

Mid Month Visit – March 2022

Earlier this year I received an enquiry about the possibility of a Tour which would start in Ladysmith. After giving it some thought, I decided that instead of taking using the N3 to Ladysmith, and being able to see very little of South African War (1899-1902) activities, I would take them down the old road, which has many 'sights' of interest relating to this conflict. I had not done that trip for a number of years so the recent Anniversary Tour of the Relief of Ladysmith, organised by Pam McFadden, gave me the ideal opportunity to experience the route. The old road to Dundee is the R23 and then the N11.

This route follows the railway line which was in use during the South African War (1899-1902) and was very important for supplies to the British forces active in the area. Heidelberg is the first town on this route, and although there is a lot of war history in the area, the road, being part of the N3, bypasses the town. Heidelberg has played an important part in South African history acting as the interim capital for the Boer Republic during the South African War (1899-1902). During the 1st Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881), Heidelberg served as capital of the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek under the Triumvirate of Paul Kruger, P.J. Joubert and M.W. Pretorius.

On 23 June 1900 Heidelberg was occupied by the British in their advance on other major towns in the Transvaal, following the occupation of Pretoria two weeks before. Lord Roberts sent General Ian Hamilton to take Heidelberg and when the shelling of the town became 'unpleasant' the Boers sent a message to the British asking whether the town would be spared if they gave it up. The British agreed, and the Boers left town on 22 June 1900 having destroyed whatever arms they couldn't take with them (the day before the town was officially occupied).

One then turns onto the R23 and the first town one comes to is Balfour, which was really only a railway station during the war. A further 20 km down the R23 brings one to Greylingstad.

During the South African War (1899-1902) the Scottish Rifles, were camped in the area and built a number of small forts amongst the farms in the area.

They laid out the initials "SR" on the hill overlooking the current town, and these are still visible today.



Picture: SR still clearly visible



Standerton is a further 50 km along the R23 and the railway line is very visible as one drives. Surprisingly, the road was in fairly good condition, and not very busy. During the First Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) a British garrison in the town was besieged by the Boers for three months. The Boer forces shelled the British from the nearby hill called Stander's Kop, but the British held out until the end of the war in February 1881.

About 15 km before one gets to Standerton there is a turnoff to Holmdene Station. It was here that Surgeon-Captain A. Martin-Leake of the South African Constabulary (SAC) was awarded the V.C. for attending to the wounded under heavy fire. On 8 February 1902 a patrol of the SAC came across a laager of Boers. A fierce engagement pursued before the SAC retired. Casualties were six killed, nine wounded and five missing. Martin-Leake's citation and a brief history of the man were featured in our (BattleToursZA) February Newsletter. Martin-Leake's V.C. was the last awarded during the South African War (1899-1902). One has to travel 12 km along a side road to get to the site, and with time not on our side, we decided not to take the turnoff.

The roads in the town of Standerton are atrocious and it was a pleasure to get out of town and once more travel on a fairly decent country road.

The next town along the route is Volksrust, but mid-way between the two towns of Standerton and Volksrust, is a settlement called Perdekop. It owes its name to an environmental oddity that occurred in the days when horse sickness prevailed.

The hill was the only high-lying place that was free of the dreaded horse disease. Farmers would bring their horses to the hill when the disease broke out in the lower lying areas of the region.

Below the highest point was a railway station on the Transvaal/Natal railway line, and this station was garrisoned by the British, as the line was strategic for supplies.



Picture: Perdekop – taken from the R23

We then reached Volksrust, a town which is best known for its 1st Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) relationship with Majuba. However, during the South African War (1899-1902) Buller camped in the town on his way north after the Relief of Ladysmith and established a garrison, as it was a strategic depot for supplies. The name Volksrust (Nation's Rest) probably refers to the Boers resting there after the Battle of Majuba on 27 February 1881, when the Transvaal won its independence back from the British – 1st Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881).



On leaving Volksrust one goes through Laing's Nek, with relationship to both 'Boer' Wars and then past the majestic Majuba mountain. Soon thereafter one passes O'Neill's Cottage where the Peace Treaty was signed after the Battle of Majuba.



Picture: Majuba Hill



Picture: O'Neill's Cottage

Our destination, Dundee, was now an hour and three quarters away, and in the three hours since leaving Johannesburg we had experienced history from both Anglo-Boer wars, something which is not evident if one takes the N3 route.

We bypassed Newcastle, the town that the Boers occupied when war was declared, leaving the town two days later to be part of the Boer force which was to attack the British garrisons at Dundee and Ladysmith.

When the Boers invaded Newcastle they renamed the town Viljoensdorp, after General Ben Viljoen who commanded the Boers when they entered the town. Newcastle became General Buller's headquarters from 8 May to 6 June 1900, after the Relief of Ladysmith, whilst he reorganised his force for the advance northwards.

Dundee was our over-night stop before we started our 'Anniversary Tour' the following day, and on arriving in the town, we spent a good few hours at the Moth Shellhole meeting our tour party, enjoying a few drinks and a meal in the company of the locals, and viewing the many exhibits in the Shellhole from various conflicts. More about the Tour in later newsletters.

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

Allan Gordon