

## A Lady's Slipper History

The Lady's Slipper finds herself in that awkward position of being a very popular walk, close to Port Elizabeth, who's slopes thousands of people have climbed, but at the same time not a particularly note worth summit. At 564m above sea level, it is about an 900m walk, with about 300m altitude gained to reach the summit. It takes about an hour to walk up & bit less to walk back. This makes the Slipper a fairly arbitrary peak, which has led to not much information being recorded & very few pictures of the Slipper from before 1960. These days thousands of people summit the Slipper each year & thousands of photos from Slipper walks are posted on social media. The Slipper has become a hugely popular outing for Port Elizabeth locals.

The Bushman would have been the first people to walk up the Slipper. Perhaps Bushman would have sheltered amongst the boulders at the bottom of the Slipper, but today there are no known traces of them except a few minor painted sites a few kilometers away in Van Stadens Gorge. The Inqua & Damasqua Khoekhoen would have visited the Slipper. Henry Lichtenstein in his book *Travels in Southern Africa 1803 – 1806* reported a Khoekhoen settlement on the heights above the van Stadens River crossing <sup>1</sup>. This would have been roughly where Woodridge or the Van Stadens Flower Reserve is today. Khoekhoen artifacts have been found in the area over the years & more were dug up during the building of the wind turbine field that is visible from the Slipper.

There is a story that elephants rubbed themselves against the boulders at the bottom of the Slipper & this led to some of the boulders being rubbed flat <sup>2</sup>. In the days of ox-wagon travel, the big boulder on the N2 side of the train track, was an outspan area for refreshing oxen & horses. This is on the land of Maria Maan, the Sunday family restaurant. The rail line was built in 1904, but not used by normal rail transport other than by trains moving railway construction material till 1905.

Colonel Robert Jacob Gordon made a drawing of Algoa Bay on 19th January 1778. It appears from the drawing that he may have been on the summit of the Lady's Slipper. This is the first known record of someone possibly ascending Lady's Slipper or Van Stadensberg <sup>3</sup>. The first survey of the summit of Lady's Slipper would possibly have been by Captain Baily in 1860 or Colonel Morris in 1890 <sup>7</sup>. They would have built a stone beacon on the summit.

Nobody is sure when the name Lady's Slipper was first used, but by 1940 the name Lady's Slipper was firmly established <sup>17</sup>. Most people agree that Lady's Slipper is derived from the rock looking like an upside-down woman's shoe with its toe pointing towards the peak & the heel projecting into space. This is as viewed from the east & the west. It is possible that Lady's Slipper refers to a subfamily of orchids commonly known as lady's slipper orchids (Cypripedioideae). The shape of the protruding rock closely resembles the flower of lady's slipper orchid. Many of the early travelers who made records of Algoa Bay area were botanists who would have been familiar with lady's slipper orchids.



One of the many varieties of lady's slipper orchids – Cypripedioideae.

The ridge that the Lady's Slipper is perched on is called Van Stadensberg. The small peak on the eastern end is called Witterklip. Witterklip follows a discernible pattern where it was common for a Khoekhoen name for a feature to be simply translated into Dutch. The Khoekhoen / Bushman name //gurus //hoa translates to 'white stone cliff'. Witterklip is 'white stone'. The Xhosa name given to the Slipper is EMduluswa meaning 'place of the prominent protrusion' <sup>4</sup>.

During the '40s Mr Carter "Block", the headmaster of Woodridge, only a primary school in those days, used to take the pupils up the Slipper from the dirt road to the beacon <sup>19</sup>. The walk up the Slipper was usually only allowed in the final year <sup>17</sup>. Woodridge is a private school about 5km as-the-crow-flies from Lady's Slipper. Until 1946 boarders at Woodridge would catch the train to Witterklip Station directly below the Slipper. From here they would be crammed into a brown panel van & driven to Woodridge <sup>21</sup>. There were only 36 boys boarding at Woodridge. They stayed at the old Cadle Hotel between 1940 & 1946. During the war years there was a huge fire & all the fynbos from Witterklip until close to the school was burnt. The rats from the veld spread into the school buildings for shelter. Some kids got murine typhus (flea borne from rats) & had to have a series of very painful typhus inoculations <sup>22</sup>.

The first mountain club formed in the Eastern Cape was the Graaff-Reinet Section of Mountain Club of South Africa. The section was formed with 30 members in 1911 & showed initial signs of prosperity <sup>6</sup>. It is unknown what became of this section & when it ceased to exist.

In December 1950 Desmond Polak placed an advert in the Port Elizabeth Herald inviting people to join him to climb Cockscomb <sup>13 14</sup>. Over the New Year's long weekend 30 December 1950 to 1st January 1951 Desmond Polack, Dennis Moore & Stella Smith summited Cockscomb. During the climb Dennis Moore conceived the idea of forming a mountain club <sup>10</sup>. On returning Polak advertised a meeting to form a mountain club that would be held in the Athenaeum Club in Port Elizabeth <sup>10</sup>. Thirty-two people attend this meeting & the Eastern Province Mountain Club was formed on 22nd February 1951 <sup>10 14</sup>. Fred A. Magennis aka "Pop Magennis" was elected President, Desmond Polack was the first Chairman, Dennis Moore the first secretary & Stella Smith became treasurer <sup>13</sup>. The first recorded EPMC trip to the Slipper, on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1952, was a traverse along the Van Stadensberg from the Witterklip (eastern end) to the lower Van Stadens dam (western end) & then back to the *Lady's Slipper Café* for coffee. The *Lady's Slipper Café* may have been at the Witterklip Station below the Slipper <sup>15</sup>. On 22nd January 1954 enthusiastic EPMC members help to found the Eastern Province Wild Flower Society <sup>10</sup>. The Eastern Province Mountain Club official became a section of the Mountain Club of South Africa on 23rd June 1954 <sup>8</sup>. The name changed to Mountain Club of South Africa, Eastern Province Section or MCSA EP Section.

John Wallace, who later became the Director of the PE Snake Park & Museum, remembers: "I first climbed the Lady's Slipper in 1956 with a schoolboy friend, Clifford McMillan. Clifford's mother ran a dairy farm near Woodridge school. We rode horses to the base of the Slipper, carrying rifles & followed by two hunting dogs. We hoped to shoot baboons which were abundant in those days & reputedly caused farmers problems. The baboons escaped being shot because they were spooked by the dogs, which were so intent on the hunt that they only returned to the farm the next day <sup>18</sup>."

The farmer in those days allowed people to simply park & walk up the Slipper. There were no gates or fences to negotiate. Photos show that cars were parked at *After Dinner Mint*, the first large boulder that is reached on the MCSA's access path. When it became known that the farmer who owned Greenfield farm, including the Slipper, intended to subdivide & sell his land, Jack Wallace & Peter Heugh, approached him to arrange for a section of land that allowed access to the peak to be sold to the MCSA <sup>18</sup>. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1963, MCSA Eastern Province Section, led by Jack Wallace, Schalk Theron, Ludwig Abel & Peter Heugh made an offer to purchase the Lady's Slipper. The MCSA purchase of the Lady's Slipper property official known as Portion 9 of Greenfield 467 was confirmed by a Special General Meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1964. The price for the 22-hectare land was R2000. A special Lady's Slipper Fund was created to raise funds for the purchase. Contributions were raised from MCSA members, from the public & from sympathetic bodies, such as the Eastern Province Wild Flower Society <sup>10</sup>. The Lady's Slipper was registered in the Mountain Club of South Africa's name on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1964 <sup>23</sup>.

Jack Wallace bought the land on the eastern side of the MCSA's portion at the same time & built his family home on it. This property was known as Highbrae. Jack's ashes are located near the upper boundary of Highbrae with a small plaque with the inscription "He loved the mountains" <sup>18</sup>. Highbrae was later owned by Monica & Jimmy Greenaway. From about 2002 the Greenaways had a tea garden & a campsite at Highbrae. This became the easiest way to access the Slipper till

about 2016. From about 1995 access to the Slipper for non-MCSA members was via a free self-issue permit. The permits were located at a “booth” on the path close to *After Dinner Mint*, the first large boulder. From 2011 the MCSA arranged that permits would be issued by the Greenaways at Highbrae & at the Falcon Rock Restaurant bar. Initially they cost R10, but later it became R20. When Monica Greenaway moved to town, the new owners of Highbrae decided not to continue with the permit arrangement. These days you can walk up the Slipper from Falcon Rock on their path or on the MCSA’s path. To use the MCSA’s path you need to be a member or be accompanied by a member. The MCSA has a set Wednesday afternoon meeting from about 16:00 that is open to the public. This is called the *Wednesday Walk*.



Around 1963, when the farmer who owned Greenfield 467 was subdividing, Colin Mantle bought the land directly below the Lady’s Slipper. Mantle was primarily a pig farmer & the sties are still visible from the summit. He built his house up against a large boulder. The western wall of this house is a natural boulder & the one wall of the lounge is real rock (*Scribe’s note; very cool!*). In the late ‘70s when Rob MacGoeghan was visiting Colin Mantle, Rob identified the bird nesting on the boulder, that *Falcon Rock* gets its name from, as a Rock Kestrel <sup>25</sup>. Ralph Huttenrach bought *Falcon Rock* in the ‘90s. These days *Falcon Rock* is the easiest access to the Slipper summit & has the best maintained path. Falcon used to have a fantastic restaurant & pub, unfortunately these days this is closed. *Falcon Rock* has a club house for a black powder

One of the huge environmental challenges at the Lady’s Slipper is invasive alien trees like wattle, port jackson & blue gum. The trees were planted by landowners for wind breaks, shade, firewood & building materials starting in the late ‘50s. The Slipper in its perfectly natural state should be grass & fynbos, with small clumps of trees. In its natural state, before European settlement brought roads & rail, which protect the Slipper from veld fires, the Slipper would have burned more regularly. Regular burning would have stunted the bush & kept the fynbos low. These days the Slipper only burns on average once every 10 years. This means the natural plants are growing larger, the combustible carrying capacity is higher & thus the fires (when they come) burn hotter. In previous years there would have been game grazing & flattening vegetation on the Slipper. Increased levels of CO<sup>2</sup> leads to accelerated growth in some plants. Alien vegetation, hotter fires, less regularly, increased growth due to CO<sup>2</sup> & zero grazing have altered the natural vegetation on the Slipper permanently. The vegetation we see today on the Slipper is not what a person would have seen 200 years ago. In October 2004 researchers released some bugs to help with controlling wattle. Blue gums are the most urgent environmental threat to the Slipper. The MCSA closed public access to their portion of the Slipper in 2020, supposedly they are going to use this closure period to try to deal with environmental issues. Hopefully they will tackle the Blue gum issue.

The path that became worn in during the ‘50s was very direct between *After Dinner Mint* & *The Heel*. This led to quite a bit of erosion. After a fire in the early ‘80s the path was redirected & some zigzags added to reduce erosion. Extra switchbacks were added after a fire in 2004 to get the path that is now the right hand (most eastern) path on the MCSA portion of the Slipper. Werner Illenberger & team carried in the materials & made all the steps between 2004 & about 2012. The MCSA’s left-hand path (these days the middle path) was made by Werner Illenberger & a team after the fire in 2017. The most left-hand path, from *Falcon Rock*, was built recently & only became active after the Covid lockdown in 2020. These days the *Falcon Rock* path is the most frequented path.

The earliest recreational rock climber to arrive in the Port Elizabeth area was Robert Stephens. Stephens was a seasoned climber who started climbing on Table Mountain at age twelve, joined the MCSA in 1946, became a life member of the MCSA Cape Town Section & was a founder member of the EP MCSA. Stephens was climbing with George Londt, a well-known SA climber, when Londt fell to his death in 1927 <sup>11</sup>. In 1949 Stephens advertised in a Port Elizabeth newspaper for a climbing companion. He only got one response, an elderly gent wanting to sell a rucksack <sup>12</sup>. Stephens was an

adventurer who refused to take on work in areas where there were no mountains to explore. He was clearly a rebel & a character. Peter Blignaut writes “Some evenings I used to walk down *Whites Road* (now called John Kani Road) to Robert’s flat. After coffee & mountaineering talk, we would go to the bedroom, put a rope around the leg of the bed, and abseil out of the window three floors to the ground <sup>16</sup>.” Stephens discovered the potential of the Lady’s Slipper as a climbing training area. Under his mentorship the EP MCSA began to learn proper rock-climbing skills. On Saturday afternoons he coached climbers on climbs up to grade E (about 13 in modern SA grades) <sup>5</sup>. This would have been late ‘40s till early 1950s. Notably Stephens did not mention the Lady’s Slipper in his article *Climbing Miscellany* in the Eastern Province published in the 1951 MCSA Journal.

*Scribes note: The Bushmen climbed steep cliffs to harvest honey. They would jam or knock wooden stakes into cracks & use these to get access to the honey. There is a story recorded about the last free roaming Bushman in the Port Elizabeth area who in about 1895 met his end climbing a staked cliff in Hells Gate Kloof just north of Rosedale. The stakes were still visible in 1920 <sup>24</sup>. Bushmen would have been the first climbers in the Port Elizabeth area.*

Unfortunately, much of the early climbing history is un-recorded or sitting in private records. Dennis Thomas & Bill Clarke moved to Port Elizabeth in 1957. They were climbers from the MCSA Cape Town Section & they brought with them climbing skills & equipment. Soon they started regular weekly climbing trips to the Slipper <sup>9</sup> & convinced others to join the. By July 1957, under the leadership of Dennis Thomas there was rock climbing tuition given on the Lady’s Slipper on most Saturday afternoons <sup>14</sup>. Bill Clarke, Mike Streeter & Geoff Streeter opened *G Face* & *G Crack* in 1957. With various other routes being opened in the early ‘60s. The MCSA EP Section’s first Rock Climbing Sub Committee was formed in February 1960 by Bill Clarke. Clarke helped to grow & sustain rock climbing in Port Elizabeth in those early years <sup>14</sup>.

These days Port Elizabeth has a very active climbing community. There are hundreds of established rock climbing routes & hundreds of boulder problems recorded. There are at least 200 people living in Port Elizabeth who count themselves climbers. Climbing as a sport in Port Elizabeth grew significantly when Valley Crag the commercial indoor climbing wall in Brickmaker’s Kloof opened in 2017. Many climbers started climbing at Valley Crag & most climbers in Port Elizabeth do climbing strength training every week at Valley Crag.

In the late ‘50s the young climbers in Port Elizabeth decided they needed a weekly meeting to discuss where they were going to climb the following weekend. They met each Thursday for a beer (or five or more) at the King Edward Hotel in Central <sup>17</sup>. This crew called themselves “*The Nearly Friday Club*”, as they mostly came home when it was *nearly-Friday* <sup>20</sup>. *The Nearly Friday Club* went on a few outings with the Mountain Club & Jack Wallace with perhaps Frank McLachlan & Peter Heugh wisely decided that they should become a splinter group of the MCSA. The older MCSA members used to meet with *The Nearly Friday Club* & gradually pulled the youngsters into line & into joining the EP section. The motto of certain members of *The Nearly Friday Club* was a-bottle-per-man-per-day of Oom Tas, as it was known & fitted in with their budget <sup>17</sup>.

One hilarious *Nearly Friday Club* meeting finished up with someone, possibly Merwyn Chappel, suggesting a climb up the Donkin Memorial pyramid. Duly fortified they headed out. Someone had ropes in his car & they soon found that it was far steeper & more difficult than they had thought. A new plan was devised, have ropes right round the pyramid & then with one climber at each corner, pull in the ropes & walk up the pyramid. All their attempts, although hugely entertaining to passing drunks, eventually came to naught <sup>17</sup>. The Donkin Memorial has since been climbed; Steven Reed climbed a seam on the eastern side using natural gear in the ‘90s. He abseiled off a sling placed on top & left a pair of underpants over the top.

Basically, there were a few waves of climbing development on the Slipper. From the late ‘70s Andrew Forsyth, Mike McKechnie, Rob Mac Geoghegan & Alvin Woods a few others started opening new lines. The lines were massively dirty &

vegetated. Many of them had to be extensively cleaned & brushed before they could be climbed <sup>25</sup><sup>26</sup>. Clee Roy & Wayne Claussen joined these route cleaning & opening missions in the early '80s <sup>26</sup>. On the harder routes the first ground-up lead often involved aid climbing & later a first free ascent was recorded <sup>26</sup>. In 1983 there was a visit by Andy de Klerk one of the most famous South African climbers. He was hitchhiking from Cape Town to Monteseel & stayed with Andrew Forsyth, while he grabbed a few of the harder first ascents <sup>26</sup>. Mike Roberts, Mark Berry & Uwe Haller stiffened the standard of Slipper climbing in the late 80's & early 90's. Mike Roberts' route, *Pumping into the Blue*, may be the first full sport line in South Africa. Rob Mac Geoghegan's climbing training school, *High Society*, held the graduation day of each the climbing courses at *Turning Rock*. For many years this was the only climbing that took place on the Slipper <sup>25</sup>. When this scribe first climbed on the Slipper in 1997, *Pixie's Pitch* was the go-to-route on the Slipper & a classic route in Port Elizabeth. Times have changed, today this is an unknown arbitrary route that seldom gets a repeat.

The *Buffalo Bastards*, a climbing crew from East London consisting of Allen Luck, Craig Bester & this scribe realized the unclaimed potential in the early 2000s. This led to some industrial route opening sprees of mostly easier lines & some brand new crags. Morne van der Mescht, Martin Renz & Neil Mostert pushed the development of the hard grade sport sectors, Hidden Boulder & Falcon Rock. They also opened many of the harder boulder problems at the base of the Slipper. The *Eastern Cape Petzl Rock 'n Road* visited Lady's Slipper in July 2009. They camped at *Falcon Rock* & harder sport lines at *Hidden Boulder* & *Falcon Rock* were part of the *Red Point Event*. The esteemed guest at the *Rock 'n Road* was Adam Ondra. Czech born Ondra, who is still is the climbing world champion, gave a slide show at *Falcon Rock*. *Wild Child* at South African grade 32 (8B) is the hardest route on the Slipper & was opened by Juan-dray Marshall when he was only 15 years old.

The development of the boulders was started in early '80s. The larger boulders were abseiled & cleaned. Bush was cut back, landing areas surreptitiously cleared of smaller boulders & flattened using spades, a pick & a sledgehammer. All the boulders on the lower flat portion of the MCSA land were traversed & bouldered. There were no crash mats in those days & it was the easier problems that got climbed. Mike Roberts could do four complete traverses of *After Diner Mint* before coming off to rest. Over the years various members of the MCSA have been caught traversing *After Diner Mint* naked. Apparently, this is a thing to do, but please remember that if you are a non-member you will need to be accompanied by a member. The latest wave of boulder development has been since the MSCA stopped climbing & walking access to Slipper. The new path from *Falcon Rock* exposed previously on realized potential on *Falcon Rock* land & to the west.

*Scribes Note: The intention of this history is to try to record all the elements associated with Lady's Slipper. Additional information, old photographs, corrections & memories are most welcome. This is a web-based publication, so it will be very easy to edit. Please send me any information or leads to people who may have information.*



