

Popular Name: George Harrison Park, Main Reef and Main Reef leader
Region: Witwatersrand Region

Co-ordinates: 26° 12' 36.28" S; 27° 59' 16.14" E
Elevation: 1708m

Municipality: City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality
Province: Gauteng

Description:

Discovery of the Main Reef, Langlaagte

In December 1885, George Harrison and George Walker, two prospectors on their way to Barberton, where the famous gold rush was at its peak, arrived at the Strubens' prospect on Wilgespruit looking for work. Walker was engaged to help in the mill and Harrison was directed to the farm Langlaagte, where he was taken on as a builder and handyman.

Meanwhile, Jan Bantjes, who had abandoned Kromdraai to investigate the Witwatersrand, was prospecting the conglomerate horizons that Fred Struben had shown him on Roodepoort, south of Wilgespruit. In January 1886, he brought some of this material to Wilgespruit for crushing. Walker would have witnessed this work, as well as the recovery of gold from conglomerates that Bantjes and Struben subsequently found on Vogelstruisfontein, east of Roodepoort.

The exact sequence of events that led to the discovery of the Main Reef Leader is not certain. Walker left Wilgespruit sometime in March and rejoined Harrison at Langlaagte, intending to continue the journey to Barberton. It seems that Walker recognised some rock that Harrison was using for building as conglomerate, similar to the material he had seen being crushed at Wilgespruit. Harrison showed him the outcrop from which the rock had come, and crushing and panning it revealed a rich tail of gold. In another version of the story, Walker claimed that he had chanced upon the outcrop while on his way to the farmhouse. This seems less likely - contemporary documents refer to Harrison as the 'prospector' of the farm, and he was subsequently awarded the 'zoekers' prospector's claim on the property.

Other prospectors were also at work on different portions of the farm - as early as 9 January 1886, Arthur Struben, Harry Struben's 14-year-old son, wrote in a letter to his cousin Godfray Lys that, together with Dirk Geldenhuis, he had visited the Langlaagte claims which show visible gold. However, George Harrison is today acknowledged as the man who made the important discovery, albeit accidentally (site W21). On May 12, Harrison and Walker entered into a prospecting agreement with G.C. Oosthuizen, the owner of the portion of Langlaagte where the discovery was made, and two days later Colonel Ignatius Ferreira staked out his camp on Turffontein to serve as a centre for the diggers. Struben and Bantjes followed up the extension of the orebody on Vogelstruisfontein, and the mill at Wilgepoort was kept busy crushing samples from here and from other farms. Geldenhuis found the Main Reef on Turffontein, and Henry Nourse located it on Doornfontein. On July 24 or 25, Harrison visited President Kruger and made an affidavit that he had discovered gold on

Oosthuizen's farm. Oosthuizen, Ferreira, and others petitioned Pretoria for a gold field to be proclaimed, and on 8 September 1886, nine farms on the Central Rand, extending from Driefontein in the east to Roodepoort in the west, were declared 'public diggings'. The first two farms, Driefontein and adjoining Elandsfontein, were proclaimed on 20 September 1886, and this date is generally recognised as the official founding of the Witwatersrand gold field. Harrison and Walker were each awarded a claim for the discovery of gold on the property. These two claims, nos. 19 and 20, were pro-claimed a National Monument in 1944. They sold their claims in about September 1886. Harrison left the Witwatersrand and has not been traced further. Walker died in Krugersdorp in 1924 (Site W22).

The fledgling town of Johannesburg was laid out on a triangular wedge of 'uitvalgrond' (area excluded when the farms were surveyed) named Randjieslaagte, situated between the farms Doornfontein to the east, Braamfontein to the west, and Turffontein to the south. Johannesburg street names reflect this triangle, and beacons are still to be seen at the corners. Commissioner Street marks the base of the triangle, while Diagonal Street defines its western boundary. West Street is so named because it is the westernmost point, and End Street defines the eastern end of the triangle. The northernmost beacon, the Randjieslaagte beacon, is a simple concrete structure standing in Boundary Road, Parktown, just off Louis Botha Avenue, and was proclaimed a National Monument in 1965.

Photographs:



Outcrop of the Main Reef and Main Reef Leader at the discovery site. Oxidation of the pyrite in the conglomerate has produced iron oxides, which stain the outcrop brown. The associated unmineralised but altered quartzites are weathered white. George Harrison Park (Courtesy: Morris Viljoen).





Location of battery stamps (see below), which were damaged at this site and subsequently moved to the Main Street Mining Mall, in Johannesburg, in 2004. Right: a plaque at the entrance gates to George Harrison Park. (Courtesy: Darren Tiddy, May 2013)



The battery stamp and historic plaque at the Main Street Mining Mall, Johannesburg.

Reference:

Viljoen, M.J. & Reimold, W.U. (1999). An Introduction to South Africa's Geological and Mining Heritage. Johannesburg, Mintek & Geological Society of South Africa, 193pp.

Created by Darren Tiddy (02.09.2013)