

Outing to Rokeby Park and the Blaauwkrantz Bridge

by Yvonne Surtees

On Thursday 21 July 2022 around 50 members of LAHS set off promptly at 9:00 from the Civic Centre on an outing to Rokeby Park Church, followed by a picnic tea and talk at the Blaauwkrantz Bridge.

ROKEBY PARK CHURCH

This area was called Rokeby Park by George Dyason, the leader of an 1820 Settler party, in honour of Lord Rokeby of Kent, where Dyason came from.

For six to seven years before the building of the church six-monthly services were conducted by Wesleyan ministers from Bathurst at private homes, then at the Halfway House Hotel and finally at Pittaway's Mill, but by 1883 there was a strong desire for a church to be built, and a one-acre stand was donated. The committee that had been established agreed that by doing the work themselves with willing members, they could obviate labour costs and the building would be put up for £163. In the end it cost £266 but as no contractors were involved, it was constructed in excellent time.



It was agreed (as with so many churches) that it would have a dual function as a school and a church. Therefore the pews were adjustable and formed school desks when the backrest of the pew was flipped over to form the desktop, complete with inkwells. The fact that the children had no backrest meant that they had to sit up straight and concentrate! These were imported desks, the first of their kind in South Africa, and are still in perfect condition.

The church was opened with great celebration on 2 October 1884 (the same year as the train came to Port Alfred) and the original miller-style lamps (possibly brass - or silver plated pewter), pupil books, carpet and cushions were still there in 1984 when it celebrated its centenary. These lamps still hang there today, looking well-loved; one notes, too, the attractive wooden cut-out details on the ceiling. In fact, the church is beautifully kept thanks to

the families in the area.

A monthly service is still held in the church, largely for the farming community, but visitors come from Port Alfred and surrounds to attend. Surnames such as Reed, Tarr, Smithers, Tyson, Butcher (Raye Butcher was the organist for many years), Arnold, Purdon, Harris, Ford, Pittaway come up in accounts of the history of the church and some of these names are also notable on headstones in the adjoining graveyard. For some years the Rev Ray Lutge was the minister.

Yvonne Surtees relates the history of Rokeby Park church. Note hanging lamps and ceiling detail



On an adjoining plot behind the church is a memorial marking the spot where a Seventh Day Adventist church was erected in 1896 and nearby are several Adventist graves. This tiny church was built of wood and iron and when their new church was built in Port Alfred the remaining sheets were taken to Port Alfred. LAHS members enjoyed exploring the church and graves before setting off to the Clayton's farm and the Blaaukrantz Bridge.

BLAAUWKRAANTZ BRIDGE

The recent rain made the farm road down to the bridge impassable for many of the cars and we were unable to get below the bridge for our picnic tea. However, Mrs Maureen Clayton very kindly allowed us to spread ourselves over the lawn near the entrance to the house and we set up our chairs in the sun with a good view of the bridge. This meant that tractors passed by every now and then, reminding us that this was a working farm!

Ben Bezuidenhout, whose booklet is entitled '*The 10.20 to Grahamstown*,' had very kindly come from Grahamstown to tell us the story of the railway disaster which occurred on the bridge on 22 April 1911. His anecdotes were interesting and entertaining, if that is possible when discussing such a catastrophe. He explained the Xhosa belief that the people of the river lived beneath the waters and had unlimited spiritual powers. Because their leader Makhanda had been defeated on 22 April 1819 at the Battle of Grahamstown and had never had a proper burial, they believed that retribution would come. Indeed it did, on 22 April, 92 years later. The history of the disaster is well documented and can be found on the internet. Peter Terry wrote a play about it entitled *Immortal* which was performed at the Grahamstown Festival and elsewhere. The story is told by Hazel (called Maudee) Smith, the little seven-year-old who fortuitously survived as a result of her dress catching on one of the girders of the bridge.

Stuart Lavender, a mechanical engineer, gave a short talk on his theory why the train left the rails. Stuart has studied the bridge extensively, climbed into the gorge several times and found pieces of the



original bridge (now in the Kowie Museum along with his model of the original bridge). It is well worth seeing. The existing bridge was built in 1928/9. After this, members were free to return home if they did not want to join those who were going to walk along the rails to the top of the bridge and in some cases, across it! It is very weathered and rusty now, but the view from the top is magnificent. There is a plaque on the side of the track with the names of those who perished, placed there on the occasion of the centenary of the event. It is very faded and scarcely legible but Stuart Lavender has very kindly offered to replace it.

Stuart Lavender leads a small group
across the Blaauwkrantz Bridge

REFERENCES:

Bailes, Doug. *As It Were*.

Bezuidenhout, Ben. *The 10.20 to Grahamstown*.