

Melrose House — a building rich in history

IN 1900 Melrose House became the headquarters of the British forces in Pretoria and provided the venue for the dramatic events associated with the termination of the Anglo-Boer-War (1899 to 1902).

Shortly before midnight on 31 May 1902, the Boer leaders and British delegates assembled in the richly decorated dining room in Melrose House to sign the document which heralded a new era in the history of South Africa.

To the Boers the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging signified the loss of the independence of the two Boer Republics (the South African Republic — Transvaal, and the Republic of the Orange Free State).

In "Panorama", Elsa McDonald says the historical house where the peace settlement was finally made, was probably built in 1886 for George Jesse Heys, who was born in Durban in 1852.

In 1876 he owned a piece of land in Pretoria. He was a keen and clever young businessman and his initiative led him to pursue various business interests. He later owned two commercial buildings, Saxon Chambers and Tudor Chambers.

His first Express Saloon Coaches took to the road probably in 1882, departing from Church Square in Pretoria and serving three main routes, to Kimberley, Baberton and Pietersburg.

Eventually, horsepower gave way to steam. By the time the train ended his mailcoach business, George Heys was a wealthy man. Melrose Villa (later called Melrose House) was well suited to the lifestyle of an important businessman.

Towards 1890 he bought another two erven south of his house and there built a coachman's cottage and stables. The house was later enlarged and a billiard room, a conservatory for plants and the present kitchen added. Many of the beautiful objects which still adorn the interior of Melrose House were bought in the countries the Heys couple visited.

A botanical garden was laid out on the vacant ground opposite Melrose House, for which George Heys was awarded the contract. When the park was completed in 1892, he could look over his own garden to what is today Burgers Park.