

# SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL AND PRETORIA : SIXTY YEARS AGO

## THE ESCAPE.

**A**T about a quarter past seven on the evening of the 13th December, 1899, Winston Churchill clambered over the corrugated iron screen that bounded the eastern side of the yard of the State Model School and escaped to freedom. Thus ended the days of his captivity which he called "the most monotonous and the most miserable of my life". The sensational reappearance of the *Morning Post's* special correspondent from within the heart of a hostile country gained him — to use his own happy phraseology — "a public reputation or notoriety which made me well-known henceforth among my countrymen"; he has also recorded that the escape put him in a position to earn money for many years so assuring his independence and means of entering Parliament. The night of the 13th was well-chosen for the escape as the moon rose at about a quarter to eight; full moon fell due on the 17th December. The time of escape is important and luckily the Rev. Adrian Hofmeyr, an Anglophile Cape Colonial and an inmate of the officers' prison has mentioned it as 7.15 p.m. Churchill puts it as half-way through the dinner hour which began at 7 p.m.

## THE INQUIRY.

**O**N the day following the escape Advocate Schagen van Leeuwen and H. W. Zeiler, a judicial commissioner, were appointed to enquire into the circumstances of the get-away. Sworn statements were submitted by the guards, other responsible officials and a few of the officer prisoners. From three sketches with the report of the inquiry committee it seems that there were usually nine guards on duty around the building or in the ground with a few others on call. The afternoon and evening watches were from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., 8 p.m. tot midnight and midnight to 4 a.m. These

### UIT DE OUDE DOOS

In December 1899 liet de regering van Transvaal een bekendmaking aanplakken waarin 25 pond beloning werd uitgelooft voor de opsporing van een krijgsgevangene die was ontsnapt uit de gevangenis van Pretoria. De tekst luidde: *ENGELSMAN, 25 jaar oud, ongeveer 1 meter 75 lang, van normale gestalte, loopt iets gebogen, bleke gelaatskleur, roodachtig-bruin haar, bijna onzichtbaar snorretje, praat enigszins door de neus, slist en kent geen woord Afrikaans.*

De naam van de bedoelde gevangene was Winston Spencer Churchill.

sketches, (henceforth referred to as the "Zeiler plans") show that by some quirk of fate there were only eight guards at the time that Churchill scaled the iron screen at the back of the closets in the yard and there was no guard at the important position at the south-eastern corner of the ground in Skinner Street. After 8 p.m. there was a sentinel at this strategic point, Jan H. Montgomery, Politie No. 94. This guard saw nothing but Churchill states that when he walked out of the garden of the adjoining house into Skinner Street the man was five paces away. Churchill, after climbing the screen lay doggo in the garden next door "for an hour" waiting for his friends, Haldane and Brockie, to join him but they were unable to do so as the guards were on the alert. Churchill was warned verbally by his friends inside the ground that no-one else was able to join him. Another guard, C. F. C. Landman, stated that he saw Lieutenant Grimshawe and two others near the fence at ten minutes to eight and when Grimshawe tried to peer over the fence the guard said "Go back you b - - - -"! In evidence before the committee Captain M. Lonsdale stated that on coming out after dinner between seven and eight he heard Churchill had escaped; he thereupon went to the spot and saw Churchill on the other side. It therefore seems that when Churchill emerged into Skinner Street it was well after 8 p.m. and the guard had been changed in the time that he was crouching in the garden next to the ground of the school.

### **CHURCHILL'S COMRADES.**

**C**HURCHILL'S friendship with Captain Aylmer Haldane<sup>1)</sup> must be recalled as it proves to be a vital pointer to the apartment in which both men were lodged; the friendship was of some standing. Haldane had aided an eager Churchill to accompany one of the military expeditions on India's North West Frontier; it was Haldane who invited Churchill to join the military in the armoured train sally to Chieveley; Haldane who persuaded the Republican officials at Pretoria station that a newspaper correspondent ranked as an officer and should therefore not be sent to the racecourse camp for captive non-commissioned officers and men; it was also Haldane who wrote to the Commandant-General on the 19th November affirming on his honour as an officer that Churchill was a correspondent and a non-combatant. The third member of the trip was Regimental Sergeant-Major Brockie of the Imperial Light Horse; he was taken prisoner by the Boers about the same time as Churchill and Haldane but not in the armoured train affray. A Johannesburg "Uitlander", Brockie knew a little of Dutch and Native languages and was therefore considered a valuable ally in an escape project. Furthermore he had shown initiative in successfully pretending to the Boers that he was an officer rightfully concluding that it would be easier to escape from the officers' camp. A close friend of these men was 2nd Lieutenant T. H. C. Frankland<sup>2)</sup> also captured in the armoured train affair. Frankland was the artist among the officers at the State Model School and was apparently

responsible for the large campaign maps that are still preserved on the wall of a room there; he also drew some caricatures on one of the partitions of his own room (See Dr. J. Ploeger's article in *Pretoriana*, No. 20, p.p. 4—6). Haldane tells us that Brockie and he first considered the fence climbing method of escape; at this time Churchill hoped to be released as a non-combatant and there was little point in his being an active member of the plot. As time wore on and his representations to the Commandant-General did not bring the desired result, Churchill joined in the plan.

### THE APARTMENT IN WHICH SIR WINSTON WAS QUARTERED.

SIR WINSTON has recorded that on their arrival the newcomers i.e. Haldane, Brockie, Frankland and he were lodged in the same dormitory. Frankland has shown clearly that he was in the same room as Churchill. In his affidavit of the 15th December Commandant v/d Wacht R. W. L. Opperman stated "Galway, Franklin (sic), Haldane slapen in kamer by Churchill." Lieutenant Gallwey informed the inquiry committee that he slept in the same room as Churchill but that the latter often had his bed in the passage. One of the guards, J. M. A. Bodenstein said that Churchill often slept on the verandah. (It was the middle of summer and hot weather probably made the rooms uncomfortable). Haldane says that immediately after Churchill's escape five of them were left in the room. Nowhere is there mention of the officers having been moved to another apartment and as the position of the room from which Haldane, Brockie and a later inmate, Le Mesurier, made their escape is known (See illustration) *it can be affirmed with a reasonable degree of certainty that this is the apartment in which Pretoria's most distinguished guest was lodged from the 19th November to the 13th December, 1899.* As Mr. C. J. Beanes mentions in *Pretoriana* (No. 20, 1956. p.a.) this was the centre room of three to the north of the main entrance, the windows of which face Van der Walt Street. (At present this is not a separate room and forms part of a larger one used by the Transvaal Provincial Education Department's Library; the marks of old partition walls are clearly visible on the flooring. A door now without number gives access to this "room" from the lengthwise inner passage.) The escape of Haldane, Brockie and Le Mesurier in Februarie, 1900 is a diverting episode in itself but is only discussed here in so far as it throws light on the exact place of lodgement of Sir Winston. Their excavations beneath the floor of the school took the following sequence:—

- (i) through a trap door under the floor of their own room;
- (ii) they then broke through a cross-wall and got under the next room (north);
- (iii) finally they dug their way through another cross-wall 2 foot thick



to get under the large end room and reached its outer wall opposite the yard of Prospect House then in use as a hospital.

This description tallies perfectly with Haldane's plan and pinpoints the room's position, which he adds, was "towards what I may term the downhill end of the building". When the school was evacuated the officers crept back under their own room and heard the guards laughing at Frankland's caricatures on the walls. It is therefore evident that the caricatures were on the wall of a room occupied by the Chieveley captives and *not* in the same room as the campaign maps which latter had its windows on the rear or eastern side of the building. In a report of the 17th March 1900 on the school Dr. Mansvelt discussed the war maps and mentioned that the caricatures were "in een ander lokaal".

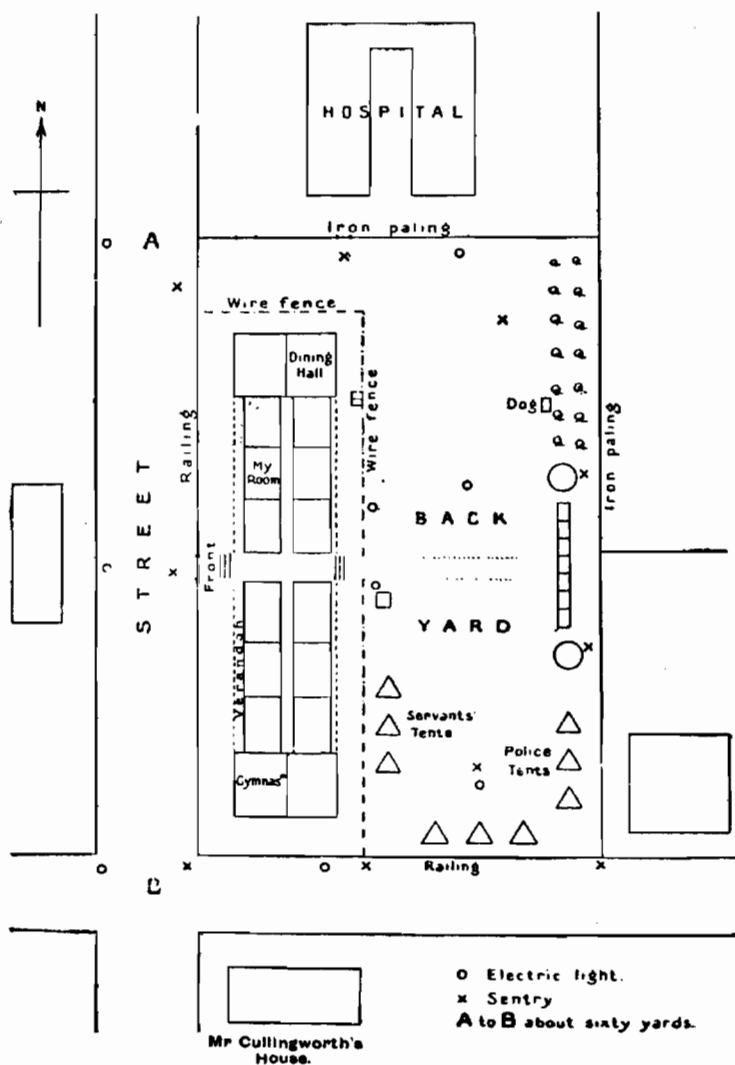
### THE CONTROVERSIAL "ZEILER" SKETCH PLANS.

**H**OFMEYR and Haldane who wrote their accounts in 1900 within a few months of their confinement both say that there were 12 rooms in the main rectangle of the building flanked at either end by two large rooms each of which was divided in the centre by a wall or partition, i.e. a total of 16 apartments. This is in complete accord with S. Wierda's plan for the construction of the school (Transvaal Archives plan S. 2/159) and with the printed specifications. Incidentally the only dividing brick walls between rooms within the building were those in respect of the room to the left of the main entrance and the corresponding room to the right of the main entrance plus a dividing wall through the large end room abutting Skinner Street. The other internal divisions were in the shape of solid wooden partitions; this is quite understandable as the partitions could then be removed to provide for larger classrooms when required. With the inquiry committee's evidence are the three "Zeiler" sketches almost identical in detail, which disclose the following common errors:—

- (i) the lengthwise corridor is shown as dividing the end rooms instead of terminating at them which was never the case. (See reproduction of one of these sketches);
- (ii) twenty different apartments are shown whereas three independent sources indicate that there were sixteen;
- (iii) the supposed room in which Churchill was quartered is marked as being the third from the south-eastern corner i.e. diagonally opposite to the room marked by Captain Haldane.

How does one account for these conflicting particulars? The explanation probably lies in the fact that the sketches were never intended to represent the details of the building accurately but mainly to show how the guards were sited during the various watches. On two of the sketches Zeiler has entered the names of the guards in his own handwriting. The plan shown in *The Pretoria News* of the 22nd October, 1955 is based

PLAN OF STAATS MODEL SCHOOL, PRETORIA



HALDANE'S PLAN OF THE SCHOOL BUILDING.

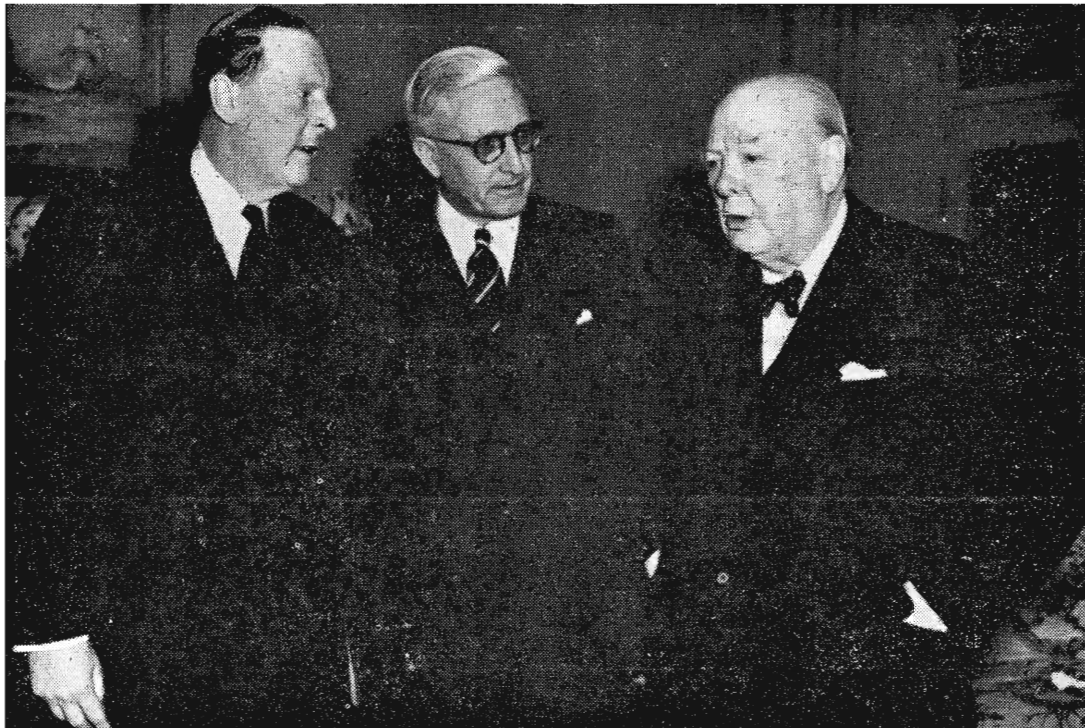
on the "Zeiler" sketches. As to the room marked as "Kamer van Churchill", one can only conclude that the compiler marked it in by guess-work or with the sketches upside down!

### **SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL'S RECOLLECTIONS.**

**A**DVOCATE A. A. ROBERTS, one of our staunch "Old Pretoria" members, was a T.U.C. student in 1910 and lived at the hostel at Prospect House next to the Staats Model School. The northern end of the school was assigned to the students and he then understood that Churchill had been confined in the large room across the north end of the building. Forty-two years later, on the 12th January, 1952, as the Union's High Commissioner in Canada, Mr. Roberts met Sir Winston at a luncheon in Ottawa and was able to put several questions to the veteran statesman about his Boer War adventures. Sir Winston was "in great form" and was emphatic in recalling that his room was entered by going up the steps of the main entrance, turning left along the passage and entering the last door in the passage to the left i.e. the third room north-west, from the main entrance. It will be seen that this indication is also totally at odds with the "Zeiler" sketch-plans and is yet extremely close to Haldane's description. If, after half a century and the dynamics of two world upheavals, Sir Winston's recollections err to the extent of the width of one room (which seems to be the case) it is nevertheless a remarkable feat of memory and a valuable aid to our conclusions. Sir Winston could not recall the Cullingworth family from whom the prisoners received news signals but it seems from Haldane's account that this episode was of later date than the time of Churchill's imprisonment.

### **THE CONTROL OVER THE PRISON CAMP.**

**T**HE statements made before the inquiry committee show that an easy-going control system was in force before Churchill's escape. Commandant Opperman who Churchill describes as "an honest and patriotic Boer" had only been in charge for a month. The guards, mainly ex-policemen, were, one presumes, of middle-age and unfit for commando service. Roll-call was never held so that Churchill had been gone for 12 hours before his absence was discovered. The officer prisoners were allowed to wear plain clothes and possess substantial sums of money. No regulation forbade their sleeping on the verandah or walking in the ground until the small hours. Corporal Z. J. Scheepers of the Wacht mentioned that a restive Churchill "liep altyd 's nachts rond tot 3 of 4 's morgens achter in yard." There was another startling disclosure; two private soldier prisoners, Cahill and Bridge, who acted as servants to the officers and were in tents, had earlier in the month escaped via the same route, viz. over the screen behind the lavatories. Although they had been recaptured the guards had thought it inadvisable to report the incident to their superiors!



*SIR ALEXANDER CLUTTERBUCK, MR. A. A. ROBERTS AND SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL,  
OTTAWA, 1952.*

*(By courtesy of Mr. A. A. Roberts.)*



## THE QUESTION OF CHURCHILL'S RELEASE.

**I**N a telegram received in Pretoria on the day before Churchill's escape the Commandant-General vigorously opposed any suggestion that Churchill be included in a proposed exchange of prisoners. Ever since the armoured train affair General Joubert, backed by the redoubtable Commandant Danie Theron, had insisted that Churchill was a dangerous prisoner who should be watched closely. Louis de Souza, Joubert's deputy in Pretoria, told the "Zeiler" committee that after the escape he received a letter from the Commandant-General in which the latter said that Churchill's proffer of parole or to leave Africa for the duration of the war could be accepted. This seems to be a reference to a sarcastic letter that Joubert wrote at Volksrust on the 12th December. This letter shows a rather reluctant change of view on the part of the Commandant-General; he said that he would raise no further objection to the prisoner's "vry relief" — "aldien de Regeering zulks aanneemt en hy zulks doet" i.e. provided the Government was satisfied that Churchill would abide by his offer and that he would tell the truth about his experiences. Joubert added a thrust of disbelief as a postscript — "Zal hy de waarheid gaan vertellen. Hy zal ook wel een aardje naar zijn vader hebben" (Will he tell the truth? He is sure to prove to be his father's son in this respect"). After Churchill's disappearance an angry Joubert insisted that all correspondence be published but F. W. Reitz, the State Secretary wrote "Wachten tot Ch. weer is gevangen" on the papers. Finally Reitz closed the file on the 19th January with "Op last van Z.H.Ed. opbergen". (To be filed by direction of the Government.)

A determined effort was made to recapture Mr. Churchill. Mrs. T. J. Rodda in her *Memories* (Pretoriana No. 20, July, 1956) has described how the police searched her parents' home. Descriptions were posted to all the landdrosts and the wellknown reward notice was issued. Suspicion of complicity fell on several people and some were put over the border, but the guards had not been bribed nor was there any evidence of other outside assistance. Frankland termed the escape project a "primitive" one but the simple and direct plan succeeded where a more devious one might have failed.

## OUT OF PRETORIA.

**L**ET us now retrace Sir Winston's steps as he turned his back on the State Model School. He was wearing an old felt hat given him by Hofmeyr and was clad in a civilian brown suit. In his pockets were four slabs of chocolate and £75 in cash. Walking down the centre of Skinner Street in an easterly direction he came to the small stone bridge across the Apies on which he rested. Having crossed the Apies<sup>3)</sup> he walked southwards "half a mile" towards the railway using the stars as a guide as he had no compass. Where he came on the railway it seemed to turn northwards — probably near Mears Street station. He then followed the



line. "The night was delicious", he tells us feelingly. "A cool breeze fanned on my face and a wild feeling of exhilaration took hold of me." Two hours' walk brought him in sight of a station and at a point 200 yards from the platform he "jumped" the train that took him on the next stage of his adventure. Haldane who memorised the names of all the stations on the Delagoa Boy line and their distances say that Churchill boarded the goods train at Koedoespoort.

## REMARKS.

I AM indebted to Advocate Roberts for having put valuable notes at my disposal. This article does not purport to focus notice on all the features of Mr. Churchill's captivity and escape so a brief mention of sources is added:—

### (a) PRINTED.

- Churchill, W.S.: *My Early Life*. A Roving Commission (London, 1930).  
 Churchill, W.S.: *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (London, 1900).  
 Churchill, W.S.: *Ian Hamilton's March* (London, 1900). This book also contains extracts from Frankland's diary.  
 Haldane, A.: *How We Escaped from Pretoria* (Edinburgh and London, 1900). Originally published in *Blackwood's Magazine*; an enlarged illustrated edition was published in 1901.  
 Hofmeyr, A.: *The Story of My Captivity during the Transvaal War* (London, 1900).  
 Rosslyn, Earl of: *The Gram*. A Social Magazine founded by British Prisoners of War in Pretoria (Facsimile edition London, 1900).  
 Appeared after the prisoners were removed from the State Model School but gives complete list of all the inmates, their ranks and regiments and contains sketches by Frankland and others.

### (b) DOCUMENTARY.

- (i) File R. 1681/99 (Vol. 8286) of the *State Secretary*; contains *inter alia* four letters from W. S. Churchill to the "Secretary of State for War" of the S.A. Republic.  
 (ii) *Leyds Archives*, Vol. 642, Part I, with the report of the "Zeiler" Committee.  
 (iii) Plan S. 2/159 of Wierda and Specification 246, 1895 in Vol. 167, *Publieke Werken*.  
 (iv) *Onderwijs Departement*, Vol. O.D. 286; has a copy of Dr. Mansvelt's report on the school.  
 (v) *Commandant-General*, Vols. K.G. 346 and 347; various telegrams concerning Churchill's capture and detention.

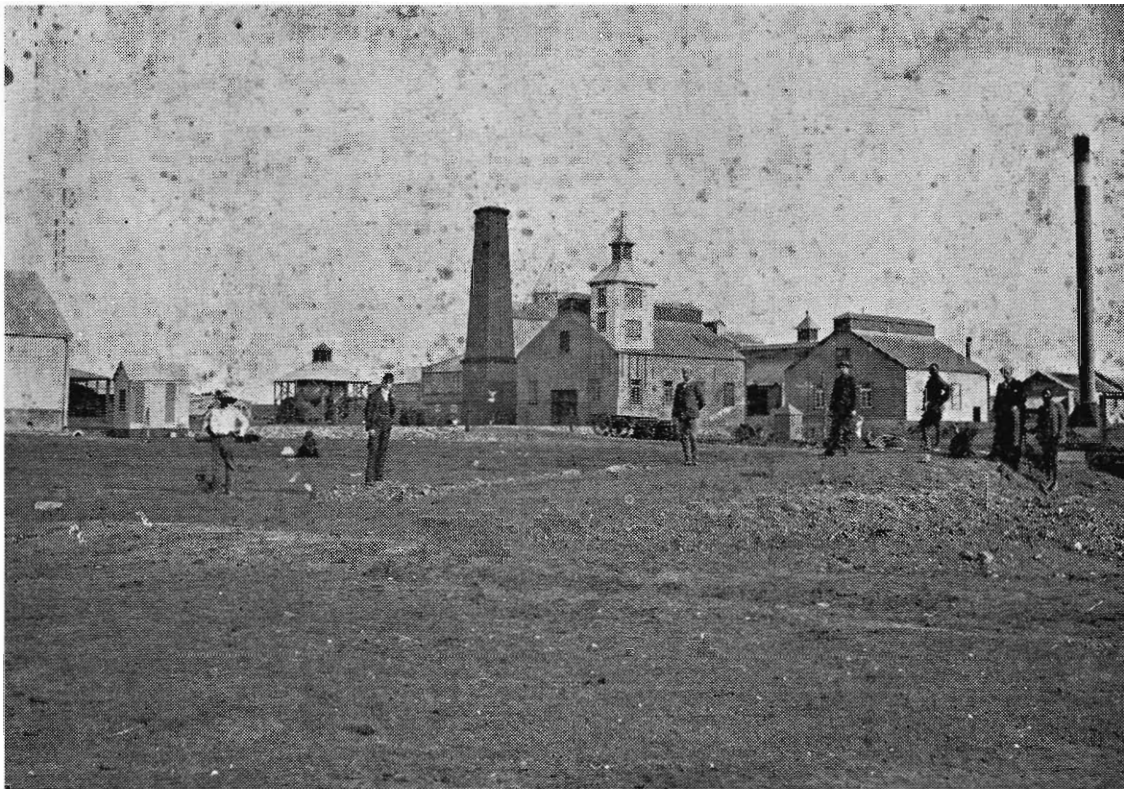
(All the documents mentioned are in the keeping of the Transvaal Archives.)

- <sup>1)</sup> General Sir J. Alymer Haldane, G.C.M.G., K.C.B., D.S.O. died on the 19th April, 1950.  
<sup>2)</sup> Colonel Frankland, killed in the Gallipoli operation, 1915.  
<sup>3)</sup> Mr. Churchill did not swim the Apies as Pretoria's ancient legend has it but the idea is not far-fetched when one sees old photographs of the river in impressive spate after heavy rains.

A. M. DAVEY.



*The Apies River in impressive spate after the heavy rains during December 1897. Photo was taken by Mr. J. C. Leyer near the confluence of the Apies River and Walker Spruit.*



„Zondag 29 November, '96 . . . Om half tien 's ochtends (gisteren) reeds de President met de Regeering, vele Volksraadleden naar de Eerste Fabrieken, het station van dien naam, waar een glasblasery zou ingewyd worden . . . Wat een mooie reeks tipische menschen. De Boerenpresident met zyn Boeren, het sappige, slimme, energieke millioenair Joodje Sammie Marks en memele (= vrou) en roodharig dochtertje. De schoolkinderen kwamen met hun meester een adres aanbieden, waarop de President o.a. antwoordde dat er niets in den weg stond dat ook zy wanneer ze goed oppassen, staatspresident zouden worden. We keken naar het blazen van een paar flesschen en daarna gingen we aan tafel waar de oude Kruger en de energieke Joodje praatte. Wat horisonten! Daar werd gedroomd van toekomstige industrieën (ysterwerken!) en van de noodige beskerming die elke „zuigeling” noodig heeft om niet in de wieg te smooeren.” (Uit: Briewe uit Transvaal van G. A. A. Middelberg (1896—1899), Ingelei en toegelig deur dr. F. J. du T. Spies, Hertzog-Annale, Tweede Jaargang, Eerste Aflewering, Julie 1953, bl. 68—69) — Red.

## DIE GLASBLASERY OP EERSTE FABRIEKEN

NA die Eerste Vryheidsoorlog het Eerste Fabrieken, veral danksy die pogings van die firma Lewis en Marks, 'n nywerheidsentrum van betekenis in die Suid-Afrikaanse Republiek geword. Bogenoemde, kapitaal-kragtige firma, het in 'n drietal rigtings die nywerheidsontwikkeling in Transvaal probeer bevorder. Op Eerste Fabrieken was 'n drankstokery, 'n glasblasery en 'n fabriek waar veral konfynt vervaardig is.

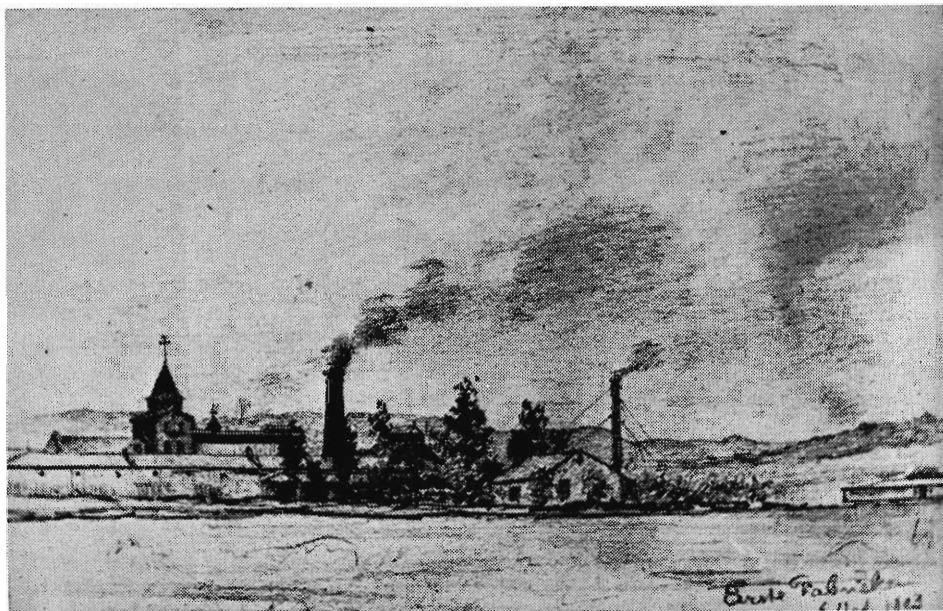
Aangaande die glasblasery beskik ons oor 'n aantal gegewens, ontleen aan 'n briewekopieboek, wat op die tydperk September 1898 tot Augustus 1899 betrekking het. In hierdie brieweboek kom gegewens voor met betrekking tot die verkoop, die verbruik van grondstowwe en diverse rekeninge en verantwoordings in verband met afnemers.

Dit blyk dat hierdie boek in die Pretoria-kantoor van die firmante bygehou is. Die meeste briewe is onderteken deur mnr. J. P. H. Faure (sekretaris) of deur sy gemagtigde mnr. J. A. Barbour.

Insiggewend is veral dié gegewens wat deur die kantoor in Pretoria aan die Londense kantoor van die firma Lewis en Marks verstrekk is. In verband met die verkoop van bottels aan die Witwatersrand gee diverse briewe, gerig aan die verteenwoordigers op Johannesburg (F. M. Joseph) 'n beeld van die verkoop van die produkte van die fabriek in daardie deel van die Republiek.

Die produkte van die fabriek het uit limonade- en sodawaterbottels van verskillende groottes asook uit bierbottels bestaan, terwyl vir die drankstokery op Eerste Fabrieken whisky- en jenewerbottels vervaardig is.

Uit die aanwesige gegewens kry die leser die indruk dat die glasblasery tydens die eerste helfte van die jaar teen 'n gemiddelde verlies van £300



*EERSTE FABRIEKEN, 6 OKTOBER 1893.*

per maand gewerk het. Daarna het 'n gunstige wending gekom. Oor die tydperk van 2.7.1898 tot 1.10.1898 het die inkomste £3,258 en die uitgawes £3,247 bedra en kon 'n wins van £11 geboek word. Tydens hierdie tydperk kon die produksiekoste van 66/- tot 47/- per gros bottels verminder word.

In sy skrywe van 8 Oktober 1898 aan die Londense kantoor het die sekretaris die vertroue uitgespreek dat die aankoms van 'n aantal nuwe werkkragte uit Engeland die uitgawes verder sou verminder. Daar was voldoende bestellings om al die werkkragte voltyds besig te hou. In 'n skrywe van dieselfde datum het die sekretaris daaroor gekla dat die monteur nie vir sy vak opgelei was nie en dat die werkers misbruik daarvan gemaak het deur te sê dat die gereedskap sleg was "when the real reason is that they have either consumed too much beer or have on a fit of laziness".

Terwyl daar in Augustus 1898 28 gros en 6 dosyn bottels verkoop is, het die verkoop in September 1898 tot 243 gros en 4 dosyn gestyg. Onder die afnemers was Weinraub en Abramsohn, die Verbena-mineraalwaterfabriek van S. Sliom en G. W. Shilling, almal van Pretoria.

In dieselfde maand is die volgende hoeveelheid grondstowwe verbruik: