

Mid-Month Visit – February 2025

A fellow Tour Guide, Colin Ross, who I regard as the 'expert' on matters Diamond Hill, relating to the battle which took place 125 years ago, on 10 and 11 June 1900, sent me a disturbing email a couple of weeks ago. He has copied it widely and is asking for influential involvement in trying to divert the interest in the land on which the battle took place.



Picture: A Sanger at Diamond Hill

Colin has identified, and plotted on maps, nearly 50 sangers in the area under threat, some of which are still in 'pristine' condition.

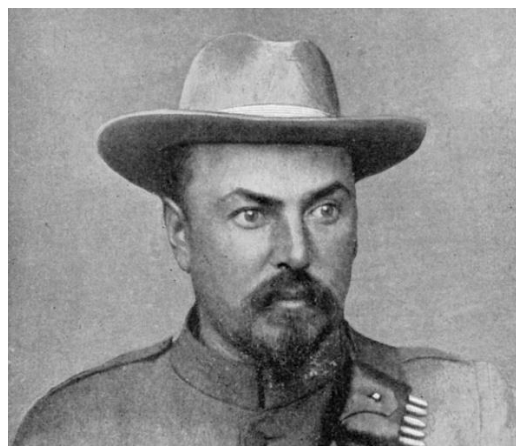
The Battle of Diamond Hill was a well-planned and important battle which lasted two days and took place a week after the fall of Pretoria. The battle pitted 6 000 Boers against 14 000 Colonial troops, and 30 Boer guns against 70 colonial guns. The Boer defensive position covered nearly 40km.

It was a battle where all the Australian units which were in South Africa at the time participated. It was the battle after which the Boer leaders divided themselves into different districts of the Transvaal to convince fellow Boers, who thought that the war was over due to the British occupation of Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Pretoria, that the battle for their freedom was not over. A month after Diamond Hill, the British were tested at the Battles of Dwarsvlei and Silkaatsnek, amongst others.

The book 'The Great Boer War' by Byron Farwell records (page 302) – "*Ian Hamilton maintained that the Battle of Diamond Hill was the true turning point of the South African campaign because it proved that, humanly speaking, Pretoria could not be retaken.*" Conan Doyle in his book 'The Great Boer War' records (page 455) – "*Such was the Battle of Diamond Hill, as it was called from the name of the ridge which was opposite to Hamilton's attack. The prolonged two days' struggle showed that there was still plenty of fight in the burghers. Lord Roberts had not routed them, nor had he captured their guns; but he had cleared the vicinity of the capital, he had inflicted a loss upon them which was certainly as great as his own, and he had again proved to them that it was vain for them to attempt to stand.*" Bill Nasson in his book 'The South African War 1899-1902' records (page 185) – "*Having frustrated the British advance, Botha abandoned his Diamond Hill wing, leaving Roberts an empty capture.*" Nasson carries on (page 186) – "*This was to be one of the last real battlefield actions of the war.*"



Thomas Pakenham in his book 'The Boer War' records (page 434) – *"Botha had restored to the volk the gift of hope. They had fought with a spirit they had not felt since the days of Magersfontein. They fled from the battlefield, but it was flight in good spirits. This defeat, Smuts remarked, had an inspiring effect which could scarcely have been improved by a real victory."*



Picture: General Botha

Colin has gone public with the following message:

"The Battle of Diamond Hill is not over! I have registered as an interested and affected party against the proposed destruction of a large part of the battlefield by open cast mining for silica. We were able to defeat the last mining application by an Australian group but this new application is by a South African BEEE company, which is a far greater threat given the ease to obtain affluent decision makers within government departments in South Africa."

In a number of BattleToursZA newsletters, the first of which was in February 2020, I recorded that little protection is given to Boer War battle-sites, and cemeteries relating to battles, and that those individuals, with an interest in following the footprints of family during the war, need to get out to South Africa rather sooner than later. Those in South Africa with an interest in history, and the war, need to make an effort to visit battle-sites and cemeteries. Many of the cemeteries are not being cared for and thanks to concerned farmers, where these cemeteries are on their land, the farmers are not allowing access unless prior arrangements have been made for the visit. So, as happens in Europe and other countries, casual visits are not possible.

Battle-sites are also not being 'preserved'. Two battle-sites – Wilmansrust and Brakpan, relating to battles fought during the guerrilla phase of the war, are now mining sites, and are not that easily found. Robin Smith in his book 'Practically Over' records (page 106) – *"Positive identification of the site of this encounter (Brakpan) has only recently been made. An Australian looking to locate the missing headstone of a relative, Private J. Semple, wrote to the Middelburg Municipality who turned the letter over to a local journalist. The journalist in turn was looking to preserve the graves on what had been the family farm, Bosmanspruit, taken over by a coal-mining company. The Campbell map was compared with an aerial photograph of the area by two local farm owners. Part of the area of the historical Brakpan farm, a subdivision called de Rust is where the Boers defended themselves from the West Australians."*

We have recently completed a 2-Day BattleToursZA Tour where we visited Wilmansrust and then the battle-site of Bakenlaagte. The historic hospital, where Colonel Benson was taken after being mortally wounded at the battle on 30 October 1901, is now a pile of rubble. On the 100th anniversary of the battle in 2001, the building was still there, painted, and well looked after. However, for whatever reason, the building is no longer.



Picture: Primrose Cemetery

The same tour visits the cemeteries at Middelburg and Primrose-Germiston, both large cemeteries where not only Boer War casualties are buried, but where civilian graves, pre and post Boer War dates are found. We have had quite a bit of rain recently, but the state of the cemeteries is a lot to be desired. It certainly doesn't look like the grass has been mowed for quite a few months, and weeds are plentiful.

Diamond Hill, if the Department of Tourism in Gauteng is serious about tourism, could be a catalyst for Boer War and history enthusiasts. It could rival the attraction of the siege towns of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking if marketed correctly. With it being the 'central point' of a guerrilla phase of the war tour, covering Mpumalanga and/or the Magaliesberg, we have a gem.

Do we want to dig it up? ... Do we need to dig it up?

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

Allan Gordon