

# Doornboom rises from the mud

Text by Herman Fourie • Photographs by Martin Smith

*The town of Heidelberg in the southwestern Cape is one of few where the original farmhouse of the settlement is still standing. A few years ago the old clay building was on the brink of collapse, but then a few dedicated volunteers took up the challenge of saving it. This is the story of the restoration, told by one of the volunteers*



*The sadly neglected building as it looked in July 2005. The leaking gutters and corrugated iron roof fed water into the top of the walls, where it was trapped by the cement plaster. The part facing the camera, the leg of the T, is the oldest part of the structure*



*The early stage of restoration, February 2007. All the cement plaster, as well as the roof, had been removed before the process of rebuilding could begin*

WHEN I first laid eyes on the Fourie house in Fourie Street, Heidelberg, it was a dismal pile of cracked plaster and clay under a scrappy cap of rusty corrugated iron. It was about to slump into its own foundations and seemed a rather poor candidate for a Cape Dutch restoration project of the white-washed-wall and sun-dappled-gable ilk.

In fairness, it deserved to look a bit bedraggled, considering that its first section was built in 1728, several decades before the Swellendam Drostdy, and that for a considerable number of years it was the only European dwelling in the vicinity.

From the middle of the 18th century onwards it was run as an informal boarding house by the formidable Susanna Fourie, widow of first owner Louis, and was used as a stopover by numerous travellers going eastwards. Close to the house there was a drift where the Duivenhoks River could be forded in some safety, although Linnaeus's famous protégé, Carl Peter Thunberg, who came to the Cape in 1772 and botanised here for three years, almost drowned in doing so.

Well-known conservationist and author Hans Fransen first told me about this historic house on the former farm Doornboom (known as the "Fourie" or "Auld" house, or simply "Doornboom") in Heidelberg some years ago, while updating his *Old Buildings of the Cape*. Did I know that my ancestors had built this last remaining example of a simple, early 18th century Cape clay farmhouse?

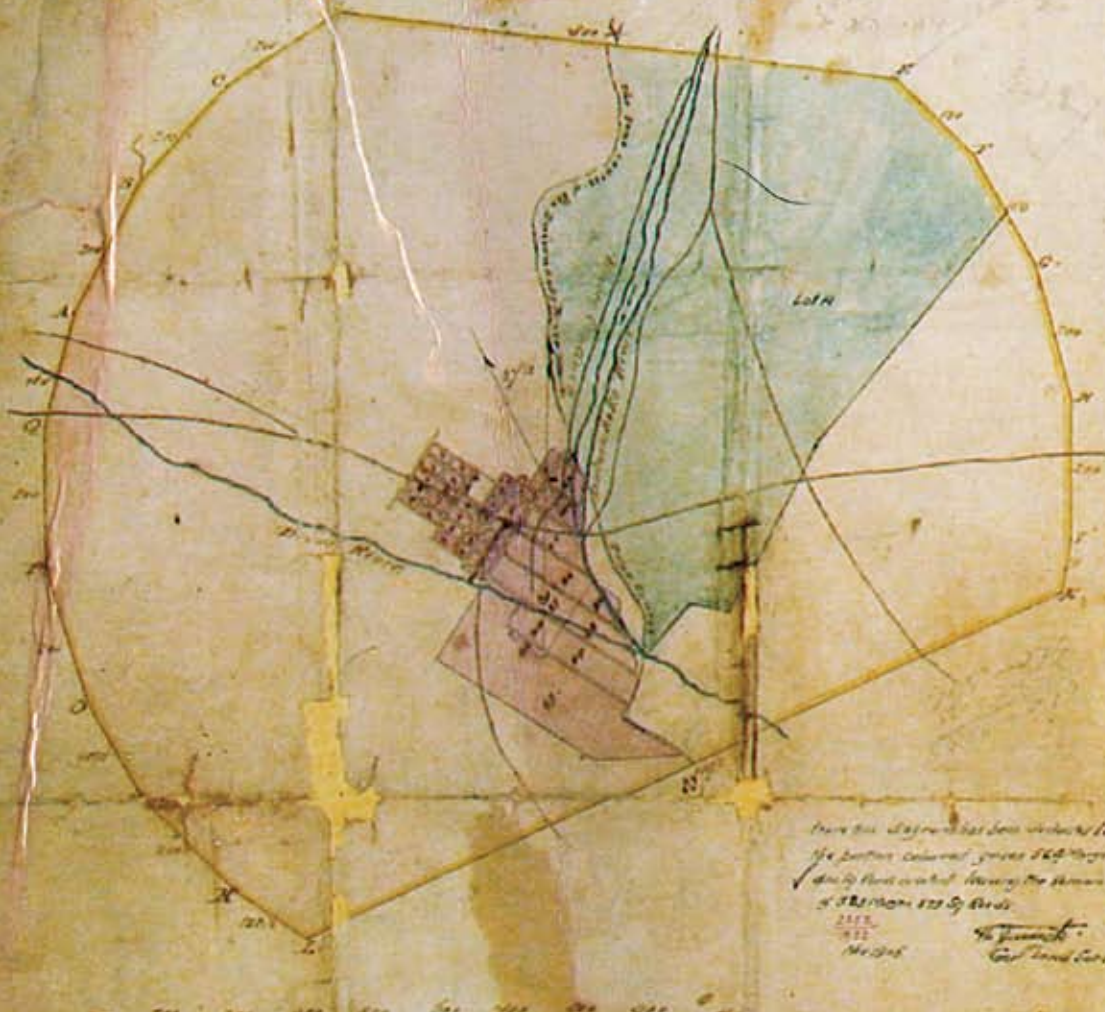
I did not – as a born "inlander", the Cape origins of my predecessors were somewhat hazy. I knew that one Louis Fourie, a great-great-grandfather, had left the Cape to settle in the Eastern Free State around the time of the Great Trek, but had no idea that he was born in this modest dwelling in 1814.

Through the years, previous inhabitants had made attempts to improve and

*The hearth and chimney being rebuilt. The roof trusses do not rest on top of the walls, but on beams set about half a metre lower down – this reduces the pressure exerted on the clay walls*



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From this diagram has been indicated that  
 the building covered ground 568 square  
 feet of which 122 square feet was reserved  
 for a future building 122 sq. feet.  
 1912  
 1913  
 1914  
 W. J. P. [Signature]  
 Civil Engineer

0 20 40 60 80 100 Feet

The above diagram is a plan of a site of 500 square feet east of Lane, situated in the District of Swellingdown, at the Dunshole River.

Surveyed by  
 W. J. P. [Signature]  
 Civil Engineer

From the above diagram has been indicated that the figures in the plan show a total area of 568 sq. ft. forming together 122 square feet of land being the entire of 122 sq. feet (including the 122 sq. feet reserved ground) and 500 square feet to be reserved for a future building. The plan is divided into the village of 'Widening' and the Place Room Room - leaving a remainder for further plan of 22 sq. ft. (including 122 sq. ft. reserved and indicated by me in the plan).

AD 1857 -  
 From the above diagram has been indicated the portion as light and including the street and 122 square feet (including 122 sq. feet reserved) forming together 122 square feet of land being the entire of 122 sq. feet (including the 122 sq. feet reserved ground) and 500 square feet to be reserved for a future building. The plan is divided into the village of 'Widening' and the Place Room Room - leaving a remainder for further plan of 22 sq. ft. (including 122 sq. ft. reserved and indicated by me in the plan).

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restore the house but their efforts ranged from the misguided to the futile. Doornboom was on the brink of total collapse when a trust created by three people with strong roots in Heidelberg made a last-ditch attempt to save it.

These visionaries – Henk Rall, Jurie Uys and Jan Geldenhuys – set out to restore it in a far more professional fashion than previous bungled attempts. Knowing what I did about it and being in a position to offer time and some resources, I volunteered to help save Doornboom.

A properly maintained cob house is a surprisingly resilient structure, as Doornboom has proven, but previous attempts to improve this one's structure – mainly by adding an iron roof and cement-plastered walls – had simply contributed to its terminal decline. Luckily a cob house is flexible and can survive a fair amount of bending before breaking. Long wrought-iron bars running at loft level from gable to gable with crosses made of old metal wagon-wheel tyres on the outside, had also helped to keep these main structural elements together.

The magnitude of the task soon became all too clear. Restoring a clay house of the most basic design and execution may sound like a walk in the park, but was far from it: it is a tedious, labour-intensive process that can't be rushed; a cob house does use simple materials like wood, clay, lime and stone, but they are either heavy, tricky and slow to use, or scarce and expensive, like aged yellowwood, thatch and hand-forged metal fittings.

A sun-baked clay ("adobe") brick or a cob wall resists water because the outside layer swells when wet, keeping moisture out of the brick. The traditional coat of thick lime rendering on the outside acts like Gore-Tex: exterior moisture stays out, while interior moisture gets out. These factors ensure that a clay wall remains dry and maintains its structural integrity.

Doornboom's corrugated iron roof (applied over the original thatch) and gutters leaked, channelling rainwater into the tops of the walls, from where it soaked downwards. Trapped inside the walls by the impervious cement rendering, the damp started softening the clay with disastrous results. When I first arrived at the Heidelberg site in the winter of 2006, the rain-soaked walls were toppling over one by one.

*Left: Part of the land grant for the farm Doornboom to Louis Fourie, which also shows later deductions from the farm (green shading) and the street grid for the village of Heidelberg, established in 1855. The Cape wagon road is shown running from west to east through the centre of the property, and the Duivenhoks Rivier from north to south*



*Doors and windows were replaced or refurbished, using only hand-made metal fittings*



*Sun-dried clay bricks were used for sections of walls that required extra strength*



*The original roof supports were tied with leather thongs and rushes, intact after 250 years*



*The ceiling of tree branches had a covering of lime and clay as fire protection*



*This casement with wooden sill shows how thick the old clay walls were*

In the end it became necessary to rebuild or restore almost every outside wall, which was done using cob, with some critical sections of sun-baked bricks set in clay mortar. Once the walls had been rebuilt and window and doorframes refurbished or replaced, the iron roof was removed in order to prepare the roof structure for its new thatched roof.

Doornboom was built in the T shape widely adopted for old Cape Dutch structures. It reflects the practice of building a first room to act as a storeroom *cum* kitchen and loft, to provide basic shelter until more rooms could be added at right angles to the first. The back section of the house – the leg of the T – is therefore the oldest and also its soundest part. It has a massive open hearth and chimney inside the original kitchen, with the storeroom behind it.

Ironically enough, the building materials and methods that pushed the price of the present restoration deep into six figures were readily available and free in the 18th century: the nearby Grootvadersbosch was full of 1000-year-old yellowwoods, of which one or two were probably felled, split, sawn, adzed and planed into the ceiling and floor boards and beams of Doornboom. The only real building costs would have been the hand-forged hinges, latches and nails, a wagon load of unslaked lime and food for the slaves...

A clay house like Doornboom was typically built on a site with suitable building clay, while thatching reed, rushes, Spanish reeds and aloes grew in the vicinity. Water was brought in from a weir some distance up the Duivenhoks River by means of a furrow. The old watermill that was also fed by this water and formed part of the farmyard, has since disappeared, although the mill house itself and a millstone still survive on neighbouring properties.

The storeroom has a loft of roughly trimmed tree branches (a “sparresolder”), seemingly leftovers from the yellowwoods that were felled for timber. These branches were laid closely together over unsquared beams and covered with a 10-cm-layer of lime and clay for fire protection and also to provide a floor for the loft room above it and behind the chimney, where it offered warm slave accommodation.

The roof beams and trusses were found to be structurally sound but the latter were strengthened during restoration to bear the weight of the heavier thatched roof. The original roof is of an unusual design, with the feet of the trusses resting on the ends of massive yellowwood beams, which are set in the walls. This arrangement feeds the splaying forces exerted on the trusses into the beams, rather than into the less resistant tops of the walls.

Because the beams are set about 500

cm below the tops of the walls, it means that the feet of the trusses stand inside the house. A secondary structure of additional, lighter trusses has been added to carry the eaves of the thatch roof outside the tops of the walls. This practice was apparently introduced by Malay craftsmen from the East.

The top ends of the trusses were held together with rawhide thongs while the horizontal laths were lashed on with rushes. Amazingly, these elements were found to be completely sound even after 250 years. The timbers in the roof structure were also free of rot or beetle. The secret of this is the excellent natural preservative, fungicide and insecticide that was applied to them – juice from the abundant local aloes.

In restoring a house dating from the early 18th century, but incorporating elements that were added to the original structure for more than a century afterwards, some adaptations have had to be made to reflect the organic development of the house. The front parts contain elements dating to Victorian and more recent eras, but the decision was made to regard 1855 as a cut-off point, as this coincides with the establishment of the town of Heidelberg on the farm Doornboom and centred on the Auld House.

The newer section of the house, in addition to the older casement windows, therefore has panel or glazed doors and some sliding sashes with inside shutters.

Inevitably some compromises were forced on the restorers by practical and financial considerations: a cement-based floor was laid, rather than a more traditional “misvloer” (cow-dung floor), peach stones or slate. The newer section of the house had a wooden floor, originally of yellowwood boards, but these have since disappeared, along with most of the original wide, low door frames and doors. A later pine ceiling in the kitchen also went the same way.

Modern fittings in the shape of a cloakroom, running water and electricity were obvious requirements. A tea garden with roses, a vine and a duck pond where the clay hole used to be are expected to be laid out soon.

Two front rooms have been opened up to create a sizable space where small weddings, conferences and the like can be housed. The original kitchen will function as a bar and lounge, with a new kitchen housed in an end room while the storeroom has been turned into a cloakroom.

The main challenge now facing the trust is more abstract: what to do with the finished house? It is all very well to call

it a “living museum”, but what does that mean in practical terms? How does one manage an investment of this magnitude? How will running costs and maintenance be financed? How will the local community be involved, how can all current and potential supporters be given a sense of ownership, of belonging to the project?

The house will have to be furnished, with at least some rooms in period style. Resources such as documents, illustrations, books, photographs, artefacts and the like will also be needed to illustrate the history of the house and its inhabitants.

A management committee has been formed to address these matters. Initially the building will be offered as a venue for small functions and, once the rose garden is established, as a wedding venue. The official opening is planned for August this year.

Doornboom is a plain, unpretentious dwelling, as it has been from the start, but its honest character can't fail to charm. It is one of the few remaining examples of what a simple farmhouse in the outer districts looked like when the Cape was still a wild part of Africa. ■

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*Fourie House in June 2007, with its new thatched roof and lime-washed walls. The front of the house faces away to the right; the left-hand part is the leg of the T, comprising the original kitchen and storeroom*