

Outing to Somerset East

by Suzette Lampier Grist

On Thursday 5 October we had our final outing of 2023. Members started early from their homes for the long drive to Somerset East. We met up at the Walter Battiss Art Museum, a beautiful double storey settler-era house on a road full of old houses.. The very enthusiastic curator, Ros Turner, kindly served tea and coffee on our arrival – it had been a two-and-a-half-hour journey from Port Alfred. She also ran a video, gave us a talk and showed us around.



The Walter Battiss Art Museum building in Somerset East (photo left) dates back to the early days of Somerset Farm: it was built in 1818 as an Officers' Mess, then donated in 1981 to house the Battiss art collection. This Art Museum houses a large collection of Walter Battiss' work, as well as family items, books, letters, and some of Professor Battiss'

clothing and personal items. (*Encounter the EC Face Book page 16/4/24*)

Walter Battiss was a master of oil painting and is still considered to be the best watercolour artist South Africa has ever had. He pioneered silkscreen printing in the country, was the best abstract artist of his day and drew with a mastery few can copy. Battiss was born in 1906 and died in 1982. He was a multi-faceted artist, working in prints, ceramics, textiles and the written word. His paintings are bold



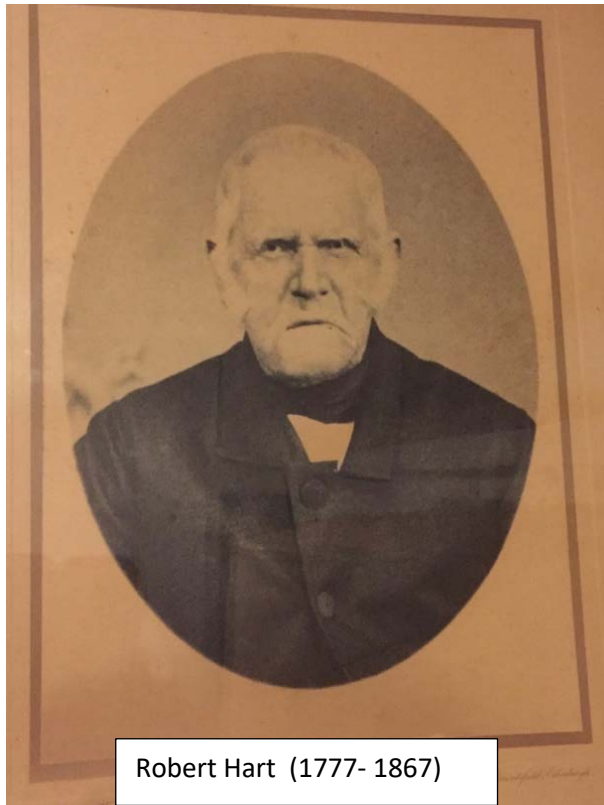
abstracts; he also invented 'Fook Island' with its own flag, currency and stamps. He met Picasso in Paris in the '50s, they became friends and Picasso gave him a painting of a Spanish bull. Both artists started conventionally before abstracts took over. There are three beautiful sketches of wild African animals placed in a corridor upstairs.

Battiss married another artist, Grace, but they led separate lives. There is a poignant black and white photograph by the stairs of them in a large, very old building, both looking out of windows some rooms apart.

The house needs much repair but unfortunately Lotto, etc have refused to give any money towards this.

Our next venue was Glen Avon farm and guest house where the main attraction was the 160-year-old settler Mill.

Robert Hart, the 'first English-speaking settler in South Africa' (Hilton-Barber, 2018) arrived in Cape Town in 1795 as a private in the Argyll Highlanders, later became adjutant of the Cape Regiment and 'chose the site where Grahamstown now stands' (Hilton-Barber, 2018) on the Frontier before returning to England. In 1807, he returned as an officer in the Cape Regiment with his wife.



He was put in charge of an experimental farm by Lord Charles Somerset. In 1825 the farm closed and Somerset East was laid out on its grounds. The Hart family settled on part of the farmland given in recognition of Hart's services. He called it Glen Avon.

Robert was a merino sheep pioneer and also grew citrus and grain. He built a commercial mill for all to use, the machinery made in Leeds, England as shown by a plaque.

The present residents are direct descendants and have repaired, restored and upgraded the Mill to full working order, with some additional help from parts from the Bathurst Mill. In Robert Hart's time, the mill could produce two tons of meal a day and eventually he was grinding all the wheat grown between Pearston, Ann's Villa and Zwagershoek. Alison Brown and husband showed us how the Mill was used and worked, pumping water from the large lake and, unusually, the water passes overhead in a trough to the wheel. Maize is ground in different sizes according to use. The Browns provided us with a much-needed cold lunch at the beautiful farmhouse, some of us having removed dogs and cats to sit on the surrounding verandah!

Two couples stayed at the guest houses. The rest of us left promptly as the weather was closing in and it rained in torrents until Nanaga. It was slow going, as the drivers had to use the newly-installed route for dozens of manganese-bearing trucks en route to Coega.

Right: LAHS members listen to the water running along the overhead trough towards Glen Avon's old wheel and renovated Mill (Photo: Britney Hawkins)



Right: inside the Mill, grain poured down the chute falls under the millstone, producing various sizes of ground grain. (Photo: Britney Hawkins)



References:

Hilton-Barber, D. Robert Hart: The first English-speaking settler in South Africa.

<https://www.karooheartland.com/robert-hart-father-of-somerset-east/>

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