A Story of the oldest Hotel in the Overberg

HOUWHOEK INN In the old days the Houwhoek Mountains were even more difficult to traverse with ox wagons than the Hottentots Holland Kloof. The former range lies close to, and to the east, of the latter. The Houwhoek Pass was built shortly after Sir Lowry’s Pass had been completed.

The name has varied from Houthoek, Houhoek, Haue Hoek, Houhoeck and Houdhoek and different explanations of its meaning have been offered. Dr H Lichtenstein, a German traveller in 1804, explained that owing to the length and roughness of the pass, the animals needed a rest and the wagons had to be held, from there “Hou”, which means to hold. G S Nienaber submitted that the Hessekwas farmed there, and “Hou(w)” is the Khoi word for cattle. Therefore, he says, Houwhoek means “cattle corner”. According to Willem van Putten, deputy factor of the Dutch East India Company, the name refers to “ter houw komen” which means, to rest – after negotiating the slopes of the pass. Houwhoek Inn is located on the spot where the toll gate stood in the days of the Dutch East India Company. The ground floor of the inn was built in 1779 and the first floor in 1861. It was the first coaching inn ever built and is now the oldest existing licensed hotel (licensed since 1834) in South Africa. The inn nestles under ancient oak trees, and one of the largest blue-gum trees in the country stands right by the front door. The blue-gum was planted in the days of the Beyers family, apparently when their daughter, Maria, was born. Maria married Walter McFarlane and they later played an important role in Hermanus. Walter built the first hotels together with his brother-in–law, Valentine Beyers. The Cape Wagon Road passed right in front of the inn and all passing mail-coaches, ox wagons, horse-carts and men on horseback stopped there. Burchell recorded in 1811 that he found an inn in the “Great Houwhoek Pass” where a Hollander provided supplies and accommodation. Lady Dulcie Duff Gordon stopped at the inn in the Houwhoek Pass in 1861 on her way to Caledon. It was a small building with clay walls – half inn, half farmhouse. She was not sure whether it would be safe to enter, but found it to be spotlessly clean inside, even though the building had clay floors. The owners were a German couple called Beyers. One of the daughters served them while another chased away flies with a branch from a tree. In the bedroom there was a large bed with pretty pillows. The Beyers children could no longer speak German; they spoke Dutch or Afrikaans. Dinner, bed and breakfast cost nine shillings (90c). In the old days there were no shops at Bot River (Compagnies Drift). The shop closest to Rooiheuvel, Compagnies Drift and the surrounding farms, was the one at Houwhoek. This belonged to George Aspinall’s father. The Houwhoek Inn had been the property of Wattie and Tissie McFarlane before they moved to Hermanus. From the early 1900s, the train running between Cape Town and Caledon stopped at the Houwhoek Inn at exactly 12:30. The passengers had enough time to take lunch at the Inn. Judges from the circuit court at Caledon regularly stayed over at the Houwhoek Inn. Successive owners have preserved the rustic atmosphere. Today many conferences are held there, sometimes catering for up to 150 people. The hotel now comprises 39 double rooms and a villa.