

History of Towerkop



The first people to leave their mark on Towerkop were Bushmen. They left paintings on the boulders in the valley between the first ridge of the current path & the *Shepard's Hut*. The eight metre monolithic pillar called *Obelisk Rock* or *Mullers Klip*¹³ is a spectacular prominent feature that gets mentioned in various historic accounts of ascents of Towerkop. The paintings although faded are reasonably prominent, but somehow are not mentioned in any accounts.

Paintings are still visible on 3 boulders & an overhang on the likely path from Buffelskloof. This is after surviving at least 200 years of weather, sun & veld fires. It is likely that there were many more paintings that have been obliterated by time.

On the eastern side of the monolith the Bushmen painted two large elephants.

Bushmen were often attracted to & painted on spectacular rock formations. It is unlikely that they saw elephants so high on Towerkop, but they probably saw them on the plains

& in kloofs below. *Obelisk Rock* looks like a tusk when viewed from the north & south. There is a good stream that runs a few metres from the obelisk. This flows even in dry times. It's unlikely that bushman stayed at *Obelisk Rock* for very long periods. Perhaps it was on their migration path or a hunting destination in dry summers. The valley stays reasonably green even in dry times, so there would have been animals to hunt.



Elephants painted on the eastern side. Elephant paintings are not uncommon, but much less common than eland & other antelope.



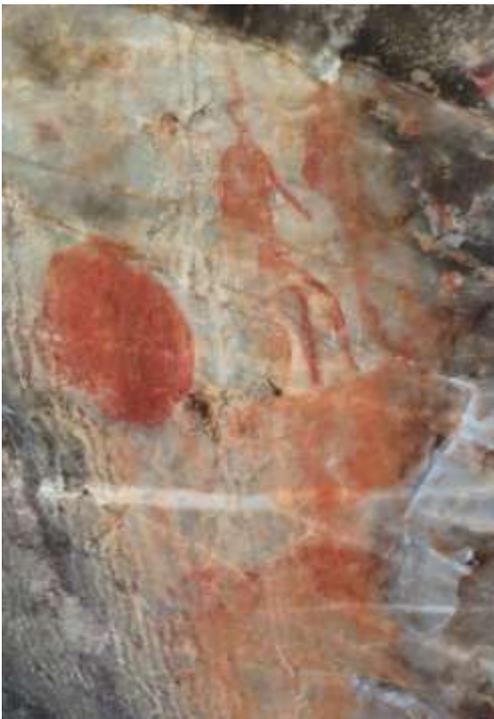
This is an unusual painting of a seemingly obese, possibly pregnant woman. The oblong dots could be termite mounds that are abundant on the northern slope of the valley.



Bushmen are reputed to have enjoyed variety in their diets²². One of the reasons for them visiting the high valley may be the abundant termite mounds on the north facing slope of the valley on the current path up Towerkop. The Bushman would have eaten termite eggs & larvae, often referred to as “Bushman rice”. These would be an easy protein source. A painting on a boulder about 300 metres from *Obelisk Rock* shows numerous oblong marks, these could be construed as termite mounds. The obesity of the woman in the painting normally indicates blessing, wealth or supernatural potency.

The high valley where *Obelisk Rock* is located is not visible from the farmland below & would have been an ideal refuge. It is possible that this was a refuge. Interestingly one of the paintings seems to show two quaggas. These became extinct in the wild in about 1840.

There are no known indications that bushmen wandered higher than the valley where *Obelisk Rock* is located.



The left hand orange circle may represent a honey comb. There is a bee hive close to the painting. Orange circles are widely distributed in many painted sites all over Southern Africa.



The small ears, no horns & horsey heads suggest that these may be two, now extinct, quaggas. The small ear



Obelisk Rock, a modern ascent via a Font 5 boulder problem on the Eastern side.

The accounts of Gustav Nefdt's historic ascent of Towerkop are steeped in small discrepancies & differing details. The full and 100% correct story may never be known. Gustav Nefdt is an interesting character. His climbing feat can be considered super human. He is a legend in South African climbing circles & he is an Afrikaans folk hero, but we know almost nothing about him. He deserves serious research.

Toverkop when translated from Dutch means "The Head that Bewitches", "The Witching Head" or perhaps "Magic Peak"⁹. In Afrikaans "Tower" means *do magic* and "kop" means peak or head. Apparently in the old days there were plenty of stories of ghosts, witches & other evil beings that resided on Towerkop. The legend goes that this name was given after a witch, flying home one evening, but the mountain kept looming higher and higher in front of her. Out of frustration and anger she thwacked it with her broomstick, and it split into two!

A more realistic origin of the name is probably from the idea that the mountain seems to change its appearance when seen from different angles⁶. In fact this is mainly caused by Nel's Cave Buttress which can easily be seen from the west, but not from the south when it blends in with the summit in the background. To the unfamiliar eye this may seem unexplainable, even magical.



An early picture of Gustav Nefdt

Early references mostly use the spelling Toverkop. The 1907 MCSA Journal article spells it Tooverkop⁵. Readers Digest's *Land of Beauty and Splendour* has it spelt Toorkop¹⁶, but they could have confused Towerkop with a nearby ridge called Toorberg. On the official government 1:50 000 map (3321AC Vleiland) the peak is named Towerkop which is on the farm Toverkop 56. The MCSA Journals use the spelling Toverkop till 2008²⁰ when the spelling Towerkop was first used. Both spellings can be considered correct.

The first known attempt to climb Towerkop was made by a Mr Ziervogel, who may have been the Mayor of Ladismith J R Ziervogel². Ziervogel and party made their attempt in 1850. Their attempt failed due to a severe storm, in which several of the party nearly lost their lives. One account alludes to several lives being lost⁴. The peak was deemed unclimbable, and a bet of £50 was made in Ladismith that nobody could get to the top.

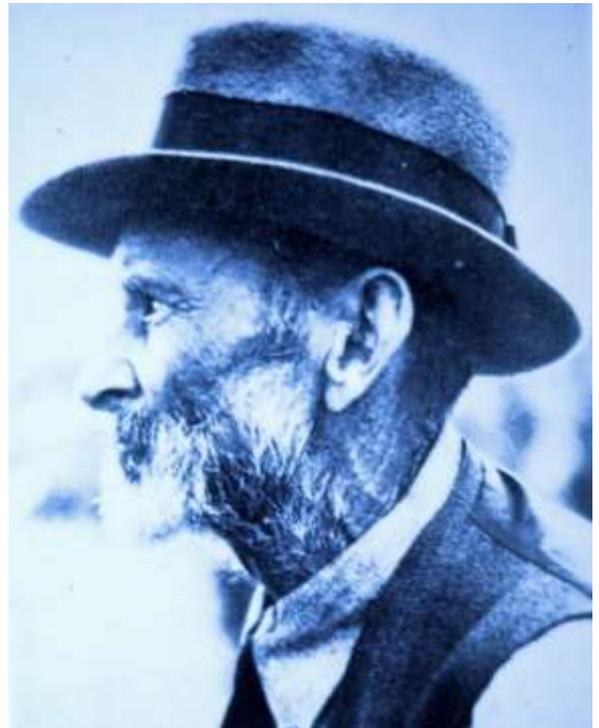
Gustav Nefdt was born within sight of Towerkop & lived his life on a farm called Vleiland at the northern entrance to Sewerweeks Poort. His father conducted a general dealer¹⁴. Gustav's first name is also spelled as Gustaf in some accounts. Apparently Nefdt often



Nefdt family portrait from about 1900. Gustav Nefdt is seated bottom left. Picture is from Joy Newton, a relative of Gustav Nefdt. Apparently some Nefdts adopted the name Newton.

climbed the unplastered walls of the farm house for exercise. In those days this was considered queer (unusual) exercise ⁴. In 1885, when Nefdt was 19 - 23 (accounts vary widely on his age), he led a party of 15 men (accounts vary as to how many men were in the party & to whether this initial party was led by Nefdt) to the base of the dome where they camped 1 200 feet from the peak ⁵. This may have been the grassy flatish area below Nel's Cave ⁴, somewhere to the west of Nel's Cave or somewhere below the Water Cave.

On the 24th of October 1885 Gustaf Nefdt woke before his companions & decided it would be a fine idea to make a summit attempt alone. So acting on impulse of the moment he made his way round to the talus slope & up to the ledge below the South Face of the Western Summit. He then soloed up the route that is now called *Nefdt's Route* & scrambled to the top. Accounts vary on whether he climbed with his socks & boots on, socks over boots, wearing only socks or barefoot ⁹, but on the summit he built a stone cairn & left one of his socks under the cairn to show that he had been there. From the top he saw the rest of the mountaineering party walking down ². At the 100 year anniversary of Nefdt's incredible feat in 1985, Mike Scott reports that four of the top climbers in South Africa soloed *Nefdt's Route*, some of them in bare feet & some with climbing shoes. Roger Price tried in socks & found it impossible to climb with socks on ¹⁷.



Gustav Nefdt in old age, photo by P. C. B. Scott Hayward

On the descent, to Nefdt's horror, he could not find the spot where he had climbed the summit & was now cut off from the world below on all sides by smooth walls of rock. After some hours of fruitless search, when despair stared him in the face, an upturned stone guided him to his ascent route ². The descent was fraught with danger. He had to let himself drop for about 6m, his hands became badly torn in the process ¹⁰. This became the earliest recorded rock climbing route in South Africa & perhaps the most difficult pure rock ascent in the world, at that time.

Scribe's note: Nefdt's route is only the first recorded climbing route in South Africa. Remember the Bushmen & Khoekoen hammered stakes into cracks to climb up to bee hives, ok sure, these were in fact the first aid routes. They may have painted rock art records of these ascents, but I haven't seen evidence of this yet(?).

Nefdt's companions had made several fruitless attempts at gaining the summit & had then preceded to walk down believing that Nefdt had already started walking down. The idea that Nefdt had summited the peak did not even enter into their heads for a moment. He caught up with his companions in a state of extreme exhaustion ². Nefdt told them he had summited the western summit & had left his sock on top. They did not believe him and viewed the sock story as being safe-to-tell as there was no danger of it being discovered ¹. They did not credit him with the ascent to the summit ⁵. Arriving back in Ladismith, Nefdt found that he couldn't collect the £50 wager since nobody believed him. Nefdt was angry.

On 5th November 1885, a survey party numbering 16 men, organised by the Land Surveyor of Ladismith, walked up the mountain, with the intention of building a beacon on the spot calculated as being the highest point, by Captain Bailey in his Trigonometrical Survey. This point is on the Western Summit. The party found the Western Summit impossible to summit without ladders. They succeeded in climbing the Eastern Summit via what is now called *The 'D' Route*. This ascent was principally through the exertions of Mr Melvill, the excise officer in Ladismith. Six others ascended that day



using ropes. Nefdt had thought this route to be impracticable. On their return this party declared that Nefdt was mistaken & that he had been on another peak. Apparently Nefdt took it very quietly, repeated that he had been on the summit and said he was willing to do the ascent again ¹.

Only one or two friends & some relatives believed Nefdt. His father said that Nefdt had never, to his knowledge, told a lie & told those that disbelieved that they would also deny that our Lord was crucified. Those that believed Nefdt offered betting odds, but backed out when the unbelievers accepted the odds ¹.

On 9th November 1885, to regain his honour, Nefdt mustered a party with, amongst others, Ladismith excise officers, Mr Melville and Mr Stockdale, who were to act as witnesses ¹. At the base of the face Nefdt was searched to make sure he did not have an extra sock to plant on the summit. He took off his boots, then climbing barefoot ¹⁰, to the amazement of his friends and witnesses, he completed the climb until he stood on a firm ledge near the top. Nefdt then let down some string, pulled up a rope, which was fastened & hereby assisted his two friends K. W. Wapenaar and Theunissen ¹⁰. The trio scrambled the last section to the summit where they recovered Nefdt's sock from under a stone. They used a mirror to signal to Ladismith that they were on top ⁵.

On his return to Ladismith Nefdt received an enthusiastic reception, with those that had not believed his first ascent, trying to make amends. Apparently Nefdt modestly told them that he did not take their unbelief amiss. No one knows, if Nefdt was paid the £50 wager, all we know is that Gustav refused to climb Towerkop again or even lead any other climbers to the foot of the crag to point out the start ^{8,9}. Nefdt declared he would never climb Towerkop again, not even for £1000 ¹, which was an incredible sum of money at that time. However when G. T. Amphlett visited Nefdt on his farm in 1898, Nefdt volunteered to escort the party up Towerkop on their next visit ³.

K. W. Wapenaar, born in Ladismith, was 19 years old when he followed Nefdt on his second ascent of the Western Summit. Around about 1949, when he was 84 & living in Rosettenville, Johannesburg he gave his account to Lawrence G. Green to use in his book *In the land of the Afternoon Sun*. He also gave a statement regarding the ascent to his daughter V. W. Hayes. It is interesting because it's from an eye witness & participant. It tells a significantly different story & provides various additional details. ¹⁴ This is his version paraphrased and shortened:

It was the ambition of most of the young fellows in Ladismith to summit Towerkop. The party of Gustav Nefdt, Willie Nefdt 40 (Gustav's uncle), Abraham Bosman 23, Jan Becker 20 & a few others left the village in secrecy at 8pm, because they were afraid that their families would object to the dangers of climbing the mountain. Due to the secrecy of the adventure they took no food or water. At day break they were almost at what would probably be *Nel's Buttress*. The party had split up & Gustav, Bosman & Wapenaar were ahead of the party. At about 10am they rested at the base of the final summits. Gustav had left Bosman & Wapenaar sitting resting & disappeared out of sight. Bosman & Wapenaar used a mirror to flash to Ladismith. Gustav returned an hour later & told them he had reached the top of the Western Summit & that he had left one of his socks under a stone. He was wearing one sock & they believed his story. Bosman & Wapenaar wanted to climb to the top immediately, but were persuaded not to as Nefdt said it was very dangerous & that he had risked his life. The rest of the party had in the meantime explored the Eastern Summit & now joined the advance party. They all set off down & reached the base of the mountain late in the afternoon, tired, hungry & thirsty. ¹⁴

Scribe's note: it would be an interesting challenge to repeat this version of events. Leave Ladismith at 8pm with no food & no modern LED torch. Walk up via the old route, summit & return to the foot of the mountain by late the next afternoon. Get a mule cart ride back into town.

On return to Ladismith, at first Nefdt's account of the summit was accepted, but then some doubt was thrown on it, because from the place Bosman & Wapenaar rested they were not able to see Nefdt climb up & the mirror flashes seen



Nefdt family, *George Herald*, 23rd August 1985

in town were not from the summit. There was general disbelief. About a month later a party consisting of villagers & farmers decided to test the accuracy of the story. Apparently they did not get far, perhaps not even out of Buffelskloof. They returned the next day to report that Nefdt was telling untruths & only a lizard could scale that face. One farmer even bet his farm that Nefdt had not been on the summit. Luckily for him nobody took up the bet. ¹⁴

A while later, in midsummer, a party that included a coloured man, who carried a rope, Wapenaar, Cornelius Eksteen, Thenunissen & the excise officers Stockdale & Melville, who were sent by the Ladismith villagers as witnesses, proceeded to the summit. Fairly early the following day, the party arrived at the edge of a 30m precipice from which the summits rise. Nefdt took off his boots & in shirt & trousers only, climbed down. Thenunissen & Wepenaar climb down using the rope. The paint & mirror were lowered on the rope & then the rope was thrown down. ¹⁴

Scribe's note: this would mean that they walked up the talus slope between Nel's & Buchu Buttress & had to climb down the northern face of Buchu Buttress. This makes sense. From here Wapenaar's account gets critically different & the scribe cannot relate his description of the climbing portion of the story to rock features or a plausible route. It certainly does not resemble the route we current know as Nefdt's Route.

"At the bottom of the precipice we found a narrow ledge, about twelve inches wide, slanting from West to East, up the perpendicular mass. Gustav was already progressing up this ledge and Thenunissen & I also worked our way up, taking the rope and mirror with us. After about 200 feet the ledge abruptly ended and then we found a chimney or fissure, straight above us. It was barely wide enough for a slender person to wriggle up by exerting pressure with arms & legs against the sides. Gustaf was already up it and he let down to us a string which he had brought with him & by means of this hauled up the mirror, paint, brush, rope and attached the rope to a rock. Then I climbed it with Thenunissen following. When we reached the top of the chimney, which was about two-thirds of the way up the entire rock-face, a distance of about 250 feet, we found that the remainder of the climb was not too difficult & soon the three of us were on top of the mountain." ¹⁴

Nefdt immediately went to a large stone & took out his sock from beneath it. The rest of the party were still on the opposite side of the precipice at the top of Buchu buttress, but could only see the summit party when the mist cleared. The summit party then flashed Ladismith. They packed a cairn as high as they could & painted their names on the base of the cairn. Then using the string fastened the mirror to the cairn, so that it would continue to flash to the villages. It was misty so this was done as best as possible. Apparently at certain times of the year this mirror cast a bright spot on a farm dam 10 miles away at the corner of Rooiberg. The frame of this mirror, but not the mirror was found by the 1906 party. The summit party then descended by the same route they came up & left the rope hanging in the cleft. ¹⁴

Not much is known about the rest of Gustav Nefdt's life. He married, but it's not recorded if he was married at the time of his famous first ascent. He had four children & lived out the rest of his life farming at the northern entrance of Sewerweeks Poort. The Ladismith District Mounted Rifles occupied a natural fort at the southern entrance of Sewerweeks Poort ⁷ during the Boer War (1899 – 1902). Nefdt would have been about 36 years old at the outbreak of war. It is not known if he took part in the war in any way. As a Dutch speaker he may have had sympathy for Boer

fighters, but under martial law assisting the Boers could have resulted in 6 months imprisonment. The Smuts Commando passed Ladismith to the south & the Reitz Commando passed to the north via Gamkaskloof (Die Hel)¹⁹. Nefdt may have been affected by the war, but there are no known records of his involvement.

21 years passed before the Western Summit saw another ascent. In 1906 the well-known Cape Town climber George Travers-Jackson and local farmer Arnold Boothman made the third ascent of the Western Summit via a new route on the North Face, now known as *Jackson's Quartzite Face*⁵.

In 1931 a party consisting of Arthur Bertram Berrisford, P. J. Burrell, A. J. Singer and Cornelius Nel claimed the third ascent of Nefdt's original route. Their ascent/descent was via top rope route, but the following day they opened a slight variation to the right¹⁰. The route to the right, recorded as Berrisford's Variation is super hard even with modern climbing shoes, equipment & training techniques. It looks like the grade would be about 24. Thus it is unlikely that this ascent is a free ascent by modern definitions. It is possible that the route was done with aid. For instance various journals mentions "removed the deal planks which had been placed against the rock by Nel sometime before to assist him in previous attempts on the route."⁹ This would have been at the base of Nefdt's Route or Nefdt's Variation. "...and gained the base of Nefdt's Route. Here we came upon three twelve foot deals bolted together."⁵ Deals are standard pine plank, probably purlin (38mm x76mm) & could have been used as assistance during the climb. They may also have stood on each other's shoulders¹¹. All of these techniques were quite normal in 1931, but is highly unlikely that this route was free climbed as per modern norm. It was only on 24th September 1947 a party of Teddy Keen, Harry Currey, Brian Russell & Denys Williamson made the third ascent of Nefdt's original route¹³.



Frank Berrisford in 1932 on the right. Picture from MCSA, Mountain Ears, Number 61 Dec 2000

Cornelius Johannes Nel, a relative to Gustav Nefdt¹², was a local Ladismith mountaineer & passionate Towerkop enthusiast. Born in 1897, C. J. Nel, as he is always referred to in the MCSA journals was motor engineer¹¹ by profession & a farmer in the Ladismith district. He was the guardian of Towerkop between about 1925 & 1956 when he passed⁹. He often guided mountaineers to the summit & had enlarged pictures of Towerkop to assist with pointing out the exact line than Nefdt took. He even had an aluminium model of Towerkop⁹. *Scribe's note: These would be interesting to look at, if anybody knows where the model & photos are.*

The popular cave that hikers & mountaineers sleep in is named after C. J. Nel. In 1931 he enlarged the habitable area of *Nel's Cave* by blasting some of the large boulders with dynamite^{21 11} & used the resulting smaller rocks to build the walls that shelter *Nel's Cave*. He is recorded as being on various historical Western Summit summit parties⁹. Today his ashes rest & he is remembered with plaque in *The Black Spot* cave below & right of *Nel's Cave*. His son, Madoc Nel, followed in his father's footsteps and went up to *Nel's Cave* more than 100 times. He was the guardian of Towerkop after his father died. He even managed to make it to *Nel's Cave* for his 80th birthday. Sadly Madoc passed away in June 2017 at age 89. His ashes will be placed in *The Black Hole* cave with his father.

The walking route to the summits in the old days, 1850 till the 1950s, started up Buffelskloof. This is the gorge to the right of the current walking path. From here the party would walk up the kloof to a flat open bend in the stream. At this point they must have followed an obvious path up the side of the kloof to the valley between the first ridge & the plateau where the so called *Shepard's Hut* is today. They would pass an obelisk (tapered monolithic pillar) called *Mullers Klip* or *Obelisk Rock*¹³. This rock is natural & is visible from the current path from the first ridge. They camped on a plateau at 5200 feet. This must refer to a camping spot somewhere on the flattish ground near *Shepard's Hut*. In those days tents & camping gear was carried up by "carriers" these were coloured, most likely Khoekoen, farm labour porters^{5 6 14}.

Shepard's Hut is not actually a shepard's hut. It's not actually used by sheep or shepard's. The hut & the current path was built in the late 1950s by the government's Department of Forestry to be used as a recreational hiking hut. The path was changed to the current path as it is overall less strenuous, avoids the thick bush & multiple crossings of the stream in Buffelskloof, which can rise quickly after rain. The path project was led by Mr Gert le Roux. In those days the government encouraged money to be spent on hiking trails & outdoor recreational activities. The materials were walked in using paid labour & donkeys.

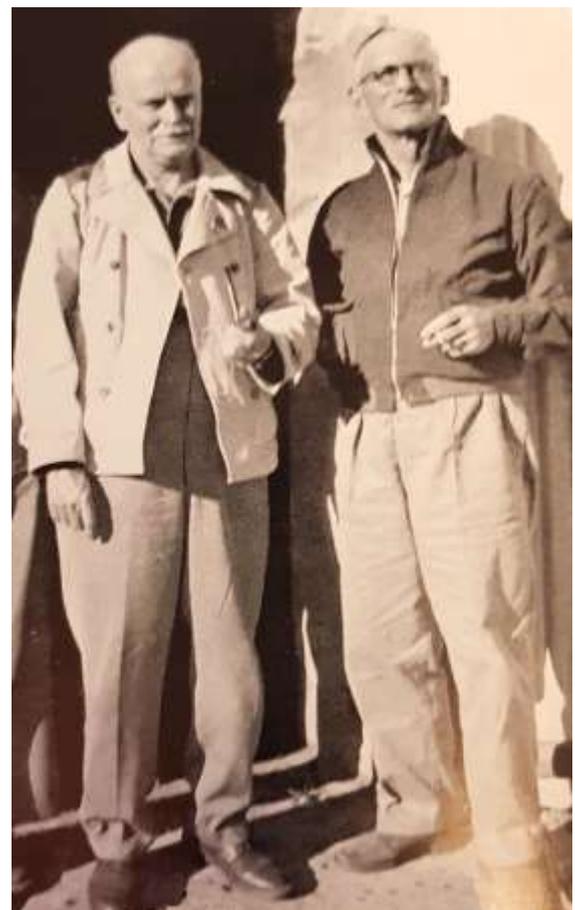
In 1973 Mountain Club of South Africa's Cape Town Section bought a 1/3 undivided share of farm Toverkop, which includes the summit¹⁵. In 1997 Cape Town Section purchased a quarter share of the Toverkop property & registered it in the name of the MCSA¹⁸.

From the 10th till 13th October 1985 the Mountain Club of South Africa held a centenary rock meet at Towerkop to celebrate Nefdt's feat. This was organised by Mike Scott, Richard Behne & Piet van Zyl. About 40 climbers. As far back as 1929 the MCSA had promised that when there were 100 cairns on the summit of Towerkop, the MCSA would hold a dinner for the surviving summiteers. Colas Coetzee a Ladismith member organised a great braai as a culmination of the 100 year celebration.¹⁷

On 17 September 2010 the MCSA celebrated the 125th anniversary of Nefdt's summit. They held a national meet with 120 mountaineers arriving to celebrate²¹. At this meet Towerkop was officially incorporated into the Eastern Cape & the official announcement was made by the president on the MCSA.



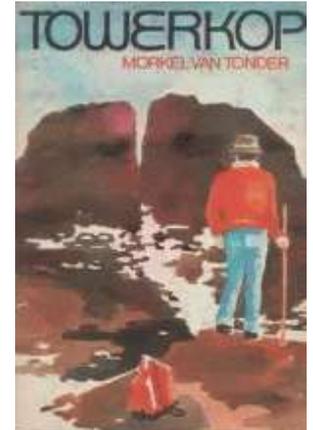
Plaque in Black Spot Cave commemorating C. J. Nel's service to mountaineering & Towerkop



Historic Towerkop first ascensionists George Travers-Jackson (on the left) & William C. West.

References, thanks & appreciation:

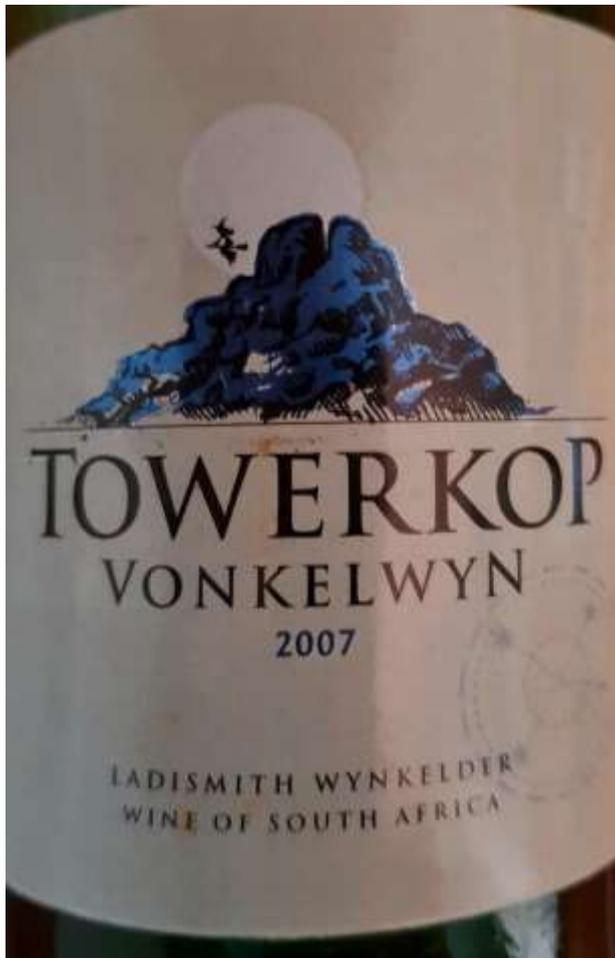
- ¹ Cape Times 19 Nov 1885, via S. A. Craven, 1985 MCSA Journal, Page 68 - 69
- ² Cape Times 22 Nov 1898, via S. A. Craven, 1985 MCSA Journal, Page 66 – 68
- ³ G. T. Amphlett, 1899 MCSA Journal, Page 22 - 23
- ⁴ Lawrence G. Green, In the Land of the Afternoon, Page 27, Page 17 – 20
- ⁵ George F. Travers-Jackson, 1907 MCSA Journal, Page 24 - 28
- ⁶ William C. West, 1912 MCSA Journal, Page 72 – 81
- ⁷ Cape Times, 7th November 1925
- ⁸ Richard Hallack, 1926 MCSA Journal, Page 83 - 88
- ⁹ E. G. Pells, 1929 MCSA Journal, Page 49 - 58
- ¹⁰ Bert Berrisford, 1931 MCSA Journal, Page 44 – 47
- ¹¹ Cape Argus 05 Dec 1935
- ¹² Richard Burton, 1946 MCSA Journal, Page 64 – 65
- ¹³ Jannie de van Graaff , 1947 MCSA Journal, Page 44 – 48
- ¹⁴ K. W. Wapenaar, 1949 MCSA Journal, Page 17 - 20
- ¹⁵ Chairman's Report, 1973 MCSA Journal, Page 192
- ¹⁶ Readers Digest's Land of Beauty and Splendour, 1976, Page 64
- ¹⁷ Mike Scott & Piet van Zyl, 1985 MCSA Journal, Page 56 - 63
- ¹⁸ Cencom Report, 1997 MCSA Journal, Page 273
- ¹⁹ Taffy & David Shearing, General Smuts and His Long Ride
- ²⁰ Jayson Orton, 2008 MCSA Journal, Page 136 – 137
- ²¹ Jan Viljoen, 2010 Jan Viljoen MCSA Journal, Page 33 – 35
- ²² John Parkinson, Shorlines, Strandlopers & Shell Middens, Page 15



Special thanks to Mike Scott who opened many of the routes on Towerkop. Mike was very diligent in recording his routes in the MCSA Journals. His topo in the 1985 Journal was particularly helpful. Mike assisted with correcting some of the plentiful initial errors in this history & provided additional information. Thanks Mike!

Extra special thanks & appreciation to Jan Viljoen for the extra detail. Jan is a Ladismith local, who has been up Towerkop more than 60 times & is considered the guardian of Towerkop in recent years. Jan filled in the blanks & added some interesting details. These details were past verbally from Madoc Nel who must have got them from C. J. Nel. Jan also got some of the information from his father. Thanks Jan!

Request from the scribe: This is intended to be a comprehensive history. I am eager to record more information. Please send changes, addition, corrections, info, pictures & any other details. I would love to make contact. 083 6818713 info@easterncaperockclimbing.co.za



Sparkling wine from Towerkop Cellar became Ladismith Cellar. Note the tiny witch from the legend.



Towerkop Cellar became Ladismith Cellar, but still used Towerkop as a name for many of their wines. Note the story of the witch on this label. Ladismith Cellar was bought out Southern Wines & they unfortunately dropped Towerkop as a name.