

RICHARDS BAY

A. de V. Minnaar

Human Sciences Research Council

Richards Bay on the Mhlatuze Lagoon has through the years been intimately connected with Empangeni. In the early days it was used as a place of recreation by the residents of Empangeni. It was also Empangeni that benefited most from the development of the harbour there. The two centres, barely twenty kilometres apart, complement and serve each other's needs and together have become the main growth point of Zululand.

EARLY HISTORY

Historically Richards Bay was visited by Portuguese mariners long before the British occupation of Natal and was known as the Rio-dos-Peixes (the river of many fish). From the fifteenth century the only White men to visit the Bay were those from the numerous shipwrecks along the Zululand coast, trekking past on their way to Delagoa Bay in the north. In January 1827 the Union Jack was hoisted at the Mlalazi River mouth (Mtunzini) by Nathaniel Isaacs on behalf of Lt James Saunders King, who had been granted permission to take possession of the area by the Zulu King, Shaka. King and Isaacs were interested in the possibilities of the Mhlatuze Lagoon as a harbour to serve the profitable Zululand trade, but nothing constructive appears to have been undertaken by them in this regard. Before the Zulu War of 1879 the area was lucrative for hippo and crocodile hunters. It is known that it was one of the favourite hunting spots of John Dunn, the White Zulu chief of the 1880s.¹

During the Zulu War of 1879 the problem of supplying the British forces had given the military authorities some concern. The Royal Navy undertook to investigate the Zululand coast to try to discover a suitable landing point. Accordingly, on 5 January 1879 *HMS Active* and *HMS Tenedos* had cruised along the coast, under the command of Commodore Sullivan. They explored the whole coastal

area as far as the mouth of Lake St Lucia. Later, in April and May that year, an official survey of the Zululand coast was carried out by the 455 ton gunboat, *HMS Forester*, under the command of Lieut.-Commander Sidney Smith. The actual survey was done by Sub-Lieutenant J.H.W. Theed. As a result of this survey the indentation at the mouth of the Mhlatuze River was named Richards Bay. The name of Richards Bay first appeared on Admiralty Chart No. 2089 which was published in December 1879. The significant thing about this survey is the endorsement of the original survey to the effect that it was done "by directions of Commodore F.W. Richards" and consequently it has been accepted that the Bay was named after him.²

Frederick William Richards, son of Captain Edwin Richards, R.N., of county Wexford, Ireland, was born on 30 November 1833. He entered the Royal Navy at the age of fifteen and saw service in Australia, the Pacific, the west coast of Africa, and in the Mediterranean. In October 1878 he was appointed commander for the west coast of Africa based at Simonstown. He hoisted his flag on *HMS Boadicea* and on arrival at the Cape, hearing of the defeat of the British at Isandlwana in Zululand, took his ship up the east coast (which was outside the limits of his command) and landed with 250 men at Port Durnford to reinforce the small British army. He was present at the Battle of Gingindlovu and the relief of Eshowe. He was awarded the K.C.B. in 1881 and terminated his service in the Cape in 1882 with the rank of rear admiral. From 1882 onwards he saw service in Burma, China, and elsewhere and became first Naval Lord in 1893. By special order of the Privy Council he was created "admiral of the fleet" so that he could be retained on the active list to the age of 70. He died in 1912. In later years, after he had become Sir Frederick Richards, the bay was sometimes known as Port Sir Richard.³

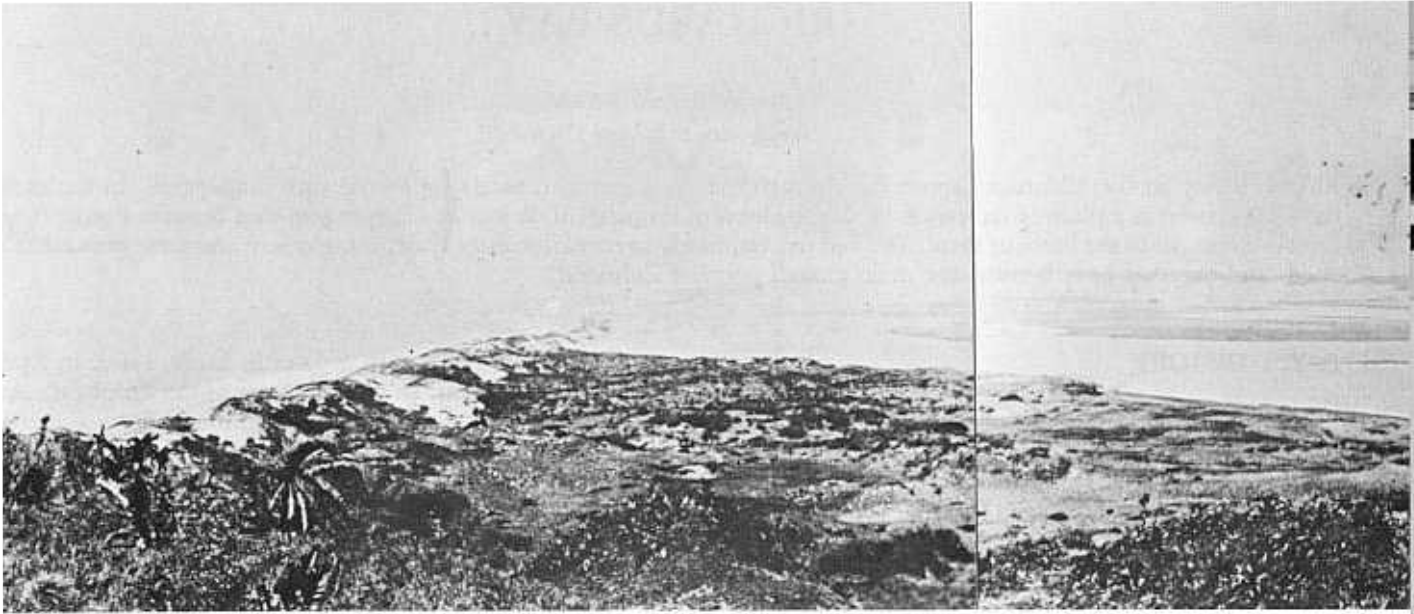
For many years Richards Bay was ignored by the authorities but after the discovery of coal deposits on the banks of the Ntambanana River, at Somkhele, and in the vicinity of Nsimbagazi (Umzingazi) Lake near the Mhlatuze Lagoon in the 1890s it assumed new importance. However, the Nsimbagazi coal deposits were never really developed. These coal beds were in fact pointed out to John Maxwell and Sigurd Sivertson by local Blacks. Maxwell then wrote to the government asking them to recognise him as the discoverer but the government refused to recognise his claim and reserved the coal for government use.⁴



Sir Frederick William Richards, R.N. (1833-1912).

PHOTOGRAPH: RICHARDS BAY PUBLICITY BROCHURE

1. T.V. BULPIN, *Natal and the Zulu country* (Cape Town, 1969), p. 41.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179; A. BOZAS, *Empangeni, the origin of its street names* (Empangeni, 1970), p. 33; *Die Huisgenoot*, 19.12.1969, pp. 11-13; *Zululand Observer*, 16.11.1972; *London Times* (extract), 30.9.1912.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg (NA), EPI 5/1/10 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1895-1896 : 1340/1896.



Richards Bay at the turn of the century.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEN. A. BOZAS COLLECTION

During February and March 1896 coal was mined at Nsimbagazi (Umzingazi) on an experimental basis. It was transported by wagon to Eshowe by T.M. Loftheim and R.B. McAlister and used in the brickyards there. But it proved to have inferior firing qualities while the labour and transportation were also too costly; so the mining was stopped.⁵ This did not deter various hopeful prospectors from applying on 24 February 1897 for mineral leases in the area west of the Umzingazi Lake and along the shore of the Mhlatuze Lagoon (Richards Bay).⁶ So optimistic about the future was S. Gielink that he applied and was given permission on 10 April 1897 to erect a store, with accommodation for travellers, near the Umzingazi mineral leases.⁷ But nothing ever developed from these leases although at the time there were plans for Richards Bay.

The lack of a good Zululand harbour had long vexed the government and Port Durnford was at best a poor substitute where goods were landed by means of rowing boats through the surf. There were those who favoured developing the Mhlatuze Lagoon as a harbour, with the railway line from the Somkhele coalfield ending there. The idea was to construct a first class naval coaling station in the lagoon, and in July, August, and September 1897 a detailed hydrological and marine survey was made of the lagoon and bar of the Mhlatuze mouth by L.B. Denham, assisted by L.M. Altern, the government surveyor for the Lower Umfolozi district.⁸ Denham and his party were enthusiastic at the results of their survey, but the plan was shelved by the Imperial government's decision to hand Zululand over to Natal. The Natalians were more concerned with developing Durban than funding a rival harbour elsewhere.⁹

The idea of a harbour was once again revived during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) especially when the absorption of the two Boer republics seemed to be the likely result of the war. The plan was considered attractive as it was felt that the harbour and rail facilities of Durban would prove inadequate for the coming demand. The work of the Delimitation Commission in opening Zululand for settlers also led to high hopes of future economic expansion. The Mhlatuze Lagoon, with its great expanse of water, also seemed the most likely place for a harbour as, from a railway point of view, it presented the shortest straight line from the coast to Volksrust and the Transvaal. Accordingly a Zululand Port Survey was set up in 1902 under Cathcart

W. Methuen, the harbour engineer of the Natal government. In August that year the surveyors visited the Mhlatuze Lagoon. The actual survey was undertaken by N. Brockbank, while in October the tug *Richard Kent* made the detailed soundings off the mouth of the Mhlatuze River. Methuen's preliminary report on the Mhlatuze Lagoon survey came out on 25 November 1902. He was much impressed by the potential of the lagoon. He found that it was nearly double the size of the Durban Lagoon and considered that it could certainly be made into a port at an estimated cost of £800 000. He felt that the existing 2,4 metre channels could be dredged and that there was an excellent site for a township on the high ground overlooking the lagoon.¹⁰

In 1903 the MLA for Zululand, E.A. Brunner, had put forward the motion in the Natal Legislative Assembly that a port be developed at Richards Bay.¹¹ This project was still under consideration by the Natal government in 1906 and for this reason A. Moore was not granted a commercial fishing licence to fish in the Mhlatuze Lagoon until proper civil authority was established over the area.¹² But the economic depression of 1907 and the uncertainty as to the political future of Southern Africa led to the plan's being shelved once more. Besides the surveying activities over the years at Richards Bay the only other activity was the opening of a Native trading store by H. Ash some time in 1893 between the Mbonambi Mission station and the Mhlatuze river mouth.¹³ On 10 April 1897 S. Gielink had applied and was given permission to erect a store with accommodation for travellers near the Umzingazi mineral leases. But when the prospectors moved away he closed down.¹⁴

5. *Ibid.* : 776/1896.

6. *Ibid.* 1340/1896.

7. NA, EPI 5/1/11 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1897 : 715/1897.

8. *Ibid.* : 1978/1897; BULPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

9. BULPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

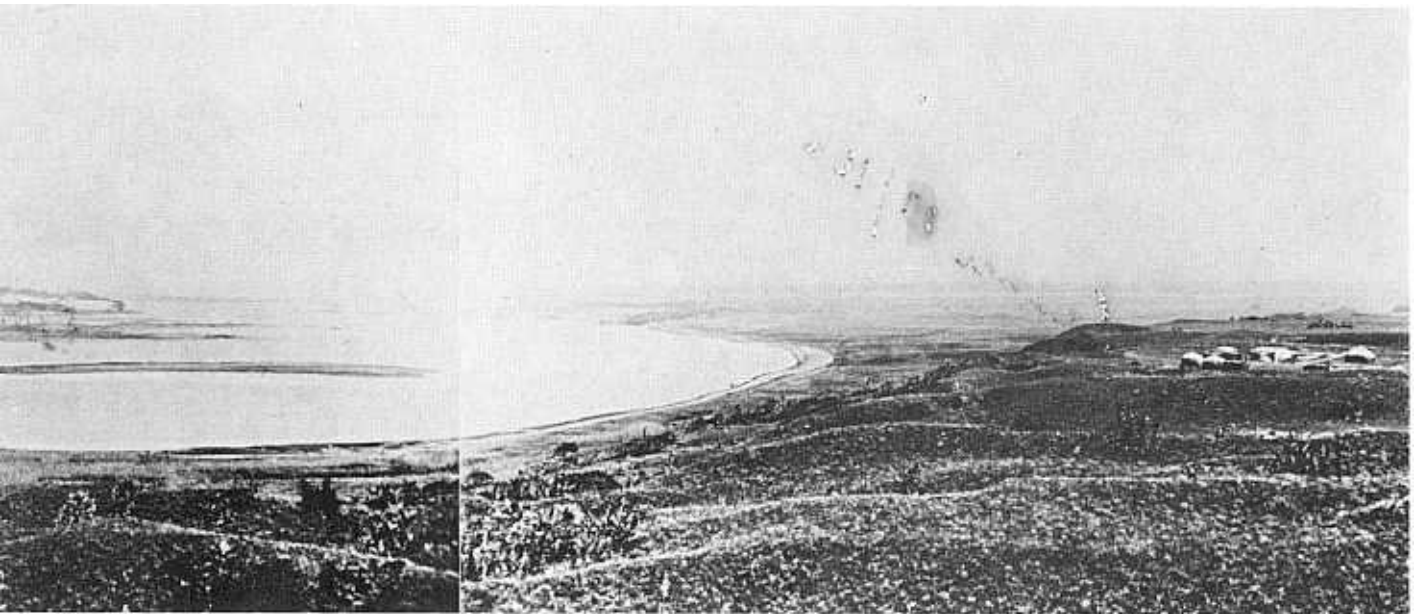
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-265; NA, EPI 3/1/1 Historical register book of Empangeni, p. 42, and 5/1/14 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1902-1903 : 782/1902.

11. *Zululand Observer*, 4.3.1977.

12. NA, EPI 5/1/17 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1906-07: 448/1906.

13. *Ibid.* : 5/1/9 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1892-1899 : 545/1893.

14. *Ibid.* : 5/1/11 : 715/1897.



Except for the most ardent fishermen Richards Bay was rarely visited even though it was a fisherman's paradise and oysters were so plentiful that one was able to purchase them by the sugar pocket if one so wished.¹⁵ In late 1906 G. Higgs founded the Zululand Fisheries and two employees, living on Pelican Island, caught and dried fish which was sold to the local Blacks.¹⁶ Some five years later, in 1911, an enterprise calling itself the Zululand Fisheries Syndicate started to catch fish in the Mhlatuze Lagoon, using a giant fish kraal, and supplied Zululand commercially with fresh seafood. They were so optimistic of this enterprise that the old idea of a harbour, even if only a small fishing one, was once again revived.¹⁷

By 1926 the fishing rights at Richards Bay were held by Major J.E.F. Gage and it was not uncommon for him to haul in 300 to 400 kilograms of fish in one day. Most of this catch was dried and sold to the Indians at the two mills at Felixton and Empangeni.¹⁸ But declining yields in the lagoon saw the fisheries catch dwindling and when Fred Ashby took over the Richards Bay Fisheries in the 1930s he concentrated more on supplying bait to the fishermen than on commercial fishing. He ran the bait shop until the mid-1940s when the Natal Parks Board took over.¹⁹ The first Parks Board ranger at Richards Bay was W. Cooper who served from 1944-1960.²⁰

An early incident which brought the name of Richards Bay into the news was the *Newark Castle* incident. The ship, the *Newark Castle*, under Captain Nathaniel Ross Nielsen, left Durban at 10h30 on 12 March 1908 bound for Delagoa Bay and Mauritius. There were 115 people on board including a crew of 69 and military draftees for the garrison on Mauritius. About six hours after leaving Durban she ran aground about five kilometres north of Port Durnford. Lifeboats were lowered and the ship was finally abandoned at about 18h30. Two lifeboats cruised near the wreck while others set out on their own courses. The steamer drifted about eleven kilometres up the coast and grounded on a sandbank outside the Mhlatuze Lagoon at about 20h00. At 22h00 the third mate, Windsor, decided to board the vessel as it was well above the water and there was no imminent danger. He fired flares and left the vessel after being on board for twenty minutes. At 02h00, finding that the vessel had not capsized, he returned and dropped both anchors in the hope that she would remain in the position in which she had struck. His hope was not realised for the steamer was gradually turned around by the stern, with the bow

pointing towards Durban, thus presenting her broadside on the incoming sea. He continued firing flares and after two or three had been fired a second class passenger, who had slept throughout the confusion, appeared, quite unaware of the predicament. At 05h00 the trawler *Evelyn* arrived and rescued Captain Nielsen and his boat's crew. The captain then reboarded the steamer. Eventually all the occupants of the boat, except the boat in charge of Major Boyes, were rescued and taken to Durban. Major Boyes's crew had attempted to land on the coast but had been swamped with the result that Mrs Boyes, a steward, Horne, and a cabin boy, Matsell, were drowned. Mrs Boyes's body was temporarily buried near the beach. The survivors, after taking refuge in a Zulu kraal, made a weary tramp to the railhead at Empangeni, some 50 kilometres away.²¹

Some time after the *Evelyn* had left a wind rose and the waves broke against the steamer, smashing up everything on the port side, which lay seaward. Crew members thought it impracticable to launch boats and were forced to remain on board. A tug, the *Harry Escombe*, arrived on the Sunday morning and the crew were taken off the *Newark Castle* and to Durban.²²

The wreck was bought for £575 by the Johnstone Syndicate. Part of the cargo was 750 000 five rupee notes being conveyed to Mauritius in steel boxes. Two of these boxes had broken up in the wreck and the beach was littered with 250 000 of the notes. The syndicate salvaged the other four boxes with 33 000 pound sterling worth of notes. The British government, however, demonetised the banknote issue and the money had no value. The wreck of the *Newark Castle*

15. BOZAS, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

16. *Zululand Observer*, 4.3.1977.

17. BULPIN, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

18. *Zululand Times*, 23.12.1926.

19. *Zululand Observer*, 20.8.1970; J.C.B. Mattinson, Empangeni, 14.4.1983.

20. *Zululand Observer*, 19.3.1970.

21. *Ibid.*, 18.4.1975; *Zululand Times*, 19.11.1908; NA, EPI 5/1/19 Magisterial records of the Lower Umfolozi district, Correspondence and minutes 1908 : 153/1908.

22. *Ibid.*



Holiday cottage at Richards Bay early 1920s.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEN. A. BOZAS COLLECTION

was later found off Richards Bay when the new harbour channel was being dredged in the 1970s.²³

Road communications with Richards Bay were always difficult owing to the nature of the terrain that had to be traversed. In 1907 G. Higgs had pioneered the first wagon track from Empangeni to the Bay. The residents of Empangeni set up a Richards Bay Road Fund which helped finance the road built by C.F.M. Hibberd in 1922 along the original wagon track. During wet weather cars stuck in the mud and it was a familiar sight to see people pushing their cars and then bedecked with mud, clambering back into them and proceeding on their journey. Some travellers, if the water was high at Double Drift (outlet of Insezi Lake), would send a message ahead so that a span of oxen could be provided to pull the cars through. Other travellers provided themselves with an iron standard and a block and tackle set. They would knock the standard into the ground and then pull the car through with the block and tackle. The first bridge, a simple wooden affair, was built at Double Drift by F.T. Poynton in 1932, the cost of £45-16-3 being borne by the Richards Bay Road Fund.²⁴

Early accommodation was provided by the Richards Bay Hotel which was established in 1922 by C.F.M. Hibberd.²⁵ In the early days this was merely a wood and iron building combining a Native trading store and a bar. Week-end fishermen used to sleep on the verandah where most of the night was spent fighting off the mosquitoes.²⁶

In 1922 at the instigation of the local member of parlia-

ment, G. Heaton-Nicholls, the prime minister, General J.C. Smuts, together with the minister of Lands, Colonel Denys Reitz and other members of parliament, toured Zululand and spent a day at Richards Bay investigating its potential as a port.²⁷ But nothing came of this visit and Richards Bay continued as a small fisherman's resort for many years. In 1928 the Richards Bay Hotel premises were taken over by Edward Brimson and in 1929 the manager of the hotel was John Howells. The hotel was supplied from the 1920s till 1960 with butter, milk, eggs, and vegetables by Charles Edmund Anderson who had settled on the farm Green Valley about eleven kilometres from the Bay. Anderson was an ardent fisherman and went fishing at least twice a week. It was his favourite fishing spot which later became known as Anderson's Channel.²⁸ In the late 1930s a handful of people began retiring to the Bay. Among the first of these permanent residents were Mr and Mrs Carl Rosenhahn in 1938.²⁹

23. *Ibid.*; A. Bozas, Empangeni, 13.4.1983.

24. J.C.B. Mattinson, Empangeni, 14.4.1983; R.G. Poynton, Empangeni, 13.4.1983; Revesby Estates records.

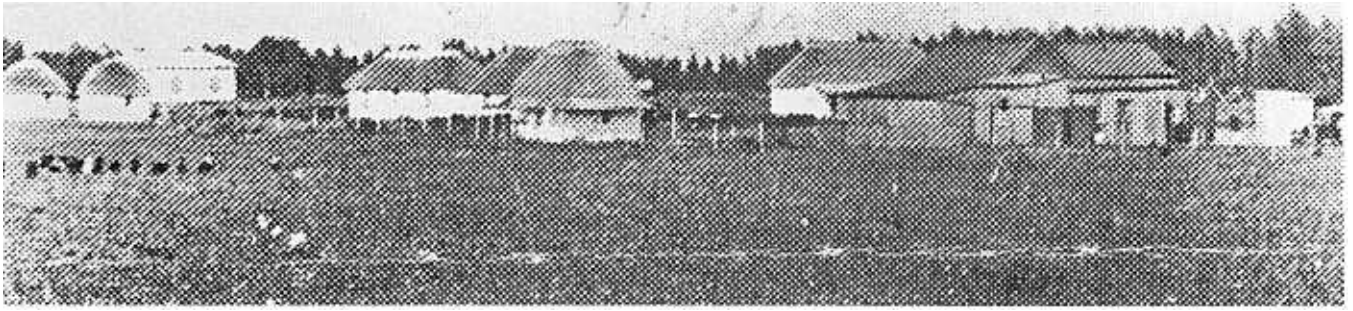
25. *Zululand Observer*, 4.3.1977; *Who's Who in Natal* (Durban, 1933), p. 123.

26. J.C.B. Mattinson, Empangeni, 14.4.1983.

27. *Zululand Times*, 3.1.1957.

28. *Zululand Observer*, 4.3.1977.

29. *Ibid.*, 24.6.1975.



Richards Bay Hotel and store early 1920s.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEN. A. BOZAS COLLECTION

During World War II the ten kilometre long Lake Mzingazi was used as a Catalina flying boat base.³⁰ After World War II the Natal Parks Board established a caravan and camping site adjacent to a nature reserve that boasted pelicans, flamingoes, crocodiles and hippopotami. In the holiday season this quiet little fishing hamlet was invaded by as many as 4 000 holiday-makers who came to boat, swim, watch the birds, and to fish.³¹

In 1954, on the initiative taken by E.J. Butler, Richards Bay obtained a health committee under the chairmanship of J.G. Davidson.³² In the same year certain local residents, especially the owner of the hotel, Bill Reid, became aware of an increase in the silting up of the lagoon. This silting process had been increased by the draining of the reed marshes round the entrance of the Mhlatuze River into the lagoon. The draining was done, via new canals, to provide new ground for sugar plantations. Originally these reed marshes had acted as a sponge and strainer of silt but with the draining of them and the increased soil erosion in the catchment area of the Mhlatuze River the lagoon was rapidly becoming a depository for mud. Reid proposed the cutting of a new lagoon mouth 400 metres north of the present one, maintaining that this would create a better flow helping to scour some of the silt from the lagoon.³³ Nothing materialised from Reid's proposed plan and the quiet life continued at Richards Bay until 15 April 1965 when the minister of Transport, Ben Schoeman, announced that a new harbour was to be built at Richards Bay.³⁴

Rapid development soon took place and in June 1969 a town board under the chairmanship of P. Pretorius superseded the health committee.³⁵ At that time there were only 49 cottages, a hotel with a one-room post office, a small general store, a bait station, and a camping site at Richards Bay. There were a mere 100 inhabitants but within five years the little fishing village had grown to a town with a population of 3 000.³⁶

Road from Empangeni to Richards Bay, 1921.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEN. A. BOZAS COLLECTION



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOWN AND THE HARBOUR

The first industrial concern to be established at Richards Bay was the Alusaf aluminium smelter. In June 1967 at the opening of the Zululand show the prime minister, B.J. Vorster, had announced the establishment of this smelter at Richards Bay.³⁷ By 6 May 1971 the reduction plant of the smelter was put into operation and the smelter itself came on line on 7 June.³⁸ The smelter plant was officially opened by the prime minister on 13 October 1971.³⁹ On 19 November 1971 Alcor, the first satellite industry drawn by the Alusaf smelter, set its bobbins spinning and started production of aluminium overhead conductors.⁴⁰ Another early development was the 45 centimetre oil pipeline to the Transvaal via Empangeni and Richards Bay which had come on stream on 9 June 1969.⁴¹

The infrastructure of the town itself grew at a furious pace. In 1970 the first water purification works were completed; the first suburb, Meerensee, was laid out; an automatic telephone exchange was installed, and the first primary school was completed. The population (including construction workers) was estimated at 800 Whites. A start was made on the John Ross Highway between Empangeni and Richards Bay. On 19 January 1971 a nursery school and sportsground were taken into use.⁴² In memory of A.J. Fabricius of the Richards Bay Town Board, this sports and recreation complex at the Bay was named A.J. Fabricius Park.⁴³ Also in 1971 the airstrip at the Bay was built while the terminal buildings at the airport were officially opened in November 1975.⁴⁴

In October 1973 the Richards Bay High School was officially opened⁴⁵ while in September 1973 the Rev. D.C. Veysie of the Methodist Church dedicated the first house of worship to be established in the Richards Bay area.⁴⁶ On

30. *Ibid.*, 1.4.1976.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 4.3.1977.

33. J.A. L'ESTRANGE, Skadu oor Richardsbaai, *Veldtrust* 4(2), February 1954, pp. 16-18.

34. NATAL UNIVERSITY, DURBAN, DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS, *Economic development in Natal: an economic survey of Zululand* (Durban, c. 1970), p. 83.

35. *Zululand Observer*, 25.1.1973 and 18.10.1973.

36. *Ibid.*, 15.11.1974 and 4.3.1977.

37. *Zululand Times*, 4.1.1968.

38. *Zululand Observer*, 17.6.1971.

39. *Ibid.*, 14.10.1971.

40. *Ibid.*, 27.1.1972.

41. *Ibid.*, 21.8.1969.

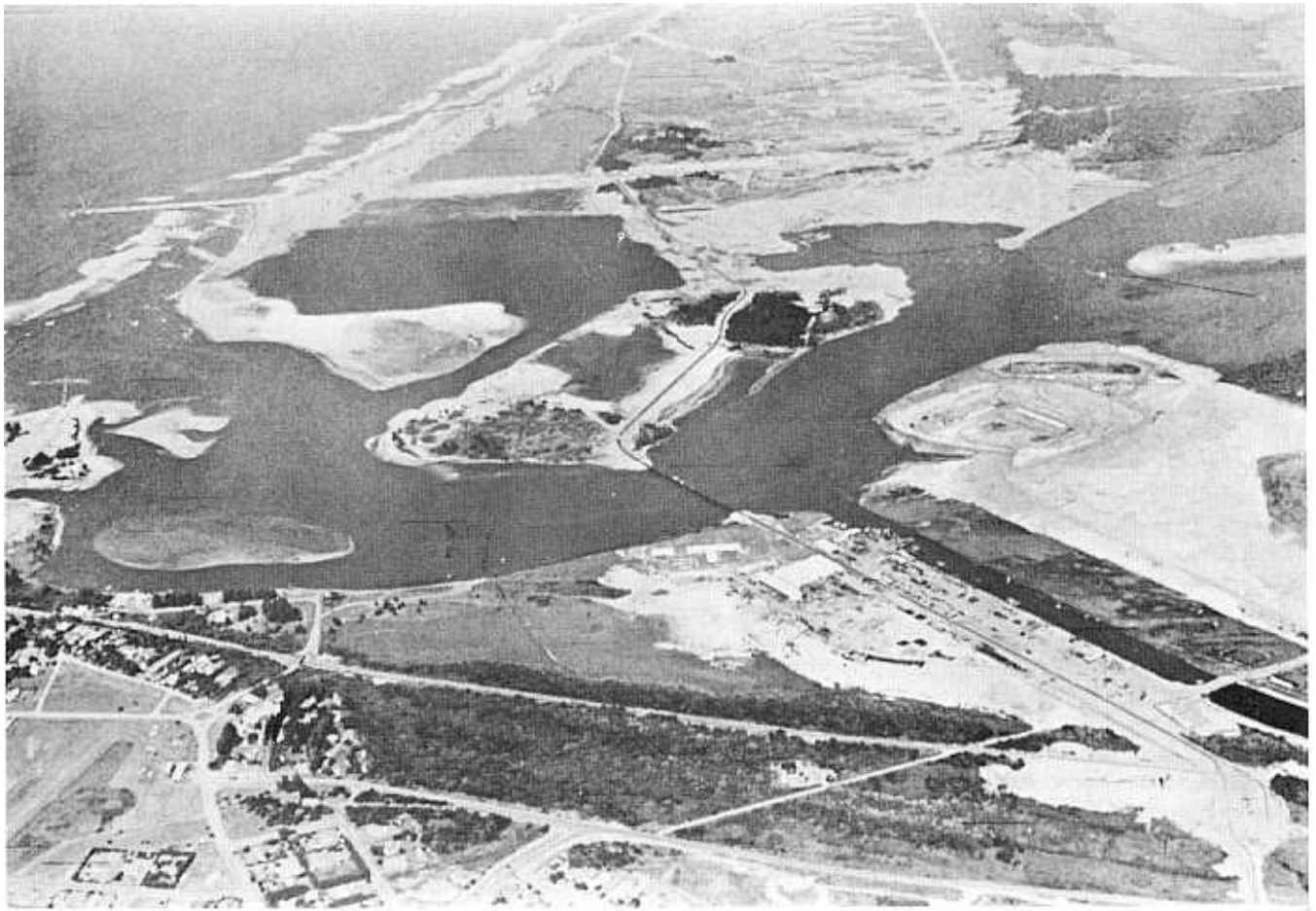
42. *Ibid.*, 7.1.1971 and 21.1.1971.

43. *Ibid.*, 7.12.1972.

44. *Ibid.*, 25.2.1971 and 28.11.1975.

45. *Ibid.*, 18.10.1973.

46. *Ibid.*, 13.9.1973.



Richards Bay Harbour under construction.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEN. A. BOZAS COLLECTION

24 November 1976 a new hotel, the Hotel Richards, owned by Karos Hotels, was opened.⁴⁷

Work on the harbour itself had got under way in earnest with the start of dredging operation in September 1972.⁴⁸ The developers of Richards Bay took heed of the environment in their planning of the new harbour. This decision led to the fact that as much as possible of the estuary was to remain free of interference and pollution and was conserved as a habitat for wildlife as well as providing recreation for people. An essential step towards saving part of the bay was the creation of a physical barrier between developed and undeveloped areas. This was achieved by the building of a berm wall in 1974 right across the bay which effectively divided it into northern and southern sections. Hydraulic flood gates were built into the wall for the control of water levels and a completely new estuary mouth was dredged for the southern half.⁴⁹ At the end of January 1975 the dredger, *Beverwijk 31*, broke through the final sandbank and opened the harbour mouth between the two breakwaters. The natural bay mouth had already been filled by the dredger, *Mascaret*.⁵⁰

The first commercial ship to sail into Richards Bay was the 4 000 ton coaster, *Marika Smit*, on 30 November 1975. The vessel was transporting auxiliary equipment for the cutter-suction dredger, *Tramontane*.⁵¹ The new harbour was officially opened on 1 April 1976 when the *SA Vaal*, with the prime minister, B.J. Vorster, on board entered Richards Bay.⁵²

The harbour was essentially designed as a bulk exporting harbour and the coal terminal section started the export of coal in 1976. The first export of phosphoric acid from the new Richards Bay by the Triomf fertilizer factory took place in February 1977; this had been achieved within two years

of the commencement of the plant and exactly two months after the first shipment of sulphur had arrived at the harbour.⁵³ Development of a clean cargo berth and extensions to the coal terminal were also undertaken. In 1983 the construction of an effluent pipeline into the sea and of the third-phase expansion of the coal terminal from 26 million tons of coal per year to 44 million tons neared completion. 1983 also saw the erection of the Mondi pulp mill.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that the development of the harbour at Richards Bay has provided a tremendous boost for the region and the Empangeni/Richards Bay area has been declared an industrial growth area. ©

47. *Ibid.*, 26.11.1976.

48. *Ibid.*, 21.9.1972.

49. *Ibid.*, 14.2.1975.

50. *Ibid.*, 31.1.1975.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.12.1975.

52. *Ibid.*, 9.4.1976.

53. *Ibid.*, 25.2.1977.

54. *Ibid.*, 22.7.1983 and 23.9.1983.