

## The History of Eight Bells Mountain Inn

It was the year of 1816 when the land on which Eight Bells stands today, was granted by the then Governor of the Cape, Lord Charles Henry Somerset, to a certain Johannes Petrus Marx.

At the time, it was some 2322 morgan in extent, stretching between the Gouritz River in the west, to the area between Little Brak and Great Brak Rivers in the east, reaching up north to the Outeniqua Mountains – the mountains named by the Khoi San and meaning “land filled with honey.”

The route taken by travellers and traders between Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn passed through the property - and a condition of the original title was that - “a place of outspan be set aside” - where the commuters of olden-day times could outspan and rest both themselves and their weary oxen and steeds before crossing the then, somewhat daunting Outeniqua Mountains to Oudtshoorn. Not surprisingly, the district was called “Ruyterbosch” – the Dutch translation for ‘ridersbush’.

The route originally followed via the tortuous Attaquas Kloof Pass (with it’s wagon-wheel-beaten-tracks still visible along recently established Cape Nature Conservation hiking trails and a 4-x-4 route in the area). The establishment of Oudtshoorn in 1853 was followed by the rapid development of farming inland and the pressing need for a decent wagon-road over the mountains between Mossel Bay and Oudtshoorn.

In the meantime, the Divisional Council of Mossel Bay, with its then hopelessly inadequate means, had been struggling to build a wagon road on the line of a native path over the Attaquas Kloof. The Cape’s Chief Engineer of Roads and Bridges at the time, Murrell Robinson, took interest in the project and allowed convict labour from Knysna to be used and provided the services of Thomas Bain without a charge, to the Mossel Bay Divisional Council. The pass finally opened in 1869 making life far easier for ‘waggoners’ to negotiate, and a grateful Council named the pass after Robinson.

Today a magnificent oak tree +- 200 years old and one of the largest and oldest surviving oak trees in the Cape today – almost 5m in diameter with branches reaching out over 20 metres – marks the entrance to the Eight Bells Mountain Inn and in particular, to the original homestead with it’s 45cm thick walls and beautiful yellowwood floor which has been incorporated into the main hotel building as a billiard room.

As the years passed by, travellers seeking shelter – as well as the first local schoolmaster posted to the area – turned to the small homestead for lodgings. The Inn’s Bosun’s Whistle Pub is to be found where the first two rooms were built on-to the homestead to accommodate visitors. It too served as the local post office and electoral station.

Situated 1km away from Eight Bells is one of the few original farm schools remaining in the Cape - Ruiterbos Primary School - which celebrated its centenary year in 1998 and to date, continues to serve the local community.

With the advent of more modern modes of transport, the need for a camping ground / place of outspan, eventually fell away - small piece of the original outspan still adjoins Eight Bells today and is state-owned.

As farm became more popular as a destination for visitors, the 1930's heralded the early beginnings of the property's transformation from that of a farm, to a guest/holiday farm.

In particular, it was frequented by seamen from ships of the Royal Navy docked at Mossel Bay – as well as members of the Royal Airforce based in Oudtshoorn at the time. Both then and today, Oudtshoorn is considered to be an ideal training ground in preparation for battle in desert-like regions. In fact, Commander Harvey R.N. O.B.E. is buried in the cemetery located in the middle of the Inn's main horse paddock.

And so, it was the regular presence of the naval-folk who influenced the name of the farm "Eight Bells". At sea, the bell is rung once for each half-hour of a four-hour watch. Eight Bells signals the end of the full watch – a time to rest, a place to rest! In this context it was a fitting name for a resort offering tranquil holidays amidst magnificent mountain surroundings.

Progressively, further extensions to the old homestead were made – the horse stable was converted into guest accommodation (today the Palm Court) and later, in the early 1940's, additional rooms and rondavels were built around the main building. Thereafter, Eight Bells flourished for many years as the premier guest farm in the region.

Sadly, the fortunes of Eight Bells changed and by 1974, when the Brown family acquired it, the property was in a pathetically run-down and neglected state.

Enchanted by the surrounding countryside and sensing the great potential of the property, the Browns, along with their then four young children aged between 3 and 10 years old, bade farewell to their secure employment and comfortable lifestyle in Johannesburg and moved down south to Eight Bells Holiday Farm.

During their 33½ years of ownership, the Brown's channeled their energy and resources, committing to the considerable challenge of rebuilding and transforming the originally derelict Eight Bells, into what it is today, amidst ever changing trends and needs created by that of a ever changing competitive hospitality industry.

This huge undertaking involved devotedly restoring the buildings and providing each bedroom with - a previously lacking - private bathroom and electricity, constructing all the sporting facilities, timber log cabins and extensive staff accommodation, as well as a self-managed basic services municipal infra-structure – which, to this day, is not provided for by the relevant local authorities.

In 1979 - the then holiday farm was awarded a one star grading; in 1985, it gained a second star – whereafter it was renamed Eight Bells Mountain Inn. In 1990 Eight Bells was granted a third star, and in 2003, secured a 4 star grading from the National Grading Council of South Africa. Last, but not least, since 1987, Eight Bells has been a property in the highly acclaimed Portfolio Collection which celebrates it's 25<sup>th</sup> year since inception, during 2007.

In 1974 the staff complement of Eight Bells entailed a mere 6 employees, yet today it has grown to that of 38 (including temporarily employed staff), peaking at a complement of 45 employees during the high season.

During the past 33½ years of ownership under the Brown family along with their staff – many whom have worked at Eight Bells for more than 20 years – tirelessly and physically carried out most of the building construction and renovations that have both restored, enhanced and nurtured Eight Bells to what it is today - proudly revived amidst it's most privileged and spectacular location in the Garden Route.

A day in the life of Eight Bells seldom passes us by without a stay from repeat-visiting guests – whether to experience memories of a moment in time so enjoyed on a previous visit before up in the mountains, or because chosen as a honeymoon retreat with a childhood memory relived – or not, or because chosen as a place to introduce subsequent siblings to idealic happy holiday surroundings.

Whichever the case may be, most of all... Eight Bells offers it's own kind of unobtrusive and simplistic ingredients that make a break away from the pressures of day-to-day life, so much more meaningful.

It was on this note - amidst numerous ambitions achieved and goalposts reached - that Peter and Jean Brown decided to retire and sell Eight Bells to the new owners, Charles and René Bongers.