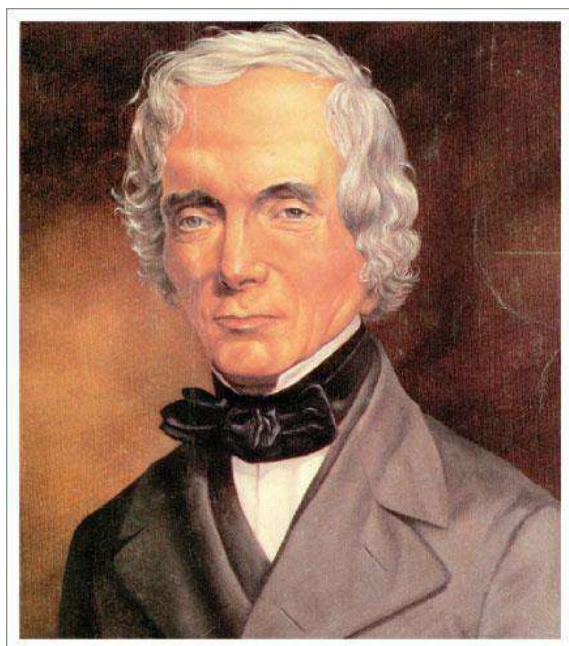


# WILLIAM JOHN BURCHELL, MULTI-SKILLED POLYMATH: his RETURN JOURNEY from GRAAF REINET to UITENHAGE 1813

by Roger Stewart

Roger Stewart describes himself as ‘a truant from medicine, academic clinical physiology, and commercial business. I conduct self-funded research and publish on African maps and the history of the Cape. William Burchell's map was one I just had to have ... and so began my interest in him. On the bicentenary of Burchell's travels in South Africa, Brian Warner and I reviewed Burchell's contributions to South African science. The story of Burchell's return journey was never published and so I set about trying to recreate it from surviving documents and specimens.’ The following article is a summary of the paper published in *South African Journal of Science S. Afr. j. sci. vol.108 n.11-12 Pretoria Jan. 2012 pp 52-61* (ABSTRACT from [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015))



Source: Fred Burchell

FIGURE 1: William John Burchell (1854).

## Introduction

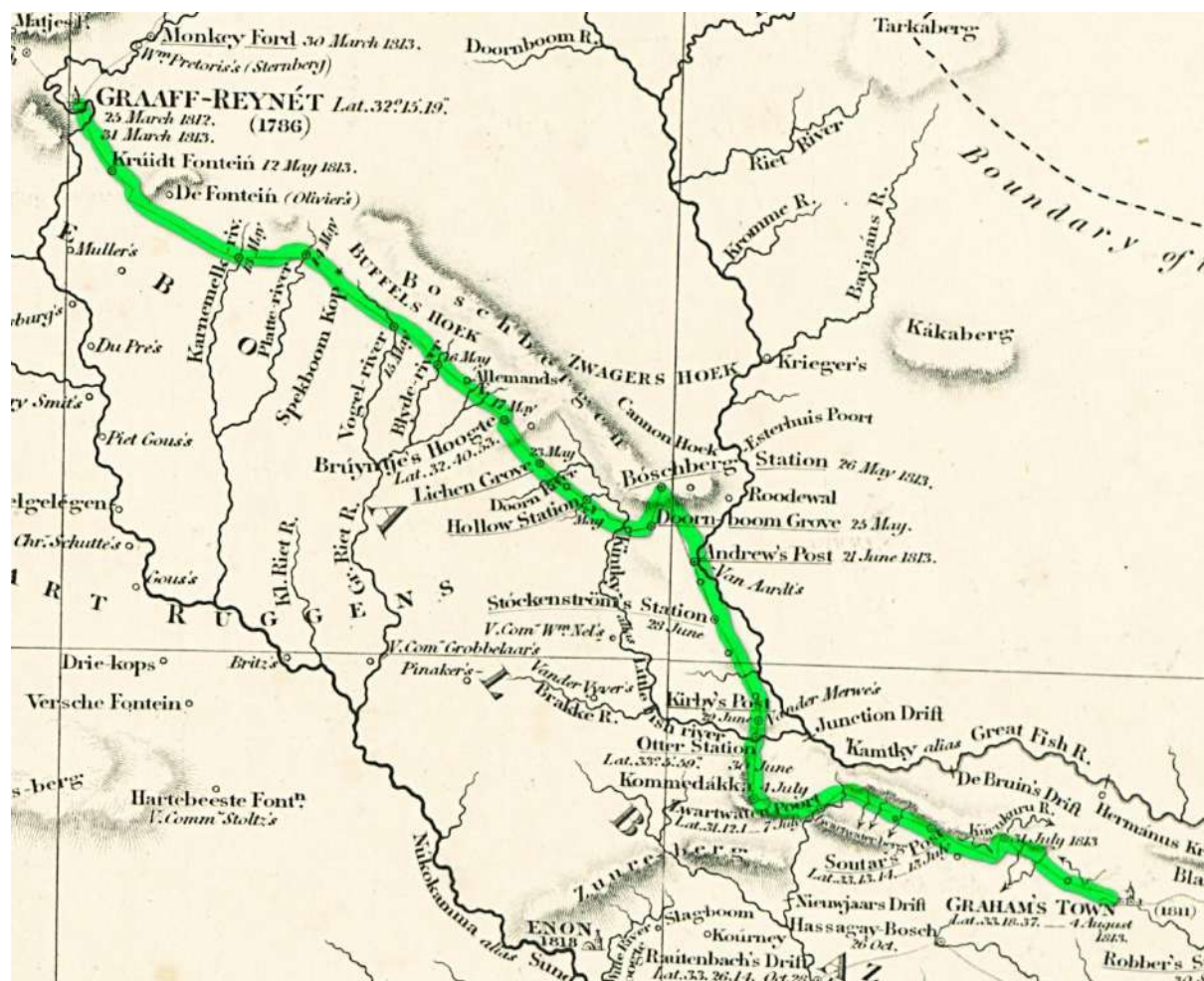
William John Burchell from Fulham, London, was born in 1781 and died in 1863. ‘His privileged schooling, at Raleigh House Academy in Surrey, his self-study and his friendly relationships with famous naturalists of the time were typical of the Enlightenment.’ Burchell studied botany and applied his knowledge practically both in the family's nine-and-a-half acre Fulham Nursery and Botanical Gardens and as an apprentice at the Royal Gardens in Kew. Among Burchell's contemporaries or colleagues were Sir William Hooker, the systematic botanist and the first director of the Gardens; the controversial botanist and horticulturalist, Richard Salisbury who left his estate to Burchell; and William Swainson, the naturalist, collector, artist and illustrator with

whom Burchell shared numerous interests. Another naturalist and southern African traveller was physician Heinrich Lichtenstein whom he met on St. Helena. Army officer, artist and naturalist, Charles Hamilton Smith, was particularly interested in Burchell's quadrupeds. Even Charles Darwin knew Burchell and was aware of his observations of numerous adaptations in nature.

In his unquenchable thirst for knowledge and desire to travel, Burchell undertook extensive field work, funded from his savings and advances from his sole source of income: the family's profitable nursery business. His travels in search of knowledge included St. Helena (1805-1810), where he was appointed official botanist to the English East India Company; South Africa (1810-1815); and Portugal, Tenerife and Brazil (1825-1830).’ [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015)

'Two hundred and ten years ago, 29-year-old William John Burchell stepped on to the wooden jetty near Cape Town's Castle and immediately started planning his journey of scientific exploration of southern Africa. This would take four years, mostly by ox-wagon, and cover 7000km. On 19 June 1811, he departed Cape Town "with a mind free from prejudice" and "solely for the purpose of acquiring knowledge" ...He travelled to about 150 km north of Kuruman, explored the Ky-Gariep (Vaal) River and returned to Cape Town via Graaff-Reinet, the mouth of the Great Fish River, Uitenhage, Mossel Bay and Swellendam...

When he returned to Cape Town in April 1815, he had amassed 63 000 specimens and 500 drawings.'



Above: Burchell's Route in 1813

Burchell's destination from Graaf Reinet was the mouth of the Great Fish River, the south-eastern terminus of his trek and an important landmark for calibrating his map.

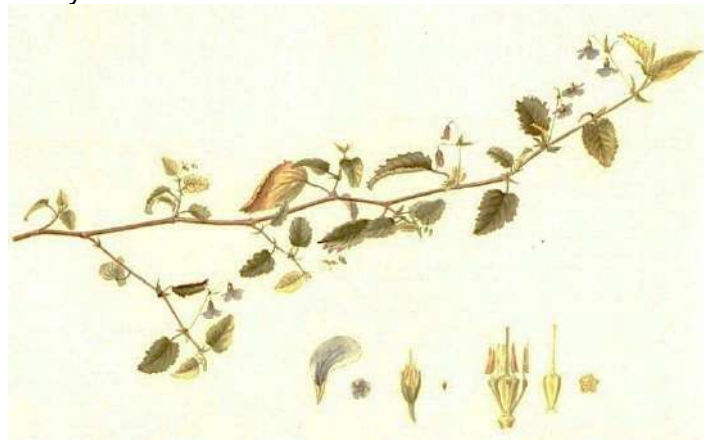
This leg of the journey took a little longer than four months. The party headed south south-west towards the Vogel (Voël) River and camped near today's village of Pearston.



En route Burchell collected his type specimen of the attractive *Haemanthus albiflos*.

Left: *Haemanthus albiflos* from the Botanical register at Kew K000366122

Burchell reached the area of Bruyntjes Hoogte (today's Somerset East) and clearly was taken by the richness of the flora. He remained there for one week, then made Doornboom Grove (on which the modern town is located) his satellite station on the Boschberg. In all, he spent 5 weeks (17/5 – 21/6) exploring and collecting in the mountainous area. One of the first plants he collected in the Bruyntjes Hoogte area (collected on 15 May 1813, CG 2988) was *Mahernia* (now *Hermannia*) *violacea*. What makes this plant of particular interest is that Burchell's pencil drawing and watercolour of it was the sole example of Burchell's botanical drawings to feature in *South African Botanical Art* by John Rourke et al.<sup>1</sup>



*Mahernia* (*Hermannia*) *violacea*: pencil and water colour at Museum Africa (with permission)

On June 4, Burchell took a walk on the southern side of the Boschberg and came across the 'Stinkhout' (Stinkwood, his *Laurus* [now *Ocotea*] *bullata* CG 3170). While the Bruyntjes Hoogte (Somerset East) specimen may no longer exist, a duplicate found its way from Kew to Somerset East. The botanist Peter Macowan was able to persuade Kew to part with many of Burchell's duplicates for the Gill College Herbarium in Somerset East, where he was a school master (professor of chemistry). On Macowan's death in 1904, the herbarium specimens were transferred to the Albany Museum.

The only drawing from the area still extant is of a small antelope (entitled Oorbii), probably a species of duiker, [more likely oribi: Ed]

The route between Bruyntjes Hoogte and Uitenhage seems to have been a hop from military post to military post, sometimes with an escort, sometimes not – and the missionary, John Campbell's journey in the opposite direction, was similar.

<sup>1</sup> John Rourke et al. *South African Botanical Art. Peeling back the petals*. Cape Town, Fernwood Press, 2001, p.38, pl 20

John Barrow,<sup>2</sup> considered the Stinkwood ‘the native oak of Africa ... and may, not improperly, be called *Quercus africana*’ – Burchell pointed out this taxonomic mistake. Burchell must have met Captain Andrews while in the area because he wrote to him thanking Andrews for his politeness and expressed his intent to take up the invitation to visit Andrews at his eponymous post, about 10km south of today’s Cookhouse, which he did a month later, on 26 June 1813. According to John Campbell, who visited Andrews two months earlier en route to Graaff Reinet: ‘the fort I erected on the side of the Fish River, where he has built himself the finest house I have seen in the Albany; ... he also has a good garden and has made an engine to raise water about thirty feet from the river to water his garden, which no less astonishes the boors than the Hottentots.’ Unfortunately neither Campbell nor Burchell drew the fort or the house.

It seems that Capt Andrews was commander of Van Aardt’s Post at present day Long Hope Railway Station. Burchell then travelled past Van Aardt’s farm along the road that was close to the Great Fish River, until he came to Stockenström’s station. This station, seemingly near today’s Middleton, is a bit of a mystery. Andries Stockenström, son of the patriarch who had been murdered in 1811, was involved in a cross border raid after Xhosas,<sup>3</sup> who had apparently broken an agreement to stay east of the Fish River and he had been joined by forces from Grahamstown who proceeded as far as Van Aardt’s. Perhaps Burchell coincidentally met Andries at this stop-over.

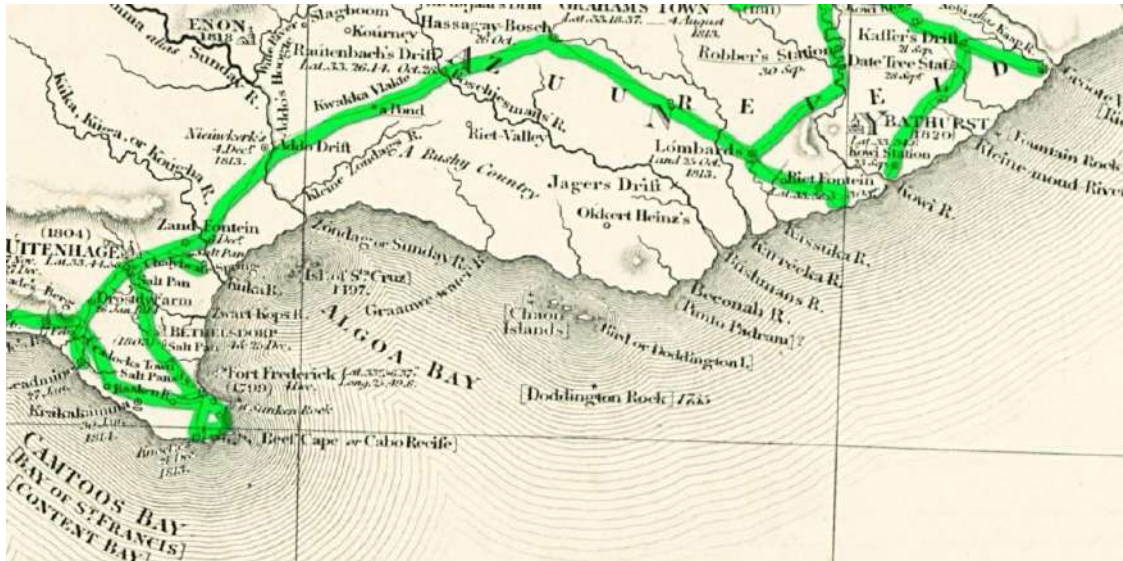
Burchell continued south to Kommadagga, a military post commanded by Lieut Devenish, whence he headed west to the Zwartwaters Poort where he spent a few days botanising.

The party reached Grahamstown, where they remained for about ten days and before Burchell departed for the mouth of the Great Fish River, he saw to some other correspondence. He acknowledged receipt of a letter from Mr J C Bergh. Burchell complained of overladen wagons and informed Bergh that Capt. Fraser, commander of Grahamstown, would see to the delivery of two boxes and a cask to Bergh. Overloaded wagons had clearly become a significant issue for Burchell. He wrote to Mr Peter Polemann, a Danish apothecary, with whom he had travelled to Genadendal on horse in early 1811. Burchell said that his collection was not significant enough to warrant ‘public curiosity’ and that he preferred to discuss his travels with Polemann ‘via voce’. He again mentioned his overladen wagons and that he was down to ‘six Hottentots’. He complained to Polemann, and their mutual friend the Rev Hesse, that his Hottentot servants were ‘a significant problem’. This is a noticeable change from his more tolerant attitude and seemingly better service from his servants on much of the outbound journey. He thanked Hesse for procuring paper but had not yet received it – Hesse had sent it to Fort Frederick at Algoa Bay.

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<sup>2</sup> Sir John Barrow, 1st Baronet, FRS, FRGS, FSA (1764 – 1848) an English geographer, linguist, writer and civil servant became the Second Secretary to the Admiralty from 1804-1845. In 1797, Barrow accompanied Lord Macartney as his private secretary, to the newly acquired colony of the Cape of Good Hope. He settled briefly at Cape Town. During his travels through South Africa, Barrow compiled copious notes and sketches of the countryside, the outcome of which was a map which, despite its numerous errors, was the first published modern map of the southern parts of the Cape Colony.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir\\_John\\_Barrow,\\_1st\\_Baronet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_John_Barrow,_1st_Baronet)

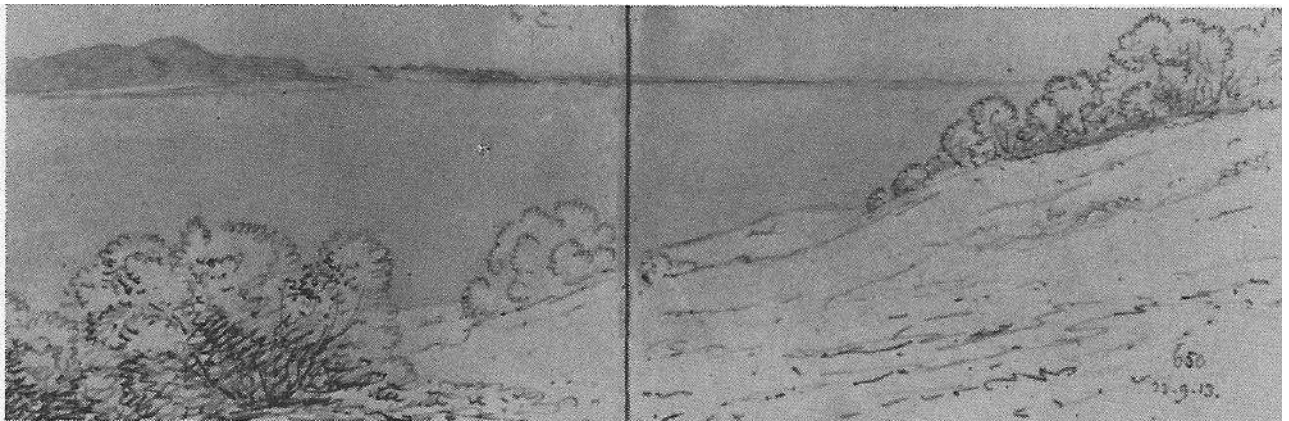
<sup>3</sup> Autobiography of the Late Sir Andries Stockenström, pp 80 – 82:  
[https://archive.org/stream/autobiographyofl01stoc/autobiographyofl01stoc\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/autobiographyofl01stoc/autobiographyofl01stoc_djvu.txt)



Burchell's route from the Uitenhage area to the Fish River

On 8 September 1813, Burchell set off for 'Blaauwe Krantz', where he spent ten days botanising. He must have been well received and developed a friendship with Ensign (later Lieut) John Laycock and his wife, because he drew their portraits. Burchell continued past Kafirs Drift (Cawoods Post) and reached the west bank of the Great Fish River (Rio Infante on earlier maps) on 22 September 1813.

Burchell collected four botanical specimens, drew the scene from the west bank of the river, the south-easterly terminus of his trek, and then returned to Kafir Drift on his way to the Kowie River, some 25 km away and which he reached on the same day.



Fish River Mouth from the west bank, drawing completed the day after Burchell arrived

The next day, September 24, Burchell set out to cross the Kowie River at the usual ford, where there was a near disaster of his overladen wagons becoming stuck in the sand. Burchell had to figure out an alternative route to Uitenhage. His plan was to return to Grahamstown and take the 'highway' to Uitenhage. So he proceeded back towards Blaauwe Krantz and stopped overnight at his Date Tree Station. This station is named after *Phoenix reclinata* which he drew in his *Memoranda Botanica, Ephemeries*.

A surprise awaited Burchell – a plant he struggled to identify 'in the wood near Date Tree Station. a.m. 29 Sept 1813'. John Rourke kindly translated Burchell's Latin entry for CG3873:

*Cyrtanthus* ??*Rootstock thick tuberous with fibres (Agapanthus)**Leaves radially arranged (Agapanthus) flat, often obliquely twisted**Flowering stem or scape two edged compressed**Flowers pendulous orange-red with green tips stigma three lobed No odour**Leaves brittle containing fibres*

More on this mystery plant later.

The next day Burchell's party was again at Blaauwe Krantz where Ensign Laycock must have provided information on an alternative route. While at Blaauwe Krantz and despite his distress, Burchell noticed the cycad (bread plant) *Zamia Horrida*, now *Encephalartos horridus* and drew the specimen.

He proceeded the next day with an armed guard of three soldiers on a route towards Lombard's post; this route allowed him to cross the Kowie River almost 20km upstream from the mouth.

Another near disaster! This blunt letter from his Robber's Station to Lieut Gair (Campbell has him as Gare) at Lombard's Post sets it out laconically.

Sir,  
 The Kaffers have last night stolen  
 23 of my draft oxen & I have not enough  
 remaining to proceed with. — I beg you  
 will let instant search be made to  
 endeavour to recover them: for I have  
 now only 3 men remaining by my  
 waggons. By doing which you  
 will much oblige &c.  
 The 3 soldiers left me this morning  
 by daybreak without my consent or  
 knowledge.  
 (or to the above effect)

To Lieut. Gair  
 or officer commanding at Lombard's  
 1<sup>st</sup> October 1813.

Helen McKay's transcript of Burchell's letter from Robbers' Station

Despite the party being disabled, Burchell managed to proceed 10–15km to Lombard's Post the next day. He makes no mention of assistance or of purchasing more oxen. Burchell was furious about the theft, the ineffective armed escort that had abandoned him after the incident, and the behaviour of his Hottentots. Later, Burchell would provide Ensign Laycock with a more complete story and request that the soldiers be punished for their behaviour; he exchanged most of his Hottentot servants in Uitenhage. Burchell set off botanising in the area south-east of Lombard's Post and seems to have made Rietfontein (Capt Lynch's farm, now known as Elmhurst) his local HQ. He

collected specimens of the Monkey Beetle (his *Anisonyx crinitis*) but his botanical discovery was more important.

On October 25 he saw and pressed another specimen of the troublesome plant he had seen at Date Tree station. The location was between Rietfontein and Lombards (the source of the Kasouga River). He now settled on the name *Cyrtanthus sylvatica*.

In his Catalogue entry, the plant is *Clivia nobilis* per John Lindley. The real source of the illustrated plant is clouded in some mystery. The Botanical Register refers to the possible genus of *Cyrtanthus*, but makes no reference to Burchell who tentatively classified it as such after having abandoned *Agapanthus*. Despite having been the first to discover the plant we now know as Clivia, Burchell's specimens at Kew are not considered type specimens.

On the next day, Burchell departed for Assegai Bush where there 'was a fort and a boer's house'. This post was on the main road between Grahamstown and Uitenhage. He then proceeded to Rautenbach's Drift, a crossing of the Bushman's River and the border with the district of Uitenhage. Then he crossed over Addo's Drift to Uitenhage which he reached on 7 November and left on 26 January 1814. The magistrate at that time was J C Bergh whom he befriended. Bergh was succeeded by Colonel Jacob Glen Cuyler, an American of Dutch origin, the commander of Fort Frederick and who became the magistrate in Uitenhage. He named Albany after his home town in New York State, USA. Cuyler was prominent in the 1820 settler developments in Albany. Later, Burchell was to play an inadvertent role in the British settlement in Albany.

Right: Burchell's route Uitenhage–Algoa Bay area

Burchell's sojourn in Uitenhage and Algoa Bay was crucial to the success of the final leg of his return to Cape Town.

He visited a nearby Chalybeate Spring. Over the years this spring has been "opened" up and also covered. It is situated on the old Percy Fitzpatrick farm, Amanzi (said to be named for the spring), previously known as Balmoral, a name given it by the 1854 owner, James Bevan. Prior to that the farm was known as Rietheuvel. It is approximately 11 km northeast of Uitenhage at 33°43' S 25°32' E.

Burchell also visited the Lead Mine. Once again Barrow in the same book describes the galena (lead ore) found there. It is on the farm Maitland Mines 478, previously known as Buffelsfontein. It became known as Maitland Mines only after Sir Peregrine Maitland became Governor of the Cape in 1844. The company formed to mine the lead was one of the earliest – if not the earliest – joint-stock companies to be formed in South Africa. The old workings are at 33°58 S 25°17' E.

Burchell also shows Drostdy Farm on his map. Almost certainly it refers to what is today named Cuyler Manor (previously the farm Doornkraal granted to Landdrost Jacob Cuyler) at 33°45' S 25°27' E – the manor was completed in 1814, and so it is likely that Burchell saw it under construction. In 1896 the Cape Government Railways expropriated the property, but the original house, much altered but rather elegant, and an old mill still exist.



Burchell's staff had been reduced by attrition to only a few, yet he maintained his rigorous routine. He also added more than 230 specimens to his collection of insects in the Uitenhage/Algoa Bay area – but only thirty botanical specimens. There were no drawings from the area. In his letters, he complained about being exhausted, but also stressed his determination to continue on his trek. Burchell replaced most of his crew in Uitenhage and presumably took on more. He had found their performance severely lacking and he knew he would need good staff to take on the rigours of the Garden Route. He had been short of paper for some while. He used it for drawing, but most of it was used to absorb the fluid released during plant pressing. When he was in Graaff Reinet, he ordered more through Rev Hesse, his friend and host in Cape Town; he collected the paper at Fort Frederick, Algoa Bay. He was very short of gunpowder which he required for shooting game for the pot and also from protection from wild animals. His initial request was turned down but he appealed again to Col Vickers, when a large shipment arrived in Uitenhage.

Quite fortuitously, when he was in Uitenhage, Morley Transport (below), better known or more notorious for its transport of convicts to Australia, had a ship anchored in Algoa Bay off the mouth of the Baakens River. In the middle of December 1813, he loaded 14 large packages of goods on to The *Morley* for conveyance to his agents, Rankin & Scott Merchants of Strand Street in Cape Town.



The *Morley* that transported Burchell's collections from Algoa Bay to Table Bay.

He gave strict instruction that the packages must be kept upright and completely dry. He collected them in good order in May 1815. Had he not offloaded his collections, it is unlikely he could have taken the Garden Route, unless he had acquired a third wagon. Through the agency of Bergh, the landdrost, Burchell also bought some fresh oranges from the Sundays River Valley for the captain of the *Morley*. The *Morley* later shipped many convicts to Australia and is also notorious for having introduced whooping cough to the country.<sup>4</sup>

While in Albany and Uitenhage Burchell wrote to his military contacts (Capt Andrews at Van Aardt's Post, Laycock at Blaauwe Krantz and Capt Fraser in Grahamstown), Stockenström (Graaff Reinet) and also spoke to Bergh (Uitenhage) about assistance in retrieving his two dozen stolen oxen and for Bergh to forward them to him if retrieved. Burchell also sought more staff; Col Cuyler, landdrost of Uitenhage, assisted him with staff from Bethelsdorp.

<sup>4</sup> Morley (1811) Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morley\\_\(1811\\_ship\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morley_(1811_ship))





There is an unexpected memorial to Burchell's visit to Algoa Bay and its environs. A bell in the Campanile in Port Elizabeth with the inscription: "In Memory of Dr WILLIAM JOHN BURCHELL 1782-1863. Explorer and Father of this City. Presented by Victor T Jones." <sup>5</sup> The campanile was built in 1922-24 in commemoration of the landing of the 1820 Settlers. The dedication probably reflects Burchell's influence on the British Parliament where he testified to a select committee in 1819 extolling the virtues of the "Zuureveld for emigrants" – however the parliament did not heed a number of his suggestions for ensuring success.<sup>6</sup>

After some local touring and to the west of Algoa Bay, Burchell set off at the beginning of February 1814 from the Uitenhage/Algoa Bay area to take on the Garden Route. He reached Plettenberg Bay in April and Mossel Bay in the middle of October.

'Burchell is still remembered today for his contributions to descriptive and philosophical aspects of natural history; some of his views were prescient of the concepts of evolution and holism. ....His observations in physical geography, geology and cartography have received less attention. In the social sciences, he provided unique ethnographic descriptions, developed an orthography of two indigenous languages and produced drawings that have attracted international research. William John Burchell is worthy of our memory.' [www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0038-23532012000600015)



Left: an unusual drawing of Burchell: 'W.J. Burchell, self-portrait drawn near Kuruman in 1812'.

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URL <https://bit.ly/3fnr9K8> .

<sup>5</sup> Simon van der Stel Foundation. Tower of Remembrance *Restorica* 1989 (24), 24 - 39

<sup>6</sup> William Burchell. *Hints on Emigration*. London, 1819 & 1820