

An investigation into the historical context of graves exhumed on the farm Wemmershuis 379JT, Belfast

Anton C van Vollenhoven

North-West University

antonv@archaetnos.co.za

Abstract

The South African National Road Agency Limited (SANRAL) requested *Archaetnos* to exhume historical graves on the farm Wemmershuis 379JT in the Belfast district, Mpumalanga Province, as the upgrade to the R33 road was impacting on the graves. The human remains were reinterred on the same farm, to another part of the semi-formal graveyard. A monument commemorating the deceased was also erected.

As most of the graves are unknown, an archival investigation regarding the farm was conducted to obtain information on who these people may have been. Indications were that the graves belonged to white farmers as the only legible headstones are that of Johanna Marija Magdalena de Beer and DG or DC Killian. This article, deals with findings after a survey was conducted in the Deeds Office in Pretoria, as well as the National Archives Repository in Pretoria.

A mass grave containing the human remains of four people was also uncovered during the field work phase. Grave goods indicated the possibility that these were British soldiers and therefore information on the Anglo-Boer (South African) War in this area is included. The ruin of a building, said to be the remains of a coach house on the old coach route, was found a few metres northeast of the graveyard. Information in this regard is also included as it may shed light on the graves and the importance of the farm.

The farm Wemmershuis was established in 1887, but it originally was a portion of another farm, Berg-en-Dal, which was established in 1862. The farm history assisted in obtaining the surnames of people who may have been buried in the graveyard. It also seems likely that the farm Wemmershuis was a stop on the route between Pretoria and the Lowveld and that people who died while traveling may also have been buried here.

Keywords: Wemmershuis; Coach-house; Anglo-Boer War (South African War); Berg-en-Dal; Johanna Marija Magdalena de Beer; Killian; Trade route; Belfast.

Introduction

During the upgrade of the R33 road between Carolina and Belfast in the Mpumalanga Province, a semi-formal cemetery was identified. Since the work on the road was in an advanced stage, it was not possible to change the route. Therefore, the historical graves that were impacted upon by the development had to be exhumed and relocated. It was possible to leave some of the graves *in situ* as these were outside of the shoulder of the new road. The human remains from those that were excavated, were reinterred on the same farm, in another part of this graveyard, to fall outside of the road servitude.

During the first site visit to assess the situation, it was realized that the area has historical significance, not only since these were historical graves, but also as there were nearby historical features. The developer was persuaded to erect a monument on site which would include information about the graves and these other historical sites. Research therefore had to be conducted about the site, not only for the purpose of the monument,¹ but also to provide ample proof of the historical significance of the site to the developer.

To obtain contextual information on the graves, an archival investigation was launched. Part of the investigation was to do background research on the history of the farm. The necessity for this investigation was due to the bad state of the graves and almost complete lack of headstones. Only a few headstones had some legible information. Indications are that these are white farmers' graves as the only completely legible headstone was that of Johanna Marija Magdalena de Beer.

One of the graves exhumed contained the human remains of four persons. What stood out, apart from it being a multiple burial, was that this grave was very shallow. These individuals are believed to be British soldiers. Thus, information on the Anglo-Boer War (well-known to also be the Anglo Boer War) in this area was included in the research. The remains of a building assumed to be a coach house from the old coach route were found a few metres northeast of the graveyard. This was also included to assist in contextualizing the site. This article deals with the results of this investigation on the farm Wemmershuis 379JT, in the Belfast district, Mpumalanga Province.

1 The information on the monument gives a summary of the information in this article, including photographs of the site components.

Image 1: Google Earth image indication the location of the cemetery, blockhouses and coach house



Source: Map compiled by A Pelser from Google Earth, 2010.

Methodology

When dealing with research for heritage management, the research questions are practical and aimed at providing context to enable the developer a better understanding of the importance of the heritage being dealt with. It rarely is done in depth as this would be time-consuming and costly, whereas the developer only needs a basic understanding of the site.

Firstly, some of the graves had to be relocated. This was done in accordance with a permit issued by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). During the archaeological work the aim was to identify and locate all possible human remains contained in the burials and to facilitate their complete and successful relocation. Furthermore, the graves, burials and their contents needed to be documented completely and in detail, using standard archaeological methodology and practice.

In addition to this, it is important to know when the farm Wemmershuis was established as that would assist in relative dating of the graves. Biographical information on who the first and later owners of the site were, would assist in determining who may have been buried there. The importance of the farm as possibly being the overnight stop for travellers on the coach route would provide additional context and influence the determination of the cultural significance of the site. Lastly, the shallow grave with the remains of four individuals is peculiar and answering the questions about who these people were and what link they have to the site, would also influence the significance of the site. All of these questions would also provide information useful for a memorial at the site.

To answer these questions, a variety of sources had to be investigated. For this purpose, research was conducted in the South African National Archives (SANA) and the Office of the Registrar of Deeds in Pretoria. In the latter the old farm registers and Surveyor-General's maps were consulted. The information from the farm register books proved more informative for this research than the SANA. Only a few documents in the archives, applicable to this farm, were found. There is at least one other farm with the name Wemmershuis in Mpumalanga Province and information related to that farm had to be disregarded.

Artefacts found with the four individuals referred to above, suggested that these people died during the War (of 1899-1902). Therefore, literature regarding this war in this geographical area was explored. Literature about the trade routes or road towards the east (from Pretoria) was also studied to obtain contextual information on the coach house.

The aim of this article is to focus on the historical context of the site. To understand the archaeological context, it is however necessary to start the discussion with the grave site.

Archaeological context

The graves

The grave site is situated within a large Eucalyptus plantation, and as a result was completely overgrown, with many of the graves extensively damaged by the vegetation. Six graves on the northern side of the site were to be left *in situ*, as they were on land provided by the landowner for the relocation of the remains. The remaining 50 were relocated.

Human skeletal remains were found in only five graves, with one containing that of four individuals. Seventeen graves contained other cultural material. Thirty-four of the graves contained no remains and soil samples were taken for reburial, as is standard practice with the exhumation and relocation of graves. Although no physical remains were found in these, clear evidence for the existence of graves were found, such as stone packed surface cairns, loose soil in the grave pit and clear burial depressions. The small size of many of these graves suggests that they were those of young children or infants, limiting the possibility of recovering any skeletal remains. It is known that mortality rates for children under five years of age increased dramatically during the period 1850-1900 in South Africa.² Only three of the graves had headstones with legible inscriptions, and one of these was very fragmented.³

Grave 15 – Johanna Marija Magdalena de Beer

This was the only grave with a complete headstone and a legible inscription. The headstone was made from sandstone, while the grave itself had a sandstone slab placed over it. The grave is that of one Johanna Marija (Maria) Magdalena de Beer, born Prensloo (Prinsloo) on 29 November 1859. She died on 15 November 1897. The headstone was erected by her husband ZL de Beer. The inscription indicates that they had 11 children, of which the youngest one, Debora Lewertha, was buried in the same grave, approximately two months later (in 1898).⁴ Johanna died four days after the birth of Debora on 25 November 1897.⁵ The fairly well preserved skeletal remains of one adult individual was identified; those of Johanna.

Information obtained from a great-granddaughter of JMM de Beer confirms that she had 11 children. The first nine of them survived into adulthood and they are therefore unlikely to be buried here. The names of the youngest two are not known by the family,⁶ an indication that they may have died in infancy. It is possible that the older of the two is buried here. The youngest, Debora Lewertha, is indeed buried here with her mother.

2 J Cilliers & J Fourie, "New estimates of settler life span and other demographic trends in South Africa, 1652-1948", *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers* (Stellenbosch, University of Stellenbosch Bureau for Economic Research, 2012), pp. 19-20.

3 A Pelsers & A van Vollenhoven, "The archaeological investigation and exhumation of graves on the farm Wemmershuis 379 JT, Belfast district, Mpumalanga Province" (Unpublished report, Wonderboompoort, Archaeon, 2009), pp. 5-8.

4 Information on the headstone of the grave of JMM de Beer.

5 AC van Vollenhoven (Personal Collection), interview, D de Beer (family genealogist, De Beer-family), 26 May 2009.

6 AC van Vollenhoven (Personal Collection), interview, H van Rensburg (great-granddaughter of JMM de Beer), 13 June 2008.

Image 2: Remains of the headstone of JMM de Beer



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2008.

Grave 13 – DG(C?) Kilian

This was the only other grave that had a fairly well-preserved headstone. The inscription on the sandstone headstone was difficult to read, but it was possible to deduct that the individual buried here was DG or DC Kilian. He or she was born in 1897 (grave inscription: ‘GB 1897’) and died in 1898 (grave inscription: ‘OVL 1898’).⁷ It therefore was an infant who died at about the age of one, explaining why no skeletal remains were recovered. Coffin wood fragments and nails were however found.⁸

⁷ Information on the headstone of the grave of DG or DC Killian.

⁸ A Pelsers & A van Vollenhoven, “The archaeological investigation and exhumation of graves on the farm Wemmershuis ...”, (Unpublished report, Wonderboompoort, Archaetnos, 2009), p. 8.

Image 3: The headstone from the grave of Killian



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2008.

Grave 17 – Unknown children

This grave contained the remains of possibly two small children. Although there was only one very fragmented slate headstone, the grave dressing was clearly separated into two sections, and coffin nails and handles were recovered from both burial pits. They are unknown since no names could be determined from the inscription on the headstone. The age of one of the deceased was legible and indicated as six years. Again, no skeletal remains were found. Associated artefacts include a piece of a late 19th century soda/mineral water bottle, a porcelain cup's ear and a brass button.⁹

Grave 16 – Mass grave

Four individuals were buried side-by-side, in a shallow grave (88cm deep), seemingly without coffins. The skeletal remains were fairly well preserved and

⁹ A Pelsier & A van Vollenhoven, "The archaeological investigation and exhumation of graves on the farm Wemmershuis ..." (Unpublished report, Wonderboompoort, Archaetnos, 2009), p. 8.

indicated that these individuals were fairly young males.

Some of the artefacts found with the remains point in the direction of these people being either British or Boer combatants. Fragments of khaki cloth similar to those of British uniforms, leather strap fragments from a Sam Brown belt, military style leather boot pieces and brass trouser buttons were recovered, evidence of a military origin. The buttons had the inscription “SUPERIOR FINISH” and another the maker’s name “BEST RING EDGE” embossed thereon. These types of button date to the late 19th/ early 20th century and are similar to ones found on other sites related to the South African War.¹⁰ It is therefore likely that they died here during the war and that they were buried at this existing cemetery by friend or foe.

Image 4: The skeletal remains of two of the four individual *in situ*



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2008.

10 AC van Vollenhoven, “Die Britse vrywilligerseenheid Steinaecker’s Horse in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902): ‘n Kultuurhistoriese studie” (PhD, University of Stellenbosch, 2010), pp. 149, 215; AC van Vollenhoven, “Report on the archaeological investigation of the Eastern Redoubt (East Fort), a British military fortification, dating to the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1901), Report no. II” (Unpublished report, Groenkloof, Archaeos, 2015), p. 221.

Other cultural remains

Most of the graves did not contain any human skeletal remains or cultural material. The few that did had fragments of coffin wood, coffin nails or coffin handles. Other cultural material found include a horseshoe, a piece of a blue castor oil bottle dating to the late 19th/ early 20th century, a fragment of a soda/mineral water bottle with partially visible name, “MIDD”, probably “MIDDELBURG”, also dating to this period, other soda/mineral water fragments,¹¹ pieces of tin and decorated late 19th century porcelain.¹²

The history of farm Wemmershuis 379JT

The farm Wemmershuis 379JT, used to be Wemmershuis 100 in the Lydenburg district.¹³ Lydenburg was established in 1850.¹⁴ It was one of the first Voortrekker towns in the area today known as Mpumalanga. The town of Belfast, in which district the farm is currently located, was established in 1890.¹⁵ In those years towns were usually established because the farmers of the area wanted a place from where they could get access to markets. This means that many farms must have already been occupied by the 1890s.

Wemmershuis was developed on the remaining portion of the farm Berg-en-Dal 378JT. Therefore the deeds information for both these farms had to be considered. Berg-en-Dal was originally part of the Lydenburg district and was then known as Berg-en-Dal 146. It later became known as farm 246 in the Carolina district after eventually becoming part of the Belfast district.¹⁶ Carolina was established in 1886.¹⁷

The first owners of the farm Berg-en-Dal were the estate of Jurie Bekker and Johannes Bekker as indicated in the first entry in the deeds register.¹⁸ This is not strange as such entries are common for the first registration of farms. What probably happened is that there was a delay between the actual date of occupation of the farm and the registration. Due to this the first entry was only made the first time when that farm was transferred to the new owner. By

11 E Lastovica & A Lastovica, *Bottles and bygoness: A guide for South African collectors* (Cape Town, Don Nelson, 1990), pp. 26-27, 43-47.

12 A Pelsner & A van Vollenhoven, “The archaeological investigation and exhumation of graves on the farm Wemmershuis ...” (Unpublished report, Wonderboompoort, Archaetnos, 2009), p. 9.

13 ODR, Pretoria, Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT.

14 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika. Die vier noordelike provinsies* (Pretoria, JL van Schaik, 1999), p. 17.

15 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika ...*, p. 21.

16 ODR, Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT.

17 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika ...*, p. 20.

18 ODR, Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT, no deed number.

the time this occurred, Jurie Bekker was already deceased.

This first transfer was on 15 March 1862, when the farm was transferred to Jan Lambertus Schurink.¹⁹ Between 1862 and 1888 the farm changed hands a number of times and it was also subdivided. One of the portions became the property of Jacobus Cornelis Smith.²⁰ After 1888 it was divided in three portions, a Remainder, a Western (portion 1) and an Eastern (portion 2).²¹ The Remainder became known as the farm Wemmershuis.²²

Since it is possible that those who resided on Berg-en-Dal may have been buried in the cemetery discussed, information on the other portions are also included. Surnames prior to 1950,²³ include Schurink, Robertson, O'Neill, Scheepers, Botha, Potgieter, Smith, Mallinson, Lewis, Marks, Brink, Immelman, Schoonraad, De Vos, Reitz and Duggan.²⁴ Also interesting to note is that some owners were from the business sector, for example the *Transvaal Consolidated Coal Mines Ltd.* who owned portion 3 between 1896 and 1912, *Lewis & Marks Ltd.* who owned the same portion from 1915 to 1916, and *De Vos and Reitz Trading* who owned portion 5 between 1908 and 1910.²⁵

Apparently, the Remainder of the farm Berg-en-Dal, belonged to Mr Wemmer and that is likely where the name Wemmershuis originated.²⁶ It is strange that Wemmer's name could not be found in the farm registers. A search of archival records indicated various people with this surname in the Lydenburg and Middelburg districts during the latter half of the 19th century.²⁷ He probably was MA Wemmer referred to in a document indicating that AE King QQ wanted to purchase a farm between Berg-en-Dal and Weltevrede, belonging to MA Wemmer.²⁸ This indeed is the farm known as Wemmershuis.

19 Office of the Registrar of Deeds (ODR), Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT, Deed no. 290.

20 ODR, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT, Deed no. 709.

21 ODR, Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT.

22 ODR, Pretoria, Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deeds nos. 1086, 3155 and 25538.

23 The graves can broadly be dated to the 19th and early 20th century. Later graves of white people had granite or cement dressings and headstones whereas these ones are stone packed with slate headstones.

24 ODR, Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT, various deed nos.

25 ODR, Pretoria, Microfische farm register including Berg-en-Dal 378 JT, Deeds nos. 175, 7816, 395, 4380, 2578, 813, 3634 and 4003.

26 National Archive of South Africa (hereafter NASA), Pretoria, Transvaal Archive (TA), Office of the State Secretary (SS), Vol. 1037, Reference R875/85: Correspondence, 18 February 1885.

27 See for instance NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 589, Reference R5533/81: Correspondence, 27 December 1881; NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1174, Reference R789/86: Correspondence, 12 February 1886.

28 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1178, Reference R920/86: Correspondence, 19 February 1886.

According to the farm register, Wemmershuis was first owned by Hugo Smit [sic], who received it by government grant on 4 November 1887.²⁹ Basically this means that the farm Wemmershuis was established on the remainder of the farm Berg-en-Dal before the latter was divided into an Eastern and Western portion in 1888, and that it became a government farm before it was granted to Smith. It probably suggests that Wemmer's farm became government property which was then granted to Smith.

In the days of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* (ZAR), a farm had to be inspected before it could be registered. On 24 March 1885 four farms in the district of Lydenburg, including Wemmershuis, were inspected by land surveyors. Chairperson of the inspection commission, J de Clercq, indicated on 28 December 1885 that the farm was inspected on 3 March 1885. The proclamation of the farm was disputed and thus the Registrar of Deeds was ordered by the Government on 31 March 1886 not to register the farm. The protest was unsuccessful or resolved as the farm was eventually registered as government property on 9 September 1886.³⁰ The protestors were JW van Heerden and RC O'Neil, whose protest was published in the *Staatscourant* (Government newspaper) of 6 January 1886. They indicated that the new farm Wemmershuis was encroaching upon their farms (Weltevrede and Bergen-Dal) and that it therefore could not be registered.³¹

In the same year *King & Company* also wanted to purchase or hire the farm, but nothing came of this.³² Later in 1886, Smith purchased the farm for an amount of £ 300.³³ The farm was subdivided in 1890 and Smith now owned portion 1, which was registered in his name on 22 May 1890.³⁴ The remainder (of Wemmershuis) was transferred to Edward Croch on 19 August 1891.³⁵ Other surnames indicated on deeds before 1950 include Fitzgerald, Robinson, De Vos, Reitz and Duggan.³⁶ The only company to own a portion of Wemmershuis before 1950, was *De Vos & Reitz* who owned portion 1 between 1908 and 1913.³⁷

29 ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deed no. 2238.

30 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1049, Reference R1535/85: Correspondence, 24 March 1885.

31 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1195, Reference R1419/86: Correspondence, 23 March 1886.

32 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1277, Reference R4586/86: Correspondence, 9 September 1886.

33 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1317, Reference R6071/86: Correspondence, 23 November 1886.

34 ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deed no. 1774.

35 ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deed no. 1670.

36 ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deeds no. 1086, 3155, 3635, 4003, 1338 and 38466.

37 ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deeds no. 3635 and 4003.

The surnames mentioned above give an indication of some of the people who may have been buried on site. However, one has to realise that visitors or travellers who died nearby could also be buried here and without legible headstones or other historical documents it is impossible to make further deductions (see Table 1 to Table 7 to follow):

Table 1: Deeds information for Berg-en-Dal Portion 1

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
–	–	Whole farm	Staats Recht	Estate late Jurie Bekker Johannes Bekker
290	15 March 1862	Whole	Estate late Jurie Bekker & Johannes Bekker	Jan Lambertus Schurink
344	22 December 1862	Whole	Jan Lambertus Schurink	Alexander Marsh Robertson
1013	28 May 1875	Whole	Alexander Marsh Robertson	John James O'Neil
1237	12 November 1880	Whole	Estate late John James O'Neil	Mattheus Johannes O'Neil Patrick O'Neil
2406	27 October 1887	½ share	Mattheus Johannes O'Neil Patrick O'Neil	Gideon Jacobus Scheepers jr
2789	4 December 1887	½ share	Gideon Jacobus Scheepers jr	Hermanus Jacobus Botha
669	7 March 1888	½ share	Mattheus Johannes O'Neil Patrick O'Neil	Richard Charles O'Neil
709	6 April 1888	½ share	Richard Charles O'Neil	Jacobus Cornelis Smith

Tabel 2: Deeds information for Berg-en-Dal Portion 2

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
2458	15 August 1895	Eastern	Joint Owners	Hermanus Jacobus Botha
7875	25 May 1920	Remaining of Eastern	Hermanus Jacobus Botha	Nicolaas Albertus Potgieter
31100	19 August 1965	Remaining of Eastern	Estate late Nicolaas Albertus Potgieter	Nicolaas Albertus Potgieter (son of above mentioned)
2459	15 August 1895	Western Portion	Joint Owners	Jacobus Cornelis Smith
3428	1 April 1922	Remaining of Western	Jacobus Cornelis Smith	Nicolaas Johannes Botha
707	13 January 1965	Remaining of Western	Estate late Nicolaas Johannes Botha	Petrus Johannes Jacobus van der Merwe Nicolaas Johannes Botha Jacobus Cornelus Botha Jacoba Maria Botha Michiel Jan Britz Machiel Coenraad Botha

Tabel 3: Deeds information for Berg-en-Dal Portion 3 (a portion of portion 2)

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
175	21 January 1896	Portion of Western	Jacobus Cornelis Smith	Transvaal Consolidated Coal Mines Ltd.
7816	16 September 1912	Remaining of portion of Western	Transvaal Consolidated Coal Mines Ltd.	Arthur Charles Mallinson
395	3 February 1915	Remaining of portion of Western	Estate late Arthur Charles Mallinson	Isaac Lewis & Samuel Marks trading as "Lewis & Marks"

4380	19 June 1916	Remaining of portion of Western	Lewis & Marks	Lewis & Marks Ltd.
2578	21 March 1923	Remaining of portion of Western	Lewis & Marks Ltd.	African & European Investment Co. Ltd.
813	6 February 1932	½ share for Brink, 3/8 share for Botha and 1/8 share for Immelman of portion of Western	African & European Investment Co. Ltd.	Hendrik Justinus Brink Nicolaas Johannes Botha Daniel Ferdinand Immelman
Different portions are now subdivided and joined to form portion B, C and Remainder				
816	6 February 1932	Remaining	Joint Owners	Hendrik Justinus Brink
817	6 February 1932	Remaining	Hendrik Justinus Brink	Jacobus Hendrik Schoonraad
T34647	25 July 1980	Remaining	Estate late Jacobus Hendrik Schoonraad	Lettie Claassen (born Schoonraad)

Tabel 4: Deeds information for Berg-en-Dal Portion 5 (a portion of portion 2)

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
3633	24 June 1908	Portion of Western	Jacobus Cornelis Smith	Hugo Smith
3634	24 June 1908	Portion of Western	Hugo Smith	Dirk de Vos & Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz trading as "De Vos & Reitz"
4003	23 June 1910	Portion of Western	De Vos & Reitz	Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz
1338	19 February 1913	Portion of Western	Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz	John Thomas Duggan
11672	24 June 1950	Whole	Estate late John Thomas Duggan	Edwin Glyndwr Duggan

Tabel 5: Deeds information for Wemmershuis (Remainder of Berg-en-Dal):³⁸

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
2238	4 November 1887	Whole farm	Government grant	Hugo Smit(h?) ⁹¹
1670	19 August 1891	Remaining extension Berg-en-Dal	Hugo Smit	Edward Croch
1086	18 February 1911	Remaining extension Berg-en-Dal	Edward Croch	Frederic Casse Fitzgerald
3155	13 April 1918	Remaining extension Berg-en-Dal	Frederic Casse Fitzgerald	James Yardley Robinson
25538	3 October 1960	Remaining extension Berg-en-Dal	Estate late James Yardley Robinson	Willem Marthinus de Beer

Tabel 6: Deeds information for Wemmershuis Portion 1

DEED NUMBER	DATE	PORTION	FROM	TO
1774	22 May 1890	Whole portion	Hugo Smith	Jacobus Cornelis Smith
5206	3 June 1903	Whole portion	Jacobus Cornelis Smith	Hugo Smith
3635	24 June 1908	Whole portion	Hugo Smith	Dirk de Vos & Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz trading as “De Vos & Reitz”
4003	23 June 1910	Whole portion	De Vos & Reitz	Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz
1338	19 February 1913	Whole portion	Jan Daniel Karnspek Reitz	John Thomas Duggan
11627	24 June 1950	Whole portion	Estate late John Thomas Duggan	Edwin Glyndwr Duggan

³⁸ Archival documents indicate that the correct spelling is ‘Smith’.

Tabel 7: Deeds information for Wemmershuis Portion 2

38466	4 December 1947	Whole portion	James Yardley Robinson	John Thomas Duggan
11629	24 June 1950	Whole portion – consolidated and becomes portion 4	John Thomas Duggan	John Maldwyn Duggan William Trevor Duggan Edwin Glyndwr Duggan

Source: Tables 1 to 7 had been compiled by AC van Vollenhoven, 2008.

The route to the east

An old building is situated a few hundred metres to the northeast of the graveyard. According to the current farmer this is an old coach house on the old trade route between Middelburg and the far eastern Transvaal.³⁹ The remains of a wide road are still visible, passing both the graves and the building.⁴⁰ In order to verify this, information on the route to the east had to be investigated.

Image 6: Ruin of the so-called coach house



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2011.

³⁹ AC van Vollenhoven (Personal Collection), interview, P Bruwer (farmer, Wemmershuis), 19 May 2008.

⁴⁰ A Pelsers & A van Vollenhoven, "The archaeological investigation and exhumation of graves on the farm Wemmershuis ...", p. 7.

At least two studies of the early trade routes were done.⁴¹ Unfortunately these are mainly concerned with the Lowveld and therefore of no assistance in determining the possibility of whether Wemmershuis was a stop on the route. It does however show these routes towards the east of the escarpment indicating that some of these went directly eastwards and others north-eastwards. One of these routes mentions the town of Lydenburg. This particular route probably started in the Lydenburg area and went to the southeast following the escarpment, linking with the road to Delagoa Bay and the old Voortrekker road.⁴²

Another road went from Sabie to Lydenburg and Sekhukhuneland across the Drakensberg Mountains. At Doornkraal it linked with two routes. One of these is applicable as it went in a northwestern direction between Rhenosterpoort and Bandolierkop to Elim where it linked to the road between Masjonaal and the coast. It went past Rustplaas, linked with the route between Ohrigstad and the Steelpoort River ending at Lydenburg.⁴³

From the above it seems that the Lydenburg area was an important location along the early trade routes. What is important for this study is to note that the Voortrekkers used some of these routes and that some of these eventually were made into wagon trails.⁴⁴ It therefore suggests that the early routes were also used later and eventually became the established ones.

The remaining question is whether the route between Pretoria and Lydenburg passed Wemmershuis. Historian Changuion⁴⁵ indicates that the early travellers from the south into the interior of South Africa (the area north of the Vaal River) also made use of the early trade routes. Some of these travellers visited the area today known as Pretoria between ca. 1820 and 1850. Of particular note is Robert Scoon, who visited the area in 1836 and moved eastwards towards the location of Middelburg.⁴⁶ This confirms that routes from the south towards Pretoria and then eastwards towards Middelburg have been known.

41 L Changuion, "Vroeë handelsroetes", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika. Die vier Noordelike Provinsies* (Pretoria, J.L. Van Schaik, 1999), pp. 9, 103-105; JB de Vaal, "Ou handelsvoetpaaie en wapaie in die Oos- en Noord-Transvaal", *Contree*, 16, 1984; JB de Vaal, "Ou handelsvoetpaaie ...", *Contree*, 16, 1984, U de V Pienaar, *Neem uit die verlede* (Pretoria, Sigma Press, 1990).

42 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 9; JB de Vaal, "Ou handelsvoetpaaie ...", *Contree*, 16, 1984, U de V Pienaar, *Neem uit die verlede*, pp. 55.

43 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika*..., p. 9; JB de Vaal, "Ou handelsvoetpaaie ...", *Contree*, 16, 1984, pp. 14-15; U de V Pienaar, *Neem uit die verlede*, p. 55-56.

44 L Changuion, *Vroeë handelsroetes* ..., p. 104.

45 L Changuion, *Vroeë handelsroetes* ..., p. 105.

46 L Changuion, *Vroeë handelsroetes* ..., pp. 12-13; 119-123.

Further light is shed on this matter when looking at the history of the three towns mentioned. Lydenburg was established in 1850, Pretoria in 1855 and Middelburg in 1867.⁴⁷ However, the first farms around these towns were established as early as 1840 for Pretoria and 1845 for Lydenburg and Middelburg.⁴⁸ This indicates that at this stage known routes must have existed between Pretoria and Lydenburg, likely over Middelburg. It probably passed through the area today known as Belfast, which was only established in 1890. In fact, a map from Bergh does indicate the road from Pretoria in an easterly direction, splitting at Belfast towards either Lydenburg or Nelspruit.⁴⁹ This also was the route used by the mail coach.⁵⁰ A mail service was established between Pretoria and other towns, including Lydenburg, by 1859.⁵¹ By 1873, this route, extending to Pilgrim's Rest, had a regular postal coach and transport service.⁵² This is further indication that the route most likely passed through the farm Wemmershuis.

This possibility is supported by an archival document indicating that some residents of the Middelburg district requested the Postmaster General in 1885 to establish a postal agency at Mr Wemmer's property on Berg-en-Dal.⁵³ It has been established above, that this portion of Berg-en-Dal is known as Wemmershuis and the request was likely made since it already was a known stop on this route. This request was denied as it was indicated that Mr Wemmer's shop was not suitable for a postal agency.⁵⁴

By 1899 the railway line followed roughly the same route, again an indication that the old routes were continuously used during later years, and that these were upgraded later on. In fact, Minnaar and Pienaar state that the Eastern Railway Line had its forerunners in the old trade routes.⁵⁵ During the negotiations for the railway line, early in 1883, the Portuguese authorities sent Major Joachim José Machado to Pretoria. He describes the route from the Elands River up to the Highveld and then via Belfast and Middelburg to Pretoria.⁵⁶

47 JS Bergh, "Grense, distrikte en dorpe, 1860-61", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., pp. 20, 142.

48 JS Bergh, "Blanke vestiging tot ca.1850", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., pp. 129-131.

49 JS Bergh, "Grense, distrikte en dorpe, 1886-99", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., pp. 21, 147.

50 EC Liebenberg, "Die fisiese omgewing", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 86.

51 C Pretorius, *Pretoria se pioniershuis, sy tyd en sy mense* (Pretoria, Hoofstadpers, n.d.), p. 35.

52 JJ Hugo, "Die poging van AH Nellmapius om 'n gereelde verbindingsroete tussen die Oos-Transvaalse Goudvelde en Delagoabaai te vestig (1874-1883)" (MA, PU vir CHO, 1999), p. 34.

53 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1037, Reference R875/85: Correspondence, 18 February 1885.

54 NASA, TA, SS, Vol. 1039, Reference R970/85: Correspondence, 24 February 1885.

55 A Minnaar & U de V Pienaar, "The Eastern and Selati railway lines", U de V Pienaar, *A cameo from the past* (Pretoria, Protea Bookhouse, 2012), p. 350.

56 A Minnaar & UDeV Pienaar, "The Eastern and Selati railway lines ...", p. 352.

The railway runs from Pretoria, via Middelburg and Belfast where it splits into a line running via Nelspruit to the Lowveld and one running to Lydenburg.⁵⁷ This confirms Belfast as being important as different routes converge here. Since Wemmershuis lies just west of this convergence it is highly likely that it could have been used as a stop especially before the establishment of the town. The railway line, called the Eastern Railway Line, between Pretoria and Komatipoort was built between 1891 and 1894.⁵⁸ Thus, it was only after 1894 that travel became less dependent on the roads. Belfast (Wemmershuis) most likely played an important role as a halt on this route before the completion of the railway line. The line from Belfast to Lydenburg was only completed between 1900 and 1910.⁵⁹ This would have made Belfast a sensible overnight stop and it is likely that Wemmershuis was used less frequently or perhaps lost this function.

Regarding the physical features of the building it can be stated that it is built from factory made bricks and although the construction has been changed, the original seems to date to more or less 1880. The corrugated roof may be original, but the eastern part thereof was substituted⁶⁰ by more recent corrugated iron.⁶¹ This therefore also fits the time period.

Archaeological excavations done at the site to obtain more information, found that the foundation of the building was similar to other buildings on the farm, dating to the late 19th century.⁶² It further revealed that the building originally had a cobblestone floor and that it was built with only one room.⁶³ The size of the building is 5,5 x 4,4 m which is not large enough to keep wagons or carts, but surely could be used to keep draught animals. The cultural material excavated also indicated a time period of the late 19th century.⁶⁴

57 TV Bulpin, *Lost trails of the Transvaal* (Cape Town, Cape & Transvaal Printers Ltd, 1974), frontpage; JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 79.

58 DH Heydenrych, "Spoorwegontwikkeling", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 329; H Bornman, *Pioneers of the Lowveld* (Barberton, SA Country Life, 2004), pp. 1-3.

59 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 79.

60 Archaeological excavations revealed that the building had three building phases, ranging between the 1880s and 1970s.

61 AC van Vollenhoven, "Report on an archival investigation on the farm Wemmershuis ...", p. 15.

62 AJ Pelsner & AC van Vollenhoven, "Final report on the historical and archaeological investigation of the historical coach house on the farm Wemmershuis 379 JT, near Belfast Mpumalanga" (Unpublished report, Groenkloof, Archaetos, 2011), pp. 14-16.

63 AJ Pelsner & AC van Vollenhoven, "Final report on the historical and archaeological investigation of the historical coach house on the farm Wemmershuis ...", pp. 33.

64 JA van Schalkwyk, CJ Meyer, A Pelsner & I Plug, "Images of the social life and household activities at Melrose House", *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 4, 1995, pp. 86-90; A Pelsner, J van Schalkwyk & F Teichert, "Excavation of a late 19th/early 20th century rubbish dump in Minnaarstraat, Pretoria", *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 7, 1998, pp. 97-108; A Pelsner & A van Vollenhoven, "The daily activities at the Northernmost outpost of Steinaecker's Horse as reconstructed through archaeology", *Research by the National Cultural History Museum*, 7, 1998, pp. 32-45; AJ Pelsner & AC van Vollenhoven, "Final report on the historical and archaeological investigation of the historical coach house on the farm Wemmershuis ...", pp. 21, 25.

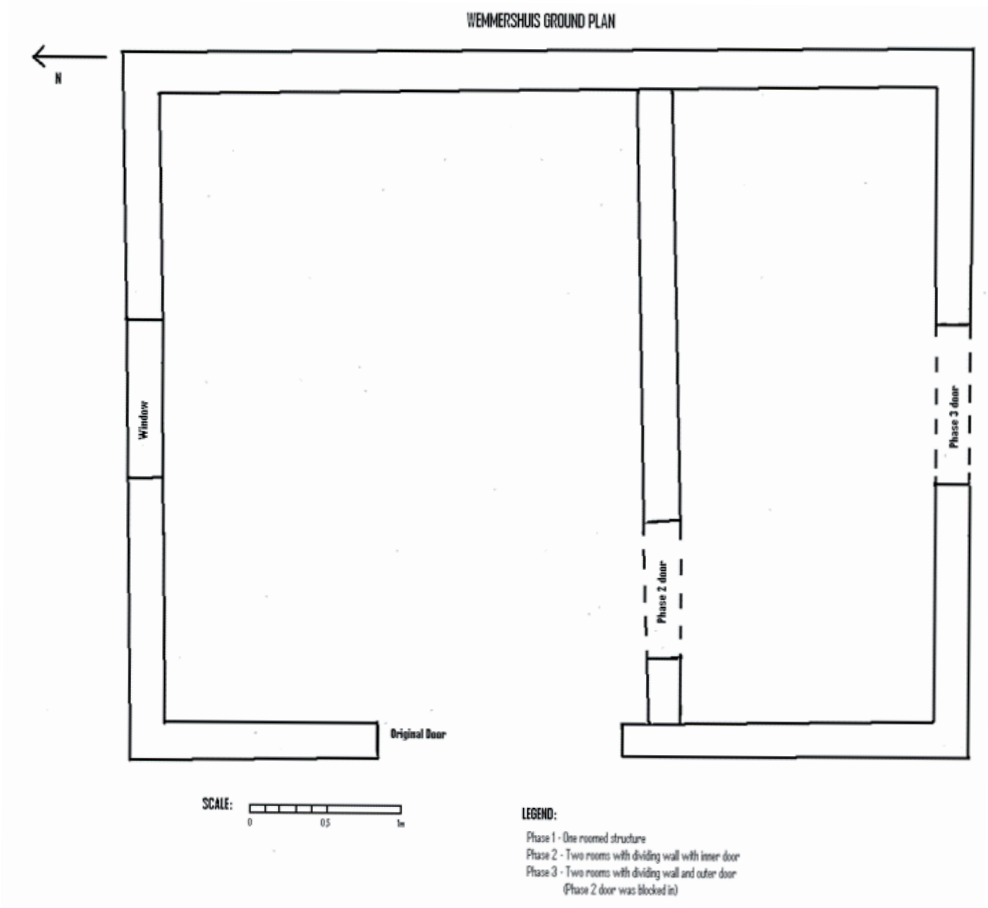
The building was therefore most likely erected during the 1880s, probably as shelter for horses or oxen. Its closeness to the old trail indicates that it indeed may have been a stop on the route between Pretoria and the Lowveld.

Image 7: Excavation indicating a cobblestone floor



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2011.

Image 8: Plan reconstruction of the building indicating different phases:



Source: Plan drawn by AC van Vollenhoven, 2011.

At the time of writing, Wemmershuis was a known stop on this route. From 1953 Portion 4 became known as the Half Way and Portion 5 today is known as Halfway House.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ ODR, Pretoria. Farm Register including Wemmershuis 379 JT, Deed no. 19171 and 43794; NASA, South African Archive (hereafter SAB), Department of Constitutional Development and Planning (CDB), Vol. 3/575, Reference TAD 9/4: 1957; NASA, SAB, Department of Constitutional Development and Planning (CDB), Vol. 3/575, Reference PB 4/19/2/4/379/1: 1981; TA, Department of Constitutional Development and Planning (CDB), Vol. 14852, Reference PB4/19/2/3/379/1: 1981; SAB, Department of Community Development (GMO), Vol. 2/20, Reference 12/4: 1957-1978; SAB, Department of Community Development (GMO), Vol. 2/20, Reference 12/4: 1983.

War time South Africa

During the War of 1899-1902 the area around Belfast saw much action. The last of the conventional military encounters between the British and Boer forces were that of the Battle of Bergendal, sometimes called the Battle of Dalmanutha. The battle took place between 21 and 27 August 1900.⁶⁶

On 21-22 August skirmishes started on the farm Van Wyksvlei, to the south of Belfast. This was followed by an attack on 23 August by the British on the Boer forces on the farm Geluk. Later that day the Boers at Dalmanutha were also under attack.⁶⁷ On 24 August 1900 the British forces occupied Belfast and on 26 August skirmishes at Geluk re-emerged.⁶⁸ The final phase of the battle was at Bergendal on 27 August 1900. The Boers retreated from the scene and the British continued their advance to the Lowveld.⁶⁹

Sources indicate different statistics regarding the casualties of this battle as is the case with many other battles during the War. Stapleton for instance indicates the British casualties as 285 and that of the Boers as at least 78.⁷⁰ Another source indicates that the British lost 385 men and the Boers 78.⁷¹ This is a clear indication that it is very possible that the respective armies may also not have known where some of the fallen had been buried.

Other information assisting with this study is that it is known that both Boer and British casualties were sometimes buried in mass graves, such as one containing 12 British soldiers at Berg-en-Dal.⁷² It further is known that at least 37 British soldiers went missing during the Battle of Bergendal. Four of these went missing on 27 August during the final stages of the battle.⁷³

One should take note of the position of the different forces at the battle since this may also assist in determining the likelihood of the four combatants buried at Wemmershuis. The Boers had their defence line centered on the eastern side of the farm Berg-en-Dal, stretching towards the south, north

66 F Pretorius, "Die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902", JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 249.

67 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog in die Oos-Transvaal* (Roodepoort, TRANSRO Pers, 2000), pp. 218-220; JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 54.

68 R Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray. The story of the Boer War* (London, Cassell, 1959), p. 358.

69 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog* ..., pp. 218-220; JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika* ..., p. 54.

70 TJ Stapleton (ed.), *Encyclopedia of African colonial conflicts* (Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 2017), p. 225.

71 *The South African Military History Society Newsletter*, November 2006 (available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/6/06novnl.html>, as accessed on 8 May 2018).

72 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog* ..., p. 223.

73 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog* ..., pp. 218-220.

and northwest. The British were mainly on the western side of Berg-en-Dal.⁷⁴ Wemmershuis is adjacent to Berg-en-Dal, on its western side, meaning that the British had the farm to their back. The Boers, towards the northwest of Belfast, may therefore have had the opportunity to attack the British from the back, that is from the Wemmershuis side. No such skirmish has been documented.

Belfast, however, saw further action during the war. After Belfast had been occupied by the British, they erected a few concentration camps. There were three concentration camps for Boer women and children.⁷⁵ The town also had two concentration camps for black people.⁷⁶ This serves as an indication that the British had a prominence in the town after it was captured. This may be important in determining the origin of the four people buried in one grave.

After the British reached Komatipoort on 24 September 1900, they erected blockhouses and other fortifications along the railway line to safeguard this from the Boers.⁷⁷ The remains of two of these are found close to the graveyard investigated, another indication of British presence in the area.

During the night of 7 January and early morning of 8 January 1901 the Boers attacked Belfast.⁷⁸ The attack started against the blockhouses on Monument Hill, towards the northeast of the town, and were eventually warded off by the British. The Boers also attacked the coal mine towards the west of the town.⁷⁹ Important for this study is again the vague inaccurate information about losses indicating uncertainties about the exact number of casualties. One source states that approximately 40 British soldiers and about 32 Boers were killed during the attack.⁸⁰ Another indicates that the Boer loss was about 40-50 men and the British casualties as 134⁸¹ (this probably includes wounded). A third source has the British who died at 38.⁸²

74 L Changuion, *Silence of the guns. The history of the Long Toms of the Anglo-Boer War* (Menlo Park, Protea Book House, 2001), p. 111.

75 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog ...*, pp. 211-214.

76 JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika ...*, p. 54.

77 AC van Vollenhoven, *Die militêre fortifikasies van Pretoria 1880-1902. 'n Studie in die historiese argeologie* (Pretoria, Heinekor, 1995), p. 86.

78 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog ...*, pp. 217; JS Bergh (ed.), *Geskiedenisatlas van Suid-Afrika ...*, p. 54; AD Greenhill-Gardyne, *The life of a regiment. The history of the Gordon Highlanders III* (London, Leo Cooper Ltd., 1972), pp. 285-287.

79 DW Aitken, "Guerilla Warfare, October 1900 – May 1902: Boer attacks on the Pretoria-Delagoa Bay Railway line", *Military History Journal*, 11(6), December 2000 (available at <http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol116da.html>, as accessed on 7 May 2018).

80 G van der Westhuizen & E van der Westhuizen, *Gids tot die Anglo-Boereoorlog ...*, pp. 217-220.

81 AD Greenhill-Gardyne, *The life of a regiment ...*, pp. 286-287.

82 AC van Vollenhoven (Personal correspondence), PA Schoeman (local historian Belfast-Machadodorp), 12 June 2008.

It is also noteworthy that this battle took place under adverse weather conditions on a very dark night. It is described: "...as an utterly black night, with gale and rain making hearing most uncertain...".⁸³ In one instance the British found five dead Boers with indications that numerous others were removed from a position they fought from. This is a clear indication that it was not possible for the combatants to remove all their dead.

The four skeletons found in one shallow grave, probably are the remains of soldiers who died during the war. The grave goods found with them, indicate that they likely were British soldiers. There is however a slight possibility that these four men were Boers as it is a well-known fact that the Boers sometimes wore British uniforms.

During the last phase of the war the Boers made use of an activity called *Uitskud* to obtain clothes, weapons and ammunition as they could not get these in any other way than to take them from the British. Isolated incidents of *Uitskud* were noted since May 1901 and during the winter of 1901 but were prohibited by Boer officers.⁸⁴ By the winter of 1902 however, it was a common occurrence.⁸⁵

Since the fighting around Belfast took place in August 1900 and January 1901, before *Uitskud* was the order of the day, it seems unlikely that these men were Boers. It is thus believed that they are four British soldiers who may have died in any of the battles indicated, but it is also possible that they died during an undocumented skirmish. There is good probability that they died during the Battle of Bergendal, since the British did not control the area and may therefore not have been able to retrieve all their dead afterwards. During the 1901 battle, they were in control of the land and were more likely able to attend to their dead afterwards.

Looking at the positions of the Boers and British, it also seems more plausible that these four men died during the Battle of Bergendal, or one of the related, perhaps undocumented, skirmishes. It also is more likely that Boers would have buried people in this cemetery which had to be known to them. It is less likely that the British would have had knowledge thereof. The four men were probably buried in a hurry by the Boers as they were on the retreat. This explains their shallow grave.

83 AD Greenhill-Gardyne, *The life of a regiment ...*, p. 286.

84 F Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Kaapstad, Human & Rousseau, 1991), p. 95.

85 F Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902* (Kaapstad, Struik, 1998), p. 45.

One would expect that the dead may have been properly buried by their own side, but since it was likely done in a hurry, this is not a given. As the activity of *Uitskud* was likely not in use during the Battle of Bergendal, they are more likely British soldiers than Boers. However, it is impossible to be certain about both the specific military encounter as to the nationality of the dead. This deduction can therefore not be taken as fact, but merely as a likelihood.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the first owner of the farm Wemmershuis 379 JT, was Hugo Smith in 1887. The farm was established on the remainder of the farm Berg-en-Dal before the latter was divided into an Eastern and Western portion in 1888. The surnames of farm owners indicated above, are those one would expect to be the people buried at the grave site discussed here.

Since it is known that the route from Pretoria to the east passed through Wemmershuis, the building investigated likely was used as a stop on this route. It probably was used as shelter for draught animals. As the farm used to be a stop on the route and this building is close to the graveyard, it is possible that some unknown travellers are also buried here.

The two known surnames at the grave site are De Beer and Killian, both not associated with the earlier farm owners. They may therefore have been living on the farm, or a nearby one as “bywoners”,⁸⁶ or may have died during a visit. The grave of Johanna de Beer is dated 1897 indicating that the graveyard must have been known during the Anglo-Boer (South African) War. The skeletal remains of four people found together in a shallow grave certainly points in this direction. It is possible that both Boer and British campaigners may be buried here. It is concluded that these four men likely were British soldiers who died during the Battle of Bergendal.

86 A white person, usually poor, working on a farm and who is compensated by receiving benefits such as residing on the farm, grazing rights and a share of the crop.

Image 9: Monument with information plaque erected at the site



Source: Photo by AC van Vollenhoven, 2011.