

# the ROAD north an old highway



Rietvlei from the air

©City of Cape Town



Vissershok in the 1950s

THE  
NORTHERN HIGHWAY

Present Road  
Old Route

noboundariescape

In 1927 a book called *Old Cape Highways* by Dr EE Mossop was published. The author's interest was the original routes from the settler's base at the Cape, and how they had developed.

Although the brief to the first settlers had been to establish a refreshment station, it soon proved necessary to venture to the hinterland in search of cattle for trading, and not least because rumours pervaded of the existence of rich, gold laden cities, such as Monomatapa, or of the long-haired, fair skinned peoples (the *Chobona*) that Van Riebeeck had heard about from Krotoa, which were the focus of the explorations.

Inevitably the existing routes and trails utilised by the Khoekhoen in their transhumant existence would have provided initial guides for these explorers to the hinterland, whether to the formidable 'Mountains of Africa' or in a more northerly direction.

The first organised expedition was a mere three years after the occupiers had arrived, and was led by Jan Wintervogel, a man with substantial experience of travel and exploration in South America. Their route was in the direction of the Salt River via the plain lying between Blaauberg and Tygerberg, then Zout Pan (now Rietvlei) through which the Diep River flows. As it was late summer the river in all probability presented little difficulty in gaining the far banks; even now it can spread expansively after heavy rains.

Today this area so far traversed reflects the rapidly spreading city of Cape Town and one is guided effortlessly out of the urban area in a northerly direction via the recently upgraded N7. It is impossible to cross the vlei in such a random fashion any longer and only at the river does one now feel that one is entering a rural landscape.

An indication of early settlement is the farm Vissershok – its beginnings can be traced to little more than a century after the first expedition. It is believed that the core of the structure and gateposts are relics of early construction.

Roads did not follow straight lines as they do now, but continued via existing paths, contours of the land, and known places of settlement, albeit farms in the early stages. So the fact the road north of Vissershok swings north east has nothing to do with directness, but more with connecting the dots.

The landscape here is sadly tarnished by the spectacle of Cape Town's refuse dump, a rapidly expanding landfill site. But sanity resumes at this intersection – the old route turns off, and is lined by what delineated many country roads: rows of blue gum trees on either side. Although obviously not indigenous, they have come to describe much of the rural Western Cape.



Just a little further north is the Morningstar Airfield, base of private clubs. Easy access to the city makes it an ideal spot for planes to be based here. When airborne one gains spectacular views of the West Coast Region and the Swartland, with Table Mountain and the peninsula in the distance forming a stunning backdrop.



The Cape Town Ostrich Ranch is sandwiched between the N7, and the old Cape highway. Boards were for many years displayed alongside the road alert you: 'No hooting, ostriches being laid' – a punchy line that has tickled many passers-by. Not only a working farm, this establishment offers facilities such as a restaurant, shops, museum, tours and a unique venue to host functions.



Planes parked alongside the airstrip with Table Mountain forming a backdrop



Tourist being lured onto a rather uncomfortable ostrich; it can probably be assumed that the bird was no less stressed by the imposition



The church in Philadelphia occupies its own little island



De Malle Meul

Inside De Malle Meul a recreation of Pieter van der Westhuizen's studio, with a copy of the last painting he was working on at the time of his death



My curiosity was piqued by the amount of Chinese visitors when I stopped by. The manager, Arthur, explained that they made up something like 75% of their guests, and it had been so for around 25 years. They certainly had fun interacting with the local ostrich population, even if a bit harassed at times by the hungry birds.



It was somewhere in this vicinity that Wintervogel's party encountered a party of San, calling them Sonqua, and realising that they were a distinct group from the Khoekhoen with whom they had already had dealings, specifically regarding trading. This group he described as 'small in stature, poor and very wild, without houses, cattle or other possessions, and clad in skins'. Little did he realise that he had stumbled on the first peoples, as they are now considered, of the land.

Possibly the smallest kerkdorp (church town), in the Cape, Philadelphia was established in 1863, not without some misgivings by the Rev JJ Beck in Durbanville. He felt it was not a viable parish, although overruled by the Synod, and retained this view for the rest of his life. Philadelphia may be translated as 'brotherly love' (The Bible, Rev 3:7-13) and hopefully this was not an ironic comment on the situation.

At the end of the 19th century it had only about a dozen buildings, and until recently there was no reason for the village to expand due to its proximity to nearby larger towns. But it is growing today, partly because of the enlarging of the N7, giving easy access to Cape Town, and signs of urban sprawl have appeared on the outskirts.

The village's most well-known resident must surely have been

the artist, Pieter van der Westhuizen (1931-2008), who has left a legacy reflecting his environment including landscapes, chickens, birds flowers, tables and chairs, and in fact anything that caught his attention, in various media. Included in his range were depictions of women, beautiful women as he considered them all to be.

Returning to the 'highway' it dips through the Diep River once again before passing by the farm Swellengift, an 1832 grant but with a date of 1823 on the gable, suggesting the building predates the formal freehold. It holds an unusual story in that the original grant was to double brothers-in-law – they had married each other's sisters, creating a somewhat interesting family affair. In relative terms the structure is fairly unaltered, giving a good indication of the period in which it was built. On a nearby copse I discovered stone age tools lying about; it must have been a point of safety or game spotting, with visibility of the surrounds in all directions.

Nearly at the end of this part of the route is Kalbaskraal, a village that sprung up in the late 19th century as a stop on the rail link between Cape Town and Malmesbury. The line is still used for freight traffic as well as a daily commuter train service, a rare function in this part of the rural Western Cape.

Just before Malmesbury the old road passes one of the finest High Victorian farms in the area, Schoonspruit, redolent with its now obsolete, but imposing gateposts. The house itself contains some decorative, tiled fireplaces that adorned such 'palaces' at the time, plus pressed ceilings amongst other features.



Swellengift in the foreground. In the distance are prototype wind turbines near the farm of Bloublommetjieskloof, on which renowned artist, Maggie Laubser, was born in 1886



Main Street, Kalbaskraal. If you are looking for a shopping mall this is not the place to find one



One of the finest examples of grand Victorian/Edwardian architecture in the region, Schoonspruit is situated just south of Malmesbury facing the old road north