Forty Years! Settlers Park's special place in the life of Port Alfred

By Heather Howard

Forty years - Settlers Park's special anniversary! A lifetime for some, just yesterday for others. What were you doing forty years ago in 1986? Well, we had just had our Silver Wedding and had sent the first of our three precious sons off to fight for the Apartheid Government in Angola, so I *do* remember that year!

Let us set the scene for this Settlers Park Ruby Anniversary and see what the world, South Africa, and Port Alfred were like at the time of its establishment in 1986. Our world leaders were Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev and Margaret Thatcher. Happenings included the Chernobyl and Challenger disasters, the first anti-smoking advert on TV, and AIDS hysteria worldwide. In South Africa, with PW as the Head of State, 1986 happenings were even more dire: anti-Apartheid movements proliferated, the Government renewed the three year old State of Emergency for another twelve months, there was a General Strike and violent resistance, deaths in detention, major US sanctions, and censorship of the press. The plane of South Africa's friend Samora Michel of Mozambique crashed. The tenth anniversary of the Soweto uprising occurred, and F W de Klerk admitted the reality of the support enjoyed by the ANC. Talks with Mandela continued; in his twenty fourth year of captivity, he was now held in Pollsmoor Prison rather than at Robben Island.

Narrowing the focus to our own Port Alfred, things were looking up a bit. There was a group of concerned citizens called the Kowie Foundation, which was looking to the future and set about creating bridges between the three largest race groups of the town. In the Herald we were called an "Island of Peace" because of these initiatives. But there were still threats of boycotts, stay-aways and the dreaded word 'Apartheid' hung over us all.

Into this local maelstrom, and in spite of so many negative factors aligned against it, came something positive – the creation of a second retirement village to cope with an increased demand for this type of accommodation in Port Alfred, already a favourite town for retirees.

This talk was not an official history of Settlers Park as that is for Settlers Park itself to undertake. Indeed there are plans to update its official history, which was previously researched and written in 2022 with great diligence by Tricia Border and Jim Truscott.

This is, rather, an acknowledgement by ALHS of the Park's importance to our town over the last forty years, and a tribute to its contribution in many different spheres.

Back in 1974, the Port Alfred Benevolent Society had already established Damant Lodge Home for the Aged on the West Bank (*they celebrated their 50 Golden Years nearly two years ago*), but by 1980 the Lodge was full and had a lengthy waiting list. In 1982**,** the South African Red Cross accepted the challenge to establish a similar-but-different home for retirees, and a committee was formed in 1983 led by the indefatigable Nigel Coster, a hero with a major influence on the Park's early establishment. Then the hunt was on for a suitable site. No less than eight potential locations were in the running.

Here I must deviate a little and bring in the need at that time for a Port Alfred Hospital. In the late 1960s the ex-servicemen of the town were campaigning and fund raising for a hospital to

be built as a memorial to fallen comrades. They accumulated a total of R29 000, a huge amount in those days, but then came the blow. The Health authorities said that Settlers Hospital in Grahamstown was enough for the area and permission was refused.

Hence, after many public meetings (what do we say in the Minutes – 'after lengthy discussion' which in this case meant that World War III was hovering), the money was finally put into the new Civic Centre then being built, with the main hall to be called the Memorial Hall which it now is. But from 1969 onwards, a new Committee began to push for a hospital again, and eventually the Health people said, "OK, we will give you a choice, either we let you have the old empty Kowie Mental Hospital buildings at the end of Main Street OR you can have a plot of land on the East Bank with a promise of new buildings if and when". Long we debated, but in the end we decided that a bird in the hand was better than the promise of a bird in the bush, so we settled for the old dilapidated and in some cases condemned buildings in town, and the East Bank plot became free. Which is where we get back on track with Settlers Park. A two-hectare section adjoining the formerly proposed hospital land was made available, and eventually the hospital land itself was included as well, allowing for expansion.

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Figure 1: The park in 1997 showing the heavy bush where the additions were eventually built

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Looking at the attractive and often amusing names of the roads within the Park, I must mention that in the past, roads in town have been named after the mayors. Think Gluckman, Lambert, Colegate, Vroom, Putt and many others, and at the time of the possible development of this erf, street names has already been allocated on the plans. The name of one of our former mayors, a great chap called Archie Slaughter, was on this plan, but the Park managed to avoid having a Slaughter Street on its signboards - not really fitting!



Figure 2: The Park in 2004

Like any large group of people concentrated in one spot, the Park has a huge influence on those living and working around it. I am thinking here of the Park's positive influence on the economy of the town. Imagine the buying power of its current population of about three hundred and fifty residents. This benefits local shops, petrol stations, service centres, electricians, plumbers and builders. Look at the health sector inside and outside the park; this includes doctors, dentists and a range of others like chiropractors, physiotherapists and radiographers, which we find ourselves in regular need of as the years go by! Then there are the sports clubs where residents help swell the number of subscribing members, especially golf, bowls, tennis and croquet. Churches too are important in the lives of the residents. And in addition, there are outsourced services like food, security, garden work, and many others.

The demand for all these associated services provides welcome employment for a very wide range of skills, from cleaners to professionals, hugely adding value to the life of Port Alfred. This is similar to the boost given by two other major establishments, Stenden University with its campus of up to three hundred students, and 43 Air School with its pupil pilots from all over the world.

Just imagine the influence that 350 Settlers' voters could have within their Ward in Municipal elections and public meetings! Speaking of influence, here I must mention the Park's website, going out to all corners of the world and focussing attention on Port Alfred, to its great advantage. Billed as an ideal retirement town, Port Alfred's charms are described and pictured on the website, alongside beautiful photos and descriptions of the Park and its amenities. Having been in tourism marketing myself, it's easy to appreciate the value this website brings to town and park.

The boost to the economy and employment that the Park gave us in 1986 was shared by four other major developments in the town and its surroundings. Starting the following year, 1987, we had two years of dust, noise and traffic disruption while the Main Street was widened, the new bridge built, and the Royal Alfred Marina developed, all simultaneously! The fourth was the creation of the Fish River Sun. All four were completed in 1989; three developments were destained to remain with us but the fourth to prove a bright bird of passage.

Let us look now at the facilities offered inside the park, an amazing array which, other than the actual accommodation, the Park generously shares with its Associate members from outside, and very often the general public of Port Alfred too. People who like to participate can surely never be bored here!

There are many facilities for residents within the Park but today we are focussing on the Park's place in the life of Port Alfred. I am thinking particularly of the Doug Bailes Library, with its books, DVDs and puzzles keeping its members and Associate members informed and entertained, a huge asset to all.



Figure 3: This is Don Powis after whom the main hall is named. Rotarians donated the motorised scooter to Settlers Park in 2005.

And of course, the Don Powis Hall from 2009. It is just amazing what these walls witness – talks, meetings, table tennis, services, short mat bowls, Scottish Country Dancing, quiz nights, themed dances, exercise classes, markets, bridge and mahjong. What does not happen here? It is another huge asset, not only for the Park but for the town itself with its own lack of a large, safe, usable hall with plenty of parking!



Figure 4: Doug Bailes after whom the Library is named



Figure 5: Thora Ford after whom the Hall's kitchen is named.

I am not forgetting Glen's Den which is wonderful for residents' socials, but is also used by the Garden Club, your Society's Committee and others, especially since its attractive extension has been completed.

Another amenity much enjoyed by residents and many Port Alfred citizens is The Hibiscus Room with its tasteful décor and views out over the lawns. Our small Reading Circle with members from all over town much enjoys meetings and "tea 'n scones" there at regular intervals.

And then there's Paddy's Pool, used by residents and outsiders alike, providing pleasure and healthy exercising. At the official opening in October 2008, then chairman Guy Hilton Barber announced to a packed audience that staff members Jann Haig and Lee Pearson would perform the opening ceremony. To everyone's amazement, they approached the edge of the

pool and at the official word “Go” they jumped into the pool, fully clothed, in perfect unison and with an enormous splash. A moment to remember!

As one drives into the Park, past the friendly and courteous gate staff, one cannot help but be impressed and indeed inspired by the layout and creativity of the gardens, especially round the Pond, showing everyone what can be done with indigenous planting, so essential in our continuously drought-stricken climate. Did you know that at one stage the Pond was home to largemouth bass and koi up to 65cms in length? Grass carp were even flown in from Magaliesberg. It was eventually decided that culling had to be done and Settlers Park Angling Club was formed, Godfrey Howes carved a trophy, and the catches were sent up to the kitchens. That was a few years ago now!

But also, as you drive around, you cannot but be puzzled by the quirky numbering of the houses, which were apparently numbered as the park developed in phases. Much too complicated to change now, can you imagine?! We have the same issue in Ravenswood, I am No.33, my neighbour is 40 and opposite me is No.8. Very confusing for visitors. And there’s another numbering, the little brass plaques naming some of the many trees in the Park, not easily spotted but of great interest to dendrophiles.

Ushers Corner in the north-east corner of the Park, is a strong a link between the park and the history of Port Alfred, being the remains of one of the oldest buildings in the town – built in about 1839 (I am quoting from Yvonne Surtees who has done much research here). It was built by the Ushers who were 1820 Settlers and its site is thought to be strategically placed at the intersection of the main wagon routes from Grahamstown via Bathurst, and the Fish River fortifications along the present quarry road. It was bought by the Webbers in about 1933 - there was a little dark shop, Webbers Trading Store, which I remember. But by the late 1960s it was already crumbling away. Its last owner Bobby Webber, a friendly man with a giant walrus moustache, was in the Municipality’s electrical department, and when the street lights came on in the evening, we used to say to our young children, “There goes Bobby Webber switching on the lights for us”. So good that this little piece of Port Alfred’s history is preserved within the safety of the Park’s boundary. Near this tree-shaded corner is the Wall of Remembrance and Columbarium, even providing space for plaques for beloved pets; a perfect spot for quiet memories.

We cannot leave without mentioning the volunteers who have helped to create this strong feeling of community within the Park. We think of the Silver Threads welcomed on monthly with enthusiasm by residents and outsiders alike; Trust Shop workers; keen amateur gardeners beautifying the grounds; helpers in the Care Centre; the Board with its major responsibilities; members of other committees; fundraisers coming up with ever-fresh ideas; creation of flower displays with appropriate themes; and finally the Wardens providing welcomes and other useful assistance to new and established residents in their section of the Park. There are so many who help in the life of the Park, assisting the work of the professionals in Admin and Health Care.

These volunteers include not just residents but many willing people who live in town and farther afield, giving their time, support, sponsorship and skills, enriching their own lives by doing so, just as the Park itself has enriched the life of Port Alfred.