

THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED.

Ian Knight on a recent expedition to some of KwaZulu-Natal's less visited historic sites.

'The Author cannot promise a narrative of hairbreadth escape and thrilling adventure', began Bertram Mitford of his classic 1883 travelogue, *Through The Zulu Country; Its Battlefields And Its People*, 'but simply an account of everyday experiences during a trip through Zululand in 1882, undertaken with the object of making the round of the battlefields in succession – which, until then, had not been done by anybody'. 'That country', he continued prophetically, was 'hitherto but little visited, and previous to the late war scarcely known, [but] is an interesting one, and destined to become even more so ...'

Indeed it is – and was. Since the early 1990s Zululand – northern KwaZulu-Natal, as it now is – has developed a tourist round all of its own, with hundreds of people each year visiting the principle battlefields, lured by a heady mix of cinematic attention (as of January this year the classic feature-film *Zulu* has been shaping our perceptions of the Anglo-Zulu War for half a century), a fulsome book market, TV documentaries, and societies like the AZWHS. Indeed, I suspect the majority of you reading this will have trodden to some degree in Mitford's footsteps, although it still requires some logistical ingenuity to 'make the round of battlefields in succession', and many are tempted instead to concentrate on the best known and most dramatic – and accessible - actions, at iSandlwana and Rorke's Drift.

I've been profoundly lucky in that regard. For me, perhaps the greatest pleasure of being an Anglo-Zulu War historian has been the excuse it has given me to explore that extraordinarily powerful and beautiful countryside, and I have seen it both in its pre-tourist days – when the past seemed perhaps just that little more tangible than it does now, but when travel was undeniably more difficult – and a good deal since. Put end to end the days I have spent exploring Zululand now stretch to several years, and include an interesting seven months working at the then newly-established Fugitives' Drift Lodge. For the last dozen years or so I have been leading the annual Holts Battlefield Tours Anglo-Zulu War Tour, which is still the only tour to combine all the sites associated with the British invasion of 1879 in one trip, rather as Mitford did (next year's tour is pencilled in for late March 2015 – see the Holts Tours website for details!).

Whilst I dearly love the Holts tour, which provides me with a chance to call in on each of the sites every year (although some, like Hlobane, do not get any easier!), it does – the constraints of family life being what they are - tend to reduce the amount of time I can spend exploring more obscure areas. This year, however, I had the chance to spend some time with an intrepid group of friends who were determined to visit those places not on the regular tour itineraries. Many of these were places that I last visited during my early travels in the 1980s, when I was guided by my mentor, local expert 'SB' Bourquin, and some, indeed, were places that I had always meant to get round to visiting – but, because they were just too far off the beaten track, even for me, had never quite gotten around to. And like Mitford I won't be recalling too many 'hairbreadth escapes' – although getting stuck in the mud on a waterlogged track between the cane fields on the 1856 battle site of 'Ndongakusuka did, I must admit, come close- although the whole experience was nonetheless a thrilling one in its way.

Driven by Holts' ground agent and stalwart Paul Marais, we began with a sweep up the coast from Durban, following the trail of perhaps the best-known of the great Zulu kings yet, at the same time, the most elusive, Shaka kaSenzangakhona Zulu. Although the broad outlines of Shaka's life and his impact on the region are well-known, they are so shrouded in myth, symbolism and political complexity that it is sometimes difficult to get a grip on the man himself (only this year the current Zulu king, HM Goodwill Zwelithini, began a law-suit to reclaim huge swathes of KwaZulu-Natal on the basis that it was King Shaka's legacy and was taken from the Zulu people by force; the issues surrounding Shaka are still alive and kicking, and by no means confined to academic debate). By common agreement Shaka's childhood was not very stable. He was born in the hills on the northern side of the Nkwalini dam and then spent a few short years at the homestead of his father, *inkhosi* Senzangakhona of the Zulu people just south of modern-day Ulundi. Today Senzangakhona's grave – and it was usual for a great Zulu man to be buried in the cattle-byre of his homestead, so the spot is most likely also his home – is marked and neatly fenced-off, and lies in the eMakhosini valley, not far from the complex of monuments and interpretation centres at eMgungundlovu.

We stopped off there later in the trip, and a young Zulu lad working at eMgungundlovu volunteered to show us the way – it's still difficult to find Senzangakhona's grave, and I was interested to note that our guide pointed it out to us in the old-fashioned way, now largely forgotten, using a clenched fist as it was considered disrespectful to point with an outstretched finger. Although the grave is not far from the main road, it was still possible to conjure up something of that old Zulu world, before their rise to greatness, when the horizons of its kings were limited to no more than the hills closing in on all sides - the more so as a splendid Nguni bull clopped slowly after us as we walked through the bush. In fact, however, Shaka had spent only a few years of his youth here, and after a rift with his father he had gone to live among the Mthethwa people, closer to the coast, and it was there that he first established his reputation as a warrior.

Perhaps because of this unsettled childhood the adult Shaka was a restless personality and later, as his power grew, he moved the focus of his kingdom southwards. He established a new royal homestead, KwaBulawayo, near Eshowe, and later a larger one, KwaDukuza, south of the Thukela River, in what was destined to become colonial Natal. This was one of the largest and most impressive of the Zulu royal homesteads, numbering as many as 2000 huts, and it was here that Shaka was assassinated in a palace coup in 1828. After his death kwaDukuza was abandoned and allowed to fall into ruins, and, being entirely constructed of wood and thatch, it had probably long since disappeared by the time white settlers built a town, Stanger (named after the surveyor-general of Natal), on the same spot in the 1870s. Nonetheless it seems that the settlers were well aware of the symbolism of their choice location since it is generally accepted that the municipal offices in Stanger were built on what was once Shaka's personal quarters at the top of the kwaDukuza complex. Indeed, there is a large mahogany tree outside the offices under which, it is said, Shaka himself used to sit when judging court cases – a great story which an understanding of botany tends to undermine, since it would need to be a particularly tenacious specimen to have lived so long. Another tree, under which the king had apparently been sitting when he was attacked, and which stood behind the town museum near the grave, has not been so lucky; just a year ago it was felled so that a vacant lot could be turned into an office block.

Stanger has recently been re-named KwaDukuza to honour its historic connections with Shaka, although at first glance it is difficult to get a feeling of the great king's presence here.

The modern town caters mostly for the farming community – the surrounding hills are carpeted in sugar-cane, there is a big paper-mill on the outskirts of town, and the streets reflect the influence of the large Indian population who were first brought to Natal in the 1860s to work in the cane industry. Yet, scratch a little deeper and Shaka is still there, as if his ghost still lingers to an older landscape, not quite yet entirely submerged beneath the bustling and sometimes rather shabby modernity. I have been to Shaka's grave many times, of course, but we wanted to go now to some of the other less-visited sites said locally to be associated with him, and in particular two spots on the stream, the Mbozambo, which runs through the outskirts of town. One, lying upstream, was said to be Shaka's favourite bathing spot, and he would retire there after a hard day at KwaDukuza to lounge for a while to soak away the pressures of state among the rocky pools. Further downstream, and altogether more sinister, is the Mavivane cliff, where he is said to have had judicial criminals executed.

Sadly we drew a blank on the bathing spot – part of the access road was closed for re-development – but the cliff of execution was surprisingly easy to find, and, with an incongruity rather typical of KwaDukuza's historic sites, a well turned-out café, complete with children's play-area, now stands on the opposite bank of the stream, with a special platform built rather hopefully for those who might want to get a closer look at the cliffs (I rather suspect we were the first international party to visit it). The story has it that those judged guilty of various crimes by the king were marched from KwaDukuza to the heights on the opposite bank, clubbed, and their bodies then tipped over the edge and into the waters below. At first glance it's difficult to imagine the horrors played out at this spot today but the café's owner explained to me that his family had owned the plot since early in the twentieth century, and in those days, before the town drained off so much water, the river had run much deeper and faster - and that it once supported a healthy population of crocodiles. With that in mind, standing on the viewing platform and looking determinedly away from the trappings of modernity, the past seemed suddenly to jump into focus. The brooding face of the ancient cliff, silent and mysterious and draped here and there with creepers, seemed altogether part of an older, darker Africa.

From KwaDukuza our plan was to drive up the coast to explore more Shakan sites outside Eshowe, but we took the time to pull off the motorway to visit those straddling the Thukela River. Until the twentieth-century the history of KwaZulu-Natal was profoundly influenced by its geography since the movements of people, cattle and armies were all constrained by the practicalities of crossing the scores of rivers that bisect the region from west to east. The Thukela is perhaps the most powerful and impressive river in the region and after Shaka's death the focus of the Zulu kingdom shifted back northwards so that the river soon became the de facto boundary between Zululand and colonial Natal. There are few enough bridges across the Thukela now, and in the nineteenth century all human movement was funnelled through a handful of fords – drifts – that were often only viable when the water level was low. The best of these was the old Lower Drift, just a few kilometres inland from the river's mouth, where indeed a modern flyover still crosses today. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century entire clans passed this way through the difficult waters, fleeing the chaos that surrounded the rise of the Zulu kingdom; Shaka himself walked here, and the first white traders crossed at this drift on their way to visit his court, which was then north of the river.

In 1838, during the first rift between the white settlers at Port Natal – modern Durban – and their Zulu hosts the settler army crossed here to raid cattle from the Zulus, only to come to grief on the hills opposite when met with an expert counter-attack. It was here, too, that

Prince Mbuyazi and his followers tried to flee the kingdom during the succession crisis of 1856, but were trapped by the flooded river and were destroyed by Prince Cetshwayo's forces in one of the bloodiest battles in Zulu history. This spot too was chosen by the British as a point of confrontation in 1879. It was here, on the Natal bank, that British representatives presented their ultimatum to King Cetshwayo's envoys beneath the 'ultimatum tree' (in fact a grove rather than a single tree), and when the invasion began the British established a secure bridgehead by building forts on both sides of the river, Fort Pearson on the Natal bank and Fort Tenedos on the Zulu side.

Whilst Fort Pearson and the Ultimatum Tree – sadly no longer the original, which was destroyed by floods in the 1980s, but rather one of its children, sprouting from its seeds – are fairly accessible, the sites on the northern bank are less so. Although the course of the 1856 battle of 'Ndongakusuka – the 'battle of the princes' – is well-known, there are no monuments on site, despite the fact that some accounts put the death-toll as high as 20,000 men, women and children, and much of the battlefield is covered by the sugar-cane which thrives in the warm, damp coastal climate. Trying to find a good spot to view it involved careful driving on muddy tracks between the cane-fields but Paul managed to get us onto the slopes of 'Ndongakusuka hill, looking across the valley towards the ridge-line held by Prince Mbuyazi's men. Prince Cetshwayo's forces had attacked from the far side, beyond the ridge, and as Mbuyazi's line collapsed the fighting men had fallen back through their non-combatants, sheltered in the valleys behind, and the fighting had engulfed them all, spreading across several kilometres as a desperate panic-stricken rush took place for the river. There is nothing to mark their flight now, but it has left its traces upon the landscape, and into recent memory workers in the cane fields still ploughed up fragments of human remains. One small stream, peacefully winding down through the spurs of the ridges and insignificant in itself, is still known simply as Mathambo – 'bones'.

Closer to the river lies the later site of Fort Tenedos. This, too, has almost been swallowed up by the cane, and part of the profile has been destroyed by ploughing. And yet, in among the undergrowth, it is still there, a concrete monument, almost overgrown now, marking the spot, the lines of the perimeter trenches and the low remains of ramparts still discernible in the tangle of roots and bushes.

From Fort Tenedos we travelled to Eshowe – stopping to walk down Wombane Hill, following the line of advance of the Zulu left horn at the battle of Nyezane – which served as our base to explore both the beginning and the end of the Zulu kingdom. From Eshowe we ventured out onto the old Empangeni road – for a long time a dirt track, but just now being upgraded – to visit the site of Shaka's kwaBulawayo homestead, the so-called 'coward's bush', and the grave of Shaka's mother, Queen Nandi. I had last visited these places in 1987 and found this time that they had changed more in the last seventeen years than they seem to have done in the previous 150. Earth-movers have cut great swathes through the old roadsides, waiting for the new road service to be delivered, and the population is denser now than it was. A new purpose-built interpretation centre stands close to the site of kwaBulawayo although – not entirely to my surprise – it was closed on the day we visited. Shaka built kwaBulawayo around 1819 or '20, shortly after he had driven the Ndwandwe out of Zululand and established his credentials as the most powerful king in the region. At that time – and until he built kwaDukuza – it was the most impressive Zulu royal homestead yet constructed, and it's difficult not to see it as a personal statement. The name has often been translated – particularly by white observers in colonial times, keen to stress the savagery of the kingdom

they had displaced and thereby justify their own ascendancy – as ‘the place of killing’, but a more accurate rendition might be ‘the place of he who was killed’, a reference to the slights suffered by Shaka in his youth. Built on the slopes of a ridge overlooking the Mhlatuze valley, where Shaka had won his greatest victory against the Ndwandwe, the view from the royal quarters at the upper end, down over the escarpment, and is simply breath-taking; ‘remember me?’, Shaka seems to have been saying, ‘the kid nobody wanted, whom you killed with your slights and insults? Well then, look at me now.’ Sadly the site itself is much changed since I was last there – an old monument still stands near where the road cuts through the lower end of the old homestead, but where in 1987 there was an open slope, covered with grass and brush-wood, there is now a thick mat of thorn-bush which makes exploration almost impossible.

Less than a kilometre away, further down the road, another monument identifies a rather ancient and knotted kei-apple tree as the spot where Shaka used to sit and review his army after an expedition. Certainly it offers a nice view across the open ground leading towards kwaBulawayo, and it’s easy to imagine his *amabutho* emerging from the complex of huts to form up in front of him. The story had it that the king would ask his commanders for the names of those who had performed well, or badly, in the recent campaign. The heroes – *abaqawe* – would be singled out and rewarded with cattle but those whose courage had failed would be made an example of. Shaka would say ‘give them a taste of the thing they fear so much!’ and they would be held fast, and an executioner would slowly press a small spear, used for killing goats – they were not worthy of a fighting spear - into each man’s arm-pit in turn. If they flinched, they were doomed – but if they endured the ordeal Shaka would interrupt, declare the accusation false, and spare them to return to their duties. For this reason the bush is still known as *isihlala samagwala* – ‘the bush of the cowards’.

The grave of Queen Nandi lies a few kilometres further on, lying in the veldt. Shaka was much attached to his female relatives – the male ones not having been, in modern terms, ‘there for him’ much – and the death of Nandi in October 1827 was a watershed in the early history of the kingdom. According to the white adventurer Henry Francis Fynn she was accompanied to the grave by her hand-maidens, buried alive, and Shaka was thrown into such a paroxysm of grief that he slaughtered thousands of his own subjects in the belief that they had failed to display sufficient grief. Modern researchers have tended to play down the scale of the killings, and to suggest that the Queen’s death was a convenient cover for other more important political issues. By 1827 Shaka had been in power for eleven years and the kingdom had grown enormously – but there are clear signs that he was struggling to hold it together. Several important groups were not reconciled to the new order, and there had been at least one attempt on the king’s life – the mourning killings provided Shaka with a convenient cover from which to purge his internal rivals.

When I last visited the grave in 1987 I found it a lonely and evocative place. A concrete tombstone, erected in the twentieth century – with the Queen’s name mis-spelled ‘Nindi’ – marked the spot, protected by a rusting and broken-down barbed-wire fence. Nevertheless, an old china cup stood on the grave with a few coins thrown in by a passer-by to honour Nandi’s spirit. The cup and the fence have long gone, the latter replaced by a stout iron railing painted bright green, but if this was put up to protect the site it clearly came too late in the day – the same concrete tombstone still lies there, but smashed now, a pile of disconnected slabs, the name no longer visible. And soon, the upgraded road will be tarred, and the passing traffic will speed past, unaware of the extraordinary history which once took place close by.

From the beginnings of the Zulu kingdom we ventured out, too, to explore its end. In 1884 King Cetshwayo – chased out by his former general Zibhebhu during the civil war of 1883 – died in Eshowe, and his followers took his remains by wagon into the remote Nkandla forest, overlooking the Thukela. This was the home of a particularly royalist group, the Shezi, and their intention was to bury the king as far as possible beyond the reach of his enemies, both black and white. It's easier now than it was to visit the grave – much of the road has been upgraded, not entirely coincident upon the decision of the current President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, to build a controversial new palace in nearby Nkandla, where he grew up. We paid our respects to the king, but our real intention was to explore the nearby Mome Gorge battlefield. In 1906, during the last uprising against colonial rule, the followers of the rebel *inkosi* Bambatha had made Cetshwayo's grave their rendezvous, hoping that something of the king's past glory would rub off on their cause. It didn't; in June 1906 the rebels were caught in their overnight bivouac in the narrow Mome gorge and shot to pieces by colonial troops.

Mome has always been a strange and evocative place, very much at the limit of modern travel capabilities, even today. Only the most dedicated and interested travellers go there – and few make it into the gorge itself. I have taken groups to the mouth, to chart the course of the action, but had not been inside it since 1987. Then, led by SB Bouquin, we had managed to press right to the far end of the gorge to photograph the stream tumbling down the steep hill-sides there, a spot so inaccessible that it was regarded as one of the best hiding places in Zululand. We had hoped to do the same this time, but found that in the intervening twenty years the site had been smothered with a quick-growing exotic shrub, lantana. A small foot-path still leads over the nek, where the rebels once fled to escape the rain of shells and bullets, and into the gorge, but only close to the stream itself did the vegetation open up enough to gain much impression of the surroundings. At times, when we walked through the ancient Dobo forest, which covers one side of the gorge and where many of the rebels tried to take refuge, we could glimpse how gloomy and claustrophobic the site must have seemed at the time, and we wondered at scars high up in the tree-tops, which might – just possibly – have been caused by that old shell-fire. The path eventually petered out three-quarters of the way along the gorge at a spot where it was just possible to see the steep rising wall of the head of the valley beyond – but for the most part, now, the Mome still shelters its secrets. The bones of the dead – which I saw still exposed in a few places in 1985 – are today shrouded in lantana, as perhaps they should be.

With our departure from Eshowe we left King Shaka's story behind. There were many more places to visit and stories to explore; before we had finished we had driven right up to the Ghost Mountain in the far north of Zululand proper, where Zibhebhu had defeated the Zulu royalist faction in 1884. We visited the battlefield of Msebe and Zibhebhu's grave nearby, and travelled along the spectacular crest of the Lebombo mountains to visit King Dingane's grave. Turning back again we visited Hlobane, ascending the mountain by way of Lt. Col. Russell's route up the side of the lower Ntendeka plateau (no easier, as it turns out, than the more usual route at the other end!), then returned to familiar stamping ground at Isandlwana. Here we took the time to walk the route of the Zulu right horn, from the bivouac in the Ngwebeni valley past the Mkwene high point on the iNyoni ridge, and descending onto the plain near Isandlwana mountain by way of the so-called 'spur' (an experience which confirmed my view of recent re-interpretations of the Zulu movements). We also walked the possible line of advance of the rocket battery, tracing the most likely way through the dongas,

and finishing up at a point on the escarpment which tallied remarkably well with survivors' eye-witness descriptions of the spot where the battery was over-run.