

THE TEMPLE AT MELROSE

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THE SYFERFONTEIN-ABBOTSFORD ERA

Abbotsford is little known, even to people in Johannesburg. Most maps of Johannesburg exclude the small suburb in favour of Melrose and Oaklands. On approximately three acres (1,2 ha) of land, in the heart of this tiny suburb, stands a little structure that was built there just over three-quarters of a century ago. It is not far from the M1 motorway and is situated on the banks of the Little Jukskei, before it joins with the Sandspruit which flows past the Melrose Bird Sanctuary. The building could well be described as one of the strongholds of Hindu religious activity in South Africa. So long as there is a Hindu community in this country, so long will there be reference to it as a monument to the pioneering days of early Johannesburg. It has, for these many years, been so popular a shrine for worship, in the somewhat archaic style, that no matter how far the Indian community may for any reason be removed from it, there will always be a regular pilgrimage to its hallowed precincts.

The farm Syferfontein, situated on the banks of the Little Jukskei River in what is today the northern part of the city of Johannesburg, was occupied in 1875 by a Mulder family. It was over 1714 hectares in size and was eventually split up into the suburbs of Abbotsford, Bramley, Dunkeld, Melrose, Oaklands, and Waverley.

Henry Brown Marshall, founder of the South African Investment and Trust Company Limited and the Clydesdale (Transvaal) Collieries, acquired (6 March 1893) a part of the farm officially described as portion B of Syferfontein No. 2 in the district of Johannesburg (formerly No. 380 in the district of Pretoria), measuring 580 square roods (59 ha). Other sections of the farm were acquired by the South African Investment and Trust Company Limited who laid out the original fifty-five stands of the township Abbotsford, on twenty hectares of the farm Syferfontein No. 2. These freehold plots were sold by the auctioneer Richard Currie in February 1898. On 14 March 1899 Marshall acquired from the South African Investment and Trust Company Limited portion A of Syferfontein No. 2 measuring 279 square roods (28 ha). He also acquired some additional property on Syferfontein No. 2 from J.J.P.C.L. Steyn.

A few months before the commencement of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 H.B. Marshall leased the part adjacent to the Little Jukskei River. The leaseholder, one Reginald Linaker, started a laundry business, the Melrose Steam Laundry, using mainly Indians. The laundry was on a site not far from that occupied today by the Melrose Bird Sanctuary. The business was, at first, successful enough to enable Linaker to purchase the farm from Marshall. A legal document was drawn up on 29 August 1919 concluding the sale of a portion of the farm Syferfontein on behalf of Henry Brown Marshall to William Bond Parfitt and Reginald Linaker.

Workers at the laundry were given homes to live in and life was probably as comfortable as it could have been on the small salaries and monthly food rations they were allowed. However, the need for a place of worship was felt very keenly, and Linaker's farm at Abbotsford seemed to be the ideal site for a temple. At least two characteristics favoured the area. Firstly, the wide open piece of attractive farmland would be an ideal place for quiet meditation. Secondly, the little river afforded the place a certain serene sanctity. This linked up with the scripturally recommended sites for places of worship in

India, where many shrines are located on the banks of the Ganga, Jamina, and Kaveri Rivers.

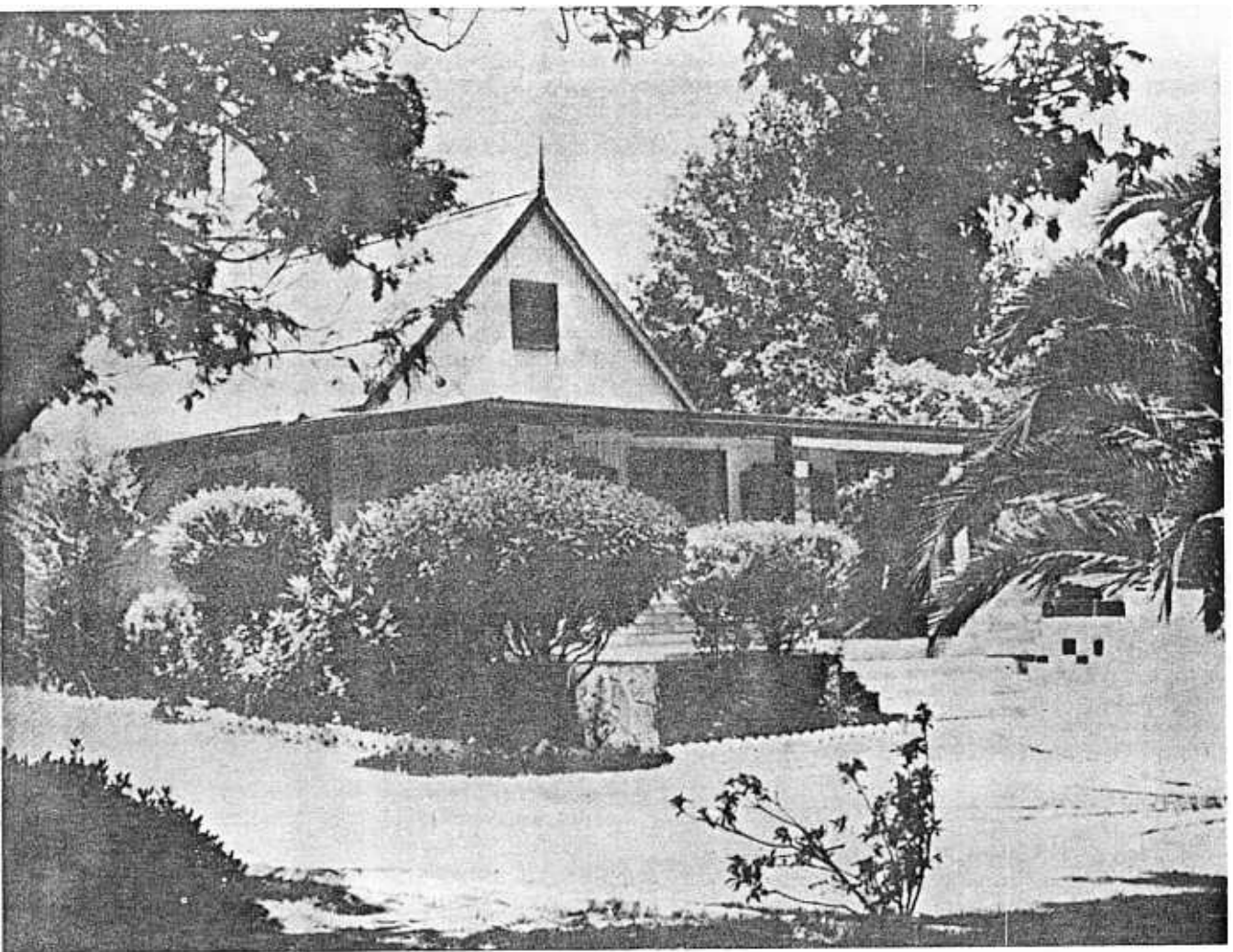
What made the choice of a temple on the site a priority was the fact that the Indian labourers, who belonged to a traditionally orthodox and rural community, were ardent worshippers of Lord Muruga. As the laundry itself occupied only a small portion of the space available on the farm, and the part on the river bank lay empty, it was resolved that an attempt be made to construct a temple, dedicated to what is perhaps the most popular of all Hindu deities in South Indian religious tradition. An approach was made, on behalf of all the workers, to Reginald Linaker.

The general view is that Kandasamy Pillay, the firm's foreman, known to his co-workers as the "Sardar", who always acted as chief spokesman for the labourers on all matters, was instrumental in convincing Linaker about the value of, and the need for, a place of worship. Linaker, sympathetic to their needs, allowed them the land on which a small temple, in the form of a wood-and-iron sanctuary, was built.

One of the most significant features of the whole episode concerning the construction of the temple was that, apart from the generous donation of land by Linaker, the entire structure was built with labour and funds provided by the workers on Linaker's farm. There was no need to raise funds, or even appeal to the Indian community in Johannesburg for assistance.

Vythalingham Chetty, of the Johannesburg Indian community, was present when the temple was built immediately before the start of the Anglo-Boer War. He remembered the installation of the images worshipped in the shrine, but was unable to give much further information, being too young at the time, and was not aware of the details connected with its construction and the induction ceremonies.

The establishment of the temple made it possible for the Indian community, as a whole, to re-establish contact with and propagate a cultural link. The temple at Melrose became a cultural centre very much the pride and joy of a basically God-hungry people. For some time all went well for the temple and its band of devoted stalwarts. It became possible for the most popular festival known among Tamil people in South Africa to be celebrated there with great fervour. The Kavadi Festival was organised twice a year and on festival days there was reason



The Hindu Temple at Melrose.

PHOTOGRAPH: T. NAIDOO

FIRST CHANGE OF OWNER

enough for the entire Tamil community of Johannesburg, the Reef, Pretoria, and Vereeniging to gather at Abbotsford.

Festival days, from the temple's inception, came to be accepted as those when the community, as a whole, would gather at the temple for the worship and renewal of contact with culture and tradition. South Africa, being as far removed as it is from the home of orthodox forms of worship and traditionally-accepted forms of cultural and social practice in the Hindu tradition, does not lend itself easily to the maintenance of these practices. Festival days are thus the days when thoughts of culture and religion are enhanced. The costs of organising an adequate programme of activities had necessarily to be high and the lack of an organised committee made this extremely difficult. The small band of workers, the Sardar and his colleagues, very soon found that the entire burden of maintaining the Temple from day to day, in addition to finding the means for organising festival days, totally unmanageable. The time had come for an organisation, possessing the means for carrying burdens of this nature, to take over. Negotiations were entered into with representatives of the Transvaal Tamil Benefit Society. Members of the Vrededorp branch of the Society were more than willing to share the burden of maintenance of the temple, and soon a number of willing people rallied round to save it for posterity.

The temple had been in existence for just over twenty years when it encountered its first major catastrophe. Linaker's laundry ran into financial difficulties and his business was declared insolvent. Part of the sequestration agreement was that Linaker would lose all his assets and the land on which the temple stood was to be put up for auction. It became necessary, upon the declaration of insolvency, for another person of the White community to be found to save the situation for devotees of the temple. The law prohibiting Indians from owning land or property in White areas is still as stringent today as it was before the turn of the century. As the land on which the temple stood was situated in a White area, the Indian community had, since the day of its construction, been plagued by the uncertainty surrounding its right to ownership of the temple. Two White persons had always to be nominated to act as "owners" of the land and property on behalf of the Indian people. When Linaker conceded sequestration, two friends of the Indian community, Lewis Walter Ritch and Henry Polak, close friends of Mahatma Gandhi, were on hand to save the situation. Ritch, a theosophist and manager of a commercial firm, had been helpful to Gandhi in securing offices for him to carry on a legal practice in Johannesburg. He had been articled to Gandhi in his days as a budding lawyer. Polak, a vegetarian and sub-editor of *The Critic*, was also connected with the legal profession.

The efforts by the Vrededorp branch of the Transvaal

Tamil Benefit Society to consolidate the position of the temple and its administration had advanced greatly since the first discussions were held with the Sardar and his colleagues. It was decided that a proper organisation, consisting of representatives and responsible members of the community in Johannesburg, would meet to discuss adequate supervision of the temple and its affairs and a responsible governing body be elected to control this.

At a meeting convened at the Good Hope bioscope hall in Commissioner Street, Johannesburg, on Sunday 2 October 1921 under the auspices of the Transvaal Tamil Benefit Society, a new administrative body calling itself the Johannesburg Melrose Siva Subramaniam Temple Council came into being to care for the temple and its affairs. A constitution was drawn up and signed by the chairman of the Transvaal Tamil Benefit Society on 5 October 1929.

The two friends, Ritch and Polak, had won the confidence of the new Council. There was sufficient faith and trust in these two to ask them, when Linaker was forced to concede insolvency, to become legal guardians of the temple. The attorney, William Ross MacIntosh, was granted power of attorney by Linaker to cede and transfer in full his property to Ritch. This transfer came into effect on 15 May 1922 with Ritch paying over the sum of £500 as total cost of transfer.

SECOND CHANGE OF OWNER

Mahatma Gandhi left South Africa in 1914 to lead his people in their fight for India's independence. When in 1922 Ritch offered to assist the Indian community in their efforts to preserve the safety of the temple, there was not much evidence to show that Ritch's legal practice was a thriving concern. As a matter of fact, in less than five years, two trustees were appointed to administer Ritch's insolvent estate. A power of attorney drawn up in November 1926 required the sale of all his assets which, in turn, threatened the well-being of the Melrose temple. The property at Abbotsford had, once again, to feature in an auction sale. The auction was to be handled by the well-known Lezard and Co. A few businessmen showed interest in the land but at the auction V. Chetty, secretary of the Vrededorp branch of the Transvaal Tamil Benefit Society, and several close friends in the Tamil Benefit Society, among them Singaram Pather, N.S. Pillay, and R.S.C. Pillay, resorted to a desperate display of emotionalism at this crucial juncture. Chetty's account of the incident is as follows: "We all stood by and watched as the auctioneer proceeded to inform the crowd of the intended sale of the land and property. A few Jewish businessmen were present and at least two of them were very enthusiastic about buying. We knew that if we did not act quickly our temple would be lost to us forever. We informed them, and all the assembled crowd, that takeover of our land and temple would mean the breaking down of the shrine and the land being put to other uses by the prospective owner. We told them we would never break down the temple that was so sacred to our people. Hence we declared that if any person bought the temple and land he would have to tear down the building himself. The wrath of our gods would forever stand in the way of his business dealings or threaten the well-being of his residential quarters. I can't tell you the effect this had on the people present. Immediately all prospective buyers became so cautious about negotiating a purchase that the very gloom and anxiety cast over the auction saved for


us our beloved shrine, and the day itself proved a red letter day for us as a community. One must admit, however, that most people present were very sympathetic to our wish to preserve the temple, so, all told, we managed to come away feeling very elated."

The auctioneering of the temple had been aborted and the episode was concluded when the auctioneer wanted to know how much money the community was willing to pay for the land they claimed rightfully belonged to them. The members of the Transvaal Tamil Benefit Society through their spokesman, R.S.C. Pillay, offered the nominal sum of £1 as a token gesture. There was no question of buying what was actually theirs. There is general belief that the amount was accepted, although official documents quote a figure far in excess of the emotionally inspired £1 offer.

The right of ownership did not, however, pass into the hands of the Johannesburg Melrose Siva Subramaniam Temple Council. To conform to government policy it still required a sympathetic and friendly but scrupulously honest person of the White community to be nominated legal owner of the property. He appeared in the form of Charles Henry Kemsley. In a deed of sale, drawn up on 7 February 1927, Kemsley became legal owner of the now famous and hallowed ground at Abbotsford. Kemsley acted as nominee for the owners of the temple until his death in 1940. He was a lawyer by profession and under his direction a trust company was formed to administer the legal requirements of land ownership in a less cumbersome way.

The Johannesburg Siva Subramaniam Temple Trust Company (Pty) Limited came into existence, two directors of the company being nominated to sign all legal documents relating to ownership of the land. It was always considered legally (and judiciously) necessary that the directors of the company should be members of the White community. The formation of the company therefore helped to reduce the great risks involved in handing over complete ownership of the temple property to people who, although sympathetic and friendly, were nevertheless only nominees selected as a matter of expediency to circumvent problems arising out of extra-ordinary political attitudes and policies.

Political policies do not, however, always reign supreme. In October 1981 the temple was declared a national monument. This act on the part of the National Monuments Council was seen as a gesture of enormous goodwill and a tribute to the sacrifices of the early pioneers in Johannesburg's Hindu community.

The temple is one of the best-loved shrines owned by the Hindu community in South Africa, and today stands in silent and serene splendour as it has done for three quarters of a century. People come from far and wide to worship, admire, or sometimes just to be at peace. 

SOURCE LIST

1. Deeds office, Pretoria: Deed of transfer Nos. 493 of 1893; 1255 of 1899; 11568 of 1919; 4971 of 1922; 1109 of 1927.
2. M.K. GANDHI. *The story of my experiments with truth*. Ahmedabad, 1927.
3. *Johannesburg and Pretoria guide*. N. p., n.d.
4. *The South African mining and engineering journal* 59, March-August 1948: Obituary notice on death of H.B. Marshall.
5. Oral source: V. Chetty.
6. A.H. SMITH. *Johannesburg street names*. Cape Town, 1971.