A river runs through it

The Overberg has been explored as early as 1663. The reason for these expeditions was to buy cattle and take it back to Cape Town. These explorers mapped out the Overberg. They attached Dutch names to the rivers and mountains that remain in use today. Corporal Hieronymous Cruse and Ensign Oloff Bergh were the pathfinders. Bergh carved his initials on the wall of the Zieken Huys cave on the banks of the Zonder End River, where periodically he traded for meat. Cruse made his mark in a different way. He kept a diary of this 1669 journey to The Breede River. This journey took 20 days, but this diary is a precious record, because it documents the road of the 17th century cattle-barterers to the Hessequas kraal. Cruse utilized words such as ‘Palmiet’, ‘How Hoek’ and ‘Zonder End River’ in his diary to describe his route to the kraals, as if they were already part of the language. This was indeed the case and Cruse himself helped to put them there.

Schrijver in 1689 followed in Curse’s footsteps. He travelled much further-up to Aberdeen in the Karoo. He took the know familiar road to the Hessequas kraals on the Breede River, but his journals for the first time filled the ‘wagen-weg’ with people and places. While passing down the Zonder End valley towards Tyger Hoek, they noted the thickly-wooded forests of large trees in the mountains on their left-hand side, and the flat country on their right which teemed with wild animals. More than 1000 bonte hartbokken were recorded.

Jan Hartogh’s trip must have been one of the last cattle-bartering expeditions of the old style. The official purpose of this journey was to study the flora of the Zonder End valley. Soon after 1707 the Company withdrew altogether from direct trading and farming and relied upon the free ‘burghers’ for its supplies. The resulting boom in agriculture expansion helped to sweep the first wave of white farmers into the Overberg.

Apparently, early Overberg colonization benefited from the upheaval in the wake of Willem Adriaan van der Stel. He viewed the Overberg territory as his personal fiefdom. In 1711 Van der Stel named some of his eighteen farms Bot River, Boontjes Kraal, Faisanten Kraal, Warmwaters Kraal(some distance from the hot springs), Swarte River, Sergeants River, Hartenbeesten River, Quartels River, Ziekenhuys, Leeuwen Kraal, Tygers Hoek, de Groote Vlakte, Welgelegen, Rustenburgh and Wytgelegen (a long way from the Cape)-may have been the present day Bredasdorp. The governor, had he chosen, could have covered the 90km distance from the foot of the Houw Hoek Mountain to the Breede River without setting foot on another man’s land. The end came for Van der Stel in 1707 with dismissal and repatriation in disgrace and his farming empire collapsed. But the govener’s activities awakened Cape burghers to the benefits of the Overberg farming and others were quick to copy Van der Stel’s example. Well to do Stellenbosch farmers found that they stood to gain by sending their flocks over the mountains at certain times of the year. During the next seven years burghers were granted ‘leenings plaatsen’ (loan places) allowing them to ‘leggen en wijden’ (squat and graze) over the mountains.

In December 1711 an important party rode out from the Castle on Company business. Willem Putten aided by Hartogh had orders to inspect and assess the forest of the Zonder End valley as a source of timber for the Table Bay settlement. Nothing came of Van Putten’s recommendations for over a decade. Then in 1724 Marthinus Bergh(grandson of the pathfinder who carved his name in the Zieken Huys cave) and Tobias Rhenius(his son would be the first landdrost of Swellendam) were again sent to inspect. Bergh and Rhenius surveyed the forest and studied the trees, identifying yellow wood, stinkwood, assegai wood, pear, alder and half a dozen other varieties.

Soon after, in 1726, a Company post was established at Zieken Huys and they raised the Dutch Flag here. (The Zieken Huys cave: means hospital) This cave was rediscovered in 1925 by dr Mossop on the farm Nethercourt). During the period of a year the governer Pieter Gysbert Noodt followed Bergh and Rhenius. He enlarged the River Zonder End post and moving the flag to Zoete Melks Valleij. From here the forest was farmed, animals were bred and fattened for the Cape abattoirs and soldiers were quartered to protect the Hottentot ‘kraals’ and white farmers from the Bushmen and each other.

Other Company posts followed. The first of these lay a little way downstream on the right bank of the River at Tyger Hoek, near present day Riviersonderend. Here they prepared timber from Oliphants Bosch and ran a heard of milk cattle. This post may have been larger than Zoete Melks Valleij. Later the farms Appels Kraal, De Droogte Boom and Bokke River were detached from it.

This history show how the European settler came to the Overberg. It has shown that the infrastructure of occupation was laid and completed within a hundred years of Van Riebeeck’s arrival in Table Bay. Elizabeth Prins in her study of the 18th century found that loan-place grants to white settlers in the western Overberg increased three-fold after the 1780’s. (1730-1779: 53; 1780-1809-135) The two hundred or so white immigrants at that time were the forefathers of the Overberg’s present masters. Nowadays their surnames have a familiar ring: DuToit, Fick, Geldenhuys, Groenewald, Linde, Morkel, Moolman, Otto, Swart, Wessels.

The first colony of Europeans in the Overberg was planted along the Zonder End River. The boundaries of their colony

were the banks of the river in the lower 40km of its course (Greyton to Stormsvlei-where the Zonder End river ends). After 1720 there was an influx of residents who saw the Overberg-and particularly the Zonder End Valley-in a different light. They discovered, not merely well watered grazing lands for cattle and sheep but also dense forests of usable timber and fertile soil for cultivating crops.

Riviersonderend was established in 1922, when Ms Edith McIntyre sold her farm Tierhoek for 6 000 pounds to the church council, for the establishment of the local Dutch Reformed congregation. The total of the land purchased was 619 morgen at 6 470 pounds. At first they wanted to name Riviersonderend ‘Nuwedorp’ (New Town), but the older residents wanted the name Rivier Zonder End. (Hesseque word: Kanna-kam-kanna – water, never ending water)

The church decided to loan 4000/ 5000 pound from Theron (the attorney who handled everything) J.T. Mossop, land surveyor, was appointed to survey the plots of the town.

On 27 September 1923 the first auction was held to sell the plots. People who bought these plots were allowed to keep a cow (for milk) and two oxen. Only butchers were allowed to keep sheep. Buyers of these properties were allowed 4 months for down payment without interest. There were 200 plots on the auction and 123 were sold for the amount of 6 230 pound. The plots were sold for about 50 pound each.

The second auction was held on 12 September 1925. On this day 40 plots were sold for 1 950 pounds. According to history Riviersonderend consist of 359 morgan of Tierhoek, 260 morgan of Olifantskloof and 30 morgan of Bego (originally part of Tierhoek).

The Kleinbergie Hiking Trail is a fascinating climb thanks to the signal canons along the way that were part of the former Overberg Signal Canon system.

The main purpose of the canons was to call the residents in the area for military service if there were indications of war in the Cape. The canons were used in 1795 and 1806 during the first and second occupation of the Cape with the canon signal system being used 8 times in total.

Today Riviersonderend is a very popular first stop or last stop on the N2 for travellers with quite a good number of shops including wine shops, restaurants, bakeries, grocery stores and a handful of accommodation facilities.