

THE KAT RIVER VALLEY, BALFOUR and HERTZOG

Compiled by Margaret Snodgrass

An enthusiastic group of Society members set out on 16 September 2022 towards the Kat River Valley. After a refreshment stop at Baddaford Farm Stall, we turned off the R67 and took the road to the village of Balfour in the Kat River Valley.

THE KAT RIVER VALLEY is approximately 57km in length and surrounded by the Katberg and Cathcart/Windvogelberg mountains to the north-east, the Hogsback range to the east, the town of Fort Beaufort to the south-west, and the Klein Winterberg range to the west. [Blackbeard, S. p9]

KAT RIVER: THE NAME According to the records and information from early travellers to the area, the streams and rivers had Khoikhoi names. In fact, a Dutch expedition of 1752 found only Khoikhoi living there. In 1807 the German traveller Ludwig Alberti also commented that *'all the rivers and streams had Khoikhoi names which the [amaXhosa] had retained.'* This leads one to presume that the area was originally occupied by Khoikhoi who were pushed back by amaXhosa.' [Blackbeard, S p14]

C J Skead in his work on *Xhosa Placenames* declares that the Kat River was called by that name following the 1790-91 expedition of Jacob van Reenen to look for survivors of the wreck of the *Grosvenor*. Skead states that the Xhosa word *Ngcwengxa*, the isiXhosa name for Kat River, derives from the Khoikhoi *Hunca*, meaning 'cat'. According to J Peires, the Khoikhoi occupation of the Kat River area ended with Chief Rharabe's invasion, which was not later than 1775. [Blackbeard, S pp 13- 14].

THE KAT RIVER SETTLEMENT 1829-1851

After the Fifth Frontier War of 1819, the Colonial Government created a belt of neutral territory between the Great Fish and Keiskamma Rivers, called the "Ceded Territory". Maqoma, the eldest son of chief Ngqika, was expelled from the area and in 1820, 4000 British settlers were brought into the Albany district on the Cape side of the Fish River.

The creation of a 'no-man's land' did not work, as both settlers and Xhosa were soon flaunting the colonial government's orders and entering the Ceded Territory. In 1828, Maqoma re-entered his old territory and settled in the Kat River Valley.

Maqoma's return to the valley was totally unacceptable to the Cape Governor, Sir Lowry Cole. He sent Andries Stockenström to the eastern frontier as commissioner-general to supervise the eviction of Maqoma. Stockenström devised a scheme which involved settling a number of Khoi in the Kat River Valley. This plan would have two main advantages. Firstly, because the Cape Corps was retrenching soldiers who could be settled in the valley, the Khoi would act as a military buffer between the settlers and the Xhosa. Secondly, some of the problems with Ordinance 50 of 1828 might be overcome as vagrancy could be reduced and Khoikhoi given a chance to own their own farms. [D. McCracken, pp 35-36]

Therefore, once Maqoma was evicted from the valley, the area was settled with small groups of Khoikhoi, discharged soldiers from the Cape Mounted Rifles, Gonaqua from the Gamtoos and Fish Rivers, Gwanga and later Tembu and Mfengu. The farms were about six

acres each and were to be held in tenure under a system of perpetual quitrent, with an initial five-year period of probation.

All went well at first. Farmhouses, schools and churches were built by the London Missionary Society and German and Glasgow Missionary Societies. No liquor was sold in the settlement. Irrigation channels were dug, the remains of which can still be seen from the R67 today. The settlement developed into a prosperous pastoral and agricultural farming community. The first citrus farms were developed there in the valley by these Khoikhoi farmers.

In order to anchor the Kat River settlement, Stockenström brought in established tenant farmers from the Baviaans River Valley. One such person was Christiaan Groepe who was brought in to act as 'squire' of the settlement. [Blackbeard, S. p29] He was the son of Heinrich Christiaan Albrecht Groepe from Rüssingen Germany, who had arrived in the Cape in the service of the Dutch East India Company. He married a Cape-Malay slave woman, Maria. By 1784 he was working as a '*knecht*' (overseer). Their son Christiaan Groepe was born in 1789.

Groepe had pioneering skills, was familiar with Western firearms and burgher commandos and had run a loan farm. Stockenström himself made no class distinctions, and maintained an open-door policy to all Kat River settlers. [Blackbeard, S. pp32-33] Both Kat River Settlement leaders, Andries Botha and Christiaan Groepe, had resided and worked on white farms and been exposed to Western agricultural techniques.

The Kat River settlement seemed to be 'on the road to increasing prosperity', when it was hit by a series of disasters. During the Fifth Frontier War of 1834-35, the people of the settlement lost £30,000 worth of property, crops and livestock. During the Sixth, 1846-47 war there were even greater losses. In both these wars, however, the population of the Kat River valley stood firmly behind Britain – but matters came to a head after the Seventh Frontier War. Serious floods destroyed many of the valley's irrigation systems and the area became overpopulated. The British occupation of British Kaffraria meant that the Kat River valley was no longer in the front line of British defence. The community resented the attempt to disarm it.

During the middle of 1850 J W Bowker, the resident magistrate, tried to evict squatting Mfengu. This alienated part of the settlement from the British. Therefore, when, the Eighth Frontier War or *War of Mlanjeni* broke out on Christmas Eve 1850, a section of the Kat River community, led by Hermanus Matroos, rebelled and joined the Xhosa and the Thembu. [McCracken, D. p37]. This war brought about the end of Stockenström's Kat River settlement.

FORT ARMSTRONG

High up on the hill,
overlooking the winding Kat
River, is the tower and all that
remains of Fort Armstrong.
(Photo: Rob Snodgrass)



Fort Armstrong was built in 1835 on the farm *Hermanuskraal* and named after Captain A B Armstrong, who had commanded a camp on the site, *Camp Adelaide*, before the construction of the fort. It served as

a place of refuge for farmers and their families on many occasions, especially the wars of 1835-36, 1846-47 and the Eighth Frontier war.

The fort was garrisoned mainly by Khoikhoi troops. They had their own officers and commandants, one of whom was Commandant Christiaan Groepe. He was well educated, one of Missionary Thomson's pupils and also a Justice of the Peace. Fort Armstrong covered a large area within its stone walls. Besides the usual military buildings such as officers' barracks and ordnance stores, there were a number of small houses of wattle and daub, accommodation for the Khoi soldiers, members of the Cape Mounted Rifles, and their families. The wall was star-shaped and there was a swivel gun on top of the tower.

Today, there is only the watch tower standing like a sentinel on the hill overlooking Balfour and the winding Kat River. On both our group visits to the Kat River Valley, LAHS members have not been up to the fort, only viewed it from a distance.

HERTZOG VILLAGE: Today, this is a settlement in the Amathole District Municipality of the Eastern Cape, in the Kat River Valley. It was originally named *Tamboekiesvlei*. In 1837 it was named *Hertzog* after Willem Frederik Hertzog (1792-1847), Assistant Surveyor-General of the Cape Colony and surveyor of the Kat River Settlement.

THE HERTZOG CHURCH: The Kat River settlement was a government and not a missionary venture; however, Andries Stockenström had asked James Read to lead a party of Khoikhoi from the Theopolis mission station to the Kat River - without any intention of allowing Read to remain there. The Khoikhoi, however, who went with Read to the Kat River Settlement asked him to stay. James Read and his son, James Read junior, settled there and formed a Congregational Church. [Blackbeard, S.p.53]

Neither Stockenström nor the British Government wanted a missionary institution in the Kat River Valley. So as a counterfoil to the Reads, Stockenström appointed the Reverend William R Thomson as the Government missionary at Balfour [see also **Stephanie Victor's article at end of Journal**]. Thomson was a former member of the Glasgow Missionary Society and a government agent to the Ngqika at Tyumie Mission Station. Stockenström invited Thomson, as the official Kat River clergyman, to establish a church based on Dutch Reformed lines.



Thomson's church was first based in Balfour in a cottage that did duty as a church, a school and a manse. Thomson began preaching and teaching literacy in Kat River on 1 May 1830. He was inducted as minister of his congregation (the Stockenström Dutch Reformed Church) in July 1830. He moved to Hertzog only when the church building was completed in 1845.

The Hertzog Church is now known as the VGK (Verenigde Gereformeerde Kerk) or the URCSA - Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa.

Susan Blackbeard describes in her book, *Kat River Conversations*, p335, exactly what we

Hertzog Church (Photo: Sue Gordon, 2022)

"From beneath a rickety staircase leading to a loft, Tom and Kathleen draw out ...a custom-made yellowwood chest with a silver Nagmaal (Holy Communion) set and a baptismal bowl in velvet-lined hollows. Communion plates - and especially those designed by William Butterfield - were popular ecclesiastical gifts at that time in England and her colonies." This particular set was donated in 1873 to the Hertzog Dutch Reformed Church by surveyor W F Hertzog's widow.



Photos on this and next page: Inside Hertzog Church, Communion goblets and platter, as photographed by Rob Snodgrass in 2010 when a LAHS group visited it, led by the late Tom Pringle. The yellowwood pews have since been removed and replaced with other seating. Below: Die Ou Pastorie, the former manse of Hertzog Church (Photo: Sue Gordon)



Unfortunately, the appointment made with Hymie Groepe for our group to visit the Hertzog Church and talk to him about Balfour and the Kat River Valley was cancelled at the last minute.

We were already *en route* to Fort Beaufort (now kwaMaqoma) when the meeting with Mr Groepe was cancelled. We had time restraints so were able to pay only a quick visit to the Grey Church in Balfour [see sketch plan] the *former Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Mission Church) that was consecrated in 1941.

BALFOUR, first known as Stockenström, is a sprawling village at the foot of the Katberg. It was established as a mission station of the Glasgow Missionary Society in 1828 by John Ross and McDiarmid. It was named after the first Secretary of the Society, Robert Balfour. Originally the site of Maqoma's Great Place, it became 'a cultural melting pot' from earliest times of colonial settlement.

After the defeat of the rebel Khoikoi during the Eighth Frontier War (1850-1853), there were many newcomers to the valley. Besides English- and Afrikaans-speaking people, the Kat River attracted European, Asian and Jewish people. [Blackbeard, p.252]

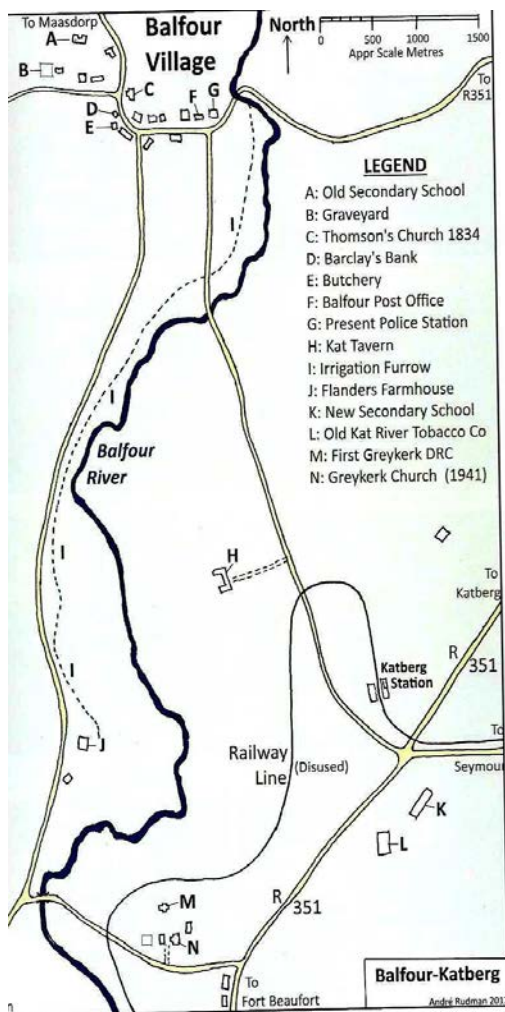


Fig 136. Balfour-Katberg map, A. Rudman



Old Greykerk - Dutch Reformed Church.
(Photo: Rob Snodgrass)



Above: 'New' Grey Church and (below)
Pastorie, 1941. (Photos: Rob Snodgrass 2010)

THE END OF THE KAT RIVER SETTLEMENT

Once Fort Armstrong was defeated and devastated, the settlement was doomed. The farms of the rebels were confiscated and given to white farmers. Although the Attorney-General, William Porter, ruled that these confiscations were illegal under Roman-Dutch law, the government pressed ahead with them. Title deeds were granted to the Khoi who had remained loyal, but most of them sold out to white farmers so that by the turn of the century only a few Khoi farmers were left.

[Grahamstown Historical Society Annals 1982 Vol: 3 No 4. pp 35-38. Published 1983.]

The Secretary of State for Colonial affairs at Westminster promised to hold a 'rigid inquiry' but none ever took place. One of the Settlement leaders, Andries Botha, was made a scapegoat and sentenced to death for high treason. The sentence was commuted, Botha eventually released but the hostility against the settlement continued to grow.



We unfortunately did not have time to visit the northern part of the village of Balfour, but hope to revisit the Kat River Valley, as, in the words of Robert Ross, *'the settlement was created by the British to use the Khoekhoe as a living barrier between the Cape Colony and the amaXhosa.....in the time that it existed, the Khoekhoe both created a fertile landscape in the valley and developed a political theology of great importance for the evolution of South Africa.'*

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