

HANS FRANSEN Ph.D., D.Phil. h.c.
HERITAGE CONSULTANT
14 Kenmain Gardens Kenilworth
021-797-7792 fransen@telkomsa.net

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OLD BETHLEHEM FARM 153

Brief

At the request of Mrs. Angela Enthoven, a very provisional inspection and consultation, in collaboration with the architect, Elisabeth Davies, of the farm complex of Bethlehem 153, which is in the process of repair and upgrading.

Background

The history of the farm and of the farm buildings, and their physical description, were extensively recorded by Mr. H.N. Vos, historical archaeologist, in 2011. In fact the only two aspects not covered by him are the timber varieties used for some of the ceilings and a probe of the floor construction – neither of which should seriously influence further planning.

Scope of work to be undertaken

The rehabilitation of the wine cellar has been nearly completed. Extensively damaged by fire in the past, an authentic restoration was never envisaged. As concerns the homestead, work planned is mostly limited to basic repairs to the basic structure. Several options remain as to the degree of reconstruction, if any, to earlier appearances. It is here that the present consultant feels that his input might be of some use.

A full restoration to the probable appearance of c.1800 (though not now envisaged) is indeed not impossible. As the Vos report has also suggested, sufficient clues remain to make this more than a thumb-suck. It would involve lowering the eaves-height by a metre or so, increasing the slope of the roof, replacing the corrugated iron by thatch, replacing the present outer woodwork by ‘Dutch’ windows and doors placed in the same openings, putting back the yellowwood floors, perhaps with quarry tiles in the old kitchen. And lastly, the construction of front and end gables, for which ample prototypes exist (one only has to look at the Spier complex, with the wine-cellar gable as the best example).

But the Vos report also touched on the possibility of leaving the homestead largely in its present appearance – though repaired and upgraded.

Apparently a full restoration is not at this stage contemplated, and for instance the lean-to additions to the homestead and the flat-roofed courtyard buildings will be retained. This consultant therefore feels that making the best of the many valuable elements that the building itself still possesses seems to be the best option. This suggestion is further reinforced by the fact that no full restoration of the cellar was undertaken, and none is envisaged (or practicable) of the stables/shed.

The existing facade windows (and their shutters) are attractive, in fair condition, of some age in their own right, and placed in the traditional positions in the facade. The ceilings, though of differing age and detail, are all of great authenticity and beauty.

Ever since the late 19th century, well over a century ago, when the walls were raised and a corrugated roof of lower pitch installed, the facade as a whole has been lacking the pristine proportions – of walls versus roof and gables – that all original Cape Dutch houses have in common. But to restore those proportions cannot be done piecemeal – it would involve a full make-over.

This also applies to the gable. The present gable was almost certainly built as a replacement, or remodelling, of the original gable, as an adaptation to the new roof-line. This required much higher “shoulders” and a lower apex, resulting in a rather spread-eagled format. This may seem a somewhat awkward design, **but to change it to a more appropriate model would make no sense whatsoever without restoring the roof to its original height and pitch.**

Conclusion

This very provisional report is based on a brief, though thorough, on-site inspection accompanied by the architect on 23 January 2013, and on a thorough perusal of the 2011 Vos report.

This compiler is available for further consultation and for assistance in submissions to Heritage Western Cape. He wishes to compliment Mrs. Angela Enthoven on the initiative to upgrade the Bethlehem farm complex, and the homestead in particular. Whatever form this upgrading will eventually take will prove very worthwhile and return an important and unique historical Cape farm complex to somewhere near its erstwhile beauty.