

## Crocodile Pools

Some years ago, I was presented a leather-bound portfolio containing issues of the MAFEKING MAIL and PROTECTORATE GUARDIAN dated 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October 1899 and 1<sup>st</sup> edition MAFEKING MAIL SPECIAL SIEGE SLIPS dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 1899 through to 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1900.

My immediate interest was the "Siege Slips" for, at the time, I was researching the history of the first and subsequent editions. So it was that I gave scant attention to two rare British South Africa Company's Telegraph forms in the collection.

One telegram, written in cursive, is from "Ludwig", dated London 13<sup>th</sup> to Gordon Wilson, Mafeking, the canceller, "CROCODILE POOLS 22 MAR 00 SOUTH AFRICA". It reads: "Delighted hear from you all well but most anxious for your relief markets firm fond thoughts & wishes"

The second is from London dated 22/3/00 to Lady Sarah, Mafeking: "Thankful cable first victories everywhere relief Lady Smith wild enthusiasm London empire absolutely determined union Jack South Africa queen goes Ireland instead Italy".

Some years later, I began to cogitate their origin, the personalia involved, and their likely mode of delivery to Mafeking.

The "Lady Sarah" is of course Lady Sarah Isabella Augusta Wilson (née Spencer-Churchill) (1865-1929), famous for having been permitted to enter Mafeking in exchange for the release of a certain P Viljoen who had been imprisoned for horse theft prior to the start of hostilities. Her experiences are related in "South African Memories".

"Gordon Wilson" is Gordon Chesney Wilson (1865-1914), her husband, then one of the besieged.

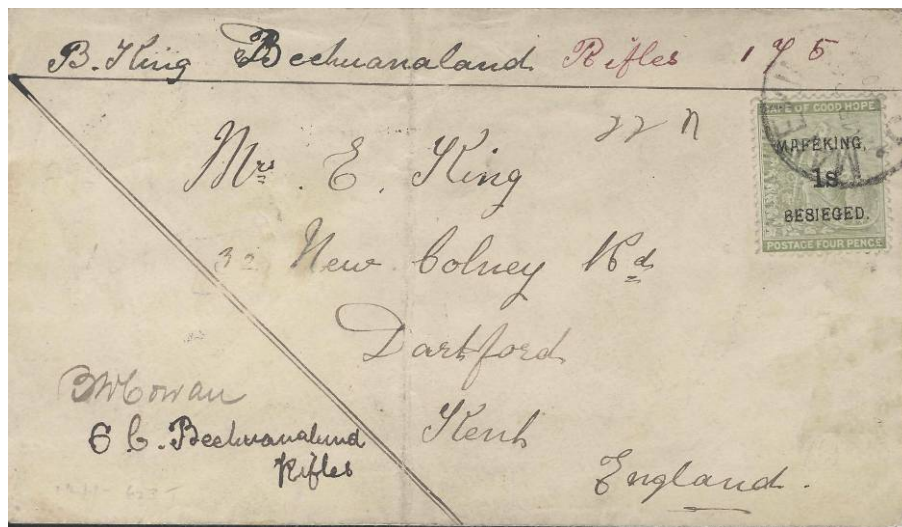
The person "Ludwig" was a little more elusive. He appears to have been Mr. Ludwig Neumann (1859-1934), a former diamond merchant and banker, and, at the time of dispatching the telegram, a member of a group led from Blenheim Palace by Lady Georgiana Curzon (later Lady Howe, and a sister of Lady Sarah Wilson) and Lady Chesham, their objective to raise funds towards the establishment of a hospital in support of the British war effort in South Africa.

The Siege of Mafeking lasted from 14<sup>th</sup> October 1899 until 16<sup>th</sup> May 1900. In the early days of the siege, unstamped mail was sent sporadically out of Mafeking under private treaties contracted with "native" runners. From mid-March 1900, an official service was put in place with postage stamps being attached to all the items. Entrance and egress was managed through the same paid courier system.

It was in 1897 that a Telegraph Office was first listed at Crocodile Pools (Siding) situated as it was on the Cape Railway in the Bechuanaland Protectorate and *en route* to the then embryonic Rhodesia. It was evacuated by Imperial troops on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1899, to be occupied by Boer forces. Crocodile Pools had proven to be the most strategically vulnerable point on the Cape railway running between Mafeking and Bulowayo, for, nearby, the railway line crossed a bridge nestled

between kopjes and only a couple of hundred meters from the Transvaal frontier. Sporadic skirmishes took place in the vicinity between Col. Plumer's force and a mainly German-officered light artillery group between 16<sup>th</sup> January and 26<sup>th</sup> February 1900 - the Battle of Crocodile Pools - reaching a climax between 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> February 1900. Crocodile Pools (Siding) was finally reoccupied on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1900 by a Col. Holdsworth.

The "native" couriers of Mafeking carried mail along the so-called southern route via Kimberley, or a northern route via Gaborone, Mochudi, Ootsi or Ramotswa Siding to Bulawayo, thence to Salisbury and Beira (Illustration 1). Once it was reoccupied, they passed through Crocodile Pools en route to Gaborone. It appears likely that the postal agency was mobile and under the control of the Military Administration in Cape Town. One can only wonder at the reasons for its existence in the first place. The use of the appellation "SOUTH AFRICA" in the canceller adds to its curiosity.



Mafeking Siege mail, northern route

The "CROCODILE POOLS SOUTH AFRICA" canceller was a double circle date stamp with a date (dd/mm/yy) in a single line across the centre, and dates from 20<sup>th</sup> March 1900 onwards. The franked telegram is dated 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1900 (Illustration 2) (Illustration 3). By which route they were transmitted and how they were reached Mafeking can only be speculated at. Suffice to say that both are in pristine condition.

**THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY'S TELEGRAPHS.**

If the reverse of this Telegram (being an Inland Telegram) is cancelled, it will be repaid on payment of half the amount generally paid for the transmission; and, if found to be incorrect the amount paid for possession will be repaid on special conditions applicable to the regulations of Cables. When the cost of a copy has been prepaid, and the receipt of words in the copy is in answer to the amount so paid for, the sender of the copy shall pay for the return.

This Form should accompany any inquiry made respecting this Telegram.

NOTE: UNIFORM TIME is observed by THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY'S OFFICES.

No. of Message: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Detail Stamp of: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Received at: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Sent at: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Delivering Office: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailed in at: London 13<sup>th</sup> 1890

From	To
<u>Ludwig</u>	<u>Gordon Wilson</u>

Woking

Delighted hear from you all  
 well but most anxious for your  
 relief. Markets firm fond thoughts  
 & wishes

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**THE BRITISH SOUTH AFRICA COMPANY'S TELEGRAPHS.**

No. of Message: \_\_\_\_\_

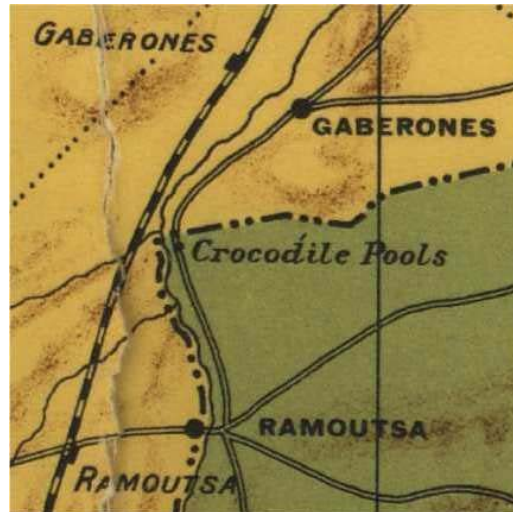
British South Africa Company's Telegraph cancelled "CROCODILE POOLS 22 MAR 00 SOUTH AFRICA"



Detail of Crocodile Pools Siding cancellation

By 1902, a Telegraph Office named Crocodile Pools again is listed, finally to be closed 1 November 1914.

And where geographically was Crocodile Pools; and what of it today? Over the years, this has been debated at length in the literature. Situated in Botswana, Crocodile Pools (Siding), now more commonly known as Ngotwane, is a railway siding 14 km. to the south of Gaborone (Illustration 4).



Section of South African map (1923) locating Crocodile Pools at approx. 23°S45' 25E°S50'.

Nearby, a stream of that name joins the Ngotwane river from the east near the Ngotwane railway dam. The Transvaal-Botswana border runs north up the middle of the Ngotwane river, turns east at this point, following the course of the Crocodile Pools stream and thence straight along some hill ridges towards Tlokweng / Kopfontein border-post (Parsons). The Union of South African map (Surveyor-General, 1923) shows it taking a somewhat different route. The exact location of the postal agency remains a mystery.

What is certain is that correspondence bearing the canceller "CROCODILE POOLS SOUTH AFRICA" is scarce and very desirable to military historians and philatelist alike.

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### Text for Illustrations:

1. Mafeking Siege mail, northern route
2. British South Africa Company's Telegraphs form cancelled "CROCODILE POOLS 22 MAR 00 SOUTH AFRICA"
3. Detail of Crocodile Pools Siding cancellation
4. Section of South African map of 1923 locating Crocodile Pools at approx. 23°S45' 25E°S50'.

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