

Back to my 19th Century “Roots”

September/October 2016

In 2013 I travelled to South Africa where besides visiting family all over South Africa, I also went to the Cullinan Diamond mine to gather more information on the Kimble family.

This year, in September/October 2016 I went back to South Africa to visit my brother, but also to travel to Kimberley where my great-great grandfather and his parents lived in the latter part of the 19th century. Before completing the 3rd edition of the Kimble family history book, I communicated with Bernice Nagel the librarian at the Africana Research Library in Kimberley. So on this trip I wanted to go to Kimberley to meet her, gather more information if at all possible and at the same time see Kimberley - as I have never been there before.

John was kind enough to offer, or was he “persuaded” to drive us there? Truth be told, no persuasion was required at all when I asked him if he wanted to go there.

Kimberley is approximately 500kms from Johannesburg, but the drive seemed much longer as the GPS, for some unknown reason, gave us weird roundabout directions, which resulted in a longer trip than it should have been, but hey, we were on an adventure together. Going back to Johannesburg the GPS behaved even more badly, we even ended up on an unsealed road for just over 100kms!

There were some really awful little towns we drove through, one in particular, was Ventersdorp. It is where the infamous white Afrikaner supremacist, Eugène Terre'Blanche lived before his murder.

This area of South Africa was obviously in a serious drought. One of the towns we passed through was Bloemhof. We stopped on the banks of the Bloemhof Dam to take a few photos and neither of us could believe the dam was so empty. In addition, it was extremely windy that day and there was also a massive dust storm. The photo below shows just how empty the dam was.



The sandy beach is normally under water.

The area around Kimberley is extremely arid and very, very flat, as can be seen in the panoramic photo below, taken from the famous Boer War battleground of Magersfontein, which we visited at the end of our Kimberley trip. It is about 30kms from Kimberley.



Finally, after a long drive we arrived at Agros Guest House in Kimberley, which had been recommended to me by Karen, my New Zealand cousin, who visited Kimberley some 18 months earlier. Peter & Alta, the owners were incredibly hospitable and friendly, and we have no hesitation in recommending a stay there.

The room was spotlessly clean and we wasted no time in having a quick “relapse” before venturing out into Kimberley town.

As I have never been to Kimberley before, it is difficult for me to compare it to what it was like 30 or 40 years ago, but considering it was one of the wealthiest towns in the late 19th century, the town now looks somewhat jaded and like time has passed it by.

Besides a handful of well-maintained, architecturally interesting buildings, much of the town and the roads in particular, are sadly in a state of disrepair.



One of the most attractive buildings is the City Hall, which is in a fine state. Kimberley's new name is now Sol Plaatjie.

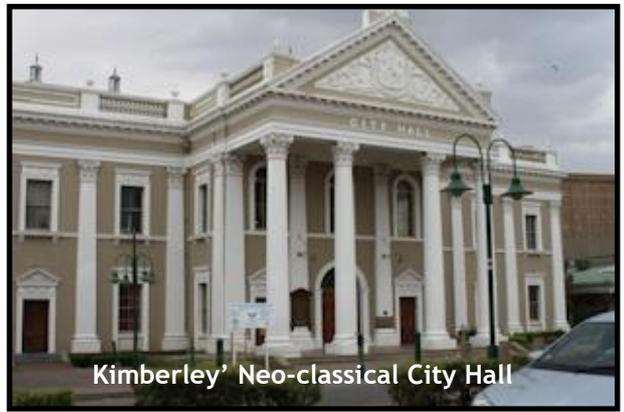
Certainly one of the greatest disappointments is the state and condition of the former De Beers Boardroom. This building is a National Heritage Building, complete with its heritage plaque, yet it is all but derelict and terribly run down.

Why would a company with as much money and history as De Beers allow this to happen? Surely they possess the pride, the will, not to mention the resources, to return this building and its surroundings to their former glory.

Some of the most important financial decisions at the time must have been made in this ex-boardroom!

That night we had a massive thunderstorm in Kimberley, with severe lightning and certainly hurricane force winds. The roof of an apartment block near where we were staying, blew off, and many of the hot water cylinders were also blown out of the roofs onto the road. When we returned from having dinner at the local John Dory fish restaurant, the road was cordoned off with a heavy presence of police and firemen.

Early next morning we visited the Big Hole, without doubt, the major tourist attraction in Kimberley. However, it was surprising to see just how few people were there.



Kimberley' Neo-classical City Hall



The original De Beers Boardroom & plaque



This was one of the highlights of our trip. David, who conducted our tour of the "hole" and surrounding area, was extremely informative and entertaining, he had a tremendous sense of humour.

The Big Hole is a must see attraction when visiting Kimberley.



My 3 x Great-grandfather's brother, Martin Michael Kimble, drove one of these steam-engine trains shown above, when he worked at De Beers, from 1884 to 1908.

The "Tiffany" yellow diamond, one of the largest yellow diamonds ever found.



It was found in Kimberley in 1878, and weighed 287.42 metric carats!



The mine's statistics!

14.5 MILLION carats mined

2,722 Kgs of diamonds \$\$\$\$

Our visit to the Big Hole included walking around the historic re-created 19th century village of Kimberley, and a tram ride on one of the original trams.



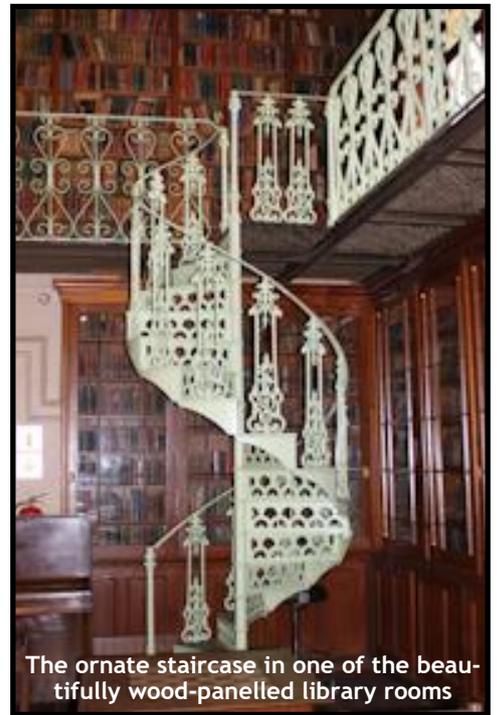
After our Big Hole visit we headed off to the Africana Research Library, to meet Bernice Nagel. Once again, the GPS gave us incorrect directions to the library which resulted in something most men hate and avoid. I ASKED FOR DIRECTIONS!

What a library! It is filled to the brim with books, with some of the oldest books ever printed. I was shown one, which if I recall was printed in the late 1400's - although I held it I couldn't read it as it was in Latin. According to official sources the library has one of the finest collections in Africa, it houses over 14,000 books, 640 manuscripts and well over 12,000 photographs. It also houses thousands of old newspapers.

It now includes the 4th edition of the book I wrote about the Kimble family history.

Bernice was, as always, extremely helpful and while John was given a guided tour around the library, Bernice and I managed to confirm a very important fact about my 3 x great-grandfather's occupation. His occupation was also stated on his death certificate in London, where he died.

This is the link to the library: <http://africanalibrary.co.za/>



The ornate staircase in one of the beautifully wood-paneled library rooms



St Mary's

Other buildings and places visited were, The Kimberley Club, which our early ancestors frequented. St Mary's Cathedral, where many of them were baptised and finally, the McGregor Museum.

The museum was built on the instructions of Cecil John Rhodes and was originally intended as a sanatorium, but later became the Belgrave Hotel and then in 1907 the title deeds were handed over, and the Alexander McGregor Memorial Museum was established.

At the museum I saw this tin, shown on the right. These tins contained chocolates and were given to all troops fighting against the Boers, by Queen Victoria. Martin Kimble, in Timaru, has the same tin given to his 3 x great-grandfather Martin Michael Kimble.



Kimberley Club



The McGregor Museum

Caught up about all the history about the Boer War, John & I decided to visit one of the major battlefields near Kimberley, Magersfontein.

No surprises, both GPS units gave conflicting and incorrect directions again. This led us to take a rough farm road for quite a few kilometres, before we decided we were definitely on the wrong road. A 32km trip eventually became a 45km trip.

The Battle of Magersfontein was fought on 11 December 1899, when British troops were sent to Kimberley to break the siege the Boers had around Kimberley. The British troops, especially the Highland Brigade suffered terrible losses and the battle was a tactical victory for the Boers.



Magersfontein Burgher Monument

Some of the wildlife seen near the battlefield.

Left: Juvenile Kudu



Right: A waterbuck



This is another African wildlife species we saw, but this was in John's house, and to be correct it's an insect. It was resting nicely on Isabel's dressing-gown. We were notified of its presence the moment we arrived back at home from our trip!

I even surprised myself, getting close enough to take this photo, as anyone who knows me, knows I suffer from extreme arachnophobia.

On the way back home in Mdrand, we ended up on a dirt road for over 100kms, and in another place we were stopped at a road maintenance roadblock for nearly 30 minutes. I asked one of the female traffic controllers if I could take her photo, as she had an interesting coating on her face, which after enquiring, I was told it was mud, which prevented her from being sunburnt.

After I took photos of her, she then asked for R20, about \$2, and then for a cold drink, neither of which we had. I only had NZ currency.



Eating out in South Africa is so cheap and such good value for money!

The meal we had at John Dory's consisted of fish, chips and salads, all this for \$8.50 for the two of us!

Some other prices, glass of wine \$2.50, full English breakfast, between \$7 and \$10, rump steak meal at steakhouse, \$14.00.

