

## Mid Month Visit – July 2022

With tourism opening up in South Africa, and with a local interest (and eventually an overseas interest) in more tours covering the South African War (1899-1902), I am working on a tour itinerary for Mpumalanga, which will include battles fought in the Belfast and Dullstroom areas. I am a member of the Mpumalanga Heritage Society and the Society organised a day trip around historical sites in Belfast – so I went along. My interest was really in the Battle of Belfast which took place on 7 January 1901, but there is a lot more to Belfast, so the trip was really worthwhile.

Belfast was founded by Richard Charles O’Neil, a businessman from Belfast, Northern Ireland. He owned the farm on which the town was built. His grave and those of his family and other pioneers of the town can be found in the cemetery which we visited on this trip.

The tour group of about 40 people travelled in convoy, with our first stop being the Dutch Reformed Churches, with huge historical interest. The first Church built on the site was completed in 1914 and is now used as a museum, with the new Church, completed in 1929, being the standout attraction on the site. It is built in the Byzantine style and looks like a small European Cathedral. It has a circular plan with a unique clock tower in which the mechanisms are moved by means of water.



To quote from the literature provided – *"this monumental church is not only beautiful from the outside; the interior displays a well-designed teak timber pulpit, panelling and decorations.*

*The main church space is located under an impressive dome that is carried on four arches.*

*This spatial arrangement is a precursor to the Voortrekker Monument that Moerdijk was to design 15 years later."*

Picture: The 'new' church



Across the road from the Church is a Retirement Village, and in the village is a monument commemorating the Burghers from Belfast, who fell during the South African War (1899-1902).

It is well looked after which is a huge bonus as many other memorials in other parts of the country, relating to this period, are in a state of huge disrepair.

One can only be grateful of the site where it is situated.



*Picture: Monument located in Retirement Village*

Our next stop was the cemetery and although there are signs of recent efforts to tidy things up, it is, to be quite honest, a disgrace and not well looked after. Most of the British graves have had the disks removed from the crosses so it is not easy to identify where the different soldiers have been buried.



Buried in this cemetery is Private Barry, of the Royal Irish Regiment, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery during the night attack on Belfast on 7 January 1901, at Monument Hill, when he smashed the breach of the Maxim gun, rendering it useless to the Boers.

*Picture: The grave of Private Barry V.C.*

From Steve Watt's book, 'In Memoriam', which contains the names and details of all those soldiers from the South African War who were buried in the old Belfast Cemetery, there should be 47 graves. With time not on my side I was unable to verify this number.



From the cemetery we travelled to the old Town Hall building – what a shameful disgrace. The building, which was built in the 1930's is not even used by squatters anymore, it is in such a bad state. Many of those in the tour party were visibly moved by the state of the building, relating stories of family weddings, matric functions, 21<sup>st</sup> birthday parties, etc., which they had attended in the past. Apparently, in the mid 1990's, when the new government came into power, the building was deemed to be too small, so it was vacated.

On the site of the Town Hall is a 'ruin' of an old slave bell, and a granite stone which was erected as a Taal (Language) Monument, to commemorate Afrikaans' status as an official language.



*Picture: Taal Monument*

Our next stop, and my final stop, was the Covenant Monument on the outskirts of the town, on the road to Dullstroom.

This Monument, in the shape of an obelisk was erected in 1886 and is the oldest of its kind in Mpumalanga.

It was erected to commemorate the Vow taken by the Voortrekkers in 1838, just before the Battle of Blood River.

Of significance to me, and the tourists I hope to take on 'Boer War' tours, is that on the night of 7 January 1901, this position was overrun by the Boers in the night attack on Belfast, and nine members of the Royal Irish Regiment were killed in action, while a further five died later from wounds received in the battle.



*Picture: Covenant Monument*

Having made this a day trip for myself, I had to get back to Johannesburg and was sorry that I couldn't have been directed to the colliery on the outskirts of the town, which was the location of the attack on 7 January 1901 by the Boers, on a position manned by the British to defend the town. At this engagement three men of the Shropshire Light Infantry were killed, and three died later from wounds received.



*Picture: British Memorial outside Bronkhorstspuit*

On route home I stopped off at the 1<sup>st</sup> Boer War memorials in Bronkhorstspuit where the column of the 94<sup>th</sup> Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Anstruther where attacked by the Boers on 20 December 1880, having refused to halt their march from Lydenburg to Pretoria.

This site too is not being looked after which is really a shame.

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

**Allan Gordon**