Rhodes Fruit Farms: A Small Beginning in the Paarl Valley
1897-1910

Chris Aucamp
University of Fort Hare

Rhodes Fruit Farms, or RFF as it is known today, is situated in the Great Drakenstein Valley between Franschhoek and Paarl, which forms part of the greater Paarl Valley. This area has been settled since the arrival of the French Huguenots in 1788. The French influence is still evident from names such as La Motte, Champagne and La Provence.1

Although, today Rhodes Fruit Farms is a large and influential fruit undertaking with assets totalling 45 farms (± 1 500 hectares), it had very humble beginnings nearly 100 years ago. However, the company was able to produce large quantities of fresh fruit for local as well as overseas markets within a few years of its establishment in 1897. It also helped to develop Britain as an important fresh fruit market (for many years the most important overseas market).

This undertaking, which was established by Harry Pickstone with the financial aid of Cecil John Rhodes, has made Great Drakenstein as well as the rest of the Paarl Valley an important deciduous fruit producing region in the Cape since the beginning of the twentieth century. The production of quality fruit was made possible by the combined efforts of the private sector and state institutions. In this way progress was made in laying the foundations of a well established fresh fruit industry, not only in the Paarl Valley, but also in the rest of South Africa.2

The establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms must be viewed against the background of the development of the deciduous fruit industry since the first fresh fruit was exported in 1886. Wine production was for many years the most important agricultural activity in the Western Cape.3 But in 1886 the disease Phylloxera Vastratrix, (an insect which lives on the root system of the vine until it dies) was discovered in Cape Town. It threatened the wine industry, not only in the Cape Colony, but also in the world at large. The only way this insect could be combated, was to uproot all existing vine stocks and to replace them with phylloxera resistant lower stocks.4

Viticulture suffered a further setback as a result of the overproduction of wine and brandy. In turn that tendency occasioned a marked decline in the price of wine and brandy which meant that wine and brandy were being produced at a loss.5 Because the wine farmer was faced with bankruptcy he realized that he had to look for an alternative. Therefore fruit farmers started increasingly to plant more fruit trees.

The development of the fruit industry in the U.S.A., New Zealand and Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century also constituted an important factor.

The fruit farmers and brokers in these countries prepared the way for the development of the industry by Cape farmers in more than one respect. This concerned especially the cultivation and marketing of the product.6

The availability of a local as well as foreign markets was also important. The discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa gave rise to an internal market. The discovery of minerals also helped to bring about the necessary infrastructure, for example, the development of railways.7

Growing demand for fresh fruit by the European markets during the second half of the nineteenth century was also a factor which contributed to the expansion of the Cape fresh fruit industry. In Europe, and especially in England, an increasing demand for Cape fruit manifested itself.8
The Cape Colony was the only area which, until then, could provide European markets with fresh fruit between December and March. New Zealand and Australia could only provide fruit from March to May, while the U.S.A. could do so from May to August. The Cape farmers therefore, had an unlimited market for those few months.9

Extremely favourable climatic conditions in the Western Cape was another important factor in the establishment of the fresh fruit industry. Cold, wet winters and dry, warm summers are highly suitable for the cultivation of fresh fruit. The only really major problem in this connection was the strong south-east wind which blows in the Cape during the summer months.10

Yet another significant factor was the part played by by-products. The production of jams, dried fruits and canned fruit contributed to the establishment of the industry on a more economic basis. These products are produced from fruit of second grade quality. This not only helped the producer to find an outlet for fruit not suitable for export, but also encouraged the development of new industries.11

It was against this background that wine farmers began increasingly to plant fresh fruit trees. The first shipment of fresh fruit was sent to England in 1886, while the first sizable shipment reached England successfully in 1892.12

During the first decade of the industry’s development, fruit producers and traders battled to get the product to the local and foreign markets in a good condition. The following factors resulted in a poor product reaching the markets: poor quality young trees, vines and cultivars; a lack of expertise concerning the cultivation of fresh fruit; the absence of a well-coordinated railway and ocean transport system, good roads and cold-storage facilities in harbours, railway cars and ships, as well as the lack of a properly structured marketing system.14

If all these factors are taken into consideration, it is readily understandable that those who initiated the new industry faced an uphill struggle. It also explains why the establishment of the fresh fruit industry took place over an extended period of time.

Several persons made important contributions to the establishment and development of the fresh fruit industry. Among them were H.E.V. (Harry) Pickstone, P.J. Cillie, P.A. Molteno, C.P. Lowsbury, C. Du Chiappini, J.X. Merriman, P. MacOwan, C.E. Pillans, L.M. Dicey and P.R. Malleson.15

Harry Pickstone was certainly one of the people who contributed significantly to the establishment of the fresh fruit industry. Pickstone, who arrived in Cape Town on 15 March, 1892, was born on 4 July, 1865 in Lancaster, England.16 He had acquired useful expertise in the cultivation of fruit in California.17

Following his arrival in the Cape Colony, Pickstone was introduced to Rhodes by C.D. Rudd. Pickstone convinced Rhodes of the Cape’s potential for the fruit industry, but he pointed out that there was a dire shortage of high quality young trees and vine stocks. The only way to overcome the problem, he believed, would be to establish more nurseries.18

Rhodes appreciated the problem and offered Pickstone £100 with which to begin a nursery. Together with S. van Reenen, Pickstone started the Pioneer Fruit Growing Company on the farm, Nootgedacht near Stellenbosch in 1892.19 Pickstone and van Reenen, however, did not see

H. Pickstone’s birth certificate. (N.I.V.V., Stellenbosch)
eye to eye on how to cultivate fruit trees. As a result of differences arising between them, Pickstone left Nootgedacht in March 1893. 20

After leaving the Pioneer Fruit Growing Company, Pickstone once again received funds from Rhodes to start a nursery. He received £150 from Rhodes as well as £150 from Rudd for this purpose. With the aid of this money Pickstone started his own nursery, H.E.V. Pickstone and Brothers Limited on the farm Welvanpas in May 1893, owned by Dan Retief (this farm was the birthplace of Piet Retief). The farm was situated near Wellington. With this nursery as headquarters, Pickstone and his brother, Horace also established nurseries in the Hex River Valley and in Constantia near Cape Town in 1894. 21 This marked the beginning of an important partnership between Rhodes and Pickstone.

The year 1896 may be taken as the unofficial beginning of Rhodes Fruit Farms. In January 1896 Rhodes resigned as Premier of the Cape Colony because of his complicity in the Jameson Raid. In December he and Harry Pickstone started discussions which constituted the immediate occasion for the establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms. Initially Rhodes was doubtful about the future of the fresh fruit industry. Pickstone, by contrast, was optimistic and expressed his confidence in the future of the industry. That is why discussions between the two men took place and these were to result directly in the establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms on 20 May 1897. 22

During 1897 Pickstone purchased the following farms or portions of farms in Great Drakenstein, Franschoek, Wellington, Paarl and Tulbagh: La Motte, Good Hope, Rhone, Boschendal, Weltevrede, Watergat, Lekkerwijn, Meerlust, Werda, Eenzaam, Niewendorp, Delta, Zandvlei, Zondervoor, Klipvallei, De Fontein, Groenfontein, Welgegund, Vredenburg, Koelenhof, Nootgedacht and Kleinberg - a total of approximately 7 000 morgen (5 845 hectares). 23 From these transactions it can be deduced that the first farms were purchased as early as March 1897. In order not to draw too much attention to his activities, Rhodes used Lewis Mitchell, manager of Standard Bank and a personal friend, as a go-between. He bought the first group of farms in Mitchell's name. Pickstone had to choose the farms for Rhodes. One of the considerations was that apart from fertile and suitable soil, preference was to be given to farms "... with old Cape Dutch houses in good condition." 24 The farms were registered in Rhodes' name by the end of 1897. 25

It soon appeared that the capital expenditure involved in the purchase of these farms and the capital for development constituted a heavy financial burden on Rhodes. He therefore approached De Beers Diamond Mines (Pty) Ltd. with a view to establishing a company for the development and administration of the farms. 26 The company reacted favourably and on 20 May 1897 it was decided "... to expend in the development of the fruit industry in the Cape Colony a sum of money on the basis of £ for £ with the chairman (C.J. Rhodes) of the company and to share jointly with him the profit or loss...

The cooperation between Rhodes and De Beers was effected on that date with the establishment of the company, Rhodes Fruit Farms. It consisted of 14 farms or portions of farms and cost £94 411. 28

In time Rhodes realized that more capital was needed for the development of the undertaking. At a board meeting on 25 April 1901, he proposed that the enterprise be financed and administered on a shareholding basis. 29 On 14 February 1902, Rhodes, Alfred Beit and De Beers signed a partnership agreement. They invested a collective sum of £300 000 (£100 000 each) in this partnership. 30 In practice this agreement meant that Rhodes owned the farms while De Beers and Beit were to develop and manage the farms with the aid of their capital. 31 Rhodes Trust, as Rhodes' share in the company was known, as well as Beit's share, was sold to De Beers before 1910, so that De Beers was the sole shareholder by 1910. 32

In 1897 Pickstone was appointed managing director and expert advisor of Rhodes Fruit Farms in order to develop its organization effectively. He took the task upon himself while still in charge of his own nurseries. R.J. Bulmer was appointed as the first manager. 33 Following the establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms Limited in 1902 the first directors of the newly formed company were appointed: Sir Charles Metcalfe, Dr. Leander S. Jameson and Edward R. Syfort. Other directors in the period up to 1910 were H.E.V. Pickstone, Sir Lewis Mitchell, Louis Abrahamson, Francis Oats and Sir Thomas Smartt. 34 The general managers (at times also in charge of business management and secretariat) were R.E. Ball, George Whiteley, C.D.H. Spence, R.R. Morrison and Gerald Open. 35 Furthermore, eleven additional farm managers were appointed in 1901 as Bulmer could not handle everything single handed. The first managers and the farms they managed, were R.J. Bulmer (Good Hope), A. Mostert (La Rhone), M.S. Louw (Boschendal), L. Baker (Weltevrede), R.A. Davis (Watergat), W.E. Rooke (La Motte), R.S. Falcon (Klipvallei), E.J.L. Woodland (De Fortuin), E.H. Read (Groenfontein and also Welgegund), G.P. Morrison, and later N.P. Rooke (Kleinberg), J.H. Posthuma Waite (Vredenburg) and E. Lange (Nootgedacht). Other farm managers who served were J.B. van der Westhuizen and W.E. Burke. 36 Most of the managers received their training in California and were brought to the Cape Colony to manage and develop the farms. 37
The Board of Directors determined the policy of the Company and took all the decisions affecting it. Amongst other things this included the appointment of new directors, general managers, business managers, secretaries and farm managers. They were also responsible for the appointment of any other employees, such as teachers (who taught the labourers’ children) store-room managers and managers of the canned fruit and jam factory.38

The Board of Directors also took all decisions relating to the financial affairs of the Company. This included the purchase and sale of shares, land and farms; the expansion and development of the farms (especially the planting of new trees) and the erection of a storeroom during 1904. It also included the establishment of a canned fruit and jam factory in 1905, the appointment of distribution agents for the Cape Colony and Witwatersrand, the erection of buildings to house labourers and farm managers, sheds and other buildings. The Board also determined the salaries of all employees and labourers.39

The secretary had organizational duties while the business manager concerned himself with all aspects of marketing. These officials operated from the company’s head office in Great Drakenstein. The task of the general manager was to coordinate and administer all the various aspects of the enterprise. In practice it meant that he was responsible for all the farm managers, the managers of the canned fruit and jam factory as well as the business manager. The secretary also had to report to him. The general manager was the person responsible for everything taking place in the company. In turn he was responsible to the Board of Directors.40

Following the systematic purchase of the farms in Great Drakenstein and the establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms, there was considerable speculation as to why Rhodes had taken on this enterprise. Some saw it as merely a political manoeuvre. They thought he wished to enrich himself at the expense of Afrikaner farm-owners. De Kolonist, for example, saw these purchases as a political manoeuvre on Rhodes’ part. This newspaper suggested that, as an Englishman, and by implication, a supporter of British imperialism, he wished to “remove” Dutch farmers from their farms. According to reports, he as a wealthy financier could purchase the farms cheaply due to the devastating effects of the Phylloxera insect and the subsequent bankruptcies.41 This argument must be seen against the background of the political situation in Southern Africa, especially in that British imperialism at that time aimed to oust Afrikaner nationalism. For that reason many Afrikaners had still not forgotten the Jameson Raid in which Rhodes had been implicated.42

One of Rhodes’ prime aims however, was to stimulate the fresh fruit industry generally. The Phylloxera insect played an important role in this connection. Rhodes wished to prove to the wine farmers of the Western Cape that they could use their farms more profitably by planting fruit trees. This would enable many farmers to keep their farms. A new “industry” could be developed alongside the existing wine industry on the same farm, which seemed promising for the future.43

Rhodes also wished to expand and develop the export industry for fresh fruit. According to him the foundations had already been laid and a concerted effort was needed to put it on a firm foundation. Pickstone was one of those who played an important role in establishing the Western Province Fruit Exporters Association of South Africa in 1899. For many years this association was able to control quality fruit for export. With the support of other export companies, it also succeeded in developing a solid export industry for fresh fruit.44

Another of Rhodes’ important aims was to import new fresh fruit cultivars from overseas and to experiment with them to determine which cultivars could best be used for export purposes. In this way he hoped to improve the fresh fruit industry. He did in fact achieve an admirable measure of success. It was Pickstone, above all, who encouraged him to budget for this purpose.45

Replying to these accusations, Rhodes expressed himself as follows:

“In a small way I have tried to encourage fruit cultivation in the Cape Colony and possess some twenty or thirty farms in the Paarl and Stellenbosch districts. Owing to their special knowledge the man in charge of these farms are almost entirely English, who have studied fruit-cultivation in California; and for the first time we have a number of English on the land in these districts. At first they were looked upon with suspicion and distrust by their neighbours. This feeling has now totally altered. They mix socially with the neighbouring farmers; they are intermarrying with the Dutch and the whole tone of these districts is changing.”46

Pickstone was the pivot on which all things turned, especially, because he could put his experience in the fruit industry into practice. From the start he did everything within his power to run the farms on an economical and commercial basis. He was particularly strongly motivated by the trust Rhodes placed in him as person and as fruit-expert.47

Rhodes favoured the appointment of well trained farm managers. Pickstone and Rhodes were both convinced this was best for the expansion of the enterprise. Following the appointment of additional farm managers he urged them to excellence and loyalty towards the company. From the beginning he also exercised strict control over the farm managers. Only in this way, Pickstone thought, could the best possible results be achieved.48

He took trouble to visit the farmers to determine the progress made and to identify problems. In so doing he encouraged the farm managers to plan their activities.49 The managers, who sometimes required certain practical information, were able to obtain it from Pickstone himself during his visits. This contributed considerably to the efficiency of the enterprise since it was often difficult to
Neither Pickstone nor Rhodes fully realised the significance of this development.

The establishment and success of Rhodes Fruit Farms proved that planting and growing fruit on a large scale was a viable proposition. By experimenting with certain cultivars, by using well trained farm managers, and by applying the right methods, Rhodes Fruit Farms clearly proved that fresh fruit could be produced on a large scale.

The Company also proved that fresh fruit could be grown on soil infested by the Phyloxera insect without fear of detrimental effects. This inclined numerous farmers in the Western Cape to optimism. Some of them were eager to plant fruit trees on their own farms.

Significant proof of the overseas marketability of fresh fruit was provided as well. In 1904, for example, an average of between 23 and 30 tons of fruit was packed weekly for local and foreign markets. Although part of the fruit was shipped to England, the rest was sent to markets in the larger centres in the Cape Colony, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The most important centres were Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Kimberley, Johannesburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein.

Although the fruit industry had been in operation for a decade by 1896, it was only the contribution of Rhodes and Pickstone that really started the development of the fruit industry on a scientific basis. Their zeal, perseverance and vision constituted an attempt to save the wine-farmer from bankruptcy. With the establishment of Rhodes Fruit Farms there was also an attempt to diversify and stimulate agriculture (especially in the Western Cape). Their enthusiasm impressed many farmers and served to convince those who struggled against the Phyloxera insect of the viability of the industry.

As far as Rhodes Fruit Farms are concerned, its efforts made the Great Drakenstein Valley one of the most prominent fresh fruit growing areas. Today the Company still centres its activities on the valley.

The fruit industry was in an infant stage of its development when Rhodes Fruit Farms was established. However, when this company was established, it took the lead in the production and marketing of fresh fruit. Pickstone, who was the driving force behind all this, had to convince the wine-farmers to invest in the fruit industry. This was only possible with financial assistance which was offered by Rhodes. With their far-sightedness, Rhodes and Pickstone eventually laid the foundation of an industry which generated between 1896 and 1910 13 852 cubic tons of fresh fruit (or 861 348 boxes) with a total value of £212 033. What Rhodes Fruit Farms...
into account the extent of this undertaking.


15. Ibid., chapters 4 and 5.


23. Ibid.


26. Ibid.


32. W. Hefer, Drakenstein - A Valley with a Place in History, Optima 2, 1976, p.56.


39. Ibid.


46. DBA, M. Buys: De Beers' Administrative Records, p.5.


48. Ibid.


50. Ibid.


57. F.D. MacDermott, 'Rural Cape Colony', pp. 297-299.


60. J.C. Aucamp, Die Geskiedenis ... 1896-1910, pp. 382-383.