the public. The farm was the centre of the Battle of Rietfontein/Modderspruit, fought on 24 October 1899. The Boers were planning on attacking the British force, under the command of Brigadier-General Yule, who were making their way from Talana to Ladysmith, and General White, who was in charge of the garrison in Ladysmith, wanted to make sure of their safe arrival in the town. At around 3p.m. White learnt that Yule's men had made good progress, and were no longer in danger of being trapped and called off the attack, withdrawing his troops back to Ladysmith. After the battle the Boers used the farm as their headquarters, the farmhouse as their hospital, and the nearby railway station as their communication link with the Transvaal.



The tour party then visited a private blockhouse on the outskirts of Ladysmith, owned by Doug McMaster. We however needed to visit the battlesite of Groenkop/Tweefontein, and having seen the blockhouse on a previous visit, said goodbye and made our way to Kestell. Kestell is a town about 40 minutes west of Harrismith, on one's way to Bethlehem, and I needed to visit the site in preparation for a possible future tour.

The Battle of Groenkop/Tweefontein was fought on 25 December 1901. Uncharacteristically the Boers under the command of General de Wet, surprised and defeated a force of mainly Imperial Yeomanry under the command of Major Williams. Williams had his camp at the foot of Groenkop and had a force of 550 men, a 15-pounder gun and a pom-pom.

In the early hours of Christmas Day the Boers attacked the position with the battle lasting about an hour. British casualties were severe with 58 being killed, over 80 being wounded and over 200 being taken prisoner. At that stage of the war the Boers were not taking prisoners, so those captured were set free across the nearby Basutoland border.



Picture: Memorial on the site of the Battle of Groenkop

All in all, a successful weekend. Apart from the state of some of the cemeteries and the inability to visit a number of sites which are part of our history and heritage, there is a lot of passion amongst tour guides. One of the attractions in Ladysmith is the All Saints Church which was built in 1902 and is known for the beautiful tablets it houses in its transept. On these tablets are the names of some 3 000 British soldiers who died during the Siege of Ladysmith, part of the South African War (1899-1902). It is no longer open to the public, and if one is lucky, an appointment can be made to visit the Church. It appears security is becoming more and more of an issue in this great country of ours.

REMEMBER to keep an eye on our website (www.battletoursza.com) - for regular updates and news.

Allan Gordon