Swellendam (by SJ du Toit)

Swellendam, named after Governor Swellengrebel and his wife (whose maiden name was Ten Damme), was proclaimed a magisterial district in 1743. This remote settlement soon became the gateway to the interior and was visited by many explorers. The Drostdy, official residence and offices of the magistrate, was built in 1747. The town only began to grow after the first Dutch Reformed church had been built in 1798.

Long before the Dutch started visiting the Overberg on their barter expeditions, Khoikhoi tribes were living in communities scattered all over the region. They had large kraals and enormous herds of cattle. The Chainoquas and the Hessekwas were the most important tribes in the area, with settlements at the Breede and the Sonderend rivers. Social activities such as pottery, ivory-carving and weapon-making, featured prominently in their culture. However, their most important activity was looking after their livestock. The granting of land to the free burghers posed a real threat to the Khoikhoi, as did the addictive influence of some barter goods, such as alcohol and tobacco, and the pox epidemics that killed them by the thousands.

The first magistrate at Swellendam was Johannes Rhenius. The Drostdy was later enlarged to include a house for the secretary, a prison, a mill and several outbuildings. The magistrate was assisted by members of the heemraad, a secretary, a prison warden and some slaves. In 1795, a group of free burgers under the leadership of P J Delport, launched a rebellion against the Dutch East India Company on the grounds that its affairs were poorly managed. They banned magistrate Faure and called a Republic under President Hermanus Steyn. However, the Swellendam Republic was short-lived. It was dissolved after only 4½ months when Britain took control of the Cape.

After the establishment of the first Dutch Reformed congregation, the town developed apace. A Town Council was established in 1843, and in 1904 Swellendam became a municipality. The town flourished because it lay on the main route to the east. The firm Barry & Cousins and their steam ship, the Kadie, brought great prosperity to Swellendam and the Overberg region. They were prominent traders from Swellendam , with branches over a wide area.

Swellendam was seriously affected by a devastating fire in 1865. Virtually everything, except the upper part of the town including the Drostdy, was destroyed or damaged. Today, those old houses together with the Drostdy form the core of the town’s proud heritage. The fire put an end to thirty years of prosperity and destroyed much of what had taken a whole century to build up. Everything had to be rebuilt from scratch.

Swellendam is a one-street town with several historical buildings, especially buildings dating from the colonial period. The Drostdy is certainly the most important of the town’s old buildings and contributes much to the town’s unique character.

The town lies beneath the Clock Peaks of the Langeberge range. These seven peaks are known from east to west as the Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten, Eleven, Twelve and One o’ clock peaks according to where their shadows fall at those times. The Dostdy is impressively etched against the Twelve o’ clock peak.

Swellendam has become a bustling, modern town and industrial centre. A variety of schools and churches serve the community. The town is surrounded by farms on which many different farming activities are practised. The area’s youngberries are famous throughout the country.