

Legendary 'Spookhuis' on Mosaic farm

MOSAIC FARM HISTORY

For over a century, people have sailed across the lagoon or traveled the old ox-wagon to visit the abandoned "Spookhuis" (Afrikaans for Spook House). Some camped on the grassy shore by the old stone homestead and told scary stories in the moonlit nights. Evidence of their passage was engraved throughout all the plaster walls, one of which commented on the reputation of the house by asserting "This place ain't haunted". The Spookhuis is a legend and local landmark.

A twelve month historical restoration returned this enchanting manor house back to its original grandeur. It is now a magnificent facility for weddings, conferences, special events, private parties, and wine dinners. When the Johnson Family purchased the farm in 2002, the Spookhuis was in a state of complete ruin. Graffiti filled the walls, floor boards had been torn up and burned inside the home, and doors, windows and most interior trim had been taken out long before. The only residents of the Spookhuis for over a half century were barn owls, thus the floors were covered with a thick carpet of owl pellets!

Cape architect, Gregg Goddard, with his expert knowledge of historical buildings, pieced together building debris to reconstruct the original character of the old homestead. The house reveals details of the English Georgian Period with a symmetrical façade, spacious proportions of the rooms and windows, and an arched Palladian entry. This style is also evident in the deep-set wooden door and window casings, built-in cupboards, and a central hall.

The building has three spacious levels and was constructed entirely of massive limestone blocks which were quarried on the farm and transported by ox-wagon. Exterior and interior walls were built of this stacked stone method, with the cellar foundation walls measuring over one meter thick. Every detail from the exterior stone pointing to the fireplaces has been restored. The wooden ceiling beams and roof trusses are all original. The old wood doors, window and door architraves, and skirtings were not salvageable, however the replacements were matched exactly to what was originally there. The original roof, which sadly had to be replaced, was solid iron which was shipped from England.

The Spookhuis is famous for the "moat" around two sides; however, there is no indication that it was ever filled with water. The original stone blocks used to build the retaining walls were one meter long. Having been a dairy farm, an incline at one end of the "moat" would have provided access for a dairy wagon carrying milk to be rolled down to the cellar ports and cheese to be rolled out. The moat walls were close to the point of collapsing but have been straightened and stabilized.

The highlight on the main floor is the John & Margaret Bridgman Library, where you will find an extensive collection of old and new books, and antique maps from around the world. The old cheese cellar highlight is now the wine cellar and tasting room which will have a revolving collection of South African wines. The spacious loft is equipped with high tech video equipment for conferencing and gatherings for environmental learning and South African rugby! The loft can also be used as a wedding chapel.

Our hope is that the Spookhuis will be used to celebrate the history, culture, people and biodiversity of our corner of South Africa. It is our vision that the transformed building will help transform lives through job creation for disadvantaged people in Stanford.

The house has also been used as the setting for many commercial film locations, including Microsoft's "Vista" operating System, Oriflame Cosmetics, French ham, and a Mercedes SUV.

Over a century of History

In 1857, the land baron Duncan McFarlane registered as the first plot owner in the village of Stanford. Within several years he purchased all the land around the Hermanus Lagoon and along the Klein River. In 1892, Duncan's granddaughter, Henrietta and her husband Jack Poole, built the enormous stacked-stone manor house on part of that land which is now Mosaic Farm. After being abandoned for years it came to be known as the "Spookhuis".

Originally from Scotland, Duncan McFarlane left the farm Wortelgat, which Mosaic Farm is part of, to one of his two daughters, Agnes McFarlane Stroud. She then left it to her daughter Henrietta who married Jack Poole. Henrietta's sister, Millie, married Jack's brother, Campbell Poole, who were also a large part of the area's history.

Henrietta and Jack choose a prime spot on the lagoon to build the massive three-story home; with beautiful mountain views and surrounding ancient milkwood trees for wind protection. The limestone blocks used for construction were quarried on the farm and hauled by ox-wagon to the site. It took over three years to construct and the keystone above the entry is dated 1892. Henrietta's mother, Agnes McFarlane Stroud moved in with Henrietta and Jack after her husband, James Stroud, died.

They established a successful dairy farm and had a cheese cellar in the lower level of the house. An incline at one end of the "moat" would have provided access for a dairy wagon carrying milk to be rolled down to the cellar ports and cheese to be rolled out. One of the stone blocks of the retaining wall still bears the engraved initials "CP" for Jack's brother, Campbell Poole.

We have been honored to have Campbell's granddaughter, Elizabeth Fortescue (and great-great grand-daughter of Duncan), visit Mosaic Farm from Cornwall. It seems there is a special place in their hearts for the old homestead.

This magnificent home situated on a productive farm, sheltered among the ancient milkwood trees at the lagoon edge, with wonderful views to the mountains across the water would seem to be an idyllic situation. However, for the socialite that Henrietta was, it was not ideal. To reach Hermanus required a trip by boat or a long ride by ox-wagon around the lagoon. The farm became a lonely place for her, especially after her mother's death in 1897. One stormy night when Henrietta's baby, John Evered, fell ill, she made her final crossing of the lagoon, baby in one arm and her favorite Persian carpet over the other. She refused to return to the farm. What became of the family is written in the books noted below.

For years afterwards, passersby reported seeing the figure of an elderly lady looking like Agnes Stroud sitting under nearby milkwood trees with a parasol. On approaching she could not be found. Thus the "spook" of the Spookhuis.

In the first half of the 1900's, the house was occupied only occasionally and by caretakers of the farm and temporary residents. It remained unoccupied for almost fifty years prior to the restoration in 2007.

Many books have been written about the area and the Stanford Spookhuis. A Stanford resident and author, S J DuToit, wrote two wonderful series about the history of the area, titled Stanford Stories and Hermanus Stories. Writer and lawyer Leslie Gray of Hermanus, along with six other writers recently launched the novel Dead Letter, A Ms Abercrombie Mystery, which takes place around the Spookhuis. Annalize Mouton, the editor of the popular magazine Village Life, has just published a most beautiful coffee table book titled Portrait of a Village which celebrates 150 years of colorful history of Stanford and its people. They are all worth a read!