

Commissary Dalton and Gold Mining at Fugitives' Drift.

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After the Anglo Zulu war, one of the heroes of Rorke's Drift, Commissary James Dalton, was promoted to Commissariat Officer, put on half pay and, following pressure from B Company members and Dalton's senior officers, he returned to England with his Victoria Cross. South Africa was too much of a magnet for him and after a few years of boredom he returned to Africa and took an active interest in gold mining. Before he could make his fortune, he was suddenly taken ill and died on 7th January 1887.

At that time many rivers in South Africa were found to have gold deposits along their rocky river banks, and the Buffalo River was no exception. Thankfully for the isolated Rorke's Drift community, the area was too far from the basic road network and of no use to any major commercial gold mining enterprise. Even when the Boer war broke out, the nearest the combatants came to their community 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 allegedly ran out. The prospectors left but one keen ex-sailor from HMS *Boadicea*, known as Albert Barclay, remained behind convinced he was about to make his fortune. He took several mining options in the area including one at Fugitives' Drift where he prospected for several months. From the pump house at the drift 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 but he claimed he had, and worse, he suddenly disappeared and it is not known what happened to him. Locals presumed he had either been murdered for his gold or he had simply disappeared, with or without his fortune.

In 1920 diamond fever had a similar affect when it reached the Rorke's Drift area but only as a result of a small dose of human greed. It all began when a Mr. Ekron, the tenant farmer at 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 and evicted the unfortunate Ekron. Local folklore remembers Meyer paying twelve times the current value for the land. Stone sifting and pumping equipment was transported to the site and washing began.

For months work progressed but nothing was found. The defrauded 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. 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 originally been swallowed by one of the ostriches, the Meyer diamond venture closed down.

This tale was one regularly related by David Rattray to his Fugitives Drift Lodge guests.