

Jagersfontein – the forgotten gem of the Free State

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Abstract

The early mining history of the Free State Province is not well represented in the annals of the mining history of South Africa. As such, only a select few would be aware of the role Jagersfontein played in the diamond mining industry worldwide. In this article, historical research is used as research strategy where the variable focus of the research is time, and specific events are interpreted within a temporally defined situation and environment. The history of Jagersfontein is relayed as a historical narrative, following its development from its conception as a diamond digging in 1869 to the present day. Events and aspects related to its development are interrogated and analysed against a backdrop of historical events that had an influence on its growth; including pointing out the human factor in determining the course of history to gain some understanding of the derelict and forgotten town Jagersfontein is today. It raises the question of the degree of corporate social responsibility mining companies have towards the people of the towns they created and abandoned prior to new legislation in this regard. In closing, it proposes that redefining Jagersfontein as a tourist destination as historic mining town is not only a means of creating job opportunities, but will also enable Jagersfontein to take its rightful place in the history of South Africa.

Keywords: Jagersfontein; Mining history; Non-alluvial diamonds; De Beers Group; Corporate social responsibility; Poverty relief; Tourism.

Introduction

Jagersfontein is situated in the Western Free State, approximately 120 km southwest of Bloemfontein, the capital city of the Free State Province. The town's nearest neighbouring town is Fauresmith, only 11 km northwest of Jagersfontein. The rainy season in the Free State has started and the normally dusty town of Jagersfontein is bedecked with a layer of fresh new green that stands in stark contrast to its buildings, which speak of a time lost to the memory of the inhabitants of this little mining town; more accurately, a time

preciously few of its current inhabitants were actively part of. Some buildings have deteriorated to a point beyond repair; some wear the patina that marks the passage of time with grace, while some others show the first signs of the terminal disease of severe neglect that will eventually lead to their ruin. Many, though, have stood the test of time and are proud reminders of a time of prosperity that once must have been.

There is, however, more to this sleepy town than meets the eye. This town once played a vital role in the diamond industry worldwide. Its name frequently appears in early travellers' accounts and books on diamond mining,¹ the London Stock Exchange of the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as in books and autobiographies/biographies of well-known historical figures like the Barnato brothers, Cecil John Rhodes and Ernest Oppenheimer.² The name was once officially lent to the highest grade for diamonds but, most importantly, it was the site of the first discovery of non-alluvial diamonds in the world. There would be other claims to fame but during the infancy years of this town, there was yet no sign of this.

This is the story of the rise and fall of a mining town as traced through archival records, old mining records, newspaper clippings, yearbooks, academic journals, autobiographies, history books, biographies, photographs, old maps and personal interviews. The focus of this article is to highlight events that warrant recognition of this town's contribution to the mining history of South Africa, but also to follow the thread of counteractive forces that ultimately led to its demise. The philosophical assumption underlying this study is grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, which has a focus on intentionality with the emphasis on the indivisibility of the person-world relationship. The causal relationship between specific events and the welfare of Jagersfontein is investigated within a temporally defined situation and environment by means of the interrogation of historical records to reach an understanding (interpretation) for the current state of the town.³

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- 1 HPN Muller, *Zuid-Afrika. Reiserinneringen van Hendrik P.N. Muller* (Leiden, AW Sijthoff, 1890); AH Roskell, *Six years of a tramp's life in South Africa* (Cape Town, Townshend & Son, 1886); GF Williams, *The diamond mines of South Africa*, 1 (New York, BF Buck & Company, 1905).
 - 2 S Joel, *Ace of diamonds; the story of Solomon Barnato Joel* (London, Muller, 1958); TE Gregory, *Ernest Oppenheimer and the economic development of Southern Africa* (Arno Press, 1962); G Le Sueur, *Cecil Rhodes: The man and his work* (London, John Murray, 1913).
 - 3 NP Kaffe, "Hermeneutic phenomenological research method simplified", *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5, 2011, p. 186.

Historical background

The first diamond discovery in South Africa occurred on the banks of the Orange River near Hopetown in 1867. It was, however, a chance discovery of a diamond in a place least expected that led to the birth of the town of Jagersfontein and the introduction to a new chapter in the diamond industry of the world. Up to then, it was thought that diamonds were found in gravelly alluvial deposits only, and the red soil of Jagersfontein gave no indication of the riches that lay beneath its surface.⁴

Jagersfontein took its name from the farm on which it is situated. The farm is said to have belonged originally to a Griqua by the name of Jan Jagers. The fountain on the farm was known as Jager's Fountain and it subsequently became the registered name of the farm.⁵ The Griqua connection is honoured by the inclusion of a jackal in the coat of arms of Jagersfontein as Griqua (*Cgirikwa*) means "the jackals".⁶

Image 1: Jagersfontein Coat of Arms: The three diamonds are symbolic of the type of mining at Jagersfontein while the pick and spade symbolise the mining activities. Above the three diamonds is the symbol for the fountain.



Source: SL Barnard *et al*, *Jagersfontein 1882-1982* (Ficksburg, Sentrapers, 1982), front page.

⁴ The term alluvial diamonds is used to describe diamonds that have been removed from its primary source by natural erosive action over millions of years, and eventually deposited in a new environment such as a river bed, an ocean floor or a shoreline such as the later discoveries of diamonds at the Atlantic coast of South Africa and Namibia at Luderitz, Hottentot Bay, Alexander Bay, Port Nolloth, Kleinsee, Koingnaas, and so forth. Jagersfontein is, accordingly, the first place of discovery in the world of a diamond in its primary source.

⁵ Free State Provincial Archives (VPAB), Bloemfontein, Vol. 1/1/20, Reference 011/5/14, pp. 4-5: Letter re the origin of the name Jagersfontein, DP Britz (principal, Jagersfontein School)/LB vd Walt (Archivist, Bloemfontein archives) dd 30 June 1929. [DP Britz obtained the information from JJ de Klerk.]

⁶ J Knappert, *Namibia, land of peoples, myths and fables* (Leiden, EJ Brill, 1981), p. 86.

Cornelius Visser, who also owned the neighbouring farm Schraalfontein, purchased Jagersfontein on 3 December 1850. A relation of Mrs Visser, a certain BJ de Klerk, went to live on the farm with his son, JJ de Klerk, who was a young man at the time. By this time Visser was a widow and, with more than one farm, in need of a foreman. The farm was also an outspan where travellers could rest and water their cattle during those early years and as such saw a fair amount of travellers on their way to and from the newly discovered (1869) diamond fields adjacent to the Vaal River. On his way back, one of these travellers from the diamond diggings told young De Klerk what a rough diamond looked like and how to “taste” it.⁷

After the traveller had left, De Klerk started digging a short way from the homestead where there was, according to him, an abundance of rubies and other garnets. It was not long before he found the first small diamond. It was the year of 1869. To confirm his find, he took it to the local watchmaker at the nearby town of Fuaresmith, who initially tried to convince him it was not a diamond, but then changed his story and offered to buy it from him for £16. Young De Klerk took it to another shopkeeper by the name of Dixon who confirmed that it was indeed a diamond. Shortly after this, the local Dutch Reformed minister, Ds HJ Luckhoff, took the diamond with him on a visit to the Vaal River diggings where he sold it for £9.⁸ This confirmed that there were indeed diamonds on the farm. In this way, history was made with the discovery of the first non-alluvial diamond in the world. Although Gardner Williams⁹ gives this date as August 1870,¹⁰ at the same time, he also refers to the fifty-carat diamond that De Klerk found that was, in fact, the second diamond he had found and sold to Hunt, a diamond buyer from Beaconsfield, for £650.¹¹ Other non-alluvial finds soon followed at nearby Koffiefontein (early 1870), and further north at Dutoitspan (September 1870), Bultfontein (early 1871), and two sites on the farm Vooruitzicht, which would later become De Beers Mine (May 1871) and Kimberley Mine (July 1871). Finally, the illusion of finding diamonds only in alluvial beds was dispelled.¹²

7 VPAB, Bloemfontein, Vol. 1/1/20, Reference 011/5/14, pp.7-8: Letter re the discovery of the first diamond on the farm Jagersfontein, DP Britz (principal, Jagersfontein School)/LB vd Walt (Archivist, Bloemfontein archives) dd 28 July 1929. [DP Britz obtained the information from BJ de Klerk.]

8 VPAB, Bloemfontein, Vol. 1/1/20, Reference 011/5/14, p. 7, 28 July 1929.

9 Williams was the general manager of De Beers Consolidated Mines, Ltd at the time the first edition of his two-volume book titled “The diamond mines of South Africa” was published. He held this position from 1887 to 1905 when he retired and returned to his native country, the United States of America.

10 GF Williams, *The diamond mines of South Africa*, I (New York, BF Buck & Company, 1905), p. 164.

11 VPAB, Bloemfontein, Vol. 1/1/20, Reference 011/5/14, p. 8, 28 July 1929

12 GF Williams, *The diamond mines of South Africa*, I ..., pp. 166-167.

The major difference between Jagersfontein and the mines near present-day Kimberley is that Mrs Visser initially allowed only family and farmers in the vicinity to participate in the novelty of digging for the shiny stones for a monthly licence of £2.¹³ These activities soon attracted other diggers, but Mrs Visser refused all those who were not burghers of the Free State, because they were “uitlanders” (expatriate migrant workers). Through this refusal, access to valuable expertise was lost to the other dry mines further north, which stunted the initial growth of the Jagersfontein diggings, in contrast to the diamond mines in the Kimberley region.¹⁴

By public demand, the Free State Government declared the farm a “Public Digging” in 1871 with an appointed inspector from nearby Fauresmith.¹⁵ The government had the same preference for allowing only burghers (Afrikaans-speaking citizens) of the Orange Free State to obtain a licence, which resulted in the farm being crowded by even more unskilled diggers working in unsystematic ways and at a leisurely pace set by the older diggers. In time, however, the novelty must have worn off, as finds were few and far between. Subsequently, the strict controls only allowing burghers to obtain a licence were relaxed, to the extent that English-speaking Free Staters with digging experience were now allowed to obtain licences to claims on the Jagersfontein farm. This eventually led to a complete lifting of any provisos regarding nationality or language.¹⁶ During these early days of mining at Jagersfontein, however, a drama was unfolding in the background, with the Orange Free State ownership of the diamond fields being challenged.

During the period 1846 to 1854, the Free State was under British control and known as the Orange River Sovereignty. The British, however, found it increasingly difficult to keep the peace between the marauding Griqua and other indigenous groups as well as the white farmers who had settled in this region and decided to withdraw their forces back to the Cape Colony. After their withdrawal, the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State (OFS) was established by the signing of the Bloemfontein Convention on 23 February 1854. Sir George Clerk represented Britain and 25 representatives of the people of the new country were present. The convention guaranteed the independence of the territory between the Orange River in the south, the

13 De Beers Archives, Kimberley, New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company Limited 1880-1971: Historical Resume, prepared by BJ Feder (archivist), 1977, p. 1.

14 W Le Barrow, “Jagersfontein”, *Optima*, 17, June 1971, p. 86.

15 Article 10 of (OFS) Ordinance 3 of 1871.

16 W Le Barrow, “Jagersfontein”, *Optima*, 17, June 1971, p. 86.

Vaal River in the west and north, and the Drakensberg in the east.¹⁷ With the discovery of diamonds in the Orange Free State, the British-controlled Cape Colony suddenly realised that these treasures lay outside their reach.

While the British were contemplating ways to annex the diamond fields for the Cape Colony, two other parties decided to lay claim to the area of the northern diamond fields; the Griqua under leadership of Nikolaas Waterboer, and the Transvaal Boer Republic (Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek) – the latter on the diggings at the Harts River. Waterboer based his claim on a treaty his father, Andries Waterboer, had signed with the British on 11 December 1834.¹⁸

The government of the Orange Free State was willing to meet with Waterboer to provide him an opportunity to prove his case. This led to a meeting in August 1870 at Nootgedact between Waterboer, assisted by his lawyer, D Arnot, and a delegation of the Orange Free State.¹⁹ Not satisfied with the proof provided, President JH Brand of the Orange Free State proceeded to proclaim the Campbell grounds as Free State territory.²⁰ Waterboer, however, turned to the British for help and asked to have his land placed under British protection. Brand was aware of this and went to see the Governor of the Cape in Cape Town at the end of 1870.²¹ In spite of this, the Cape Colony annexed the diamond-fields area known as Griqualand West as crown land on 27 October 1871.²²

This was followed by a five-year period of arguing between the Orange Free State and the Cape Colony regarding the ownership of the diamond fields which ended in an official agreement concluded on 13 July 1876 whereby the Orange Free State received £90 000 in compensation for the loss of the diamond fields.²³ Although this financial boost enabled the Orange Free State eventually to become the model state it was known for during the reign of Brand, it also meant that the Koffiefontein and Jagersfontein diamond

17 VPAB, Bloemfontein, OSS, Volume 18, Part 1 (1853-1854), 23 February 1854.

18 SGE Cory, *The rise of South Africa: A history of the origin of South African colonisation and of its development towards the east from the earliest times to 1857* (New York, Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd., 1926), p. 277.

19 VPAB, Bloemfontein, Official Publications, Volume OR87B – Orange Books (1854-1899): Minutes of a meeting of the Executive Council of the Orange Free State, held at 'Nootgedacht', on the Vaal River re proof of Claim to the Campbell Grounds, 18 August 1870.

20 FJD Spies, *Hamelberg en die Oranje-Vrystaat* (Amsterdam, NV Swets & Zeitlinger, 1941), p. 327.

21 WW Collins, *Free Statia* (Bloemfontein, The Friend Printing & Publishing Co., 1907), p. 342.

22 OFS, *Protest by the Volksraad of the Orange Free State against the annexation of the diamond fields* (Government Notice, 19 December 1871), p. 3.

23 FJD Spies, *Hamelberg en die Oranje-Vrystaat*, p. 344.

mines were now separated from the rest of the dry mines further north. As will be seen later on, it is on the consolidation of these mines that the De Beers empire was built, which in turn enabled Kimberley to grow into a self-sustainable town.

Image 2: Map showing the boundaries of Griqualand West, which incorporated the area known as Waterboer's Territory, the OFS-owned Campbell's Land north of the Vaal River and a section of the Orange Free State south of the Vaal River, which included the rich deposits of the Bultfontein and Kimberley mines



Source: Section of a 'Sketch map of South Africa showing British possessions – July 1885' (available at <http://www.britishempire.co.uk/images3/southafrica1885map.jpg>, as accessed on 10 August 2011).

Systematic mining at Jagersfontein

One of the earliest descriptions of the Jagersfontein diggings comes from the travel descriptions of Arthur Roskell, who travelled through South Africa between 1877 and 1883. Having found temporary employment in Fairesmith in 1879, he accompanied his employer on a trip that took them through Jagersfontein, which he described as follows:²⁴

²⁴ AH Roskell, *Six years of a tramp's life in South Africa* (Cape Town, Townshend & Son, 1886), p. 36.

We drove through Jagersfontein, just halting for a drink on the way at one of the hotels. The Fields presented a lively appearance. The camp consisted of a couple of hundred wooden and canvas houses, and any quantity of hotels and drinking places. These are generally the veritable signs of wealth in South Africa. Where there's money knocking about there's abundance...

A number of people from Fauresmith who had gained digging experience at the Kimberley fields were the first to attempt a more systematic working of the diggings at Jagersfontein and formed a group called the Fauresmith Diamond Mining Company, headed by C Barnard as manager. The real change, however, came about when a number of experienced Australian gold miners arrived on the scene in November 1878. Among them were the brothers Kerr, who are said to have laid the foundations of the mining industry at Jagersfontein.

In 1878, the digging area was surveyed and chartered by the Orange Free State government surveyor, GC Brand, showing 1 244 claims of 30 x 30 feet each. The Orange Free State government appointed an inspector of the mine, JW Lotz, and Mrs Visser appointed JA Schickering as her representative. Under the watchful eyes of these two men, everything concerning Jagersfontein or its mine would be scrutinised for irregularities.²⁵ The town was also surveyed at the same time as the mine. Up to then, diggers lived in temporary shelters made of sheets of corrugated iron or tents. Even after the town had been laid out, the first buildings were not built with durability in mind, as the mine's future was still not sure. Therefore, the earliest buildings for the most part consisted of sun-dried bricks and corrugated iron. The town was laid out in a simple grid-system that fitted snugly into the space between the edges of the surveyed mine area in the south and the low hills to the north.

The eclectic social mix of the early mining towns necessitated the passing of new laws to maintain law and order in the country. Illegal Diamond Mining (IDB) had also become a huge problem and the situation at Jagersfontein was directly responsible for the passing of a number of new laws at a special sitting of the Orange Free State Volksraad on 17 March 1882 to deal with the IDB problem. These included the following:²⁶

- A drastic ordinance for the suppression of IDB;
- An ordinance establishing a special court exclusively for the trial of IDB cases;

25 De Beers Archives, Kimberley, New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company Limited 1880-1971: Historical Resume, prepared by BJ Feder (archivist), 1977, p. 1.

26 VPAB, Bloemfontein, Official Publications, Volume OR68 – Orange Books: Buitengewone vergadering van den hoog-ed Volksraad op Vrydag 17 Maart 1882.

- An ordinance for the appointment of an Assistant Landrost (magistrate) at Jagersfontein;
- A law for the establishment of an efficient police force;
- A law by which Jagersfontein was created a town with the establishment of a *Dorpsraad*;²⁷
- An effective searching law (for diamonds).

With the official acknowledgement of Jagersfontein as a town and the establishment of a *Dorpsraad*, buildings were subsequently erected with permanence in mind and the town started taking on a more orderly appearance with neat buildings on their small allotted erven dotting the town; 60 x 60 feet for businesses and 75 x 75 feet for dwellings.²⁸ The difference this brought about is clearly demonstrated, when comparing Roskell's description of what he saw in 1879, and the way Muller described the town he visited barely five years later:²⁹

... een klein dorp, ongeveer een honderdtal rijk...de woningen, ofschoon kleiner, waren veel netter en zorgvuldiger dan bij Kimberley...

“[Translation: a small town approximately one hundred in number ... the houses, although smaller, are much neater and more meticulous than at Kimberley ...]”

Image 3: A section of Jagersfontein township c. 1890



Source: VPAB, Foto, Jagersfontein, Reference 5374.

²⁷ A distinction is made between this town council (*Dorpsraad*) and the official municipal town council that would follow later.

²⁸ SL Barnard et al., *Jagersfontein 1882-1982* (Ficksburg, Sentrapers, 1982), p. 14.

²⁹ HPN Muller, *Zuid-Afrika. Reisherinneringen van Hendrik P.N. Muller...*, p. 277.

Prosperity, though, still eluded this town, whilst at the same time the other mines further north experienced an unparalleled boom; lured by promises of instant riches, diggers from all over the world flocked to these diggings. Speculation in claims at the Jagersfontein diggings resulted in people buying claims to sell at a profit without working the claim, often raising the stakes by seeding claims with diamonds obtained elsewhere.³⁰ A result of the great number of unworked claims was that business in the town suffered, as most of these profiteers did not reside in Jagersfontein. In an attempt to change this situation that had such a dire effect on the town and mine, a special delegation of people closely related to both the mine and town met in the magistrate's office on 19 January 1884 to draw up a missive to present to the Volksraad for, among other things, the compulsory working of claims.³¹

For Jagersfontein the change came about when a number of people (mostly from the Kimberley mines) formed the New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company Limited in January 1887 with the objective of gradually effecting the amalgamation of all the claims. By February 1888, it had already acquired the holdings of four other companies and one individual, totalling 645 additional claims.³²

After the death of Mrs Visser, in 1887, the family sold their farm by public auction to the Jagersfontein Mine & Estate Company, a sister company of the Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company.³³ This in turn benefited the town as it was now run like a business. Prior to this, there were numerous complaints about the fact that Mrs Visser did not use any of the rental collected for property stands towards the upkeep of the town.³⁴ Primitive methods, scarcity of water and lack of sufficient capital, however, made for little success at Jagersfontein during its early years of existence.

By 1890, ownership of the claims (and town) mainly resided with the New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company and United Diamond Mining Company. In 1891, an amalgamation secured total ownership of the

30 MJ Boon, *The history of the Orange Free State* (King William's Town, Hay Bros., 1885), pp. 35-36.

31 De Beers Archives, Kimberley, Jagersfontein Mine: Retrospect of matters in connection with the Jagersfontein Mine, prepared for the member of the Volksraad, for this ward (Middenveld), Mr CWH Van der Post, so as to enable him the better to combat the Compulsory work movement which will come before the next session of the Hon. the Volksraad, 27 March 1889, W Wagner.

32 De Beers Archives, Kimberley, New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company Limited 1880-1971: Historical Resume, prepared by BJ Feder (archivist), 1977, p. 2.

33 Notice of a public sale of the farm and effects to be held on 27 October 1887 was posted by Van der Post & Bukes notaries from Fauresmith on 28 July 1887.

34 W le Barrow, "Jagersfontein", *Optima*, 17, June 1971, p. 87.

mine for the New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company with the exception of only four shares of £1 each. It was at this point that the De Beers Company made a first appearance on the Jagersfontein scene when Cecil John Rhodes became a member of the newly amalgamated company's board of directors.³⁵

Three years prior to that, on 13 March 1888, Rhodes and his partner CD Rudd launched De Beers Consolidated Mines after the amalgamation of a number of individual claims at Kimberley that had steadily been bought up over a period of 18 years.³⁶ In 1893, Rhodes formed a strategic alliance with a London-based syndicate of Jewish companies whereby all De Beers' diamonds would be sold to the syndicate.³⁷ With this alliance, they sealed their monopoly of the world's diamond supply and the Free State mines had to keep a close watch on developments. Rhodes, however, had also been elected as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in 1890³⁸ and in this way, the British controlled Cape Colony finally managed to gain a modicum of control over the portion of the diamond pie that had eluded them with the division of the diamond fields in 1876.

Early on in the history of De Beers Consolidated Mines, Gardner Williams, the managing director, initiated the investigation of more effective methods to recover diamonds from the diamondiferous soil. One of the employees, Mr Fred Kirsten, was in charge of the experimentations that took place in the large crushing plant under supervision of Mr George Labram. After several failed attempts, Kirsten asked to attempt one final experiment by coating the percussion table with a thick layer of grease as he had noticed that diamonds tended to stick to oily substances such as axle grease.³⁹ This proved to be highly successful and led to the registration of the Labram Grease Patent in 1898.⁴⁰ Several official records from the Jagersfontein Consolidated Mining and Exploration Company dating to the early 1900s show that the Jagersfontein mine also had access to these grease tables, but had to pay a percentage fee to De Beers on all diamonds recovered via this method.

35 De Beers Archives, Kimberley, New Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company Limited 1880-1971: Historical Resume, prepared by BJ Feder (archivist), 1977, pp. 2-4.

36 GF Williams, *The diamond mines of South Africa*, II, (*Winning the diamonds*) (New York, BF Buck & Company, 1905), p. 19-20.

37 EJ Epstein, *The diamond invention*, Ch. 7 (London, Hutchinson, 1982), p. 4.

38 G Le Sueur, *Cecil Rhodes: The man and his work* (London, John Murray, 1913), p. 73.

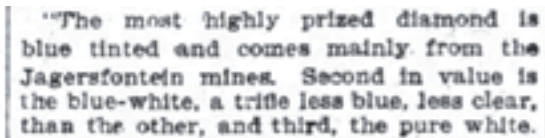
39 GF Williams, *The diamond mines of South Africa...*, p. 19-20.

40 Patent 10510 registered on 14 April 1898.

Exceptional quality of diamonds

Although the individual mining operations did not yield the same quantity of diamonds as the Kimberley mines further north, they delivered diamonds of an exceptional quality. These diamonds are known as blue-tinted diamonds or brilliants and are unique to the Jagersfontein mine. For a long period in the history of diamond grading, the term Jager (the name taken from the mine where this type of diamond was found for the first time) was an official grading term for diamonds of the highest quality.⁴¹ This grading was later dropped when it was discovered that the blue tint of the Jagersfontein diamonds was actually caused by its fluorescence properties and it was replaced by Grade D, which is reserved for diamonds of exceptional whiteness only (in the diamond industry that means colourless). Jager has become an additional description when blue fluorescence can be observed in Grade D colourless diamonds, even in daylight, thereby indicating their property of fluorescence.⁴²

Image 4: Extract from an article on diamonds, “Extravagance in Diamonds”



"The most highly prized diamond is blue tinted and comes mainly from the Jagersfontein mines. Second in value is the blue-white, a trifle less blue, less clear, than the other, and third, the pure white."

Source: *Washington Post*, Sunday, 19 November 1905.

It was, in fact, the uniqueness of the diamonds at Jagersfontein that exposed a scam in 1905 when a French self-proclaimed inventor, Henri Lemoine, claimed that he had discovered a process of producing diamonds from coal. Such an invention, of course, would have had dire effects for the De Beers-controlled diamond industry. His scam might have worked but for his choice of diamonds he used for his demonstration. The top executive of De Beers at the time, Francis Oats, was one of a delegate of associates to investigate the claim and attend the demonstration. He immediately noted the similarity between the “synthetically manufactured” diamonds and those from the Jagersfontein mine. Lemoine, however, was clever in doing the demonstration stark naked to dispel any possible doubts of hidden diamonds. The first demonstration delivered 20 gem-quality diamonds and when asked to repeat the process he produced another 30 of the same quality. Not fully convinced that they had not been tricked, Lemoine was nevertheless offered an advance of money to

41 JM King *et al.*, “Color grading ‘D-to-Z’ diamonds at the GIA laboratory”, *Gems & Gemology*, 2008, p. 296.

42 TM Moses *et al.*, “A contribution to understanding the effect of blue fluorescence on the appearance of diamonds”, *Gems & Gemology*, 1997, p. 245.

develop his invention on the condition that it remained a secret. Three years later, however, a Persian jeweller admitted that he had sold Lemoine diamonds from Jagersfontein that matched the description of those he “produced” during his two demonstrations and Lemoine’s scam was exposed.⁴³

With increased scientific knowledge many years later, the reason for this exceptional quality became clear and in the process Jagersfontein obtained yet another unique label. Diamonds are proverbial geological dinosaurs and date to as early as 3.3 billion years ago. They originate from deep within the mantle of the earth from depths of 180 km down to the transition zone (400-670 km) – and possibly deeper – and they are amongst the deepest solid objects to reach the surface of the earth. Kimberlites (ancient volcanic pipes) provide the passage for the diamonds to reach the surface. Diamonds of exceptional quality, such as can be found at Jagersfontein, have their origin in the transition zone and these kimberlites are known as super kimberlites. Jagersfontein is therefore considered an important locus in the geological correlation of plume-generated continental flood basalts and kimberlites in the Mid-Cretaceous period (a geological period dating approximately 100 million years ago).⁴⁴

Although the Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company effectively remained the owners of the Jagersfontein mine and town until 1931, world events following soon after the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902 rang the death knell for a mining company that was comparatively much smaller than its De Beers-owned counterpart in the Kimberley region was. It had already lost three years of mining during the Anglo-Boer War/South African War and was still in the process of making up the deficit in the years following this when the depression in America during 1908 led to a restricted market for diamonds and consequently large-scale retrenchments at the diamond mines in South Africa.

Mining, however, continued during 1908, but with the outbreak of World War I (1914), washing of diamonds was suspended until 1916 and mining operations resumed only two years later at the end of the war in 1918. Barely three years later, in 1921, mining operations were once again suspended because of the post-war depression of 1920 and the flooding of the market of diamonds by Russia after the Bolshevik revolution. Mining was once again resumed in 1922, but subsequent discoveries of diamonds at Alexander Bay in 1926 and

⁴³ EJ Epstein, *The diamond invention*, Ch. 15..., p. 2.

⁴⁴ SE Haggerty, “Superkimberlites: A geodynamic diamond window to the Earth’s core”, *Earth and Planetary Science Letters*, 122(1-2), 1994, p. 57.

Lichtenberg in 1927 once again affected the economies of diamond mining negatively. This situation affected all the diamond mines in South Africa, but the effect on the economy of individual mines, such as Jagersfontein, that were not part of a larger group of mines was devastating. The 1929 Wall Street crash that led to a worldwide depression forced the mine to close shortly after De Beers Consolidated Mining took over the mining effects at Jagersfontein.

A town with a unique physical character

It was during the period of the New Jagersfontein Mine and Exploration Company that Jagersfontein acquired its unique character that is still largely prevalent today. Improved mining methods and equipment, including the use of the new grease table, resulted in the more effective mining of the diamondiferous soil so that by 1910, they were already near the bottom of the present-day open pit mine and started moving to underground mining. By 1913, underground mining was fully established and open-pit mining ceased. The town blossomed during this period of stability and regular income that could be spent in its shops. It is, therefore, not strange that the majority of the town's buildings today date to this period of prosperity between approximately 1890 and 1914, despite the three-year interruption of the Anglo-Boer War. However, it was Jagersfontein's unique quality of diamonds that made Jagersfontein world famous and consequently added to its prosperity.

Image 5: Meteor Street, Jagersfontein



Source: Photograph, L Philip, 2014.

When taking into account the series of events that took place since the beginning of World War I, it is understandable why the town itself has experienced very little change since the turn of the 19th century. The poor markets caused by successive wars and depression periods are more likely to have a profound effect on a town that is solely reliant on an export product for its survival than, for instance, the surrounding agricultural communities. On the one hand, it stunted growth, but on the other hand, it captured Jagersfontein in a “time capsule” that in time obtained a value of its own. It is this timeless quality that inspired author Roger Webster⁴⁵ to conclude his story on a quest to find a mystery metal box in Jagersfontein, stating, “Go and walk her [Jagersfontein] streets one day – you will sense the spirits of our country’s forgotten past as I have done”.⁴⁶

The official De Beers era

This period in Jagersfontein’s history was preceded by two events, one seemingly insignificant at the time, as Jagersfontein played a role in Ernest Oppenheimer taking over the chairmanship of De Beers in 1928. The first event was when the young Ernest Oppenheimer became an alternate director of the Jagersfontein mine in 1911. The second, more telling event was the gradual buying up of shares in the Jagersfontein Mine by Solly Barnato so that by 1916 he was the largest individual shareholder in both the Jagersfontein and De Beers mines. His support enabled Ernest Oppenheimer to take over chairmanship of De Beers.⁴⁷

In 1931, De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd, under the chairmanship of Oppenheimer, became the official new manager of the Jagersfontein mine and town, but on account of the worldwide depression underground work was stopped in 1932. In addition to the poor economy, most of the mining equipment was out of date and not on a par with De Beers’ other mines further north and they needed to be replaced for more cost-effective mining. By 1937, impending worldwide trouble was already evident with the outbreak of war between Japan and China. By the 1st of September 1939,

⁴⁵ Independent writer, historian, guest speaker and radio personality Roger Webster is renowned for his historical and anecdotal tales based on South African history.

⁴⁶ R Webster, “Thirst for the past”, M McClellan (ed.), *At the fireside – True Southern African stories*, 3 (Claremont, Spearhead, 2005), p. 141.

⁴⁷ M Fraser, “Joel, Solomon Barnato (1865-1931)” (available at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=34195&back=>, as accessed on 7 June 2012).

with Germany's invasion of Poland, and France and the United Kingdom's subsequent declarations of war on Germany, the possibility of a second world war had become a foregone conclusion. Jagersfontein's mining operations thus remained on hold until a year after the end of World War II in 1945. In 1946, De Beers instructed their consulting engineers to proceed with development for the re-equipping and reopening of the mine. Production was started and the mine was officially reopened on 12 December 1949.⁴⁸ The mine remained in production until 28 May 1971, when operations finally ceased.

Although this period can be considered as the second major period of prosperity for the town, it did not leave as visible a footprint on the town itself as had the first period with the Jagersfontein Mining and Exploration Company as the town was already established. Unsuccessful negotiations with the town in obtaining municipal grounds for the erection of housing for mine employees prior to the re-opening of the mine resulted in the establishment of a new mining village, Charlesville, southeast of Jagersfontein. This meant that Jagersfontein mainly served as economic business centre for both the mine and mining village, as the latter had no shopping facilities.

The end of the De Beers era

The following words were spoken by the mayor of Jagersfontein shortly after the last load of diamond-bearing soil was hoisted from the depths of the earth of the Jagersfontein Mine when De Beers finally ceased operations in 1971.⁴⁹

The colourful and picturesque town, nestling in its shallow valley, flanked by low, bush-covered hills, is still pristine in its brightly coloured paints; its houses, churches and public buildings, many nearing a century old, are still in an excellent state of repair. 'And that's how we hope to keep it,' says Mr van Pletsen. 'Though we do not know what the future holds for us, Jagersfontein will certainly not become a ghost town.'

Words that certainly would come back to haunt him, were he still alive, because for the next nearly 40 years the mine lay dormant and the ravaging effects of this on a town with no means of generating an income slowly but surely started to take its toll.

⁴⁸ Anon., *The Diamond News and the S.A. Watchmaker and Jeweller*, "Jagersfontein Mine ceremoniously re-opened", 1949, pp. 15-19.

⁴⁹ *News from the Mines*, "The glitter goes out of Jagersfontein", 4, August 1971, p. 4.

A major oversight was that De Beers did not heed the recommendations made in the socio-economic evaluation report that was compiled by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of the Free State on request of the then Minister of Planning. The report states that in an extensive agricultural region such as where Jagersfontein is situated, it is not economically viable to have more than one service point. Up to the first successful attempts at organised mining at Jagersfontein, nearby Fauresmith was the central service point for the region. The development of Jagersfontein as a town because of the mining activities, and the later addition of Charlesville in 1949, resulted in three towns within a radius of 13-15 km. Without the economic buying power the mine provided during its operational times, the reality is that these three towns would have to vie with one another in providing services to the farms of the region. As it was, Fauresmith has remained the agricultural centre for this region throughout the existence of the town, which had already put the other two towns at a disadvantage. It was, accordingly, recommended that Charlesville be demolished and for Jagersfontein to resort under the municipality of Fauresmith to form one extended town.⁵⁰ However, De Beers did not demolish Charlesville and instead donated the mining village to the then Department of Social Welfare and Pensions as housing for state old age and disability pensioners.⁵¹ This had an adverse effect on the economy of the town, as it meant the addition of economically inactive residents, which was not conducive to the growth of the town.

An additional problem was that De Beers did not formally close the mine but merely left it to lie dormant. This left the few who chose to remain with the hope that the mine will one day be re-opened and that prosperity will be restored. In the period since mining operations had stopped in 1971, the black township of Jagersfontein trebled in size, whilst Jagersfontein remained the same. Today the combined Jagersfontein-Ithumeleng-Charlesville municipal area is one of the most impoverished municipal areas in the Free State.

A new mining era

In March 2010, De Beers put the Jagersfontein Mine, including its “more than 13-million tons of mineral resources tailings” up for sale and on 28

50 Instituut vir Sosiale en Ekonomiese Navorsing (ISEN), Universiteit van die OVS, *Jagersfontein: 'n Sosio-ekonomiese waardebeoordeling* (in samewerking met die Departement van Beplanning vir die hulpbronne en beplanningsadviesraad, November 1968).

51 SL Barnard et al., *Jagersfontein 1882-1982* (Ficksburg, Sentrapers, 1982), p. 44.

September 2010 published a media release on the conclusion of a sale with the Superkolong Consortium. It was, however, a sale with a proviso. The new mine owners had to ensure that they would do the following:⁵²

- Establish a Community Trust of which the Jagersfontein Community is the sole beneficiary
- The Community Trust will hold 10 per cent equity ownership in the holding company that acquires the De Beers Jagersfontein assets
- The Trust must, on formation and registration, receive R20 million in cash for investment and, after due process, expenditure on community benefiting projects
- The Trust will have a deferred right to an amount of R30 million, which will accrue interest over time and contribute to the future financial position of the Community Trust
- The new mine owners must be committed to facilitate skills transfer to members of the community, with a view to ultimately sourcing skilled labour from Jagersfontein

Through these provisos, De Beers passed on their corporate social responsibility to the new owners who had no hand in creating the problem. The consortium wasted no time in getting ready to go into operation and by mid-2011 they were operational. The Superkolong Consortium, headed up by Sonop Diamond Mining and Superkolong, has subsequently teamed up with Johann Rupert's Luxembourg-listed Reinet Investments to form Jagersfontein Developments, under which name the mining effects are currently operated.

The new mining operations did not restore the expected prosperity as envisaged by the local community, as the highly mechanised plant for recovering the diamonds is not labour-intensive. Consequently, precious few local people were able to secure a job. The fact that the town had been promised in what seems to them a fortune in trust did not help either, as many of the very poor expected that this money would be given to them directly to alleviate their immediate needs. Although the new owners are living up to their side of the sale, this is a mammoth task that requires more than what they can or should be expected to provide.⁵³

52 R Bates, "De Beers sells diamond property", *JCK – Jewellery Industry News*, 28 September 2010 (available at <http://www.jckonline.com/2010/09/28/de-beers-sells-diamond-property>, as accessed on 11 February 2011).

53 B Ryan, "Johan Rupert goes diamond mining", 16 May 2011 (available at miningmx.com/news/diamonds/johann-rupert-goes-diamond-mining, as accessed on 15 May 2015).

Corporate social responsibility

De Beers' catchy slogan, "Diamonds are forever", is certainly not applicable to the towns that arose because of diamond mining. This phenomenon can also not be assigned to diamond mining alone, as several other mining industries have left devastated communities in the wake of their mining activities. New legislation in this regard is attempting to redress the situation through the new Companies Act, No. 71 of 2008 (with effect from 1 May 2011), as amended by the Companies Amendment Act, No. 3 of 2011. Section 72(4) is of importance as it states that "The minister may by regulation prescribe that a company or a category of companies must have a social & ethics committee, if it is desirable in the public interest ..." [Act 71 of 2008].

The amended version of 2011 expands on this section and adds another six sub-sections on social and ethics committees. In 2011, the Companies Regulations were gazetted and Section 43 thereof contains substantial more guidance on this matter. On 1 May 2012, it became mandatory for certain categories of companies, including, amongst others, all state-owned companies and all listed public companies, to appoint a social and ethics committee. In terms of Regulation 43(5) of the aforementioned Companies Regulations, good corporate citizenship includes the monitoring of "the company's contribution to development of the communities in which its activities are predominantly conducted ..." As the De Beers sale of the Jagersfontein mine effects had been concluded before the new legislation came into effect, it is to be commended that they did add the afore-mentioned proviso for the sale but, although better than nothing, it is insufficient to save the town effectively.

Claims to fame

Apart from being the first place in the world of discovery of a diamond in its primary source, and apart from its exceptional quality of diamonds and geological importance, Jagersfontein also has other claims to fame:

- In June 1893, one of the world's largest diamonds, the "Excelsior", was discovered at Jagersfontein. It weighed 971¾ carats (uncut) and until the Cullinan Diamond's discovery in 1905 remained the world's largest diamond discovered. The black mineworker who found it was awarded with £500 in cash and a horse equipped with saddle and bridle.⁵⁴

54 W Le Barrow, "Jagersfontein", *Optima*, 17, June 1971, p. 86.

- Two years later, in 1895, another large diamond weighing 634 carats (uncut) was discovered and initially named the “Reitz” after the then President of the Orange Free State, FW Reitz, but was later renamed the “Jubilee” in honour of Queen Victoria’s 60th birthday.⁵⁵ These two still rank in the world’s ten largest diamonds found to date.
- Before this however, a lesser-known diamond, the whereabouts of which no one seems to know today, was found in 1891. At the time, it was known as the “Pam Brilliant”, but the name was later changed to the “Jagersfontein”. Originally a 115-carat diamond, it was cut to 56,6 carat. It is reported that Queen Victoria was most interested in obtaining this diamond and requested it to be shown to her at Osborne House. The untimely death of the Duke of Clarence (1892), her grandson for whom the purchase was intended, put an end to the negotiations.⁵⁶
- On 16 May 1967, a diamond unique to the Jagersfontein mine was found. Throughout the mine’s existence it delivered very few brown diamonds, none of them of any significant size. Not only did this brown diamond weigh 248,9 carats in its uncut form, but it also came from a depth of 2 500 feet, which is considered an exceptional depth for a diamond of this size in a volcanic diamond-bearing pipe. It was purchased by Baumgold Bros. of New York and cut into a pear shape weighing 111,59 carats. When cut, it proved to have an exceptional brilliance, which is not normally associated with diamonds of strong colour. Because of its brilliance and colour, Joseph Baumgold named it the “Earth Star”.⁵⁷
- Over the years, the Jagersfontein mine produced several diamonds of notable size, but none quite as large as the “Excelsior” and “Jubilee”. Few of these are known, as diamonds are only named after they have been cut.
- The town also claims that its open-pit mine is not only bigger than that of Kimberley, but also the steepest hand-dug open-pit mine in the world. Historian Steve Lundersted has researched this claim using archival mining records and concluded that Jagersfontein is indeed the biggest and that Kimberley’s Big Hole cannot lay claim to this fame.⁵⁸

55 Anon., 24hGold, “List of the largest diamonds in the world”, 25 September 2012 (available at <http://www.24hgold.com/english/contributor.aspx?article=1993198956G10020&contributor=Famous+diamonds>, as accessed on 5 February 2013).

56 Anon., *The Diamond News and the S.A. Watchmaker and Jeweller*, “Free state diamonds in Victorian times: Fascinating stories of Jagersfontein and Koffiefontein mines”, 1956.

57 I Balfour, *Famous diamonds* (ACC Distribution, Woodbridge, 2008), p. 306.

58 H van der Merwe, “Big hole loses claim to fame”, 20 May 2005 (available at <http://www.news24.com/southafrica/news/bigholelosesclaimtofame20050519>, as accessed on 18 July 2013).

Jagersfontein is today considered one of the most impoverished towns of the Free State and has one of the highest percentages of unemployment in the country.⁵⁹ Looking back, it is difficult to imagine that this town was once known all over the world, when few people in South Africa today would know either of its existence or the important role it played in the mining history of this country. One can only wonder what readers today would think author Henry⁶⁰ could possibly have meant when he described the girl in his story as, “Her eyes now sparkled like jagerfonteins”.⁶¹

Image 6: 1966 Aerial view showing the open mine, plant and southern section of the town



Source: De Beers Archives, Jagersfontein Mine, Photograph 579.

Conclusion

More than half of South Africans live below the national poverty line, which indicates that a stronger focus on poverty-reduction strategies in South Africa at every level of governance is needed. Jagersfontein’s close proximity to

59 Statistics SA, *Census 2011 Statistical Release* (Pretoria, Statistics South Africa, 2012).

60 American born and bred William Sydney Porter, known by his pen name O Henry (1862-1910).

61 O Henry, *A newspaper story. Whirligigs* (New York, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1917) (pages not numbered).

Fauresmith, which is the service centre of the region, necessitates the need for a different focus in generating jobs. During the two identified booming periods in the history of Jagersfontein, it had a healthy economy which sustained the town and “mining” its history can provide similar results. Although the current mining activities are not able to secure sufficient jobs to swing the pendulum in terms of poverty, Jagersfontein has several marketable assets that the town can benefit from. The quaint, largely Victorian, architecture dating to the turn of the 19th century, the unique aspects of its manmade open pit mine, and its exclusive history in terms of being the first place in the world where non-alluvial diamonds were found, lend Jagersfontein a character unparalleled elsewhere. Tourism is a viable way to compete with Fauresmith for its existence and a view of its open pit mine alone warrants a visit to the town, as it is situated literally on the edge of the town. The town’s time-bound architecture ties in with the theme of a historic mining town and if restored to its former glory will be an equally big asset as the open pit mine is. However, it will require the identification of several stakeholders other than the community itself to provide the required financial backup as well as professional knowledge in terms of planning, kicking off the process and transferring the necessary skills to the local people to enable them to develop it further. In the process, Jagersfontein will write itself back into the history of South Africa and can once again become world-renowned.