Unique Shipwreck Museum

Contributed by SJ du Toit

While visiting Miss Mary Swart in Bredasdorp, she told me of her sister Susan and husband Jack van Rensburg who fought to save the buildings now housing the museum. In 1967, the authorities planned to demolish the old Independent Church building and hall. The community joined hands and after a large nest egg donated by Gideon Albertyn, money came in for a museum fund. The buildings, which belonged to the Anglican Church at that stage, were bought under the auspices of the municipality and declared a National Monument.

A two-part museum was planned. In the church building an unique shipwreck museum came into being and next door in the old hall, the village museum. Shipwreck expert and author, Coenraad Potgieter helped to plan the museum. Shipwrecks along the Strandveld coast had an immense influence on the history of the region. Many survivors from shipwrecks stayed on in this far-off and isolated area, bringing their experience and skills eg. as carpenters, to life in the Overberg.
The Southpoint is sometimes called the graveyard of ships. The Bredasdorp museum now has an amazing exhibition of items like furniture, figureheads, shipping equipment, household articles, lifebuoys, newspaper cuttings and scale models of shipwrecks. The earliest known wreck was the Zoetendal in 1673, the first to be recorded on the South African coast.

Members of the Board of Trustees and Friends of the Museum have done sterling work over many years contributing to a most unusual museum. One of the pioneers of the Board of Trustees was Hercules Wessels, who served as chairman for 27 years and made an enormous practical contribution. He was supported by people like Marie Faffa, Thelma Pratt, Mary Swart, Abraham Roux, Sura Pieters, Prof Carl Lohann and many representatives of the authorities.

When plans of the demolition of the Agulhas lighthouse became known (see a separate story), it was decided to transfer the light house to the Bredasdorp museum in a move the save it. The village museum also harbours an interesting coach and carriage section. The old wagons, carts, hearse and fire engine are of special interest to visitors.

At the entrance of the village museum is a special room for local author, Audrey Blignaut, who was born and bred in Bredasdorp, lives in Cape Town and has a countrywide readership. As the only shipwreck museum on the African continent, founders, curators and the community of Bredasdorp can indeed by very proud. Anyone visiting the area, who does not visit this museum will be that much the poorer.