



an agency of the  
Department of Arts and Culture

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## **SITE INSPECTION REPORT: Botshabelo Mission Station**

**BY**

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**HERITAGE PROTECTION UNIT**

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## 1. Introduction

Section 5 (1)(a) of the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 (NHRA) states that “*Heritage resources have lasting value in their own right and provide evidence of the origins of the South African society and as they are valuable, finite, non-renewable and irreplaceable they must be carefully managed to ensure their survival*”. In May 2016, SAHRA Heritage Inspectorate Unit received an e-mail from an officer at the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality. This was regarding the disrepair of the Botshabelo Mission Station which is a historical significant landscape and the Fort Merensky which has been declared as a Provincial Heritage Site. SAHRA officer went to the site for inspections.

## 2. Purpose of the site visit

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, SAHRA officer visited the Botshabelo Mission Station, following a communication that took place between SAHRA Heritage Inspectorate Unit and the Steve Tshwete Local Municipality regarding a Provincial Heritage Site which is in disrepair. The Steve Tshwete Local Municipality contacted SAHRA to assist with resolving the dispute between the Botshabelo Community Development Trust members and the restoration of the site. The inspection took place in compliance with section 5 of the NHRA which states that “*Heritage Resources contribute significantly to research, education and tourism and they must be developed and presented for these purposes in a way that ensures dignity and respect for cultural values*”. The main objective of the inspection was to inspect the state of the site and to obtain more information concerning the Botshabelo Community Development Trust dispute. This was done to ensure that the authority responsible is in compliance with section 5 of the NHRA.

## 3. Background

In the 1860s Alexander Merensky and Heinrich Gruntzner from the Berlin Mission Society decided to broaden their missionary work to the Swazi and Pedi people. Ruler of the time, Chief Sekhukune suppressed Christianity and ordered Merensky to leave his country. Merensky and his followers including some members of the Kopa tribe later moved and started Botshabelo Mission Station. The mission station was called Botshabelo meaning ‘a place of refuge’. The mission station developed into a small town where the gospel was preached, people obtained education and industrial work was practiced. A fort called Fort Welhelm was built to protect the mission station against



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attack from Chief Sekhukune. The fort had a number of rooms including a high round tower.

Work ceased on the missionary when the Anglo-Boer War started. Conditions got worse with the outbreak of the World War1, where finances were no longer imminent from Germany. The fort was in bad shape and was restored by Hans Merensky in 1960. The fort was therefore renamed the Fort Merensky and declared as a National Monument in 1962. In 1969 the schools and training facilities closed in terms of the Nationalist Party apartheid policy.

In 1972, the Middleburg city council bought Botshabelo, and was a historical town surrounded by a nature reserve. Renovations of the mission station were done in the 1980s. The Botshabelo game reserve was developed to encourage tourism and included hiking trails, accommodation and the Ndebele Village. The Pakendorf House which was built in 1882 was changed into a trading post, where local crafts were sold. The seminary was used as a museum for display of old photographs and artifacts. The old high school was used as an information centre and a cultural museum.

#### **4. Assessment**

The condition of almost all the buildings at Botshabelo Mission station has deteriorated. The furniture is still in good condition. The Fort Merensky and some of the houses at Botshabelo Village are still intact the area where the village is located has grass overgrowth. The Church building has recently caved in close to the podium.

#### **5. Conclusion**

The Fort Merensky is a declared Provincial Heritage Site. Botshabelo village including the mission station are significant historical landscapes. In 2005, the Toevlugt 320 JS farm, which forms part of the Nature Reserve, was awarded to the Botshebelo Community Development Trust as part of the land claim. The community of 930 beneficiaries intend to resettle on the property. After the Land Claim Botshabelo was no longer maintained as a result fell into disrepair. This came as a result of the dispute among the Botshabelo Community Development Trust members. Many of the buildings have been vandalized including the Fort Merensky which is a declared Provincial Heritage Site. The site on which the community intends to resettle on is located within the Botshabelo Nature Reserve which is a habitat to a number of animal species. A number of original inhabitants and the founders of Botshabelo were buried on the property, south of the Mission Station.