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Cover illustration

Detail from Map of the Southern Districts 1880-1900: 15 Robertson, 800 Roods to 1 inch (Trig. Survey, Mowbray).

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Town and village layout at the Cape, with special reference to the mission village

Hans Fransen

Introduction

After many decades studying our individual buildings, my interest has gradually started shifting towards their grouping, their totality – towards our towns and villages. I had, so to speak, never seen the wood for the trees. I started discovering that a town can be seen as something greater than the sum of its parts.

In their layout, towns and cities all over the world can be very roughly divided into two groups. There are those that in their origin and development grew organically – along a river, or a road, preferably at crossroads, around a castle, by a bay, or on the spur of a hill.

Figure 1. Fourteenth century “bastide” town: Monpazier in France.

And then there are those that were clearly established by an act of reason, planned or “planted”. In most “colonies” – that is, territories occupied and/or settled by people from elsewhere, towns had to be founded from scratch, a fact which is often reflected in their rational design. In Britain, most cities with names ending in “chester” – like

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1 Article based on a talk delivered to VASSA members on 17 April 2012.
Chichester – have their origin in a Roman “castrum” or rationally planned army camp, a fact which often, after two millennia, is still visible in the layout of their nuclei. In southern France there are the English-founded 14th-century *bastides* such as Monpazier, invariably also on a rectilinear plan (Fig.1). Fortress towns often have a “grid-iron” street plan. All over North America we find “checkerboard” towns such as Philadelphia (Fig.2).

*Figure 2. American “checkerboard” town: Philadelphia (T. Holme 1681).*

In this article, I want to discuss the occurrence at the Cape of these two types of towns, and especially that of an agrarian type of village that seems peculiar to this part of the world and which I like to call the “river-strip” town.

**Cape grid-iron towns**

In the Cape colony, as in other colonies, few towns grew spontaneously – without a deliberate act of design. Among the very few exceptions are the harbour town of Simon’s Town, which developed on the narrow strip between the steep mountainside and the bay (Fig.3) – as did, on a smaller scale, the neighbouring fishing hamlet of Kalk Bay. Also organic, at least in their origin, are the ribbon towns of Paarl (Fig.4) and Swellendam, which both follow the course of old wagon trails, or Colesberg, squeezed into a narrow valley.
But most towns in the Cape, and indeed in all of South Africa, were laid out by the surveyor’s theodolite and straight-edge, and belong to the “grid-iron” type of town. In new country towns, neat rectangular blocks were divided into equally rectangular plots or *erven* (a word that derives from the Dutch/Afrikaans verb to “erf” – to inherit) that could be purchased from the entrepreneurs who had set up the town. In just over half of the older Cape towns these entrepreneurs were in fact the Dutch Reformed Church.
When the church felt the need for a new congregation *om af te stig* (“to secede”) in a developing area, it would purchase part of a farm and call in a surveyor to lay out a town. The word “town” incidentally, is related to the German “Zaun”, meaning hedge or fence, and to the Dutch “tuin”, (garden, meaning, like “town”, not the fence but that which is fenced in). The church would sell the *erven* to people wishing to live near the new church or conduct their business there, or to build *tuishuisies* for rental to use at Nagmaal. In the process the congregation would hope to make enough of a profit to build a church, parsonage and sexton’s house.

In fact this could be a risky venture, for some new towns never really took off. Our own Philadelphia was founded much against the advice of the minister of the mother congregation, Paarl, and even today only has about twenty houses, though this did not prevent a handsome church being erected.

A few grid-iron towns had their origin in private entrepreneurship. McGregor is the prime example of such a speculator’s town. It was laid out in the expectation of a new pass road scaling the Sonderend Mountains, which would have held the promise of good business but which was never to materialize. One row of blocks is divided in two, providing stands for poorer people. The little town’s good state of preservation is entirely due to this miscalculation: it never grew or changed much! (Fig.5).

![Figure 5. Well-preserved townscape: McGregor (“Die Trein”) (HF 1963).](image)

This kind of speculative greed could have weird consequences, such as at Uniondale where in the mid-eighteen-hundreds two developers could not come to an agreement and each founded and laid out his own village, their separate grids literally running at cross-purposes (Fig.6). The town’s present name stems from the time that the two townlets, Lyons and Hopedale, eventually merged. But its split personality is still very
evident from the sky. Something similar happened at Knysna where the two halves, Melville and Newhaven, fit together a little better.

![Figure 6. The battle of two towns: Uniondale (Surveys and Mapping, 1935).](image)

Although the surveyors tasked with laying out villages must have been men of considerable skill and enterprise, few of them were expert town designers. Their street patterns seldom showed much imagination. The church, so often the *raison d’être* for the town, could mostly be given a prominent spot as the focus of one of the main streets as in Montagu (Fig.7). Or it could be placed on or near an open area reserved as an outspan for visiting farmers, as in Piquetberg (Fig.8). The main street had to be wide enough for a wagon with a span of oxen to be able to make a U-turn (Fig.9). Neither the surveyors, nor the prospective residents, had much of an eye for “urban beauty” – the potential beauty of location or of streetscape. But luckily the harmonious beauty of the Cape Dutch style could often turn even the straightest street into an attractive environment (Fig.10).

It must be borne in mind that Cape towns were seldom if ever seen as urban constructs, but usually provided a semi-agrarian environment in which allotments could serve as mini-farms, sometimes as large as a hectare in extent. The main product of the large town of Graaff-Reinet was apparently “cheap brandy” made from grapes grown in the town’s gardens.
Figure 7. Montagu D.R. Church, quietly dominating the townscape (Elliott c.1920).

Figure 8. Piquetberg Church, dominating the outspan (Poortermans 1857)

Figure 9. Church Street Graaff-Reinet with turning ox-wagon (c.1890).
We have learnt to live with grid-iron towns. Cape Town itself, of course, is a full-blooded grid city, its streets running dead straight into the bay or into the surrounding amphitheatre of mountains, its squares being little more than building blocks left open (Fig.11). The beauty of its setting and of its once highly attractive, harmonious architecture more than made up for its unimaginative layout.

The design of the town of Worcester, drawn up at the behest of Governor Lord Charles Somerset, was an exercise in authoritarianism (Fig.12). Worcester consists entirely of square blocks, four by eight of them forming a rectangle of a mile by half a mile, the charming drostdy set at the end of the central street though hardly visible from halfway down the street, with two empty blocks in front of it. Two more open blocks in the town centre set off the Dutch Reformed Church. Somerset forgot that South African towns
don’t grow very fast in the beginning, and for decades his ambitious *drostdy* capital would remain an enormous barren area with a few houses here and there (Fig.13). Worcester has a plan as boring as – though less well thought out than – Simon Stevin’s famous “Ideal City” published in the 16th century. It should be noted that in Worcester’s highly unattractive town grid, the villagers managed to contrive attractive townscapes by “furnishing” it with their gentle, harmonious thatch-roof architecture (Fig.14).

*Figure 12. The Lord’s new capital: Worcester on the drawing board (1818?).*

*Figure 13. The new capital still empty: early Worcester (C. D’Oyly c.1830).*

*Figure 14. What the villagers made of the Worcester grid (Anon. c.1890).*
A decidedly more interesting grid-iron town is Ladismith, with its blocks of differing depth (Fig.15). Note that a place was found for the famous Hager church at the focus of one of the long streets – though strangely, not the central street (Fig.16). At Robertson, too, some interest was created by varying the block sizes and shifting their rhythm to find a focal position for the church. Graaff-Reinet is a grid-iron town nicely embraced by the Sundays River (Fig.17). The grid system was also used up-country, where it often shows a complete lack of imagination, as in the Voortrekker towns of Potchefstroom and Pietermaritzburg.

Figure 15. A grid with some licence: Ladismith (Surveys and Mapping, c.1935).

Figure 16. The focus of a long street: C.O. Hager’s D.R. Church, Ladismith (HF 1963).
Figure 17. Grid cradled by river: Graaff-Reinet (HF 1965).

**River-ribbon towns**

After this brief overview of the Cape’s grid-iron towns, I want us to look at towns designed according to an entirely different principle, seldom seen in the mother countries – at least as far as I am aware. These I will refer to as “river-ribbon” villages, for lack of a better name. As we saw, most towns in the Cape were in essence “agrarian” more than urban settlements, in the sense that they provided for small-scale farming allotments even within a semi-urban environment.

In largely arid areas, proper irrigation was of the essence in these farming settlements. A type of layout was developed where a small river was selected and the village itself sited a little distance away from it, leaving a strip of highly fertile alluvial ground between its base street and the river. This strip could then be watered from a furrow (itself derived from the river higher up in its course), running along the base street.

While the design of the 1685 nucleus of Stellenbosch was a tiny grid layout, its subsequent development along the old wagon-road that became Dorp Street, made use of such a furrow, the “Meulsloot”, from which a wide strip of fertile land along the Eerste River, cut up in narrow allotments, could be watered (Fig. 18). This strip is now unfortunately almost entirely built-up. The same sort of morphology is still clearly evident and more intact in Napier (Fig.19). In Clanwilliam, the houses stand neatly lined up on the river side with their backs towards the base street (Fig.20). At Riversdale the river strip was combined with a grid of slightly later date (Fig.21).

Another good example of such a river strip is that of Tulbagh, where all the oldest houses are lined up on the higher side of Church Street, each with their narrow strip of land on the river side. How significant this feature is was borne out recently, when
someone wanted to build a house on the vacant river-side, and had been given permission by Heritage Western Cape to do so, only for it to be overturned by a tribunal. The argument that won the day, I am pleased to say, was that this river strip is as much part of the Church Street morphology as the proclaimed restored buildings themselves.

Sometimes the river-strip scheme could be repeated on the other side of the river, as at Oudtshoorn (where the open strip has gradually been built up) and at Barrydale, leaving an arable strip dividing the town in two somewhat uneven parts – because only one of the two sides can become the business centre! (Fig.22).

Figure 18. Stellenbosch: tiny grid plus Dorp Street and long river-strip (W.F. Hertzog, 1817).

Figure 19. Napier: river-strip at its best (Ravenscroft c.1920).
Figure 20. River-strip with houses on river-side, their backs to the street: Clanwilliam (Surveys and Mapping 1935).

Figure 21. Long river-strip combined with later grid: Riversdale (Surveys and Mapping 1935).

Figure 22. Two river-strips straddling river: Barrydale (Surveys and Mapping 1935).
The mission-town layout

The “river-ribbon” scheme was particularly suitable for the so-called “mission towns” that were founded in the late-18th and early 19th century. As we know, the various mission societies allowed homeless people, including freed slaves, to use small allotments of land, to till and to provide for their own requirements – under the watchful eye of the church. With this small-scale agrarian use as their main means of existence, these villages provide for a wide strip of river land, cut up into narrow fields, each with a house at the top standing neatly lined up along the base street – not at all unlike Napier or Clanwilliam.

The first, and still the best known, of these mission towns is that with the beautiful name of Genadendal (Vale of Grace). As its life-giving central feature the Baviaanskloof River was chosen, coming down the Sonderend Mountains. Where the river’s course flattens out somewhat, the alluvial soils of its valley proved ideally suited for tilling by the landless people flocking there. The surveyor’s straight-edge was mercifully absent in the new town’s layout, which follows the natural contours of the setting, with an irrigation furrow following the base street to water the open river strip (Fig.23). Exactly who it was who devised the intricate pattern of its furrows, streets and land parcels is not known. What is certain is that the missionaries themselves, often people of humble stock, must have been highly versatile and inventive men.

Figure 23. Genadendal: the kerkwerf left and the river-strip right (Ravenscroft c.1915).

The fertile land in the valley bottom itself clearly being too precious, the actual village centre or kerkwerf was placed at its head, with its church, parsonage, school and shop forming one of the prime heritage groups in the Cape. The villagers’ dwellings, meanwhile, are now subject to an irreversible process of modernization, no doubt due to an understandable urge to move away from what is perceived as the “bad old days”.

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Genadendal proved such a haven for the landless that it soon became the second largest town in the Cape. In order to accommodate more people, “out-stations” were founded a few kilometres away (Fig.24). At both Voorstekraal and Berea similar rivulets from the same mountain range were used to create settlements laid out in analogous fashion to the mother settlement, each with its kerkwerf at its head (Fig.25). The plot diagram illustrates the principle admirably clearly, every numbered river-side plot with its corresponding house plot at the top, just above the irrigation furrow (Fig.26).

Figure 24. Three of a kind: Genadendal with (extreme left) outstation Berea.

Figure 25. The perfect double river-strip: Berea.
Other Moravian mission towns soon followed: Groenekloof (now Mamre) in 1807 (Fig.27), and Elim in 1824. Both of these have retained their river strips and their splendid *kerkwerwe*, but their streetscape have suffered irreparable degradation, especially at Mamre. At the London Mission of Middleton near Caledon, the very elegantly swinging ring road, a little river as its spine, follows the same principle (Fig.28).
Wupperthal

Today, the best preserved of all Cape mission towns is the Rhenish station of Wupperthal, dating from 1830. Its comparatively unspoilt state of preservation is due to its distant and isolated location strikingly situated in a small valley in the Cedarberg (Fig.29). Here the entire village, as well as the land parcels, occupies only one side of the Tratra River, the other side serving as commonage (Fig.30). As at so many of the early mission villages, the kerkwerf or church complex is placed at the head of the elongated village (Fig.31). Its cluster of buildings includes a cruciform thatched church and the parsonage that was once the old homestead of the farm that was purchased on which to lay out the village (Fig.32).

![Figure 29. Wupperthal: getting there.](image)

![Figure 30. Wupperthal: one-sided river-strip (Surveys and Mapping 1935).](image)

What makes what is left of the environment in our mission towns so attractive to us is the cohesion of its architecture: the unity of scale, proportions, materials and construction that is but a modest version of the Cape colonial architecture of the major farm homesteads (Fig.33). Their almost intact survival until well into my own first
acquaintance with them, fifty years ago, was a monument to one of the nobler chapters in our colonial history. Their subsequent degradation is an equally eloquent expression of the villagers’ inevitable move into a new but not necessarily a more attractive dispensation.

Figure 31. Wupperthal with river, left, houses, right, and river-strip, between (HF 1963).

Figure 32. Wupperthal: the kerkwerf at the head. Note threshing-floor (HF 1963).

Figure 33. Base-street in Wupperthal (HF 1963).
Conclusion

I remember giving a lecture here once with the title “Cape Dutch: Dutch or Cape?”. I could pose a similar question again, except that the majority of the older towns in the Cape date from the English period, not the Dutch. Of some 150 towns founded up to 1900, only eleven were in existence by the end of the Dutch period, 1806. Even among our 19th-century Cape towns, most were Dutch Reformed Church towns, and there is certainly not much that is “British” about them.

Whatever the case may be, it is hard to find true prototypes for the Cape river-ribbon towns anywhere in Europe. They are essentially “Cape”, not European.
Robertson, 1853-1905: A study of the development of the town and of the architecture

Karin Ström

Introduction

Derek and Vivienne Japha proposed in their studies of the town of Montagu that Montagu has many characteristics which recommend it as a model on which to base more general hypotheses regarding the process of founding and the character of mid-19th century Cape villages (Japha 1991 and 1992).

This article sets out to test two of the hypotheses which have arisen out of these Montagu studies: the first has to do with the set of circumstances that led to the establishment of early Cape villages, the second has to do with the architectural typology of these villages. The case of Robertson (Fig.1) is used to extend these hypotheses, and in doing so, to test their more general validity.

Robertson is an interesting example to use as a test case because of the many things it has in common with Montagu. These similarities include the following: (1) the towns fall within a very similar climatic and economic region, as they are situated only 50 kilometres apart (Fig.2), (2) they were founded within three years of each other, (3) their town plans are both variations of a basic grid, and (4) in both towns the system of water distribution came to impose a second grid on the town plan.

Figure 1. Church Street, Robertson, circa 1908 (Cape Archives: AG8175).

2 This material was researched and presented as a paper for a B.Arch. (UCT) in 1992.
A potentially significant difference is that Robertson was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church, which both opened the official channels for the establishment of a town and supplied the necessary capital. Montagu, on the other hand, was founded with the capital and at the instigation of private individuals. In their Montagu studies, the Japhas challenged the commonly held notion that the construction of churches in rural Cape farming communities was the most important factor contributing to the establishment of new villages. The case of Robertson is perfectly suited for re-examining this issue.

![Figure 2. Portion of a surveyor's diagram of the field cornetcy of Robertson, drawn for the 1891 census (CA: M3/1652). Note the proximity of the villages of Montagu and Robertson, and the grid plan formations of both villages.](image)

The founding of Robertson and the character of the town during its early years

The earliest records of settlement in the vicinity of Robertson appear in the loan farm registers of the Colonial Government. Cattle and sheep farmers, known as freeburgers, arrived in the area in about 1710, in which year a grazing licence for the piece of land “over the Breede River, between the two cross rivers” was granted to one Pieter Joubert. Grazing licences were free to begin with, but after 1714 a fee of 24 rixdollars was charged for a year’s grant. The grant did not allow the division of farms into smaller portions. By the year 1800, however it became possible to purchase a piece of freehold land outright from the government, and in the district surrounding what is today Robertson, several farms had permanent owners. Farms were sometimes divided up
between the offspring of succeeding generations. It is not certain how much this contributed to increasing population density.

In the years 1839-1852, the farm “Het Roodezant aan Hooprivier” was owned by the farmer J.H. van Zyl. This farm had already become something of a centre for the dispersed local farming community, as every three months, when Dr William Robertson the Dutch Reformed minister at Swellendam visited the area, it was at Van Zyl’s farmhouse that nagmaal was held. Robertson had already been visiting minister to the congregation of “Voor Cogman’s Kloof” for nineteen years when the idea of establishing a village at Roodezant was officially proposed. The Church appears to have played an important role even as the idea of establishing a town was conceived. It was to Robertson, in his capacity of Secretary of the D.R.C. Circle of Swellendam, that farmer Van Zyl and Mauritz Polack (Fig.3), the teacher at the farm school, addressed a letter dated 22 September 1852, stating that it was the general feeling in the area that a new parish should be established. They requested Robertson to put their proposal to the Church Circle.

After a meeting of the Circle, a committee was appointed to visit and inspect Roodezant on Wednesday 19 January 1853. After this visit a parish was provisionally declared, with Dr Robertson as relieving minister. The land was purchased on the same day, although the deed of transfer is dated 28 July 1853. The farm, 1525 morgen in all, was sold for £4200. A small portion of the farm was not sold, remaining the property of Van Zyl. Arranging for the setting up of the new town and parish proceeded apace, although it was October 1853 before the nearby Church Circles at Worcester, Caledon and Tulbagh had all given their approval, and approval from the Colonial Government only came in December 1853.

The land was bought by Mr Polack, with Dr Robertson’s authorisation, in the name of the still-to-be-elected Church Board, and twenty-six gentlemen who were present signed themselves as guarantors. A group of directors was chosen to manage the new parish and the proposed town. The directors met immediately and agreed to approach the Colonial Government with a request that the Church be granted a waiver on transfer duties and long lease tenure duties. They also agreed to appoint a land surveyor.

At the next meeting of the directors on 29 January 1853, the surveyor H. van Renen was appointed to measure up the erven, and given instructions to begin immediately. It was decided that the water erven should be a half morgen and the dry erven (droë-erwe) a quarter morgen each. Those present decided to call the town Robertson in recognition of Dr Robertson’s many services to the community. On 18 February 1853 the Cape Government Gazette advertised that the Lieutenant Governor had approved the name. Soon afterwards, in the 31 March edition of the same paper, an advertisement appeared stating that on the 4 May 1853, erven would be sold in the town of “Robertson” (Fig.4). The advert stressed that the land to be sold was vrugbaar (fruitful) and also noted the future town’s excellent links with established towns, namely Swellendam, Montagu and Villiersdorp. Joseph Barry, proprietor of the successful general dealer store in Swellendam, was to be the auctioneer.
On the day of the auction, 199 of the 300 erven up for sale were bought. A very small percentage of the erven purchased were *droë-erwe*. The conditions pertaining to the purchase of an erf were as follows: (1) the currency used to buy erven would be rixdollars, (2) no bid less than 10 rixdollars would be accepted, (3) buyers would have to pay their dues in two instalments, (4) the owner of a property would have to pay a yearly sum of 10 shillings to the Dutch Reformed Church, Robertson [this annual tax was not abolished until 1951], (5) buyers would be forbidden from buying alcohol until a police force had been set up in the town, and (8) buyers would be allowed to take occupation immediately, with a stipulated head of livestock permitted per erf.

The speed with which the idea of founding a town was taken up and implemented is interesting. Only eight months elapsed between the proposal to set up a town, and the settling of the first inhabitants. It shows extreme confidence on the part of those who were investing money in the town, albeit as guarantors, that the project was a secure economic venture. And although there does seem to have been some small scale property speculation in the town, most people did not buy their land as an investment that they would let lie dormant. Within 12 years of the town’s founding nearly all the erven which had been purchased were being farmed, and most of the 80 or so first property buyers (or their successors) had built some form of dwelling on their land. There were already 100 houses in Robertson in 1865. This pattern of the eager uptake of land at auction sales, and subsequent rapid settling of the land, fits a pattern described for other Overberg towns such as Montagu (Japha 1992).
The Church people who had set up the town did not lose any time organising the building of a church for their new parish. The cornerstone of the church was laid on the 16 September 1853. It took three years to complete the building, however (Fig.5). It appears that building operations did not run as efficiently as the Church officials desired: there was a shortage of money and problems related to ordering building materials. The Church thus wielded no particular power over the fairly commonplace transport and organizational problems that necessarily beset the setting up of a new town. An extraordinarily large crowd, of an estimated 1200 people, attended the consecration of the church on its completion in October 1856.

The account of the founding of the town is largely drawn from the Church Centenary History (Tromp 1953). Statements regarding the establishment of the town published by Tromp are validated by quotations taken from archival letters, deeds of transfer, church notices, minutes of municipal meetings and other early records.

**Church role vs Commerce vs Agriculture**

Derek and Vivienne Japha have suggested in their Montagu studies that “a conception of the mid-19th century Cape village as an intensive agricultural settlement which functioned also as a religious centre, and which contained a limited amount of commerce and artisan industry” (Japha 1992:5) can, at least in some cases, account for the development of several new towns in the Cape during the mid-19th century. This view challenges the notion that the building of churches was in itself the generator for many new towns. In the case of Robertson, the Church, as financiers, founders and governing body of the town, had the fullest opportunity to establish a “church town”. However, when they sold the land by public auction, although there were stipulations
prohibiting alcohol in the town and requiring the annual payment of a church tax, there was no stipulation that buyers of erven be members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Within nine years of the town’s founding, two more churches, a Wesleyan Church and an Anglican Church, had been built, indicating that although all property holders had to pay taxes to the D.R.C., they could well belong to another denomination, and could well be English- not Dutch-speaking. In any case, the D.R.C. was not in those days the predominantly Afrikaans speaking institution it is today. Two of the first ministers of the Robertson church, namely Dr Robertson himself, and his successor, Dr Andrew McGregor, were both English-speaking and born in Scotland. They studied theology and Dutch in Holland prior to emigrating to South Africa.

The Church leaders soon began to show signs that complete control of the development of the town and the activities of the citizens was not their primary aim. Indeed, the ten “directors” who had been chosen in January 1853, and later became the town’s first governing body, soon came to the conclusion that, "die bestuur van ‘n dorp nie die ‘n taak van ‘n kerkrad is nie, dat te veel van die raad se tyd in beslag geneem word deur die bespreking van sake wat eintlik nie daar tuisgehoort het nie" (Tromp 1953: 73).

The Church Board found that solving citizen’s problems was using up a great deal of time, with disputes regarding water rights being the main bone of contention. In February 1856, therefore, the first controlling body which acted independently of the Church Board was elected to oversee the building of sloots and other water-related matters. Only a few months elapsed before the Church Board decided to hand over more of their governing powers. In 1857 a governing body called Municipal Commissioners were elected, the forerunners of a proper municipality. They drew up a list of Regulations which were approved by the Governor, Sir George Grey.

The Church still hung on to some authority, refusing to hand over the title deeds of the town to the Commissioners. This caused friction between the Commissioners and the Church Board, as did the question of the paglande (fields let out by the Church to people who did not own land suitable for cultivation), and whether the Church had to pay taxes on their immovable property. In spite of these disputes, however, within four years of the town’s founding, the D.R.C. had effectively relinquished most administrative matters not directly relating to the Church. It can even be suggested that the founding of Robertson was a partly speculative venture on the part of the Church. Presumably the Church used some of the money earned from the sale of erven to finance the construction of the church building. Thereafter they seem to have seen to the collecting of taxes due to them, and interfered very little with the practicalities of running the town. Thus, although the D.R.C. was always a key player in the town, with approximately 80 percent of the towns inhabitants as parishioners, the Church leaders did not, or could not, alter the economic and cultural forces which began to shape the new town of Robertson.

Population and economy of early Robertson

This section reconstructs an idea of what the early settlers of Robertson were like, using census details, rates records (Cape Archives: 4/RBN/1, 2, 3), details from Cape Colony Directories, death notices (see References) and contemporary descriptions (Tromp
In accordance with the example set up by Derek and Vivienne Japha’s studies of Montagu, assumptions are not made about what the town used to be like using simple observations in the field, rather, in order to establish what life in Robertson might have been like during the town’s first 40 years, a number of questions are addressed:

- Was the population permanent or not?
- What were the proportions of English, Dutch and ‘Black’ settlers?
- How did the people earn their living?
- What percent of the income of the town did various occupations generate; e.g. agriculture, commerce, artisan trade?
- What type of land use was most prevalent, as indicated by the layout of the town and subsequent infill?
- What type of houses did people of varying social status occupy, and what kind of social boundaries were there?
- Were poor people all ‘Black,’ and did new farmers in the area earn enough money to build themselves large houses within a few years?

First, the question of who the first settlers of Robertson were must be addressed. The 1875 census lists 198 families resident in Robertson in that year, and shows that two-thirds of the population was described as ‘white’, while one third were described as ‘black’. Figures are also given for the religions of the inhabitants, and the number of people listed under ‘no religion’, or under denominations other than Dutch Reformed, indicates that from the first, for many people, there must have been reasons to settle at Robertson other than an opportunity to worship at the Dutch Reformed Church.

It is clear that social stratification along race lines was firmly entrenched from the town’s very beginning. Although there were no restrictions barring black people from purchasing good farming land in the village, most black people in the colony at that time came from impoverished backgrounds, namely they were ex-slaves or ex-farm laborers and did not have the capital to purchase expensive land. Census figures and rates records reveal that while there were black land holders in the village, the land they owned was not agricultural land, and most of them were employed as labourers.

This does not imply that all white settlers in the village were wealthy. Rather, census figures show that in Robertson’s early days even relative wealth was more the exception than the rule. There were in Robertson in 1875 only 78 houses with more than three rooms, and even if all of these were owned by white heads of families there must have been at least 58 white families living in tiny cottages with three rooms or less. Not even all those who had bought large consolidated landholdings had managed to accumulate enough wealth to build themselves impressive homesteads. In 1875 there were 24 landholders who owned properties consisting of four or more erven (4 acres or larger), and according to the rates records many of these large landholdings did not boast correspondingly large homesteads. Several families, white and black, were living in extremely basic accommodation, namely some 34 one-roomed houses and 21 “huts”.

Other characteristics of the early settlers are difficult to determine, but the census does give some indication. Only 32 of the town’s 715 inhabitants in 1885 were not born in South Africa. Death notices (Fig.6) state the birth places of many who were to become
Influential Robertson farmers, carpenters, and wagon makers, and show that they did not come from very far afield at all. The nearby farming areas of Vink Rivier, Swellendam, Worcester, and Montagu are all listed.

From the first years of settlement, the town seems to have attracted a fairly youthful group of people. Figures given in the 1865 census show that only 35% of the adult (taken as over 18 years old) population was over 40 years old, and this pattern continued with the later influx of people after 1875. Figures given for the Robertson district in the 1891 census show that 82% of the population of the area were under 40 years old. The relative youthfulness of the population appears to be consistent with other “country” areas, as figures for census districts such as Tulbagh, Worcester and Swellendam show. Death notices indicate that many heads of family who became influential Robertson citizens, came to Robertson as young men. Many did not bring accumulated wealth with them, but rather they started their “working life” in Robertson, gradually establishing themselves as the town itself became established over the years.

Census figures for 1865 indicate that about 80% of the adult white population was fully literate, while about 30% of the adult black population was fully literate. Figures given in the 1875 census in this regard are clearer: 95.95% of the white population was fully literate, while only 27.63% of the black population was fully literate, and an additional 17% of black people could read but not write. The census does seem to indicate that levels of literacy were generally higher in the towns than in the surrounding farm areas, with this distinction becoming more evident as educational standards in the towns gradually improved.

Details regarding education in the town serve to provide an idea of certain attitudes of the early settlers. Schooling for black children was separate from white schooling, and the fact that ministering to and teaching black children was always considered to be “mission” work reveals the patronising attitude of those who ran the schools. Dr Robertson, describing the type of young man who would be considered for the post of teacher for the “white” school in Robertson in 1856 (Tromp 1953: 101), wrote:

At Robertson there are a number of Coloured people still in a state of Heathenism, and any pious or zealous young man would have a fine field of usefulness as a Sabbath school teacher in the evening. He might in fact be half a Missionary.

Figure 6. Facsimile of Death Notice of Willem Adrian Cilliers, died in Robertson December 1888. Note his birthplace (Vinkrivier) and his occupation (agriculturalist) (CA).
Racial segregation became increasingly obvious as the years passed. In 1907, a secondary “mission parish” of the Dutch Reformed Church was established, a separate church building was erected, and a white mission pastor sworn in. Up until that time black and white people had worshipped together.

The fact that a farm school already existed on Roodezandt eight years before the founding of the town might be cited as a reason for families to have moved from the isolation of farm life to the relative sophistication of town life. In reality this was hardly the case. While there were twenty six children attending Mauritz Polack’s farm school on Roodezant in 1853, the number of children attending the school in 1865 had only grown to eighty eight, or a mere 25% of the town's white population. (These are census figures, whereas figures given in the church records are even lower.) In comparison, 15% of black children in the town were attending a day school, most likely the Wesleyan Church Mission School. The Dutch Reformed Church’s “coloured” school seems to have been established a good while later.

For the town’s first twenty years, schooling appears to have been very inconsistent, with enrolled numbers varying drastically each year, and teachers not holding their posts for long. In mid 1873, however, one thousand pounds was spent buying what had once been Van Zyl’s farm house, and setting it up as a boarding house. The school was now called the Breederivier Distrikt Kerkskool, and in 1874 it had 115 pupils from Robertson and surrounding areas. After this the school continued to grow from strength to strength.

The 1865 census details agricultural production within the municipal boundaries, however, it is not clear whether this includes details for the *paglande*, which were fields let out by the Church to people who did not own land suitable for cultivation. That the cultivation of crops in the village was a serious concern from the start there can be no doubt. In 1865 no less than half the land (130.5 morgen of 255 morgen) within municipal boundaries was under cultivation. Principle crops were wheat, grapes for wine and brandy, and fruit for drying. Vegetables and fodder were also grown.

Livestock were not present in great numbers. The census gives details of 97 horses, 126 head of cattle, 243 head of sheep and 188 goats. As there were approximately 350 privately-owned erven listed in the 1871 rates records, it is possible to calculate that there were not even four animals per erf. This is interesting considering that at the time of sale in 1853 the stipulated number of livestock permitted on each erf was 14 horses, cattle or mules, and 25 sheep. In the district surrounding the town sheep, goats and cattle were farmed in large numbers, along with cultivated crops like grapes and other fruit.

The 1865 census also lists the occupations of people in Robertson and surrounding areas. A picture is established of a town where 5% of the population are merchants, 15-20% are artisans, a small percentage are professionals and government employees, and by far the majority are farmers and labourers. 1871 rates records show that in the town only 15% of all erven owned were worth less than 50 pounds, and were thus *droë-erwe*, which also gives an indication of how much farming activity there was in the town.
The supply of water was always a contentious issue during the early years, not only because everyone wanted their fair share of it, but also because of contamination which led to repeated outbreaks of gastric fever. A gastric fever epidemic in 1860 left 86 people dead. For the first 45 years of the town’s existence, all water was reticulated in open sloots, and many people had to fetch their water from the sloots in buckets. According to the colonial medical authority’s report in 1898 the water became contaminated as it flowed over neighbouring farm land before it reached the village (Tromp 1953: 83). A system which brought the water from a source in the mountains by means of a pipe was only finally installed in 1898.

Even though the town was rapidly settled by a fairly large number of people, and half the municipal area was put under cultivation during the first ten years, development during the town’s early years was really very slow. There are reasons which can account for this. In 1861, drought and rust caused crop failures throughout the Overberg region, and this was followed by a general economic depression in the Cape Colony for the remainder of the 1860s. Crop failures, and the gastric fever epidemics, caused the white population of the town, which for various reasons tended to be the more economically productive, to decline from 502 in 1865 to 434 in 1875. Moreover, in 1865 after the death of Joseph Barry, the firm of Barry and Nephews that connected Robertson farmers to markets in Cape Town and even overseas, was liquidated.

Living conditions during the town’s first twenty years for the majority of inhabitants were simple. Life was basically agrarian: they tilled the fields, fetched water, gathered firewood and cooked on open stoves. For some, this style of life did not really alter until well into the 20th century. Others, however, began gradually to adopt a more “urban” lifestyle, as a more stable economic base in the town and the surrounding district allowed for occupations to become more diversified. After 1875 the village started to grow more rapidly. It took twenty two years from the town’s founding for the population to reach 1104 people but in the sixteen years to 1891 this figure very nearly doubled to 2121 people. Moreover, in 1865 after the death of Joseph Barry, the firm of Barry and Nephews that connected Robertson farmers to markets in Cape Town and even overseas, was liquidated.

Occupations of the inhabitants became increasingly diversified as the town’s economic base became more established. By 1894 there were 12 general dealers in the town, while the wagon building industry and blacksmith trade accounted for 15 businesses. The number of wagon-makers in the town continued to increase. In 1897 the directory lists 19, and by 1902 this figure had grown to 32. 1902 was, however, both the high point and downfall of the wagon-making industry, as after the Boer War had ended people came to rely increasingly on rail transport. By 1894 the town was supporting four of its own shoemakers, six bakers, five butchers, two coopers, four saddle-makers, two dressmakers, five tailors, five millers, six carpenters and five builders, as well as tinsmiths, a printer, a gunsmith, a paperhanger and others (see Directories, Fig.7).

The first bank in the town, the Standard Bank, was established in 1880, another indication that the town was developing fast economically at that time. In 1904, the
decision by the Church Board to demolish the Church building, which was only 48 years old, and replace it with a grander edifice, is evidence of the new prosperity which the last years of the century ushered in. 1904 also saw the completion of a 21.5 mile long canal, built by the Cape Administration, which brought water to the town from the Breede River, and opened up new opportunities for commercial farming.

Robertson’s early economic and social development can be seen to have happened along the same lines the Japhas have suggested for the town of Montagu, even though the one town was founded by the Church and the other by private entrepreneurs. In both towns, the history of development can be divided into two periods, although there is no cut-and-dried point at which one period ended and the other began. Roughly speaking, the period before 1885 can be seen as a period of slow economic development, and the period thereafter as one of gradual economic advancement.

Development of urban form

Only a portion (approximately one-sixth) of the 1525 morgen purchased from Van Zyl was used for establishing the street layout of Robertson. The town therefore occupies approximately 255 morgen. An additional area known as the paglände was established on the outskirts of the town. These paglände were allocated by the Church to individual white families who could not afford a farm, as a matter of deliberate social policy (Chapman 1984). The existence of paglände has not been identified in any other mid-19th century Cape village, and may be unique to Robertson.

The plan of Robertson has much in common with the plans of other 19th century Cape villages. It is arranged on a grid pattern, with houses set close to the street edge. Water is distributed by means of furrows, but here Robertson differs from other towns in that there is no distinction between a “watered” area of town and a “dry” area of town. In 1992, water was distributed almost equally throughout the whole town (Chapman 1984: 51). Before the town was linked to an irrigation system in 1905, however, water was not made available to all erven. The surveyors’ diagrams (Figs 8 & 9) show the original subdivision of the town for the first auction sale, as well as two later subdivisions. The original subdivision seems to have provided for mainly largish water-erwe of one acre or more, whereas the two later subdivisions provided mainly small droë-erwe.
Figure 8. Copy of the surveyor’s diagram (Sw.Q. 13-32, dated 1 November 1838), showing the loan place Over het Roode Zand. The portion marked ‘A’ was bought by the DRC in 1853 to establish the town of Robertson. Only the piece which lies between the Willen Nels and Hoops rivers was used for the layout of the original plan, although the town extends across the rivers today. Note the complex of small farms lying within portion ‘A’. These farms predated the town and their impact on the town plan is still clearly visible (Surveyor-General’s Office diagrams 595/1838 & 419/1853).
Figure 9. Diagrams showing the 199 lots which were auctioned on 4 May 1853. Note the church square, the only public space provided in the plan. The blocks that are shown without subdivisions at the northwest were later subdivided into droë-erwe (SGO: General Plans 419/1853).
Figure 10. Town plan showing how lots were not bought in the pattern shown on the surveyor’s diagram. The diagram shows the consolidation of lots as indicated by the first title deeds for each property. The diagram also indicates the stages at which various properties became privately owned for the first time.

The grid plan of Robertson is not completely regular (Fig.10). A strip of small square blocks runs across the centre of the plan, which is otherwise composed of rectangular blocks, just over double the area of the square blocks. The reason for the existence of, or need for, these smaller blocks has not been ascertained. As the whole town lies on a very gentle gradient, it is possible to bring water by means of furrows to any block below the level of the dam, which is situated at the foot of a hill to the north of the grid. It does not seem likely, therefore, that these small blocks were intended to provide droë-erwe. Only two blocks of the grid, which lie at the level of the dam, were divided into very small plots or droë-erwe.

As in other villages, planted fields are combined with residential areas. Again, this does not follow as clear a pattern as it does in a town like Montagu. Today, fields are scattered throughout the town on a seemingly random basis. A photograph of the southern side of the town taken by Ravenscroft in about 1904, shows that there does appear to have been some sort of pattern of land use within the town. In 1904, the southern part of town near the main road was chiefly being used for farming, the houses isolated from one another and on the edges of properties. The strip of small blocks running across the town appears to have been more closely built up. Another photograph taken from the west confirms these impressions.
As the Japhas have illustrated with the case of Montagu, the layout of erven in the grid plans of small towns did not necessarily affect the pattern of land use that came to be established once people bought plots and settled on the land. In Montagu, people bought far larger land holdings than the minimum sizes suggested by the town plan. This happened in Robertson too (see Fig.10, diagram showing pattern of land purchase for the years 1853-1890). These large consolidated lots formed viable small farms. Houses were usually placed on the periphery of the lots, perhaps so as not to occupy valuable farming land.

The following figures (Figs.11 & 12) show differences and similarities between Montagu and Robertson. Note the agrarian nature of both towns, with large pieces of land under cultivation. The system of distributing water by means of furrows imposed a more distinct pattern on Montagu than on Robertson. Montagu has only small *droë-erwe* above Bath Street, while erven below Bath Street are larger.

*Figure 11. Montagu, circa 1890 (Japha 1991: 40).*

*Plan of Montagu showing early subdivisions (Japha 1991: 16).*
Figure 12. Aerial photograph of Robertson, 1943 (Director of Surveys & Mapping); Plan (Fransen & Cook 1965).
The 1943 aerial photograph of Robertson (Fig.12) shows how the large consolidated landholdings of the mid 19th century have been subdivided over the years. The old patterns of land use in Robertson have completely given way to one of two models: (1) lots with free-standing suburban buildings occupying their centre, and (2) small subdivided lots with houses either semi-detached or set very close together, so that rows of houses occupy the street edge. As research into the gradual subdivision of property in the town lay beyond the scope of this project, no diagrams of land use patterns were analysed for the years intervening between the buying of large consolidated erven and the town as we see it today (Figs 13 & 14). A study of the type of land use associated with two particular types of buildings is given further attention in the following section.

Figure 13. Panoramic view from the southern side of Robertson, circa 1904 (CA: AG 1071) and September 2012.
Domestic architecture: 1853-1915

It is not within the scope of this study to do an in depth analysis of all the domestic buildings in Robertson. Rather, the comparison of the towns of Robertson and Montagu is extended to include a comparison of their domestic architecture. Derek and Vivienne Japhas’ Montagu studies, which have listed and categorised all the remaining historic buildings of that town, are once again used as a model. Thus, the applicability of categories and hypotheses which the Montagu studies have generated are tested, and an assessment is made of how much one can reasonably expect to find similarities in the architecture of mid-19th century Cape villages.

Types of domestic architecture

The Japhas divide the domestic architecture of Montagu into two broad periods. These dating categories coincide with two identifiably different periods in the town’s economic history. As it has been shown that the process of the evolution of Robertson was not markedly dissimilar to the process in Montagu, it is feasible to apply the dating categories used in the Montagu studies to the architecture of Robertson. The two periods are: (1) an early period, from 1850-1885, and (2) a later period, from 1885-1915. A further classification regarding the status of buildings is also identified, and it is noted that distinctions between the homes of wealthy and poor span both the early and late periods though these distinctions were clearer during the first period than the second. The interaction between local “Cape” ideas about building and the influence of British architectural models is also discussed, and seen to have been a discourse running through both time periods.
**Types of domestic architecture found in Montagu and Robertson, 1853-1915**

All the house types illustrated in the diagrams of Montagu houses (Figs 15 & 16) are represented in Robertson, with the exception of figure (e) of the early house variety, the end-gabled homestead with adjoining cellar. It is also possible that none of Robertson’s gabled houses are of the one-room-deep variety illustrated in figure (a) but this cannot be stated with certainty as none of these houses were inspected internally.

*Figure 15. Diagrams of house types from the earlier period of village development, Montagu: (a) front gabled house with one room deep plan in T-formation; (b) 2 room deep rectangular house with gable, (c) double-storey parapeted house, (d) 2 room deep rectangular ‘barn’ house without gable, (e) rectangular house with adjoining cellar, (f) parapeted cottage with flat roof, (g) cottage with pitched roof (Japha 1992: 29).*
Figure 16. Diagrams of house types from the later period of village development, Montagu: (a) double-storey parapeted house, (b) asymmetrical villa, (c) asymmetrical cottage, (d) rectangular house with verandah, (e) single-storey parapeted cottage, (f) cottage with saddle roof (Japha 1991: 68).

House types found in Montagu

1. Gabled:
   1.1. Thatched
   1.2. Corrugated iron roofed;
2. Rectangular ‘barn’ with parapeted gable ends:
   2.1. Thatched
   2.2. Corrugated iron roofed
   2.3. With stoepkamers;
3. Thatched cottages;
4. Single-storey parapet;
5. Double-storey parapet;
6. Double-storey with hipped roof;
7. Villa-type (sash windows):
   7.1. Asymmetrical
   7.2. Symmetrical
8. Double-storey asymmetrical;
9. Rectangular with clipped gables:
   9.1. Gable end to street
   9.2. Long side on street
   9.3. With stoepkamers;
10. Houses with hipped corrugated iron roofs;
11. Semi-detached with central clipped gable on street;
12. Villas with returns on verandahs;
13. Villa-type (casement windows).

The houses of Robertson and Montagu: similarities and differences

In Robertson there are certain minor variations on the basic house types described by the Japhas in Montagu but none of the variations is significantly different enough to warrant the formulation of a whole new “house type” category. [See photographs on pages 41-45, taken in 2012.] A major and important difference that does come to the fore is that two of the “high-status” houses types, namely double-storey parapeted houses and rectangular barn-like houses with pitched roofs of thatched or corrugated iron, are present in far greater numbers in Robertson than in Montagu. It is uncertain whether this is because more were originally built, or whether these types of houses were at some point demolished in Montagu. This study cannot throw any light on the issue.

What would be of use in the broader study of mid-19th century Cape villages, is additional information regarding the circumstances pertaining to the building of the two house types mentioned above. This could add valuable insights to the Japhas’ discussions on building types and social status, which have hitherto been chiefly based on a discussion of houses in Montagu.

It should also be noted at this point that Robertson has a better sample of surviving “low-status” houses than many other towns, most probably because it did not suffer the damages of Group Areas removals. This article does not encompass discussion of this type of architecture, however.

Methods for investigating the architecture

It is evident that Robertson’s remaining buildings are only a part of the system of urban fabric of which they were once a part in the mid-19th century, and so an idea of the type of landholdings on which buildings were constructed and occupied has to be reconstructed. The use of style-dating in the field has been avoided as much as possible, as it has frequently been shown that importing ideas about style and date from what one knows of “Cape” architecture in general can lead to complete misinterpretations of the architecture of individual towns (for example, the Japhas’ work has shown that some of Fransen & Cook’s original dates (Fig.17) are out by as much as 30 years (Fransen & Cook 1965).
The field work focused on a sample group of parapeted and rectangular buildings in Robertson. Architectural features indicated that they may have been built any time between the founding of the town in 1853 and the turn of the century. The selected houses all have similar joinery details (mostly six-pane sash windows and double front doors with 4, 6 or 8 panels), although the quality of the craftsmanship and the type of timber used differs. A particular quality of plaster work, rather chunky and uneven, was also used as a selection criterion. Very little is known about the plans of the buildings, as we did not get a look inside more than two of the houses, and we did not look for any drawings. Archival research was then carried out to verify information about who built these houses, what the occupations of the owners were, and the exact year in which the houses were constructed. [The following photographs were taken in November 2012.]
Gabled house with corrugated iron roof: 59 Adderley Street.

Rectangular barn house with parapet gable ends, previously thatched: 43 Albert Street.

Rectangular barn house with half-hipped thatch roof and quoining: Robertson Museum, 50 Paul Kruger Street. Dated by the museum curator to c.1863, rates records prove it predates 1880. Named Druid’s Lodge in the 1880s.
Rectangular barn house with parapeted gable end and single stoep kamer: 12 Van Zyl Street.

Rectangular barn house with parapeted gable ends and two stoep kamers: 32 Loop Street.

Thatched cottage: corner Van Zyl Street and Hopley Lane.
Single storey parapet house: 46 Albert Street.

Single-storey parapet house with stoep kamer: 40 Polack Street.

Double-storey parapet house, Polack Street.
Double storey parapet house with returned stoep: corner Albert and Keerom Streets.

Double storey house with hipped roof: 44 Truter Street.

Asymmetrical villa: 19 Truter Street.
Rectangular house with clipped gables, gable end to street: 93 Paul Kruger Street. Note double vent, common in Robertson.

Rectangular house with clipped gables, long side to street: 91 Paul Kruger Street.

Semi-detached houses with central clipped gable on street: 32 Albert Street.
Double-storey parapet and rectangular ‘barn’ houses

The comparison of the remaining house types found in the two towns today can be placed in some sort of historical context by comparing documentary evidence of the full range of buildings of which these remaining buildings were once but a part. The census of 1875, which listed buildings according to number of rooms for many towns in the colony, forms a useful basis for comparison (Table 1). In that year, Montagu is said to have had 123 houses to Robertson’s 189. If a high status house is considered to be one having six rooms or more, then the percentage of high status houses in both towns was an identical 22% (37 in Montagu and 40 in Robertson). If percentages appear incorrect, it is because 19 of the houses in Robertson were classified “unspecified” and have not been included in the statistic. As it would have been unlikely for a large house to be “unspecified”, it is possible that the percentage of large houses in Robertson was even lower.

Table 1: Houses and room numbers, Montagu and Robertson, 1875.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of rooms</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2/3</th>
<th>4/5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>6 or more</th>
<th>unspecified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robertson</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar figures given for Robertson in the 1904 census indicate that although the number of large houses in the town had increased greatly (the census lists 178 houses with more than six rooms) these houses still only represented 27% of all the houses in Robertson. Unfortunately, figures enumerating Montagu houses in 1904 were not obtained. However, panoramic photographs of the villages in about 1910 reveal images of the two towns which are quite alike (see Figs 11-14). The photographs also show many thatched buildings in both towns. Some rectangular ‘barn’ houses (which one can locate in the field from the photograph of Robertson) were once thatched, but now have corrugated iron roofs.

The architecture of the two towns therefore evolved at very much the same pace, and thus analysis of the two building types isolated for study in Robertson can reasonably use analytical information related to Montagu buildings. Using a dating technique which assesses the ratable value of properties in different years, it has been possible to establish, within reasonable bounds, the dates for double-storey parapeted houses and for rectangular ‘barn’ houses. Information regarding the size of the landholdings on which these houses were built, and the occupations of the people who built them or lived in them at the turn of the century, has also been added. From this integrated information we can get a reasonable picture of the circumstances of the building of these houses.

Of the seven datable parapeted houses only one appears to have been built before 1891, and the exception was built somewhere around 1880. These houses seem generally to have been built on properties consisting of two or three consolidated lots. The occupations of their owners varied greatly, but they seem to have been from the higher
ranks of Robertson society. Owners include a farrier, who also acted as a Municipal Commissioner, a doctor, a builder and mason and a shop keeper.

The detailing of the houses varies considerably. All the houses which were sampled in the field have double doors, some have delicate 8-pane sash windows without horns, and others have more robust 6-pane sash windows with horns. Some of the houses have quoining or fluted pilasters while others do not. There is certainly no hard and fast rule that determines whether certain details correspond with a certain dates.

The seven datable rectangular houses seem to be spread over a greater time span than the parapeted houses. The earliest date we could establish for such a rectangular house was 1878, while some were definitely built after 1891. Their owners also seem to have been well-off people: a butcher, a wagon-maker (who built President Paul Kruger’s wagon), a farmer and a general agent. In general these houses were built on larger properties than the properties on which parapeted houses were built, as three of them were built on 4-acre properties. However, a ‘barn’ house that was built on a single half-acre lot seems to defy this pattern. Again, joinery and plaster details defy attempts to link them to styles or periods.

These parapeted and rectangular houses fit into the same periods that the Japhas described for such houses in Montagu. Parapeted houses and rectangular ‘barn’ houses span the two periods of development identified for both villages. However, the Japhas’ assertion that these types of houses started to be built any time after 1850, and continued to be built up until the turn of the century, is qualified by the Robertson case as the evidence suggests that more of these types of houses were built towards the turn of the century than earlier.

**Conclusion**

Robertson was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church at the request of a local farming community who felt that the establishment of a new parish in their midst was warranted. In some mid-19th century Cape villages, although churches were built very early on, Church authorities were not as involved with the process of bringing the towns into being as they were in the case of Robertson.

This article has shown that the Church people who bought the land on which the town of Robertson was developed, and arranged for the sale of erven by public auction, acted in a way which was not dissimilar to private individuals who used property speculation to establish other Overberg towns like Montagu. The Robertson Church Circle presumably used the money generated by the sale of erven to finance Church projects. No particular conditions relating to development were stipulated, and within four years of the founding of the town the Church relinquished all administrative powers to an independent governing body. Economic and cultural influences which shaped the new town were therefore very much the same as for other developing towns in the region.
References


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Cape Archives: 4/RBN/1, 2, 3.