

Notes and Queries

FORT NAPIER DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Contributed by Shelagh Spencer

The fort was established in 1843 by a detachment of the 45th Regiment as a show of force. The ‘enemy’ was a number of dissident Boers who were unwilling to accept British rule, even after the defeat of their forces a year previously. It was built on a hill above the highest part of the village of Pietermaritzburg, the Boers’ capital of their defunct Republic of Natalia.

From then until 1914, the fort was the headquarters of the British garrison in Natal. With the withdrawal of the South Staffordshires for service in Europe in August 1914 it was unoccupied briefly and then converted into an internment camp for German nationals.

Eckhard (Jos) von Fintel has painstakingly researched this era and has produced a monograph *Fort Napier: internment camp for Germans during World War I*. Compiled in 2005 it contains 210 numbered pages and also a series of appendices (unpaginated). There are numerous photographs and also copies of archival documents. In addition he has traced the histories of a number of the individuals interned and also many details of their families. The research is ongoing.

One of the most interesting facts that emerges is that after General Botha’s evacuation of Lüderitzbucht for tactical reasons in the South West African campaign, the port’s women and children were all sent to Fort Napier (their menfolk being away in the desert serving with the territory’s *Schutztruppe*).

This work is not published but a copy is freely available for research in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository.

LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

Contributed by Adrian Koopman

If one reads the current columns of *The Witness*, whether the columns of irate letters written by readers, or the more staid columns which emanate from the reporters, one is immediately given the impression of a city in chaos so far as its traffic is concerned.

Speeding kombi taxis; unco-ordinated traffic lights, or worse—non-functioning traffic lights; overloaded kombis; inadequate access roads; kombis that ignore traffic laws; Eskom electricity outages that result in no traffic lights at all; cattle wandering all over Sweetwaters Road; kombis that shoot the few traffic lights that actually still work; giant potholes; and above all overloaded and unlicensed kombi taxis that obey no traffic laws and speed down an unlit Sweetwaters Road, now and then demolishing the odd vagrant cow.

It wasn't always like that, though. Take a break from *The Witness* of today and its reports of motorised mayhem, and browse instead through the illuminating pages of the 1895 *By-laws of the City and Borough of Pietermaritzburg*, published by P. Davis & Sons, Printers, 254 Longmarket Street, Pietermaritzburg.

Today's speeding overloaded taxis would not recognise the name 'Longmarket Street' any more. A wise city council replaced this in 2004 with 'Langalibalele Street', a name meaningless to the majority of residents of Pietermaritzburg in 2004, but which in 1895 would have resonated as the name of the Hlubi 'rebel chief' who 'took up arms' against Her Majesty's Government in Natal. But I digress. What sort of picture do we get of the pace of transport on the streets of Sleepy Hollow in 1895—a mere 113 years ago?

Perhaps by-law No.12 gives us an indication:

No person shall allow any wagon or vehicle under his charge, or being his property, drawn by oxen to pass through the streets or roads within the borough without a driver and a person at the head of the oxen as leader.

Note that it is perfectly in order to drive an ox-wagon through the roads and streets of the borough. Any of the roads and the streets of the borough, by the look of it. It is simply necessary to have a driver. A good idea, that, I would have thought. Oh, and a *touleier* is also required. That is to say, the person who walked in front of the team leading them with a short rope. Note again, the person who *walked* in front of the team. Not the person who *ran* in front of the team. Or the person who *suddenly appeared around the corner at enormous velocity with the team in full cry behind him*.

Life was quieter then.

And you can see the emphasis put on this aimed-for quietness in by-law No.11:

No person shall by shouts, gestures, or actions, wilfully frighten any horse, mule, ox, or other animal, so as to endanger the safety of any person.

By-law No.7 supports this intention of noise-free and fright-free streets:

No person shall crack, flourish or extend the lash of any wagon whip on any street or road within the Borough, and every wagon whip shall be looped while being carried along such street or road.

All sorts of thoughts crowd my mind when I read this by-law. One is admiration for the sheer poetry of the phrase 'crack, flourish or extend'. Another thought is to wonder how the modern version would fare: 'no kombi taxi driver is to sound his horn to alert potential passengers to his presence'. And yet another thought—the requirement that each wagon whip 'shall be looped'—is *this* the origin of the name of *Loop Street*? (An irrelevant query, of course, as there is no longer a Loop Street in Pietermaritzburg.)

By-law No.10 seems to me to have inherent contradictions. It calls upon those wagon teams going downhill to stop to allow those going uphill to pass more easily. This seems sensible—certainly it is easier to keep on going once stopped if you are facing

a downhill than if you are facing an uphill. The same by-law, however, instructs mule and horse-drawn wagons travelling in the same direction as ox-drawn teams to call on the latter to stop so the horse or mule-drawn wagon may pass more easily. This smacks to me of superiority, and almost inevitably calls to mind the attitudes of drivers today who are in charge of a vehicle, or a convoy of vehicles, which flash blue lights.

Ox-drawn vehicles. Horse-drawn vehicles. Mule-drawn vehicles. It all seems very quiet and safe from our viewpoint in the 21st century. And yet there were hidden dangers on the thoroughfares of late-19th century Pietermaritzburg, dangers which we today cannot even begin to think of. By-law No.25 gives a hint of these:

No person shall roll any hoop or wheel, or fly any kite, or throw stones, or use any bows and arrows, or catapults, or play at any game whatsoever, in the streets or thoroughfares of the Borough ...

The throwing of stones at vehicles is occasionally reported from bridges on the highways of the Natal South Coast today, but — thank heavens! — we no longer in any street, road or thoroughfare have to deal with flying hoops, wheels, kites, bows and arrows, or catapults. They must have taken this seriously, though, in the streets of 1895 Pietermaritzburg, for by-law No.25 goes on to say that

... the officers of the Corporation are hereby empowered to destroy all such kites, catapults, hoops, and other articles so used ...

Nor were kites, catapults and hoops the only perils of the road. By-law No.26 states that

... no person shall drag any block, plough, harrow, tree, bush, or roll any cask, barrel, or other thing dangerous to public safety, in any street or road.

Nor shall they (By-law No.27)

... leave or cause to be left upon any road, street, bridge or thoroughfare within the borough, any plough, harrow, wagon, cart or other vehicle, without any horse, mule, ass or ox being harnessed thereto ...

Note here that the prohibition is not against the ploughs, harrows and carts *as such* being left in the streets. It is the leaving of these ‘vehicles’ *unattached* to an animal. No doubt the streets, roads and thoroughfares of Pietermaritzburg were blocked three or four deep with harrows and ploughs, each with mule or ass attached, and there was *absolutely nothing* the traffic wardens of the day could do about it. The kombi taxis that regularly today block Pietermaritz Street three or four deep would have been proud of them.

Bicycle riding was freely permitted so long as a bell was attached ‘for use by day’. Both a bell and a ‘lighted lamp’ had to be attached if the bicycle was to be used by night. By-law No.18, which provides this ruling, usefully tells us that the purpose of the bell and the lamp are ‘as a warning to the public’. It is interesting that this by-law includes tricycles as well as bicycles. Clearly these were not the miniature pink plastic tricycles that we find today sold for the use of toddlers, but something more robust and useful.

Public transport in the Pietermaritzburg of today is almost entirely based on the kombi taxi. What did the public transport system consist of in 1895?

We get an idea from the heading of Section XXXII: ‘OMNIBUSES, CABS, HACKNEY CARRIAGES, AND RICKSHAS’.

Unfortunately, we do not learn much more from the by-laws that follow. We do learn from by-law No. 322 that annual licence fees were three pounds for a four-wheeled

vehicle, two pounds for a two-wheeled vehicle drawn by animal power, and twenty shillings (why not 'one pound'?) for every 'ricksha' [sic]. All vehicles were required to have a registered number displayed, and the driver of the vehicle had to wear a metal identification badge.

By-law No.328 requires that

all jinrickshas¹ plying for hire shall provide a bell ... to be affixed to the shaft, and shall have the owner's name in letters no less than 1½ inches in length, and in luminous paint, on both sides of the vehicle ...

The problems in 1895 were not about public transport vehicles speeding, as they are today, but more about their dawdling or otherwise going too slowly. By-law No. 329 deals specifically with this problem:

When hired by time, the driver in charge of this vehicle shall be required to drive at a proper rate of speed, say not less than five miles per hour

For those of us no longer familiar with speed reckoned in miles per hour, this works out at a madcap *eight kilometres per hour!* Clearly there were passengers who could not take this kind of reckless speeding, for after the words 'five miles per hour', the by-law continues with 'unless requested to drive at a slower rate'. And if any are appalled at the idea of rickshaw pullers being forced to dash about madly at five miles per hour, the last line of this by-law will make them feel happier:

Provided that this shall not apply to persons in charge of rickshas.

Sensitive readers will also be happy to note that rickshaw pullers are exempt from by-law No.331 which allows each passenger in a public vehicle up to thirty pounds of luggage without any extra charge.

A final by-law under this section makes for amusing comparison with today. By-law No. 342 states that:

Every person in charge of vehicles plying for hire, but not actually hired, is forbidden to loiter in any public thoroughfare; nor shall he by calling out or otherwise, importune or solicit any person to hire such carriage to the annoyance of such person or of any other person.

Compare this to a more recent description of today's kombi taxis by Trevor Wills:

'At peak periods the "ranks" used by minibus taxi operators ring with the cries of the usually very youthful drivers' assistants who hang out of doors and windows announcing the route to be followed and exhorting people to climb aboard.'²

Wills tells us further that rickshas were introduced to Pietermaritzburg in 1892 and 'provided a means of transport for all but the very poor'. The numbers peaked at 912 rickshas in 1902, and then started declining in 1904 after the introduction of the tram system, which ran until 1936. Wills notes that the rickshaw, although overshadowed by the trams, outlasted them, for rickshas:

'... did not disappear from city streets until well after the Second World War, being used particularly to transport purchases home from the Market Square, or up to the railway station.'

The present writer recalls rickshas lined up outside the Durban Railway Station in the mid-1950s, taking people from the station to various venues in the city and returning them with their purchases to the station. These were not the gaudy, fancy affairs later and still to be found on the beach-side promenades.

Sadly, neither the 1895 By-Laws, nor Trevor Wills, nor indeed any other contributor to Laband and Haswell's work give any further information about the 'Omnibuses, Cabs [and] Hackney carriages' that appear in the heading of section XXXII of the 1895 By-laws. Perhaps I will have found something by the next issue of *Natalia*.

NOTES

- ¹ The by-laws spell this word in three ways: as 'jinricksha', as ricksha with a prefixing apostrophe replacing 'jin' ['ricksha], and simply as 'ricksha'. The word is a 19th century loan from Japanese jin ('man') + riki ('power') + sha ('carriage'). (Collins English Dictionary, 1986: 821)
- ² Trevor Wills: 'From Rickshaws to Minibus Taxis', in Laband and Haswell (1988:138). Note yet another spelling in 'rickshaw'.

SILENT BELLS

Contributed by John Deane

The old sort of bell, cast in a foundry and hung in a belfry or other high place, plays a much smaller part in today's world than it used to. In many places, such as schools, electric bells now mark the passage of time with nerve-jarring clamour. In Pietermaritzburg there are three old bells that have been silent for many years, though they still hang in full view. Perhaps readers know of other noteworthy mute bells in the city, and may wish to inform *Natalia* about them.

The smallest of these is in a high little turret on St John's United Church in Jabu Ndlovu Street (Loop Street). The church was for many years the chapel of the sisters of St John the Divine, where for almost seventy years the little bell sounded at certain solemn moments in the Anglo-Catholic Eucharist on weekdays as well as Sundays. The sisters moved their convent to Durban in 1968, and although the building remains a place of Christian worship, the bell fell silent.

Then there is the bell of the old Merchiston Preparatory School building in Burger Street. A larger classroom block was built in 1917 when the school was only fifteen years old, and above the headmaster's office the new school bell hung in its turret. Merchiston moved to new premises in Bulwer Street in 1965, and its old buildings were used by the Provincial Administration for other purposes, none of which required the tolling of a bell. That bell had divided up the school days for forty-eight years, and has now been silent for almost forty-five.

Largest and most impressive of the three, and unused now for about half a century, is the bell in the tower of Publicity House (formerly Electricity House, formerly the Municipal Offices) on the corner of Chief Albert Luthuli Street and Langalibalele Street (Commercial Road and Longmarket Street). [See the article 'New names for old. Transformation in the streets of Pietermaritzburg' in *Natalia* 35.] Until about the 1940s it had various functions, including at one time tolling the curfew after which no African was supposed to be abroad in the streets.

Mention must also be made of a fourth bell, which after a silence of more than 40 years recovered its voice. The bell of St George's Church, Napierville, (formerly the garrison chapel) became too dangerous to use when its very inaccessible wooden supports became decayed. Recently, on the initiative of the chapelwarden Michael Daly [See

‘Obituaries’ elsewhere in this issue.] and with the use of a crane, the bell was lowered to the ground, a new, free-standing belfry was built and the bell re-hung. Sadly, it tolled at Michael’s funeral on 24 January 2008.

THE NATAL SOCIETY FOUNDATION

Contributed by Pat McKenzie

The Natal Society Foundation has awarded a bursary to John McGuiness to assist him in his studies. He is a registered MSc student in the field of Music Analysis Software and in 2006 was awarded the BSc degree *summa cum laude*. His thesis is titled ‘Investigation of Techniques for Automatic Polyphonic Music Transcription using wavelets’. The programme he developed in his Honours degree work is a music analysis tool, which is able to extract musical notes and generate a musical score given a sound recording. This tool will be useful for musicians who are not able to read or write music, but would like to preserve their compositions on paper. His MSc programme is a continuation of this work and in his motivation he added that ‘A large part of South Africa’s musical heritage has been handed down through successive generations simply by ear; so a lot of this music has never been written down. When complete, my software should be able to capture recordings and even live performances, thus preserving them in written form’. He also intends to develop software geared for use with school music programmes.

Ian Kiepiel, who was awarded a scholarship by the Foundation in 2007 for research into the pollination biology and breeding system of the charismatic plant genus *Clivia* has made good progress and has enough evidence to document the reproductive biology of *Clivia miniata* and *Clivia robusta*. and is working on the functional significance of colour and scent for the attraction of butterflies and evidence of bird pollination.