

# DURBAN'S DUTCH CHURCH

1923

## HISTORIC ASSOCIATION

### The Architect and his Work

(By a Special Correspondent.)

To-day I had occasion to pay a visit to Clonmel Chambers, Johannesburg, and encountered in one of the passages Mr. Berard Moerdijk. He asked me to enter his studio, and immediately the word "Durban" caught my eye. I found that the clear print in question represented the inscription which is to be carved on the corner-stone of the Dutch Reformed Church to be laid by the Minister of Justice (Mr. N. J. De Wet), on July 7. In Dutch the expression "corner-stone" ("hoeksteen") is still preserved. In English, in connection with the usual ceremony "foundation stone" has replaced the simpler "corner stone" of King James' Bible.

Judging from the plans, this Church, which is destined to meet the spiritual needs of the Dutch-speaking people of Durban, and neighbourhood will be a graceful structure. One thing that immediately caught my eye was the representation of a big tree, and Mr. Moerdijk immediately anticipated my questioning. "I found this there," he said, "and I am going to let it remain. It is a very fine tree (of some indigenous South African species) and therefore, in my opinion, more suitable than any of the children of the Voortrekkers than yew or elm-tree shade. When I was a youngster, studying architecture in England, and at holiday time went roaming in some of your beautiful counties—Kent or Buckingham, for example—I was always struck with the exquisite harmony of the grey old churches and the trees that looked down upon the resting place of the dead. From the yew-trees of English churchyards were fashioned the bows of the sturdy Englishmen who would never brook invasion. And from our South African trees did not the old Dutch Voortrekkers obtain the wood with which they fashioned the strong wagons which through many a year of trial and tribulation were their homes—and often their sure defence?"

#### ENGLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA.

This thought—this linking of a churchyard like that where Gray wrote his "Elegy," for instance—with a spot at the corner of Smith Street and Cato Avenue in South Africa's busiest port—appeared to me at once; and I realised that Mr. Moerdijk was not merely a conscientious architect but an artist of refinement and taste. And my impression was confirmed by one of the pictures in the office—a delicately pencilled sketch of Canterbury Cathedral just as it must have appeared to little David Copperfield at the end of his long, long tramp. And in reply to further questions, Mr. Moerdijk told me something about his student days in London, where he won his A.R.I.B.A., and his deep appreciation of the beauties of the English countryside—above all of week-end visits to sequestered spots.

"And where the kneeling hamlet drains  
The chalice of the grapes of God."

Also of his studies in Paris at the Ecole Des Beaux Arts, and in Rome at the Archaeological School of which Mr. Moerdijk is a member.

It was extremely interesting to find what had been accomplished by this modest but very ambitious Transvaaler, born in Waterberg District, almost in the wilds, who was selected by the Dutch Building Commission of Durban to design for them their Church. To the Afrikaans magazines and other publications in South Africa Mr. Moerdijk has contributed many articles and sketches, and he is also the author of a brochure on Churches and Church Building in South Africa, of which the Rev. J. D. Kestell was moved to say that "the writer furnishes proof that he has the true insight into the art of building. He takes a very high stand. He sees in architecture an element that is Divine."

Thus all Mr. Moerdijk's work is characterised by a peculiar love for it and by an originality which reproduces the old Cape Dutch style in a most attractive manner. In the Church with which a start has now been made at Durban there will be sitting accommodation for

450 souls on the ground floor and another 200 in the gallery; and the plans have been so ingeniously constructed that not only is the furthest seat only 60 feet from the preacher, but each and every one can easily see and hear him. Due provision is made for the choir and organ gallery, and for what is further necessary for the services of the church. Also for a roomy hall which will meet the social requirements of the congregation.

"HET HAANTJE VAN DE TOREN."

As at Dundee so at Durban has Mr. Moerdijk planted—or will plant—a weathercock on the top of the tower which, from its altitude of 90 feet, will be visible from all parts of the Port and from the sea.

The English rendering of the Dutch inscription on the corner-stone will be as follows:

In gratitude to God and in remembrance of our Voortrekkers and our forefathers, this stone is laid on July 7, 1923, by the Hon. N. J. De Wet, Minister of Justice.

"Thou in Thy mercy hast led forth this people which Thou hast redeemed."

—Ex. XV. 13.

F. Ferg, Chairman of the Building Committee; Wilson and Hendry, Contractors; Louw and Moerdijk, Architects.

It may be added that the gallery is the generous gift of a lady from the Free State, Mrs. Uys.

The ceremony on July 7 will doubtless be a red letter day in the history of the Dutch-speaking people of Southern Natal, and quite a number of up-country people have signified their intention of being present for the occasion. What is of particular interest is that the site in question—at the corner of Smith Street and Cato Avenue—is stated to be the identical spot where Piet Retief met the English Colonists before he departed on his last tragic visit to Dingaan.