

Mid-Month Visit – December 2023

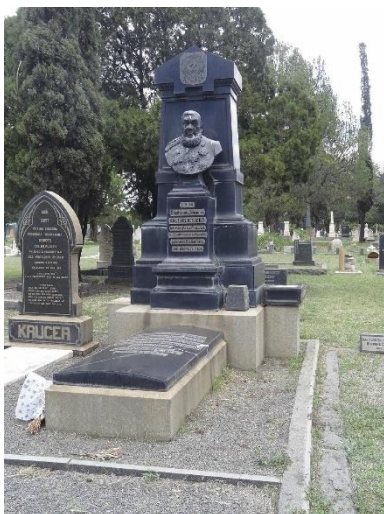
I was fortunate enough to be part of a visit to the Staats Model School, at the end of November, organised by the Northern Branch of the Archaeological Society of South Africa. My interest in this visit is that, with the association with Winston Churchill, it has significance and interest to some 'Boer War' tourists who visit South Africa – and I was interested to ascertain its viability as a tourist destination.



A few months ago, in putting together an itinerary for tourists, I discovered that Melrose House, the building where the Peace Treaty to end the South African War (1899-1902) was signed, has now been 'moth balled' – all access gates locked.

If one googles 'Melrose House', one will find, amongst other information, the following – *"Built in 1886 by the prosperous Pretoria businessman George Jesse Heys, it was named after the famous Melrose Abbey in Scotland. Melrose House gained fame during the Second Boer War (1899–1902) when Lord Roberts requisitioned it as the headquarters for the British forces after Pretoria was invaded in June 1900. For more than 18 months, instructions for the British forces in the field were issued from here. The use of the house as a military headquarters ended when the Treaty of Vereeniging, which ended the war, was signed there on 31 May 1902.*

The Pretoria City Council purchased the house and its contents in 1967 for R300,000 for restoration, culminating in State President of South Africa Charles Robberts Swart opening it as a museum and declaring it a national heritage site on May 17, 1971."



In my research around Pretoria I established that the old cemetery, where British soldiers are buried and where the old 'Heroes Acre' is sighted, the FAK - Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge ('Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations'), which is a non-profit, non-governmental Afrikaans cultural organisation, has decided to look after what is still there and try and get it back to where it should be. They organise monthly work parties and one hopes that this cause of theirs, will not be in vain. Of relevance to tourists from outside South Africa are the graves of Breaker Morant and John Handcock, as well as a nephew of Queen Victoria, who died of disease in Pretoria on 29 October 1900.



But back to the Staats Model School. It originated from a school established in 1893, which was a school, around which other schools in the then Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek were to be modelled, and to train teachers for these schools. On 11 October 1899 the school closed as a result of the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902). During the war the building functioned as a hospital for Boer soldiers and as a prison for British officers.



Today it is part of the Department of Education and functions as a library. The main building is as it was, but most of the outbuildings are new. For our 'outing' and presentation we sat under large trees which date back to the war but are sadly going to be removed next year as, mainly the root systems, are interfering with the structure of the building.

The interior has obviously changed but our guide showed us where Churchill had spent his time there and we were shown the under-floor tunnels where Captain Aylmer Haldane and Sergeant Major Adam Brockie spent days as planned, for their attempt to escape. Churchill was supposed to be part of this plan, but on the evening of 12 December 1899, he was presented with an opportunity to escape. The perimeter guards were busy in conversation and Churchill clambered over the corrugated fence at the rear of the school and calmly walked down the road.

Our guide shared with those interested, the study that has been done on the under-floor tunnels, but the highlight of the visit was the Map Room. British army officers had drawn large maps of battles and troop movements etc., updating these maps with information received from reliable resources. The maps are huge, about a metre and a half in height and length, and were drawn directly on the wall surface, and are now covered by glass. The maps were hand drawn in pen, crayon and pencil. The red markers indicate British troop positions and the blue for the Boers. It is not possible to get too close to these maps, and obviously, after over 120 years the detail is fading. Our guide mentioned that some years ago, across the road from the school, was an original building dating back to the time of the war, where British sympathisers lived, and it was from this house that much of the information for the maps was received. Although this building had been declared a 'national monument' it was demolished one week-end.



It certainly looks like the Staats Model school will survive for a number of years to come. The cemetery is in good hands and I have heard that the Royal family will be visiting our shores in the not too distant future and that representation is being made for a visit to Christian Victor's grave. If that happens then I am sure money will be allocated to its restoration and possible upgrade.

But what of Melrose House?



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Allan Gordon