

The great little town of Philippolis

Text by Darryl Earl David

Philippolis just north of the Gariep, the oldest town in the Free State, has turned the tide of rural depopulation around by reinventing itself on the back of literary tourism. Many people now regard the village as one of the greatest small towns in South Africa

Philippolis has associations with Emily Hobhouse, who championed the cause of the Afrikaners during the Anglo Boer War and who, in 1905, began the first spinning and weaving school in the Orange Free State (OFS) at Philippolis. It was also home to Adam Kok, father of the Griqua people. Moreover, the architecture draws tourists and compliments from around the world – Philippolis has one of the finest collections of Karoo, Victorian,

Edwardian and Colonial buildings of any town in South Africa. Lastly, Philippolis is the birthplace of Sir Laurens van der Post, a literary giant on the world's stage. But what makes Philippolis truly unique is the fact that it is the only town in South Africa to have reinvented itself on the back of literary tourism, breaking decades of depopulation of the platteland.

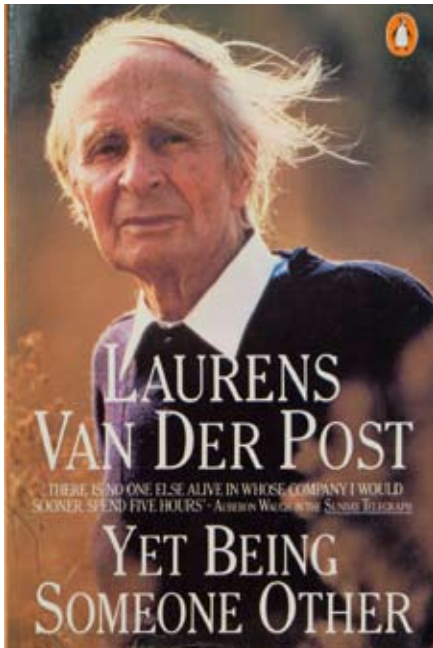
According to A W G Raath, author of *Vesting in die Transgariep*, Philippolis was initially home to a group of people

called *Die Bergenaars* (the mountain people), as well as Bushmen. The early history is dominated by conflict between the Bergenaars, the Bushmen and the Griqua people of Adam Kok. The cannons overlooking Philippolis bear testimony to the warring tendencies of the early inhabitants. The Bergenaars were the first to wilt in this conflict which resulted in a straight conflict between Bushmen and Griqua for Philippolis. Doctor John Philip, Superintendent of the London Missionary Soci-



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Water is a scarce commodity in the Philippolis area, and here a good source warranted the erection of four windmills



Famous author Sir Laurens van der Post (a book cover shown far left) was born in the house at 7 Colin Fraser Street (left)

even stories that Sir Harry threatened to have Adam Kok hanged if Kok did not accede to his demands. But Adam Kok II was an obstinate character and it was only death (natural) that removed him as an obstacle to Sir Harry. Unable to withstand the pressure exerted on him by Sir Harry, Adam Kok III (successor to Adam Kok II) eventually capitulated. In 1861–2, three thousand Griquas began their exodus to Niemandsland (“no-man’s-land”, later called Griqualand East) with a convoy of 300 wagons and 20 000 head of cattle. In the course of 1862, Philippolis became part of the OFS.

Amongst the many historical buildings in Philippolis, the Dutch Reformed church is the most prominent. In 1862, after Philippolis became part of the OFS, the NG Kerk purchased the old Griqua church for R1 800. In 1863, Rev Colin Fraser arrived in Philippolis as the first clergyman. For seven years services were held in the old Griqua church, but in 1869 the foundations for a new church were laid. From the first day this new church, which cost R12 000, was considered one

ety in South Africa, was on the side of the Griqua people, while magistrate Andries Stockenstrom was the protector of the Bushmen. He felt that Philip had no right to give the land (Philippolis) to Adam Kok. Early reports confirmed the brutality of Adam Kok and his people, when they threw Bushmen children and livestock into a bonfire. There are also reports that as many as thirty Bushmen had their throats slit in one horrible massacre. In 1827, the Bushmen left Philippolis and

were given a new mission station in what today is known as Bethulie.

Eventually the Griqua people suffered the same fate as the Bushmen at the hands of the Boers and the British. When Sir Harry Smith landed at the Cape his mission was to colonise as much of South Africa as possible. To this end he tried to broker a settlement by offering Adam Kok a sum of £11 000 for each Griqua farm, as well as an “allowance” of £300 per year for the rest of Adam Kok’s life. There are



The Dutch Reformed church (1869), seen from the edge of the village. It has been described as one of the finest buildings in the country



Notes written by Emily Hobbouse about her stay in Philippolis were found at this house



Oom Japie's House, home to a second-hand bookshop and the tourist hub of the village



An old horse-mill at the Transgariiep Museum, still used during the annual Witblits Festival

of the finest buildings in South Africa. As the community at Philippolis grew, two wings were later added to the building.

The church has repetitive patterns on the arches of the doorway and the windows. The beautiful pulpit was carved from one piece of wood, with no screws or joints being used. During the Anglo-Boer War the church was occupied by British soldiers and used as a fort, and the organ suffered irreparable damage.

The library and adjacent Transgariiep Museum can still hold their own as architectural gems even though one can see that these buildings have known better days. The library is a Victorian building built in 1905–6 by two Dutchmen. From 1921 to 1977, the home was owned by a certain Mority Jacobson and upon his death, it was bequeathed to the municipality to be used as a library. In the Transgariiep Museum are interesting displays on the town's history, most noteworthy being the Hobbouse collection encompassing relics from the first spinning and weaving school in the OFS.

The van der Post family home can be found at 7 Colin Fraser Street. Records seem to indicate that this house was built in 1874 by a certain Joseph Beddy, brother to William who was the general manager of the Jagersfontein diamond mine. An 1894 photograph shows the house without gables. With the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899, the Beddy family decided that Beaufort West was a safer place to call home. It was only around 1906 that this house became associated with the van der Post family – archival material shows that Laurens van der Post was born in the front bedroom on 13 December 1906.

C W H van der Post (father of Laurens) was extremely affluent and, having come under the spell of Stellenbosch, decided to give his house Cape Dutch gables. Due to the large size of his family (fifteen children, of which Laurens was number 13) he also bought the adjacent house, which is now 9 Colin Fraser Street. The wagon house of No 7 is a bone of contention, with many believing that it may have belonged to Adam Kok, the Griqua chieftain. The house changed hands regularly over the years but stood vacant for twelve years between 1966 and 1978, due to the general depopulation of the platteland. In 1988 a retired policeman from Burma, John McArdle, acquired the house. When he heard the rumour that this was indeed the house of the now knighted Sir Laurens van der Post, he contacted Sir Laurens to verify the story.

Laurens subsequently visited the house on two occasions. In 1990 the McArdles were successful in their application for National Monument status for the house.

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The house, which changed hands again in 1994, is said to be a fine example of Victorian architecture, and has been a source of inspiration for many an author, not least of all Laurens van der Post. Some of his ashes were also buried under one of the old trees.

The van der Post Literary Museum complex comprises the Artists' Retreat, the Garden of Remembrance and the Labyrinth. The Artists' Retreat offers free accommodation to artists of any genre looking to find their muse in the serenity that is Philippolis, and doubles as a guest house when not in use by artists. The Garden of Remembrance and the Labyrinth are recent additions to the complex.

The Artists' Retreat is the creation of architect Alida Stewart. The interior is consistent with the décor of early Philippolis, with floors of a mixture of concrete and hay, and a shower without tiles. The choice of location for the museum was important: it is said to link the townscape to the rural landscape in the direction of Trompsburg, and also forms the link between central Philippolis and the lower end, home to the black township.

The van der Post Museum is unusual in that Sir Laurens had no links to this building. After the death of Sir Laurens, his children thought it appropriate to honour their father through the creation of a museum in the town where he was born. Unfortunately, the family home was now in private hands, but with money from his trust certain prominent figures from Philippolis, most notably Rev Bertie Haasbroek, helped the family to purchase and create one of the great literary monuments in South Africa. This is probably the only literary museum in South Africa that is not situated in the home of a writer, and may serve as a model for similar museums in future.

Another landmark is *Oom Japie se Huis* (Uncle Japie's House) which was bought by Oom Japie Janse van Rensburg, considered the town's philosopher. Oom Japie then engaged the services of a prominent Bloemfontein architect to restore the house to its former glory. The restoration project was such a success that the South African Institute of Architects awarded the house the main prize in its bi-annual award for the best restored house in South Africa. With pride, Richard Proctor-Simms (curator of the van der Post Museum and owner of a second-hand bookshop located in the house) recounts that this house is featured in author Karel Schoeman's magisterial work *Vrystaatse Erfenis*. When Oom Japie passed away, two of the prominent figures involved in the museum, Bertie Haasbroek and Alida Stewart, purchased the house. It is now the tourist hub of Philippolis. ■



Left: Oom Gert van Biljon in his 1934 Chrysler, which he restored himself. Oom Gert, a retired farmer, is a great expert on the veld and especially herbs. He is planning a museum in Philippolis for his collection of old farm implements

Below: The van der Post Literary Museum complex. The modern design blends in with its historic surroundings and creates links to the countryside and townscape. It includes an Artists' Retreat where artists may stay to find their muse

