

01

I R E N E

H I S T O R Y



1830

BOER VOORTEKKER DANIEL ELARDUS ERASMUS LEAVES CAPE TOWN ON THE GROOT TREK.



1844

DANIEL ERASMUS REGISTERS THE TITLE DEEDS FOR THE FARM DOORNKLOOF.



1855

THE VILLAGE ON THE NEIGHBOURING FARM ELANDSPOORT IS NAMED PRETORIA.



1889

A.H. NELLMAPIUS BUYS TWO THIRDS OF THE ERASMUS FARM, NAMED THE FARM AFTER HIS DAUGHTER.



1898

HACK'S & CO LTD. THE FIRST TRADING STORE OPENS NEAR THE TRAIN STATION.



1899

THE SECOND BOER WAR BREAKS OUT.



1902

THE IRENE TOWNSHIP IS ESTABLISHED BY J.A. VAN DER BYL.



1911

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE IRENE COUNTRY CLUB.



1954

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NATIONAL DAIRY RESEARCH INSTITUTE ON THE IRENE FARM.



1974

IRENE ESTATE'S LIME WORKS HAD TO BE CLOSED DOWN.

1937
THE MARIE VAN RIEBEECK NATURE RESERVE IS PROCLAIMED, TODAY KNOWN AS THE RIETVLEI NATURE RESERVE.



1889

NELLMAPIUS COMMISSION
WILLEM DE ZWAAN TO
DESIGN HIS HOUSE AND
STABLE.



1893

THE FIRST TRAIN ARRIVES
AT THE NEWLY BUILT
IRENE TRAIN STATION.



1896

J.A. VAN DER BYL
BECOMES THE NEW
OWNER OF IRENE
FARM.



1903

IRENE FARM BECOMES
HOME TO THE
GOVERNMENT TREE
NURSERY.



1908

J.C. SMUTS BUYS
THE LAST THIRD OF THE
FARM DOORNKLOOF
STILL BELONGING TO THE
ERASMUS FAMILY.



1998

CORNWALL HILL
RESIDENTIAL ESTATE
IS ESTABLISHED.



2003

THE FIRST RESTAURANT
IS BUILT IN THE
ORIGINAL BARN
ON THE IRENE FARM,
THE BARN.



2006

THE SOUTHDOWNS
COUNTRY ESTATE
IS ESTABLISHED.

fig.1.1. HISTORIC TIME LINE OF IRENE ESTATE

SHORT INTRODUCTION TO IRENE

The Irene area south of Pretoria is rich with history and decorated with numerous colourful characters who defined the story of this part of the city.

Mzilikazi, Daniel Erasmus, Hugo Nellmapius, Bertie van der Byl and Jan Smuts are but a few of the prolific residents in the short written history of Irene.

The first of these characters is the breakaway Zulu chief Mzilikazi, the founder of the Khumalo tribe. He devastated the area in the early nineteenth century after moving west from Mozambique due to conflict with the surrounding tribes in that area. "He slaughtered most of the Bakwena tribe at what is now Irene" (Allen, 2007:193).

Hereafter the first known white settlers in the area are the Voortrekkers.

Daniel Elardus Erasmus and his family established their home at the convergence of the two streams where the Irene Country Club is situated today.

He proclaimed the title deed of the Doornkloof farm in 1838. After Erasmus passed away in 1875 his 5 136 hectare farm was left to his three sons and was divided into three roughly equal portions between the streams that course through the farm (Allen, 2007:198).

The area was quiet until after the 1880/1881 war: (Helme, 1974:10) "the history of Doornkloof remains a closed book until the sparkling figure of Nellmapius bursts upon the scene at the end of the 1880s.

Alois Hugo Nellmapius was born on 5 May 1847 and immigrated to South Africa in the late 1880s (Helme, 1974:11), "presumably attracted by the glitter of diamonds at Kimberly and gold at Pilgrim's Rest". He became in his short life an "outstanding pioneer of industry and agriculture in the Transvaal". (Helme, 1974:11)

In the 1880s Nellmapius became obsessed with the idea of turning virgin Transvaal soil into productive agricultural land. (Helme, 1974:13)

After forming syndicates with business colleagues, they bought nearly one million hectares of land in the Pretoria area. Nellmapius came to own a number of farms along the Hennops River, in particular some 3 605 hectares of the original Doornkloof farm (Helme, 1974:14) from the Erasmus brothers, Stephanus and Daniel, who owned the western and northern portions of their late father's farm. Nellmapius named the farm after his young daughter, Irene, meaning 'peace' (Allen, 2007:192).

Nellmapius had "grandiose schemes for the development of his pet project - the model farm at Irene" (Kaye, 1978:86).

He began to experiment with different crops, but not limiting himself to agriculture, he also established a "stock farm and dairy, for which he imported seventy Friesland cows" (Kaye, 1978:87).

Everything was envisaged on a large and generous scale. There was nothing petty or over-cautious about him. (Kaye, 1978:87)

He employed only the most knowledgeable specialists for the operations on his farm. One of these specialists was a young Swiss veterinary surgeon, Dr Arnold Theiler, who became the stock manager and veterinary surgeon on Irene farm. He later became a state veterinary surgeon and established the Onderstepoort Veterinary Research Laboratory and Teaching Hospital just north of Pretoria.

Another of these specialists was his first horticulturist Richard Wills Adlam, the "curator of the Pietermaritzburg Botanical Gardens in 1889" (Helme, 1974:15). His successor was the German born J. Fuchs, or 'Hans' as he was known on the farm. He "was both horticulturist and farm manager until 1895 (Helme, 1974:16). Fuchs was responsible for the design and landscaping of the gardens. "He built two arched glass-houses [which], by their design, fit snugly and artistically under the canopy of great trees" (Kaye, 1978:86).

Theiler gives a detailed description of the farm in one of his letters home (Kaye, 1978:87):

'Imagine an undulating terrain', he writes, 'through the lowest part of which a river flows. Everything, as far as the eye can reach, is part of the farm ... All is grass and only grass, with trees only along the river. Yet there are also gardens, practically wild, in which peaches, oranges, pomegranates, figs, almonds etc. grow.'

The staff on the farm were categorised into farmers and artisans, of which the farmers were sub-categorised as stablehands and field workers.

The artisans included two joiners and carpenters, a blacksmith, a saddler, a painter, a butter-maker, a storekeeper, a butcher, and a coachman and driver (Helme, 1974:18).

Nellmapius decided to build his homestead about one kilometre west of where the Irene Country Club is today. The Erasmus brothers built a water-furrow that was fed by a dam upstream toward Rietvlei. The year after Nellmapius's arrival he extended the water-furrow, which he used to irrigate his orchards, gardens and vegetable gardens using gravity.

He commissioned one of the best 'contemporary' architects of the time, Willem de Zwaan, to design his home. The "large Hungarian-styled stable-barns had been built, as well as the double-storeyed building" (Helme, 1974:16), with dolomite blocks and red bricks of one metre thick, and served as a dairy and butchery on ground floor level and staff quarters on the first floor level. Theiler resided in this building during his time on the Irene Estate. He gives an elaborate description of the facilities on the farm during this time:

The commodious home for the owner surrounded by a veranda and newly planted garden. There were homes for two managers, tool-sheds, a dairy, two large stables with coach-house and workshop attached, chicken-runs, duck ponds, 'an enclosure for stork-like marsh birds', cattle kraals and also a pen for springboks. He was particularly impressed by the 'model stables arranged for each special animal', in which cows in calf and milk cows were kept separately (Kaye, 1978:87).

Fuchs was responsible for the landscaping and design of the gardens, with their "sweeping lawns, shady avenues and brightly coloured flower beds" (Kaye, 1978:86), and created a retreat for the Nellmapius family where they could escape from the troubles of the business world.

This was what the Irene Estate was famous for, and not as a grazing farm: "Irene was known to the public as an extensive flower, vegetable, and fruit garden, and for the perfection of its amenities, twenty thousand fruit trees and a hundred thousand forest-trees having been planted" (Wallace, 1896:25).

The forest trees consisted of imported timbers from America, Australia and North Africa. The trees that shaded the garden around the house were stinkwood, swamp mahogany, loquats, imbuia, jacaranda from South America, cypress from the Himalayas, and a camphor tree from Japan. Fuchs brought several saplings of forest trees and shrubs indigenous to Europe.

The abundance of fruit trees and shrubs were endless as Kaye (1978:87) explains: "Irrigation canals, bordered with hedges of quince, pear, apple, plum and peach, criss-crossed the lands." To imagine such a landscape where most of the trees bear fruit makes one think that Nellmapius created a Garden of Eden for himself and his family. The farm became an "investment and experimental" (Kaye, 1978:89) for Nellmapius.

Flora Shaw from the London newspaper 'The Times' visited the farm in late 1892 and wrote the following about her experience of the Irene Estate:

The hill-tops have been planted with European trees - pine, oak, chestnut, etc., the lower slopes are clothed with vines, and in the valleys plantations of oranges and lemons alternate with American, Australian and African timber. There is hardly a crop from tea to turnips which I did not see in the course of a long morning's drive. (Kaye, 1978:90)

Nellmapius was of the opinion that the Highveld had incredibly fertile soil and that it was not being utilised to its full potential, as had been thought possible up until that time. He felt that the soil could yield a greater variety of products, such as wheat, rye, barley and oats, as well as maize, millet and sorghum, all of which were found to thrive in the Highveld soil.

The experimental farm became a refuge for Nellmapius, who in the early mornings could be found "tenderly inspecting his young orange trees and carefully going through the immense stables where horses, cows and even wild animals knew him intimately" (Kaye, 1978:90).

The livestock on the Irene Estate was as diverse as the workers on the farm. Nellmapius imported Friesland cows for the dairy production on the farm. He was also famous for preserving antelope species that were being decimated by hunters in the Lowveld. Among these species of antelope were eland, springbuck and zebra. Nellmapius experimented with taming the eland and zebra on his farm to work as coach animals. It was known that when travelling through the town of Pretoria from his Albert House residence he would commute on a cart pulled by four zebra. The eland proved to be more difficult to convince to serve any function other than being an alternative to cattle on the farm.

The grazing capability was perfect during the wet summer months but "incapable of supporting its ordinary stock of cattle during winter" (Wallace, 1896:25). The seventy Friesland cows which made up the dairy herd received artificial feeding to sustain their dairy production capabilities. He continues, however, that the farm as "an extensive flower, vegetable and fruit garden" (Wallace, 1896:25) was an "unqualified success".

Nellmapius advertised this service in his paper during 1893, which reads as follows:

Families and hotels can arrange for a regular supply of choice and forced vegetables in and out of season. Especially hothouse cucumbers, tomatoes, bleached celery, etc. can be had throughout the whole winter. Also fresh butter, sweet cream, evaporated fruit, finest fruit, vinegar salad oil, hams, bacon, lard and sausages (Helme, 1974:22).

Nellmapius “was not to see the full fruition of his great efforts at Irene” (Helme, 1974:23). He caught a cold in the winter of 1893, which became much worse by the middle of July of that year. He had also developed a dangerous skin disease on his head, and by the 25th his condition was critical. On the night of the 27th of July his temperature suddenly rose, and at eight o’clock on the morning of July 28 he passed away.

“The short, spectacular Nellmapius era had ended” (Helme, 1974:25).

The Estate of Nellmapius was advertised in the press to be sold at an auction in Church Square. The press notice preceding the auction described the house as “substantially built, containing six rooms, bathrooms, kitchen, two pantries, two wine cellars, etc., etc., water laid throughout, surrounded by verandah” (Helme, 1974:35).

The Irene Estate was sold for a mere £21 500 and the buyer was J. A. van der Byl, acting as agent for Eckstein’s and Lewis and Marks. Including stock and movables, auction fees and transfer fees, the final price came to about £26 000. Bought for £40 000 seven years previously by Nellmapius, who had spent another fortune developing it (Helme, 1974:35).

Johannes Albertus ‘Bertie’ van der Byl was born on the farm Elsenburg near Stellenbosch in 1856 (Helme, 1974:26). He received his education at Victoria College on the Island of Jersey, between France and the United Kingdom. “Intelligent, full of vitality, fun and common sense, Bertie rapidly made a name for himself as an efficient and popular farmer” (Helme, 1974:29).

The first two years at the Irene Estate were favourable for Bertie financially, and the greatest profit came from the Estate’s building lime that was sold to the public. Interestingly enough, the second most profitable sector of the estate was the garden, which sold “strawberries, fruit, flowers and seedlings to the Johannesburg and Pretoria markets” (Helme, 1974:35).

In 1902, as soon as the war was over, Berite established the Irene township to “assure the outlet for the milk produced by his dairy herd” (Helme, 1974:44).

The township was laid out with 337 one-acre erven, and the development started at the south-western corner close to the station.

In October 1903 the British Government started their tree nursery at Irene. The nursery rapidly became the most important of some half-dozen in the Transvaal, and lasted until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 (Helme, 1974:44).

Bertie and his son were responsible for many of the planted trees on the farm; the beautiful avenues of oaks along the river and around the homestead were planted with their own hands. Another of the species they planted was the Honey Locust Tree, “with its clusters of dark red thorns and honeyed pods, which are so much enjoyed by the farm pigs and cattle” (Helme, 1974:44).



fig.1.2. IRENE ESTATE 1937



0 1 km

fig.1.3. IRENE ESTATE 1971

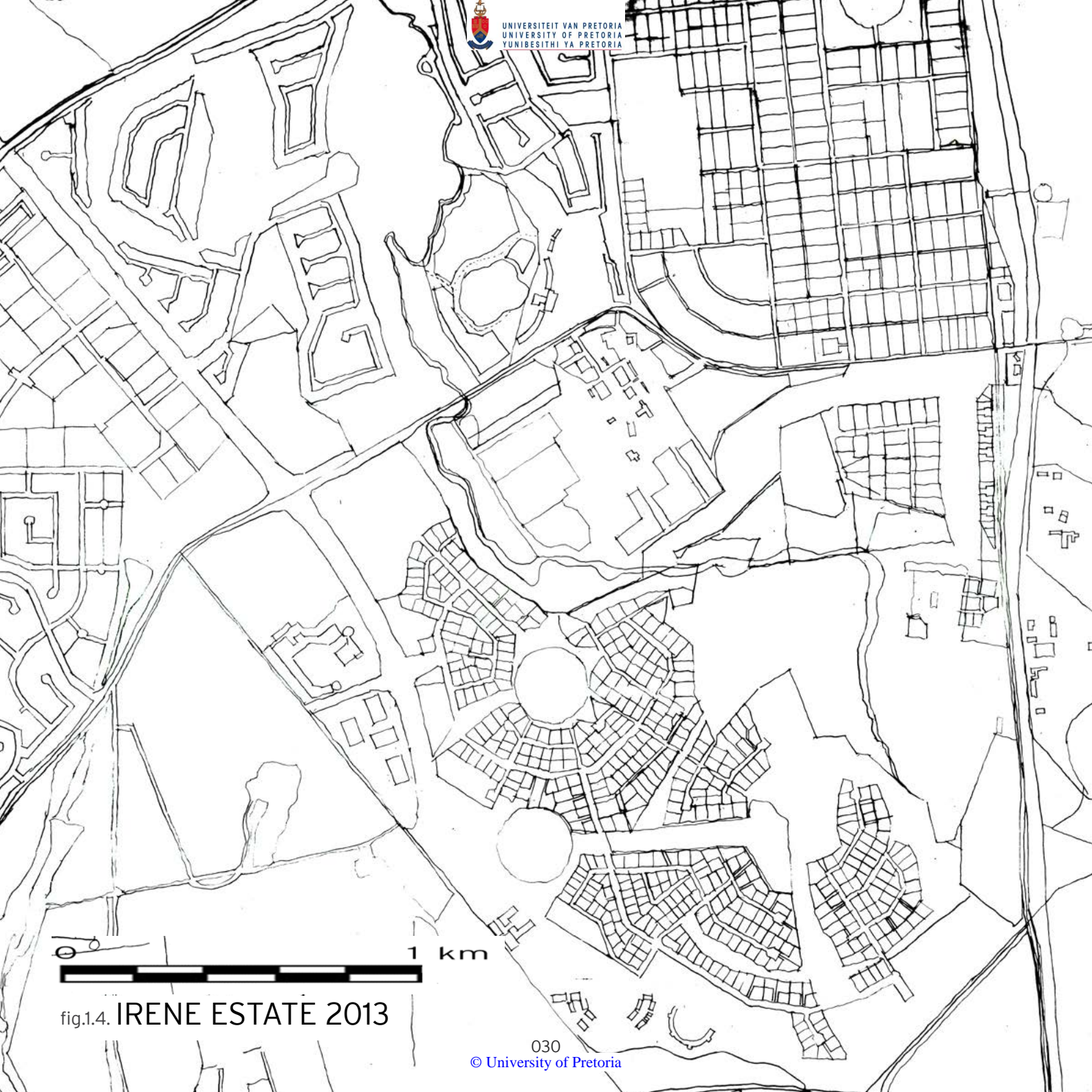


fig.1.4. IRENE ESTATE 2013