Contents

Stormsvlei: A unique settlement frozen in time: *André Pretorius*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Zonderend Valley</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avontuur’s eighteenth century leaseholders</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christiaan Andreas Storm</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetual quitrent (1820)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Twentyman era (1841-1871)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Village</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation and social activities</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Thomson era (1949-)</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerial view of Stormsvlei c 1990 with numbered features</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cover illustration

In 1921 the itinerant Dutch-born painter, Cornelis Albers, produced two panoramic friezes in the Victorianised Manor House at Stormsvlei. Featured here is the one showing Stormsvlei werf. From left to right, it depicts the Inn, shop, bar, post office, Manor House, smithy and other outbuildings.
In September 1984 Colin Cochrane, curator of the Drostdy Museum at Swellendam, prepared this layout of Stormsvlei to show most of the buildings with tentative dates. He recommended to the National Monuments Council that the settlement’s buildings and land and the nearby bridge should be proclaimed. This was never done.
Stormsvlei

A unique settlement frozen in time

*André Pretorius*

Stormsvlei hamlet comprises a cluster of buildings on the farm Avontuur, 20 km east of Riviersonderend. It lies just off the N2 highway on a trunk road leading to present day Bonnievale, Montagu and Robertson, and is sited immediately before the bridge over the Riviersonderen. Dr Morley Thomson of Swellendam is the current owner of the Stormsvlei complex. His father, James, acquired the hamlet in 1949 (excluding the modern hotel), together with 49 morgen of land. Through the purchase of the adjoining farm Avontuur in 1968, the property was extended to 250 morgen and is now farmed by Morley and his son Sven.

*****

In accepting the Swellendam Trust’s offer of honorary life membership in 1998, the late Dr James Walton, wrote: “I would like to make a request to the Trust. Will you please do whatever is possible to restore and preserve the wonderful old smithy, together with its imported Ransome portable mill, and all the buildings at Stormsvlei, which constitute a unique South African settlement”.

James Walton, a Yorkshireman, was a founder member (in 1964) and later President of the Vernacular Architecture Society of South Africa. He published scores of papers and numerous books on the subject and was eighty-five at the time of making this special plea. He died two years later and as yet his call, except for the praiseworthy efforts of the Thomson family, has gone unheeded.

Dr Walton was my mentor. He used to berate me for being reluctant to put pen to paper, pointing out that my vast collection of vernacular photographs and supporting information was wasted unless published. To this I would respond that what I had was incomplete and that I was, after all, no more than an enthusiastic amateur. He would retort: “Just make sure that what you commit to paper is, to the best of your knowledge, correct. Leave it to others to fill in the gaps or, for that matter, to point out the errors in what has been your honest effort at recording our vernacular heritage”.

The following, then, is my contribution towards reviving interest in what Dr Walton described as a ‘unique’ settlement which has literally been frozen in time and which deserves to be preserved in toto.

*****
The Zonderend Valley

In order to keep the ships of the Dutch East India Company (VOC - Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie) supplied with meat, bartering with the indigenous tribes for livestock was an important and continuous task for those in command at the Castle of Good Hope. To this end exploration and trade expeditions to the hinterland were an ever-increasing activity and after 1665 sorties into the Overberg, the region east of Hottentots Holland Mountains, became more numerous.

As early as 1669 it is officially recorded that Corporal Hieronymus Cruse bartered with the Hessequa Hottentots of the Zonderend Valley, and by 1678 Corporal Cruse and fellow explorer/trader Pieter Cruijthof had already ventured beyond Mossel Bay. In 1689 Ensign Isak Schriver, who earlier had been on an expedition to Namaqualand, camped at Tygerhoek - site of the present day town of Riviersonderend (Burrows 1944). It is almost certain that he, and other early pioneers, traversed the area which was later to become known as the farm Avontuur. It was also there that the hamlet of Stormsvlei, with its inn, smithy, trading store and other amenities, would later evolve into a self contained settlement. By the end of the seventeenth century the trail to the eastern hinterland had become known as the Caepsche Wagen-weg/Kaapwagenvoeg/De Groote Wagenweg, alongside which farms, stopovers like Stormsvlei, and eventually villages and towns would develop.

In time the Company (VOC) gradually withdrew from direct trade with the indigenous population and to meet its needs relied increasingly on those free burghers who had become farmers. As a consequence, the beginning of the 1700s saw even more people crossing the formidable Hottentots Holland mountains to settle on loan farms in the Zonderend Valley, and beyond. This eastward migration was facilitated by the smallpox epidemic of 1713, which so decimated the local nomadic stock farming tribes (‘Hottentots’) that it was easier for European settlers to stake their claim to land.

Avontuur’s eighteenth century leaseholders

It was during this ‘colonization’ period that the name Avontuur is encountered for the first time, the origin of which has not been determined. On 4 April 1732 grazing rights to Avontuur, above the Compagniesdrift on the Riviersonderend and below the Hessequas Kloof, were granted to Michiel/Michael Otto, for which he had to pay an annual rent (recogntite) of 12 rixdollars (RLR 9/3 p.665). Through its repeated payment he held the property for eleven years until his death in 1743.

Avontuur’s first tenant, Michael Otto, was an absentee landlord and typical of many well established Cape Town burghers who sought to expand their wealth. He hailed from Stettin (Germany) and had arrived at the Cape in 1714 as a sailor (de Villiers & Pama 1966: 677). Five years later he was a free burgher and, thanks to a second marriage in 1722 to Anna Margaretha Siek the widow of Barend Gildenhausen, became the owner of Vergelegen at Somerset West, once the prize of the corrupt Governor William A van der Stel’s vast land holdings. Otto, commonly known as ‘Michiel Ox’, had a most unsavoury side to his character and was on several occasions...
punished by the authorities for the inhumane treatment he meted out to his slaves. He also drank heavily (Mentzel 1944: 49-50).

The second tenant of Avontuur was Hendrik Gildenhuyzen, Otto’s stepson, who took over its lease in April 1744 (RLR 11/2 p.283). Hendrik died in 1770. In July 1772 Hendrik Vollenhoven became the third lessee to farm *avontuur gelegen boven Kompdrift aant Rivier Zonder end onder de Hisquas Cloof*. He later abandoned the property and on 24 November 1781 Christiaan Andreas Storm was formally granted this loan place, which was then described as a *verlaten plaats* (RLR 23/2 p.215).

**Christiaan Andreas Storm**

Christiaan Andreas Storm, born in 1757, was the eldest child of Johan David Storm, a German soldier who had arrived at the Cape in 1751 (de Villiers & Pama 1966: 937). By 1762 Johan had improved his station to that of a bookkeeper to the Company. Christiaan followed in his father’s footsteps and entered the local militia in 1774. In August 1782 he was appointed as *wagtmeeester te Swellendam landmilitie*, being promoted to cornet in the same regiment three months later.

Being a lowly paid soldier, particularly in the outlying districts, was not always a full time occupation so Company employees sometimes supplemented their meager wages by other means, such as applying for grazing rights. This is apparently what the *wagtmeeester* Storm did too. His association with Avontuur/Stormsvlei ended in 1786 after he asked for his discharge from the Swellendam *landmilitie* as he intended to settle at the Cape. The property now became that of the Swellendam burger, Petrus J. Kemp (RLR 35 p.87-27/9/1786). Four years later it passed on to Daniel Louw who is mentioned in the journals of both Dirk E. van Reenen and Aide de Camp Paravacini di Capilli, who accompanied the expedition of Governor Janssens, when a night was spent on the farm in April 1803 (Blommaert & Wiid 1937: 32-33; de Kock 1965: 12-13).

In 1779 the surveyor, Leiste, compiled a map appertaining to the journal of Governor van Plettenberg’s expedition to the eastern districts in the previous year (De Bussy 1951: 53-54). It shows the route followed and the name ‘Storm’ appears where the farm Avontuur is sited (Fig.1). On early maps farms were often identified by their owner’s name so the fact that ‘Storm’ appears prominently on Leiste’s record of the Governor’s 1778 expedition would lead one to conclude that by then Christiaan was already associated with a property straddling the Riviersonderend, at the Company’s drift.

Hendrik Vollenhoven’s deserted loan place, however, was only officially granted to Storm in 1781 - yet his name appears on the map of 1779. The most plausible explanation for this would be that as the map was apparently only finalised in 1785, Leiste then correctly placed Christiaan’s surname on the site he had formally obtained in November 1781.

The late Professor J. le Roux of Stellenbosch University, whose grandfather worked at Stormsvlei as a wheelwright in the late 1800s, holds the view that the name Storm refers to the winds which blow across the *vlei* (marsh), especially the northerly wind which prevails when it rains in the Boland.
Figure 1(a). Map by the surveyor Leiste completed in 1785 and based on Governor van Plettenberg’s expedition of 1778 as well as on his own journals kept during later expeditions sent to formulate the map.

Figure 1(b). Detail of map above. The name ‘Storm’ appears between the wagenweg and Rivier Sonder Eynde at a point where it breaches the hills before linking up with the Breede Rivier.

We can reasonably conclude that during the half century preceding Storm’s departure a dwelling and outbuildings, however rudimentary, would have been erected. These then would serve as the nucleus of what was to become the hamlet, which, more than two hundred years later, still bears his name.
Figure 2. The old loan place, Avontuur, was surveyed for the first time in 1820 when Adriaan de Waal formally received it in quitrent. Schutte’s diagram shows a typical semi-circular farm (110 morgen) with a T-plan house flanked by two long outbuildings. The ‘wagon road’ to Swellendam and numerous cultivated lands are also indicated.

Perpetual quitrent (1820)

In 1813 an event of major significance for land owners took place when, after the second British occupation of the Cape, the Governor, Sir John Cradock, decreed that any holder of a loan place “on his making application by memorial to the Government, for the purpose, shall have a grant of his place in Perpetual Quitrent to the same extent as he has hitherto legally possessed on loan”. Before a deed of tenure could be issued, however, the farm first had to be surveyed, which often resulted in a delay of many years because of the few available surveyors at the Cape.

Despite this frustration it was welcomed as a sound and orderly system. Adriaan de Waal, who occupied Stormsvlei after Daniel Louw’s departure in 1807, availed himself of it and on 15 April 1820 this historic loan place from the 1730s, together with two adjoining pieces and Luipaardskloof (all told 5111 morgen), were finally surveyed and granted in perpetual quitrent (SG dgm. 238/1820; SWM Quitrents 3, Nos. 15 & 16).

Surveyor’s diagrams are often rich sources of information and in De Waal’s case this also holds true. For the first time we have confirmation of a dwelling with
outbuildings, the location of cultivated lands, the route of the wagon roads to Swellendam and a description of the grazing (Fig.2).

The Twentyman era (1841-1871)

On the 16 August 1833 (T.286) De Waal sold the farm for £830 to Rudolph Cloete, grandson of Hendrik Cloete II of Groot Constantia. Six years later Rudolph’s younger brother, Pieter, bought it from him for the same price. In 1841 (T.113/26) Pieter Cloete, in turn, sold it for almost twice as much to the Cape Town merchant establishment, Twentyman & Co. This doubling in value would seem to indicate that in the interim the homestead/inn and outbuildings/stables had been enlarged in order to cater for an ever-increasing stream of travellers.

Figure 3. William Twentyman – the Laird of Stormsvlei – was born in London in 1823 and stabbed to death at Stormsvlei in 1871. For many years visitors to the Inn made a point of viewing the bloodstain left on the floor of the room in which he drew his last breath.
(Photo courtesy of Margaret Cairns)
Lawrence Twentyman arrived at the Cape in 1818. In 1820 he established the firm Twentyman & Co. in partnership with John Chrisholm. The company became silversmiths of repute and a successful merchant house. In 1832 Lawrence returned to England with his family, so the decision to buy Pieter Cloete’s land in the Riviersonderend region nine years after his departure must have been on the recommendation of his partner. In 1843 their association was dissolved and in November of that year Lawrence, in absentia, became the sole owner of the farm Avontuur/Stormsvlei. In his absence, both the Cape Town business and the Overberg farm were managed by his new partner, George Warner.

Being an absentee landlord probably induced Lawrence Twentyman to dispatch his 21-year old bachelor nephew, William, to the Cape in 1844 (Fig.3). William’s father had died the previous year. He apparently immediately took charge of his uncle’s Riviersonderend farming interests. Twenty years later, in March 1864, William married the widow Annie McIntyre (née Arderne). With the four children from her previous marriage the couple promptly set off for England where he managed a farm in Sussex. William’s return to Stormsvlei in 1868 was almost as abrupt as the couple’s departure four years earlier. Except for this short sojourn in England, William had in effect been managing the property since 1844, and now purchased the entire holding of 5111 morgen from the deceased estate of his uncle Lawrence who had died in England in 1852 (T.117, October 1868). William held the property until his violent death at the Stormsvlei Inn in 1871. In 1872 William’s widow disposed of the entire property to Charles van Reenen Barry.

The noted genealogist, Margaret Cairns, is a distant relative of the Twentymans and in 1970 conducted a comprehensive investigation into the family and William’s death (Cairns 1970 & 1975: 76-93). She concluded that, “despite lack of corroborating legal evidence, his death was indeed a violent one; the circumstantial evidence is too strong to be ignored”. Among William’s relatives she found what was tantamount to a “conspiracy of silence” on his murder.

The Village

The Stormsvlei of the Twentymans had become a sizeable settlement and an important stopover for travellers to the eastern districts, for the mail coach and to others waiting to cross the Riviersonderend by the pont at the drift close by. We now take note of some of the activities at the time of William Twentyman - the Laird of Stormsvlei – and under his successors who further contributed to, and benefited from, the village’s golden era, which lasted from 1850 until the great depression of the 1930s.

Inn

To the early pioneers, trekboere, traders and hunters, ox-drawn wagons served not only to transport them and their wares, but also as accommodation to sleep in, or under. As the hinterland opened up, Swellendam was founded as early as 1745 and certain locations on the wagon route to the interior were established as manned out-posts of the
Company. These, together with a few strategically situated farmsteads on this *Kaapse Wagenweg*, became recognised outspans. The halt at Stormsvlei, being situated on the mail route, near the pont and at a crossroad, was to grow in importance and experienced an era of expansion and prosperity for most of the nineteenth century.

This ever increasing flow of post and passenger traffic created a need for accommodation. The early owners of Stormsvlei at first probably provided it in their dwelling, a T-plan house built of layered clay (*opgekleide mure*) dating from the 1700s, and in outbuildings. Gradually the homestead was extended to eventually become a rambling structure, which also served as an inn (Fig.4). William Twentyman was a bachelor for most of his sojourn at Stormsvlei, so during his time (1844-1871) its day-to-day management was left in the hands of John and Rebecca Croxford who also cared for him. After William’s marriage to the widow McIntyre in 1864, Annie ran the Inn until her husband’s death in 1871.

![Stormsvlei Inn](image)

*Figure 4. Thomas Ravenscroft’s photograph (c1910) shows the Inn with adjoining shop complex on its right. Note the Inn’s thatch roof. On the left the shop is flanked by a flat roofed wing, which then housed the postal agency. The wing on the right accommodated a bar.*

In 1883 the brothers Henry and William Heatlie of Worcester bought Stormsvlei from the insolvent estate of Barrey & Nephews of Swellendam. When they put the property up for auction in October 1897, a large dwelling house is listed that was also used as a hotel (Heatlie 1981: 63). At some stage in the late 1800s an annexe was built to the Inn, some distance away (behind the present day hotel). The Inn, plus the annexe, continued to provide accommodation until the construction of a modern hotel in about 1920. The annexe was later converted into a home where Willem and Mary Spies live, the hotel’s present proprietors.

**Stables**

William Twentyman and his predecessors no doubt supplied the passing traffic with substitute animals from their stables. On the surveyor’s diagram of 1820 a long
outbuilding is indicated to the left of, and parallel to, the homestead. It served as stables and a wagon shed (Fig. 5).

With the advent of a regular postal service, Twentyman was contracted to provide relay horses, which had to be available at the scheduled time of arrival, and the outspanned team stabled and rested for the return journey. All this coming and going of travellers, traders, trekboere, and the mail coaches called for adequate accommodation not only for the animals but also for their owners, grooms, stable hands and the likes of blacksmiths, wagon makers, millers, bar tenders, and so on. As a result the Stormsvlei halt soon grew to become a self-contained settlement. Georgina Lister, a visitor to Mrs Twentyman’s Inn, was sufficiently impressed to recall that this old posting station was, “interesting on account of its great yard, stables and shed used for the relay of horses”.

By the time the Heatlie brothers put up the property for sale in 1897 they provided stabling for up to fifty horses, besides the stables for the exclusive use of the post coach.

Figure 5. This long outbuilding appears to the left of the T-plan house on the surveyor’s diagram of 1820 (Fig. 2) and most likely served as stables and a wagon shed. It probably dates from the late 1700s and was built of mud and stone, plastered with clay and then lime washed. In a Ravenscroft photograph (Fig. 21) it is clearly divided into two sections. (Photo AP 1998)

Postal service

In the beginning mail was conveyed by relay ‘Hottentots’ who carried it on foot. In 1804 they were replaced by so called ‘postal orderlies’ who wore blue coats with conspicuous badges. The early post-carts were rudimentary vehicles. The coaches that followed transported both mail and passengers and were drawn by a team of up to ten
horses. By 1816 an official post office was established at Swellendam (Rosenthal & Blum 1969: 9).

The Stormsvlei stopover received a major boost in the 1830s when both the Franschhoek and Sir Lowry passes were opened, breaching the formidable Hottentots Holland Mountains. They made the hinterland accessible to the greater speed of horse-drawn vehicles and soon post-coaches conveyed both mail and passengers to destinations along the upgraded ‘Colonial Highway’ to a regular timetable.

Figure 6. Stamps depicting the evolution of South Africa’s postal service: (a) initially ‘Hottentot’ runners conveyed the mail in a leather bag; (b) by the early 1800s they were replaced by ‘postal orderlies’ on horseback; and (c) the first post carts were soon replaced by (d) horse-drawn coaches transporting both mail and passengers. It was the advent of postal carts and coaches, frequenting the old Stormsvlei stopover at the Compagniesdrift, which set it on its way to becoming a thriving settlement.
As early as 1819 Governor Lord Charles Somerset had laid down the rule that mail was not to be delayed for more than one hour in any place. This called for relief horses and stables at regular intervals on the mail route, which the owners of Stormsvlei geared themselves to provide. In 1834 the first regular mail coach, as distinct from a post-cart, began running between the Cape and Swellendam. For many years Joseph Barry, founder of the Barry trading empire in the Overberg, held the concession to carry mail between Cape Town and Swellendam. In about 1844 a partnership headed by Barry launched the Swellendam Mail Coach Company, which was under contract to run a twice-weekly 22-hour service, each way between the Cape and Swellendam.

The conveyors of mail passed through Stormsvlei and often stopped over long before the advent of any officially regulated mail cart/coach system. Yet, it was only in 1868, when William Twentyman was appointed as deputy postmaster, that Stormsvlei became a full-fledged postal agency. It could henceforth sell stamps (which came into circulation in 1853 with the famous Cape triangular stamp) and serve as *poste restante*, where people could collect and/or leave letters instead of having to travel many miles to the nearest post office at Swellendam or Caledon. This service was initially rendered from the *handelshuis* (trading store) adjacent to the Inn.

Dr Morley Thomson recalls being told by Mrs Anna le Roux (an early resident of Stormsvlei and sister of the man who bought the wagon makers shop in 1897) that the post coach arrived in the afternoon and that it announced its impending halt by the blowing of a bugle. The mail was kept in locked leather sacks and while it was being off-loaded in front of the shop a fresh span of horses soon saw the coach on its way to Swellendam. Later (1921) a special building, now vacant, was erected to accommodate the postal agency (Fig.7).

![Figure 7](image)

*Figure 7. 1921 saw the inauguration of Stormsvlei’s modern post office with ‘a staff of two and a telegraaf installation’. It is now vacant and the postal agency has reverted back to the shop. In the background to the left is the kerksaal. (Photo AP 1998)*
The Stormsvlei postal service has had a very erratic history. In his definitive book on the S.A. postal service, Ralph Putzel records that a deputy postmaster was appointed on 1 January 1879, a sub-office opened on 17 September 1896, and a post office was established in 1904, which in 1910 was designated a sub-office with telegraphic facilities. In June 1916 it was termed a postal and telegraphic agency, but in April 1919 it was called a post office! All this must have been at the premises of the shop, as a post office building was only completed in 1921. It was finally closed on 3 December 1973. Currently, a very basic postal service is still rendered at Stormsvlei, once again operating from the trading store (handelshuis) (Fig.8).

Figure 8. Dr Morley Thompson and the author in the shop that was opened by William Twentyman in 1853. The counters are yellowwood. (Photo 2001)

Shop (handelshuis)

At the time when a trip to the nearest town or village meant a long journey over bad roads, shops on farms in the outlying districts were common throughout Southern Africa. Being on the main road to the east, as well as at the cross roads to the Brederivier Valley and Little Karoo, Stormsvlei was ideally sited to also provide this lucrative service.

In 1853 William Twentyman expanded his activities when he applied for and was granted a licence to open a shop (Fig.9). It was housed in a wing built in front of, and at right angles to, the extended homestead, which was then also serving as an inn. He was authorised to sell gunpowder, which was a major concession. The shop became
a bustling trading centre that not only provided the locals and surrounding farmers with goods, but in turn also purchased their produce such as wool and grain. This was initially transported by wagon to the Cape or Caledon, and later, when the railway line eventually reached Protem, to this halt some 20 km south of Stormsvlei. The back extension to the shop served as a store for wool and other produce. Interestingly, a ship’s mast, cut in two, serves as two of the roof beams in this section, which until recently housed a butchery.

Figure 9. The present-day handelshuis and postal agency, which has been saved from closure, is run now by Sven Thomson. (Photo AP 1998)

Figure 10. Detail from C.J.A. Albers’s frieze, showing the bar in 1921.

The shop changed hands often and reached its heyday in the time of Jan Geldenhuys, who sold everything from farm implements to motorcars. He even printed his own catalogue of goods. In 1922, Petrus Fourie (Dr Morley Thomson’s grandfather from his mother’s side) hired it from Jan Geldenhuys. After Fourie’s death in 1937 his widow
continued to run the shop until about 1950. Mrs Fourie was followed by Mr F. de Bruyn (who also taught at the school) and then Mrs Margaret de Wet. Sven Thomson has run the shop since 2000, and also manages the dairy and other farming activities at Avontuur.

**Bar**

Owning an inn did not automatically include the right to sell alcohol, as this was a privilege not readily granted by the authorities. In February 1869 William Twentyman motivated his application for a hotel and liquor licence in a letter to the magistrate of Swellendam stating that: “I find it very inconvenient not being able to provide the passengers of the post and passenger carts with refreshments, both of which change horses here”. The licence was granted and the bar was housed in a flat-roofed building off the stoep of the shop.

The bar is clearly indicated as such on both the Albers frieze of 1921 (Fig.10) and in the even earlier Ravenscroft photograph of c1910 (Fig.4). Thomas Ravenscroft was an unofficial agent for the Cape State Railways and from the late 1880s photographed places served by them. He practised photography for more than eighty years and died aged 96, leaving us a unique photographic record, including Stormsvlei with its buildings and the Van Eeden bridge (SABW 1977).

*Figure 11. Carolus (Cornelius) J.A. Albers (born Amsterdam 1865, died McGregor 1940) painted the detailed friezes in Stormsvlei Manor House and at the Botrivier Hotel. During the Anglo-boer War he served in the Transvaal Staats Artillerie and is reputed to have guarded Winston Churchill, who made a daring escape from his Pretoria place of confinement.*
Smithy

Before the advent of the train and much later the car, ox and horse drawn vehicles were the mode of inland transport. Poor roads took their toll on wagons, carts and carriages, which had to be constantly repaired and the horses shod. Many of the owners of stopovers on the wagen-weg provided such services in addition to accommodation.

The smithy (Fig.12) at Stormsvlei was a particularly fine one, which was advertised when the Heatlie brothers sold up in 1897 as having, “two excellent bellows, 4 excellent vices, 1 wheel plate, 3 anvils, 3 benches, 1 bending machine and all other instruments needed in a large wagon makers and blacksmithy shop”. Federick J. le Roux and James Kennedy, trading as Le Roux & Kennedy, purchased it with transfer taking place on 16 July 1898 (Fig.14).

Besides wood, dried cow-dung at three pennies a bag was used to heat the iron tyres. The extremely heavy cast iron wheelwright’s hooping plate for shrinking the iron tyres onto the wooden wheel frame is still to be seen (Fig.15) - it takes four men to lift it.

Except for minor damage caused by the earthquake that struck the Western Cape in 1969, the smithy and much of its contents have survived almost unchanged. The smithy would greatly benefit from being restocked with donations of old tools and typical furnishings of the period.

Figure 12. The old smithy. (Photo AP 1998)
Figure 13. Above: Sven Thomson operating one of the two bellows that served the smithy’s large open forge. In the foreground is an old grinding stone for sharpening utensils; Below: Sven Thomson standing next to the machine used to bend the metal to form the ‘tyres’ of a wagon wheel. In the foreground is an anvil and behind it the second bellow. (Photo AP 1998)
Figure 14. Diagram of 1898 made when the wagon maker’s shop and smithy, standing on 2 morgen and 57 square roods, was sold to Le Roux & Kennedy. Note the adjacent site, donated by the Heatlie brothers for a DR Church in 1890.

Figure 15. The hub of a wheel was slotted into the hole in the middle of a circular cast iron wheel plate. The heated iron tyre was placed around the spokes and shrank firmly into position when water was applied to the still hot metal, causing it to contract. (Photo AP 1998)
Wagon and furniture Factory

The large double-storey building that housed the smithy also accommodated a thriving wagon maker’s business. According to the late Professor F.J. le Roux, whose forebears once owned the ‘factory’, carts (kapkarre) and as many as ten wagons were made per year. They were in great demand and were decorated by special painters from Robertson and Montagu (Fig.16). A fine example of a Stormsvlei kapkar is owned by Andries Streicher of Swellendam (Fig.17). This facility not only manufactured and repaired means of transport but also turned out stinkwood and yellowwood furniture - even coffins!

Harnesses, saddles and bridles, etc. were an integral part of the equipment for animal-drawn mail coaches, carts and wagons, so a local tannery provided the leather for these, and boots, too.

Figure 16. Reputedly the last of many wagons made at Stormsvlei. Note the decorative ‘art work’ which was a feature of top-rate wagons. (Photo AP 1998)
Figure 17. Andries Streicher, of the farm Annex, Swellendam, proudly displays a kapkar, which was one of the last ones made at Stormsvlei. (Photo courtesy of A. Streicher)

Figure 18. Stormsvlei’s portable mill was made by Ransomes, Sims & Jefferies Limited, England. In November 1903 it was despatched to their Caledon agent, L.H. Fick, who lived on the farm Ysbrandskop. (Photo James Walton 1991)
Mill

In the building housing the smithy and wagon maker’s business was also a flourmill, which was initially operated by a steam engine. The engine worked both the mill and the other machinery in the complex. It was later replaced by a suction gas engine, and eventually by an engine that ran on crude oil.

Thursdays were milling days and as the mill operated on a first-come-first-served basis wagons queued up from early morning. A portable Ransomes Mill was installed in 1904 and can still be seen on the site (Fig.18). Despite being close to a river there is no record of a water-operated mill, such as was to be found at Avontuur farm.

Victorian Manor House

When the farm Avontuur was surveyed for the first time in April 1820, the diagram (Fig.2) showed a T-plan house flanked by two rectangular outbuildings. These were most likely to have been built by the affluent Adriaan de Waal, who owned the property for some time before applying to have his loan place surveyed and formally granted in perpetual quitrent in terms of Sir John Cradock’s decree of 1813.

Figure 19. Survey diagram 139/1872 ‘pertaining to Avontuur in the Field Cornetcy of Onder Rivier Zonder End, district of Swellendam’, was made when Charles Barry purchased the property from the estate of Lawrence Twentyman. Of the many buildings we know were there, the only one identified is a ‘house’.
The next diagram of the property was made a year after William Twentyman’s mysterious murder in 1871, when his widow sold it to Charles van R. Barry for £4340. The main building recorded on the 1872 survey diagram (Fig.19) is a rectangular ‘house’ without any reference whatsoever to the Inn, smithy, shop or the numerous other structures which we know by then comprised the bustling werf. Possibly because of this surfeit of buildings, the surveyor was happy to merely indicate the position of the new owner’s residence - the homestead that also served as an inn. A detailed poster advertising the Heatlie sale of October 1897 makes no mention of a new house away from the Inn, only of a; “large Dwelling-House, arranged so as to accommodate two separate families [the Heatlie brothers] and which is also used as an Hotel”.

At the sale F. le Roux bought the wagon makers shop and mill and is reputed to have built a house in the following year. It was most likely the nucleus of the present Manor House (Fig.20).

![Figure 20. The Manor House at Stormsvlei in 2000. (Photo AP 2000)](image)

A Ravenscroft photograph (Fig.21) dating to about 1910 shows a large dwelling flanked by flat-roofed wings. Pieter Barnard, who later married Lucy Hall the first teacher at the village’s Public School, probably added them. It later became the home of the successful businessman, Jan Geldenhuys. He must have had it ‘modernised’ before 1920 as the dwelling’s Victorian features (the multi-arched stoep and the wings which now also have a pitched roof) appear on the Albers frieze painted in the house in 1921 (cover picture).
In a Ravenscroft photograph, c1910, Stormsvlei Manor House (circled) had two flat-roofed wings. By the time Albers did his painting (cover) of the hamlet buildings ten years later, the wings had corrugated iron pitched roofs and there were six arched columns on the front stoep.
After purchasing the property in 1949 Dr James Thomson (Morley’s father) lived on and off in the Manor House until his death in 1997. For nearly a century the dwelling has retained its external features, with a modern kitchen and other conveniences being installed in 2000 by his grandson and now the house’s permanent resident, Sven Thomson.

**Church (kerksaal)**

Being far from Swellendam the fast growing community of Stormsvlei sorely needed pastoral guidance. In 1879 the Reverend George Murray answered their call and tended to their needs for nearly thirteen years, initially conducting services in an outbuilding. On 29 January 1890 the cornerstone of a church building (*kerksaal*) was laid on a morgen of ground donated by William and Henry Heatlie, owners of Stormsvlei. After that, Dutch Reformed Church ministers from Swellendam, Caledon and neighbouring towns conducted regular services, excluding communion. Services were later held on a monthly basis but are currently sporadic.

One of the conditions of the grant was that the hall might not be used for political gatherings. For a while it also served as a school and was the venue for related functions. Travelling *toneelgeselskappe*, such as the Hanekoms, brought Afrikaans theatrical productions to the village.

![Figure 22. An expanding community called for a suitable place of worship and in 1890 a church hall (kerksaal) was inaugurated. It was razed to the ground by fire in 1983 but faithfully restored seven years later- in time to celebrate its centenary. (Photo AP 1998)](image)

In February 1983 disaster struck when a veld fire raged out of control and reduced the *kerksaal*, with its thatched roof, to ashes. High costs and a diminishing flock - the settlement went into economic decline with the advent of modern transport - lead to the responsible parish of Swellendam West not seeing its way clear to fund the hall’s restoration. At the instigation of a conservation organisation, The Swellendam Trust, and the financial backing of the surrounding community and other enthusiastic
‘Stormsvleiers’, Blits Odendaal, a local farmer and builder, was given the green light to restore the ruin. He completed the restoration by October 1990 - in time to celebrate the kerksaal’s centenary (Fig.22) (Soewenier Program 1965).

School

As well as a place for religious devotions, a bustling settlement would also require educational facilities, and from January 1901 these were rendered in the new kerksaal. In December 1915 Jacob P. van Renen granted a site for a government-sponsored Public School, which was duly built the following year (Fig.23) with Miss Lucy Hall as the first teacher. In 1922 the school burnt down but was immediately rebuilt in the same style. Stormsvlei also had a schoolmaster’s house, which is still in good repair (Fig.24).

Figure 23. Before the Government erected this school in 1916 the kerksaal served as the venue for educating local ‘White’ children. It closed in 1966 and was resuscitated as a private multi-racial school in about 1984. Presently it serves as a mission to the local ‘Coloured’ community. (Photo AP 1998)

Pieter Schoonwinkel relates that when he left for high school in 1948 there were more than a hundred pupils. This attendance figure appears out of proportion to the settlement’s adult population until one bears in mind that families were big then and that the school also catered for nearby farms which often had a large European (bywoner) labour force. Consequently an adjacent building, which was once a garage, was used to accommodate the overflow. According to Selma Viljoen (né Otto), who was the last teacher when the school closed in June 1966, there were by that time fewer than ten pupils.

The school was vacant for more than a decade, until 1979 when a former Springbok swimmer, the Reverend Maggie Gaisford, launched a Protestant-orientated bible training centre at Stormsvlei. The group established a multiracial, self-supporting commune of subsistence farmers. About four years later they started a school for the
exclusive use of the community’s children. In 1986 this caused an outcry in Parliament when conservative members, who were completely against mixed schools, demanded an explanation. The 23 pupils, of whom six were designated ‘Coloured’, attended classes blissfully unaware of the raging controversy. Fortunately the local National Party MP, Allan Geldenhuys, voiced the view that, “It’s a private concern and doesn’t worry anybody”. This saved the day and the school remained multiracial until the Christian group - which numbered about 60 at the time of the outcry - disbanded because of dwindling numbers (Cape Argus 1986).

Presently the school building serves as a mission to the local ‘Coloured’ community (Stormsvlei Christelike Gemeente) and the old garage is a crèche that is run by Revival SA (Fig.25).

**Figure 24.** The Stormsvlei Public School was inaugurated in 1916 and for fifty years served both local children as well as youngsters from the surrounding farms. This was the schoolmaster’s residence. (Photo AP 1998)

**Figure 25.** A crèche for ‘Coloured’ children is now run in the building that once served as Stormsvlei’s first garage, and later as an extension to the Public School (at that time boasting more than a hundred pupils). (Photo AP 2000)
The Pont and van Eeden Bridge

When Avontuur was first granted as a loan place in April 1732 it was described as being, “above the Compagniesdrift”. This old crossing (**drift**) through the Zonderend River, about three hundred yards upstream of the present bridge, was therefore already a recognised route to the Breede River Valley in which the present day towns of Bonnievale and Robertson lie.

When the Sonderend River was in spate travellers had to bide their time in their wagons or, in later years, at the old Stormsvlei Inn which overlooked the crossing. Because of its strategic position, where the road to the north and south split from the **Kaapse Wagenweg** to Swellendam and beyond, the settlement was a hive of activity. Locals referred to this north/south road as the link between the **bossiesveld** of the interior and the **ruggens** of the Overberg. It was particularly busy over the festive season when holidaymakers from the Breederivier Valley and **Klein Karoo** passed through on their way to the sea.

Later a pont/ferry was put into operation at approximately the same spot followed by today’s highway. Lawrence Green wrote that crowds came out to witness the pont being launched. He had seen a newspaper report dated 5 August 1885, which emanated from Stormsvlei, stating that, “Officials and a number of ladies and gentlemen met to watch the floating of the new pont over the Zonder Einde River. It was called the **Fredericka** and launched by Mrs Heatlie”. Does the word ‘new’ imply that this was the first pont to ferry wagons, carts and livestock over the river, or was the **Fredericka** a ‘new’ replacement for an earlier craft?

Figure 26. **Pieter Schoonwinkel of Bonnievale, who attended the Stormsvlei school in the 1940s, salvaged one of the swaartolienhout posts to which the old pont was hitched.**

*(Photo AP 1998)*
The pont continued in operation until about 1910, when the present Van Eeden Bridge was completed by the engineer Gordon Ralph (Fig.27).

![The construction of the Van Eeden bridge (c1910) removed the trials and tribulations of navigating the Zonderend River at the 'Company's drift'.](image)

There was a toll house (Fig.28) on either side of the bridge and those passing over it were required to pay according to a set tariff. For example, the toll for sheep and goats was ¼d. a head, horses, cattle and pigs 2d. and an ostrich 3d., while a wagon, cart or other vehicle was levied at 2d. per wheel.

The last pont master was Philippus Vermeulen, who lived on the Stormsvlei side of the bridge. Despite protestations by the late Dr James Thomson, Vermeulen’s home was demolished when the approach to the bridge was later altered.

![The tollhouse on the Bonnievale side of the Van Eeden bridge. The last pont master was Philippus Vermeulen, whose dwelling (on the Stormsvlei side) was regrettably demolished to make way for a new approach to the bridge.](image)
Police post

Exactly when the SA Police established a presence at Stormsvlei has not been established. From correspondence, however, we do know that the police took possession of quarters there on 22 May 1918 (Fig.29). It is remembered as a significant station with a staff of three who patrolled the area on horseback - hence the large stables (Fig.30).

Figure 29. The date on the gable of the old police station is 1921. As the police had already taken occupation in May 1918 this must have been a later extension to provide extra accommodation. (Photo AP 2001)

Figure 30. In about 1918 the SA Police manned a permanent post at Stormsvlei. Patrols were initially conducted on horseback and their mounts were kept in stables that adjoined the prison cell. (Photo AP 1998)
The present owner of the premises, Dr Morley Thomson, recalls that a motorcycle with sidecar later replaced the horses. Johan Notnagel’s father was Stormsvlei’s first resident police officer and he remembers that in 1925, as there was as yet no police presence at the new village of Riviersonderend, this area was part of his father’s patrol. Johan (now 87) recalls, “My father told me that if a crime was committed he would proceed to investigate it on horseback. Should an arrest be made, the culprit had to run in front of the horse all the way to Stormsvlei, spend the night in the cell there and the next day, in the same fashion, continue the journey to Swellendam to stand trial”. Eben Uys reports that his brother Johan was the officer in charge when the station closed in 1954.

Garages

Motor transport, which eventually more than anything else heralded the demise of the numerous activities at Stormsvlei, established a permanent presence there in the early 1900s when a garage for Jan Geldenhuys was opened close to the school (Fig.25). Hubmobiles and Fords were henceforth to become a regular sight on the old wagenweg.

So rapid was the acceptance of this new mode of transport that a second garage was soon established. The owner was Clarence de Villiers, son of the hotel proprietor, who had seen service in the 1914/1918 World War. Clarence, being a man of many talents and mechanically minded, returned home to sell and service motor vehicles from a building adjacent to the new hotel. According to a 1938 catalogue, a Ford Coupe could then be had for £285, a Sedan cost £310 and the prestigious Lincoln Zephyr, “with outside luggage trunk”, sold for £610.

In the pioneer days of motor transport platteland garages received their petrol in one or two-gallon containers securely packed in wooden boxes. A petrol pump (Fig.31) was later installed and its fuel supply was initially delivered in 44 gallon drums which had to be fetched from Protem station.

Figure 31. Petrol was initially transported in metal cans and later in 44-gallon drums. In the 1930s a ‘modern’ hand-operated Pegasus petrol pump was erected on a ramp in front of the handelshuis. Note the corrugated iron that temporarily replaced the thatch shown in Figure 4. (Photo courtesy Mrs Aileen Lombard (née Fourie)
Early motoring was a taxing experience and Johan Notnagel remembers that when petrol was running low his father negotiated a hill by turning the car around and then reversing to the top. This was because fuel was fed to the carburettor by gravity so a low tank and a steep incline meant that the engine was starved of petrol and consequently stalled.

There is no longer a garage at Stormsvlei, only a solitary petrol pump!

**Modern hotel**

The old Inn, which was later designated a ‘hotel’, was a rambling structure that had grown haphazardly over time. Its facilities were sub-standard and so a later owner, Johan de Villiers, decided to give the settlement a new lease of life by building a modern hotel, and at the same time to boost his lucrative off-sales business (Fig. 32). It was constructed on de Villiers’s holding of 47 morgen which had been deducted from Stormsvlei and sold to him in 1918.

The nearby town of Riviersonderend, sited on the old VOC post of Tijgerhoek, was laid out in 1925 as a ‘dry’ village. Thuys Roux of Stellenbosch remembers his father relating that to quench your thirst one had to go to the pub at Stormsvlei, which was referred to as Stokkiesbaai.

![Figure 32. In about 1920 a modern Hotel was built to replace the antiquated facilities of the original Inn. P. Traumitter painted this picture of the hotel in its heyday (1958).](image-url)
In 1955 Jimmy Blanckenberg bought the hotel, which his daughter Mary and her husband Willem Spies took over in 1985. Ten years later it ceased to provide accommodation but retained its off-sales outlet. A servitude condition prohibits the owner of the original Inn and shop from selling liquor while the licence holder of the modern hotel may not engage in a general dealer’s business. Mary Spies now operates ‘Country Flowers’ from the premises (Fig.33).

Figure 33. Mary Spies developed a unique method of drying flowers that renders them flexible and virtually crush-proof. In 2001, as top exporter, she was among the W. Cape finalists in the National Dept. of Agriculture & Land Affairs annual competition to determine the Woman Farmer of the Year. (Photo AP 2001)

Recreation and social activities

Stormvlei’s kerksaal was the hub of the settlement’s social life as it was there that the Christian Youth Movement gathered, bazaars and school concerts were held, travelling
tour groups presented plays and the annual Christmas tree was erected. The VLV (Vroue Landbou Vereniging) and the ACVV (Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging) also featured prominently on the local social scene.

Marksmanship - *n boer en sy roer* - has always been a much-admired talent on the *platteland*. It was therefore only natural that target shooting would be an important social activity with intense rivalry amongst neighbouring teams (Fig.34). In later years these were absorbed into local commandos. The weapons they used were the popular and versatile Martini-Henry rifles, which were adopted as standard military issue by both Boer Republics after the first Anglo-Boer War of 1881. The rifles were named after Austrian Friederick von Martini’s bolt action and Scottish gunsmith Alexander Henry’s 7-grooved barrel. They were purchased from Birmingham, England (Lategan 1974: 57-58).

Figure 34. Stormsvlei’s winning marksmen, c1910.
*From left to right: Back: Koot Calitz, Jan Calitz, Koos Blom, Frikkie Calitz, Koos Swart, Jacob Schoonwinkel; Middle: Robert van Eden, Koot Calitz, Japie van Eden, Piet Barnard, Frikkie le Roux, A. Schoonwinkel; Front: Nolsie Schoonwinkel, John Roux.*

The village even had its own brass band, of which Clarence de Villiers was the founding father. He taught musically inclined locals to read sheet music and by 1924 had a band of sixteen musicians (Fig.35). It was in great demand to perform at agricultural shows and other functions in nearby towns. According to Christoffel ‘Waks’ Uys (now 83) dances were well attended and patronised by neighbouring communities too. The venue was an outbuilding (*danssaal*) adjacent to the hotel.

Tennis enjoyed great popularity and in 1940 the scholars and the local community built a court at the cost of only £26 - a team effort so typical of the *platteland*. Croquet was also played, and with a river at the village’s doorstep angling was a natural recreational choice for old and young alike.
The Thomson era (1949-)

Dr James Thomson (Fig.36), formerly of Bloemfontein but born in Ladybrand when it was still the Orange River Colony, acquired Stormsvlei in 1949. Together with his son Morley and grandson Sven, this family of Scottish ancestry has been the custodian of what was once a bustling self-contained village for more than fifty years. If one takes into account that Petrus Fourie and his wife, Morley’s grandparents from his mothers side, ran the local shop from about 1920 until 1950, then the extended family’s involvement with Stormsvlei covers nearly eighty years. This is more than twice as long as the sojourn of the Twentymans.

It is the Thomsons’s ambition to keep this unique settlement intact, with its well-preserved structures dating from the late 1700s up to the first half of the twentieth century having been literally frozen in time.

Being a stone’s throw off the N2 highway, Stormsvlei is ideally sited as a stopover for both local and foreign tourists visiting the Overberg and the southern tip of Africa, or who have the Garden Route as their destination. To warrant a visit, though, the eighteenth century smithy should be fully reinstated, the flourmill made operational, and the handelshuis stocked and furnished to reflect its old-world charm. It could sell local produce, such as preserves and dried fruit. Mary Spies’s hugely successful dried flower
undertaking confirms that there will always be a market for innovative quality goods with a *platteland* pedigree. Equally important, there is an opportunity to establish a craft centre representing artists, potters, ironmongers, weavers, and so on, in the now vacant buildings.

Dr James Walton’s plea that the “unique South African settlement” of Stormsvlei should be preserved, underscored the opinion of Colin Cochrane, curator of the Drostdy Museum at Swellendam in 1984, who strongly but unsuccessfully recommended that the buildings, property - and also the bridge - be proclaimed national monuments.

It is hoped that this article will revive an interest in the history of Stormsvlei, its owners and early inhabitants. Further research is called for, particularly into the construction and evolution of the original eighteenth century dwelling, which later became an Inn. Perhaps it is now time for the Vernacular Architecture Society and the Swellendam Trust to petition the authorities, at long last, to declare Stormsvlei a Heritage Site?

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Figure 36. Dr James Thomson (1904-1997) founded a dynasty which after half a century is in its third generation on the property. They remain proud and worthy custodians of Stormsvlei. (Photo 1987)
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Interviews and correspondence

Dr and Mrs Morley Thomson, Malta, 114 Voortrek St., Swellendam. Discussions during numerous visits to Stormsvlei and Swellendam, 1998/2001; access to their research material; photographs and reading of manuscript.

Late Dr James Walton (87), Sherwood House, Kenilworth. Early research (1991) and notes on Stormsvlei – and at whose instigation this research has been undertaken.

Margaret Cairns (87), 32 Thornhill Road, Rondebosch. Noted cultural historian and genealogist. Information on early owners and the Twentymans; reading of manuscript.

Johann C.J. Notnagel (87), Huis Lafras Moolman, Rawsonville. Correspondence and interview.

Late Prof. F.J. le Roux, 23 Assegaaai Lane, Thornton C.T. Born Stormsvlei; great-grandchild of first wagon maker. Detailed letter (c.1970) to Mrs Irene Thomson, mother of Dr Morley Thomson about early inhabitants.


Pietie Schoonwinkel, Main Street 15a, Bonnievale. Attended Stormsvlei School. Owner of VOC pont’s hitching post.

Mev. A. Viljoen (geb. du Toit), Bus 134, Rawsonville. In 1941 skool gegaan Stormsvlei; herinneringe en koerant uitknipsels.

Gawie le Roux, 16 Herfsvreugde, Bonnievale. Interviewed; photo of brass band.

Mary Spies, ‘Country Flowers’, Stormsvlei. Interviewed, provided photographs of complex from the air and the Traummitter sketch of modern hotel.

Telephone conversations

Theuns Kok, Tel. 851-1420, Somerset Wes.
Kat Neethling, Tel. 028 - 212-3103, Caledon.
Gert Neethling, Tel. 022 - 437-1215, Moorreesburg.
Mary Pegsnes (83), Tel. 434-6355, Sea Point.
Eben Uys, Tel. 011 - 826-5780, Boksburg.
Johan Wolhuter, Tel. 021 - 968-471, Bellville.
Aerial view of Stormsvlei by L.P. du Toit, Bredasdorp, c1990.

(1) Original Inn, (2) shop and postal agency (handelshuis), (3) butchery, (4) abandoned post office, (5) early schoolmaster’s dwelling, (6) smithy, (7) accommodation units, (8) Dutch Reformed Church hall, (9) school, still in use, (10) first garage, now a crèche, (11) Manor House, (12) original stables and shed, (13) modern Hotel, now closed, (14) a homestead, (15) police station, now a homestead, (16) old stables for police horses, (17) second garage, (18) road linking main highway (N2) with Bonnievale, (19) bridge over the Riviersonderend, (20) annexe to the old Inn, (21) site of the abandoned pont.