



Mining Heritage

Visitors to the SAIMM offices in the Chamber of Mines Building in downtown Johannesburg cannot fail to notice the rather imposing stamp mill in the adjacent pedestrian walkway that was once Hollard Street. This 10-stamp mill went into operation at the Robinson Mine in Langlaagte in September 1886, making it one of the earliest stamp mills on the Witwatersrand. On the nearby noticeboard the fascinating story is told of how the mill was buried in a deep slimes dump and later recovered, exhibited at the Empire Exhibition in 1936, and then erected at George Harrison Park, before being relocated to the Main Street Mining Mall in 2004.

One block west along Main Street is an impressive display of a mine headgear, 23 m high, originally built in 1950 for Rustenburg Platinum Mines. Over the road from that is a mineworker's monument, sculpted by Andile Msongelwa, that was recently erected to recognize the role played by mineworkers in developing the economy of South Africa. Further along the attractive walkway of Main Street, from the mining-house headquarters in the west to Gandhi Square in the east, are other mining-related displays that include cocopans and a replica of the golden rhino from Mapungubwe. A walk around this area leaves one feeling that the mining history of Johannesburg, and indeed the wider region, has been well acknowledged.

There are numerous other places where some local mining history can be explored. Gold Reef City presents a display of mining history that is popular with tourists, including a descent of a 226 m shaft (to Level 5 of Shaft 14 of Crown Mines), and a gold pour. The Sci-Bono Discovery Centre has an interactive mining display aimed primarily at schoolchildren. Fred and Harry Struben's Confidence Reef Mine (a declared Provincial Heritage Site) in the Kloofendal Nature Reserve periodically has guided tours that can be arranged to see the site of an early discovery of the gold-bearing conglomerates of the Witwatersrand in September 1884. The Blaauwbank gold mine near Magaliesburg provides an opportunity to explore the narrow workings inside an early shallow gold mine.

The discovery of the world's most prolific gold mining area certainly transformed the place that became Johannesburg. The discovery of the main reef of gold in 1886 set off one of the largest gold rushes in history, and within ten years Johannesburg was the largest city in South Africa. The Witwatersrand Basin represents the richest goldfield ever discovered. It has been claimed that 40% of all of the gold ever mined has come out of the Basin. About 50 million kilograms of gold has been extracted from the Wits Basin to date. In 1970, South Africa's output accounted for nearly 80% of the world's gold production; forty years later, South Africa's share of world gold production had dropped to less than 8%.

Have we done enough to recognize the site of the discovery of the main gold reef? George Harrison, a bricklayer and prospector, is credited with the discovery, on the farm Langlaagte where he was employed to help build a small house. George Harrison Park, the site of his mining claim, is a very important part of our mining heritage, but is unfortunately in a sad state of disrepair. The site became a National Monument in 1944, and in terms of current heritage legislation is now considered a Provincial Heritage Site. Illegal miners and vagrants inhabit the original mine shaft, and are apparently working the remaining reef in the nearby Central Rand Gold open pit. The historic Langlaagte stamp mill had to be removed from the site when vagrants started using it for firewood. The site custodian, Johannesburg City Parks, seems to be unable to take action to rectify the filthy and unsafe condition of this historic site. In 2010, there were plans to restore and develop the park with designated pathways surrounded by lush grass and trees, a small play area for children, a mining headgear and viewing deck, and a museum showcasing the area's historical value. The viewing deck was erected, but since then, a commemorative plaque has been removed, there has been fire damage to the memorial panel, and metal railings within the old workings have been stolen, making the area somewhat dangerous. Surely we should be doing more to commemorate the official discovery of the gold-rich Main Reef pebble conglomerate.

Mining Heritage *(continued)*

Other areas reported to be under threat include the central avenue of Crown Mines Village (which has been invaded by squatters) with its fine corrugated iron buildings and beautiful plane trees. Last year saw the illegal demolition of the old ERPM Recreation Hall off Cason Road, near Main Reef Road in Boksburg. Until then, the Recreation Hall Annex was one of the few surviving industrial structures designed by Sir Herbert Baker. Further afield, Pilgrim's Rest is also struggling, as the provincial government has failed to maintain the buildings of the town appropriately (as required by various pieces of legislation), and the central reduction works are in urgent need of restoration.

A more controversial part of our mining heritage has been the array of mine dumps that formed a very visible outline of the mining areas along the reef. To nearby residents they were a nuisance, a source of much dust, and a health hazard. To others, they had a romantic appeal and charm – manmade golden mountains with a beauty of their own. One of the most prominent landmarks in Johannesburg was the Top Star drive-in cinema on the top of a mine dump, with a spectacular view of the city skyline. This disappeared a few years ago.

The extravagant homes of some of the early mining magnates (Randlords) on Parktown Ridge have been well preserved thanks to the stalwart efforts of bodies such as the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation. These are well worth visiting on days when special tours are arranged.

Many of the mining magnates (including Cecil John Rhodes) spent a great deal of time at the Rand Club, the most prestigious of the early gentlemen's clubs of Johannesburg. The Rand Club was founded in 1887, the year after the gold rush city came into being. In 1905, the third version of the Rand Club building was completed on the site bounded by Fox, Commissioner, and Loveday Streets. This building has been the site of many historical developments, including the 1895 Reform Committee and the plotting of the Jameson Raid, being a target in the 1913 Miners' Strike, and the tumultuous events of 1922. The building contains many historical artefacts, photographs, paintings, and sculptures (prominently featuring the rather diverse group of Rhodes, Paul Kruger, Queen Elizabeth II, and Nelson Mandela), as well as a well-equipped library. However, the Rand Club has a somewhat uncertain future, as it is not as well frequented today as it was a few decades ago, and it suspended its operations on 30 September 2015, after 128 years. Perhaps it will start up again with the support of a hotel group, or perhaps it could become a museum of mining-related history that provides a venue for special events.

Historical conservation preserves memories and reminds us of the accomplishments of the past – the successes and the failures. What can individuals do to preserve our heritage? One simple practical contribution could be to document what is known today. Wikipedia celebrated its 15th anniversary this month (15 January 2016) and provides a wonderful information resource. There is currently a project underway that intends to document heritage sites in Johannesburg and provide quick response (QR) codes outside buildings that can be scanned with smartphones to automatically link to websites with information (in a variety of languages) about the place being visited. If we all contributed information about people and places that we know about, I am sure the world would be at least a slightly better place.

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