

INTRODUCING GREAT BRAK RIVER

WRITTEN BY

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Whilst Great Brak River and Mossel Bay grew up together, often challenging one another at different sports, they have very different histories. The first known reference to the Great Brak River was made in 1730 when its banks were reached by the pioneering trek farmers. In 1745 the river became the eastern boundary of the Cape Colony in an area known as 'De Verre Afgeleegene Districten'. The eastern part of the Colony, between the Breede and Great Brak Rivers, fell under the jurisdiction of the Drostdy (magistracy) at Swellendam.

Francois le Vaillant described the area in 1782: "We crossed a plain, encircled with hills, beautifully covered with trees and bushes, about five miles in circumference. I found there thousands of pelicans and flamingos ... When we left the river, we had to climb a difficult and very steep mountain. With patience and hard work, the top was reached (Great Brak Heights). The scenery which now appeared to the eye richly rewarded our trouble. We were admiring the most beautiful country on earth. This land bears the name of Outeniqua, meaning in Khoi-Khoi 'man laden with honey'.

As the Cape Colony expanded northwards and eastwards during the nineteenth century, Great Brak River became a well-used outspan en route to George and further east. Georgetown was established in 1811. Mossel Bay was the only port; thus, the access road was improved during the 1840s. In 1850 a causeway was built over the Great Brak River. This consisted of thirteen stone piers still in use today. This crossing became a toll in 1852.

The river often came down in flood bringing debris in contact with the causeway, which caused both damage and hindrance to the crossing traffic, which in the early days were mainly farmers and their farm animals and wool for export from Mossel Bay. In addition, the river mouth was often blocked allowing the estuary water level to build up and again preventing easy access across the river.

The village of Great Brak River was started in 1859 when Charles Searle brought his family to the then virtually unknown rural settlement alongside the flood prone river to operate and collect the toll which provided for his wellbeing and for the cost of maintaining the crossing. Travellers often needed their shoes (veldskoens) repaired. Charles Searle saw an opportunity and in 1886, with two of his sons, established a small boot and shoe factory and in 1887 a tannery which eventually became one of South Africa's leading dynamic industries allowing the village to grow extensively.

From its beginning in 1859 Great Brak River was a little back road village started by an unknown family with little experience of business. It had a number of strong advantages. It was located on the banks of an unpredictable coastal river subject to flooding which was essential to cross when travelling east. It also had a good bridge, crossable on most days of the year and it was in a country area far from the many major historic 'events' that subsequently took place.

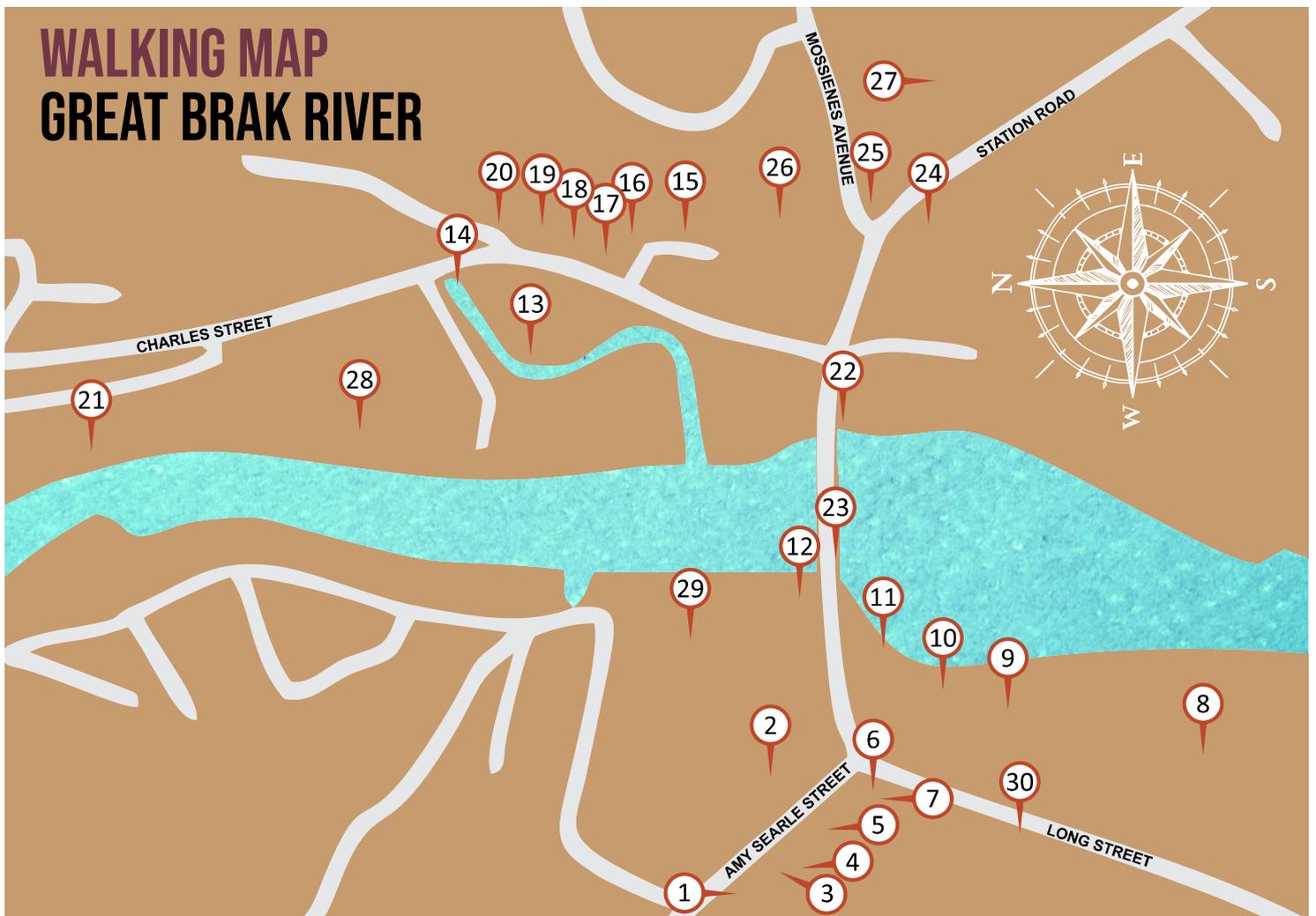
Charles Searle senior had been convinced that it was Great Brak River and not the operating of the toll that would lead their family to success. This and subsequent war rumblings must have been in their minds when they fashioned their leather works domain. They soon started expanding into retail and the Searles outlets opened in Knysna, George, Mossel Bay, Riversdale and Oudtshoorn. Although concentrating on Boots and Veldskoens, they provided leather of all descriptions for harnesses and other related products. During 1899, fearing attack from the Boer armies, many local guard units were formed and these required good quality boots, saddles and outfits.

The First Boer War was a war fought from 16 December 1880 until 23 March 1881 between the United Kingdom and Boers of the Transvaal (as the South African Republic was known while under British administration). The second Boer war took place from 1899 to 1902 which coincided with the rapid growth of the Searle factory which in the early days manufactured not only boots and shoes but were tanners and curriers (a currier is a specialist in the leather processing industry). During 1914, World War one started and in the early war years, there were no tractors to pull the cannons or to position the large guns and this was left to the men and their horses. Both men and horse required suitable gear and leather was top of the list especially in bad weather. From the 1890s to 1920, C. Searle and Company was the leading leather works factory in South Africa.

In 1905 a waterwheel was installed on a freshwater furrow built by Charles Searle in 1874. This produced the first electricity which fed the factories machines. To keep up the rapidly rising demand for power the plant was enlarged and later an extensive hydroelectric plant (still in working order) was installed, fed with water carried by a new water furrow 19 kilometres long. The village of Great Brak River was in a fortunate position to be able to produce electricity some 15 years before George or Mossel Bay.



WALKING MAP GREAT BRAK RIVER



MAP REFERENCES

1. Museum and Information Office; 1902
2. Wolwedans Farmhouse; was bought in 1827 before the the arrival of Charles Searle and in the 1840s was used as a posting house when owned by Hercules Terblans.
3. Original Stables; 1830
4. Corrugated Iron Cottage; 1900
5. Searle Memorial Church Hall; 1900
6. Searle Memorial Church. Built 1930 and the architect was Gordon Leith in a Spanish architectural style. The pulpit was designed with timber bought by the London Missionary Society in appreciation of the Searle's service to religion.
7. Prospect House; built in 1915 as a wedding gift from Thomas & Jemima Searle for their eldest son Allan Murray Searle and Amy Mary Leith.
8. Chauffeur's Cottage; 1920
9. Fairholm; was given as a wedding present to Thomas Searle's daughter Emily, who fell in love with Claude Dugmore. The house was built in 1916.
10. Searle Family Cemetery; 1881
11. The original house, Riversyde was built in 1898 for Thomas Searle and his wife Jemima. He was the youngest son of Charles senior and Pamela Searle.
12. West Bank was built in 1896 for Charles Searle junior and his wife Mary nee' Murray. The house had large gardens tended by English gardeners and in 1915 was famous for its orchid collection.
13. Pic n Pay (Shoe Factory & Retail Store); 1903
14. Searle's Head Office This building was built in 1920 as the Searle's Ltd. Head Office. At the time, the post office was incorporated into the building. Bolton took over the company and building in 1989.
15. Belhambra House. In 1880 Charles Searle senior & his wife Pamela built a new home known as Belhambra House. The other half of the building housed the Searle's Store. Extended in length 1899.
16. Bioscope Hall (Traders Auctioneers); 1924
17. Boarding House; 1920
18. Boarding House, Le Art; 1920
19. St John the Evangelist Church; 1930
20. Mission Hall (New Apostolic Church); 1894
21. Old Factory Pensioners Houses; 1867
22. Position of Original Toll House; 1850
23. Original Causeway, now Bridge; 1850
24. Searle Shoe Factory; 1917-18
25. Pepper Tree; 1884
26. Double Story Flats; 1900
27. Sunnybrae House, erected in 1913 for Willie & Edith Searle. It was a house of music & laughter as Edith & her three daughters were generous in imparting their musical talents with the villagers.
28. Site of 'House of Accommodation'; 1856
29. Glencairn; 1903
30. Workers Cottages; 1900