

# *Post Carts in Southern Natal and East Griqualand*

From the 1870s until 1914 post carts were the principal way to convey mail and passengers over much of Natal and East Griqualand. This article is a brief overview of the history of the post carts in southern Natal and East Griqualand and is concerned in particular with the route from Pietermaritzburg to Kokstad.

Postal services in southern Natal were established in 1850 when a post office was opened at Richmond, and William Dacomb was appointed postmaster<sup>1</sup>. The mail was carried by an African runner from Pietermaritzburg on the 1st and 15th of each month, and from Richmond on the 8th and 22nd. There was no need for the service to go beyond Richmond as there were only a handful of settlers living in the Ixopo district and at the Umzimkulu drift. As the number of settlers increased the need emerged for a postal service in the Ixopo area and a post office was established at Umzimkulu, on the Natal side of the river, in 1864. Thomas Hancock was appointed postmaster. It is not clear how the post was conveyed from Richmond to Umzimkulu, but it was probably by runner. The Griqua government had an African runner named Jacob who would fetch the post from Umzimkulu and take it to Kokstad once a week. Thus by the mid-1860s post was being conveyed between Pietermaritzburg and Kokstad by African runner.

In 1872 Wesley Darby, the Kokstad manager of the trading firm Goodliffe & Ballance, organised a private postal service from Kokstad to Harding by African runner. He commissioned J A Blair, the Springvale mission printer, to design and print the well-known Mount Currie Express stamp. By the mid-1870s there was a regular postal service between Cape Town and Pietermaritzburg. On the final stages of the eastward route, the post was taken on horse-back from Clarkbury to Salle by a Mr Stoffel, from Salle to Harding by African runner, from Harding to Umzimkulu by Donald Strachan and from Umzimkulu to the Umkomazi by John Houston and then to Pietermaritzburg by runner.

By the early 1870s the mail was being conveyed by post cart, although post was still taken by African runner for many years after the post carts were established. In 1872 a post cart service was established between Pietermaritzburg and Richmond by a William Henwood. In 1879 Henwood's service was replaced by one run by J.W. Welch<sup>2</sup>. Welch had been a coach driver between Piccadilly and Gloucester before coming to Natal aboard the *Hebrides* and establishing a coach service in 1862<sup>3</sup>.

The first recorded post cart service between Kokstad and Umzimkulu was in June 1878<sup>4</sup>. The service was run by Bydell and Uys. Baartman Uys had been a transport rider on the Durban road before going into business with Bydell and opening a shop, bakery, butchery, canteen, billiard saloon and post cart service in Kokstad. It is not clear how

long Bydell and Uys ran the service, but at some point they gave up the post carts to concentrate on their trading ventures and land speculation. What happened to the service after that is sketchy. At some point it was run by J.S. (Joe) Murray. By January of 1885 the trading firm of Strachan & Co. had secured the government contract to convey mail between Kokstad and Umzimkulu<sup>5</sup>. Strachan & Co. had been founded in 1856 by the brothers Donald and Thomas Strachan at the Umzimkulu drift. Over the years the company expanded the post cart business until it was running carts from Richmond to Umzimkulu, Umzimkulu to Port Shepstone via Harding, Umzimkulu to Umtata and Umzimkulu to Elliot via Swartberg. Strachan & Co's principal rival along the Richmond to Umzimkulu and Umzimkulu to Harding routes was J.W. Welch.

A post cart was a bed of thick wooden planks, usually yellowwood, mounted on a metal axle with two metal wheels and a disselboom protruding in front to which were harnessed six mules or horses. Mounted in the middle of the platform at the front was a wooden bench on which the driver and a few passengers could sit, depending on their importance, age and gender. There was also a box behind the driver with space for three or four more passengers. Behind the driver were stacked the mail bags and on them sat the other passengers and a youth whose duty it was to hold the leading horses at the stops and then to jump on to the mail bags and see to their safety. The mail was always put in first, followed by the passengers. Luggage was limited to 20 pounds weight plus hand luggage. Passengers were charged extra if the luggage was overweight. The government post carts, which were painted red with V.R. in gold on the side, had right of way on the roads and other carts had to move aside for them.

Keeping the post carts running smoothly took a great deal of organization. A stop was necessary every few miles for horses to be changed and fed. The distance from one stop to another depended on the terrain through which the service operated. These outspans comprised a few acres on which stood a corrugated iron stable with a feeding manger capable of holding six to eight horses or mules and a wattle and daub hut to house a caretaker and a youth assistant. There was also a paddock in which the animals could relax. At least one passenger tried to buy a wheelbarrow at one stop but was informed that they were imported from England and none were at present available for sale. As the post cart approached a relay station the driver would blow his bugle so that the fresh horses or mules would be standing ready in order not to cause any delays, as post carts carrying government mail were fined if they were late. The incoming team had to be rubbed down and fed, usually a ration of crushed mealies and, depending on the time of the year, hay. There was a specially positioned hole in every manger to hold a sickle so that the oat hay could be cut into small portions as no wastage of this precious food was allowed. The sickles, like the wheelbarrows, were imported. The firm also imported specially designed hats from South America to protect the mules from the heat, particularly in the Umkomazi Valley. The caretakers and stable-hands were recruited from Strachan & Co's stores at Umzimkulu and sent to the stops. Their rations were mealie meal, samp and beans and a bit of sugar.

Between Pietermaritzburg and Richmond the carts stopped at Fox Hill stables and on the farm *Blackwood* at Arnold's Hill. The route from Richmond to Umzimkulu did not follow the present road. The cart route went down to the Umkomazi via the Nkobeni stream and then up towards the Springvale mission. Staging posts were established on this part of the journey at Nkobeni, Waterfall, Longfontein, Ixopo and Puff Adder. At

Waterfall there was a small, rather run-down canteen where travellers could buy refreshments. The first stop after Umzimkulu was at a trading store owned by Strachan & Co. at the Ibisi. There the postal routes divided: one went to Port Shepstone and the other to Kokstad. From the Ibisi to Fort Shepstone stables were built at Niewmarck, Nqabeni and Murchison. The first post cart route from Umzimkulu to Kokstad was up the Umvubukazi valley and on past the Griqua settlement of Riet Vlei. On this route staging posts were established at the Ibisi, Riet Vlei, Stafford's Post and *Beestekraal*. Stafford's Post was a trading station established by Edward Sparrow Stafford in 1866. After the Second Anglo-Boer War a British army regiment was sent to Umzimkulu to construct a new road leading out of the village up the commonage to the upper reaches of Donald Strachan's farms Bizweni and Mountain Home and on to Schimper's Nek. The new road opened up the interior and made it more accessible, as before it had been difficult for vehicle traffic to cope with the steep Umvubukazi Valley. The new road altered the post cart route and new staging posts were established at the trading store on Mountain Home, at Ngozanda, at Sneezewood, where James Cole had a trading store, and Newmarket. From Newmarket Strachan's best white horses took the post into Kokstad with the driver proudly blowing his bugle announcing to the locals the arrival of the post cart.

This network of post carts was remarkably efficient despite bad roads and unbridged rivers. So good was the service that Strachan & Co. were able to advertise fresh fish for sale in the winter months in Kokstad. The fish would be conveyed by train from Durban to Port Shepstone, then by post cart to Umzimkulu and on to Kokstad the next day.

Almost all of the post cart drivers were Griqua or Cape Coloured men. Probably the best known driver in East Griqualand was George Bell. This was the man who drove Mary Moore from Umzimkulu to the Ibisi and whom she referred to as 'George, a Griqua (yellow mixture)'. Very little is known about his background. Bell, who was of Malay extraction, had been born in Cape Town. In 1877 he drove the novelist Anthony Trollope from Greytown to Pretoria. When Trollope hired Bell he wrote: 'And there was a coloured driver, one George, whom everybody seemed to know, and who was able as everybody said, to drive us anywhere over Africa. George was to have 5 pounds a month, his passage paid back home, his keep on the road, and a *douceur* on parting, if we parted as friends'<sup>6</sup>. Trollope was satisfied with Bell's ability, as he records when they arrived in Pretoria 'our Cape-boy had not once been drunk and nothing material had been lost or broken'<sup>7</sup>. Bell then spent some time in Pietermaritzburg before moving up to Kokstad and finding employment driving the mail carts for Joe Murray. By 1893 he was working for Mr Woodhouse<sup>8</sup>. He then joined Strachan & Co.. Bell drove the Umzimkulu to Kokstad route. In 1938 Bell was about 80 years old and living at the Clydesdale mission station just outside Umzimkulu.

The demise of the post carts came as the railways spread in southern Natal and East Griqualand. By 1911 the railway had reached from Pietermaritzburg to Llewellyn near Franklin and that part of the postal service was stopped. Strachan & Co. continued to contract for the services to Matatiele and Mount Fletcher until 1914 when the whole operation was closed down.

**REFERENCES**

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