

# Northern Branch of ArchSoc: Artefacts



## Karoo Tour - 6 to 10 October 2022

### Thursday 6 October

Twenty-five members and friends of ArchSoc departed from the Sunnyside Park Hotel by luxury coach. We arrived early evening at the guest cottages on the 3 000-hectare Ganora sheep farm, near Nieu Bethesda. This historic farm, originally known as Africanderskloof, named after the nearby gorge on the Wilgersbos River, was first recorded as a loan farm in 1777. Our hosts, Jan-Peet (JP) Steynberg and his wife, Hester, welcomed us warmly. Following much needed pre dinner drinks, we enjoyed a delicious three course meal with the main course consisting of leg of Karoo lamb and a variety of vegetables, in the interesting dining room which has historic farming implements and tools decorating the walls.

### Friday 7 October

After a hearty farm-style breakfast, we split into two groups. One group went off to with local guide Henry to view rock art in shallow caves above the nearby gorge, while the other party visited the Ganora farm's private museum of fossils.

We then travelled to the farm Wellwood, which has been owned by the Rubidge family for more than 150 years. This sheep farm covers approximately 40 000 hectares and runs some 3 000 sheep.



*Bruce Rubidge welcoming us at the Wellwood farmhouse*

Here we met our guide for the next two days, Professor Bruce Rubidge, currently Director of the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Palaeosciences at Wits University, his brother, who is the present owner of Wellwood farm, and their wives.

We paused to admire the attractive farmhouse and beautiful gardens, that would not have appeared out of place on a scenic Boland wine farm. Then we visited the extensive Rubidge fossil collection housed in a separate building on the farm. Bruce's grandfather, Sidney, began collecting fossils on the farm in 1934, with the collection being added to by his descendants and other fossil hunters. It now totals more than 850 fossils, many of which include the name Rubidge in their classification, being the type specimens. The term 'type specimen' means the fossil was the first of specific specimen found. The fossils in the collection date to between 256 and 250 million years ago.



***At the Rubidge fossil collection with palaeontologist Dr Marc Van den Brandt***

Bruce explained to us that 300 million years ago, about two thirds of what now comprises South Africa was covered by a large shallow fresh-water lake. The Karoo is one of the few regions of ancient Gondwanaland that remains intact. Bruce gave us a most interesting talk about the evolution of reptiles and mammals and the geological conditions that gave rise to this fossil record.

We then travelled to the Lootsberg Pass where we observed geological evidence of the Permian-Triassic extinction event, which wiped out 90% of the world's biota.

A short drive took us to nearby Nieu-Bethesda, a small village at the foothills of the Sneeuberg, 54 kilometres distant from Graaff-Reinet. It was founded in 1875 as a mission station. The name is of New Testament origin and means 'place of flowing water', and quite appropriate as 'leivore' (irrigation furrows) still line the quiet gravel streets.

Our first visit was to the Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre set up by Bruce over a decade ago, where we viewed an excellent video illustrating the continental drift and the breakup of

Gondwanaland into the present-day continents. The fact that the same fossils were found in India, South America, and Antarctica, provided James Kitching with evidence to prove the theory of continental drift. James William Kitching (1922-2003) was born and grew up in Nieu-Bethesda and became a world-renowned palaeontologist. Many fossils found by him in the area now reside in the museum on the Rubidge farm.

Although he had no undergraduate training, Kitching was permitted to submit a PhD thesis on the distribution of Karoo fossils to Wits University with the consent of the university Senate. Until his retirement in 1990, he served as the Director of BPI Palaeontology at Wits University. We noted that after a visit to the region in 2003 the Archaeological Society had contributed to the founding of the Kitching Fossil Exploration Centre.

We then walked to the nearby Gats River-bed to look for fossils embedded in the rock. Our guide pointed out small pieces of fossilised bones and compared them to casts of fossils he had brought along.

After a late light lunch, we visited the Owl House, home of the reclusive 'outsider' artist, Helen Elizabeth Martins (1897-1976).

Born in Nieu Bethesda, she qualified as a teacher at nearby Graaff-Reinet but spent most of her life in this village, where for a time she taught English at the small local school.



*The old entrance to the Camel Yard with a two-sided owl perched on the arch peering both into and out of the Yard*

She was an eccentric person who, after two brief but failed marriages, created a sculpture garden consisting of biblical and other unusual figures in her back garden. After her death, the sculpture garden would become widely known as the Camel Yard. The last sculptor to contribute to it, Koos Malgas, became almost as well-known as Helen herself, for his skill in fashioning unusual sculptures from cement, wire, wine, and beer bottles. Helen clearly was fascinated by owls, as several of their sculptures adorn the Camel Yard. She transformed her Karoo styled house by replacing the original small windows with large sheets of multicoloured glass. Sadly, her artistic

genius was only recognised following her death, brought about by drinking caustic soda while suffering from a bout of severe depression.

We then went on to Graaff-Reinet. The town was established in 1786 and named after Governor Jacobus van der Graaff and his wife, Reinet. We were warmly welcomed to the Reinet House Museum by its staff and the Director of the local museums and treated to glasses of wine. The museum was opened especially for us at night-time. This building is now the flagship of the Graaff-Reinet museums. It houses attractive furniture and artefacts from the pioneering colonial era.

Erected by the Dutch Reformed Church in about 1812 in the typical Cape Dutch style, the Pastorie was occupied by Rev. Andrew Murray from 1822 to 1866 and by his son Rev. Charles Murray to about 1904. Thereafter the building deteriorated. It was unrecognisable until architect Norman Eaton began restoring it in 1953. Today the building looks as good as it ever did.



*Reinet House Museum. Image obtained from internet*

### **Saturday 8 October**

Saturday dawned bright and clear as ArchSoc members enjoyed another hearty breakfast after which the two groups of the previous day exchanged their previous morning's outings. Having viewed the Khoisan rock art the previous day, we now visited the Ganora farm's own museum of fossils. Our host JP Steynberg provided a detailed explanation of the fossils he had found on the farm over the years with humour and wit. JP explained the differences between reptiles and mammals, from the well-known to the obscure.

With each fossil type JP held up samples from his display cases, including coprolites, fossilised droppings. Some of the skulls were as small as a thumb and others bigger than a rugby ball. Among other items of interest, JP told us that the gender of reptile hatchlings is determined by the

temperature inside the brood nest. Crocodile farmers, for instance, can determine the gender of their stock by adjusting the temperature in their incubators.

JP went on to explain the abundance of Palaeozoic fossils in the Karoo compared to the absence of dinosaurs. This was where action of deposition – vs – erosion and the life of dinosaur creatures happened so late in the geological record that the shale levels hiding dinosaur secrets were eroded first and disappeared from the Karoo long before the breakup of Gondwana.

Our museum tour complete, we boarded our bus for the drive to the farm Doringplaas where we met up with Bruce Rubidge and his two assistants Dr Mark Van den Brandt and Jason Arnols. We were briefly introduced to the farmer of this vast sheep station and informed of our day's task: finding fossils, in-situ.



*Searching for fossils at Doringplaas*

With the sun reaching its zenith, we set off down a dry riverbed. We were challenged by Bruce to identify exactly what we could see round our own feet, namely fossilised fish scales. Shortly afterwards we identified fossilised mussels, the remains of bi-valves and a dicynodont skull. Further on, we found the fossilised burrows of burrowing animals.

Bruce pointed out that where we stood, we were exceedingly early in geological record, just prior to the Permian – Triassic extinction event that wiped 95% of all living things out about 251 million years ago. The rocks around our feet had been dated at 255 million years ago through a technique that involved measuring the decay in radioactive material found in zircon crystals.

We sought refuge from the baking midday heat in the airconditioned comfort of our luxury tour coach and set off for a welcome lunch in Graaff Reinet. In the afternoon we changed vehicles from our large coach to two 13-seater vehicles, for the steep and winding ascend through the Camdeboo National Park to the Valley of Desolation. Here we met with David McNaughton, a local historian who took us through the early development of Graaff Reinet and the settlement of the surrounding countryside by the Trek Boers. He then took us back to the formation of the Karoo

sediments and to volcanic eruptions 182 million years ago that created a magma intrusion in places over 1 600m thick completely burying the former sand desert and most of South Africa with it. Now most of the lava had been removed by erosion, leaving behind the flat-topped hills and dolerite dykes that are so characteristic of the Karoo landscape today.

We enjoyed sundowners on a wide viewing deck overlooking the valley below. Then it was back to Ganora to enjoy a delectable supper of braaied ostrich meat.

### **Sunday 9 October**

Following the exertions of the previous day, we all agreed a lazy morning around the Ganora swimming pool was just the remedy we required. The more active members scraped together sufficient energy to join Anna Batchelor Steyn for a walk to the Khoisan rock art site, where she provided guidance on the interpretation of rock art.

A light lunch at Ganora followed before our departure to Cradock. Cradock, the fourth oldest town in the Eastern Cape was established in 1813.



*Gathering for the guided walk along the Karoo Tuishuise and the surrounding area. Following the previous sweltering day, the weather had suddenly turned cool.*

Upon arrival at the Victoria Manor Hotel, owner Sandra Antrobus and daughter Lisa warmly welcomed us.

After we had settled in our new accommodation, Lisa took us on a guided walk along Market Street, lined on each side by fifteen authentic and beautifully restored and furnished Victorian Karoo cottages. Lisa had us spellbound as she recounted how her mother and late father in 1982 purchased and restored five of these then dilapidated Karoo cottages earmarked for demolition.

Over several decades her mother bought and restored the neighbouring cottages, eventually owning all thirty Victorian Karoo cottages along Market Street, together with the adjoining Victoria Manor Hotel, dating from 1848.

The restoration of the thirty Cradock Tuishuise and the Victoria Manor Hotel is one of the most successful private restoration projects ever completed in South Africa. We were all delighted that our tour in a small way contributed to its ongoing success.

Our guided walk went past the Olive Schreiner House Museum, and the attractive St Peters Anglican Chapel designed by Sophy Gray, and consecrated in 1858. The attractive stone-built chancel and vestry were both added in 1869.

A short walk took us to the Fish River and then back to the Market Square, on which regrettably a commercial building, devoid of any visual attraction had recently been erected. The nearby Dutch Reformed Church building seemed an identical replica of St Martin-in-the-Fields at Trafalgar Square in London.



*Exterior of the Schreiner House Museum, Cradock*

### **Monday 10 October**

After breakfast at the Victoria Manor Hotel, a short walk took us to the Schreiner House Museum at 9 Cross Street. Here Museum Curator Leon van Wyk briefed us on the history of this house and the life and times of the teenaged Olive Schreiner, who lived in Cradock from 1868 to 1870. Although Schreiner House is one of the oldest extant houses in Cradock, its exact age is not known. A building appears on this stand on an 1850 map of Cradock. Theo Schreiner, Olive's older brother hired this house in 1867 and Olive came to live here with him.

The AA Mutual Life Assurance Association purchased the Schreiner House in the 1980's and it was restored with funds provided by the Cradock Municipality. Following restoration, the property was donated to the National English Literary Museum and opened as a museum in 1988. The

exhibitions at Schreiner House explore Olive Schreiner's life and work and recognise her significance as a writer and feminist. Some of the books from her library are also exhibited here.

Olive Schreiner later wrote that she had loved the mountains around Cradock all her life. After her death in December 1920, she was buried in the Schreiner family plot in the Maitland Cemetery. Samuel 'Cron' Cronwright-Schreiner arranged for the reinterment of her remains, together with those of their unnamed daughter 'Baby' who had died shortly after birth on 30 April 1895, and her dog, Nita, on the summit of Buffelskop. On 13 August 1921, a burial party consisting of over 30 people, including 10 coffin bearers, ascended the summit of Buffelskop to honour her wishes.

Our last visit was to the Great Fish River Museum, situated in the old Parsonage erected in 1849 and declared a National Monument in 1971. This museum depicts the early history of the Eastern Cape Pioneers from 1840 to 1900. There is also a Cradock Four gallery, which houses a pictorial display on the lives of four victims of the struggle against apartheid, Mathew Goniwe, Fort Galata, Sparrow Mkhonto and Sicelo Mhlauli.

We then set out on the long drive back to Johannesburg, having enjoyed a stunning tour.

***Report by Barry Jacoby, Bill Murray, and SJ de Klerk.***

***Photos by SJ de Klerk.***