

ORANGE RIVER STATION

The rarity of postal history originating from Orange River Station or Oranjerivier will be attested to by most collectors of South African philately. But the majority would not be able recount anything of the place and of its significance in South African history. This is an account of a visit to Orange River Station and an exploration of its past.

Orange River Station lies on the southern bank of the Orange River, 14 kilometres outside Hopetown on the R369, Petrusville road. It is surrounded by a group of farms, the Kromhout Estate, of which *Doornbult* is the principle farm. *Doornbult* is no ordinary farm where pastoral activities are focussed solely on cattle, ostriches, sheep or cash crops. This is home of the Wiids; and the site of Lieutenant-General Lord Methuen's headquarters prior to his march north along the railway line to relieve Kimberley and of one of Field Marshall Lord Robert's many concentration camps.

Lord Methuen used Orange River Station as a staging post for the relief of Kimberley. He established a series of fortifications around the area; Fort Frederick above the river on its northern bank, a blockhouse (one of 8600¹ to be built throughout the country) at the southern end of the old railway bridge, and a series of entrenchments on the crests of the *koppies* which overlook the station. All were linked by heliograph to his headquarters below. A gentle stroll up the "cannon paths" which were cleared for the installation of his 15-pounders takes you directly to these fortifications, most of which remain in excellent condition.

Some 8,000 to 16,000 soldiers were bivouacked along the railway-line either side of Orange River Station. One can visit the sites of these encampments, of the British hospital, and of the east-facing graveyard set against a hill, the final resting place of numerous blacks, mostly women and children, who died of disease and accident when in the service of the British.

South of the station lies *Doornbult* proper. Formerly the family estate of the Du Toits, the farm was proclaimed in 1845. In April 1901, on this land, the British established a concentration camp which was to house at least 1600 people. Both Field Marshall Lord Roberts and Major-General Lord Kitchener were of the opinion that the *boer* female was a powerful influence in ensuring that the menfolk continued their struggle against the British. From November 1900, they applied a "*scorched-earth*" policy in an attempt to combat this influence. 3000 farmsteads² and over 40 towns in the Oranje Vrij Staat alone were burnt and live-stock slaughtered. The women, children and elderly men, together with many of their black staff, were brought in open cattle trucks from all over the southern Free State to this place.

Nestling against the rail-track is a stone building (formerly the camp hospital, now a museum), with an artesian well out front. This was excavated by the women and children of the camp. Close by, is the simple cemetery where more than 500 people (mainly children) were to be buried in graves dug by the camp inmates themselves. In 1901, torrential rains, chalky ground and a high water table all conspired to envelope these environs in a foetid smell of death. To-day, there is a morose tranquillity to this place. The cemetery is preserved and most graves have the dignity of a name. One gravestone remains adorned by a simple flower fashioned out of tin all those years ago.

But it is out in the veld over a kilometre away that one engages the true history of the place. There one stumbles across the detritus of a time long past, for the earth is strewn with artefacts of archaeological interest. There is "the bird cage", a wire "cell" created to restrain the unco-operative in conditions of baking heat by day and punishing frost by night. Here are the simple kitchen utensils fashioned of wire and black metal; lead sealed tins – chicken soup, salmon., bully-beef, cacao, condensed milk – which, when used to heat food, caused lead poisoning. Here are bottles – aqua glass, gin, ink, medicine, perfume, whiskey ; and shards of pottery – glazed earthenware kitchen jars and transfer-printed porcelain. Here are the spent coals of campfires, boot-scrappers fashioned from serried ranks of buried tins, and raised stony ground where canvas tents once stood.

¹ "The National Army Museum Book of The Boer War" : Field Marshall Lord Carver Publ: Sidgwick & Jackson ISBN 0-283-06333-5

² Lord Carver puts these numbers at 353 farmsteads burnt; and 136,000 people interned

Water was drawn once a day from outside the camp hospital over to the east, carried in primitive containers, and had to satisfy the requirements of both hygiene and nutrition. The succulent *asbosse* when burnt provided ash which substituted for soap. Emily Hobhouse, representing the South African Women and Children Distress Fund, visited the camp and was horrified at the conditions she found and disgusted at the high mortality rate. Following a later visit to South Africa from the Liberal Unionist, Mrs Millicent Fawcett, conditions were to improve with the provision of soap and wash basins, kitchen utensils and milk for babies. This is a place filled with pathos. During the South African War, over 160,000 ² people were to be interned in such camps; of these, at least 27,000 died of starvation or disease.

The Orange River Station itself has been much changed in recent years. However, Victorian semaphore railway signals set on cast-iron gantries still stand along-side the train lines, as do elevated water-tanks and hoses ³ which, until recently, fed the boilers of the great 25NC's steam locomotives which worked the "Steel Kyalami" between Kimberley and De Aar. Along side the station, one can visit a large corrugated-iron building dating from the 1880's which positively exudes *Eau de Algemehandelaar* and which was formerly the hotel serving a busy railway junction. To-day it is little more than a local *poste restante*.



Oranjerivierstasie 1899 : South African Archives AG 7129

And what of the Orange River Station post-and telegraph office? Gone is the prefabricated post-office (illus) ⁴ which once stood on the east-side platform, its former site lost to local lore until the author's visit. There remains but the original telegraph pole which once hugged its side, marked "*Siemens Brothers & Co., London*" (illus.) ⁵, and it is this and the building behind which places the post-office exactly.

³ Two of the eight still extant were unceremoniously cut down in May 2000 for no reason apparent to the author nor to those who did the deedexcept that they were "old".

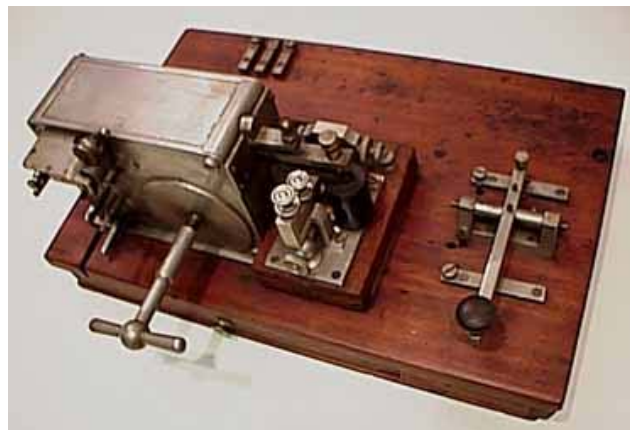
⁴ Oranjerivierstasie 1899 : South African Archives AG 7129

⁵ Original telegraph pole, "*Siemens Brothers & Co., London*" : RMP May 2000



Original telegraph pole, “*Siemens Brothers & Co., London*”

From this simple relic, it has been possible for an expert to deduce that the office would have housed one telegraph instrument, that is a British Siemens Brothers Key-Register Set with Unique Sounder-Operated Register. This set was used throughout Europe in instances where copy-by-ear using sounders was not trusted. The set was labelled: Siemens Brothers & Co. London. No. 17022., with a unique sounder mechanism attached which would have read: A. E. Co. Ltd. A.T.M. Liverpool. With this instrument, a roll of paper tape was stored in a drawer under the register; the key was of a typical straight-lever European style key; and the ink-writing register would have been operated by an Unique Sounder Mechanism which was directly coupled to the Register mechanism ⁶.



British Siemens Brothers Key-Register Set with Unique Sounder-Operated Register

The post-office was renamed simply Oranjerivier (Orange River) in 1885 ⁸. The use of an 1864 Barred Oval Numeral Cancellor (BONC) no. 525 is attributed to the post-office itself, together with three different types of single circular date stamps (cds.), namely “ORANGE RIVER STATION”, ORANGE

⁶ Museum of Telegraph and Scientific Instruments : Prof. Tom Perera, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043 : Virtual Museum No.1730, instrument and keypad

RIVER TO' and "ORANGE RIVER CGH" (illus)^{7 11}. From the 28 February 1901, the camp was under control of the civil authorities and the deputy-administration of the Orange River Colony was made responsible be for the maintenance of the concentration camp (and all allied services which included postal services) and the creation of new camps. All military officials in the camps were replaced by civil personnel. Mail from the concentration camp is said to have been only identifiable by mail endorsements and that no cachets are known⁸. Army (Field) Post Office (A.P.O.) cds. that are thought to have been used at this site⁹ include A.P.O.2 by the 1st Brigade as early as 17th November 1899, A.P.O.4 by the 1st Division between 17th and 26th November 1899, A.P.O.11-A by the 3rd Brigade between 17th November and 7th December 1899 and possibly A.P.O.16, for the 9th Brigade was bivouacked at this site. All, if indeed they were used at this site, are extremely rare.



Civilian cover marked "ORANGE RIVER CGH JU.3 / 01"

Doornbult and Orange River Station represent the most complete archaeological site of its type in South Africa¹⁰. What puzzles the author is the rarity of its postal history, given that the post-office was established in 1884 at a busy railway junction, was formerly occupied by many thousands of soldiers and played host to a concentration camp of significant size over a period of years. Historians in Hopetown avow to having never seen any examples of its postal history. One could be forgiven for saying "its as though this service never was....." just as, in a similar vein, much of the history of the district fails to get a mention in South African historyas though it never were.

⁷ "The Runner Post" Journal of the Bechuanalands and Botswana Society 1989: 17; 306. In "Postmarks of the Cape of Good Hope" R Goldblatt : Publ. Reijger Publishers, 1984. Here BONC 325 is linked with ORS. This is thought to be erroneous.

⁸ "The Encyclopaedia of South African Post Offices and Postal Agencies" R F Putzel : Publ. Putzel

⁹ "History of the British Army Postal Service : 1882-1902" Ed. E B Proud : Publ. Proud-Bailey

¹⁰ Orange River Station railway bridge blockhouse : RMP May 2000

¹¹ Civilian cover marked "ORANGE RIVER CGH JU.3 / 01" : David Crocker Collection, Montague



Orange River Station railway bridge blockhouse

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