

African Studies

A collection of watercolour paintings by Kenneth. S.
Birch depicting the atmosphere of the
Witwatersrand Gold Fields
in the 1960 decade

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

A PICTORIAL REVIEW OF THE WITWATERSRAND GOLD FIELDS

This collection of watercolour paintings of gold mines still producing in the 1960 decade along the Reef, from Randfontein to Heidelberg, was painted mainly between 1960 and 1975.

These paintings are the work of the South African architect and artist Kenneth Stanley Birch of Johannesburg (1914 -). Kenneth Birch has donated this collection to the safe keeping of the University of Pretoria. It is in memory of all the people who worked and slogged on or in the gold mines who helped to produce the development of South Africa

It is a particular African Study in time.

INTRODUCTION

About 1834 the Witwatersrand was so named by the Voortrekkers as they explored the ridges and hills that divide the South African riparian system. The numerous fountains and streams of the sparkling White Waters were only too evident. The waters that flow south from the Rand flow into the Vaal Gariep catchments and so to the Atlantic Ocean. Those that flow north are in the Jukskei, Crocodile, Olifants and Limpopo basin to the Indian Ocean.

A payable gold field from what is now Boksburg to Roodepoort was proclaimed by the ZAR in September 1886. Randfontein and the far East Rand followed after. By 1886, despite any infrastructure as we now know this technical condition, company promotion and mining activity were in full swing. Payable gold was available from the outcrops of the reefs, “die dagsooms”, and until 1910 there were up to 100 small mines digging into the ground as the strata declined to depths.

In 1910 the process of amalgamation and deep level mining got going, so the 45 mines (listed below) form the substance of the Witwatersrand Gold Field. Most of these mines are depicted in the pictorial review.

Kenneth Birch, born in 1914, grew up amidst the mining scene. All the moths in South Africa, and elsewhere, were attracted to the bright lights of the Rand. Johannesburg was known as both Egoli and die “stad van sonde”. It was the only pulsating activity in a still sleepy scene in a colonial colony. The Witwatersrand was a solar system in miniature, with Johannesburg the sun, surrounded by its planets, the Reef towns and their mines.

In the old days approach by road or rail to the Reef was an experience. The golden mine sand dumps and the rock dumps testified to the vast quantity of ore and rock moved from underground. There were the turning wheels of the shaft towers, the drum roll of the rock grinding mills, the sound of hooters announcing the working hours and shifts, a flock of sheep or some cattle belonging to the mine compounds, grazing around. The reduction plants, workshops and stores were the largest industrial buildings in the country.

In spite of later criticism the original gold mining properties, the Rand was a special area for all races.

Mining is a limited event. By 1975(some of the mines had reached depths of 4000 meters below surface) the payable gold was worked out. In 2006 with the increase in the price of gold there are a few attempts to reopen workings, reclamation efforts, but the old Witwatersrand mining scene has totally disappeared. The entire area from Nigel to Randfontein is a sprawl of industrial, commercial urbanisation. The sparkling White Waters are covered or running in concrete culverts, and the vitality has become impersonal.

As the names of the great mines are now virtually unknown, for easier reference and research purpose the Academic Information Service, Special Collections Unit at the University of Pretoria has reclassified the paintings under the names of the Reef towns that grew around the mines.

**THE MINES OF THE WITWATERSRAND GOLDFIELDS AS THEY EXISTED
IN THE 1960 DECADE, LISTED UNDER THEIR URBAN LOCALITY**

RANDFONTEIN

Randfontein Estates Ltd.

KRUGERSDORP – LUIPAARDSVLEI

West Rand Consolidated Mines Ltd
Luipaardsvlei Gold Mining Co.
East Champ d'Or Gold Mine

ROODEPOORT, FLORIDA

Durban Roodepoort Deep Ltd
Rand Leases Gold Mine
South Roodepoort Mines

MARAISBURG

The Consolidated Main Reef Mines

JOHANNESBURG

Langlaagte Estate Gold Mine
Crown Mines Ltd
Robinson Deep Ltd
Village Main Reef Co.
City Deep Ltd (incorporating Geldenhuis and Nourse Mines Co.)

GERMISTON

Simmer and Jack Mines Ltd
Primrose Gold Mines
Rose Deep Ltd
Witwatersrand Gold Mining Co. (Knights)
Witwatersrand Deep Ltd

BOKSBURG

East Rand Proprietary Mines Ltd (ERPM)
Van Dyk Consolidated Mines

BENONI

New Kleinfontein Gold Mining Co. (Incorporating Van Ryn Deep Co.)
Van Ryn Estates Ltd
New Modderfontein Gold Mines Ltd
Modder Deep Ltd

BRAKPAN

Government Gold Mining Consolidated Areas Ltd.
New State Areas Ltd
Brakpan Mines Ltd
S.A. Lands and Exploration Co.

SPRINGS

Springs Mines Ltd
Geduld Mines Ltd
East Geduld Mines Ltd
Modder B Mines Ltd
Modderfontein East Gold Mines Ltd
The Grootvlei Mines
Daggafontein Gold Mines Ltd
East Daggafontein Gold Mines
Marievale Consolidated Mines
Vogelstruisbult Gold Mines

NIGEL

Nigel Gold Mining Co.
Sub Nigel Ltd
Vlakfontein Gold Mining Ltd
Spaarwater Gold Mining Ltd

HEIDELBURG

The Witwatersrand Nigel Gold mines Ltd

There are a number of framed, named, dated and signed paintings hanging on walls in the Academic Information Service, Special Collections Unit at the University of Pretoria.

There are more pictorial records of African Studies in the sketch books of KS. Birch which are housed in the Archives at the main Library at Unisa.

His paintings of Johannesburg are held by Museum Africa, Newtown, Johannesburg.