

History of Cockscomb

At 1768m above sea level, Cockscomb is the highest peak in the Groot Winterhoek range. Cockscomb is an eye-catching proud mountain peak that is visible from some parts of Port Elizabeth & Jeffreys Bay. Cockscomb is approximately 49km from the sea as-the-bird-flies.

The Bushman name for Cockscomb was *Cuncungwa*¹, which means misty peak. There are Bushman paintings scattered all along the Groot Winterhoek range on both sides of the ridge. The closest paintings to Cockscomb peak are in *Tokolosh Cave*. *Tokolosh Cave* is on the path on the ridge up the northern side between *Pinnacle Gorge* & *Grootbosrivier Kloof*. *Tokolosh Cave* is about 700m in altitude below the Cockscomb summit & about 1.5km from Cockscomb peak. There are numerous caves that would have provided shelter for Bushmen on the ridges & in the valleys below Cockscomb. They would have hunted eland & smaller antelope on the high plateaus on the Winterhoek ridge. The Bushman may have migrated to the coast at a certain time of the year using various migration paths over the Winterhoek ridge. It is highly likely that the Bushman made the first ascent of Cockscomb peak.



Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon 1743 - 1795

Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon, who was Dutch of Scottish decent, made five journeys in Southern Africa between 1773 & 1786. These journeys were on horseback accompanying an ox wagon party. He kept detailed journals in Dutch on his travels². Charles Lennox Stretch¹ recorded in his journal that Gordon had ascended Compassberg & Cockscomb. Apparently, Gordon left his spy glass in a fissure on Cockscomb, *where it still remains*. Gordon's ascent could be the first recorded ascent. Colonel Gordon did make various high point ascents which are recorded in various of his travel journals. He mentions what would have been Cockscomb variously through his journals & records the correct height. He also records Cockscomb on his map³ & in illustrations⁴.

Note from scribe: A conclusively record of an ascent of Cockscomb could not be found in any of Colonel Gordon's journals or letters that are available online.

Charles Lennox Stretch¹ recorded his own ascent of Compassberg & Cockscomb in his journal. This ascent in about 1829, with an escort of local farmers, was made for the purpose of taking measurements with a compass & theodolite. It is not known from which side Stretch climbed to the summit. Unfortunately, high wind on the summit prevented Stretch from making any measurements. Stretch was born in Bristol in 1797. He served in France in 1815, during the latter days of the Napoleonic wars & was deployed to Cape of Good Hope in 1818. He moved to the Eastern Cape in 1819, where he took part in the Battle of Grahamstown. In 1823 became a land surveyor in Graaff-Reinet. He served as a Captain in the 2nd Battalion of Provisional Colonial Infantry (a Khoekhoen unit) during the 1835 frontier war. He served as a Resident Agent to the Ngqjika (Xhosa tribe) for eleven years. Between 1854 & 1873 Stretch represented several constituencies in the Legislative Assembly & the Legislative Council of the Cape Colony.



Charles Lennox Stretch 1797 - 1882

Walter Stanhop Sherwill made an unsuccessful attempt to climb Cockscomb from the northern side in 1840. Sherwill who came from a military & mountaineering family was an officer in the English East Indian Company. He reached at least the rank of lieutenant, but was employed by the company as a revenue surveyor & economic geologist. Based in Calcutta, he rose to professor of surveying at the Civil Engineering College. Sherwill set out from Port Elizabeth on 29th July 1840 in an ox wagon with Eden Baker. They took four days to reach Wellige Fontyn, the farm of Hendrik Petrus van Staden. Wellige Fontyn is immediately north of Cockscomb & is probably the farm now called Willige Rivier (Willow River). Sherwill, Baker & a hired guide proceeded up a 'dangerous' kloof (probably what we know as Momentum Gorge) to a watershed. At this point Baker was exhausted & declined to go further. Sherwill continued alone towards the eastern flank of the summit. He managed to get with-in 120m of the summit by late afternoon, when he was reminded to turn back by two gunshots. The party made it back to the farmhouse intact ¹⁵.

Sapper D McDonald of the Royal Engineers & his party of surveyors made an ascent of Cockscomb on 31st May 1860. They camped on the summit for three weeks while making observations for the trigonometrical survey of the Cape Colony ¹⁵.

William Atherstone, a medical doctor from Grahamstown, made a Cockscomb ascent on 14 October 1849. Atherstone's ascent was from Elands Rivier on the southern side. The party consisted of Atherstone, George White & Mr Erasmus, who would likely be from the farm *Erasmuskraal*. Atherstone made a further ascent in 1871 ¹⁶.

Cockscomb saw numerous local ascents after Atherstone's recorded ascents. These ascents were from the north & the starting point was from the Rudman's farm Willow River. From at least the 1890s onwards the Rudmans ran guided trips up Cockscomb ⁵ & would collect aspirant submitters from the Kleinpoort Train Station for an additional fee. C. B. Rudman, in 1920, said that he had made fourteen trips to the summit, mostly with school groups from Uitenhage. Apparently, the Rudmans provided farm workers who led aspirant hikers & donkeys laden with their comforts up to the saddle. From there the hikers scrambled up standard easy route on the northern side. This is called *Gardener's Corner* ⁸.

Colonel William Morris, a surveyor with the Royal Engineers, built a stone beacon on the summit in 1890. He was accompanied to the summit by a forefather of the current Rudmans who live at Willow River ^{5 15}.

The stone beacon was replaced with a concrete beacon in 1919 by an assistant to the surveyor Martin E. Smuts ⁵. The assistant, who was "colored", is only referred to as "G" (*Scribe's note: it is unfortunately that we do not know more about G. In those days' writers did sometimes only record the first letter of a name. It was not a practice specifically reserved for non-Europeans.*). G traveled ahead of Smuts & built concrete beacons for surveying. On Cockscomb G was assisted by 20 laborers, 15 of whom were brought from Steytlerville as there was a shortage of farm labor. Materials for the beacon were transported to the saddle on the northern side by donkey train. From the saddle the materials were carried by the labors up the steep scramble to the summit. G's beacon team dug holes to catch water under boulders to 20m to the south of the summit. These are still used occasionally by hikers & climbers to quench thirst. *Note from scribe: one of these holes had drinkable water in 2003, where poor planning found this scribe on the summit after 10pm, exhausted & dehydrated after a long day of rock climbing.*

In September 1920 Smuts, G, four laborers & six donkeys went to the summit for the actual survey. The party followed the bridle path that started out from behind a shop at the Rudman farm at Willow River. In those days there was a "good" shop at Willow River. The bridle path ⁵, cattle track ⁷ or jeep track ¹¹ route followed by early ascents would be approximately the same as the dirt track to the east of *Momentum Gorge* that continues down to Elandskroon on the Elands River on the south side. On the Winterhoek ridge they would have contoured westwards to the final scramble up the peak of Cockscomb. Smut's account indicates that they camped on the saddle exactly due north of the summit. On a steep part of the scramble, they found some iron pitons that were placed by Colonel

Morris in 1890. On the summit Smut's team erected an observation tent over the beacon. His observations were delayed by mist & were only made the following day. Under the summit boulder Smuts found a bottle with scraps of paper recording names & dates of previous ascents ⁵.

In 1910 Elizabeth Frazer-Grant, Miss Bale, Miss Gairdner & a guide provided by the Rudmans, made it to the summit expecting to be the first women to summit ¹⁸. They however noted in the summit book that there had been two women in 1888. The names of these two women have been lost.

There is a bit of a legend about a heliograph record being set during the Anglo-Boer War, where messages were flashed by heliograph from the Cockscomb mountain to Compassberg (202km) or Nardouwsberg (148km). The stone wall on the top of the peak is supposedly the remains of a British heliograph station. However, normally a heliograph would be little more than a set of tripod mounted mirrors. There would not be a building or any permanent construction. It would be a specific location used for transmissions when required. The site would be occupied for a few hours or several days depending on what type of communication was required ²³. Long distance & long-term heliograph networks required significant manpower, organization & logistics to be effective ¹⁹. It may be that the signalers built the wall for shelter from the wind & to pass time.

Note from scribe: Despite a number of mentions, on the internet, of the above record being made during the Anglo-Boer War, no conclusive evidence of a heliograph record set during the Anglo-Boer War involving Cockscomb could be found. This may be a distortion of a similar record as per below.

The Eastern Province Command Signal Unit can trace its history back to the early 1900s. They claim a world heliograph distance record for a message sent on a 5-inch mirror. The message was sent in 1911 by Captain Sadler of the Natal Carbineers from Compassberg to a Major Home on the "Cockscomb Mountains" ²³. The record is specific to the size of mirror ²³. There are longer heliograph distance records made with larger mirrors. A 5-inch mirror had a normal working range of about 85km in good sunlight ²².

Note from scribe: this might not be Cockscomb peak specifically, but somewhere on the Groot Winterhoek ridge.

The Anglo Boer War came within 45km of Cockscomb. General Jan Smuts & the Rijk Section, which included Deneys Reitz (author of *Commando*), came from the direction of Zuurberg & reached Glen Connor on 02 October 1901 before turning north. This "invasion of The Cape" by Smuts' commando is known as *The Long Ride*. They skirmished with the British at Bothaskraal close to Glen Connor. Three young Boers were killed on the Brakkefontein mountain just north of Glen Connor. The British had thousands of soldiers along the railway line between Blue Cliff & Jansenville. General French was using the railway to maneuver his forces to block Smuts' passage. Smut's movements & coordination of British stopper groups troops was communicated via telegram, but this was often cut by Boer forces or sympathizers ^{20 21}.

Note from scribe: While it is possible that the British may have been coordinating intelligence & the movement of troops via a system of heliographs, that may have included a station on Cockscomb or on the Groot Winterhoek range, the scribe could not find a record to support this.

In December 1950 Desmond Polak placed an advert in the Port Elizabeth Herald inviting people to join him to climb Cockscomb ^{11 14}. Over the New Year's long weekend 30 December 1950 to 1st January 1951 Desmond Polack, Dennis Moore & Stella Smith summited Cockscomb from the south, via *Waterfall Cave* which is on the northern side of the Groot Winterhoek ridge in the upper reaches of *Momentum Gorge* ¹⁴. During the climb Dennis Moore conceived the idea of forming a mountain club ¹⁴. On returning Polak advertised a meeting to form a mountain club that would be held in the Athenaeum Club in Port Elizabeth ¹⁴. Thirty-two people attend this meeting & the Eastern

Province Mountain Club was formed on 22nd February 1951¹¹. Fred A. Magennis aka "Pop Magennis" was elected President, Desmond Polack was the first Chairman, Dennis Moore the first secretary & Stella Smith became treasurer¹¹. The Eastern Province Mountain Club official became a section of the Mountain Club of South Africa on 23rd June 1954⁹.

The first official Mountain Club meet to Cockscomb was led by Frank McLachlan up the cattle track on the southern side¹¹. The McLachlan's had been walking up Cockscomb prior to 1949, when their son Anton was born²⁹. At this stage the cattle track (variously called the bridle path, cattle track or jeep track) was still the only known & most used path up Cockscomb¹¹. The paths that are currently used up the northern ridges past *Tokelosh Cave* & past *Echo Cave* were cairned out between 1951 & 1970¹¹ by the *Nearly Friday Club*²⁵. The *Nearly Friday Club* was an EP MCSA splinter group that met at the King Edward Hotel²⁶. From the mid '50s till *Echo* & *T'Numqua Caves* took over in popularity, *Dassie Cave* was the cave that the EP MCSA & *The Nearly Friday Club* camped in on trips to Cockscomb. When *Dassie Cave* became too small for larger parties, the club used *Echo Cave*²⁹. The first proper roped rock-climbing route up Cockscomb was *Coronation Buttress* on 1st June 1953, the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. Arthur Harlow, Bill Clarke, Geoff Streeter, Frank McLachlan, John Damant, D. Baily, Tim & Crystal Robertson were on that party¹⁰.

With the formation of EP MCSA, walking up Cockscomb became very popular. At a stage the EP MCSA was making weekend trips to the summit at least once a month. Cockscomb & the land on all sides of the peak was privately owned land. Although the members of the EP Section had good relations with the farmers & foresters, they desired to own a portion of land on the summit that would secure access & conserve the peak for future generations. To this effect they started to negotiate the purchase of what became Portion 1 of Afgunst 255. Afgunst 255 is the farm to the north east of Cockscomb. Portion 1 is 51 hectares, shaped like a slice of pizza, making up approximately a quarter of the summit, includes the top portion of *Pinnacle Gorge*, *Echo Cave* & *Dassie Cave*. This section of summit land was (perhaps still is) hugely desired by the Mountain Club, but ultimately, with much angst the purchase fell through¹¹.

Echo Cave, originally called *Dance Floor Cave* due to its spacious size & flat floor, was discovered by Les Armer & Charles Haynes in the mid '50s¹¹. *Echo* has a good view of Cockscomb & gets its name because any noise made in the cave returns from the steep gorge opposite in the form of an echo. In the '50s & '60s this was where majority of parties stayed on the mountain. The Loots family, who purchased the land, have over the years made a considerable effort to make *Echo Cave* surprisingly comfortable. Most of the material was carried from the jeep track approximately 3km away. Some of the larger items like the picnic table was flown in by air force helicopter in about 2005. There is a circle of rocks in the neck to the east of *Echo Cave* marks the helicopter landing spot^{30 31}. In 1956 Erik Manson discovered *Arch Waterhole* a natural permanent water trough on a minor peak to the east of Cockscomb¹¹. This has been piped into tanks in *Echo Cave*. The tanks are connected to a convenient tap in *Echo Cave* & a flush toilet about 40m below the cave. Section 1 of Afgunst 225 was proclaimed a private nature reserve in 1988²⁸.

After the purchase of Portion 1 of Afgunst 255 falling through, the EP MCSA members began in earnest to look for another accommodation cave & to purchase another section of summit land. Frank McLachlan asked a local farmer & friend, Lance Bosman²⁹, to assist the MCSA to approach Corneels Joubert, the owner of the farm Bosch Riviers Berg 256. Bosch Riviers Berg 256 is the wilderness farm, that contains *Grootbosrivier Kloof* to the north west of Cockscomb. Bosman, McLachlan, Peter Heugh, Tim & Crystal Robertson negotiated the purchase of a section of the summit, that also including *T'Numqua Cave*¹¹. After lengthy negotiations, in 1969 the MCSA offer to purchase a 30-hectare portion of Bosch Riviers Berg 256, for R600, was accepted. Finding surveyors willing to survey the rugged & remote terrain that the MCSA desired presented some difficulties. Ken Rollo & Robert Myrdal undertook the survey

¹¹. Their equipment was transported up the jeep track. From there it was carried in by Tim Robertson, Peter Heugh & George McAll. They stayed at *Dassie Cave* & the survey took four days. Ben Loots' Portion 1 of Afgunst 255 was surveyed at the same time which allowed for a reduced survey fee. Interestingly the cost of the survey of Portion 1 of Afgunst 255 was only R306.50 ²⁸. The MCSA received the official title deed to Portion 1 of Bosch Riviers Berg 256 on November 1970 ¹¹. The land, shaped like a slice of pizza, includes *Gardener's Corner* ⁸, the main scramble up the summit from north & an eighth of the summit

T'Numqua Cave where most modern parties accommodate when overnighting on Cockscomb, was discovered by Peter Heugh while taking a party to *Eland Cave*, which is about 700m further into *Grootbosrivier Kloof* ¹¹. It was only on a re-visit in 1968 that *T'Numqua* was deemed a suitable sheltered cave. *T'Numqua Cave* is a large cave that can accommodate up to 50 people. It has a flat floor & an entrance that is screened with trees. Unfortunately, the closest running water is about 1km away at the top of *Pinnacle Gorge*. Fortunately, Tim Robertson discovered an intermittent water drip about 40m east of the cave. The drip falls from an overhang at least 10m off the ground, which makes it difficult to capture. Peter Heugh came up with a plumbing scheme to provide a convenient permanent water source. On the next trip Frank McLachlan George McAll, Geoff Mandy & Peter Heugh, carried in a 75-litre asbestos water tank, weighing 14kg & set up the plumbing system. Drips were caught on a plastic sheet that formed a catchment basin; the water was then piped into the tank & then on to a conveniently placed tap. All the plumbing work was hidden by well stacked stones ¹¹.

The 75-litre asbestos water tank proved adequate till the severe drought in 1972, when the drip stopped completely. The tank emptied, leaving a party of Rhodes University climbers in dire distress. A 300-litre heavy duty plastic tank was procured. A discussion at a Rotary lunch between George McAll & Dr Hoskin, the operations officer at the local helicopter squadron, led to the tank delivery being recognised as a suitable training exercise for the squadron. On a Friday afternoon in September 1973, a helicopter picked up Peter Huegh & the tank from Willow River. It was a misty afternoon & the pilot did not find the indicated landing area above *T'Numqua Cave* suitable. Heugh, his backpack & the tank were summarily deposited on a flat spot in the valley below *T'Numqua*. Heugh spent the rest of the day manhandling the tank up into *T'Numqua Cave*. The following day Tim Robertson & John Abel, who had joined Heugh during the night, fitted the tank to the plumbing system ¹².

The other plumbing system that should be noted, the first longdrop at *T'Numqua Cave* was built by Raymond Packwood, Peter Heugh & John-Lew Knight. It was later upgraded with a box & seat built by Rudi Goosen. This was flown in by the air force & fitted by Rob Mac Geoghegan, Mark Terblanche & Alan Gibb ³⁰.

In 1961 Bill Clarke, Ben Loots, Jack & John Wallace opened *The Spiral Route*, which is a non-rock-climbing route up the south side of the summit ¹¹. On the walk-in from the south side there is *Erie Cave* that was discovered by Jack Wallace in about 1960 ¹¹. Another popular cave on the south side of Cockscomb is *Elephant Cave*. *Elephant Cave* has Bushman paintings of elephants & twenty stylistic birds. A portion of the painting of the birds, which are possibly vultures, was used in the design of the South African Post Office 1987 20c stamp & the envelope of the first-day-cover ¹⁴. The vultures, on the lower right-hand corner of the stamp, are not exactly reproduced & require some conjecture to see.

In the '70 Anton McLachlan lead the MCSA search & rescue team. He & Dave Thompson were flown to the summit of Cockscomb in an air force allouette on a midweek training exercise. Thompson briefly exited the helicopter onto the summit in his business suit with tie ²⁹. In 1986 Dave Thompson started the MCSA EP Section newsletter. It was

originally called *Beacon Snippets*, but later it was changed to *Cockscomb Chronicle* ¹⁴. Issues of the *Cockscomb Chronicle* were published every quarter till 2009, when it made a slow fade into history.



Left, the elephant & vulture painting in Elephant Cave on the south side of Cockscomb. *Photo thanks to Werner Illenberger.*

Above, the 1987 stamp with the vultures in the right-hand lower corner.

Cockscomb has been referred to by many different names. Charles Lennox Stretch recorded the Bushman name as *Cuncungwa* ¹, which means misty spitz (peak). Stretch used the spelling *Cock Comb* ¹. R.R.W Nixon in 1970 records that the Khoekhoen name for the peak as *T'Numqua*, meaning mountain of mist ¹¹. Colonel Robert Gordon's journal from his 5th Journey ², 7th February 1786, referred to Cockscomb as *Festoonberg*. On Gordon's great map ³ of Southern Africa, he recorded the various names that Cockscomb was known by. The Navy (must be Dutch Navy) calls it *Gefestoneerde Berg*, the English call it *Craggij Mountain* & by the Khoekhoen as *Hommoequa* which means blue cloud. In Gordon's Panorama of Algoa Bay ⁴, Cockscomb is simply labelled Winter Hoek. A list of peaks in the 1932 MCSA Journal gives the name "Cockscomb = *Hommoequa*, *Craggy Mountains*, *Gefestoneerde Berg*", their source is listed Surveyor General ⁶. William Atherstone ¹⁵ used the spelling *Coxcomb*. Afrikaans speakers refer to Cockscomb as *Hanekam* ¹². The current Mr Rudman of Willow River calls the peak *Hanekam*.

This history is a work in progress & can be edited easily. Please send old photos, changes, correction, comments & additions. All will be appreciated.



The 1987 first day cover with the vultures from Elephant Cave.

