

## **RAND STEAM LAUNDRIES, RICHMOND, JOHANNESBURG**

Heritage report prepared by the Parktown and Westcliff Heritage Trust.  
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Stand Numbers: 32, 33,34,35,36, Portion1 and RE of 37, 225,  
185,186,187,188,189  
Street Address: 27-37 Napier Road  
Township: Richmond  
District: Johannesburg

### Introduction:

Running through the west end of Parktown and of Richmond are two streams; the Braamfontein Spruit and the Gas Works Spruit. The existence of a reliable, constant supply of potable and good quality water was very important for a number of industries, particularly laundry. The Zulu washermen, the AmaWasha, worked on the Braamfontein Spruit in a section which is now covered by the German School. Close by, and, much to the chagrin of the township owner of Parktown, the Braamfontein Company was the land owned by Louw Geldenhuys who likewise had a wash site which he leased to the washermen.

Braamfontein Company Minutes of 31<sup>st</sup> December:

Comments on manager's report

***Kafir Wash: Washing operations were on several occasions stopped by the Pass Office. Officials re-imposed the 5 shilling per month pass. "It is the more aggravating to them seeing that the boys on Mr Geldenhuys's wash site, which is within 50 yards of the Company's site are allowed to obtain the usual 2 shilling a month pass."***

Up until 1899 the Gezondheidskommittee which administered Johannesburg repeatedly tried to get the AmaWasha closed. The Braamfontein Company opposed this, not out of the kindness of their hearts or concern for the Zulu washermen, but because of the rents received from the washermen and the company's refusal to recognise the jurisdiction of the municipality over their private land. In 1897 which had been a really bad year because so many of the washermen had returned to Natal due to the political upheavals (Jameson Raid) they had taken 805 Pounds and sixpence.

Presumably Mr Geldenhuys has been doing at least as well from his site in Richmond. It was Lady Dunbar, however, who took over the battle of the washermen, persuading them to accept registration as her employees to avoid the forced removal to Klipspruit. The struggle on the Sans Souci site ended in April 1902 when they were finally evicted by Milner's Town Council.

Professor van Onselen says the Sans Souci and the Auckland Park wash sites were the oldest of all the wash sites in Johannesburg, and that they had been in use since 1890.

The majority of residents of Johannesburg were working men living in lodging houses or sharing rooms. With no wives to do their washing, little time or space to do their own, they had little choice but to make use of the washermen and subsequently of the steam laundries.

The survival of the laundry buildings in Richmond is a memento of the social history of early mining days and also a reminder of the reliance of mining town on the natural streams of the Witwatersrand.

## RAND STEAM LAUNDRIES

The name comes from the amalgamation of two laundries viz. the smaller Palace Steam Laundries (originally the Auckland Park Steam Laundry and re-floated in 1898 as the Palace Steam Laundry) and the Crystal Spring or "American" Laundry. The American Laundry was in financial difficulty and as Nelson who owned the Palace Steam Laundry, was already substantial shareholder, it was proposed that he take over the bigger operation and that the two be run jointly under the name of the Rand Steam Laundries. This took place in July 1902.

Frank O Nelson, a laundryman from Chicago claimed to have established the first steam laundry on the Rand at the Robinson Mine. He built his home on part of the Rand Steam Laundries site. The building Plans say on stand 32, but the Valuation Roll lists him as an owner on Stands 37 and 38 with a fairly substantial house. The 1916 advertisement shows a twin gabled house facing Park Road on the land he owned. Designed by the architect Bertram Avery, it was a double-storey, attached to a unit containing a shop facing Richmond Road (now Napier Road) with lodging rooms above.

The road or lane which ran from Stanley Avenue to the edge of the property was named Nelson Terrace, presumably in deference to the laundry-master.

The Rand Steam Laundries were the biggest laundry operation in South Africa. The Union Castle line would rail its laundry to the RLS every week and there were depots in a number of centres.

An advertisement in *South African Who's Who in Business 1919 / 1920* has this description.

***The Rand Steam Laundries and Cleaning and Dyeing Works is the largest establishment of its kind in the whole sub-continent. Employing about 270 people, including about 100 Whites, it has its own water supply, Cottages for people, Blacksmith and Farrier for making carts, makes its own Soap: and in fact is quite a Village by itself. "***

The housing for white workers would have been superior in size and location, probably the picturesque gabled cottages fronting Napier Road with its oak trees. It is possible that the cottages for coloured (originally Malay) workers was the serried row of smaller dwelling units, west of Nelson's Terrace, but contained within the site with an exit into Park Road.

Both sets of accommodation have survived recognisably as originally residential although altered and very badly maintained. The gabled cottages are used mainly for storage by a metal worker, while serried row are in even worse condition and are used by a furniture maker. The walls between the cottages have all been broken through to create a single extended space, stepping down at each level. Their small gardens are piled high with old timber.

The original accommodation for black workers has not been identified during site visits, but a 1916 sketch in an advertisement shows a "Native Compound." A remnant of that building might remain. The site needs to be fully investigated.

A large pepper tree is probably indicative of the location of the stables and farrier's shed as pepper trees were always planted near stables to keep the flies away.

Mr. Amoils Senior acquired the property in 1946 and the laundry was later run by his son until it closed in 1962.

The original laundry buildings – washing and ironing as well as the dyeing and dry-cleaning sections are still standing. Mr Amoils pointed to section where soap was made. The boilers have gone as well as all the laundry equipment

The impressive chimneys on their corrugated iron roofs indicate the use of steam. They are striking buildings both inside and out, underlining the industrial character of the site and also the use of steam which was once the major power source in Johannesburg, operating the mines as well as manufacturing industries.

There is a large round tower where the bore-hole water was filtered to soften and purify it further.

Since 1962 the property has been used by a number of light industrial companies, mainly furniture makers and repairers with the occasional artist. In modern parlance it is a "hive" with tenants of every colour and creed.

## GAS WORKS SPRUIT

The spruit has been canalised and covered for the upper reaches so there is no evidence left here of an early wash site. For that it was essential to have pools and rocks. These certainly existed on the Braamfontein Spruit close by until it too was destroyed in 1979 and the equivalent outcrops with small

waterfalls must have existed on the Gas Works Spruit owned by Mr Louw Geldenhuys, although not within 50 yards of the former, as the Braamfontein Company claimed. .

## CURRENT USE AND NEED FOR REZONING

The present use of the property for light industrial and manufacturing is unauthorised. The properties were zoned residential in terms of the Johannesburg Town Planning Scheme of 1946, but the Rand Steam Laundries would have operated under an existing use right.

The proposed new use according to articles in the press (see Rosebank Killarney Gazette issued 7 March 2006) is for motor car showrooms.

This is incompatible with the retention of the many significant heritage buildings on the site and certainly adds no value to the revival in Richmond / Milpark of higher density housing mixed with small offices and retail use.

## SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE:

These were the observations and conclusions of the Joint Plans Committee after the visit to the site in October 2005.

- This site is related to early pre-industrial commercial activity on the Witwatersrand: the Zulu washermen; early Black enterprise. The canalised section of the stream is close to if not the actual site of the Geldenhuys wash-site.
- The site includes the original part of stream at north west end; Three boreholes subsequently provided water for the washing;
- The Rand Steam Laundries are the oldest remaining laundry buildings in Johannesburg and probably on the Witwatersrand, some dating back to 1896.
- The property boasts a largely intact group of buildings used for a single common purpose;
- There is an interesting range of buildings and structures including small scale residential, minor industrial, a water storage and filtration tank and large scale industrial;
- Examples of steam driven industrial sites have largely been lost in Johannesburg;
- Individual buildings within the group clearly demonstrate their original use with large double volume, clearstory lit spaces, suitable for steam operated laundry machinery;

- It is a well-known landmark with significant roof-scapes of with large serried ranks of sheet metal ventilators.
- Technically the large industrial buildings have interesting examples of timber roof structures: longitudinal parallel girder trusses on columns supported smaller transverse roof trusses thus freeing up the internal volume and creating a high volume 'nave' with lower volume aisles;
- Socially significant through the contrasting examples of housing provided for workers, both coloured and white. There may be examples of rooms for black men on the site, but the compound has disappeared.
- There is an unusual group of row houses at south west corner of site, stepped to follow site slope and carefully articulated to create small private courtyard spaces to the front of each house; the roof-scape is carefully articulated with projecting firewalls, corrugated iron roofs and substantial chimneys;
- The group of row houses at north east corner with articulated gable fronts, small scale verandas and projecting fire walls creates a human scaled street frontage to Napier Road. This especially picturesque with the oak street trees.
- The site and buildings lends themselves to some potentially very successful adaptive re-use possibilities without destroying the original character;
- Demolition should be strenuously resisted

### Recommendation

At its meeting on 10 February 2006 the Board of Management resolved to submit a report to PHRAG and apply for the provisional declaration of the site in order to protect it during the time of transition. Its size makes a Heritage Impact Assessment essential before it can be rezoned and this study would no doubt support the points made above and resolve the questions of where other important elements were located.

This decision was strongly supported by of a group of members of the Trust on 4<sup>th</sup> March who visited the site as part of a tour of Parktown West-Richmond. The Trust has also received a number of enquiries regarding the future of the buildings so the concern is wider than was realised.

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F Bird  
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