

## Mid Month Visit – January 2022

My mid-month visit in November last year was all about the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Battle of Kleinfontein, sometimes referred to as the Battle of Driefontein, fought on 24 October 1901.

After visiting the memorial and listening to Peet Coetzee tell us all about the battle, we visited two cemeteries in the area, which I was planning on including in my December mid-month visit. However, I felt the Silkaatsnek Blue Plaque event that happened around the same time was more pertinent.

You might remember that I mentioned in November last year that we made our way to a British cemetery, on private property, very close to the Boer monument visited to commemorate the battle. This is where bodies of soldiers killed, and buried in the District, were brought together and re-interred in a central cemetery, by a local group of concerned women, who formed a Guild to address the issue of scattered British Graves in the area. A wreath was laid to commemorate those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice. This cemetery is the Wonderfontein Cemetery and there are 20 British soldiers interred there.



*Wonderfontein Cemetery*

On 11 June 1901 Lieutenant-General Methuen camped on the site of the present cemetery and two of his force, Lance-Sergeant H. Gilham and Private C. Lucas of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Imperial Yeomanry, were killed in a skirmish with the Boers and buried on the site of the present cemetery.

The next 11 British soldiers who were later re-interred at the cemetery were all killed in an action against the Boers, on a farm Rhenosterfontein on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 1901, near the town of Marico. Once again Methuen's column was attacked by the Boers under the command of General Kemp. Those killed, and later reburied at Wonderfontein were – Privates F. Brown, W. Coxon, T.



Morris, J. Dixon, T. Brown, H. Manno, and A. Dixon, Lance-Corporal J. Hewitson and Sergeant J. Douglas, all of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Imperial Yeomanry, together with Corporal H. Gudge and Lance-Corporal H. Wilson of the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, Imperial Yeomanry.

In doing a bit more research I established that the Marico Dam was built in 1933. Could these graves have originally been on the site of the dam, and through the work of the Guild of Ladies, moved to a better place of 'eternal rest'? After all, similar relocation of graves was carried out for the building of the Harbeespoort Dam.

On 22 October 1901 Private T. Norman of the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Imperial Yeomanry was wounded in a skirmish with the Boers and died of his wounds the following day. He was buried in a single grave near Swartruggens, and later re-interred at Wonderfontein.

Another five British soldiers were killed in skirmishes with Boers near the town of Groot Marico – Private J. Deary of the Bechuanaland Rifles on the farm Staatsdrift on 3 September 1901, and Corporal H. Bennet of the New South Wales Imperial Bushmen on 16 October 1901 on the farm Riekertsdam. Also on the farm Riekertsdam, on 18 October 1901 Private P. Boyd and Private J. McCracken, both of the Bechuanaland Rifles, were killed. Private T. Amos of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion Imperial Yeomanry was killed on 19 October 1901 on the farm Rondavelkraal.

There is one Unknown Soldier buried at the Wonderfontein Cemetery.



*Bokkraal Cemetery showing the as yet unveiled memorial in the foreground*

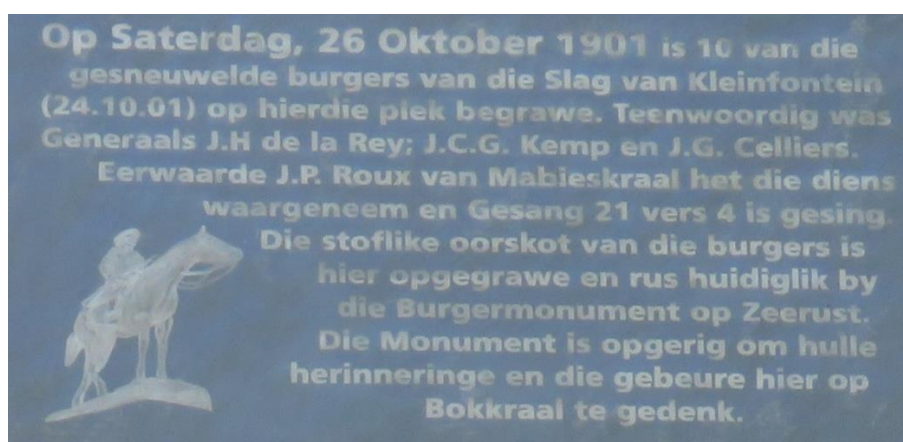
Our next stop was approx. 30 km away – the Boer Cemetery, Bokkraal.

It was here that 10 Boer casualties from the Battle of Kleinfontein were buried, and a new memorial to those buried there was unveiled. From the photograph one can see that this is a very tranquil, serene setting, in the middle of a small community of farmers, far away from the hustle and bustle of traffic. Boer losses were 17 killed in the battle and four died later of wounds received. Ten of those killed were transported to Bokkraal and buried immediately after the battle.



From the battle account written by Peet Coetzee (page 48) – *"a wagon came slowly driving up....on the wagon were the corpses of the Boers who had fallen in the battle. The Blacks, who had been captured within the other wagons, had already dug their graves."*

Jan F. E. Celliers was a member of General Kemp's commando at the battle and was at Bokkraal when the wagon arrived. Celliers was to become an outstanding Afrikaans-language poet who wrote in the immediate wake of the South African War (1899-1902), having studied literature overseas immediately after the war. He was born in the Cape but moved with his family to Pretoria as a 10 year old. During the war Celliers fought at Colesberg and then with Kemp during the guerrilla phase of the war. All accounts researched indicate that he escaped through British lines, evading capture, by wearing his wife's clothes.



*The wording on the memorial recently unveiled at Bokkraal Cemetery*

Celliers recorded the events at Bokkraal in Dutch – whilst I cannot do justice to a translation - in essence what he recorded was the following –

*"Late last night we arrived at Bokkraal where Generals de la Rey and Kemp were already there with their Burgers. The younger men were sitting on the wagons singing and talking. Groups of Burgers were standing around talking in hushed voices. Close-by our wagons stood a bigger group which I approached. Ten bodies had just been off-loaded from a wagon that had just arrived from the battle-field. Their bodies were placed next to one another in the moonlight – their faces, hair and bodies covered in half dried blood. Their eyes stared as if death had come to them instantaneously. They lay there like dolls. My body shivered in recognition of what I saw. A big grave had already been dug and the bodies were placed in this grave, one by one. The bodies lay there the whole night – eyes staring at the moon. Early the next morning the funeral commenced."*

All I can say is that when these words were read in Afrikaans, there were tears in many eyes. It was a moving tribute to those who had lost their lives.

**REMEMBER** to keep an eye on our website ([www.battletoursza.com](http://www.battletoursza.com)) - for regular updates and news.

**Allan Gordon**