

SAMHSEC explores the history of Fish River Valley

By Sue Gordon



SAMHSEC members and guests gather outside St Mary's Church Cuylerville. Adele Cutten (4th from left) described the settlement's fascinating history.
(Photo: Sue Gordon)

The local branch of the SA Military History Society (SAMHSEC) chose a beautiful summer day for their outing on Sunday 17 November 2024. The rendezvous was Cuylerville's St Mary's Anglican Church, a national monument, where local resident Adele Cutten shared its interesting history. That story begins with Bailie's settler party, led by Lieut John Bailie RN, the largest 1820 party (263 persons) and the first to leave the Tent Town at Algoa Bay in 1820. Bailie's group comprised a high proportion of skilled tradesmen and professionals.

Colonel Jacob Cuyler, in whose honour the settlement was named, was then military commander of Fort Frederick, and he led Bailie's party to an area whose only occupants were a few scattered Dutch farmers. Land allotted to the settlers was 100 acres/family; the Church is on one of these original allotments currently used by Gary Fletcher, a descendant of William Fletcher of the Bailie party.

We know that survival in the area was precarious because of the settlers' struggles against drought, floods and an inability to grow crops. By 1823 only 16 families, destitute, remained from the original 86.

A building for church services was occasionally served by passing missionaries and from 1824, the remaining families tried to provide schooling for the children. Charles, son of John Bailie, set up a building on their farm "The Hope" (which still exists today) for services led by George Porter. Rev Boardman of Bathurst was occasionally preached there and it is said that Robert Godlonton, who acquired nearby Palmiet Farm, donated land for a replacement building (Ann Williams' article dated 22 Dec 2006). John Bailie had applied for

funding for a priest/school master but the Sixth Frontier war (1834-35) broke out and halted all activity. In June 1835 while 26 year-old Charles was patrolling the Keiskamma valley he and his comrades were ambushed and killed; their bodies were found only in October by a party headed by his father.



When peace returned to the frontier area circa 1839 tenders went out for the building of a school chapel and a schoolmaster's house. The church building still comprises two small rooms (the schoolrooms) and the church itself. Both buildings were completed in September 1840 and the following year, 10 years after John Bailie had requested a teacher-clergyman, John Boon from the Colonial Church Society began teaching at Cuylerville. In 1844, after his house was attacked and damaged, John Boon left for the Winterberg.

Left: The simple interior of the Church
(Photo: Sue Gordon)

During the Seventh Frontier War (1846-7) 66 souls regularly sought refuge in the Church, which had loophole windows, and a large porch to shield against assegais. Cattle theft and the burning of farm houses occurred frequently. No residents were killed, however, although it was dangerous to venture down to the stream for water, unescorted. Nevertheless, in 1846, the Cape Town Mail in 1846 described Cuylerville thus: *'an important post, situated between Cawood's and Fort D'Acres posts...garrisoned by men who have proved their ability to defend themselves. Francis Whittle [Whittal] is in command with 35 armed burghers and natives, and a total of 223 cattle of which 136 are draught oxen. This post supplies much of the oat hay to the Fish River mouth for use of the troops at Fort Peddie.'* (The Cuylerville Saga. Ann Williams, Talk of the Town Dec 22 2006)

By 1853 and following nine major attacks in the area, the Eighth Frontier War ended whereafter the peace held. Rev James Barrow had served the Cuylerville Church during those difficult years, and in 1854 John Boon returned to take up his duties again, serving a wide area. The Cuylerville community continued to diminish until the Church eventually served the farming community only. It became a chapelry under St John's Bathurst where services were held irregularly for many years. "Where the name St Mary's came from is not documented," said Adele Cutten.

In 1947 an endowment was made to the church by Mr W W Whittal in honour of his family who had defended the church 100 years before. With these funds the Lychgate at the

graveyard was built to commemorate all who had perished in three frontier wars. This was dedicated in 1969. In 1970, on the 150th Anniversary of the settler arrival the little Church came to life as wagons and descendants in period costume undertook a symbolic trek ending at the Church. Bonfires and stories rekindled the focus on Cuylerville Church and donations went towards renovations. Charles Acton in particular did a wonderful job cleaning the old roof trusses and fixing the windows and doors.

The church organ was unfortunately vandalised in the 1990s, but later restored.

Services are still held on the first Sunday of the month with clergy from St Paul's visiting a now very small community. Local farms have become bigger, the younger generation has moved to the cities, so only the older folk remain to keep the legacy of Cuylerville Church alive.

The SAMHSEC group then travelled through the magnificent Kap River Valley and its pristine and impenetrable bush towards two military sites and graveyards. The following (*Robson & Oranje*) gives context:



'From the earliest British administration, fortifications were planned. Colonel Graham instituted a series of frontier posts from which patrols could guard the drifts across the Fish River. They were first manned by burghers (civilians) from George and Swellendam, and later by troops. These posts were either rehabilitated farmhouses of wattle and daub, or stone-built shelters enclosed by primitive earthen redoubts.'

The lychgate entrance to the cemetery. Here visitors read plaques listing those killed during Frontier wars. (Photo: Sue Gordon)

Cawood's Post:

Named after David Cawood. Dr Mike Erasmus' book 'A river runs through it' (pgs 520 & 521) shows, both before and after it was burnt down, a double-storey Officers' Barracks which 'housed a strong cavalry force.' The little that remains of Cawood's Post today is covered by wattle. Cawood's Post Cemetery is well signposted along the route to K Drift Post, the field trip's next destination.

KD (Kaffir Drift) Post:

Also described as 'The Guardian of Lower Albany,' this post commanded a strategic high position above the Fish River and formed the extreme end of the line of defense, 55 km

from Grahamstown. Except for a drift below the Post, the 16 kms of river flowing to the mouth were unfordable. A surprise moment with personal relevance to Stephen Bowker (descendant of Settler Holden Bowker, in photo on next page, with Theo van der Walt) was when he was asked to read a plaque, that stated:

'This Fort, commenced in 1815 was used during the Frontier Wars of 1819 and 1834 and burned down in 1835. It was rebuilt and re-occupied under Field Captain Thomas Bowker of the Grahamstown levy in the Frontier War of 1846. It became a station of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police in 1863.'

Water provision and the declining state of the buildings presented problems, and Cawood's Post, 10km away, eventually replaced KD Post. The SA Police still occupy buildings on the site, while the remains of the original brick and stone walls are almost wholly consumed by the roots of a spectacular old fig tree. A little further on at the KD Cemetery we paid our respects to unmarked graves, where a memorial obelisk (photo below) lists the deceased.



The drive towards the Fish River mouth, the end point of the outing, was scenic and colourful. A good gravel road bordered by early summer flowers and pineapple fields wound its way to the Fish River Diner picnic spot.



Thanks to Theo van der Walt and Malcolm Kinghorn for the day's superb planning and organisation.

REFERENCES and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Adele Cutten
 Malcolm Kinghorn
 Krsic, Shirley. *Fortress of Faith*
 Williams, Ann. *The Cuylerville Saga*. Talk of the Town, 2006.
 Robson & Oranje. *Strategic Military Colonisation*