Hermanus - Whale Capital of the World

Hermanus Pieters, a Dutch teacher from Boontjieskraal near Caledon, used to travel with his small flock of sheep from farm to farm during the school holidays, teaching the local children wherever he stayed. During the early 1830s he trekked over the mountain from Hemel-en-Aarde right down to the sea. There he discovered a strong fountain and some good grazing for his cattle. Thereafter he returned to the place regularly and told the farmers of the district about the good holidaying and fishing spot he had discovered.

Pieters died in 1837 and was buried at Boontjieskraal. By that time his holiday place was already known as Hermanus Pieters’ Fountain. In 1854, twelve plots were measured out near the fountain and sold at a public auction in Caledon. Twenty years after the old teacher’s death the Henn family of Herrie’s Bay moved to Hermanuspietersfontein. There they discovered a sheltered little harbour and an abundance of fish. Henn and his sons-in-law were the founding pioneers of the new town known as Hermanuspietersfontein. Not long after they settled there, other families followed and became part of the new development. Michiel Henn built the first house on one of the original plots. This was close to where the Grobbelaar Hall stands today. Others built their houses on crown land near the harbour, where they paid a nominal rent.

The fishing village became very popular and it quickly grew into a busy town with various hotels and other amenities. In 1902, the postmaster decided that the long name did not fit properly onto an envelope. So, with official permission, he chopped off two thirds of the name, and Hermanus was born. To the west of Hermanus, from where the Marine hotel is today up to the Klein River lagoon, lies the remainder of Mossel River, the Cloete’s farm. Subsequent owners were Smith, Erwee and land baron Duncan McFarlane. After McFarlane’s death, his daughter Agnes (Stroud) inherited the farm. She left it to her daughter Henrietta and her husband, Jack Poole. The Pooles built the Riviera Hotel and lived at Highfield.

The eastern side of Mossel River was surveyed in 1893, and the Mossel River Estate Co Ltd developed the village that later became known as Voëlklip. In 1925, Voëlklip was awarded its own town council. Poole’s Bay was surveyed in 1893 and developed by a syndicate. The town council was created in 1925. The two “villages” developed side by side, Voëlklip mainly as a holiday destination.

Hermanus, which became a municipality in 1904, was keen, for various reasons, to amalgamate with Poole’s Bay and Voëlklip. However, this involved a long process which had to wait until 1940.

The history of Hermanus encompasses a wealth of stories about its families, its fishermen, its development, its education and many other aspects. Over the years, many books about Hermanus and the vicissitudes of its people have seen the light. The town has four large bookshops offering the reader an abundance of reading matter about the town.

Of the thirteen hotels built here, only two – The Marine and the Windsor – remain. Many of the older ones burnt down and others were pulled down. Today, Hermanus boasts more than enough guesthouses and an increasingly good infrastructure.

Visitors flock to the town during the early Spring when southern right whales visit the shores in large numbers. Hermanus is renowned as one of the best land-based whale watching spots in the world.