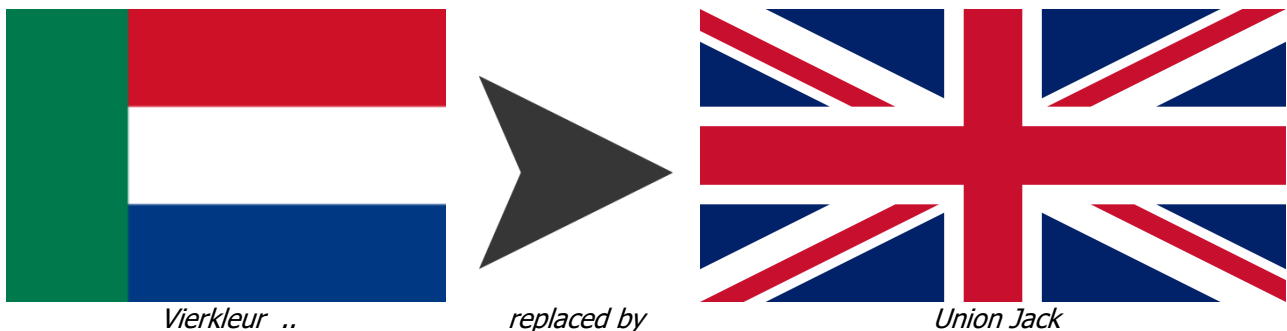


Mid Month Visit (or was it?) – July 2021

With the severity of the third wave of the Covid virus, we in Gauteng are not allowed to leave our Province – so I had to give thought to where I was going to visit, given the restrictions of travel. In the back of my mind there was a site that I had always wanted to visit, not with South African War (1899-1902) relevance, but still with Boer War significance – the Battle of Rooihuiskraal which was fought on 12 February 1881, during the First Anglo-Boer War.

As an introduction, for those who are unfamiliar with the reasons for the war, which lasted a mere 10 weeks, Britain wanted to create a confederation of all the British colonies and independent Boer republics in South Africa, under British control.

On 12 April 1877 a proclamation of annexation was read out in Church Square in Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal Republic. There was no resistance and the Union Jack replaced the Vierkleur. The Transvaal Republic or Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR) did not exist anymore, but was now part of the British Colony.



Boer delegations visited London in 1877, 1878 and 1879 protesting the annexation of their Republic and even though they had a petition of nearly 7 000 signatures, their pleas fell on deaf ears. Britain at that stage was involved with the Anglo-Zulu War in Natal. The Boers then hoped that the election of the Liberal Party in Britain in 1880 would mean independence for the Transvaal, but the new Prime Minister, W.E. Gladstone, insisted on maintaining British control in Pretoria.

The first open conflict between the British and Boers happened in November 1880 in Potchefstroom. A Boer by the name of Bezuidenhout refused to pay extra fees on his wagon claiming that he already paid his taxes. The British authorities confiscated his wagon. On 11 November 1880 a commando of 100 men under Piet Cronje took back the wagon from the British bailiff and returned it to Bezuidenhout. A month later between 8 000 and 10 000 Boers gathered at Paardekraal, near Krugersdorp and a triumvirate of Paul Kruger, Piet Joubert and Marthinus Pretorius were appointed to restore Boer independence. On 13 December 1880 these leaders proclaimed the restoration of the Transvaal Republic and three days later raised their Vierkleur flag at Heidelberg, thus rejecting British authority.



The British garrison in Pretoria immediately sent for reinforcements and a major part of the Garrison in Lydenburg were sent to Pretoria. This led to the Battle of Bronkhorstspuit, which was covered in our October 2020 Mid-Month Visit.

The Boers, as was to happen in the South African War (1899-1902), commenced with their 'mode of attack' – the sieges of the British garrisons at Potchefstroom, Pretoria, Marabastad, Lydenburg, Rustenburg, Standerton and Wakkerstroom.

In addition to the sieges, there were four main battles during the war – the Battles of Bronkhorstspuit, Laingsnek, Schuinshoogte (Ingogo) and Majuba. The Battle of Majuba resulted in the defeat of the British and the subsequent peace negotiations, which then saw the restoration of the Boer Republic of the Transvaal.

The Battle of Majuba was fought on 27 February 1881 and the British suffered heavy losses, with 92 killed, 131 injured and 50 men taken prisoner. Major-General Colley was among the dead.



Conductor F Field was wounded and taken prisoner at the Battle of Majuba – from the bar on the medal one can see that he was present at the Anglo-Zulu War in 1879

Private M Reilly of the 92nd Highlanders (The Gordon Highlanders) was wounded at the Battle of Majuba

So where does Rooihuiskraal fit into all of this. Well, it is a battle site that is 15 km south of Pretoria and easily accessible to those who stay in Johannesburg (Gauteng), and other than Doornkop (which one cannot access anymore), is worth a visit. Having got to the site, we found the entrance locked, and the security guard was not interested in giving me access to take photos – so here goes with the story.

The Boers who were part of the Siege of Pretoria received an intelligence report that the British garrison intended leaving Pretoria in a south westerly direction to join the troops in Natal. The route to be followed was the road leading from Pretoria to Heidelberg – Johannesburg did not



feature anywhere in the battle reports as it only became a settlement after the discovery of gold in 1886.

Under the command of Commandant Erasmus the Boers took up a position behind the large kraal walls at Rooihuiskraal and awaited the British troops. In all books on this war Rooihuiskraal is referred to as 'Red House'.

In the book 'The First Boer War' by Joseph Lehmann, he records (page 198) – *"Very early on the morning of February 12th a strong column of 614 men (198 of them mounted) with three guns moved down the Heidelberg road, hoping to surprise the enemy. But again the Boers were ready for them. As the mounted volunteers rode up towards the summit of the hill with the red house, the Boers began to pick them off. Gildea rushed forward with the main column and guns in support. The Carbineers tried to take the stone cattle-kraal near the red house, but they soon discovered that it was fully occupied."*



Picture: a ridge where Boer soldiers were stationed during the battle – the red roof on the far right is possibly the original 'red house'

It is interesting to note that the red house really meant the house with the red tin roof, which is still on the site.

Lehmann goes on (page 198-199) – *"Receiving volleys at short range, the Carbineers retired to cover. Shells were dropped into the kraal. And the burghers took to their horses. Galloping behind a ridge, they suddenly appeared, heavily reinforced, on the left rear flank of the Carbineers. Nourse's Horse rode to support the Carbineers, but the line caved in. By accident or design, a surgeon drove his ambulance several hundred yards in front of the British line to minister to Captain Sanctuary and other wounded Carbineers. The ambulance was fired on from both sides, as some of the British mistook it for a Boer wagon. The infantry, still in the wagons, came under attack. The fiery Gildea, conspicuous in mufti, stood up in his saddle and shouted orders – he was*



shot in the buttocks. The infantry barely got into action when a flanking fire caused them to get out of hand, a fact which Bellairs later attributed to the extreme youthfulness of the men, including the non-coms. With some difficulty the officers succeeded in restoring order. The Boers, with steady accretions, were emboldened by the sight. An Engineer who had seen action in the Zulu War swore that all the firing at Ulundi put together, was as naught compared to that lively quarter of an hour."



Picture: Colonel Gildea

The British retreated back to Pretoria where Colonel Gildea recovered from his wounds. The British losses were one man killed and 15 wounded. Seven of the wounded, including Captain Sanctuary died from wounds received.

Charles du Val, who was a lecturer in Pretoria, and thus caught up in the Siege, wrote reports on British activities and had the following to say after the battle – *"The Red House Kraal was the last assault by the beleaguered."*

In the book 'The Transvaal War' by Lady Bellairs, she records the following (page 120) – *"I (Gildea) did not consider it advisable to advance further than I did, with the force at my disposal, taking also into consideration the position we now occupy, and the large number of enemy in the field, and the very few soldiers we have to fall back on."*

Lady Bellairs also records what her husband, Colonel Bellairs had to say (page 122) – *"that the too great eagerness and want of proper caution on the part of the Carbineers, should have led to some casualties which might otherwise have been avoided, and to the temporary loss of the services of such a good officer as Captain D'Arcy, and brave man as Trooper L. Melvill."*

This battle is regarded as a very important action of the war as it prevented the British troops in the Pretoria garrison from breaking through the Boer lines to join the war on the Natal front.

Mention is made of Bellairs above – he was, at the time of the war, Colonel Bellairs, who was the Deputy Adjutant-General in South Africa. Colonel Gildea was in command of the Garrison at Pretoria.

So, after all that, Rooihuiskraal is still worth a visit.

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

Allan Gordon