THE ORIGIN OF TOWNS IN THE EASTERN CAPE MIDLANDS

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IN this study the Eastern Cape Midlands are defined as that area including most of the upper and middle sections in the drainage basins of the Sundays and Great Fish rivers, the southern boundary being taken as the Klein Winterberg and Suurberg ranges. This region consists of the magisterial districts of Murraysburg, Aberdeen, Graaff-Reinet, Jansenville, Middelburg, Somerset East, Pearston, Bedford, Cradock, Maraisburg and Molteno (figure 1). The area is of considerable interest in a study of urban origin in South Africa since it incorporates some of the oldest inland towns in the country, Graaff-Reinet, for example, dating as far back as 1786, and it reveals some factors that were important in pioneer township formation. Furthermore, although there are some complicating relief features, it is a fairly homogeneous area in terms of climate, vegetation and natural resources, and therefore one in which central-place relationships can be studied with a minimum of disrupting influences.
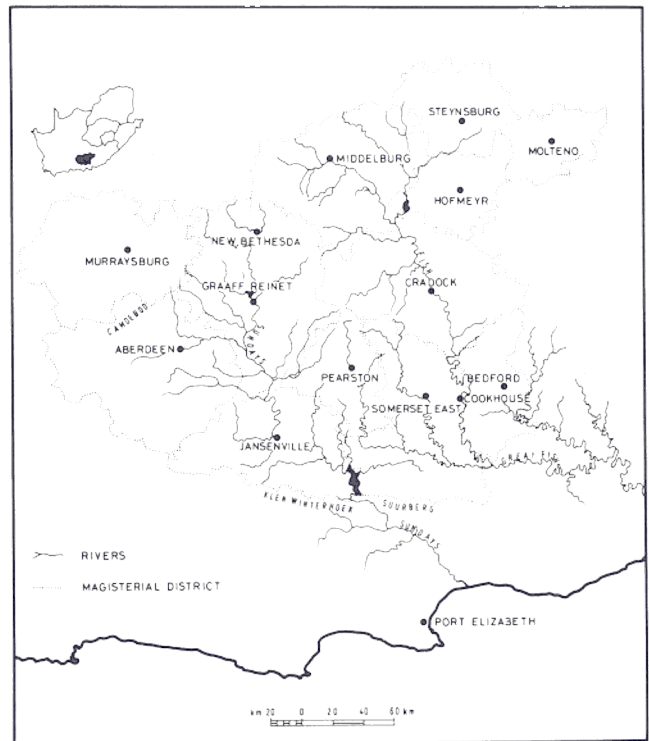
The origin of urban centres must be seen against the background spread of early settlement to the area and the increase of local population. Mark Jefferson noted that "cities do not grow up by themselves. Countrysides set them up to do tasks that must be performed in central places."[1] It is self evident that, excluding such factors as the discovery of rich mineral deposits which could have led to the formation of mining settlements, the need for urban centres would only have arisen after a considerable local rural population had evolved.

EARLY SETTLEMENT

At the beginning of the 18th century several factors, but in particular overproduction, encouraged farmers in the Cape to change the emphasis of their activities from agriculture to stock raising. Stock numbers increased rapidly. During the first ten years of the 18th century the number of cattle and sheep in the Cape Colony increased from 8 300 and 54 000 to 20 000 and 131 000 respectively.[2] New grazing land had to be sought for these large numbers of stock, and many farmers, finding stock rearing much more remunerative than agriculture, ceased agricultural production completely and moved across the mountains eastwards and north-eastwards into the interior. Here vast tracts of grazing land, albeit of a fairly low carrying capacity, lay before them.

At the time of this early pioneer settlement, the entire area west of approximately the Great Fish River was only sparsely inhabited by indigenous Hottentot and Bushmen tribes. Conflict with the Hottentots was virtually unknown. The Hottentots were nomadic and peaceable and not very numerous. The smallpox epidemic of 1713 had decimated them and destroyed their tribal life, and often they welcomed the arrival of early settlers rather than offered resistance because of their infatuation with the stock-farmers' gifts of tobacco and strong drink, and because they regarded them as their protectors from the attacks of the belligerent Bushmen.

Relations with the Bushmen were entirely different. They saw the farmers as the illegitimate confiscators of their hunting grounds and resisted through plundering attacks, particularly in 1715, 1731, 1738 and 1754. These attacks on the farmers were, however, seldom on a broad front and, excluding some areas such as the Nuweveld and Sneeuberg, did little to restrict the spread of settlement to the interior.

Figure

Probably the most important factor influencing the extent and nature of settlement of this area lay in the Africans from the north, who had by this stage also reached the area of the eastern frontier, and confrontation between them and the stock farmers along this contact zone was inevitable. The farmers had only sparsely inhabited the eastern frontier zone and consequently had their hands full trying to stem the advance of the militant and tribally well-organised Bantu. To the north, strong resistance by the Bushmen also prevented expansion in the direction of the Orange River. Thus began a period of consolidation of territory already occupied.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TOWNS

The first towns established in the area resulted

1. M. JEFFERSON, The distribution of the world's city folks: a study in comparative civilization, *Geographical Review* 21, 1931, p.453.
2. A.J.H. VAN DER WALT, J.A. WIID & A.L. GEYER, *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (Cape Town, 1955), p.86.

directly from an increase in the numbers of the stock farmers in the region and the desire of the authorities at the Cape to maintain control over them. With the establishment of Graaff-Reinet as drostdy in 1786 the pioneering era for instituting urban centres in the Eastern Cape Midlands may be considered to have begun, for it was around the drostdy that many of the early towns of the colony developed, such as Stellenbosch, Tulbagh, and Swellendam. The district of Graaff-Reinet was, however, very extensive, and as it became more difficult to maintain contact with the increasing numbers of stock farmers, particularly in the more remote areas, the district was subdivided. Soon after the turn of the century the district of Uitenhage was created from part of Graaff-Reinet, and in 1825 the district of Graaff-Reinet was extended northward as far as the Orange River, but an eastern section had been severed and formed into the district of Somerset (now Somerset East), while from a western section the district of Fort Beaufort had been created. Before the end of the next decade the district of Graaff-Reinet had been further reduced in size, Colesberg district having been formed from its northern part, Cradock district shaped from part of the Graaff-Reinet and the northern half of the Somerset districts. The latter had now become known as Somerset East (figure 2). With each new district created a drostdy for each was established. It should, however, be borne in mind that before the district of Cradock was formed an outpost or subdrostdy had been established since 1813 on the site of the present town.

The founding of the drostdy did not automatically mean the simultaneous establishment of a town. But it did focus attention upon a particular point around which township development could occur. In this context the

Church Street, Graaff-Reinet, c. 1860.

problem arises of what to regard as the date of origin of a town. When can a focal point, such as a drostdy, be considered to have accumulated around it sufficient buildings and activities, such as houses and business, to be regarded as a town? The date when it was granted municipal status is surely unrealistic, since many settlements can be clearly regarded as towns long before municipal status is granted. Functional determination of the date of origin, that is, the time at which a nucleated settlement has ceased to display rural functions and at which urban activities have become dominant, is also vague and virtually impossible to extract from historical records. The date when the survey of the town's plan was completed must be rejected since this can be regarded as nothing other than a potential town. The earliest realistic date for the origin of a town is therefore taken as
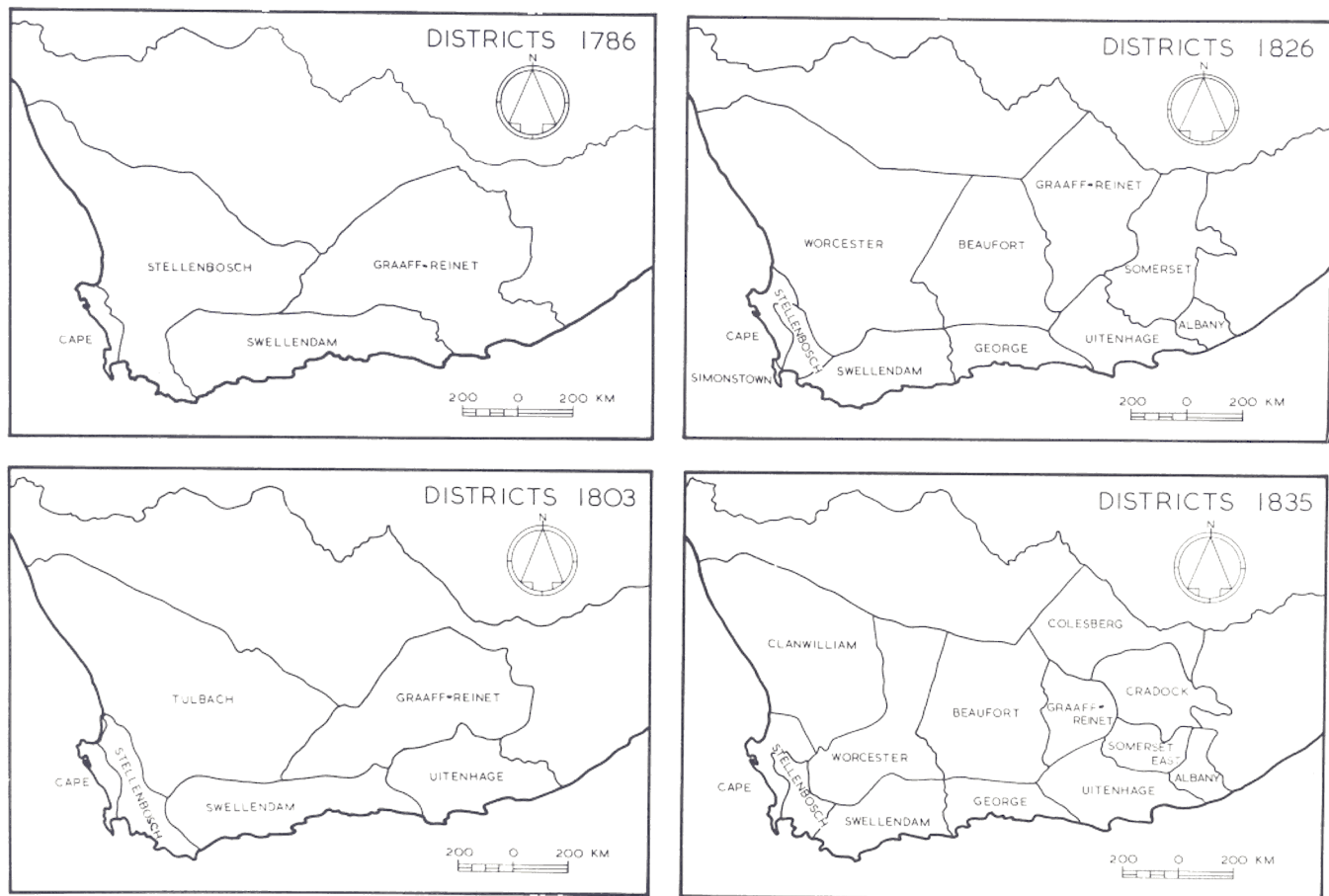

Figure 2

the date on which the first purchase of town land was made. The date of origin of these first three drostdy towns of the area is therefore taken as the year when the land was set aside for the establishment of the drostdy, since the function of the drostdy is decidedly urban in character. Thus Graaff-Reinet was established in 1786, Cradock in 1813 and Somerset East in 1825.

Three distinct periods of township formation may be distinguished by examining of the dates of origin of the towns in the area.

Period	Town	Date of Establishment
1	Graaff-Reinet	1786
	Cradock	1813
	Somerset East	1825
2	Middelburg	1852
	Jansenville	1854
	Bedford	1855
	Aberdeen	1856
	Murraysburg	1856
	Pearston	1859
3	Steynsburg	1872
	Hofmeyer	1874
	Molteno	1874
	New Bethesda	1875
	Cookhouse	1880

As will be seen from the above dates, after the first three towns had been established some 27 years elapsed before the second period began. Within this (second) short period of no more than seven years, six new towns came into being. Another 13 years elapsed before the third period of township formation began, and here again, within the brief eight years between 1872 and 1880 five new towns were established.

Drostdy towns

The reason for the formation of Graaff-Reinet, Cradock and Somerset East, namely to administer the district or sub-district of which they formed the centre, has already been referred to. But these drostdys were not merely imposed upon the countryside by the Cape authorities purely to suit their own ends. The social and economic conditions surrounding the farmers and their families motivated these people to request such a move.

Graaff-Reinet: Great distance separated the stock farmers from the nearest civilization around Cape Town, and the only means by which they could reach it was by ox-wagon. This meant a long and tiresome journey, lasting up to a month, fraught with great hardship and deprivations, resulting especially from the lack of water along the way. Such a journey could only be undertaken at most once a year, primarily in order to take butter and soap to the Cape market and to renew the lease on their loan farms. Annual military exercises were also held at Stellenbosch, and burghers were obliged to attend. Failure to attend without a valid reason (long distance not being acceptable) brought heavy fines upon them. But in spite of this many farmers living in the more remote areas did not visit Cape Town for years, the duty of renewing their lease being left in the hands of friends or simply ignored. Further reluctance to undertake the long journey stemmed from the danger of leaving their families

and stock unprotected from the attacks and plundering of Bushmen and natives.

The nearest church was located at Roodezand (Tulbagh) or Stellenbosch. This too the farmers could visit at most once annually, when apart from worship all ceremonies requiring the ministration of the church, such as christening and confirmation, were enacted, and when they were able to take Holy Communion.

Educational facilities for youth were almost non-existent. Occasionally the services of a travelling "meester" could be secured for a few months, but other than that the responsibility of teaching his children to read rested upon the shoulders of every parent; this duty, together with regular Bible reading and family worship, was religiously carried out, so that illiteracy even under these adverse circumstances was virtually unknown.

Such were the conditions when in 1768, after his journey to the Outeniqua, J.W. Cloppenburg expressed grave concern about the degeneration of the stock farmers and decided that this was because there were not enough "dorpen, buurschappen en gehugten" in which the colonists could be served by religious, educational, legal and administrative facilities. In 1778 some of the foremost inhabitants of the Camdeboo submitted a petition complaining that young people were growing up like dumb animals and were degenerating because they needed the reproof of the Christian Church and the comfort and ministration of Holy Communion. During his journey into the interior which followed this petition, Governor Van Plettenberg met the farmers of the Sneeuberg personally to acquaint himself with their grievances and desires. Their main and general request was for a magistrate and a minister. The drostdy created at Graaff-Reinet eight years later was the direct result of the population's needs in this remote and isolated area, though only one requirement was hereby satisfied. The need for a church and educational facilities was satisfied only years later.

Cradock.   PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (A.G. 1451)

Cradock: An additional factor led to the establishment of Cradock in 1813. The Cape Colony had in the meantime come under British rule. Together with this, the policy of the government towards the natives on the eastern frontier had also changed, and in general a policy of appeasement was followed towards those who crossed the frontier from time to time on marauding expeditions. By 1812 the loss of life and property suffered by the frontier farmers had assumed such proportions, and so many had crossed the border to live in the area between the Great Fish and Sundays rivers, that the Governor, Sir

John Cradock, decided to clear the area of natives. In this operation, the Fourth Kaffir War of 1812, some 20 000 Ndhlambis and Gunukwebes were driven back beyond the Great Fish River. In order to fortify the frontier against any future advances of the natives the Governor established a line of forts along the Fish river. One of the forts was set up on the farm Van Staden's Dam, some 20 km south of the site of the present town of Cradock, and here Ensign Andries Stockenström Jr. was instructed to set up a court, which could be utilized by the Circuit Court. Other buildings were also to be erected, such as administrative offices and residences, a prison, and homes for policemen. A second aim of the Governor was to provide a settlement and military protection for people whom he hoped to settle in the area between the Fish and Sundays rivers. However, at Stockenström's request the site for the court and settlement was altered from that at the fort on Van Staden's Dam to the site of the present town of Cradock, which he considered more suitable. In 1813 the loan farm "Buffelskloof" was taken over for this purpose and the stipulated buildings erected. At the same time the military force attached to the fort at Van Staden's Dam was moved to the site of the settlement, and a small number of erven were surveyed and sold to residents.

By January 1814 the small outpost had taken on the shape of a small village to which the name Cradock (after the Governor) was given. The establishment of Cradock can thus be considered to have stemmed not only from the need for an administrative centre but also from military motives.

Somerset East.　　　PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (J. 6945)

Somerset East: The founding of Somerset East appears to have resulted from personal prejudice on the part of the Governor of the Cape, whose name it bears. In 1814, soon after the founding of Cradock, Lord Charles Somerset came to the Cape as Governor. In the year after his arrival he had a government experimental farm laid out at the foot of the Boschberg, on the site where the Voortrekker leader Louis Tregardt had previously had his farm. George Thompson, who visited Somerset Farm, as it came to be called, describes it as follows: "The agricultural part of the concern was by no means the principal department. The supply of rations to the British settlers for two years after their arrival, and the provisioning of the troops on the frontier for several years past, was committed to this establishment. It was in fact rather a commissariat depôt than a farm; and the purchasing of

cattle, sheep and corn from the boors, and forwarding them as required to the various military posts, constantly occupied a great number of Hottentot herdsmen, and waggon drivers. Five or six English ploughmen and three or four mechanics, with a clerk or store-keeper, were the whole British population of the place, exclusive of the three superintendants and their families".[3]

In his reports to the Colonial Office, Somerset appears to have been unfavourably disposed to the settlement of Cradock. Early in 1825 he created the new district of Somerset, dissolved Cradock as sub-drostdy of Graaff-Reinet and set up the new drostdy on the site of Somerset Farm, which was now declared a sub-drostdy of Grahamstown. In a letter to Lord Bathurst, Somerset gave his personal reason for shifting the sub-drostdy, which he did much against the wishes of the Colonial Office because of the expense involved. He states: "I have removed the establishment of the sub-drostdy of Cradock (a miserable place which could never advance)..."[4]

At the same time as the drostdy was created the plan of a village was laid down and "at the public sale of the *erven,* or lots of ground for houses and gardens, there was great competition, owing to the concourse of purchasers from all parts of the eastern districts, especially from Albany; and the prices ran very high."[5]

Somerset Farm had, in the meantime, proved a failure financially and its farming activities had been terminated a few months before the drostdy was established.

For almost the next quarter century Graaff-Reinet, Cradock and Somerset East served as the only central places for the area. To the north Colesberg also came into being in 1837. These were the centres of administration, the seats of the local court, the centres at which some of the necessary goods and services could be obtained and where people could go to church.

Church-founded towns

Middelburg: By the 1850's the population of the area had increased considerably, but great distances still had to be travelled in order to reach the nearest town; for example, the distance between Graaff-Reinet and Colesberg was approximately 200 km. Members of the Colesberg parish, living in the ward Rhenosterberg, were the first to act upon their long-standing desire to have a place of worship close at hand and they applied for secession from the parish of Colesberg and for a new parish of their own. Permission for this was granted and two inhabitants of the ward donated £3 000 to buy the farm Driefontein for the site of a new church and township.[6] In 1852 the first Church Council for this new congregation was appointed and the new parish instituted. The first lots of the new township of Middelburg, some 200 in number, were sold by public auction some three months later, many of them were bought by people from Graaff-Reinet as potential business sites, but there were also a considerable number of buyers from the neighbouring towns of Cradock, Colesberg and Burgersdorp.[7]

With this a general pattern of township formation

3. G. THOMPSON, *Travels and adventures in Southern Africa I* (ed. V.S. Forbes), (Cape Town, 1967), p.32.
4. Quoted in *Cradock 1814—1964, 150th centenary brochure* (ed. Denis Smith), (Cradock, 1964), p.63.
5. THOMPSON, *op. cit.,* p.32.
6. *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode,* 12.6.1852, quoted in *Middelburg, Cape, centenary book* (ed. H.J.H. Vermeulen), (1952), p.9.
7. *De Zuid-Afrikaan,* 30.8.1852, quoted *ibid.,* p.9.

was ushered in, a pattern present in almost all the towns founded in the next seven years, i.e. the second period of township formation. Only Bedford may be considered as a partial exception to this pattern of church-founded towns.

Jansenville's founding in 1854 followed that of Middelburg. The Rev. Alexander Smith, Dutch Reformed minister at Uitenhage, prevailed upon Petrus Fourie to lay out a township on his farm Vergenoegd and make a site available for the erection of a church. As a result the first erven were sold in February 1854.

Aberdeen and **Murraysburg** were established within a few months of each other. Both were founded by the Dutch Reformed Church. At the time of their founding in 1856 the nearest town to Graaff-Reinet in an easterly direction was Beaufort West, some 190 km distant as the crow flies. The region of Aberdeen, the Camdeboo, had been inhabited from very early times. Swellengrebel stated in 1776 that there were about 25 occupied farms in the Camdeboo and also drew attention to the severe deterioration of the grazing after only seven or eight years of occupation.[8] The area had thus been inhabited since the late 1760's. For 70 years Graaff-Reinet had been the nearest town and had contained the nearest church. In October 1855 the Graaff-Reinet Presbytery of the Dutch Reformed Church resolved to create a new parish from its members living in the Aberdeen area. The farm Brakkefontein, some 50 km south-west of Graaff-Reinet was purchsaed and the township of Aberdeen was laid out. In order to serve its members living to the north-west of Graaff-Reinet more adequately, the Presbytery similarly purchased the farm Eenzaamheid and laid out the township of Murraysburg.

Pearston was also founded by the Church in 1859. Since 1850 church services had been held and Communion celebrated by the minister of the Somerset East parish on the farm Rustenburg, at that time the property of Mr

C.J. Lötter. These services were simply held in the open under a large pear tree. In the *Kerkbode* of 11 September 1858, the following notice appeared: "Men is voornemens aan de Vogelrivier, halfweg tuschen Graaff-Reinet en Somerset een dorp en gemeente te stichten, waaraan reeds de naam Pearston is gegeven. De verkopen van erven to behoewe van de kerk, heeft ongeveer £10,000 sterling opgebracht, waaruit na betaling van den koopschat van der plaats, man in staat zal zyn eene kerk en pastorie to bouwen". This, in fact, was the pattern followed by the Church when the need arose for the erection of pioneer churches, namely to purchase a farm, subdivide it into lots, reserving some for its own purposes, and then to offer the rest for sale, the proceeds of which could be utilized for defraying the expenses incurred by the expansion.

During the third period of township formation in the region, the Church was again responsible for founding three of the five towns.

Steynsburg.   PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (J. 5555)

Steynsburg was laid out by the Gereformeerde Kerk in 1872 in order to provide a local church for its members who, until then, had had to travel to Middelburg.

8. VAN DER WALT, WIID & GEYER, *op. cit.*, p.3.

Bedford, c. 1880.

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (A.G. 1463)

Hofmeyr (known as Maraisburg until 1913) and **New Bethesda** were laid out in 1874 and 1875 respectively by the Dutch Reformed Church, again in order to eliminate travelling distance for the parishioners living in the area.

Other towns

Bedford was founded in 1855. Here the need for a church did not figure prominently as a reason for its founding. It nevertheless appears to have been founded because of the need for a central place in the area. A report in the *Graaff-Reinet Herald* of the time throws some light on the reason for its founding: "A portion of the beautiful estate of Sir A. Stockenstroom will shortly be offered for sale, amounting to about 30 000 acres. It is proposed to build a village on this site to be named Bedford ... The Winterberg farmer will not fail to be benefitted by this location being inhabited by many families. Indeed the proposed arrangement is carrying out the idea which His Excellency has embodied in his Minute, where, speaking of the establishment of new villages, he says, — 'In which may be brought together a respectable and industrious population, of a class to supply honest labourers as well as men capable of uniting for efficient self-defence, and as an example to the country, to show that men can live in communities here as well as in any other part of the world, and not exclusively on farms of 6 000 acres in extent, with lone dwellings, 15 miles apart.' " [9] Closer settlement, the need for a central place and self-defence against the natives appeared to figure prominently in Stockenström's motive for founding Bedford.

Molteno was founded perhaps more purely as a central place than were the aforementioned towns. Coal had been discovered at Cyphergat some ten km from the present town in 1859, and also on the farm Onverwacht, of which Molteno is a portion, some six years later, but Molteno did not come into being simply as a mining town. The mining activity which followed the discovery of coal undoubtedly precipitated its founding, but it came into existence at the instigation of the farmers inhabiting the area who felt the need for a central place.

Cookhouse came into being as a railway village. The railway from Port Elizabeth to the then recently-opened diamond mines at Kimberley reached this point in 1880. This point also served as a junction for the branch line to Somerset East and the line from King William's Town in later years.

Thus all the towns, with the exception only of Cookhouse, have found their origin, basically, in the need to have a central place for the surrounding area. ◨

9. *Graaff-Reinet Herald,* 17.2.1853.