

Kasouga – The Eastern Cape’s First Holiday Resort

by Laura Guest, daughter of the late Jocelyn Guest (nee Randall). Jocelyn made a presentation to the Lower Albany Historical Society on 17 October 2024.



There are few places left on the South African coast where time feels as if it has gently folded itself into the landscape, where nature’s rhythms have remained mostly untouched by the modern rush. Kasouga is one of these rare enclaves — a naturally pristine, secure and much-loved retreat cradled between Port Alfred and Kenton-on-Sea.

Here, the coastline curls around a sweep of sandy beach, a lazy lagoon, and a patchwork of bushy dunes and grassy hills, all watched over by a small community of permanent

residents and loyal holidaymakers who have, over generations, preserved the spirit of a bygone era.

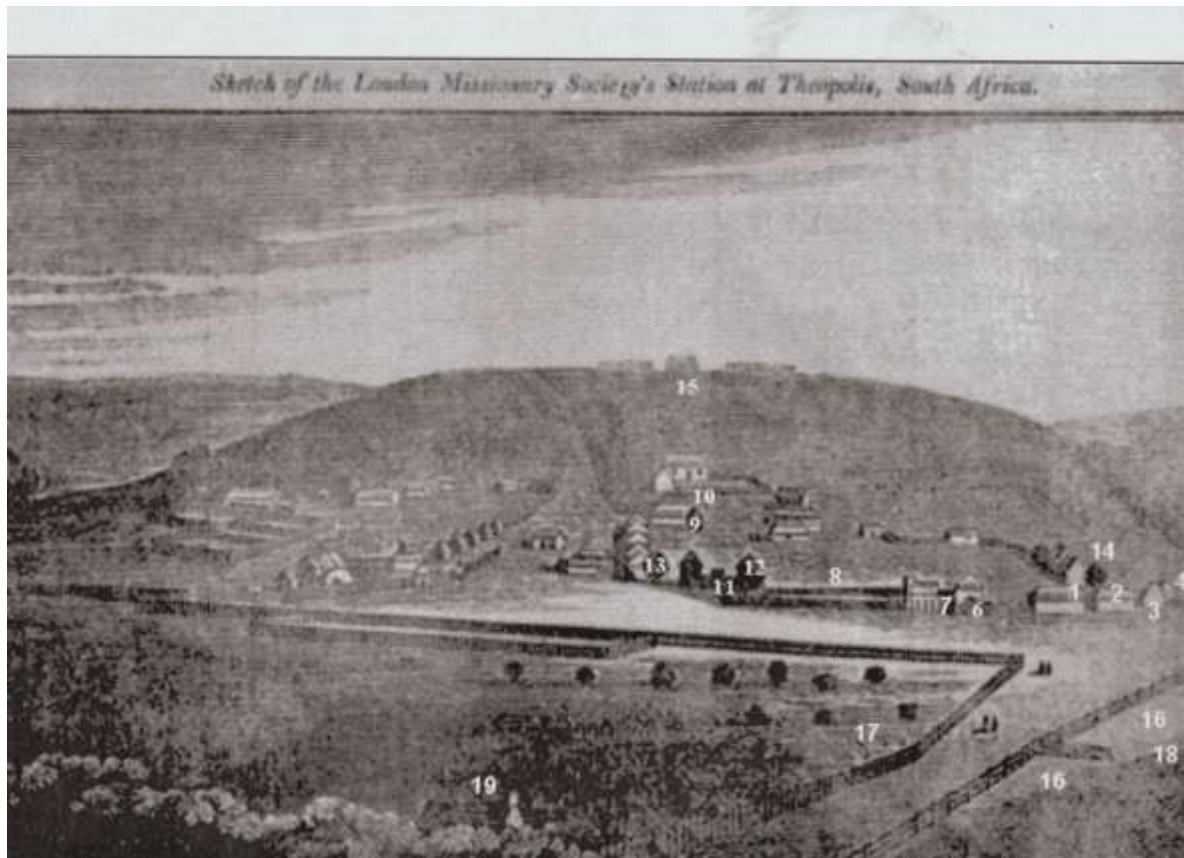
The story of Kasouga’s beginnings is one of simple pleasures and enduring charm. Even before the arrival of the 1820 Settlers, this peaceful stretch of coastline had already earned its place as a retreat.

In an era when most settlements were carved from hardship, Kasouga quietly offered something different — a haven for rest and recreation. Both the British military and the thriving Theopolis mission station recognised its rare appeal: a modest barracks was built for soldiers seeking furlough from their headquarters in a fledgling Grahamstown, while missionary George Barker brought members from nearby Theopolis to enjoy restorative and educational stays. Their early presence vindicates Kasouga’s proud claim as the Eastern Cape’s oldest holiday resort. The barracks still stands today and is a private home.

Right, centre: the old barracks. The other four houses are believed to be the very first built in Kasouga. All five buildings are still used as homes today; some now have permanent residents. Photo supplied



Before them, strandlopers had wandered these shores for millennia, leaving behind fragments of pottery and traces of a simpler existence in the middens found in the dunes. Even the name Kasouga, sometimes rendered Kasuka, speaks of an ancient past, believed to mean “place of the leopard” in the Khoe-Khoe language. In folklore, a story circulates that it was derived from the isiXhosa word *suka*, meaning “go away” — but for anyone who has ever visited, it is clear that Kasouga’s spirit calls people to linger, not leave.



‘Sketch of the London Missionary Society’s Station at Theopolis, South Africa.’
Artist unknown, and numbered items not explained.

By 1880, both Theopolis and the British military presence had faded into history, but there was no doubt that Kasouga’s tranquil beauty was too valuable to be lost to time. Three local men — John Edwin Wood, Charles Joseph Stirk, and Sir Andries FS Maasdorp — became the first Trustees of what would go on to be a haven for generations to come. Initially, camping became the most popular way to experience the area. Whole families would travel by ox-wagon, taking up to several days to reach the seaside, bringing with them live sheep, cows for milk, chickens for eggs, and all the necessities for a long, self-sufficient stay. It was not long before the first modest cottages appeared, several of which still stand today, offering a more permanent place for those looking for seasonal retreats.

Travel was never for the faint-hearted. Tracks masquerading as roads wound their way through Southwell and beyond, and later, even early cars, trailers and tractors struggled with the rugged journey. But no one seemed to mind. The hardships of the road only sweetened the prize of arrival. Once there, days stretched out in a succession of beach walks, fishing adventures, river boating, and lazy picnics on the riverbanks at Honeymoon

Bush. Life at Kasouga moved to the rise and fall of the tide, punctuated by impromptu cricket matches between Campers and Cottagers, and lively variety shows and the annual New Year's Eve dance that filled the air with music and laughter.

When local farmer and erfholder John Ford endowed the land upon which the Community Hall was built in 1925, he insisted on a temperance clause: no alcohol allowed within its walls. It was a curious rule for a community that loved a good party, and over the years it was respected with cars parked strategically outside the Hall providing boot bars for the revellers. The James Ford Hall, a classic wood and iron structure, still stands today and is lovingly maintained. It is host to all sorts of activities: weddings, fitness classes, celebrations, markets and of course, the annual Erfholders Meeting presided over by the current three Kasouga Trustees. Not forgetting the annual New Year's Dance where the wooden floors boards literally bounce as Kasouga-ites of all ages countdown the old year and celebrate the new. It wasn't until the 2000s that the no-alcohol rule was formally repealed — though by then, the tradition of boot-side refreshments had become as much a part of local tradition as the dances themselves.



Above: The trawler *Cape St Blaize* went aground near Kasouga on 23 June 1965. The crew of 13 men were rescued by the legendary Ronny Samuel of Port Alfred – after the Port Alfred police had received a message from Durban, where the distress signal had been picked up! The weather was so bad and the sea so mountainous that the grounded trawler could not be refloated. She was eventually washed off the sandbar onto low-lying rocks and 'holed.' The wreck is sometimes exposed on Kasouga beach. (Photos: Kowie Museum and Sue Gordon)

The quiet rhythm of life continued largely unchanged until the 1960s, when the R72 coastal road brought Kasouga closer to the world. With better vehicles and, later, the arrival of electricity in 1980, paraffin lamps and wood fires gave way to modern conveniences. Yet even as camping was phased out in 1983 and the Trustees approved the building of the simple "shacks" on the grassy green near the river, the essence of Kasouga remained steadfast. The river, affectionately called a lagoon, continued to offer safe paddling for children and shady fishing spots for those content to lose hours to the gentle pursuit.

Today, Kasouga's permanent residents uphold the old spirit with quiet pride, welcoming holiday homeowners and day trippers who come to find their own piece of paradise. Those who walk its beaches soon find themselves drawn into the simple, captivating beauty of the place. Whether setting out towards Ship Rock or viewing the rusted remains of the Cape St

Blaize, the fishing vessel wrecked offshore in 1965, every step echoes with stories of holidays past and memories yet to be made.

In a world where coastal villages increasingly succumb to overdevelopment, Kasouga has remained blissfully resistant. Its wild beauty is undiminished. The open beaches stretch wide and empty under endless skies. The river winds its slow, secretive way through bird-rich reeds and grasses. At the Cathedral — the natural bower of milkwood trees where weddings are still held — light filters down in dappled patterns, creating a sense of timeless peace that no architecture could ever replicate.

Old families and their descendants continue to hold the keys to Kasouga's collective memory, ensuring that the rich tapestry of shared histories, traditions, and folklore are not lost. They tell of fishing tales spun around campfires, of dances that carried on until dawn, of first kisses stolen behind sand dunes, and of friendships that lasted lifetimes.

Kasouga's story is not only one of the past but one that continues to unfold in the hearts of those lucky enough to call it theirs — whether for a summer, a season, or a lifetime. It remains a sanctuary, not just in the physical sense, but in spirit: a rare and precious place where nature, history, and community still walk hand in hand, and where the whisper of the waves and the cry of the gulls speak a language that time itself seems to understand.