P John Luyt - "Hotelier Par Excllence" (By SJ du Toit)

“The 'Father' of Hermanus”—an appropriate title given to John Luyt by the media reporting on his death in January 1940. He did indeed contribute enormously to the early development of the village. When John Luyt arrived in 1903, Hermanus was a small, primitive fishing hamlet. When the village took leave of him, in 1940, it had grown into a prosperous and well-known seaside resort, with better working opportunities for all.

This was largely due to his influence and hard work. He never stopped publicising Hermanus and improving his hotels.

Pieter Johannes Luyt (fondly known as P John) was born in Cape Town in 1876. He married Margaret ‘Dollie’, daughter of Valentine Beyers who, with Walter McFarlane, built the Marine Hotel in 1902. John came to manage the Marine for his father–in–law. After a few years he bought the hotel from Beyers for £5 000 who lived with them until his death. In 1908, Luyt also bought the Riviera Hotel.

P John and Dollie had had four children when Dollie died in 1914. Within a year, P John met the young St Peter’s School teacher, Joey van Rhyn. They married in 1915. Although she had no experience in running a hotel, they set about making the Marine one of the best hotels in the country. P John was hard-working, ambitious, strong willed and principled, but he was also popular as “mine host” and his guests and everyone in Hermanus loved him.

The hotel became known to anglers from across the country and even overseas as a place which offered special attention. In 1920, the Marine’s own electricity plant was installed and a bus service between the Marine and the Riviera started. Guests travelled free of charge and the bus took cans of milk, the post, parcels and provisions to the Riviera. Guests staying at the Riviera wanting to spend a day in the village, could have a free lunch at the Marine and the Marine guests wishing to bathe at the beaches below the Riviera Hotel, could have their lunch there.

P John built Schoongezicht, with its sweeping view of the Bay, in 1922. When His Royal Highness Prince Arthur of Connaught came to Hermanus in 1923 to open the new golf course (another of Luyt’s projects), the royals stayed in Schoongezicht.

“Queen Victoria” visits Hermanus

P John had a wonderful sense of humour. He often took guests on outings such as picnics at the waterfall opposite the lagoon, travelling by ox-wagon and later by motor car. One day the owner of the small farm at the waterfall, an eccentric beekeeper told the picnic party to get off his land. P John told him quietly that there was a very important personage in the party. He presented

Mrs Taylor, their housekeeper, as Queen Victoria and the old man was delighted and said that Her Majesty was welcome to picnic on his farm at any time.

P John Luyt died in 1940 aged 63. On the day of his funeral, all businesses were closed; the village mourned. Joey sold the Riviera Hotel in 1941 and she and her daughters continued to run the Marine hotel, renaming it Luyt’s Marine until she sold it in 1947. Now, after 57 years and many changes, The Marine, under new ownership, is still the most popular hotel in Hermanus.

By SJ du Toit