



## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF KNYSNA (1770 – 1890)**

Stephanus Jesaias Ter Blans, the eldest son of Heemraad Pieter Ter Blans (Terblanche) of the Reeboksfontein farm near Little Brak River, was the first recorded colonist farmer to settle on the Knysna Estuary, in 1770. The loan farm was registered as de Melkhoute Craal (Melhoutkraal) and was located on the east bank of the Knysna River. The farm stretched from the Indian Ocean to today's Long Street in the town of Knysna. Stephanus Ter Blans died in 1794 after having had the loan rights for over twenty years.

His widow, Hester Marx, remained on the farm and ran it with the help of her children, subsequently marrying Johann von Lindenbaum in 1798. In 1801 Lindenbaum sold the farm to Richard Holiday, who died the following year.

By 1780, another settler, Hendrik Barnard, was farming on the farm Uitzigt, better known today as Belvidere and Brenton.

The massacre of colonist farmers, on 15 October 1802, at a place known as De Poort, near the Garden of Eden in Harkerville, was a setback for settlement in the Knysna area. This event occurred during the Third Frontier War when a group of renegades plundered farms all along the Langkloof and entered into the coastal regions, harassing farmers from Plettenberg Bay all the way up to the Kaaiman's River near George.

A group of Plettenberg Bay colonist farmers, Botha, Heyns and Wolfaart, with their families and retainers were returning to the Cape in fear of their lives when they were ambushed at De Poort. Four of the men were killed and the women taken hostage. The women and children were released later but many of the settled farms lay unoccupied for many years thereafter.

By 1804 peace had returned and the scene was now set for a new wave of colonisation.

Scottish ex-mariner, James Callander, had surveyed the Knysna Estuary and forests and the promise of Knysna had reached George Rex in Cape Town – the timber, farming, and a possible harbour for export of goods.

George Rex settled in Knysna in 1804. George Rex had served in the British Admiralty Court at the Cape, where he had practised as a lawyer. After the handover of the Cape to the Batavian Republic, in terms of the Treaty of Amiens, he decided not to return to England and to remain in the Cape Colony. Instead, he bought the loan farm Melkhoutkraal from the deceased estate of Richard Holiday.

George Rex then extended his landholdings by obtaining the loan rights to the farm Welbedagt (Welbedacht), which he renamed Eastford, in 1816, situated between Long Street in Knysna and east of the Knysna River.

He later ceded 80 acres (40 morgan) of Eastford to the Cape Colonial Government on which, in 1825, the British Royal Navy laid out the naval township of Melville, so named after Viscount Melville, the 1<sup>st</sup> Lord of the Admiralty. George Rex eventually owned all the farms encircling the Knysna Estuary, and beyond, viz.

Melkhoutkraal  
Eastford  
Westford  
Uitzigt  
Leeuwenbosch  
Springfield

The next major player to settle in Knysna was Captain Thomas Henry Duthie, late of the 72 Highlanders, who married Caroline Rex and, in 1834, bought the farm Uitzicht from his father-in-law George Rex, which had been re-named Belvidere by Rex, located on the west side of the Knysna Estuary. Here, in 1848, Duthie built a stone farmhouse and raised a family. He was also the driving force behind the building of the little Norman style sandstone church at Belvidere, the Holy Trinity Church, which was consecrated in 1855.

The original Duthie home is today the focal point of the Belvidere Manor Hotel.

George Rex died in 1839 and in accordance with the terms of his will his properties were put up for sale. By 1840 Thomas Henry Duthie had bought further farms, namely Westford and Portland, out of the George Rex Estate.

In 1842 the Englishman Henry Barrington, 12<sup>th</sup> son of George, the 5<sup>th</sup> Viscount Barrington, arrived in the Cape and came to Knysna. Here he purchased the Portland farm from Thomas Henry Duthie and built a stone farm house, styled on the manor houses of England, which was, unfortunately, completely destroyed by the Great Forest Fire of 1869.

Undaunted, he rebuilt the home which still stands today, called Portland Manor.

As was the case with Thomas Duthie, Barrington also imported skilled labour from England to help in the running of the farm and the building works.

Selling the Melkhoutkraal farm turned out to be a lengthy affair.

The Rex family resolved to retain the southern portion of the original Melkhoutkraal farm known today as Hunter's Home and Woodbourne (which includes New Place/Rexford), with some of the Rex family members pooling their inheritance and with financial assistance from Thomas Duthie bought this portion out of George Rex's estate.

In 1844 Lt. Col. John Sutherland, an officer of the British Indian Army bought the northern section of Melkhoutkraal, out of the George Rex Estate, during a visit to Knysna on furlough from India to the Cape. He died two years later but his eldest son, also a John, proceeded with the establishment of the village of Newhaven on this property, which was surveyed by William Hopley and laid down in 1845.

John Sutherland then offered the surveyed lots for sale.

By 1848 the population of, what was to become the village of Knysna, excluding the families of the gentleman farmers, viz. Rex, Duthie and Barrington, and their retainers, consisted of a tiny (white) population of only 10 adults and 5 children!

But the character of Knysna was soon to change.

In 1847 John Sutherland built a stone school building and by 1855 there were 55 school children attending class.

The building of the school was closely followed by the construction of the little stone Anglican St. George's Church (1848 - 1851), consecrated in 1855. The first minister in Knysna was the Rev. Dr. William Andrews and now, at last, the Knysna folk no longer had to travel the arduous journey to George to have their children christened in the Dutch Reformed Church there.

The first Dutch Reformed Church in Knysna was built in 1851.

Knysna was at this time a Field-Cornetcy of the District of Plettenberg Bay in the Magisterial Division of George, but in 1858 Knysna was declared the seat of magistracy of a separate Magisterial Division; bounded in the west by the Swart River, east by the boundaries of the new Magisterial Division of Humansdorp, north by the Outeniqua Mountains and south by the Indian Ocean. As a result of this the old stone Gaol building in Main Street was built - initially to house the convicts working on the roads in Knysna under Thomas Bain, later the Prince Alfred's Pass through the Outeniqua Mountains. James Fichat, the first Resident Magistrate and Civil Commissioner, was appointed to administer justice and a District Surgeon was sent to Knysna.

Knysna now became the new commercial centre for this area and merchants set up trading enterprises and more hotels and boarding houses were established. Magistrate Fichat started a Public Reading Room, the forerunner of the 1893 stone-built public library.

By 1865, the brothers Pieter and Johannes Metelerkamp were living in Knysna, having arrived from the Eastern Cape.

By the early 1870's Knysna had 25 settler dwellings and the population had risen to 200.

Also in early 1870 Arnt and Matheus Thesen and their families arrived to settle in Knysna. The Thesen's had travelled from Norway on their sailing ship, the Albatros, and brought with them much needed sailing, commercial and practical skills. The Albatros was immediately put to use as a coastal trading vessel. The large family soon set to work in the vast indigenous forests, extracting and exporting timber on the Albatros to the Cape for construction and boat building. They established their own steam sawmill at Bracken Hill, where they also manufactured small boats. This sawmill and boat building factory was later relocated to Paarden Island, later known as Thesen's Island, in the Knysna River Estuary, and was operational by 1923. They also established the Thesen's Steamship Company.

By 1880 there were over 1000 settlers in Knysna.

The town took on a new importance with the discovery of gold in 1878, when a gold nugget was found by Jack Hooper in the Karatara River near Ruigtevlei, west of Knysna. Eager prospectors followed the gold trail into the Millwood Forest and by January 1887 the Millwood Forest had been proclaimed as a goldfield.

In 1881 the first bank was opened in a room in Melrose House, Queen Street.

Commerce and trade in Knysna grew as the demand for food and supplies for the gold miners increased. The gold boom was unfortunately short-lived and later, when the mining industry at Millwood collapsed, many of the miners settled in Knysna, bringing their little wood and iron homes down into Knysna with them, as well as their skills, to the growing little town.

In 1882 the two villages of Newhaven and Melville, plus “the wedge”, a triangle of land between the two villages, being a remaining portion of the farm Eastford, had been amalgamated to form a municipality, known as *The Knysna*, taking its name from the Knysna River. A Municipal Committee was formed, mainly of the leading Knysna businessmen at the time, resulting in the formal management of future development.

In 1891 George Parkes arrived in Knysna from England and saw the opportunity to use the hardwoods of the Knysna Forest. After acquiring large tracts of indigenous forest and a steam sawmill in Knysna, he formed the Knysna Forest Company, later re-named Geo. Parkes & Sons Ltd.

The Company still trades under this name today.