

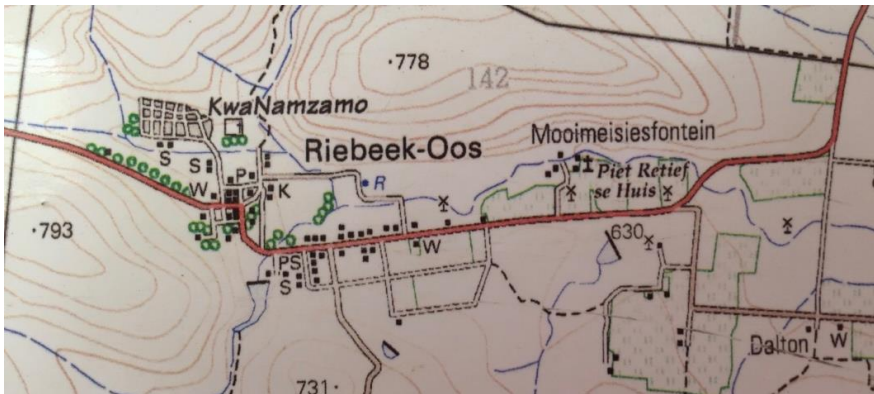
Visit to Riebeeck East, 17 October 2019

Compiled by Suzette Lampier Grist and Sue Gordon

On a searingly hot day (40 degrees C) LAHS members travelled to Riebeeck East, some 50 minutes north of Grahamstown/Makhanda, into an area of dusty, dry farms and game farms. Piet Retief was the first owner of the farm Mooimeisiesfontein, where the village now stands (and as legend has it, he had beautiful daughters!)

On arrival, we were given tea by the hospitable Gavin and Ruth Blamire in the cool of the Church Hall. The Blamires are originally from Botswana, where Gavin was GM of a major book and magazine printer; on retirement they moved to the town five years ago. We then walked across to the imposing stone Dutch Reformed Church which rises majestically above the village. Gavin is more than a caretaker, or voluntary 'koster' - his passion for the church's history and restoration were obvious in his talk to us.

The Congregation of Albany (Riebeeck-Oos) was established in 1831. The first clergymen were Presbyterians from Scotland: Rev G Morgan of Somerset East was appointed Custodian and Rev John Pears became the first resident minister in 1839. In 1841 Rev Adrian Roux was appointed as the first South African Dutch Reformed Minister for this congregation. It is said that he named the town and used an old wagon house at Mooimeisiesfontein for services.



At a meeting in Grahamstown in September 1842 the envisaged town was planned. Council members named the streets after those first clergymen: Morgan Street, Pears Street, Roux Street. (Later the town was named Riebeeck East to distinguish it from Riebeeck West in the Western Cape.)

The congregation of Albany wanted a Church building and to this end in 1840 the Church Council purchased from M J van Rooyen 1574 morgen (1348 hectares) of Mooimeisiesfontein farm, at a cost of 10750 Rix Dollars - just under R2,5 million today. To help finance this purchase, the Council sold off plots of land.

The original church in town was nearly completed when the Frontier War of 1846 broke out. During the Seventh Frontier War (1850-53) the church was severely vandalised, but the indomitable townsfolk started all over again. The present stone church was commissioned in 1862 under Rev Roux.

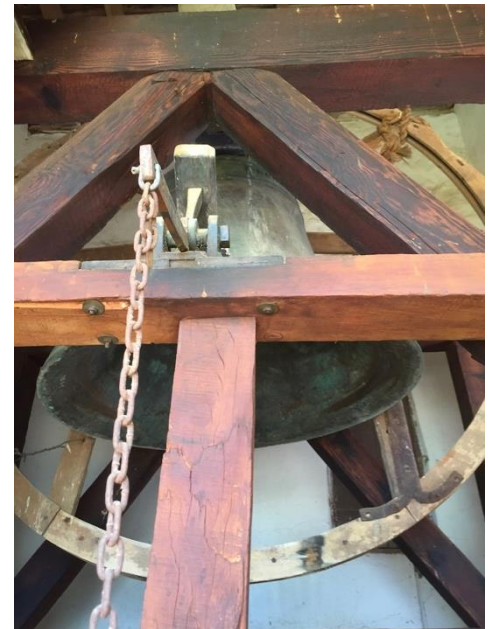


The church became very neglected over the years. Funds were raised and the congregation unexpectedly received a windfall to go towards restoration. Today the cleaned pine cladding looks most impressive on the fresh white walls, balancing the high ceiling and balcony on which is the organ. The extra wide pulpit is a modern replacement, because the original built by J C Potgieter (one of the three members of the church building committee), somehow found its way to Bushmans River. (A sensitive matter, this: there may be negotiations in future for its return.) At the time of building the Church the door locks were most unusual and innovative. The pews are an improvement on the originals, which had severely upright backs in order to keep the congregants awake during the sermon!

Gavin had brought out the huge old bible and assorted silverware for us to admire. The old harmonium, 'a symphonium-orchestrion' was made in France between 1851 and 1883. A distant repairer made it playable again - this huge expense was covered by a local effort, but it still needs a little more work.

The old door locks were manufactured between 1830 and 1870 by J Carpenter at his factory Summerford Works, Willenhall, England.

In the hall of the main entrance hangs the bellringing rope, suspended all the way from the top of the tower. It has a 'solly,' the woollen strip pulled by the campanologist, or bellringer [I was one myself! – Suzette]. At the rear of the balcony a door leads to ladders set against the tower walls for access to the bell, which came from Dublin, Ireland. The Clock was built by Galpin of Grahamstown in 1873.



This church is still a much loved place of worship and while it still falls under the NGK Grahamstown, it attracts all denominations.

Outside, we walked towards the street opposite to admire the old Post Office and its murals. It is now a self-catering establishment, but the two murals, one imagining Piet Retief and his 'mooi meisies' in their farm kitchen, the other of the attack on the Church in one of the Wars, remain an attraction for visitors. The village store, called "Tussen Erens en Nerens" ('Between Somewhere and Nowhere'), in

the tradition of small-town trading stores, sells literally everything. Further on, there is another B&B, and the old secondary school (1907) which one of our LAHS members, Peggy Southey, attended.

One side of today's small Cacadu municipal office was originally a bakery-confectionery owned by a branch of the Woods family (eminent Grahamstown 1820 Settlers) and the other side was a trading store. Both are described nostalgically by Eleonore Setterfield in her article in *Toposcope* 2017. (Eleonore's forebears included a Wood, a German Legionnaire who settled on the Frontier and Norman Pohl mentioned below.)

Further down the road one notices the *Pastorie* (privately owned) and a selection of cottages, many attractively renovated.

Mooimeisiesfontein

From the Church it is a short distance to Piet Retief's farmhouse, now privately owned. When Piet Retief moved to a farm of over 3100 morgen in 1814 he built a small house while constructing his more permanent dwelling, which became his home until 1832. He planted extensive orchards, many trees and installed a water furrow/canal. Unfortunately nothing is to be seen of these now.

In 1837, the famous Atherstones, Dr John and his son Dr Guybon Atherstone, tried unsuccessfully to persuade Piet Retief against embarking upon the Great Trek. After those eventful and tragic years the farm was sub-divided and bought by Carl Pohl (who, incidentally, had donated money for the Church bell). He in turn gave each of his sons, George, Norman and Lennox, a portion.

As mentioned earlier in this article, about half of Mooimeisiesfontein was sold to the church board and the other half to D W van Rooyen. Rev Pears of Grahamstown (then a temporary preacher) bought land as a church farm from Van Rooyen and the old house served as his *Pastorie*. When the last owner, Gert Nel, purchased the farm only 20 morgen were left of the original farm. The old house was in a poor state by this time but nothing was done to repair it, until 1919, when a commission decided to turn it into an orphanage to honour Piet Retief.

In 1921 H A Hanekom and his wife arrived, became interested in it and joined a small group who tried to raise the money to buy it. Eventually in 1923 Hanekom bought the farm from Nel, on behalf of the State.

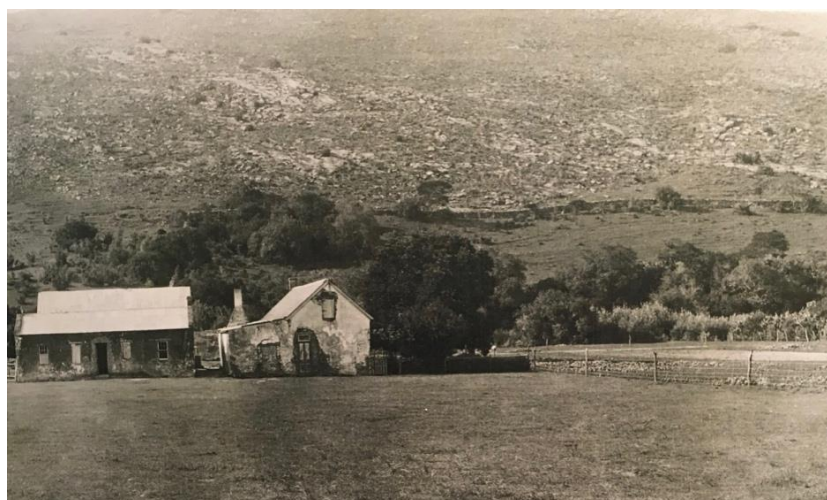


Figure 1: Piet Retief's house Mooimeisiesfontein, pre 1967?

A Covenant Festival involving the entire 'Ring van Albanie' (church district) and driven by the Hanekoms, was held in Dec of that year at Mooimeisiesfontein. Amazingly, it was attended by 2000 and ex-President F W Reitz was guest of honour. It was decided then and there that Retief House and his last 20 morgen would be retained as a living monument to the Voortrekker hero, to benefit disadvantaged Afrikaans children on behalf of the State.

The authorities then restored the garden and house, although the latter was declared a National Monument only in 1948.

The Piet Retief Kinderhuis enrolled their first 6 boys in January 1928 and accommodated the children in the old house. Later a large separate building was built and the Kinderhuis was registered for 'needy white, troubled, difficult, problem and intellectually challenged' boys of 6-14 years, drawn from care homes all over the Republic. Mr and Mrs D Gericke were employed in 1957 by the NG Kerk. Gericke had worked in a medical mission and been head of another orphanage; his wife was a general and surgical nurse and had also worked in NG Kerk mission hospitals.



Figure 2: Piet Retief's house Mooimeisiefontein in 2019

In 1967 the FAK honoured the Hanekoms in recognition of the couple's work in establishing the institution. The Dept of Public Works again restored Retief House in that year. One room was allocated for the housing of historical artefacts (one wonders what became of these?).



Two of our LAHS party, Old St Andreans Niall Wylde (left) and Geoff Bennett (right) pose before the stony 'field' on the other side of the fence (Figure 3). They remembered having had to clear it before playing a rugby match there against the Riebeeck East 'Reformatory.'

The Orphanage-Reformatory (Kinderhuis) itself is a large building complex facing the entrance to the property; according to the art deco sign it was built in 1936. In 1973 it accommodated as many as 93 boys. Today the old Kinderhuis is desperately in need of repair and occupied by squatters.

Riebeeck East today has a small population of fewer than 400 souls, several of whom run their own businesses on the Internet, while others commute to Makhanda. The town is steeped in local history and remains charming, peaceful and totally timeless.

Figure 3: Old St Andreans Niall Wylde (left) and Geoff Bennett (right)

References:

Mooimeisiesfontein and Kinderhuis Piet Retief from NGK Afrikaans brochure, 1973

Setterfield, Eleonore *Riebeeck East* Toposcope 2017.

Kruger, L R *A Brief History of NGK Albany Riebeeck East* Stellenbosch University, 1981

*Cory Library/Rhodes University/Africa Media Online

After the LAHS Outing to Riebeeck East, we made our way to Hilton Farm, where we enjoyed our picnic lunch in the little shade we could find on this particularly hot and dusty day. Thereafter we visited the 152-year old Church.