

Visit to and History of Hilton Farm and St Peter's Church

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Before the arrival of the 1820 settlers, *Hilton* was owned by Philip Schutte and was known as 'the loan place *Roodekraai- (Red Bend)*'. In 1823 Harry Rivers was granted the farm on 'perpetual quitrent.' He, however, was transferred to Swellendam at his own request and in 1825, the property was transferred to Messrs Lee and Cock [William Cock and Lee entered into a butchery partnership in the early-mid 1820s-Ed]. Ten years later Coenraad Frederick Scheepers had the farm for a very brief period.

On the 19th August 1836, Alexander George Cumming became the owner. He was not an 1820 Settler but had travelled widely before coming to this country in 1823. He married Catherine, the 18-year old daughter of Dr John Atherstone and Mrs Elizabeth Damant Atherstone (Elizabeth was four years old when she came out with her family on the ship *Ocean*). Dr William Guybon Atherstone was her eldest brother who became famous for identifying the first diamond discovered in South Africa and performing an amputation using an anaesthetic.



Figure 1: The LAHS Group Picnicking at Hilton

George Cumming kept a diary and sketchbook. One of his sketches shows a Georgian house set in park-like grounds, which may have been the model for his new home at Hilton. Richard Gush of Salem was contracted to build the house and apparently went bankrupt while building it. He nevertheless completed the building work and later paid George Cumming every penny owing. George and Catherine lived in the stable while the house was being built.

The foundations of the house enclose cellars, used as storerooms. The walls are thick lime-plastered stone on the outside with brick inside. Richard Gush was a master carpenter and used local yellowwood for most of the woodwork. The banister is mahogany. The 'cross and Bible' motif appears on all the doors. There are mock windows to the east and west of the house because there used to be a window tax in England and its colonies at the time and George Cumming could not afford the extra windows. The original roof was slate which was replaced by an iron roof.

Wooden uprights in the cellar support the floors of the two front rooms and these could be knocked out to allow more spring to the floors when front rooms were cleared for dancing.

The Cummings were famous for their hospitality.

George Cumming died in 1881 and Catherine nine years later. The Cumming family continued to farm at Hilton until 1924 when it was sold to Monty Hilton-Barber for £4000.

In 1934, the Barbers sold the farm to Mr Tokkie Rose-Innes who fell ill with TB and Miners' Phthisis. He built a pair of thatched rondavels for himself and his nurse (he died in 1938). Mrs Rose-Innes and her children Colin and Nancy lived in the house.

There were many successive owners of Hilton until 1951 when the property was bought by T C White and sons (Pty) Ltd and Alan Selwyn Brown, the road being the dividing line. Timmy and Aileen White were married in 1951 while the purchase of the farm was being negotiated, so they moved to Hilton. They farmed sheep, angora goats and cattle.



Figure 2: The Main House on Hilton Farm

In 1992, Timmy's younger son John and wife Janet returned to farm at Hilton and lived in the rondavels for several years. The house stood empty before Timmy gave up the usufruct (use) of the house in 2001, whereupon John, Janet and family moved into the main house at the beginning of 2002.

St Peter's Church

A short distance away from the Hilton homestead is St Peter's Church, which owes its existence to the efforts and interest of the local farmers and Canon Peter Robert John Mullins.

In 1875, George Cumming ceded a morgen of land to the Diocese of Grahamstown for a church for the local community. The little stonewalled, thatched roof church was built by Charles Ansley, in memory of George Thomson, who had been Canon of the Cathedral and Curate of the County Districts (1848-1874). The first service was held on the 1st April 1877 and thereafter every fortnight. The congregation came by horse and buggy from Table Farm, Brackkloof, Atherstone, Broadfields, Thornkloof, Teafontein, Palmiet, Vaalkrans, Aylesby and even as far afield as Carlisle Bridge and Heatherton Towers. The Reverend RJ Mullins conducted most of the services until he was forced to retire in 1911 owing to ill health. He died in 1913 and donated the chancel furnishings which were made by a Mr Forbes. In 1891, Mr Hyde of the farm Hounslow, donated the font - as well as an ostrich hen, on condition that a male ostrich and suitable grazing were found!

An interesting feature of the altar is the inverted cross carved into the stretcher signifying the manner in which St Peter chose to be crucified.

St Peter was referred to as 'The Rock' - an extremely appropriate dedication as the ground is very stony with blue dwyka rock just below the surface.

The 14 benches (Figure 3) which were built by a Mr Bax at a cost of £20 each are in use today. In 1923 it was proposed that the benches be stained, and measures taken against the bats. The benches were eventually varnished in 1977 in time for the centenary celebrations.

St Peter's became the venue for many baptisms, marriages and funerals. After the World War I a Roll of Honour and three memorial tablets were erected. R G Mullins, a son of R J Mullins, continued to conduct bi-monthly services.



Figure 3: The 14 Benches in St Peter's Church



Figure 4: The Church had Fallen into Disrepair by 1951

In 1922, when the Hilton-Barbers bought Hilton Farm they continued to care for the church. By 1929, the number of people attending services was dwindling and so services were held monthly. In 1935, Colin Rose-Innes bought Hilton Farm, and the last regular church service was held in 1941.

In 1951 T C White and Sons of Table Farm bought Hilton Farm and discussed the re-opening of St Peter's. The church had by this time fallen into disrepair, but in 1953, a rededication service was held, when it was decided to hold services every two months. A communion rail was acquired and kneelers donated by Edward Hudson of Cranford. In 1972, Mrs Nelly Norton donated a vestment wardrobe in memory of her late husband, Johnny Norton, who had died in October 1970. The handsome altar rails, a gift from three families, were made of mellowed teak wood designed and hand made by Mr Bill Hudson.

The teak was procured by Alan Brown of *Brak Kloof* and was part of the old staircase salvaged from the disastrous fire at the Parisian Bazaars, one of the oldest buildings in Church Square, Grahamstown.

In July 1977, St Peter's celebrated its centenary with a service. Mrs Ruth Knowling, a daughter of R G Mullins suggested an aloe garden be established around the church. Regrettably, services are no longer held on a regular basis, and the church no longer falls under the Diocese of Grahamstown, so the maintenance of the church comes from collections and donations only.

After John and Janet White moved into Hilton in 1992 they offered Hilton as a wedding or christening venue and their home as a B&B. In this way the church is used more often and benefits financially.

Note on Table Farm and the White family: Lieutenant Thomas Charles White, who married Ann Grant Damant, led the 1820 White's Party on The *Stentor* and settled initially near Seven Fountains. Ann was part of the Damant party that sailed on The *Ocean*. Thos White was prepared to challenge Lord

Charles Somerset about the conditions the Settlers suffered under and even returned to England in 1824 to make personal representations to the Colonial Office. He also brought from France rust-free wheat for the Settlers. White sold his first farm and bought Table Farm, NW of Grahamstown, adjoining Hilton, in 1828. The deed of Sale was signed by Piet Retief who had farms in the area.

Damant Lodge in Port Alfred is named after Ann's father and uncle, who are both buried at Table Farm. It is still in the White-Damant family. Their family commemoration event planned for 28 March 2020, the day after Lockdown began, was unfortunately cancelled.

References:

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