

EXCURSION TO BREDASDORP AND ELIM

Saturday and Sunday 16th and 17th October 1971

ITINERARY AND NOTES

The following is a characterization of the Bredasdorp, Strandveld, and Duineveld areas, as written by Dr. Mary Cook:

" The small town of Bredasdorp was founded in 1838 on the farm Langefontein, and was called after Michiel van Breda of Oranjezicht, one of the partners of the firm Reitz, van Breda, Joubert and Company, merino breeders and farmers. It was this firm that first brought prosperity to the district.

Most of the farms in the district, however, date from long before the founding of the dorp. They began as loan-farms, whose origin and first occupants are often difficult to trace. Indeed, many loan-farms were not continuously occupied; for various reasons, men often moved on to some other place, and a loan-farm might go for many years before being let again. On the other hand, if a man liked a loan-farm and prospered there, he often built a house; and the building of a house was undoubtedly a frequent reason for converting the loan-holding into quitrent, which gave security of tenure (provided the small yearly rent was paid.) A still later stage was conversion into freehold, by means of payment of a lump sum.

This explains why some of the older and simpler houses are difficult to date. They seem (and indeed often are) earlier than the date of the quitrent grant, while lack of any definitely datable architectural feature prevents their being dated on style, except within wide limits.

The contrast between the very simple farms of the Bredasdorp district and the ornately gabled homesteads of the Cape and Stellenbosch districts is tremendous. It is true that some of the larger Bredasdorp farms have on them spacious homesteads and many outbuildings (e.g. horse-breeding farms near the coast, such as De Hoop, and sheep breeding farms of the rich merino period, such as Zoetendalsvlei); but stylistically they remained simple in spite of their size. The typical front gable is the 'dormer' gable, and the typical end is either the simplest sort of straight gable or a wolwe end.

Possibly due to this simplicity, the attraction of which went unperceived, there has been more alteration - and unfortunate alteration - to old homesteads in the Bredasdorp district than anywhere else. Steel windows, fancy gables of utterly unsuitable design, mean-looking modern doors, 1930-ish balustrades, and odd rooms projecting illogically from the main buildings, are everywhere in evidence.

Yet behind this 20th century smoke-screen of poor judgment and even poorer taste, it is possible to see something very moving: the austere lives of the first settlers, their determination to survive in a hard environment, and their uninterest in the frills and furbelows of living. In many ways, this is more characteristic of South Africa than the decorative homesteads nearer to Cape Town."

9.00 : Departure from Cape Town.

10.40 - 10.50 : Turn off onto Bredasdorp road.

11.15 - 11.40 : Tea under the trees at Karnemelksrivier. No terrific hurry this time. This pleasantly situated farm is one of the many modernized ones in this area, yet retains several original features. The main homestead is H-shaped. It has an 1840-ish gable of clumsy design (but at least it has one, which is more than most houses in the district can say!), identical to that of Wolfgat nearby: obviously both the work of one of the, in these parts, rare breed of gable builders. The sash windows are of the same period. The roof is now of bright-painted corrugated iron, clipping the ends. A second homestead stands at right angles on a slight rise, also with clipped roof, and a facade containing a row of early -Victorian french windows.

11.50 - 12.30 : Fairfield (if a visit can be arranged.) Fairfield the home of Major Piet van der Byl, has been in the van der Byl family for a long time. According to Dr. Cook, the farm seems originally to have been part of Hansjesrivier, granted in quitrent to one De Bruyn in 1833 - although existing as a loan-farm long before that date. After subdivision, c.1840, Pieter Voltelen van der Bijl (son of the owner of Welmoed, Stellenbosch) acquired the part now called Fairfield. It must have been he who built the homestead still standing, a rectangular double-row-of-rooms house with a roof of wide span and therefore correspondingly high. The simple triangular gable and the woodwork certainly point to the 'forties'.

What is reputed to be an older homestead stands alongside; whether it is, and what its history is, the Major may know. Dr. Cook does not always see eye to eye, that is on historical matters with old Kaledonnegs such as Dr. Con de Villiers. And who are we to say who is right? The farm complex at Fairfield has grown considerably since the early days, several new outbuildings, sporting fancy gables, and ornamental urns, everywhere serving as the farms trade mark.

12.45 - 13.00 : Slow drive through the village of Napier (pronounced 'Napieg' .) This town, approximately the same age as Bredasdorp, was named after Governor Sir George Napier. Unlike most towns founded in this period, it developed ribbon-like along a winding street following a contour of the hill-side, with many early buildings still lining it. There is also a tiny thatched mission church.

13.15 - 14.15 : Lunch at Mountain View (also called Hillside) just outside and overlooking Bredasdorp on the slopes of Bredasdorpberg. It is one of several very small farms here, all as old as the town. Judged on style (stable door, almost flush windows) this house may even be slightly earlier, say 1820. Like Fairfield, it is an example of the modest rectangular "double-row-of-rooms" plan, in this case with a roof span of only 24 feet, i.e. only slightly more than normal, so that the rooms are a mere ten feet deep. It has a dormer ("leg-of-mutton") front gable and half-hipped (wolwe) ends. There are good yellowwood ceilings and profiled doors inside.

14.20 - 16.40 : Bredasdorp (pronounced "Bedaagsdorp".) Founded in 1838 and taking its name from the leading family in the area at that time (Michiel was instrumental in its founding), it owed its existence to the need for a church, the nearest one till then being at Swellendam. Langfontein was bought and erven sold in 1838 and Ds.J.J. Brink arrived the next year.

The present D.R. church dates from the beginning of this century, but there are two churches dating from the first few decades of the town's existence. The Anglican Church is one of the many designed after sketches by Mrs. Gray, wife of the first Anglican Bishop here, about 1850. It was originally rectangular, consisting only of the present nave, to which two aisles were later added, one with a separate pitched roof, lower than the first one, and one (on the street side) with a lean-to roof, all thatched.

The interior, with its low roofs open to the thatch, is of even greater intimacy than most Anglican churches of the period.

The old Independent (Congregational) Church is being restored and will serve as a museum. This congregation broke away from the Anglican parish about 1870 and this church built then. But it soon rejoined the mother congregation and its church became the Anglican church hall. It is a fine little building, of plastered stone, rectangular with a slate roof and pointed neo-gothic windows with hood moulds. The front has a pronounced straight moulding following the roof-line but without a connecting horizontal string-course - a feature repeated in several town houses (e.g. 27 Fletcher Street.)

Next door stands the charming Old Rectory, until recently the Anglican Minister's house. Why it adjoins the church of a formerly rival faction, we do not know. Possibly it was an existing dwelling acquired by the Independent congregation upon its formation, with an adjacent vacant plot where the church was built, and became the Anglican rectory after the happy reunion. It is strikingly similar to the Clanwilliam Rectory, but if the above theory is correct, this can only be coincidental. In any case, both buildings antedate their parishes. While that at Clanwilliam is O-shaped, the Bredasdorp Rectory has the shape of a U, with the "uprights" parallel to the street, so that it looks very similar. Both buildings have hipped ends and corners and a dormer gable in front, and Georgian woodwork, and date from the 1830's. The building, in bad condition, is also being restored and will form part of the new museum.

The only letter-of-the-alphabet house in town - T shaped - stands at 41 Long Street, but it is not known if it is the original Langfontein opstal. It does not appear to be much older than 1838.

16.55 - 17.20 : Zeekoevlei, and old freehold grant of 1806 to Nicolaas Swart, 3000 morgen in extent. It was then already known as a loan-farm "aan 't onderste eiland van de Karserivier." The T shaped house was probably built in the 1830's by the then owner, Hendrik Willem, son of Michiel van Breda. Its front was given a second storey by yet a later owner, Dr. Frederik Albertyn. There is a long row of hipped outbuildings.

17.30 - 17.55 : Hotagterklip. This is a picturesque group of fisherman's cottages, of the type also found at Waenhuiskrans (Arniston) and until recently also nearby, at Struisbaai. They are of stone, with massive chimney stacks at one end.

They have recently been repaired by the Monuments Council.

18.00 : Arrival at Struisbaai Motel, for supper and an informal get-together in the evening.

Sunday 17th :

9.30 : Departure.

9.40 - 10.40 : Zoetendalsvlei, one of the most impressive farm complexes in the coastal area, with De Hoop and Nachtwacht. Dr. Cook's account of its history does not coincide with that of the late Mr. Hamilton van Breda, and will therefore not be stated in detail. Certain it is that Michiel van Breda built the original homestead about 1816, but its unusually complicated groundplan and some later woodwork are indications that it grew in stages. It is one of the few in the Cape that does not conform to the general pattern of a symmetrical front with wings only at the back. The oldest part is rectangular, three rooms in a row, to which two wings were added on one side and one on the other, the present front being formed by one end of the old nucleus, projecting slightly beyond the sides of two wings. All ends have straight gables with plaster balls on each "shoulder" as well as on the apex - a feature occurring on one or two other farms in the district. All the yellowwood ceilings are intact. There are two old outbuildings, both with small triangular gables; the others are modern, but blend perfectly with the old buildings. Zoetendalsvlei derives its name from a ship wrecked nearby in 1673.

11.10 - 2.00 : Elim. The farm Vogelstruyskraal was bought from a brother-in-law of missionary Seidenfaden by the Moravian Church in 1824. It was situated on the Nieuwejaarsrivier, which had good water all year round, and held good prospects for gardening, though less so for cattle and wheat. As it was the first property this church held in quitrent and not on loan or as an old Hottentot residential area, new methods and firmer regulations could be followed here. It was given the name Elim after the oasis in the desert where the Israelites rested on their way to the promised land among palm trees and water fountains. The first missionary, Bonatz, arrived the same year, and held his first service in the existing homestead, attended by the Hottentots and slaves, and also some farmers from the neighbourhood.

From the beginning Bonatz tried to achieve an ecumenical outlook, and also extended his pastoral cares to the farms in the area, and unlike at Baviaanskloof and Groenkloof (Genadendal and Mamre) good relations were maintained with the farmers. Bonatz died in 1827 and was succeeded by Teutsch.

Though its situation is not nearly as striking as that of Genadendal and particularly Wupperthal, it has now taken over from the latter as the best preserved of all mission villages. It is of considerable size, with several parallel streets. The main one, with the old church imposingly at its end, is extremely wide and no modernizing influences are visible yet. The houses are on the whole somewhat larger than those in the other villages, several having small dormer gables. The actual mission centre, as is customary is situated at the top end of the village, and is, together with that of Genadendal, the most interesting complex of them all. There is firstly the former homestead, with its back towards the church, T-shaped with a simple holbol gable dated 1796, early-straight ends and flush casements (those in front replaced by later ones.) It is interesting to reflect that this homestead is the only "orthodox" one in the entire Bredasdorp area. Why just at Elim? Firstly, when Vogelstruyskraal was bought in 1824, it must have been one of the few well-established farms in the area for it to qualify as a mission station. Secondly, the conservatism of the mission authorities saw to it that it remained largely as it was, while in this area, more than elsewhere, refashioning was the order of the day. The church is dated 1835 on a plaque near the entrance.

Which village had the "grander" church was traditionally an object of good natured rivalry between Genadendal and Elim. The Elim one is certainly of greater interest. It is T-shaped with wing widths of as much as 39 feet and a length of 87 feet, to which small, low rooms were later added at either end. The tail end has a straight gable, the other two ends have enormous holbol gables, probably of later date. Its interior, like that of the other Moravian churches, is entirely white, with balconies in each of the three wing ends. Of interest is the ceiling, which because of its great span consists of outsize beams supporting the normal sized secondary ones: a system known as as "moer en kinderbalken" (mother-and-child-beams) in the Netherlands. Behind the church, a circular walk leads along several interesting buildings. At the far end is the mill, in working condition, and there are several offices and dwellings, some of them with early casements, two being L- and one T-shaped. Lunch will be had nearby.

2.40 - 3.05 : Stanford, a modest little town with several
thatched and dormered houses dating from the
second half of last century.

5.15 : Arrival in Cape Town. One more farm may be
thrown in for good measure, but arrival should
in no event be later than 6 p.m.

Suggested reading:

Kruger, Bernhard: The Pear Tree Blossoms, the History of the
Moravian church in South Africa 1737 - 1869.
Genadendal 1966.

Barros, E: Overberg Outspan. Cape Town 1952.