

Mid Month Visit – December 2022

Last month's mid-month newsletter covered my involvement in the Tour that was put together for a family from overseas who came out to retrace their Grandfather's footsteps during the South African War (1899-1902), most particularly the Guerrilla Phase of the War. From all the travelling and research I did in planning that tour, I realised there was an opportunity for a 1-Day Tour to Potchefstroom, and at the beginning of this month we ran our first 'Potchefstroom Tour'. It was always going to be a long day, but I didn't realise how long, and the next Tour will include some 'tweaking'.

We began our journey with a stop at the Danie Theron Memorial, a memorial I have stopped at many times, always to find the gate up to the memorial locked.

I had just started with my talk when a 'bakkie' stopped across the road and the driver approached us asking if we would like to go up to the memorial. What a bonus!

He is the owner of the land and having unlocked the gate, made us promise that on exiting we would lock the gate. What a wonderful first 'delay' on the Tour. The site is well looked after and I now understand why the owner keeps the gate locked.



Picture: The Danie Theron Memorial

Our next stop was Deelkraal. Most investors in South Africa have heard the word Deelkraal as at the time of its opening, Deelkraal was the richest and deepest gold mine in the world. However, Deelkraal was a site, established in 1837, by Voortrekker leader, Andries Potgieter. When Potgieter reached the Vaal River in 1836, the Matabele Tribe, a break-away faction from the Zulus, under Chief Mzilikatze, were wreaking havoc amongst the local tribes in the area. Potgieter befriended these tribes, and together they decided to drive the Matabele out of the Transvaal, and recover all the cattle and livestock that had been stolen. Potgieter promised, that with the help of these tribes, once the Matabele had been driven far north, the recovered cattle and livestock would be shared equally amongst all who had lost these 'assets'. When Potgieter returned, having successfully cleared the Transvaal of the Matabele, the cattle and livestock were shared at a place to be called Deelkraal. For those who don't understand Afrikaans, Deel means Share, and Kraal can be translated as an area where cattle are housed. There is much more to this story, but what is recorded above summarises many hardships experienced by all involved.

The Wimpy in Potchefstroom was our 'breakfast stop' which unfortunately caused our second delay – slightly less pleasant than the first.



We then made our way to Frederikstad Station to experience the battle that took place there from 20 to 25 October 1900. On route we stopped at the 'Mooi River' which is mentioned in the song 'Sarie Marais'.

At Frederikstad we spent time at the Boer Memorial erected to commemorate all those Boers who lost their lives during the battle. We then moved to Gun Hill, which is on private property, and thanks to Gerhard Jacobs, who joined us in Potchefstroom, and who knows the owner of the property, we were able to experience what is closed off to the general public. From Gun Hill one is able to see the whole battlefield and get an appreciation of the scale of the battle. Gun positions are still very visible, and a 'communication trench', constructed out of rocks can clearly be identified. One can appreciate why access is denied, by the wildlife which roams freely on the farm. Gaining access to the property is through a double gate and an electrified fence.

Then on to Potchefstroom to discuss the part played by the town during the 1st Boer War (1880-1881).

We stopped at the museum to view the map and discuss what had happened during the siege, and then made our way to the site of the fort.

The site is a disgrace and it is a pity that we are unable to really look after our history, and help create a healthy tourist environment – there is so much history in many of our towns.



Picture: The site of the Fort

Gert van den Berg, in his book '24 Battles and Battle Fields of the North-West Province' has a good summary of the Siege of Potchefstroom (page 28) – *"The siege of Potchefstroom, was remarkable for various reasons. Firstly Potchefstroom was the capital of the South African Republic (Pretoria was the seat of Government) and therefore dear to the hearts of the Republican forces. Secondly the rising tide of republican opposition to more than three years of British rule, since 1877, had first taken an active turn in Potchefstroom where the local farmers were the first to pay their taxes under protest. Also, the first active resistance to British rule was witnessed in Potchefstroom where the first shots of the War were fired. Finally, the British garrison in Potchefstroom was the only one besieged during the War to surrender."*

An expected 'quick lunch' of fish and chips was our third delay for the day.

After lunch it was off the battle site of Tygerfontein which was the battle where General de Wet evaded a large British force, when he crossed the Vaal River at Schoeman's Drift, making his way into the Transvaal. Again, thanks to contacts that Gerhard has we were able to gain access to a number of gun positions in the hills adjacent to the Vaal River. The Magaliesberg has only a few



passes through which wheeled transport can pass – the Vaal River is very similar, and Schoeman's Drift was the major pass. The British eventually established a number of 'serious' gun positions in these mountains and we were able to see the position where the Elswick Gun was positioned.

The Elswick Battery, deployed to South Africa during the war, is a story on its own.

Lady Meux, a beautiful socialite. ordered six Naval 12-pounder cannons on travelling carriages to be made and sent out to South Africa.

Captain Hedworth Lambton of HMS Powerful, stopped at Mauritius, and on his own initiative picked up a battalion of soldiers stationed there. He led this naval brigade to Ladysmith with four twelve-pounders and two other guns.



Picture: The location of the Elswick Battery, wording engraved by one of the gunners

After the Relief of Ladysmith Lambton called on her to describe his experiences there, and praise the patriotic spirit of her gift. Lady Meux was 'touched by this tribute' and wrote into her will that Lambton be the heir to the large fortune left by her husband Sir Henry Brent Meux upon his death in 1900, including her house at Theobald's Park in Hertfordshire. The only condition was that Lambton should change his name to Meux.

Instead of being able to travel back to Johannesburg in the late afternoon, our trip back started at sunset. For future Tours, 'coffee and rusks' will probably be breakfast for those who haven't had breakfast before the start of the tour.

Feedback from those who have been on all three of our tours, is that this one is 'the best'. Not sure why, but there we go.

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

Allan Gordon