GREYTOWN : A SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSCAPE

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Towns are much like the people who live in them. The appearance of towns — termed townscape — is a vivid reflection of the values and beliefs, ideas and images, of the culture group, or groups, responsible for the establishment and subsequent development of any town. In the South African context our historic towns were founded, with only very few exceptions, by people of either Dutch or British descent, and the Dutch-Afrikaner *dorp* and British town can be readily identified and contrasted. But as each of the provinces came under British control and a blending of *dorp* and town features produced throughly South African towns. Greytown, Natal, is just such a place.

HISTORIC DORP AND TOWN CONTRASTS

The *dorpe,* or nucleated agricultural settlements, established during Dutch rule of the Cape, and laid out in the interior by the Voortrekkers, constituted a close family. Common morphological features were: large, often one full morgen (0,86 ha), irrigated erven which extended from one street to the next street, rows of diminutive houses built close to the street line; furrow and tree-lined streets, whose original names usually included Kerk, Mark, Loop, Lang and Boom; a prominent Dutch Reformed church set in a spacious central *kerkplein;* and a cemetery located on the outskirts of the original layout. These places are best described as *kerkdorpe,* their main functions being agricultural and ecclesiastical.

A *dorp* had to be laid out on an irrigable site, and this invariably meant on a flood plain or on a spur — a sloping ridge of land between two river courses (Fig. 1). The stream or river from which the *dorp's* water supply was diverted was often appropriately named the Dorp-spruit.
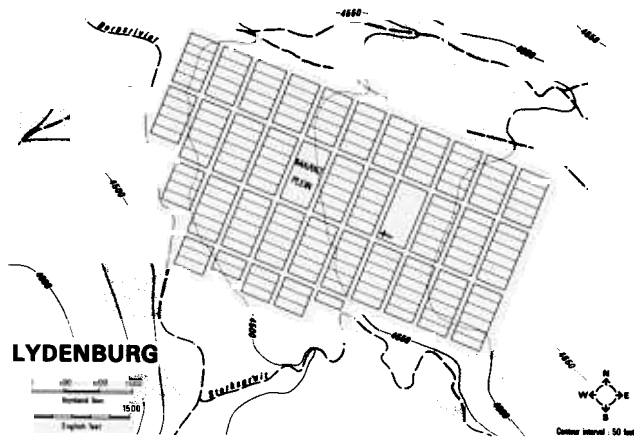

LYDENBURG

Fig. 1. Lydenburg 1850 (redrawn from a plan in the Transvaal Archives Depot, Pretoria).

In addition to these visual elements the *dorp* was characterised by "...'n gees van rustigheid ..."[1] or, as Bosman put it, "a restfulness verging on somnolence".[2]

By contrast British settlers and surveyors drew from a more varied townscape heritage. Whereas the dorp was strikingly regular in appearance, the town was seemingly irregular (Fig. 2 and 3). The British-founded town was essentially a commercial-administrative centre. Their morphology was characterised by: small, perhaps one half-acre (0,2 ha), non-irrigated plots; Georgian and Victorian houses set back from the street amid flower gardens; streets named after royalty and colonial officials; a central market square — often the site of a later and prominent town hall; prominent commercial buildings such as corner stores; less prominent Anglican and/or Methodist and Presbyterian churches and adjacent churchyards.

Fig. 2. The regularity of a Voortrekker dorp: Pietermaritzburg circa 1851.

PHOTOGRAPH: NATAL MUSEUM

Fig. 3. The irregularity of a British-settler town: Verulam 1855.

PHOTOGRAPH: W.C. HOLDEN, *HISTORY OF THE COLONY OF NATAL* (CAPE TOWN, 1963)

The British often chose a site alongside a drift for a town. Such sites were conducive to trade and attracted inn- and store-keepers (Fig. 4). Towns were therefore far more lively and noisy than *dorpe*. Spoelstra, somewhat disparagingly yet fundamentally correct, asserted that "De Engelschen bouwen eerst een 'canteen', dan een 'tronk' en eindigen met eene Kerk; bij de Boeren is het anders; het dorp dankt zijn ontstaan aan de Kerk".[3]

THE BLENDING OF DORP AND TOWN FEATURES

British annexation of the four provinces was soon followed by the delimitation of magisterial districts, the selection of town sites, and the laying out of towns. Lewcock

A. COETZEE, *Die Afrikaanse volkskultuur* (Cape Town, 1960), p. 120.
2. H.C. BOSMAN, *Jacaranda in the night* (Johannesburg, 1947), p. 3.
3. C. SPOELSTRA, *Het kerkelyk en godsdienstig leven der boeren na den Grooten Trek. Historisch kritisch onderzocht* (Kampen, 1915), p. 62.
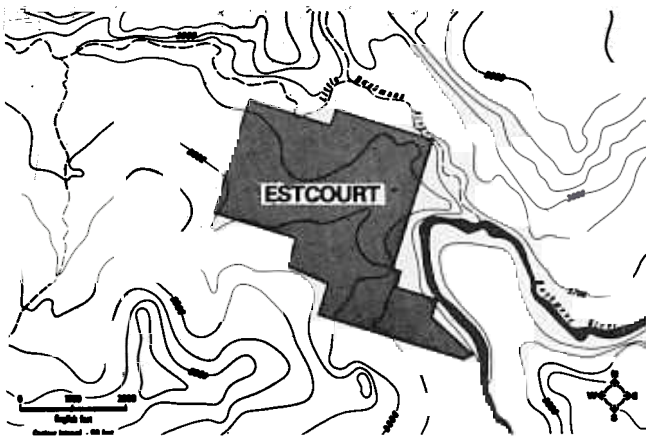
Fig. 4. Embryonic British-Settler Towns: Estcourt's site (top) and a circa 1920 view (bottom).

PHOTOGRAPH: LIBRARY: UNIVERSITY
OF NATAL, PIETERMARITZBURG

has pointed out that "to the cultivated British official with the townscaping heritage of the eighteenth century behind him, such a design (the *dorp* drainage grid) must have appeared an anathema".[4] Clearly British surveyors and predominantly Afrikaner populations would have different preferences for: 'town' sites; town and street names; the size of plots; the location of the Dutch Reformed church and individual houses. In fact there would appear to have been little basis for compromise, and it is hardly surprising that two of the first wave of 'British' towns to be laid out in the Orange River Sovereignty, viz. Harrismith and Smithfield, proved to be failures and soon had to be moved to *dorp* sites. However, initial town-founding conflicts soon gave way to pragmatic if not ingenious compromises.

One can hypothesize that a bicultural, or British-Afrikaner, town/*dorp* could consist of: both large irrigated and small non-irrigated erven designed to accommodate agricultural and commercial land uses, or intermediate-sized erven; a variety of house types — some built along and others set back from the street line, and hybrid houses which contain both British and Afrikaner elements;[5] British and Afrikaner street names, or British names but Afrikaner streetscape features such as trees and furrows; a town hall which competes with the Dutch Reformed church for visual and symbolic dominance; a peripheral cemetery used by several denominations.

Variations on this townscape-blending theme are not only possible but are to be expected. No two places may be identical, yet a pattern is discernible. The purpose of proposing these possible combinations is not to suggest that all South African townscapes display these features, but rather to provide a basis for the comparison of his-

toric townscapes throughout the country. Furthermore, it may well be that those cases in which this cultural borrowing hypothesis appears not to be applicable will provide the greatest interest for those concerned with either national trends or local variations. Case studies of individual townscapes can, by utilising the proposed town-*dorp* blending framework, contribute far more than just idiosyncratic details.

GREYTOWN

In 1848 the British Governor of Natal appointed a Land Commission whose brief was to divide the Colony into magistracies and to establish towns or villages in each. Greytown like several other Natal towns was laid out as a result of the Commission's deliberations, but not on the chosen site.
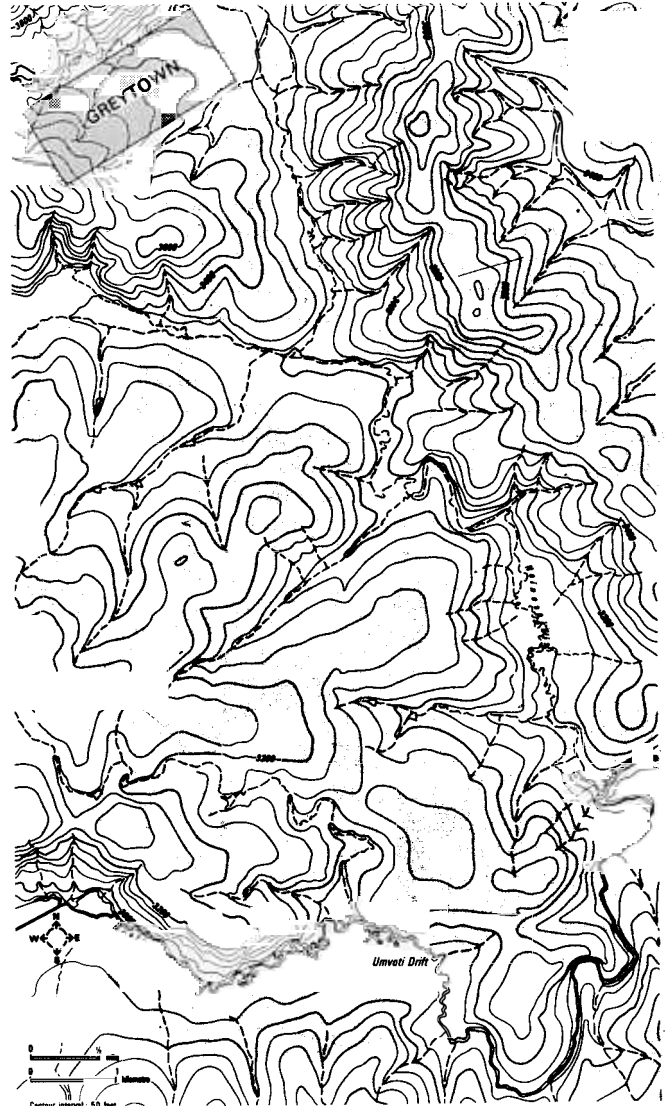

Fig. 5. Greytown's spur site in relation to the Umvoti Drift site.

The Commission suggested a township at the waggon drift on the Umvoti River as "... an eligible position at which to station a military force, to serve at once as a protection to that portion of the District, a rallying point

4. R. LEWCOCK, *Early nineteenth century architecture in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1963), p. 404.
   The interaction of British and Dutch architectural traditions has been well documented by D. GRIEG, *A guide to South African architecture* (Cape Town, 1971), and LEWCOCK, *op. cit.* In fact the subtitle of Lewcock's treatise is 'A study of the interaction of two cultures'.

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for the Colonists and Native subjects . . ."[6] Messrs. Boshoff and Okes were appointed to survey the Umvoti Drift area and submit an inspection report. In this report Boshoff proposed an alternative site to the drift and thus supported the objection to the drift site which some local inhabitants had raised (Fig. 5). Boshoff reported that "... having since the objection made to the selection of the spot for the purpose stated examined the nature of the ground etc. I fully concur with the inhabitants on that point and strongly recommend the spot desired by them for a Township, which tho (sic) smaller in extent, I believe in every other respect to be better adapted for that purpose".[7] Although a copy of the inhabitants' objection has not survived it seems probable that an irrigable and cultivable site took preference over a drift site. Accordingly in 1850 the surveyor Thomas Okes was instructed to lay out a town on the inhabitants' choice of site.

Okes produced the *dorp*-like town plan reproduced as Fig. 6. The outstanding features are the highly rectangular grid, with the long streets aligned with the length of the spur to facilitate irrigation, and the street-to-street erven measuring 360 by 121 English feet, or one acre (0,4 ha) in area. The plan included English street-names and a large central market square, but Okes restricted the Dutch Reformed church to a single erf rather than including it with a church square or granting it a terminal vista location.
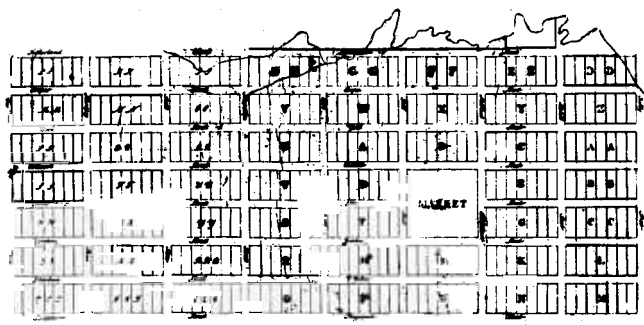

Fig. 6. *Greytown 1850.*   PLAN: NATAL ARCHIVES

Kearney[8] has described early Greytown as resembling a Karroo town with flat-roofed and whitewashed houses as well as thatched cottages, and this description has been repeated by Christopher[9]. However, the photograph on which this description rests (Fig. 7) does not appear to be of Greytown, despite the hand-written caption. The topography, the vegetation — or rather lack of it, the position of the church, the Karroo-type houses, the small lots rather than large erven, and furthermore the fact that for many years Greytown, as is typical of a dorp layout with erven which run from longstreet to longstreet, did not have houses built along her cross streets, all strongly suggest that the photograph in question is not of Greytown.[10]

Fig. 7. *'Greytown', Natal.*   PHOTOGRAPH: KILLIE CAMPBELL MUSEUM

Although Afrikaner residents of the district put forward the names Pretoriusdorp or Rooyenburg, and English residents preferred Newcastle, the authorities named the place Greytown in 1854 in honour of the newly-appointed Cape Governor, Sir George Grey. It is a moot point whether -*dorp* or -*town* would have been the more morphologically accurate suffix. Perceptively the Zulu, who refer to Pietermaritzburg as 'Umgungundlovu' (the place of the elephant), named Greytown simply as its diminutive 'Umgungundlovana' (the little place of the elephant).

Fig. 8. *Pine Street, Greytown, 1930.* PHOTOGRAPH: AFRICANA MUSEUM:

Greytown's townscape is a composite of town and *dorp* elements. Even its main commercial thoroughfare, Pine Street, still exhibits this duality (Fig. 9). Ox-waggons have given way to motor cars, furrows have been covered up, and false building facades have been erected, yet the oak trees, the width of the road, and several historic structures remain as reminders of its *dorp*-cum-town origins.

Symbolically a Wesleyan and a Dutch Reformed church stand almost *tête-a-tête* in Pine Street, and the town hall was built on a prominent corner site of the former market square. Greytown also contains some good examples of Voortrekker and later Victorian-Gothic houses; cornerhouse stores; English houses built in 'Afrikaner positions', and South African houses, such as an English floor plan, red-brick house which features a Cape-Dutch influenced gable and a stoep; and contrasting social and recreational activities.

The cultural duality in the townscape mirrors the fact that Greytown High School is a dual medium institution.[11] Towns are indeed like the people who live in them, and conversely people are like the towns in which they live.

CONCLUSIONS

Townscape evidence may shed new light on the hazy origins and early development of towns. Furthermore, the interpretation of townscape features can add visual embodiment to local history, which is not confined to museums and archives but is in fact all round us.

Moreover, the appreciation of ordinary, and seemingly insignificant, townscape features may stimulate greater pride in the buildings which surround us, and remind us of the *South Africanness* of our places. ▣

6. Natal Archives Depot, Pietermaritzburg, (NAD), Natal Government Notices, 1848.
7. NAD, Inspection Report, Division of the Mooi River and Umvoti, 1848.
8. B. KEARNEY, *Architecture in Natal from 1824 to 1893* (Cape Town, 1973), p. 10.
9. A.J. CHRISTOPHER, The Natal interior, *Contree* 6, 1979, p. 23.
10. Perhaps a reader can correctly identify the place in question.
11. Significantly General Louis Botha, an advocate of conciliation and unity among the country's English and Afrikaner groups, was born and raised in the Greytown area.