

# HISTORICAL EAST LONDON AND MDANTSANE

## **Introduction**

East London was founded to serve as a supply port for the military during the frontier wars. King Williams Town had been established as the headquarters for military operations and it was decided that the mouth of the Buffalo River was deep enough for vessels to enter and off-load. The actual founding date has had two interpretations. Sir Harry Smith, Governor of the Cape at the time, issued a proclamation, dated 27 December 1847, which stated that 'the rising town at the mouth of the Buffalo River to be called London'. Some confusion evidently arose as "one would think that a flying machine had been invented as the trip from Cape Town to London took only 3 days", and on 11 January 1848, the second proclamation was issued which named the town "East London".

The first settlement took place on the west bank where a small jetty was built. Trade followed the military and soon a small community was established. The military however, maintained tight control and strangled any development for many years. Once their control had been lifted in the late 1860s, the possibilities for the growth in commerce became more positive. The establishment of a railway terminus at the port gave a great boost to the economy, but as it was situated on the east bank, most of the business men moved their homes and work from the west bank. The belief that ships could enter the harbour with ease proved unfounded and until the first dredger arrived in 1880, ships had to anchor in the roadstead and warp passengers and goods ashore in surf boats.

East London has never been a town favoured by successive governments, so development has been sporadic. The Anglo-Boer War boosted commerce and many fine buildings date to the early 1900s. The wool trade also played a part in an economic upsurge and many Art Deco buildings of the 1930s indicate that period of prosperity.

## **Sites selected**

Bakers Wells, Prince Alfred Square, West Bank Post Office, wood and iron houses, wooden houses, Erf No 1, West Bank School, West Bank cemetery, Grand Prix Race Track, Gately House, Station, Old Anglican cemetery, Queens park, City Hall, Old Library, Cuthberts, old Standard Bank, Ann Bryant Art Gallery, Kimmerling's Plaque, old Wool Exchange, Calgary transport Museum, Mrs Sontshi's House, Mdantsane.

## **WEST BANK**

This was the first area to be settled and unlike most cities in the country where the CBD has flattened the oldest buildings, the West Bank retains its scale and atmosphere. Black inhabitants occupied a 'Location' where the present Daimler Chrysler plant is now situated. The first white residents were military personnel, those who were employed by the harbour and those engaged in somewhat precarious trading ventures.

## **Bakers Wells:**

The first water supply for the little village was found by a military officer, Captain Baker of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Highlanders. The original fresh water spring was situated below the Hood Point Lighthouse and on the sea side of the present road. In 1879, the spring was dammed in

three places higher up the slope and piped to the village. These became known as Baker's Wells erroneously. The remains of the stone retaining walls can still be seen below the West Bank golf course. The engineering firm who are working on the marine outfall pipe have promised to erect a sign to identify the site.

On the corner of Dale and Strand Steets is **Erf No 1**, the 3<sup>rd</sup> plot sold to a civilian in 1849. Descendants of the first owner presented the erf to the City and a plaque attached to a stone, marks the site.

#### **Prince Alfred Square:**

This open space bounded by Frere, Bank and High Streets was named in honour of the visit of Prince Alfred, 2<sup>nd</sup> son of Queen Victoria, to the eastern Cape in 1860. A market established in 1873 with John Venn as market master. As no produce was received, he had to retire. The Border Historical Society have erected a plaque in the centre of Prince Alfred Square.

Many of the houses in West Bank date to the 1850s and 1860s, especially those in Strand, Smith and High Streets and east of Alexandria Street. **Wood and iron houses** are common as this was a form of building construction which was inexpensive, easy to erect and could be easily transported if a venture was unsuccessful. Some have been plastered over and cement pillars replacing the original wooden veranda supports.

34 High Street and ? Strand Street are two very early **wooden houses** which have been 'modernised'. They both date to the 1850s. There are very few existing examples of this type of construction in the country and should be preserved.

#### **West Bank Post Office:**

This building was erected as the **first Magistrate's Court**, Customs House and Revenue Office in 1866. In 1882, the Magistrate's Court was moved to Panmure and the building became a Post Office. It is a National Monument. The Norfolk Pine, which stands next to the building, was planted in 1874 by the Resident Magistrate at the time, Arthur Orpen

#### **West Bank School, Hood Street:**

The first school in East London was started by the rector of St Peter's Church and was for boys only. The original section of the present building was erected in 1881. Later additions were made.

#### **The Cemetery:**

This was laid out in 1879 and contains many graves of great interest. These include George Walker, Harbour Master from 1850 to 1876, Colonel John Maclean, Governor of British Kaffraria from 1860 to 1864 and an "unknown Seaman".

#### **Grand Prix Race Track:**

This race circuit was constructed on the West Bank in 1935 and for many years was an international Grand Prix Circuit. Here raced most of the most famous names in international racing of the 1930s and 1950s. The venue was moved to Johannesburg in the 1960s.

## **EAST BANK**

### **The Station. Terminus Street:**

A start was made in the construction of the railway in 1876 and a single storey building was erected and opened in 1877. With the completion of the railway through to Queenstown in 1880, a second storey was added and this date can be seen on either side of the clock on the central pediment.

### **Gately House:**

#### **Introduction**

This was the home of John Gately, an Irish immigrant who was a successful businessman. He was a leading personality in early East London and one of the founders of the municipal council. The house became the property of the East London Museum in 1966 and is administered by the Museum.

#### **Description**

Gately House is a single-storey house with a veranda on three sides set in a pleasant garden. Built in 1876, it is an excellent example of a modest Victorian home and is one of the only House Museums in the country which contains the original furniture. There are very fine pieces of furniture such as balloon-back chairs, a magnificent mahogany dining table and leather button-back suite. This is a proclaimed National Monument.

#### **Location**

The house adjoins Queens Park.

#### **Access**

This can be through Queens Park and the Zoo, but the road is overgrown and vehicle access is limited. The main entrance is at the end of Beaconsfield Road but can be difficult to find. Instructions can be obtained from the Museum and a telephone call to the Curator will ensure that the gate will be opened and parking can be done safely within the grounds. Hours: Tuesdays to Saturdays: 09h30-12h30 and 15h00-17h00, Sundays: 15h00-17h00. Telephone: 043-k722 2141

### **Old Lock Street Gaol – now SBDC:**

#### **Description**

This impressive stone complex was built in 1880 to accommodate the law-breakers of a growing town. A gallows room and death cells formed part of the old gaol and the first execution was carried out in 1882. From 1935, all executions were carried out in Pretoria. In 1954 it became a prison for women only. Many famous people were incarcerated here, including Daisy de Melker and Winnie Madizikela-Mandela. In 1979 the prison was closed and the building abandoned. The Small Business Development Corporation took it over in 1980 and developed a hive of shops for small businesses. There is a display on the history of the gaol in the old gallows section.

#### **Location**

Lock Street, off Fleet Street.

#### **Access**

Free

**Old Anglican Cemetery:**

Although situated adjoining the old Lock Street Gaol, this old graveyard predates the prison. It was originally attached to Grace Chapel, established by the Anglican church in 1858 and was situated on the corner of Fleet and Station Streets. The mission was not very successful and with the building of St Johns church, the congregation moved there. The construction of the Lock Street Gaol in 1880 also made the situation less desirable. The property was sold to the Municipal Council by the church in 1909 “on condition that the land shall be put into a proper state of repair and be conserved as public property”. The cemetery was maintained in relatively good order by the prison authorities until the Gaol was closed in 1980. In 1985 the Small Business Development Association took over the property and proposed to flatten the cemetery for a car park. After strenuous objections by the Historical Society, it was agreed to retain the portion in which most of the graves were situated, exhume the graves and remove the headstones and relocate them to the designated space. The contractors arrived with their bulldozers and proceeded to smash and break the headstones. There was an outraged protest from the Society and members of the public and the contractors had to mend the headstones. Three graves were never exhumed and were buried under the park with the loss of three headstones. The remaining graves date from 1875 to 1882.

**Location**

Lock Street, off Fleet Street, adjoining the parking area.

**Access**

Free

**Queens Park:**

Land was set aside for a Botanical Garden in 1880. Gardens were laid out with carriage drives and pathways. In 1890, visiting Governor, Sir Henry Loch, opened the park officially, giving it the name of Queen’s Park, to honour Queen Victoria, then in the 53<sup>rd</sup> year of her reign. It was proclaimed a National Monument to protect the valuable exotic and indigenous vegetation, when road-makers threatened to drive a road through the middle. The wrought-iron gates were given by three leading businessmen, Sir Donald Currie, John Stroyan and James Georgeson, in 1894.

**Location**

Entrance at the lower end of Park Avenue.

**Access**

Free to the park, but the old pathways have not been maintained. The Zoo occupies much of the land today.

**City Hall:****Introduction**

The 1890s saw remarkable growth in East London as wool became a valuable export. The City Hall is a very visible symbol of the faith, which the leaders of the community had in the future of the town at the time. The foundation stone was laid in 1897, the same year that Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee. It was decided to name the clock tower in her honour, the Victoria Tower. The building was completed in 1899, but the opening

celebrations were muted as the Anglo-Boer War was declared in the same month. This is a declared National Monument.

### **Description**

The large elaborate late Victorian structure dominates the cityscape of East London. East London became a 'city' in 1914 and only then did the 'Town Hall' become the 'City Hall'. An excellent programme of restoration in 1987 saw much of the supporting fabric being installed as the tower and gables had become dangerously unsteady.

### **Location**

Oxford Street

### **Access**

Free, but as this is still a building in use, it would be preferable to get permission from the caretaker.

### **Recommendations**

It could be of interest to have guided tours available.

### **Old Library:**

A public library was established as early as 1876, but the first premises proved inadequate and were described as a 'rabbit hutch'. As the population grew rapidly in the 1890s and early 1900s, funds were raised for a capacious new building. The foundation stone was laid by Mrs W.H. Fuller on 17 June 1905 and officially opened by Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson. The 'Greek Temple' colonnaded façade was designed by a local firm of architects, Page and Cordeaux. It is a National Monument.

### **Location**

Corner of Argyle and Cambridge Streets.

### **Access**

This is owned by the City Council. The interior is not of much significance.

### **Cuthbert's Building:**

This is another splendidly ornate building, which demonstrates the confidence which commercial enterprise had in the future. It was built in 1900 to house a branch of the new Cape Town shoe store, started by Mr W. Cuthbert. It is a National Monument.

### **Location**

Corner of Gladstone and Oxford Street, opposite the City Hall.

### **Access**

The façade is of interest as the interior has been changed too often to have any significance.

### **Old Standard Bank:**

The original premises Standard Bank were on the market square and housed in a small wooden structure. The dignified building in Terminus Street was erected in 1900 and expanded to the corner site in 1927, with the architects carefully matching the original

design. The corner entrance has a small cupola and the entrance hall has a beautiful stained glass clerestory window, which are of interest. The building is at present owned by the Provincial government. It is a proclaimed National Monument.

**Location**

Corner of Cambridge and Terminus Streets.

**Access**

By request at the door.

**Ann Bryant Art Gallery:**

**Introduction**

This elegant house reflects the way Victorian men were prepared to demonstrate their success in decorating their residences. In this case, the owner's confidence was misplaced. It was built in 1905 by Arthur Savage, who had made money during the profiteering time of the Anglo-Boer War, but who had lost it in the subsequent depression. It was bought by Mr E.A. Bryant, a more successful businessman. He and his wife were interested in art and built up a private collection. When she died, she bequeathed the property and the collection to the City. It was officially opened as an Art gallery in 1947.

**Description**

This is a double-storey home set in the original spacious grounds. It has two elaborate gables surmounted by chimneys. There are beautiful stained glass windows.

**Location** The block between Oxford Street and Belgrave Road.

**Access**

Opening Hours – Mondays to Fridays; 09h30-17h00, Saturdays; 09h30 – 12h00. Telephone; 043-722 4044

**Kimmerling's Plaque:**

East London was the scene for the first powered flight in the country. At the invitation of the Gala Committee of the East London Town Council, Albert Kimmerling, a Frenchman, brought his 50 horsepower biplane to East London. On 29 December, 1909, he made the first controlled power flight in South Africa on the then Nahoon Race Course. Stirling High School and the Bunkers Hill sports fields are situated on the old race course.

**Location**

The plaque commemorating this event is attached to a rock on the corner of Gleneagles Road and M13.

**Old Wool Exchange::**

East London became a centre for trading in wool during the 1890s, with the buying and selling of wool mainly in the hands of wool brokers, usually by auction. As the wool industry grew, co-operatives for brokers and buyers were formed. In 1928 the East London Wool and Mohair Buyers Association decided to build a 'Wool Exchange', which was completed in 1930. In 1981, wool buying was moved to Port Elizabeth. The building was

purchased by Rhodes University for the site of their new East London campus in 1982. It is a National Monument.

**Location**

On the corner of Hill and Station Streets.

**Access**

This building is in use. A visit could be arranged with permission of the university authorities. Telephone; 043-704 7000

**Calgary Transport Museum:**

This is a comprehensive collection of vehicles used in transport in the Eastern Cape over the past 150 years.

**Location**

13 kilometres from East London on the N6.

**Access**

A small entry fee. Open Mondays to Sundays 09h00-06h30. Good parking. Telephone; 043-730 72 44

**Mrs Sontshi's House:**

This home was an original wood and iron municipal council house, which escaped being demolished during the forcible removals in the 1960s. It was erected in the 1920s and had substantial additions in 1958. This is an example of a house of the East Bank Location, later named Duncan Village.

**Location**

1558 Mngqebisa Street, Duncan Village

**Access**

Privately owned.

**Recommendation**

More background information on the Sontshi family should be obtained. The house is still owned by Mr Sontshi.

**MDANTSANE**

By the 1940s, living quarters for black East London workers were hard to find and the existing locations and Duncan Village were overcrowded. In 1954 the City Engineer was requested to find space for expansion, especially on suitable land adjoining Duncan Village. This survey was refused by the national government and the area was declared to be for whites only. Areas near Newlands, Macleantown, Kwelegha and a farm "Umdanzani", were examined. The latter was found to be suitable as it lay alongside the national road and railway line, and in 1958 the new site was declared.

The municipality undertook the planning which was based on the 'neighbourhood concept' of a garden city, first suggested by E Howard in 1898. This envisaged a central CBD with

neighbourhoods clustering around it. In each neighbourhood there would be low order central areas, which would house shops, churches and educational facilities. The nature of the topography, ridges and valleys, dictated much of the layout, which tried to avoid the formal grid pattern and worked around curves, loops and triangles. By the end of 1963 the first 300 residents occupied the new houses.

In 1966 it was proclaimed a 'Ciskei homeland' town and excised from East London. The advantage at least was that this did allow for freehold title. It was originally only intended to make provision for 120 000, but it grew very rapidly and today has 11 zones.

Visits should be arranged with a qualified tour guide.

### **EAST LONDON MUSEUM**

The East London Museum has much to interest visitors on the history of East London.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The above list has mainly utilised the proclaimed national monuments but there are many more buildings and sites which tell the story of the history of East London and Mdantsane. Some of the sites have been incorporated in other sections.

The contribution of the Coloured, Chinese and Indian communities have not been recognised. Consultations with these communities could be helpful as many have retained much of their respective cultural heritages.

Mr Jeremy Watson, an architect with a knowledge and interest of the built heritage compiled a book *The Urban Trail*, which identified several walking trails thorough East London and which gave the history of each building encountered. Since its publication in 1989, many of the buildings have been demolished. Mr Watson began an updated version, but then left to settle in Scotland. It would be extremely useful if contact could be made with Mr Watson and the updated version obtained.

From this information tourism leaflets or brochures could be compiled for selected tours. These would be of interest to both local people, as well as tourists and would be particularly valuable for educational purposes.