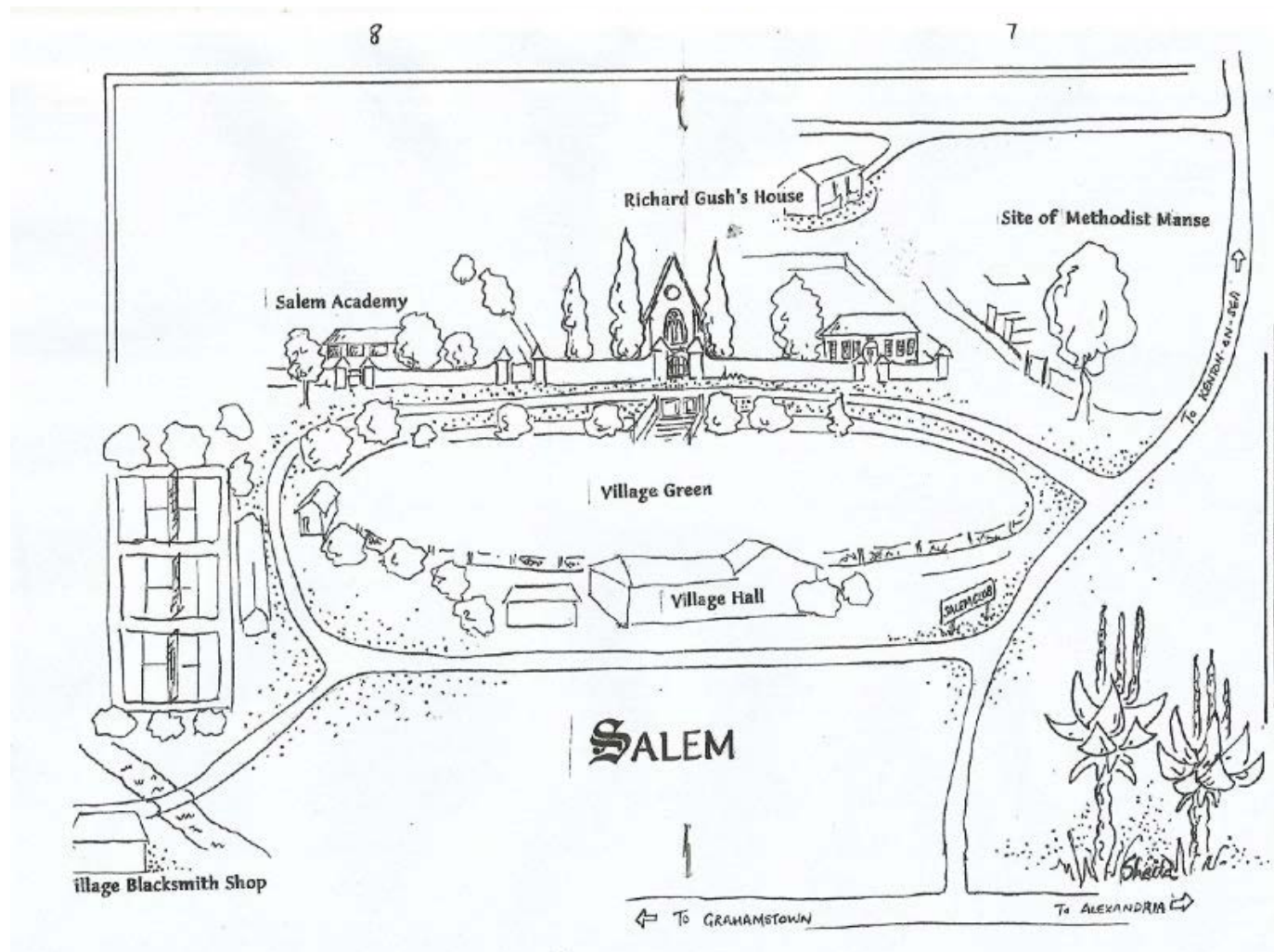


Outing to Salem, 'Place of Peace'

by Daphne McNeill

On 21 September 2023 - a beautiful sunny day - a good turnout of LAHS members gathered outside the famous 1832 Salem Wesleyan Church for a guided tour by Daphne McNeill. She is the granddaughter of Rev Peter Eyre, Salem minister, who died in the 1918 flu epidemic. His widow Grace, Daphne's grandmother, moved with her four children into Rosslyn House, Salem, and soon after married the owner, Sid Hill.



Map of Salem, from Mullins, S, *Salem Walkabout* brochure, sketches by John English

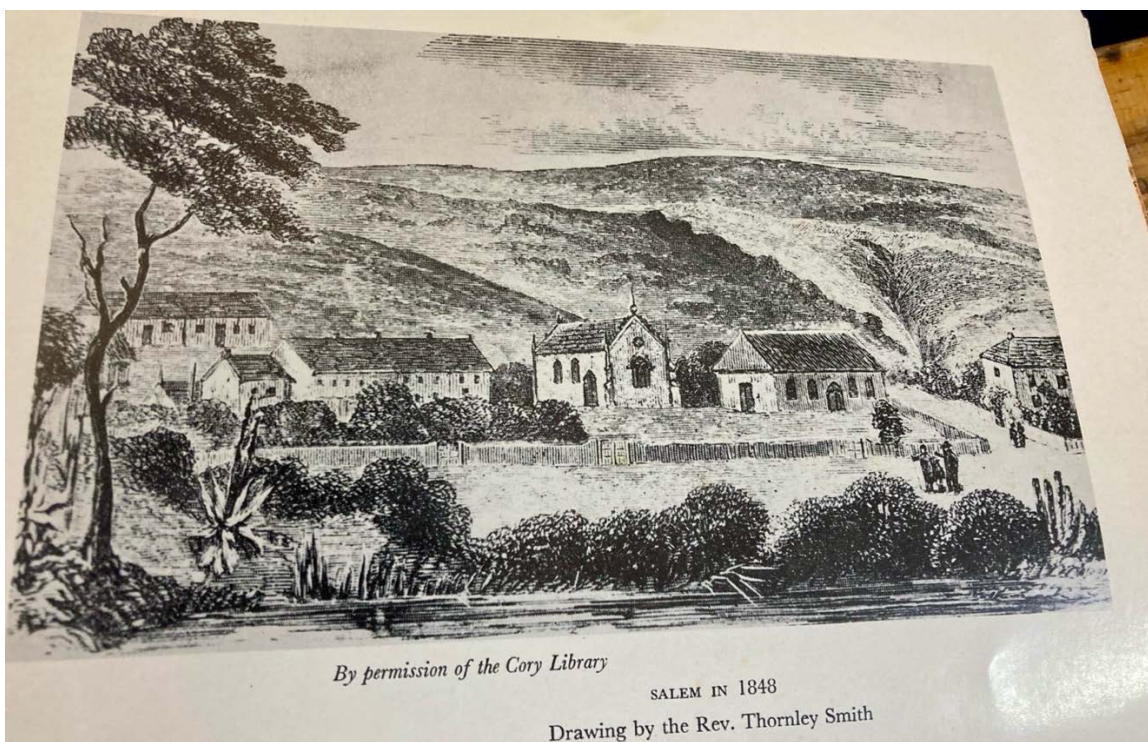
Salem is the only village built by a party of settlers in 1820 that remains well preserved today.

Parties of emigrants like that of Hezekiah Sephton had left behind desperate conditions in England: in 1819 the country was bankrupt, there was high unemployment for soldiers returning from the Napoleonic wars, the Industrial Revolution was underway. The people were very unhappy. England also wanted to extend its rule eastwards from the Cape Colony to the Fish River. The solution was to offer the people settlement “in a land of plenty” with seed and tools to farm 100 acres of land. Ninety thousand applied but only 4 000 came out.

After a long, uncomfortable journey by ship Hezekiah Sephton’s party landed in Algoa Bay on 25 May 1820. Some came out on The *Aurora* and others on The *Brilliant*. Here the settlers were housed in tents until being taken by ox-wagon to their destination, arriving on 18 July at a place nestled in the Assegaai Valley surrounded by aloes and thorn thicket.

Can you imagine the feelings at being set down and abandoned alone amid wild animals, antelope, leopard, buffalo and elephant? ***[When our LAHS group visited, we assembled on the spot where the settlers had been unloaded.]*** Feeling apprehensive, they realised that they would have to “take root or die,” so they set up camp and eventually built their houses and planted seed. They named their village Salem, meaning ‘peace’ (Hebrew and Arabic), from Psalm 76.

Reverend William Shaw was 21 years old and had married Ann in England. They built their stone “one-up-one-down” house where the new cemetery now is. Next door a larger house was built to become the Methodist manse (unfortunately now demolished). All the walls and churches in Salem are National Monuments today.



This early picture of Salem’s layout (from Makin, 1971) shows three main buildings that are still well preserved today. From left: the Salem Academy, the church of 1850 and the 1832 Church. Across the lane is the site of Rev Shaw’s manse, now the new cemetery. (Photo: Sue Gordon)

Reverend Shaw initially used the derelict building left by Daniel Bouwer. The back room was used as a storeroom for their rations, and these attracted rats and snakes. During a service a parishioner interrupted Rev Shaw's sermon with "Excuse me, Sir, there is a snake at your feet". After the offending snake was removed the sermon continued.



Services were held as follows:

Morning 7am

Prayer meeting

11am Preaching

Afternoon 3pm

Preaching

Evening 6.30pm

Prayer meeting

Sunday school 9 - 11am

This was the start of the Salem Academy. On 14 August 1821 children had their first scripture exams at which they did well. The older children also learned writing. Residents of Salem realised they had to rely on their faith in God, community living and respect for others; so English settlers, Dutch farmers and Xhosa people all worshipped together in the church.



Top left: the original 1832 Salem Church, and above, both Salem churches side by side. (Photo: Sue Gordon)

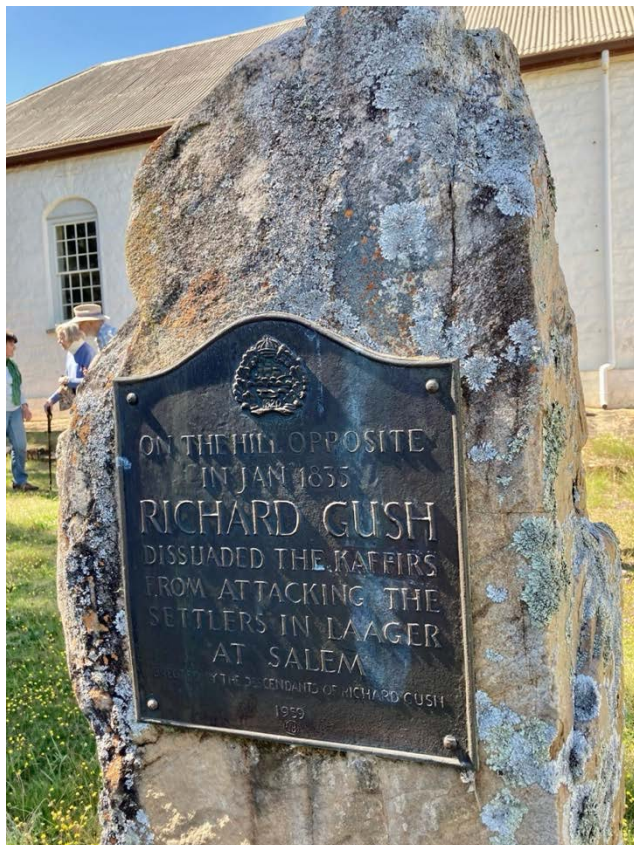
The last elephant in the area was shot in 1826.

The 1832 church replaced the original wattle-and-daub structure built in 1822. On entering the yellowwood door one is amazed at the enormous yellowwood beams, pews and partition all carved by Richard Gush. The church is still used for services every Sunday and is maintained by Salem residents. Richard Gush was born in Beer, a fishing village in Devon on 24th April 1798. He joined the Sephton party on The *Brilliant* in

1820. He lived in a cave with his family on the banks of the Assegai River. Farming was not easy due to droughts, crop diseases and floods, and few settlers had been farmers; many had been tradesmen (millers, carpenters etc). Richard Gush decided to go to the Cape and trade there. After many disasters he returned to find his house flooded out. He built a house on the hill behind the church filled with yellowwood furniture and fittings. By then Richard had become a Quaker – a man of peace.

During the Sixthth Frontier War (1834 – 1835) the raids by the Xhosas became worse and many cattle were stolen. The women and children sheltered in the church building surrounded by barricades as the villagers prepared to defend themselves against attack from the approaching Xhosa impi intent on taking more cattle. They approached 'Monkey's Kop,' a hill on the north opposite the church. Richard Gush refused to fight and against his family's advice and that of others, he stripped off his jacket to show he was unarmed and rode out. His son-in-law Phillip Amm, and Barend Woest, a Dutch farmer, rode out with him.

The Xhosa watched suspiciously as Richard



dismounted and approached alone to ask them why they threatened them, given that they prayed for the Xhosa in church. The Xhosa chief answered, "We are hungry". Richard replied, "How can that be, as you have taken all our cattle?" "We want bread," they replied. Richard said he would give them bread and in return they were to leave Salem in peace. He hurried back to the church where residents baked and gathered bread. Gush returned to the chief with bread and pocket knives. The Xhosa then departed and Salem was left in peace.

A stone plinth in front of the church looks toward 'Monkey's Kop' and commemorates Gush's ride to meet the amaXhosa. (previous photos, Sue Gordon). He continued life as a carpenter and died at Woodbury in Sidbury on 27 September 1858, but is buried in Salem.

Crossing through the graveyard we entered the 1850 church with a splendid stained glass window dedicated to the men and women who gave their lives in both World Wars. Many memorial plaques adorn the walls.

The history of the clock on the church wall: it has for 70 years registered the time of services (and measured long sermons). It was donated in memory of an event that took place in 1868 during a camping holiday at Kenton-on-Sea. The Shaw family received visitors and the Shaws' three-year-old son, George, was told to give up his seat. He wandered off unnoticed and no one was concerned as it was thought that he was visiting another family nearby. As it got dark the Shaws became anxious after making enquiries at other camps – George could not be found. A frantic search began: all night they searched with lanterns but to no avail. Another day, night and day passed

and hope of finding little George was at a low ebb. On the fourth day following a storm in the night an African herder found small spoor and followed it. Eventually little George, very weak, was found in what was then known as 'Fishbone' now called 'the Glade,' between Vasco de Gama and Land's End Roads. The very cold, weak child was nursed and fed teaspoons of warm milk until he recovered. Rev Shaw rewarded his herder with a cow and a calf and in gratitude presented the church with the clock.

Completing the buildings on the south side of the village is the Salem Academy. The original building has been renovated since earlier times when it served as a school for the village and surrounding farm children until 1993.



Above: View from inside Salem Academy towards 1850 Church and graveyard. (Photo: Sue Gordon)



Left: Richard Gush's grave at Salem and above, his house in 1970 (now demolished) on the hill behind the old church.
 (Photo: Sue Gordon, from Ridden, S)

References:

Makin, A E. *The 1820 Settlers of Salem: Hezekiah Sephton's Party*. 1971
 Mullins, Sheila and Salem 1850 Church booklet. *Salem Walkabout*
 Ridden, Sheila. *Salem: Place of Peace*. 2019

