

THOMAS RIVER HISTORICAL VILLAGE

by Dave Hawkins

Thomas River was given its name by the Dutch missionary Jan Van Der Kemp in 1801. While the latter was leading a party of 58 people out of Chief Ngqika's territory, Thomas Bentley, an English deserter, was killed by a bushman's poisoned arrow and buried near a stream. Thomas River Village later became an outspan station for wagons taking goods to the diamond and gold fields of Kimberley and The Reef.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: The Village has the extraordinary distinction of having had three visits by members of the Royal Family, and there are displays to this effect in the main building.]

In 1860, the youngest of Queen Victoria's children, 16-year-old Prince Alfred, 'had breakfast here' (Jeff Samson) before embarking on an elephant hunt in 1860. In 1947, the Royal Family's White Train passed through Thomas Village on its way through the Eastern Province; neighbouring farmers and other local well-wishers waved them through. In 2016 the Princes William and Harry diverted to Thomas River for refreshments and a look around after having been hounded by paparazzi near Kei River. Jeff Samson recalls how astounded William was to find cabinets displaying royal memorabilia in the main hotel building in a village 'in the middle of nowhere.' The Princes were on a charity motorbike tour of South Africa at the time.]



Above: The sea-green roofed hotel (Building 4) with old fire-fighting equipment in the foreground (Photo: Sue Gordon)

The following numbered descriptions are from a self-guide handout for visitors:

Building 1, seen on the right hand side as one enters Thomas River from the SE, is the blacksmith's workshop, essential in those times for repairing wagons. It is now used to house a collection of classic cars and memorabilia.

Building 2 was the post office and telephone exchange, used from about 1877 until the 1970s, when party lines were phased out and there was no need for an exchange operator. The building is now being used as a backpackers hut for overnight accommodation. The original red telephone booth is still on the verandah, as are the letter posting box and Post Office nameplate.

Building 3 was the original hotel and when no longer in use was converted to a home for the shop owner.



Left and below: Building 1 that houses vintage and classic cars; and Building 6, which has a collection of old carts and wagons. (Photos Sue Gordon, Dave Hawkins)



Building 4: The original shop, or trading store, sold everything for the local farmers including groceries, fuel, clothes and farming implements. The last owner/trader, Daniel Langner, closed the shop and left in 1991. Under the most recent owners, Jeff and Anne Sansom, it became a pub, restaurant and showcase for a vast collection of memorabilia. All the buildings were in a terrible state when the Sansoms purchased the property in 2002. Twenty years and a lot of hard work later, has made Thomas River a prime tourist destination.

Building 5, of stone, became the rock art museum set up by Victor Biggs, a well-known authority on rock art. There are several rock art sites in the conservancy showing examples of early San culture.

Building 6 is a wood and corrugated iron structure used as a storeroom for the shop. Built with imported Oregon pine, it has withstood the test of time and is now being used to display a collection of wagons and associated memorabilia.

Building 7 was the Government school until 1945 and is now the village library. The steel roof trusses, corrugated iron roof sheets and fascia boards were taken from military barracks, which were erected at the Kubusie River, during the Anglo Boer War of 1899 -1902. This library houses an amazing collection of old books, typewriters, and artifacts, too numerous to mention.



Left, Building 7 - from Anglo-Boer War barracks remains, to rural schoolhouse and now village library. (Photo: Dave Hawkins)

Building 8 is the Thomas River Farmers' Hall. Built in 1928 by neighbouring farmers, it was essentially the Hart brothers who contributed most towards the costs, which is why it is named Hart Hall. Used today for weddings and other community functions, it is still in pristine condition.

Building 9 near the cemetery, further up the hill on the right, is a dressed stone church, built in 1888 by John Wardle. The original 3000 ha farm, called Granta, was owned by the Queenstown Hospital, which leased it out to raise money. John eventually bought the farm and subdivided it into four sections for his sons. Grandson Neil Wardle now owns this section, still called Granta.

Building 10, seen on the right as one comes back down to the station, used to be the cream room. Louvres in the walls allowed air to blow through to keep the cans of cream cool before they were loaded onto passenger trains, destined for various locations.

Building 11 used to be the station with public office, parcel rooms, waiting room ticket office and main signal room. The signal room had big levers and cables connecting the signals, which were used to control a train's movements - either to stop or proceed through the station. The building was converted into a residence for the owners.

Buildings 12: three stone military watch towers, complete with gun slits and thick wooden doors, protected the original wood and iron station building. The fourth tower was demolished to make room for the newer station building. These towers were never used in hostile action. Three British soldiers who died during that period - one of whom drowned in the Thomas river - lie buried in the lower corner of the cemetery. Until recently, Building 12 was used as visitor accommodation. Building 13 was the station foreman's house. He did night duty; the station master would normally take the day shift.

Building 14 was the station master's house, also now used as visitor accommodation.



The old Station (Building 11). Note one of the original four stone watch towers, background left
(Photo Sue Gordon)

References: Printed handout guide to Thomas River Village (from Jeff and Anne Samson)