

Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa

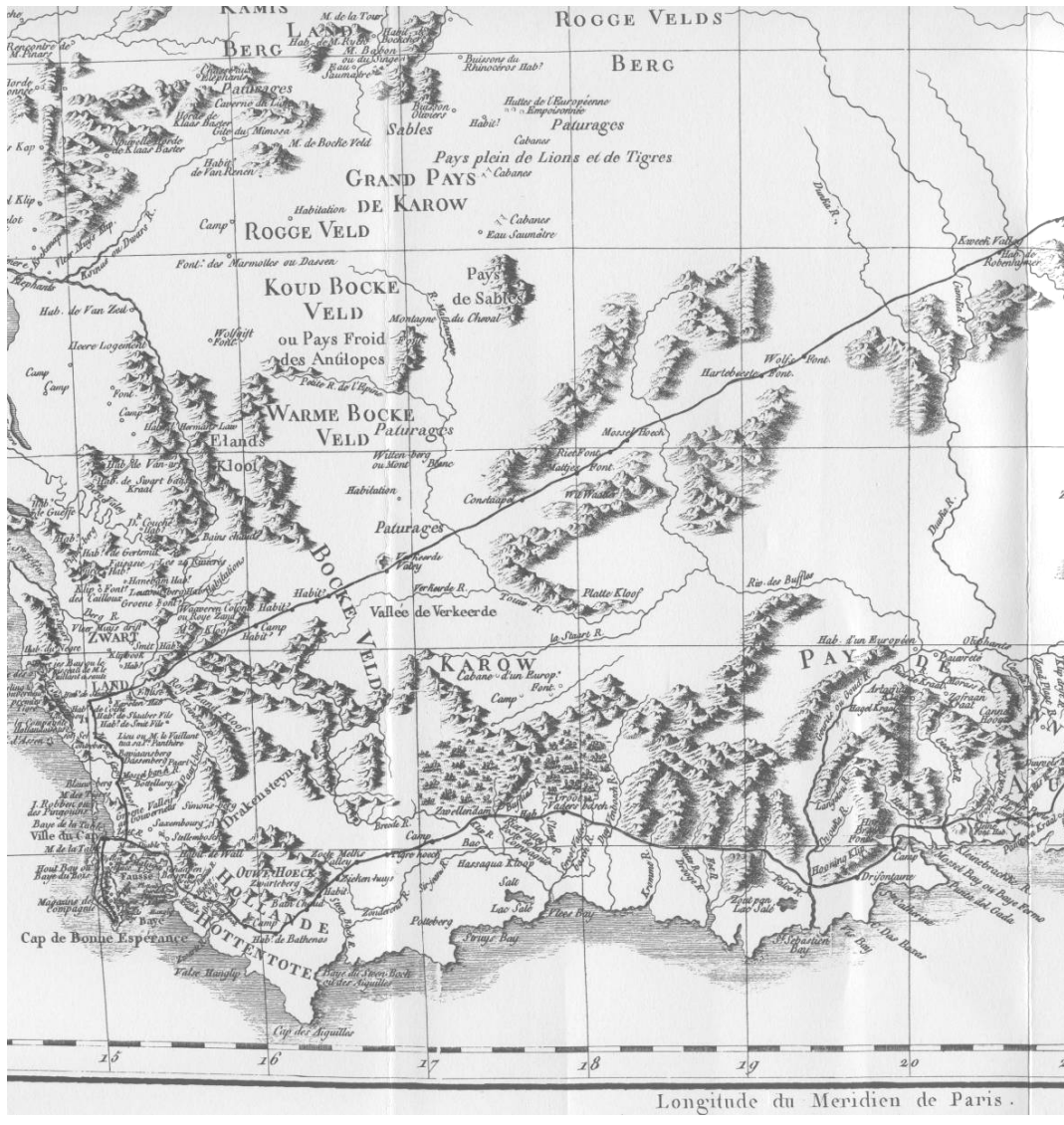


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Map of the Cape Colony in about 1780.

(J.C. Quinton & A.M. Lewin Robinson (eds). 1973. *François le Vaillant, Traveler in South Africa ... 1781-1784*. Cape Town: Library of Parliament).

The vernacular architecture of Swellendam and its surroundings

Eureka Barnard

Introduction

Worldwide within the past sixty years or so, the study of vernacular architecture has expanded dramatically beyond the limits of antiquarian and nostalgic interest in old, quaint, usually rural buildings. The study of vernacular architecture has engaged the interest of scholars in many fields and each one has contributed the techniques of his or her discipline to the general inquiry (Brunskill 1987:18). Influenced by the theories and methods of cultural geography, sociology, folklore, and especially social history and anthropology, scholars increasingly have come to recognise that buildings are cultural artifacts suitable for intensive study. Durable and stationary, buildings can complement more traditional historical resources and, for many sectors of past societies, they represent the only surviving record (Wells 1987:5). To the extent, then, that the social sciences and humanities are concerned with patterns of human behaviour, vernacular architecture is an important and perhaps neglected field of investigation.

In response to this deepening interest and expanding focus, and in support of material culture studies especially the study of vernacular architecture, an investigation into the ordinary buildings of the third oldest district of the Cape was undertaken in the early 1990s. The results of the architectural research, field work and analysis was presented as the main study for a masters degree which was awarded by the University of Stellenbosch in 2003.

When studying the material cultural heritage of a region the first thought that one ponders on is what houses or structures the first inhabitants and early settlers built. As architecture is one of the most visible and noticeable artforms, or in this study's context, material cultural products, one almost expects to find examples of the earliest surviving buildings and structures. However, closer inspection showed that few examples of early vernacular architecture have survived. This in turn led to more questions:

- Why are there so few examples of vernacular architecture to be found in the third oldest district?
- What environmental factors influenced the characteristics of the built environment?
- Were certain building traditions passed on from generation to generation?
- Was there conformity among the structures?
- Was there an interplay between the vernacular architecture of the indigenous people and the settler farmers?

However, one soon realises that some aspects of man's relationships to the natural environment, of vital concern to the geographer, cannot be properly comprehended without knowledge of the cultural inheritance of the social group. Conversely, certain aspects of the history of the social group are better understood when viewed in relationship to the physical endowment of its environment (Forbes 1965:3). In studying a region's vernacular architecture it is important to note all the influences on architecture. The main study on which this paper is based therefore analysed the region's climate, the economy, living conditions, roads, river crossings, soil property, vegetation; and the availability of building materials, tools, water, wood and labour.

Swellendam and its surroundings

Swellendam is situated in the eastern part of the Overberg region and is bordered by the districts of Bredasdorp in the south, Caledon and Robertson in the west, Montagu and Ladismith in the north, and Riversdale and Heidelberg in the east. In pre-colonial times two main Khoikhoi tribes, the Chainouquas and the Hessequas, lived there. Because of the favourable climate and terrain, the expansion of the European settlers from the Cape into the interior after 1700 happened most rapidly across the Hottentots Holland mountains in the direction of the Breede River. On 12 November 1743 a sub-*drost*dy for the *Colonie in de verre afgeleegene districten* was founded and a *landdrost* and members of the *heemraad* were appointed (Alheit 1948:20). On 26 October 1747 the Political Council decided to name this district Swellendam. By 1747 the *drost*dy and a number of other buildings had been completed.

Evaluation of the architecture

The central focus of the study was to analyse and evaluate the vernacular architecture of Swellendam and surrounds with special reference to building materials used, construction methods and floor plans.

The following objectives were derived from this:

- to determine which styles or types of vernacular architecture are to be found in the area,
- to juxtapose the vernacular architecture with the historical development and geography of the region,
- to determine what building material were available and how they were used, and
- to determine what characteristics could be classified as typical of the vernacular architecture of the Swellendam area.

The research focused on the period from the first half of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century.

Research method

In several phases, in-situ research was done on all the surviving vernacular farm buildings and structures in the Swellendam area that could be found by word-of-mouth. A preliminary study of existing buildings and structures was firstly made. This was followed up by recording and describing the buildings and structures and by photographing the architectural features and details. Historical research was done to establish cultural relevance and context. An elaborate literature study was inevitable where the recordings of the earlier travellers provided insight into the region's history and added character to its settler population. Valuable knowledge was gained from the writings of Mentzel (mid 18th century), Barrow (1797-8), Lichtenstein (1803-6), Burchell (1810-15) and Backhouse (1838-40).

Providing background to the European influence on the vernacular architecture of this region was the work of Gailey (1984) on Ireland, Brunskill (1987) on Britain and Meiron-Jones (1985) on France. The writings and publications of Walton (1981, 1989), surely the doyen of vernacular architectural research in South Africa who has done pioneering work on the architecture of especially the Western Cape, proved indispensable for this study. The doctoral thesis of Labuschagne (1988) on the vernacular architecture of the white settlers of the former Transvaal provided valuable support.

Visits to open-air museums across Europe and in South Africa gave further insight into the vernacular architecture of specific peoples in specific regions and provided valuable opportunities for comparative analyses. In South Africa the Willem Prinsloo Museum in Pretoria

and the Kleinplasië Open-air Museum in Worcester were visited and records analysed. In Europe, among many others, the open-air museums of Skansen in Sweden, Arnhem in Holland, Bokrijk in Belgium, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Ireland and some open-air museums in Denmark and Germany, were visited and studied.

The key informants who were interviewed for the study were all inhabitants of the Swellendam region and very knowledgeable on the region's history and its people. Valuable insights were obtained of earlier building materials and building methods.

Construction methods and building materials

The use of clay as building material

The pioneer settlers in the Swellendam area applied the methods of building to which they were accustomed, which they knew by tradition or to which they had been exposed.

J.W.D. Moodie (1835) describes in the beginning of the 19th century how clay houses were built:

“A hole is made in the ground as near as possible to the intended site, and, after throwing the upper soil aside, a quantity of clay is mixed with water and well trodden by the feet of oxen until it is of the proper consistence; that is to say, as stiff as they can work it. When the foundation of the house is dug out, for they do not generally build foundations in this dry country, large square lumps of the wrought clay are laid along the ground exactly in the manner of building sod walls. When the first layer is placed all round and leveled with a spade, and the clay dried sufficiently (which is very soon the case in this climate), a second layer is arranged in the same manner above it, and so on till the wall is a few feet in height; and then they dress and level it with a sharp spade. This process is continued until the whole wall is completed. They afterwards make the roof, and thatch it by sewing successive layers of reeds and rushes to the rafters. This will give a sufficient idea of the simple operation of erecting a clay dwelling; and it is sometimes useful for colonists to know how to build the house themselves without the assistance of a regular mason, who is not always to be had in an infant settlement”.

Earth has been one of the most widely used building materials ever since people began to build. Such buildings and structures were probably built without the assistance of masons, joiners, carpenters and blacksmiths. Earth requires simple production tools, like moulds, presses, shuttering and masonry tools. Many of the most ancient cities, villages and dwellings on every continent around the world were built with earth. The term clay or earthen architecture encompasses structures made from unfired earthen materials. The sun-baked earth brick, also known as adobe, is moulded by hand, pressed into wooden moulds, using thick mud to which straw is usually added. Wattle and daub, also called *torchis*, consists of clayey earth mixed with straw, applied to a lattice on a bearing structure. In another method, earth compacted in shuttering, creating very wide (monolithic) walls, is called rammed earth or *pisé de terre*. Cob, on the other hand, is a stiff mixture of earth, sand and straw that is packed when still moist to also form a wide (monolithic) wall onto a stone foundation. It is usually plastered with lime or earthen plaster.

Richard Ford describes in 1837 how the most commonly used building material was applied across the world: “The cob is now made use of by both the Moors and Spaniards. We have seen it rising in Andalusia and Barbary, while it is the usual mode of building in the Cape of Good Hope, the other extremity of Africa” (Ford 1837:538).

Using stone as building material

According to Roberts (1972:246), who is knowledgeable on folk crafts, stone as building material was widely used across Europe. Gailey (1984:46) confirms that in Ireland stone was the generally used building material. In South Africa, especially in dry areas where stone is more readily available, it is a very popular building material. Stone was also used without bonding material (*dagha*) and especial in *kraal* walls.

At the beginning of the 19th century houses at the Cape were seldom built only with stone. Because the use of stone is very labour intensive it was mostly used in foundations and low walls, and without plastering. Stone that was not dressed was most commonly used in the districts outside Cape Town and mostly in the wall construction of houses and outbuildings (Pearse 1968:21; Lewcock 1975:513-514).

Labuschagne (1987:194) distinguishes between the buildings that were built by ordinary folk and those of skilled craftsman. Buildings with uneven stone masonry are mostly found in traditional architecture. Much of the character of a stone wall comes from the shape of the individual pieces of which it is composed and in the absence of skilled craftsman each stone type presents its own characteristics. In general unprepared stone or roughly dressed stone was used in vernacular buildings and structures. In Swellendam and surrounds slate (*Bokkeveld skalie*) is readily available and in many parts of the region slate was bedded in clay, as revealed when walls of such material fall into ruin.

Of all the available building materials earth is the only material that produces a homogenous mass. Other materials used, such as stone, flint, cobble and brick, are jointed and rely on the skill with which the individual pieces are put together, and the suitability of the jointing material as well as the quality of the basic material, for stability and weather excluding properties (Brunskill 1987:34).



Figure 1: Wall construction: Tarentaalsrivier stone kraal (photo EB 1992).

In the western Overberg (Rademeyer-De Kock 1993:191) and in the Swellendam area, stone was mainly used on outlying cattle or sheep stations (*veeposte*). A typical example is found on the *werf* of Perdefontein in the Barrydale area. Stone structures were also built at Port Beaufort, in the Vermaaklikheid area and at De Hoop in the Potberg area. Because it was time consuming

to produce unbaked bricks for the building of all the structures on a *werf*, they were mainly used in the building of houses while *kraal* walls were mostly made of stone (Figs 1 and 2). The owner therefore had to have labour, time and capital to accomplish this (Rademeyer-De Kock 1993:191).



Figure 2 : Kraal wall, Vermaaklikheid (photo EB 1992).



Figure 3: Kraaiheuvel house showing the use of large stones on the corners of the walls (photo EB 1991).



Figure 4: Klaaskaffersheuwel longhouse showing the use of sandstone (koffieklip) (photo EB 1992).



Figure 5: Wall construction of house at Melkhoutrivier near Infanta showing that at the base of the wall the heaviest stones were used (photo EB 1992).

Only a few stone-built houses or houses where stone was used were found in the study area. They were Appelsbos (Swellendam), Kraaiheuwel (Rûens) (Fig. 3), Klaaskaffersheuwel (Rûens) (Fig. 4), Melkhoutbos (Rûens), Barry and Nephews Shop and outbuildings (Malgas), Kruithuis (Malgas), Melkhoutrivier (close to Infanta) (Fig. 5), Perdefontein (Barrydale), Bo-Kleinrooivlakte (Barrydale) and *kraal* and farmland walls in the Swellendam area.

As Brunskill (1987:34) has noted, more than any other single component, the choice of walling material establishes the character of an example of vernacular architecture. It is the wide range of walling materials available and the intricacy of their distribution which gives the unique variety to vernacular construction.

Building types

Kapstyl (A-frame), clay and stone houses are the three types of homes of which remnants have been found in the Swellendam area. *Kapstyl* structures were used mainly as temporary homes and also as barns. Clay houses were the first more permanent structures erected in the Swellendam area. As mentioned earlier, in the Swellendam region stone buildings were primarily erected at livestock stations and, compared to clay houses, there are few remnants of stone-built homes. This article highlights of some of the findings presented in the original study.

Going back in time to the early inhabitants of the region, we can refer to sketches of how the impermanent dwellings of the indigenous people could have been constructed (Fig.6).



Figure 6: The construction of a Khoikhoi hut (Hattersley 1973: opposite p.30).

However, to provide context for our architectural heritage how did the local building traditions relate to what was happening on other continents.

In his search for the origins of Irish building traditions, Alan Gailey, writer of the first complete study on Irish vernacular architecture, studied north Irish housing before 1600 AD. His research concludes that during this period there were two contemporary traditions of domestic structures co-existing in northern areas of Ireland. Impermanent dwellings, some rectangular but most mainly oval or circular in shape, were widely attested. They were post-and-wattle dwellings, the walls of which were not of mass construction and therefore may not directly have supported their roofs. They were thatched, chimney-less, and were associated with transhumant, extensive use of territory for grazing cattle. Misunderstood by contemporary English and other observers, who regarded their inhabitants as nomads without permanent dwellings, these flimsy habitations (known as “creats”) were usually described in derogatory terms (Gailey 1984:21).

Sir John Davies described the dwellings of the people in County Fermanagh in 1607 as “so wild and transitory as there is not one fixed village in all this country ...” and in the next year Sir Arthur Chichester advised that the native population of Ulster should “be drawn from their course of running up and down the country with their cattle ...”. Illustrations of such huts, which could be put up within an hour, occur in military maps of Newry, Carrickfergus. The huts were hemispherical and without suggestion of eaves or walls in any way separate from roofs (Fig. 7).

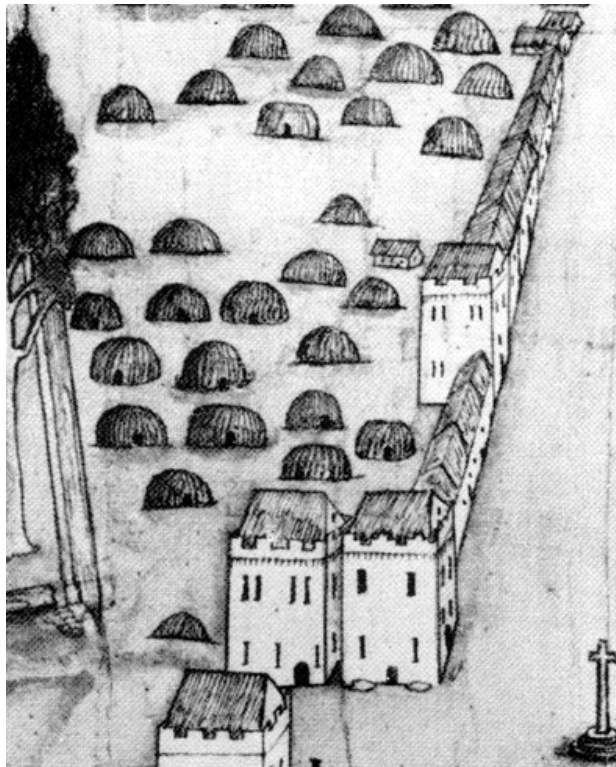


Figure 7: Late 16th-century creats at Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim (Gailey 1984:23).

A military map of Armagh shows wattled, curved walled houses with dome-like thatched roofs, an interpretation echoed in a reference to “a few small wattle cottages ...” in the ruined city (Fig.8).

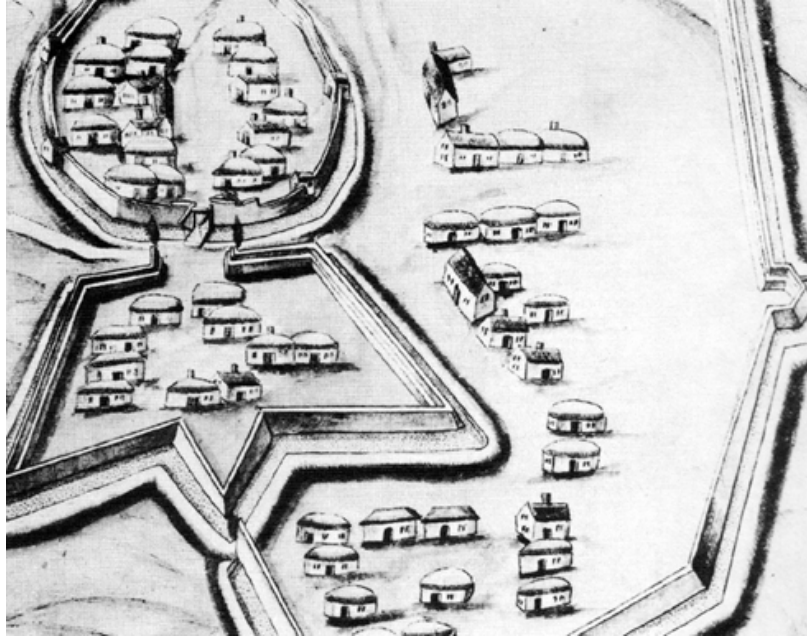


Figure 8: Irish houses inside and outside the fort of Mount Norris, Co. Armagh, c1600 (Gailey 1984:24).

For Gailey there can be no doubt that these flimsy huts continued the early Christian traditions of circular wattled houses. He writes that they must surely have had counterparts somewhere in the entire social range of habitations, during the centuries after the transition from round to rectangular house was completed by 1000AD (Gailey 1984:21-23).



Figure 9: Huts of the Khoikhoi at Genadendal (Burchell 1953:84).

Little did he know that the building of such impermanent houses was not restricted to the Irish in late 16th and early 17th century Ulster, or Europe for that matter. Indigenous people on the southern tip of Africa built similar impermanent huts. They were known to be exemplary stock farmers (Giliomee & Elphick 1990:89). Further complicating our perception and understanding of indigenous architecture and what the layers of our architectural traditions are made up of is the diary inscription of Lady Anne Barnard who visited the oldest mission station at the Cape, Genadendal, in her travels during 1798. Two centuries later than Gailey's observation, she notes that she saw clay huts covered with reeds and that some, in typical Khoikhoi style, were round and some square as in Ireland (Robinson 1974:162). Gailey's claim that at the turn of the century two types of semi-permanent structures were built, some

rectangular, but mostly oval and circular, has with the writing of Lady Anne Barnard taken on a deeper meaning (Robinson 1974). In his travels through the Cape John Burchell visited Genadendal in 1812/1813 and sketched the houses (Fig. 9).

Trefois, a well-known architect and historian from Flanders, believed that the Cape house developed from the *kapstylhuis* and *hartbeeshuis*. The *hartbeeshuis* consisted of a series of modified A-frame trusses placed on the ground and thatched over with reeds (Frescura 1987:32). The roof construction of these houses is important to note. Both are described as rectangular one-roomed buildings of the longhouse type (Trefois *et al.* 1969:34-39). Although both are variants, their roof construction is derived from the West-European couple roof where couples are tied together at their top ends without a ridge beam. The couples formed trusses and were joined together with a collar beam (*hanebalk*). In northern Netherlands these houses were found until the 19th century (Trefois *et al.* 1969:35). The *kapstylhuis* developed from this (with its wind tie (*windlat*) and ridge beam) as did the *hartbeeshuis* (with its collar beam and two recurved battens which were tied together) (Trefois *et al.* 1969:35). Walton supports Trefois in his description of paired-couple roof-houses and comes to the conclusion that this house type has an early European origin and that its development there could be linked to the *kapstylhuis* in South Africa (Walton 1981:8).



Figure 10: The first illustration, dated 1656, of a Cape *kapstyl* house built in 1654 on Dassen Island (Walton 1981:2).

On their travels into the interior the pioneer settlers preferred the *kapstylhuis* (Walton 1981:2). In its simplest form the *kapstylhuis* is a rectangular one-roomed house with a series of trusses forming a saddle roof that is directly built on the ground. Such structures were probably built by the first settlers as temporary dwellings. As proof, Walton points to the oldest illustration of a *kapstylhuis* depicted on a sketch of the structures on Dassen Island, dated 1656 (Fig. 10). This structure was built in 1654 when Jan van Riebeeck had to supply reeds and wood for the construction of a barn (Walton 1981:2).

The best examples of South African *kapstyl* architecture are found in the surroundings of Heidelberg and Riversdale (Walton 1981:2). In the early 1980s *kapstylhuise* were prevalent in the Albertinia area and were mostly used as barns, wagon sheds and for drying tobacco, while smaller *kapstylhuise* provided storage in Vermaaklikheid. At Noetsie, formerly a private beach near Potberg, seven *kapstylhuise* were built at the turn of the 20th century (Tomlinson pers.comm. 2002) (Fig.11). Today, near Vermaaklikheid (Figs 12 and 13) and at nearby Puntjie and St Sebastiaan's Bay (*Basjan*) are two private holiday places on the mouth of the Duiwehoks river mouth where *kapstylhuise* are still found. Puntjie has about 70 such houses.



Figure 11: Kapstyl house at Noetsie (photo D.M. Tomlinson)



Figure 12: Duinerug, front view with rounded front side and six pane window (photo EB 1992)



Figure 13: Duinerug, end gable with chimney attached outside (photo EB 1992)

The original houses at Puntjie were built as temporary dwellings for farmers who in former times travelled down the river with their boats to fish in the river mouth. Later they were used as holiday houses and gradually more houses were built (Walton 1981:3). The first houses at Puntjie were built c1896 and only a few of the original houses have survived. By their nature they do not last forever. The structural elements (poles/beams) may survive but thatch has to be replaced. From the 1930s until about the 1940s, Lool (Lodewyk) de Jager of Vermaaklikheid built the Puntjie house as its known today (Tomlinson pers. comm. 2002). However, it has also been recorded that Freek (*oom 'Kaffertjie'*) de Jager also had a hand at it (De Jager pers. comm. 1991).

Danish examples of vernacular architecture show notable resemblances to the *kapstylhuis*. Danish farmers in the environment of *Nymindegab* (west coast of Jutland) built what they called 'huts' close to their farmsteads. Their position close to the farmstead is intentional for in the old days the family lived in them when taking part in fishing on a nearby Fjord. Here and elsewhere along the west coast farmers moved down to the beach for the fishing season. The huts were temporary dwellings used solely during the season and stood empty for the rest of the year when the occupants returned to their farmsteads and cottages further inland (Michelsen 1973:199-201). These huts and *kapstylhuise* therefore illustrate an occupational diversification common in former times.

The fishermen's huts are dwellings, as can be seen by the chimneys (Fig. 14). The chimney is built of turf against one gable, beside the entrance. Cooking was done at floor level at the base of the chimney. A fourth hut, not shown in the picture below, has no chimney for it was used for storing tools and fishing gear. Apart from the wooden gable this seasonal dwelling is a simple roof span set on the ground, thatched with marram grass collected from the dunes and with a turf ridge (Michelsen 1973:200).



Figure 14: Three fisherman's huts at Nymindegab, West Jutland (Michelsen 1973:200)

Floor plans and longhouses

For almost two centuries the elongated wing plan in the form of an I, T, U, L, etc. was followed at the Cape. In the Swellendam study area the T-plan is most common, with a considerable number of longhouses (I-plan) in which man and beast were lodged under one roof.

In the last decade of the 18th century and the first quarter of the 19th century the layout of the *werf* of Cape homesteads developed into definite patterns in contrast to the earlier disorderly layout. Walton classifies these patterns as follows: linear (Klein Welmoed), parallel (Boschendal), *ooggespreide* (Babylonstoren) and the enclosed *werf* (Hartebeeskraal, Greyton).

There is also a plan that was found only near Malgas close to Swellendam. The shop of Barry and Nephews at Malgas is a construction that consist of three parallel wings. Directly adjacent to a three-room house a second three-roomed structure was built within 1,5 metres of the first house. The second structure was connected to the first with an enclosed passage. The third wing is at the back and to the south of the second wing and connected to the second at the top of the southern side. Originally the structure had a thatched roof. The first two wings possibly date back to the middle of the 19th century (c. 1850). The third wing is the oldest wing and could have been the original *Malegaas Craal* homestead that was noted on the site in 1832. The farmhouses at Nooitgedacht and Melkhoutbos in the Swellendam area have the same wing pattern but both of these have only two wings joined by a passage.

The longhouse tradition persisted in the region during the 19th century. The first farmhouse at Vryheid (in the Rûens), probably built in the early 19th century, was a longhouse to which a short tail was added to accommodate a kitchen.

In the Swellendam magisterial district a building plan occurs that does not conform to Walton's description of a longhouse and how it evolved, but which is rather a variation. Walton (1989:15) held that Cape longhouses were seldom erected as a whole but that rooms were added from time to time as required and that the whole was subsequently put under one roof. There are examples in Swellendam and surrounds of buildings that were erected as a whole and in which people and animals were housed under a single roof. It occurs more often than was expected.

Possible reasons for this could be that the area was sparsely populated, water and other resources were scarce and, being stock farmers, most people were not wealthy so that separate buildings were not built for slaves, stables and wagons. Some of the longhouses in this area have smaller dimensions, possibly for the same reasons. A longhouse type of structure is less expensive to construct than separate structures for each purpose. From all this one may deduce that longhouses as multipurpose structures occurred most frequently in outlying districts.

The first structure that was built on the farm Klaaskaffersheuwel (in the Rûens) in the early 19th century was a two-roomed dwelling comprising kitchen and bedroom. Subsequently a stable was added and a pitched roof erected over the entire structure (Fig. 15). This example confirms Walton's statement that the longhouse was usually not built at one time but that rooms were added later. An early 19th century building on the farm Kraaiheuwel (Bredasdorp) was also constructed in this way, the only difference being that the stable was adjacent to the kitchen.

A unique longhouse has been recorded in the Barrydale area, north of the Langeberg but still in the Swellendam magisterial district. Standing on the farm Bo-Kleinrooivlakte this longhouse consists of dwelling, stable and wagon-shed, with a row of triangular nesting places for chickens in the northwestern wall. This longhouse was constructed as such at one time (Figs 16 and 17).



Figure 15: North view of Klaaskaffersheuwel longhouse, with the living quarters to the east and the stable to the west built in two stages – note the use of different stone and the level of the ends of poles (photo EB 1992).



Figure 16: Front view of Bo-Kleinrooivlakte longhouse (EB 1992)



Figure 17: Back view of Bo-Kleinrooivlakte longhouse (EB 1992)

Combination (multipurpose) structures

A few combination patterns have been found in the layout of outbuildings. Examples of these are the combinations of stable and shed and wagon-house (Appelsbos c. 1747-1780, Swellendam and Avontuur c. 1750-1798, Stormsvlei), stable and shed and wagon-house and kraal (Perdefontein c. 1840-1860, Barrydale), stable and shed and wagon-house and hens' nesting places (Melkhoutbos c. 1780-1840, Swellendam), and the slave quarters and milking shed and wagon-house combinations (Zeekoegat c. 1735-1836, Riversdale).

Evaluation

The study of the surviving vernacular architectural buildings and structures in Swellendam and its surrounds showed that only three building types survive, namely *kapstyl* houses (being a significant structure in the region), clay houses and stone houses. Some informants referred to sod and *hartbees* houses (e.g. Muller pers. comm. 1993) but no traces could be found of these. It is quite possible that these structures were some of the first building types constructed in the region. In support of this, Geldenhuys (1984:52) claims that in 1984 some sod houses were to be found in the Heidelberg and Albertinia areas. Parts of the wall construction of Doornboom in Heidelberg are of sod construction.

Taking into account among others the history, geography, climate and vegetation of the area it is understood why relatively few surviving vernacular architectural structures were found in the region.

Conclusion

The principal area of concern was the loss of historical farm buildings in the study area. Some could only be studied through photographs and oral history. Farm buildings and structures, although representing a specific way of life, are often considered insignificant in terms of their cultural and historic value. Consequently, their heritage value is ignored and numerous examples of vernacular architecture have been lost through lack of understanding, neglect and demolition.

One of the first steps to heritage conservation is the identification and physical recording of the remains of human activity in the field. Naudé (2003:66) rightly quotes Jooste of Tshwane University of Technology, who wrote: "In the context of recording the man-made landscape, all human activity that shapes or alters the environment is regarded as architecture". By recording our vernacular architecture we are preserving a memory of structures and places, the people who created them and their socio-economic circumstances, and the building material and technology available at the time. This is our cultural heritage that would otherwise be lost forever.

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A tribute to our Octogenarian Vernackers

Helen Binckes, Shirley Chapman, Marion Ellis, Mary Floyd & Joy Saxon

Graeme Binckes	Leslie Hurst
Lavinia de Klerk	Dee Kilpin
Eve Dunt	Wenda Melck
Robin Ellis	Walter Middleman
Gawie Fagan	Micky Munro
Gwen Fagan	Phillipina Oberholster
Mary Floyd	Joanna Sharland
Willem Héfer	Mike Visser

Graeme Binckes

As an architect Graeme's particular interests are in the integration of urban and rural environments, and the conservation of buildings and places. To demonstrate the depth of this fascination, during their courting days his first date with Helen was a visit to the building site of UCT's Driekoppen residence, and the second was a trip to the graveyard in Simon's Town to track a forebear's headstone.

He first heard about VASSA from Maureen Archer who was enthusing about a young man whom she'd met (Gawie), and what was intended by this new and motley group. He and Helen joined soon after this and have been members for 40 years, with Graeme serving as chairman for 13 of them!

Inspired by the National Trust in the UK, which Helen had been a member of for many years, Graeme sustained the links and coordinated the visit to South Africa of James Castle, its representative, culminating in a photographic exhibition in 1974 at Stuttafords. In 1975 he attended the European Architectural Heritage congress in Amsterdam but was granted 'observer' status only because he was classified as a 'non European'. Undaunted he and Helen attended the US ICOMOS (International Council for Monuments and Sites) conference in 1987 at Jefferson's home Mount Vernon. They socialised meaningfully, even with Russians and others across the political divide, and successfully affirmed shared interests in historical preservation issues. Professionally Graeme has sustained this focus throughout his life and he was the first director of The Cape Town Heritage Trust.

Lavinia de Klerk

Growing up in the Cape, Lavinia has a keen interest in local history. Her grandfather owned Koornhoop before building Steubenheim, now the College of Music at UCT. Educated in Cape Town and Paris her interest in the history of art and antique furniture continues. She and her husband Theo trained racehorses for many years, getting to know a variety of horse breeders, their farms and the countryside. She is an appreciative and long standing member.

Eve Dunt

Eve arrived in Wynberg from Calvinia aged 11, and was socially 'adopted' by the Caldecott family. Zerffi, an artist and keeper of the Michaelis gallery, precipitated Eve's association with a number of European artists who had emigrated here in the late 1920s and early 30s, loosely

sharing their 'new' ideas and pooling joint exhibits. Their fresh approaches had a pivotal impact on the art scene, and together with local artists Gregoire Boonzaaier and Terence McCaw, the likes of Ruth Prowse, Lippy Lipschitz, Frieda Locke and Moses Kottler regularly gathered at the Caldecott house on Carr Hill, with Eve becoming the secretary of this New Group. Eve's association with the Caldecotts of Carr Hill endured for thirty years before she purchased and lived on in Zerffi's house for another thirty-plus years.

A teacher for four decades, her impact was wide and deep. She shaped and honed the reading, 'riting & 'rithmetic abilities of over sixteen hundred Wynberg boys and Rustenberg girls, who now revere her for setting high standards, even if they still recall being daunted at the time.

One of the perks of being a teacher was that she could attend the Frank Joubert Art Centre, where she chose to learn weaving, and ended up a founder member of the Weaver's Guild. Eve was fascinated by marionettes, which she carved, assembled, dressed and integrated into her teaching. Another perk was a year-long teaching exchange abroad, which also allowed her to investigate the sights of Europe. Her spirit is indomitable and still inquiring.



Eve Dunt and Robin Ellis admire the strooidakker in Paarl (photographs A.Malan).



Joanna Sharland discovers a fellow octogenarian during a Vernacs visit to his cottage in Clanwilliam.

Robin Ellis

Robin was born in India and brought up in Italy. During the Second World War an involvement in the Underground extended her linguistic abilities to the maximum, so that when Florence was liberated by the SA troops, she could aid and abet the victors strategically as well as practically. She shared the last of her paints and brushes with the officially designated 'War artist' Terence McCaw and provided English books for Tony Clarke. In the case of Ian Ellis, her assistance was personal and permanent. They married and ventured south together, having no idea then that they would end up in Cape Town and sustain these associations in South Africa.

A career in the travel business preceded further years as a tour guide, again using her language skills. Robin's family suggested she join the Vernacs to get an accurate update on things historical!

Gawie Fagan

A founder member of VASSA and its chairman in 1969, the same year that Tulbagh was devastated by an earthquake. The research and restoration project of this village came to epitomize Gawie's impressive contribution to the preservation of our built heritage.

Despite his renown in conservation circles he "sees himself primarily as a modern architect, one of whose specialities is restoration" (*Architecture SA* 1988). He graduated as Bachelor of Architecture in 1951 from the University of Pretoria and since then has produced a prodigious quantity of work throughout South Africa and particularly in the Cape. It covers a huge range of buildings, from a series of 25 Volkskas banks to numerous small and large urban and rural homes and outbuildings, and huge monuments such as the Castle in Cape Town. Gawie has been awarded numerous awards, medals and accolades, including two honorary doctorates (University of the Orange Free State in 1991 and University of Stellenbosch in 1993).

The office of Gabriël Fagan Architects is in a recycled warehouse in Bree Street, where an informal atmosphere belies an intensely creative and hard working practice. He also writes and lectures, sits on numerous committees and contributes time and energy towards helping Vernackers to understand and appreciate vernacular architecture. It is his deep rapport with people and the landscape, a special sense of humour and years of experience that so enriches our Society.

Extracts from a special VASSA publication prepared for Gawie's 80th birthday.

"I was amazed to see the geographic spread and variety of work that we have covered. From Langfontein in the Koue Bokkeveld, Langrietvlei at Berg Rivier, Rotterdam and Morgenson at Swellendam, the old houses in Mossel Bay, and even a church in Bloemfontein. GT's dogs are seasoned travellers." [Len Raymond]

"For me, Gawie's greatest contribution is his ability to translate his love for the landscape, old and new architecture, sailing, flying and great machines into a personal architectural language. By being passionate about his own life and place in the world he makes a valuable contribution to a diversity of expressions that builds our national architectural identity. Gawie's work sets a huge challenge for the next generation of architects to translate their passions and readings of the world into a meaningful contribution to our collective culture." [Heinrich Wolff]

Gwen Fagan

Gwen grew up in Stellenbosch and graduated in medicine. Marrying Gawie in 1949 and settling in Pretoria she practiced in various hospitals while raising four children. In 1969 she gave up medicine and joined Gawie's architectural practice in Cape Town to take on the exhaustive research needed for the historical background to the meticulous restoration of old buildings, for which the Fagan's have become renowned.

Her book, 'Kerkstraat in die land van Waveren', records the research into the homes of Tulbagh after the earthquake and before the restoration of Kerkstraat. An interest in old roses arose from her research into old gardens. She replanted the gardens of Government House and Boschendal, among many others, to recreate the period matching the restored buildings. 'Roses at the Cape of Good Hope' is now a collector's treasure, a magnificent book illustrated with ingeniously lit photographs taken by Gawie. He and Gwen tore around the country on a motorbike to catch the blooms at their moment of perfection. Journeys to New Zealand, Europe an international interest in the book have brought her far-flung recognition.

An honorary member of the SA Institute of Architects and the SA institute of Landscape Architects, Gwen was awarded an honorary degree by the university of Stellenbosch in 1993, and in 1995 she was awarded a D.Phil by UCT for her thesis on 'The history of manmade landscapes of the Cape over two centuries'. Though not a sailor like Gawie, she is still very active and busy as a wife, mother, *ouma*, and as an author and guardian of her language, Afrikaans. A Renaissance Woman indeed!

Mary Floyd

On her way to register for history and fine art courses at 'varsity Mary got deflected by the lure of hush-hush radio, and inadvertently signed up for radiography instead. Despite a significantly successful career in this field, when she heard James Walton speak on things vernacular at Summer school in 1964, her heart rejoiced, she 'converted', and became the secretary of the very first VASSA committee.

Her involvement with the likes of Barry Biermann, Dirk Visser and Hans Fransen and others was entirely unsupported by her architect husband Hugh, who considered them her 'funny friends' with whom she stayed up 'nattering all night.' Only towards his retirement and particularly after a trip to the Highlands, Brittany and West Coast islands, did he 'convert', producing his last thesis on the origins of vernacular architecture of these maritime people. And he became so hooked that he built their home in Llandudno at the Cape with vernacular materials, such as clay tiles, and even made his own lime wash.

In between raising four children, creating the X-Ray Film Library at UCT's Medical School together with Sue Henderson, and supporting Hugh while he was president of the Institute of Architects, Mary indulged her 'vice' – history - by organising guided historical tours of the Boland. This prompted Hannes van der Merwe to recruit her onto an Entertainment committee.

Over the years deep friendships were made that have endured, particularly between the Waltons, Hugh and Gawie, Dirk (once a student of Hugh's) and Jean, and Barry. As President she still supports VASSA as open-heartedly, though not necessarily 'til one on the morning.

Willem Héfer

There is a duality to Willem. He is a Burgersdorp boy who won a Rhodes scholarship, a rugby blue who became a diplomat, a director of Anglo-American who saved and preserved Hatfield House and masterminded the purchase and restoration of Boschendal, was mayor of Sandton and concerned about the poverty in Alexandra, who once stood for the DA and now advises the ANC on health matters, is fascinated by the past and genealogy, yet focuses on present realities and strategises about a better future.

While commuting between Johannesburg and Cape Town and staying over in Victoria West, he became concerned about its neglect and degradation, so together with some associates, he purchased, restored and revived a number of houses, which have greatly contributed to the town's revitalisation. Willem is a self-confessed maverick who has made an indelible mark.

Leslie Hurst

Involved in the hotel industry for forty years, Leslie jokes that he 'started at the top and worked his way steadily downwards'. He became manager of Fairfield at 21 and then peripatetically worked in the UK and SA. He ended up as one of only three people to wear 'The Golden Keys', awarded during his long sojourn with the Carlton group.

In his life after the service industry, as well as having served on the VASSA committee and produced the fastest ever turn-around time with the minutes, he has been associated with Peter Visser Antiques, the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens bookshop, and the Breakwater Hotel in the Waterfront, where he manages and attends to the indigenous garden.

Dee Kilpin

Dee was a member of the first committee of VASSA, representing the country districts. An Englishwoman married to a fruit farmer in the Elgin / Villiersdorp area at Vyeboom, she lives in an unusual old home containing ship's cabin doors salvaged from an old wreck, among the other delights of Bosmansrug farm.

Dee arranged the first outing of the Society, showing us houses she had recorded on the Bree River which were to be inundated by the future Teewaterskloof dam. Villiersdorp was her area of special interest. She travelled into Cape Town for committee meetings, and recently joined us at an outing to the Forge at the Castle with her son, an enthusiast amateur smith, who is now running the farm.

Walter Middelman

Walter emigrated from Germany for political reasons in 1936. His wife Ruth started Honingklip farm in Bot River area in 1950, an enterprise involving growing proteas, selling flowers and seeds, and exporting dried floral material. He joined her in 1962 after selling his own business and created the SA Wildflower Growers Association, which changed its name to the present SA Protea Producers and Exporters Association in 1976. He was the long time chairman and founder member of the International Protea Association. Their son came on board in 1970 and today manages the company.

He and Ruth travelled widely and annually, for business as well as with the aim of exploring many other cultures and places. His slides and anecdotes are memorable, such as an Ethiopian trip. His main personal interest is a private library built up over many decades, particularly of Africana and botanical literature with special reference to southern Africa, botanical art and old botany. (Ruth had an unusual and large collection of ornamental frogs.) He has been associated with nature conservation interests, the Botanical Society of SA and Kirstenbosch for well over 50 years. He was the Honorary Life Vice President of the Cape Natural History Club, founder member of the Historical Society and the Society of Bibliophiles of Cape Town, and belonged to many other cultural organisations, mainly Cape-based.

Micky Munro

A founder member who served on the committee, Micky has contributed largely with her constant, lively interest in the world. A graduate of Michaelis School of Fine Art, we know her as a talented artist. Recently she designed and supervised the building of a house in the garden of her old 19th century house in Rouwkoop village to meet the needs of her husband Hugh, now sadly confined to a wheelchair.

We remember this gallant woman as Cape Town's top photographic model. Glamorous long legs, sophisticated and beautiful on the 'gravure' page of every Saturday's *Cape Times* magazine - and other publications too. She probably had a dry sense of humour even then.

Phillipina Oberholster

Phillipina and her husband Obie, who was professor of history at the University of the Orange Free State, became friends of Connie and James Walton when they lived in Maseru. An interest in old buildings brought them together. Prof Oberholster was the man who drove the recognition of the Historical Monuments Commission in its early days. This friendship endured when they all moved to the Cape. After Connie and Obie died, Phillipina and James continued to travel extensively together. She lived in Stellenbosch with a family home in Kleinmond, but through the years when James became increasingly disabled and confined to Cape Town she remained his staunch friend and chief support.

Consequently she became a much valued friend and member of the Vernac Society. She has extensive knowledge of vernacular architecture and SA history, particularly the Stellenbosch region.

Joanna Sharland

Joanna still sails once a year at the False Bay Yacht Club. She met her husband Clive on her father's yacht, and for sixty two years they sailed and hiked together. Venturing from Britain to Southern Rhodesia in 1946 and involving herself in local affairs, she ended up becoming the Mayor of Bulawayo in the '70s before purchasing an historic Simons Town cottage in the '80s and becoming involved in things local there. She and Clive were introduced to the Vernacs by June Sykes at an outing to the Sandveld, and Joanna is still an intrepid member and a valiant walker.

Mike Visser

Responding to an advert for a job in Kenya, Mike succumbed to a long held desire to travel. He didn't know that as Clerk of Works he would be required to climb up five stories during the construction of a mill in order to inspect the pouring of concrete - despite suffering from vertigo. Or that because of the multiplicity of religious beliefs in the office, and concomitant need for time off to celebrate these beliefs, that he would end up working six and a half day weeks - though he did manage to relax in Mombassa fairly frequently. Another unexpected discovery was that in the town of El Doret the largest church was Dutch Reformed - a legacy from the significant exodus of disgruntled Afrikaners after the Boer War.

Returning to Cape Town four years later, he was involved with a number of long-term construction projects which included Tygerberg and Groote Schuur hospitals and the township of Mitchells Plain. Mike claims to be the longest serving committee member (and we dare not refute this for he is renowned for his memory). He cites a time around the second or third VASSA AGM when there was no quorum, and the chairman, Gawie, proposed disbanding things. Mike stepped in and intrepidly and all alone organised an outing to Caledon, and the Society carried on

We acknowledge his stalwart presence, his ability to make connections and to share his knowledge - all of which deepens our understanding and appreciation of vernacular architecture.

Wenda Melck

After marrying Martin Melck, Wenda moved to Kersefontein the family home near Hopefield, spending over thirty eight years there. During this time she raised funds to help organize the building of the *hardebieshuises* in Hopefield, ensuring that this type of vernacular dwelling made of local hard reeds would be conserved, and put up a permanent exhibition in the municipal offices showing the layout of the original Elandsfontein farm where fossils dating back millions of years were found. Along with Philip Tobias, the palaeontologist, she was awarded a gold medal for her service to conservation by the Simon van der Stel Foundation. Julian, their son and eighth generation Melck, took over the running of the farm when Martin and Wenda retired to Claremont in 1986.

Coenradenberg

Pat Kramer

Pat and John Kramer were very new members of VASSA when they visited Coenradenberg in October 2004 during a typical Vernac Saturday outing. Since then they have been active and enthusiastic participants in all the Society's activities.

Everyone has heard of Groot Constantia, Vergelegen and Boschendal – famous as prime examples of our cultural heritage. Fully researched, carefully renovated, beautifully furnished and adequately funded, from a distance they take one's breath away as they glisten and gleam in the sun. In fact, that reaction is not a coincidence as these buildings were strategically placed in their surroundings to impress visitors in the past, and they continue to do so today. But sitting out in the veld near Hopefield is one of the most important – and unheralded – farms in the Western Cape – the complete and unspoiled farmyard or *werf* of Coenradenberg.

I visited the farm on a sunny day in the company of members of the Vernacular Architecture Society (Fig. 1) who had studied Coenradenberg's *werf* in the 1970s and published a booklet in 1983, and were now returning for a visit as part of their 40th anniversary celebrations to see how things had progressed (or not). As I stood with the group in the shade of a huge gum tree and listened to the discussions swirling around me – why was the date on the gable much earlier than the house, why didn't the position of the windows match the layout of the *voorhuis* ... and other conundrums which the Vernacs like to pitch their combined wits against - I wondered what it must be like to be the owner of a place where your family has lived and worked for nine generations – as Jasper Smit is.



Figure 1. The Vernacs at Coenradenberg, October 2004. On right, Tim Maggs and Guido Lugtenburg.

Jasper Smit, the present owner (Fig. 2), can trace his family's presence on Coenradenberg back to 1749, when Pieter Smit obtained the lease for the land. Pieter Smit was, in fact, the grandson of Jan Smit, to whom most of the Smits in South Africa can trace back their lineage. Although the Smits arrived on the farm in 1749, the first reference to Coenradenberg is dated

1712 when the records show that the land was leased to Burgert Pietersz van Dyk for grazing cattle. He was followed by Christina Diemer, the widow of Frederick Russouw, who subsequently abandoned the farm and left the lease to be taken over by the Smits in 1749. Eventually, as in the case of most of these loan farms, the family came to own the property and it was divided up over the generations.

In coping with the farm Jasper has a tough job on his hands. He might not have to deal with marauding Khoekhoen, lions or elephants as his ancestors did, but his big problem is water. The *werf* is situated at the edge of a raised plateau above the Soutrivier – a river which, according to Jasper Smit, flowed until recently. Also gone are the many springs which kept Coenradenberg a viable wheat and cattle farm. Where has the water gone? Well, combined with drought and changing weather patterns, theories range from settlements along the West Coast tapping into the underground water for holiday homes, to potato farmers around Vredenburg using huge amounts of water for their thirsty potato crops. Whatever the reason, the result is that today Coenradenberg has no water and in a drought has to rely on government subsidies to survive. This precarious existence places not only the farm but the farm buildings in jeopardy.



Figure 2. Jasper Smit, the present owner of Coenradenberg.

The *werf* is dominated by the homestead which looks as though it comes straight out of an Arthur Elliott photograph. In fact, you almost expect children dressed in Victorian clothes to come running around the corner! The house is a low-slung, TT-shaped building which is typical of Swartland vernacular. The gable has *holbol* outlines and is topped off with a plinth (Fig. 3). The heavy front door is original but the brass knocker inexplicably now graces the kitchen door at the Koopmans-de Wet house in Cape Town. The double casement windows with their green shutters are also original. It turns out that they do not match the width of the *voorhuis* inside because this large room was at some stage divided into two small rooms with an entrance passage leading in from the front door. This I learned from the Vernacs ‘reading’ of the building. If you know what to look for buildings can often reveal their secrets.

Stepping into the cool, dark interior is like stepping back in time (Fig. 4), a feeling especially evoked in the kitchen with its huge black stove and *muurkas*. This is not a farmhouse furnished with elaborate European pieces – it is a home filled with items acquired over many years of simple living – a charming time capsule. Marie Smit kindly showed us around and told the story of the huge four poster bed which must have been built in the bedroom as it cannot fit through the door. The story of the bed was, in fact, told by Oom Jasper (the present owner’s father) to Dawid Botha who interviewed him before his death:

“Oom Jasper came to Coenradenberg in 1925 to farm. On the death of his grandfather about 1936, the farm of approximately 7740 ha was divided between his father and his uncle. ... Oom Jasper’s father received nothing from his people – what is to be found on the farm now he himself bought. On

the death of his grandfather an auction was held at which he bought two tables ... The canopied iron four-poster in the bedroom proved impossible to dismantle so it has remained in the house.”



Figure 3. The front gable and detail of casement window.



Figure 4. The interior of the house is cool and dark, and full of things acquired over many years.

And there it stands to this day.

But, although the inside is charming, the picture on the outside is not as rosy. The house received some restoration in the 1970s, but is now once more in dire need of repair. The thatched roof of the house is in a bad state and has been patched with corrugated iron (Fig. 5). Clay brick walls disintegrate quickly once water can enter through the roof. This house needs a new roof – and quickly.



Figure 5. The roof of the house is in dire need of repair.

Elsewhere on the werf, the Vernacs were now roaming far and wide photographing and exploring every nook and cranny. More of Oom Jasper's stories came to mind:

“In the time of Oom Jasper's great grandfather there were about 200 horses on the farm. In the stable closest to the homestead were the cart horses, next to it the wagon horses. Because of a dangerously leaning gable on the southern end of the stables, a little lean-to stable was constructed at the end to act as a buttress.

The large wagon house accommodated three wagons and two carts. Wheat and rye were packed in the loft. On the riverside of this building is a room, now a milk room, where formerly tar was kept for lubricating the axles of wagons. The tar was sold in a barrel which was kept inside a pit on a raised platform to facilitate tapping. Behind the wagon house are the pens where horses, calves, cattle and pigs were kept.”



Figure 6. Original thatch is replaced with corrugated iron, and the outbuildings are stabilized.

Jasper has replaced the disintegrating thatched roofs on the outbuildings with corrugated iron and in this way he has at least managed to stabilise the buildings which will remain standing and not be left to collapse as is the case on many farms throughout the Cape (Fig. 6).

Although there is a building marked as slave or herdsman's house on plans of the *werf*, Oom Jasper remembered a freed slave from his childhood who lived in the family's original homestead and appears to have been a bit of a character:

"The former homestead was ... occupied by a freed slave, Oupa Kanka, his wife Ai Griet and their children. Oupa Kanka had a snow-white beard and come from Mozambique where, he related, in his youth he was caught by the Portuguese, stuffed into a woolsack and shipped to Cape Town. Here on the slave market, Oom Jasper's great grandfather bought him for 25 pounds."

Oupa Kanka was not above taking the law into his own hands and giving naughty children (including Oom Jasper) a good thrashing.

By now the Vernacs had discovered the wonders of the wagon shed (Fig. 7) – a treasure house of old farm equipment ... wooden threshers, grain shovels, and pitchforks; leather whips and harnesses, and lots of other old farming paraphernalia - including chests containing heaven knows what – even Jasper couldn't remember. And now the midday sun was beginning to take its toll and Vernackers emerging from the threshing floor, old 'slave quarters', in fact, all directions, gradually reassembled to thank Jasper and Marie for their hospitality.



Figure 7. The wonders of the wagon shed.

The Coenradenberg *werf* has withstood the test of time— dangers which once existed have long since disappeared – a testimony to one family's endurance. Help is needed to assist Jasper Smit to ensure that this *werf* does not disappear as so many have before it (Fig. 8). To quote Antonia Malan, "the farm complex at Coenradenberg is a marvelously comprehensive example of gabled farmhouse with its related outbuildings, still furnished in a wonderfully unselfconscious way, but not entirely safe".

It took the Vernacs 30 years to revisit – let's hope the *werf* will still be there in 30 years time.

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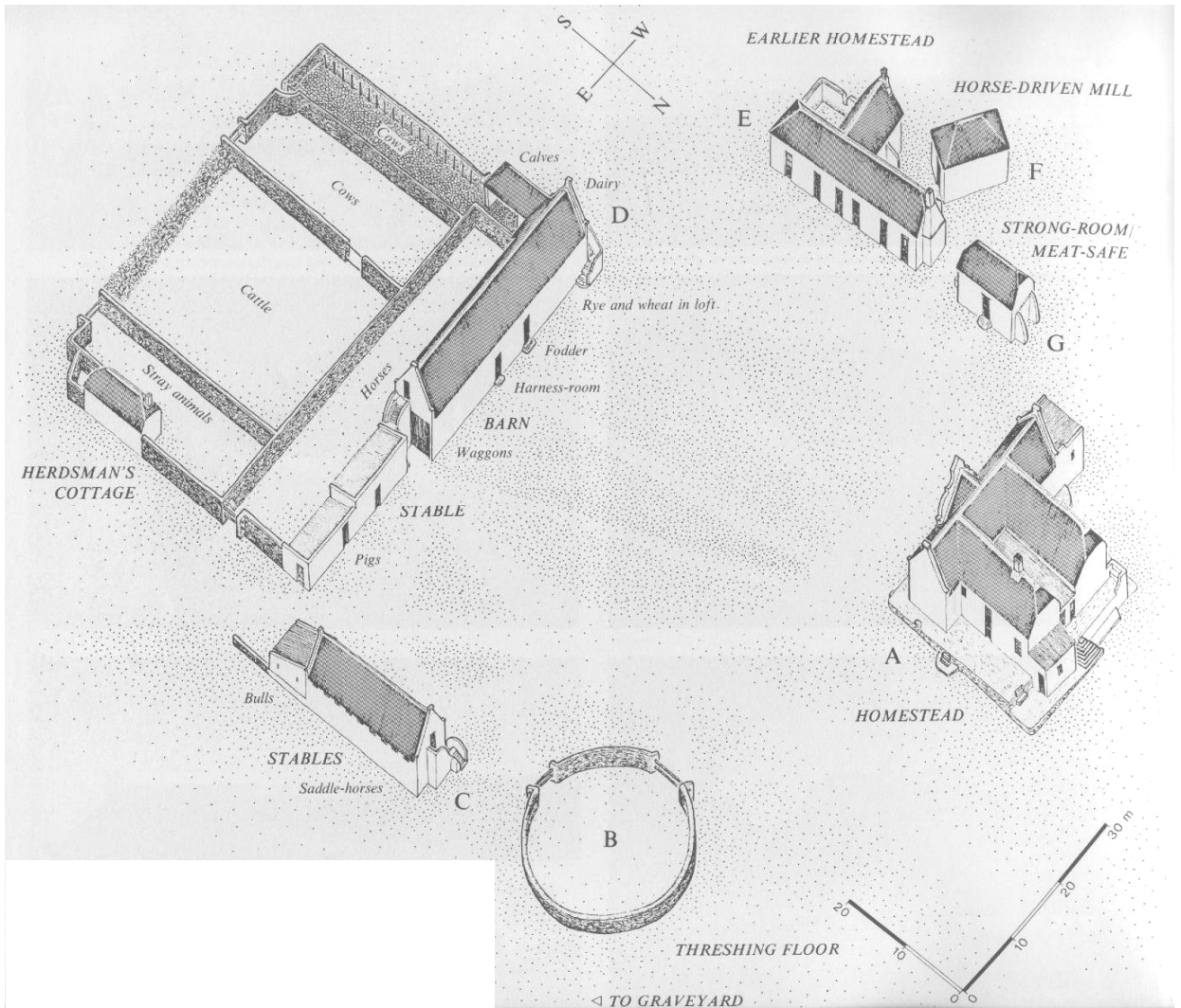


Figure 8. The farm complex of Coenradenberg (from Obholzer et al. 1985: 270).