

Gold Fever at Rorke's Drift

By Katie Stossel

After peace broke out following the 1879 war, thankfully for the isolated Rorke's Drift community, the area was too far from the basic road network and of no use to any commercial enterprise. Even during the later Boer Wars, the nearest the combatants came was to Dundee with a small outpost at Helpmakaar but with South Africa becoming famous for its mineral wealth in the 1880s, it was not too long before gold fever spread from the Transvaal to the steep and rocky Buffalo River gorges near Rorke's and Fugitives' drifts.

The search for gold had originally started a few miles south of the drifts and in one lucky period, some eight hundred ounces of gold were recovered, and then the seam ran out. The prospectors left but one keen ex-sailor from HMS *Boadicea*, known as Barclay, stayed on convinced he would make his fortune. He took several mining options in the area including Fugitives' Drift where he prospected for several months. From the pump house at the drift, which today supplies water to the nearby Fugitives' Drift Lodge, the original workings built by Barclay can still be seen, as can the mineshaft built into the base of the cliff overlooking the river, known to the local Zulus as 'Albert's shaft'. Local folklore suggests Barclay never found any gold and worse, it is not known what happened to him.

Diamond fever had a similar affect when it reached the Rorke's Drift area but only as a result of a simple human error. In 1920 Mr. Ekron, the farmer who owned Petroskar Farm near the fugitives' graves, found two rough diamonds in a small pool next to the river. He took them for verification to a Mr. Meyer at Dundee who, without telling Ekron, swiftly purchased the land surrounding the pool. Local folklore remembers Meyer paying twelve times the current value for the land.

Stone sifting equipment was transported to the site and washing began. For months work progressed but nothing was found. Ekron occasionally passed by and one day came across Meyer watching the sluicing operation. Ekron, by accident or design, mentioned that this was the very place where his ostriches once gathered to drink. Meyer knew Ekron had once owned a flock that had been reared for their feathers but the venture failed and he asked Ekron where the ostriches had come from, to which Ekron replied 'from the diamond fields at Kimberley where they had been used as 'guard dogs' to prevent thieves scavenging loose diamonds'. On realising the diamonds found by Ekron had been passed by one of the ostriches, the Meyer diamond venture then closed down.