

A BLINK IN HISTORY:

the visit of Joseph Chamberlain to Bloemfontein, February 1903.

"A war over the points of contention, which can be solved by negotiation or arbitration, would not only be an insult to Christianity and civilisation, but would be a crime against humanity"
M T Steyn ⁱ



Illustration 1: Ex-President Steyn. Duffus Bros, Cape Town. ND

Presented is an 1898 Halfpenny definitive BRIEF KAART overprinted "V.R.I." fifth setting variant 3 (issued first in July 1900) and bearing a canceller Bloemfontein O.R.C. (Putzel No. 47a) dated 18 December 1902 (illustration 2).



Illustration 2

Cards such as these are two-a-penny and engender very little philatelic enthusiasm. However, what this card serves to do is remind us of a little documented event, namely the visit of Joseph Chamberlain to southern Africa after the cessation of the hostilities which were *Die Engelse Oorlog* 1899-1902.

The card (illustration 4) was sent by WA Koller, the then Town Clerk of Bloemfontein to SE Gasson, requesting his attendance at a meeting convened to consider a programme welcoming the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain to the town.

“.....the technical casus belli is a very weak one” J Chamberlain ⁱⁱ



Illustration 3: Joseph Chamberlain. Duffus Bros, Cape Town. 1903

BACKGROUND TO VISITING BLOEMFONTEIN

Generals Botha, de la Rey and de Wet had visited London in August 1902 after coming to the realisation that the Treaty of Vereeniging (21st May 1902) was to form the framework within which South Africa was to be reconstructed. There they met Joseph Chamberlain, the British Secretary of State for the British Colonies, on the 5th September 1902 in an attempt to have him moderate the terms. Though he declined, the concerns they expressed left Chamberlain less than comfortable with the belief that he was fully *au fait* with the political realities facing Great Britain and its Empire in the aftermath of a disastrous war. Contrary to the expressed opinions of many at home, therefore, he decided to visit and appraise the *status quo* for himself.

Following a farewell banquet in Birmingham a week earlier, Joseph and Mary Endicott, the third Mrs. Chamberlain, embarked on H.M. Cruiser *Good Hope* on the 25th November 1902 *en route* for Egypt, British East Africa and South Africa. After a sojourn that took them to Port Said and Cairo, through the Suez Canal to Mombasa, and through much of British East Africa by special train, they re-joined the *Good Hope* in Zanzibar on the 20th December 1902 and headed for Natal. Purposely delayed so as not to inconvenience Chamberlain's hosts, the vessel arrived off Durban on 26th December 1902.

The party was met in Natal with great pomp and ceremony; and Chamberlain made the first of very many speeches crafted to promote reconciliation between former combatants whilst asserting the authority of the Imperial Crown for the benefit of those who remained adversaries: "I am come to express on behalf of the King and his Government and the people of the motherland their sympathy with all their kinsmen across the seas; their desire to understand them better, and their hope for a closer and more personal intercourse".

By any stretch of the imagination, the visit must have been an arduous one. The first stage of the tour taken by the Chamberlains and their entourage described a broad anticlockwise sweep; their traveling *inter alia* through Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith and Standerton to Pretoria; then on to Johannesburg and via Potchefstroom, Mafeking and Vryburg to Kimberley. Their progress was punctuated by welcoming addresses, Chamberlain granting audiences to various delegations and petitioners, whilst all the while reiterating the purpose of his touring southern Africa: the promotion of Unity, Loyalty, Self-sacrifice and Service.

BLOEMFONTEIN 3rd to 9th February 1903

On the 31st January 1903, the couple entered the Orange River Colony and camped at Paardeberg. Having inspected the battle field and later Abrahamskraal, the party made its way to Bloemfontein.

Arriving in the former capital of the Oranje Vrij Staat Republiek on the 3rd February 1903, the Chamberlain's were received with an affability that was altogether unexpected.

However, on the 6th February, Chamberlain was faced with the perceived realities of a vanquished people when he received a delegation led by General de Wet. He was presented a petition in which the British government was accused of breaking three terms of the Treaty of Vereeniging. Chamberlain took considerable umbrage at the contents of the document and what he construed as the discourteous manner in which it was delivered. As a consequence, he engaged in a two hour argument with General / Judge JBM Hertzog, the man responsible for its drafting. Though Hertzog, realising he had somewhat overplayed his hand, is reported as trying to pacify Chamberlain, the latter remained indignant and unequivocally said so.

THE BLINK

And what of the Brief Kaart ?

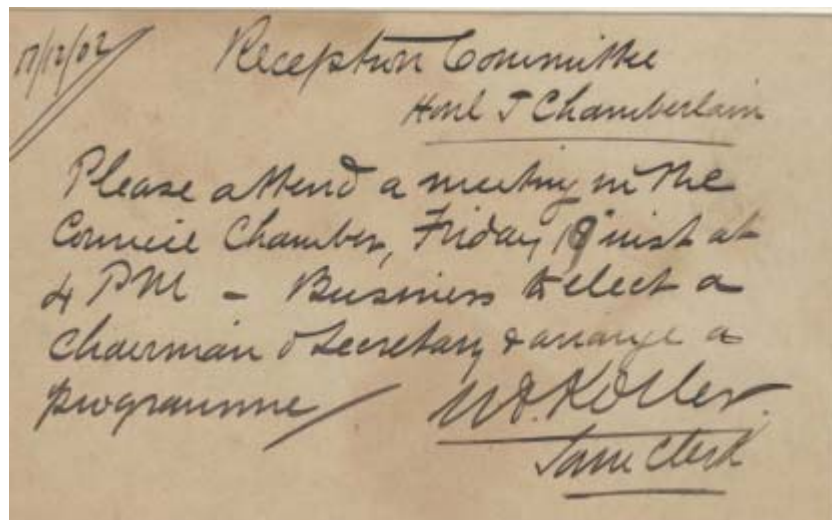


Illustration 2

William Alfred Koller was an experienced bureaucrat when he wrote this card inviting SE Gasson to a meeting convened to prepare for Joseph Chamberlain's reception. A registered House, Estate and Law Agent by profession, the date and circumstances in which he was appointed Town Clerk of Bloemfontein are not known. Though he hailed from the Cape, by 1894, he and his family were resident in Bloemfontein. But a few archival remnants remain of Koller's activities in Bloemfontein. He and his wife, Elizabeth Ann Turner, who bore him eight children, later retired to their farm "Bequest" in the Heilbron district. He died in Parys, Orange Free State on the 16th October 1949.

Sidney Edward Gasson (SEG), together with George Henry Gasson and Alfred Wallace Reid formed Gasson & Company, which traded as wool brokers and general merchants. Measured by the size of their estates, each was successful in their own right. SEG., however, was extraordinarily so. He was born in London circa August 1864. In June 1894, he married Christina Elizabeth Stock in Bloemfontein. She bore him five children. Gasson died in East London on 7 May 1943 in his 79th year, leaving an estate well in excess of £500,000.

The efforts of WA Koller and SE Gasson bore fruit. On the 7th February, the Chamberlain's attended a banquet held by the town in their honour; and on the 11th February 1903, the Legislative Council passed the following carefully crafted motion: "The Council desires to record its high, appreciation of the visit of the Right Honourable Joseph Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, which has been carried out at so much personal sacrifice to himself, and its conviction that the intimate acquaintance with the affairs of this Colony which he has acquired thereby, and the personal interviews which he has had with so many of its inhabitants, will be of the greatest benefit to the country in general, and result in increased good feeling among all classes of the community and greater confidence in the future of South Africa under British rule". This, it appears, did much to settle Chamberlain's ire. It was acknowledged with thanks in a telegramme addressed to the Lieutenant Governor on the 13th February 1903.

DENOUEMENT

Leaving Bloemfontein on the 9th February 1903, the Chamberlains traveled on to the eastern Cape via Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth and Graaff-Reinet, thence to Beaufort West and Paarl, arriving in Cape Town on the 17th February 1903. In the Cape, Chamberlain found that the Afrikaners were more accommodating than many members of the English speaking community. Indeed, Dr Leander Starr Jameson, at the time leader of the Progressive Party, characterized Chamberlain as "the callous devil from Birmingham". By all accounts, the time spent in the Cape appears to have been less than easy.

On the evening of the 25th February 1903, the Chamberlains embarked on the Union Castle liner *Norman*, reaching Southampton on the 14th March 1903.

Whilst on tour throughout the four southern African colonies, Joseph Chamberlain and his wife are stated as having visited twenty-nine towns, he receiving eighty-four deputations and delivering sixty-four speeches. Chamberlain, a man with a strong imperialist vision, is quoted as saying that he went to South Africa at some inconvenience to himself, having no personal motives nor personal ambition to satisfy. He left convinced that the natural forces which drew people together were more potent than evil that tended to separate people. Sadly, his vision, and that of most others that held the reigns of power over the following ninety years, at no time embraced a meaningful political role for the indigenous people of colour.

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Saturday, 20 January 2007

ADDENDUM

By kind permission of Paul Mills of Clarke's Africana and Rare Books, the following:
 Cape Government Railways JOURNEY OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE
 GOVERNOR OF CAPE COLONY, SIR W.F. HELY-HUTCHINSON, G.C.M.G.



CAPE GOVERNMENT RAILWAYS.

Running Time of Special Train conveying H.E. the GOVERNOR from Newlands to Mafeking.

STATIONS.	Saturday, Jan. 24, 1903.		Sunday, Jan. 25, 1903.		STATIONS.	Sunday, Jan. 25, 1903.		Monday, Jan. 26, 1903.	
	arrive.	depart.	arrive.	depart.		arrive.	depart.	arrive.	depart.
Newlands		8.0 P.M.			De Aar	11.0 P.M.	11.25 P.M.		
Salt River	8.10	8.15			Orange River			3.43	3.58
Durban Road	8.36	8.38			Belmont			5.31	5.33
Paarl		9.35			Modder River			7.23	7.29
Lady Grey Bridge		9.44			Beaconsfield			8.50	9.20
Wellington	9.59	10.10		A.M.	Kimberley			9.30	10.0
Ceres Road			12.7	12.12	Windsorton Road			11.15 P.M.	11.16 P.M.
Worcester			1.16	1.26	Warrenton Road			12.3	12.4
Town's River			4.29	4.37	Fourteen Streams			12.20	12.21
Matjiesfontein			6.28	6.45	Vryburg			4.4	4.10
Prince Albert Road			10.18	10.23	Maribogo			7.25	7.29
Fraserburg Road			11.27	11.37	Kraaipan			8.11	8.19
Beaufort West			2.25 P.M.	2.50	Maritzani			9.10	9.12
Victoria Road			6.49	7.10	Mafeking			10.30	P.M.
Richmond Road			8.37	8.40					

Cape Town, Jan. 14th. 1903. T. S. MEYER, General Manager.

ⁱ Marthinus Theunis Steyn, President of the Oranje Vrij Staat. Quoted in Gronum, MA. Die Engelse Oorlog 1899-1902. [p. 111]. Publ. Tafelberg, Cape Town. 1972.

ⁱⁱ Joseph Chamberlain to Sir Alfred Milner on 2 September 1899 quoted in Nutting, A. Scramble for Africa: The Great Trek to the Boer War [p. 414]. Publ. Constable, London. 1970.