

The Old Farm

Onverwacht – The Bush – Die Bos

As a child it was a Sunday ritual to visit my grandmother and *oom* John (who as the elder son was the owner) and *tant* Nettie (Antoinette née Malan) on the old family farm. After greeting the adults we were free to roam and play on the farm – it was interesting and different to ours. There were oak trees so old that the centres were hollowed out and one could hide inside them. Pine trees were huge with thick soft bark from which one could pry off pieces to carve small model boats to float in the irrigation furrows. We could collect pine nuts and break them open on stones to get at the edible nuts. There was a large grove of tall bamboo in which to play. We could pick guavas and loquats and a strange eastern fragrant fruit called *jamboes* (3). A flock of geese wandered around the farmyard and chased us aggressively when we came close. There was a tomb with a half opened steel door.

Sunday afternoons were open house where family members and friends would drop in for tea and cake. Even after my grandmother died in 1942, my parents regularly visited and we would meet various uncles, aunts and cousins. They included some of the rugby Morkels such as Gerhard and Albert and Harry. My mother continued visiting occasionally long after my father had passed away, and I enjoyed visiting *oom* John who by that time was very old. We also felt comfortable to drop by unannounced to visit cousin Hanna and his wife Susra who then occupied the main old house while *oom* John and his second wife, *tant* Maud lived in the second house. These were good memories.

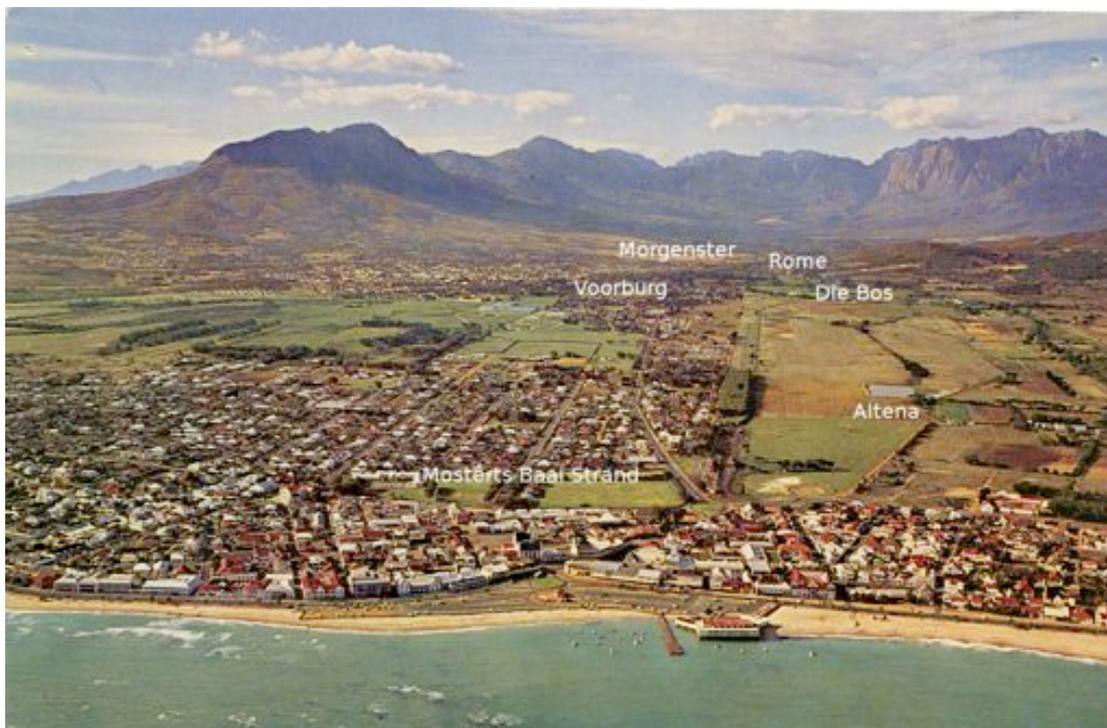
The family farm, *Onverwacht*, later *The Bush* or *Die Bos* has a special place for the family. Stamouer Philip Morkel and his wife Catharina Pasman settled there in 1713 and it became the oldest farm in South Africa to be passed down from father to son (1). Over the years pieces of land were added and subtracted, but the core remained intact – until it became part of the urban sprawl during the late 1900s, and even then the large farmyard (*plaaswerf*) with the houses and farm buildings was held out by the family. During the late 1700s, a large portion, *Voorburg* plus *Mosterts Baay Strand** was hived off for 3rd generation Willem Morkel (2). Later, in 1828, *Rome* was cut off and, during the 19th century the part near the Strand was sold during hard times. This portion, later called *Altena* was bought back for my father, and this is where my brothers and I were born and raised.

* The Morkels had a fishery at the beach at *Mosterts Baay Strand*. Philip Morkel's widow, Catharina Pasman acquired the property, earlier called *Vlootjesbaai* (Fleabay) in 1748. Already in early times, families came to the beach in the summer, initially camping in the dunes. Eventually a township developed, called The Strand. When holiday makers returned to empty beach shacks, fleas were a problem reflecting its original name. The Strand developed into a substantial town forming part of the Hottentots Holland urban sprawl.

The name *Onverwacht* would have been difficult to pronounce in English and during the 19th century the name was called *The Bush* because of large groves of trees which grew round the house and on the farm. Later this was changed back to Afrikaans – *Die Bos*.

In 1722 the ship *Schonenberg* was wrecked near Cape Agulhas, about 150 km from the Cape. The story is told in P.W. Morkel's book (1) – see Chapter 1 on our website, and also as a separate story "[The Wreck of the *Schonenberg*](#)". About 80 sailors survived and trekked overland through difficult mountainous terrain. They shot a hippopotamus for food and eventually reached *Onverwacht*, the first farm on their journey where Philip and his brother Willem housed and cared for them. On returning to Holland, one of those shipwrecked

composed and had printed an epic poem, *Liefdekrans* (lit. a garland of love) about the event. Dated 1725, it hangs in the house at *Die Bos*.



Some of the Morkel Farms

Source: Picture postcard bought early 1960s

The farm straddled the plain from the foothills of the Hottentots Holland Mountains to the sea. Travellers to the south west interior had to cross the farm. It was about a day's journey by horse carriage from the Cape and many travellers stayed at the farm before tackling the formidable *Gantouw* (Khoi word for eland path) pass over the Hottentots Holland Mountains on their way to Swellendam and Graaf Reinet. Eventually the path became a road, followed by a railway, telegraph and telephone wires, and during the 1900s, a divided motorway, electricity pylons and cables, and three large water pipelines carrying water for Cape Town from the Steenbras dam in the mountains. Being the way, the farm was repeatedly dissected by these utilities. Parts were also appropriated for the water treatment plant for the Strand and a railway line to that town.

Remote from markets, the farm from early times was largely self-sustaining in producing a large variety of crops typical of Mediterranean climate and keeping animals for milk, butter, eggs and meat. Wine was produced from the earliest days, although there was no attempt to make quality table wines. I remember wine being made in the large vats and carted to the cooperative in Stellenbosch for further processing. In 1825 the Morkels had the following vines under cultivation (4):

- Daniel Johannes Sr. of *Onverwacht* – 100,000 vines
- Daniel Johannes, (his son) of *Rome* – 60,000 vines
- Philip Hendrik Sr. of *Morgenster* - 150,000 vines
- Willem of *Voorburgh* and *Mostertsbaai Strand* – 80,000 vines.

From P.W. Morkel's Family History (1, p3) comes the following story: "*Onverwacht* has always been a wine farm, as were other neighbouring farms, and in the time of the slaves, there was great rivalry as to which farm would first finish picking and pressing. On the great morning, the slaves would, as they did every morning, gather at the farmhouse and sing their

"morning-song". Then with shot-guns and mouth-organs they would hurry to the boundary of the farm, and fire a salute, and give a performance on their mouth-organs to let the neighbours know that *Onverwacht* had finished first as usual. They would then hurry back to the farmhouse to a feast prepared by the mistress, washed down by new wine or "*Mos*" from the crop they had just gathered. Later in the year when the wine had matured, the broad band "*Twee lêer*" (*two leaguer – a leaguer was a large barrel of wine*) ox-wagons were inspanned and, laden with barrels of wine, hauled across the heavy sand of the Flats to Mowbray, to take the road to Cape Town and off-load their burden at the wine merchants in Strand Street."

Farms of this kind were labour intensive, particularly before the advent of mechanisation. The following table shows slave numbers in 1815 for some of the larger farms in the district (5, p26):

Vergelegen: M.W. Theunissen & Sara C. Malan – 60 slaves

Onverwacht: D.J. Morkel & Sophia A. Brink – 55 slaves

Voorburgh: Willem Morkel & Anna M. Wium, - 32 slaves

Morgenster: P.H. Morkel & Johanna P. Malan – 30 slaves

Welgelegen: Widow Hercules Morkel – 28 slaves

The farmyard was enormous – compared to more recent farms. When it was established it was a remote outpost and needed space and buildings for farming activities including wine making, threshing and storage of grains, animal husbandry including milking and slaughtering as well as being self-sufficient in trades such as building, carpentry, and blacksmithy.



Die Bos – A part of the farmyard showing the Dovecote, ringmuur and kraal in the distance. Susra Morkel with young Philip, Daniel and André. Photo: Author

The yard was enclosed by a *ringmuur* - white plastered low wall, typical of the old Cape farms. It contained the ornamental dovecote with its neoclassical gable, a round threshing floor, the large main house, a second house for either the unmarried adult son or the retired parents (often the widowed mother), a house for the foreman, wine-cellars, stables, barns and housing for labourers.

There were several very old oak trees in front of the house and scattered around the farmyard – probably from the original owner Jan Hartog's time. His boss, governor W.A. van der Stel, like his father before him, were big planters of oak trees in the colony. In time the wood of the trees rotted and they became hollowed out. Two ornamental pillars supported an old slave bell dated 1723, cast in Amsterdam and decorated showing workers in a vineyard.



Kraal gate at Die Bos.

Source: P.W. Morkel (1)



Die Bos farmyard with Dovecote, threshing floor, barn and Kraal in the background. An old hollowed-out oak tree left.

Photo: Author

The tomb was in a vineyard some distance away from the farmyard, surrounded by a grove of cypresses. It was dated 1831 (Catharina Theunissen who married Hendrik Johannes Morkel died in 1831) and 32 Morkels were buried there up to 1902 (5, p16). It was in a dilapidated state when I saw it as a child. The door was ajar and we could see the coffins stacked in the tomb. The remains were later buried and the tomb demolished. A plaque marks the spot in the present day gated housing estate.



Morkel Tomb at Die Bos dated 1831.

Source: P.W. Morkel (1)



Plaque commemorating the Morkel tomb.

Photo André R. Morkel

The main house was a large 18 room U shaped building (cousin Hanna and Susra closed off the U with modern bathrooms resulting in a square shape with a courtyard). It was modernised in 1897 – the thatch roof was replaced with corrugated galvanised steel and the front facade decorated with pebble inlays. There is a simple triangular gable above the front door. *Tant* Alida told that the family rented a house in the Strand during the renovations and at that time *Tant* Maraaitjie (Maria Broeksma, née Morkel) was born – i.e. 1897. According to family tradition (2) the house was built by second generation Willem Morkel (1718 –1788), but it would have replaced an earlier dwelling of his parents Philip and Catharina Morkel, and even earlier of Jan Hartog. It seems the house never had the ornamental gable so popular of the old Cape Dutch houses, such as at *Morgenster*. Sir John Herschel who visited the farm in September 1835 (8), used a *camera lucida* to sketch the house showing only a simple

curved (leg-of-mutton) gable (5). The house would have been built before fancy gables became popular – most are from around the 1770s to 1820s. Willem was a man of means but saw no need to change the gable to keep up with the neighbours. More than half of the house was destroyed in a severe rainstorm in July 1822 (10) and its then owner, Daniel Johannes (who had the dovecote with its neoclassical gable built) also did not change the gable.



Die Bos Farm-house – mid 1970s – young Philip, André and Daniel Photo: Author



Die Bos Farm-house by Sir John Herschel September 1835. Source: Hopkins (5)

About a day's journey from the Cape, and for many years, the last farm before tackling the mountain range to the south-west interior, *Onverwacht* and neighbouring Morkel farm *Voorburg* were logical stopovers for travellers. They included explorers, botanists, governors and administrators, farmers from the interior, Swellendam revolutionaries and missionaries. Horse carriages could not negotiate the difficult and rocky path over Hottentots Holland mountain chain. Until an adequate pass was constructed in 1830 (under Governor Sir Lowry

Cole) transport was with slow ox wagons and on horseback. Several times the Morkels provided an extra team of oxen to help over the mountain pass.



**Gantouw Pass over the Hottentots
Holland Mountain - Wagon Ruts**

Source: Victor de Kock (9, p142)

The original *Gantouw* passage, is about a 20 minute hike east of the modern pass. Ruts in the rocks made by the laden ox wagons can still be seen. On the way down, the wheels were fixed into skids and the wagons pulled down the mountain like a sled to prevent it from careering out of control. These skids ground ruts into the rocks.

Lady Anne Barnard, the wife of the colonial secretary Andrew Barnard was a charming hostess who did much to smooth relationships between the British forces and the locals during the first occupation. She made several journeys to the towns and farms outside Cape Town. In

May 1798 a month's leave was given to Andrew Barnard and he and Lady Anne spent it in travelling to the interior, as far as Swellendam. (7) The first stage of their visit took them to *Meerlust*, the farm of Philippus Myburgh, cousin of the Morkel brothers. (Read our story "Then the British Came", how only a year or so earlier, Earl Macartney had stationed 22 dragoons at *Meerlust* and 10 with Daniel Johannes Morkel at *Onverwacht* because they were slow in signing the oath of allegiance).

They arrived at *Meerlust* and found *Mynheer* Myburgh away from home, but *Mevrouw* (Hester Anna van der Byl, who could not speak English) gave them a very good dinner – ‘a large dish of mutton-cutlets fried with breadcrumbs and pickles, some chickens and roast lamb, fish in the nature of cod pickled with turmeric ... It was excellent. The wine was very good. The vegetables so too, butter the best I have tasted here – indeed as good as English.’ (7, p62)

“After this sumptuous meal – an impromptu one for they were not expected on that particular day – they went on to *Onverwacht*, the Morkel's farm. Here every one was away, except a tutor of moralizing and philosophical turn of mind; he was very kind and did his best for their comfort by providing them with feather beds for the night and lending them a team of oxen next morning.” (7, p63).

In 1803, the botanist Dr Henry Lichtenstein travelled with General Janssens (governor of the Colony), his aide-de-camp Captain Paravincini di Capelli and several attendants to Swellendam. They rested in the heat of the day ‘at an opulent farm belonging to one Willem Morkel’ (*Voorburg*) and had there a ‘most splendid dinner, the main feature of which was ‘a great variety of sea fish drawn from the abundant stores of these furnished by False Bay’ (2, p63). They stopped briefly at *Onverwacht* where they were joined by Daniel Johannes Morkel who accompanied them to the foot of *Hottentots Holland Kloof* which they found extremely steep and difficult (2, p80).



THE TUTOR AT ONVERWACHT

**Lady Anne Barnard's watercolour of
the Tutor at Onverwacht.**

Source: Fairbridge (8, facing p63)

The missionary, Ignatius Latrobe, passed through in February 1816 and reached Mr Morkel's farm (*Voorburg or Onverwacht*) at Hottentots Holland where 'a slave took pity on us and our beasts, provided the latter and our groom with good quarters and food and showed us into an empty room, with a plate of peaches on the table. In an adjoining chamber stood two empty bedsteads, on one of which with my portmanteau for my pillow, I enjoyed some refreshing sleep for about three hours. My companion slept in a chair'. The next morning the family received them kindly, 'lamenting' that they had not been aware of the arrival of visitors and gave them a good breakfast. (2, p63).

Sir John Herschel, Astronomer Royal at the Cape from 1834 to 1838, visited *Onverwacht* in 1835. He was the son of the famous William Herschel, who discovered the planet Uranus. Sir John was also a brilliant scholar who made substantial contributions to astronomy and also photography. He used a *camera lucida* as an aide for sketching and discovered the use of hypo to fix photos and coined the terms positive and negative used in photography. His sketch of the house at *Die Bos* is shown above. He travelled to Somerset West early September 1835. The following is from his diary (8, p183):

Sept. 3 1835. (He had left his home at Newlands, Cape Town at 9h50m – it would have been by horse drawn carriage)

4h30m: Arrived at Mr. Morchel's a little beyond Somerset village, a very large farm with an immense Vineyard enclosed in a square of tall firs in single rows like a vast colonnade within which is smaller (yet large) square similarly enclosed for an orchard. The house stands aside from the squares & is like all Dutch houses one story, thatched & forming 3 sides of a square on a raised terrace or stoop with the slave houses, stables &c at a distance forming quite a Town. Explained to Mr M that we had sent to Mrs Stadler (who keeps a lodging house or inn) at Somerset to engage apartments but owing to Justice Menzies being expected could not have them. On which Mr M assured us that we were welcome though his was not a lodging house. So we took possession & were well lodged and entertained as part of the family. Walked out to look about us but the weather was gloomy & evening was coming on. So saw little. Somerset stands in a fertile & well watered spot, much better soil than on the opposite side of the flat being clayey mould.

Sept. 4 1835. – After a rainy night the prospects of the day looked doleful – waited until noon when the clouds rather cleared from the tops of the hills & induced us to proceed – Drove in rough and jumbling stile over Brake & Bush down to the sea strand near the head of Gordon's Bay or Fishhook Bay the most North East (sic: it would have been south east) point of False Bay. (He spends the rest of the afternoon at Gordon's Bay and then drove to Sir Lowry's pass but soon turned back because of the clouds.) Descended & got home to Morchel's where arrived about 6 & passed a dull and rainy ev(en)ing in company of our very unamusing and slenderly informed (tho' by no means slenderly personed) landlord and his rather fine-ish & would-be ladylike young 2nd wife who after scolding the slave girls duly seems to think life has no other occupation left. In the Ev(enin)g our party was increased by a certain young Mr Judge, one of the circuit attendants of Justice Menzie's troops, who finding no accommodation with the rest came over here. He seemed well informed and proved to be communicative enough though in one respect his information & assurances that we ought to consider ourselves as on the mere hospitality of our host & that a remuneration for our accommodation was not expected & would not be received, proved inaccurate (much to our relief for we had been teezing ourselves with the idea of the trouble we were giving & feeling quite ill at ease about the whole affair as a regular intrusion)

However Morchel himself set that matter right before departing by a (several words erased) distinct & reasonable charge. Surely this is the best way and surely it is hospitality or at least good nature in a country where there are no inns or only one here and there, to allow chosen customers the benefits of your residence & refreshments taking from them such reasonable repayments as acquits all sense of pecuniary favour on both sides & leaves both parties gainers in point of fact.

I also tell the story of Herschel's visit under "Vanities, Fables and Foibles, Pt 1". Mr Morchel was Hendrik Johannes Morkel (1798 – 1859) and his second wife, Esther Elizabeth Morkel (1813 – 1880). She would have been 22 years at the time of Herschel's visit.

Growing up in the isolation of then far away Africa, Hendrik was placed in the role of host to one of the top astronomers of the time, one who was described as a prodigy in science and a prize winner at St John's College, Cambridge – no wonder our ancestor was 'slenderly informed' by comparison. It also reflected the superiority the British of that time felt over anyone not an English gentleman. Incidentally, slavery had been abolished at the Cape on 1 December 1834, almost a year before Herschel's visit to *Onverwacht*.

The house at *Die Bos* contained some lovely pieces of furniture handed down through the generations. Cousin Hanna (Hendrik Johannes Louw Morkel) showed me around and I took some photos. In the entrance hall stood a large ornamental *kis* (chest) which came from *stamouer* Philips Morkel's wife, Catharina Pasman. These kists were used to bring linen and soft goods from Holland. It was always specially valued and the South African government wanted to display it at an exhibition in London in the 1930s. *Oom* John politely refused, concerned about whether it would be returned safely.



Catharina Pasman's Kis at *Die Bos* Photo: Author



Stinkwood display cabinet and writing desk at *Die Bos*.
Photo: Author



Grandfather clock at *Die Bos*. On the wall the *Liefdekrans* poem dated 1725, family crest and painting of the dovecote. Photo: Author

In the entrance hall there was also a grandfather clock of the 1700s and the *Liefdekrans* and family crest from *stamouer* Philip's time hung on the wall. In a corner stood a striking stinkwood display cabinet/writing desk. The window panes of the cabinet showed their age with gas bubbles in the glass. Hanna told me it lay discarded for a long time outside in the chicken run until his father, *oom* John brought it in to the office in the house to store horse harness items. When antique furniture prices escalated, the family realised they had a gem on their hands. It was nicely restored and placed in a prominent spot in the entrance hall.



Die Prul. Sideboard made of camphorwood from historic trees at Vergelegen. Photo: Author

The dining room contained a large extendable dining table and beautiful stinkwood chairs. The lounge had a large sideboard with old decorative porcelain tableware.

An interesting piece was a sideboard called *die prul* (lit. a shoddy or fake piece). When Catharina Jacoba Theunissen married Hendrik Johannes Morkel in June 1821, her father Marthinus Wilhelmus Theunissen of Vergelegen had one of the camphor trees on the farm chopped down to make two sideboards – one for each of his daughters on their marriage. (The other sideboard went to the Scholtz family at *Groot Paardevlei*) These camphor trees were planted by W.A. van der Stel at *Vergelegen* around 1700 and are still standing. They are now national monuments.

Apparently the workmanship of the sideboard was not the best – hence the term “*prul*”. I thought it looked OK, but then I am not a good judge of these things. The family kept it out of sight in a side room off the dining room. Today it is valued for its unique historical value.

André T. Morkel
April 2009

Notes and Sources

1. P.W. Morkel, 1961. *The Morkels. Family History and Family Tree*. Published privately.
2. Peggy Heap, 1970. *The Story of Hottentots Holland*. A.A. Balkema. Cape Town.
3. Rose Apple. Helena Liebenberg provided (26 April 2002) the following about Jamboes. Its botanical name is *Eugenia Jambos*. In Indonesia the word is used for a wide range of related fruits, including guava. Van Linschoten in 1596 describes Jamboes as – is een seer excellent fruyt ... van de groote van eenen Appel, heft een coleut root en witachtigh ... seer lieflic om te eaten, heft eene reuc ghelic of het rooswater waer.
4. Private communication from Jean Le Roux, Paarl. 28 September 2004
5. D.H. Hopkins, 1969. *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Gemeente. Somerset Wes*. Issued at the 150th anniversary of the Church of Somerset West.
6. D.Sleight, 2004. *Die Buiteposte. VOC-Buiteposte onder Kaapse Bestuur 1652 – 1795*. Protea Boekhuis. Pretoria.
7. Dorothes Fairbridge, 1926. *Lady Anne Barnard at the Cape of Good Hope 1797 – 1802*. Oxford, At the Clarendon Press.
8. David S. Evans et al., 1969. *Herschel at the Cape Diaries & Correspondence of Sir John Herschel. 1834 – 1838*. A.A. Balkema, Cape Town.
9. Victor de Kock, 1952. *Our Three Centuries*. Van Riebeeck Festival. Cape Town.
10. George McCall Theal, 1902. *Records of the Cape Colony, June 1821- August 1822*. www.archive.org

Appendix

***Onverwacht* before the Morkels**

The Hottentots Holland valley and plain was used by the VOC as a *Buitepos* (outpost) to produce crops and for pastorage (6). The Company bureaucrats managed the buitenposten so badly that in 1677 the Directors, the Here Sewentien (Lords Seventeen), ordered that farming be handed to the free burghers or the Company's slaves. The *buitepos* at Hottentots Holland was rented out to *baasslagter* (master butcher) Jochum Marquart and *baaslandbouer* (master agriculturist) Hendrik Elbertsz. Eventually Governor Simon van der Stel, (governor 179 – 1699) who was already farming at Groot Constantia became involved with the *Buitepos*. His son, Willem Adriaan van der Stel succeeded him as Governor (1699 – 1707) and became even more involved with the Hottentots Holland *Buitepos*. He persuaded visiting Commisisoner Wouter Valckenier to grant him about 400 morgen of the Hottentots Holland *Buitepos*. This was done without the knowledge of the Lords Seventeen in Holland, but followed a precedent where his father Simon was granted *Groot Constantia*. W.A. called his farm *Vergelegen* (Far Away), built a house and farm buildings using Company slaves and materials. He extended his holdings by granting land to the Company's gardener, Jan Hartog who spent most of his time at *Vergelegen*.

Jan Hartog named his farm somewhat cynically *Onverwacht* (unexpected) and transferred it back to van der Stel for a nominal sum. (There is some uncertainty whether the land was actually transferred – when *Onverwacht* was purchased at auction, it was transferred from Jan Hartog to Claas Elbertsz – transfers were slow and chances are that van der Stel had de facto ownership of the farm). Van der Stel's farming was very lucrative because labour and materials were from the Company. W.A. also insisted on priority access for himself and his cronies (including brother Frans van der Stel who owned neighbouring *Parel Valleï* and *Groot Paardevlei*) to the main markets of the ships calling at the Cape for fresh meat and vegetables.

The local farmers were angry mainly for being excluded from their most important markets by arrogant and corrupt officials. A protest group was formed under the leadership of Adam Tas. These were tense times and W.A. imprisoned the leaders of the rebels in the dungeon at the Castle. (The *dagboek* (diary) of Adam Tas has survived and provides a vivid, if biased, account of the events. Read in our story of "The Formidable Pasman Ladies" about Pieter Robberts, acting Landdrost of Stellenbosch who was a crony and informer. Robberts was the second husband of Philip Morkel's mother-in-law, Sophia Pasman).

In 1705 the rebel group sent an account of their grievances to Holland. Response times were slow and the rebels sent a second memorandum detailing the corrupt practices of the Governor and his cronies. Van der Stel imprisoned the rebel leaders and made the mistake of sending four of them to Holland for punishment. They were able to personally present their case to the Lords Seventeen. W.A. van der Stel, the Landdrost Starrenburg and reverend Kalden were recalled and his brother Frans van der Stel banished. W.A. van der Stel left the Cape on 23 April 1708 for the Holland on the *Oosterstein*. (Philip Morkel had arrived on the same ship on 30 January 1708 from Batavia in Indonesia.) The large house had to be demolished and the farm divided into four portions and auctioned off. The portions were (i) the present *Vergelegen*, (ii) *Lourensford* plus *Erinvale* (then called *Welgelegen*), (iii) *Morgenster* and *Land and Zeezicht* and (iv) *Cloetenburg* (site of the town of Somerset West). *Onverwacht*, which included the later *Voorburg* and *Rome* was also auctioned at that time.

Sources: The van der Stel story is told in many books and publications. In our list of references, see Peggy Heap (2), D.H. Hopkins (5) and Dan Sleight (6).