

# **PRYNNSBERG ESTATE FREE STATE**

## **HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION**

**By James Alabaster**

PRYNNSBERG has been appropriately described as “The Free State’s Crown Jewels...it is one of the most magnificent sandstone buildings in the country and a window into the historical development of a unique South African family”. The magnificent Prynnsberg Estate was the creation of Charles Newberry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a result of the purchase of land, circa 1880, from his wife’s maternal grandfather, William Pryn (b.1811), who ran a trading station on the estate, the remains of which can be seen today in the Retreat Valley. It was here that King Mosheshwe of the Basuto, Chief Sekonyela of the Batoklwa and Major Warden, the British Resident at Bloemfontein, met to negotiate a peace treaty. During its heyday, the stately home of Prynnsberg hosted a variety of distinguished guests including, Rudyard Kipling, the Duke of Connaught, President Steyn, Alfred, Lord Milner, Bendor, Duke of Westminster, amongst others; by repute it was also the headquarters of General Nickerson during the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902)

Charles Newberry (1841-1922), the ‘first owner of Prynnsberg was a remarkable individual by any standard. Born in the English country of Huntingdonshire in 1841, he left school at the age of 15 to assist his father in his carpenter’s shop. In 1864 he traveled to South Africa in the 250-tonne sailing vessel ‘Evangeline’ to join his brother, John, landing in Durban after a voyage of 103 days.

The brothers worked as carpenters at Greytown but John left to try his luck at Kimberley when diamonds were discovered there in 1872. Charles Newberry followed shortly afterwards, traveling in a scotch cart drawn by four oxen, and took a leisurely two months over the trip so that the oxen would be in good shape for transport work at the diggings. At the diggings the brothers divided their time between transport and building, mainly the provision of dwellings for other diggers, and diamond digging, using the proceeds from the former to acquire claims and finance their digging operations.

By dint of hard work the brothers accumulated funds with which they bought and worked claims and after about seven years they amalgamated with other diggers to form the Central Company to which they contributed eight full claims, at which stage they retired from active digging. As a result of further amalgamations, De Beers Consolidated came into existence and Charles Newberry became a director.

By the time Charles Newberry had augmented his fortune by judicious land transactions and was at 35 a very wealthy man. In 1880, by which time he had married Elisabeth Mary Daniel, the daughter of a Wesleyan Missionary, he bought a property at several thousand hectares near the village of Clocolan. He named the property Prynnsberg after his wife’s grandmother Sara Clarke Pryn. From that time he concentrated on the development of the property on the lines of a traditional English estate and built a lavish

home of 22 rooms which he equipped with priceless imported furniture and other appurtenances of refined living. Apart from his tree-planting venture, he established beautiful gardens and stocked the property with a variety of game, some of which was imported from overseas.

The family were devout Christians and Charles Newberry built an Anglican Church and a Rectory on the property, in which services that were attended by worshippers from the village and neighboring farms were held regularly (and indeed, through the beneficence of the present enlightened owners, continue to this day).

After her husband's death in 1922, Elisabeth Newberry continued to live and farm on the estate, and presented a hospital to the people of Clocolan, known as the John Daniel Hospital, as a memorial to her son who was killed in the First World War. She died in 1936. She and Charles Newberry lie side by side in the churchyard at Prynnsberg; (Information kindly supplied by Mr. Robin Newberry)

## **SITUATION**

The Prynnsberg Estate is situated about 6 kilometers east of Clocolan in the Eastern Free State. Ficksburg (Airport) approximately 24km., Fouriesburg approximately 74km., the Golden Gate Highlands National Park approximately 105km., Ladybrand approximately 46km., provide a range of recreational and shopping facilities, and the estate is approached through some of the most colourful and striking mountain scenery in the region culminating in the impressive Maluti Mountains. N8 is reached via R26 linking with other motorway networks, (N1, N5, N6 and N12) and Bloemfontein Airport is about 160km, and Johannesburg approximately 380km.

## **DESCRIPTION**

The Prynnsberg Estate is known and recognised nationally as 'The Jewel of the Free State'. It is one of South Africa's national historic treasures and one of the two best known estates in the area, the other being Westminster, formerly belonging to Bendor, Duke of Westminster. The Manor House at Prynnsberg is a magnificent sandstone building, lavishly carved with highly decorative stone work, shaped and crow-stepped gables and intricate lattice-work.

Professor Ronald Lewcock, the distinguished academic, wrote that 'of the surviving diamond magnets homes in the area 'the finest probably being the Prynnsberg (sic) near Ficksburg in the Orange Free State (1881), (was) designed in England in a Victorian version of the Elizabethan style' (see Standard Encyclopedia of South Africa, 1974, p.528).

The property was built in 1881 (the foundation stone is dated 7<sup>th</sup> May 1881) and was probably designed by Charles Newberry. Newberry having made a fortune on the Kimberley diamond fields bought vast tracts of land in the Free State and elsewhere and

laid out the then magnificent formal gardens of Prynnsberg and established possibly South Africa's first private game reserve on the estate. Of the latter he wrote 'the main idea was that the beautiful and various antelope of South Africa were in danger of being exterminated, as many species had been already, and it was worthwhile from mans' point of view (and the creator's) that the destruction should go no further' (unpublished memoirs, Jan 1912). There is today a herd of Blesbok and other antelope on Prynnsberg. Photographic evidence from Charles Newberry's game book, circa 1890-1900, records the fabulous variety of different types of game introduced to the estate, some of which were imported from overseas via specially planted game release pens still to be seen on the estate today.

Charles Newberry was also the pioneer tree-planter of the Free State and established on Prynnsberg the first timber plantations in South Africa outside the Cape Province, circa 1881-82. A remarkable feat when it is considered that the first commercial plantations in South Africa was established by the Cape Forest Department in 1876. A very large area of the estate is still under trees and there are today at Prynnsberg fine plantations of Eucalyptus, Pines, Poplars, Willows and magnificent avenues of Deodar Cedars and Canary Pines, which are a legacy of Charles Newberry's endeavours more than a century ago. It is recorded that between 1881 and 1887 about 350,000 trees were planted.

## **THE MANOR HOUSE**

This magnificent 22 room stately mansion was built along the lines of the great Elizabethan Country Houses of Britain, so also was it furnished, although most of the original furniture was regrettably dispersed at the sale on the premises in March 1996. Internally however, nearly all the original features from the period have been retained, including the splendid parquet flooring in a variety of geometric compositions for the main reception rooms and the main bedrooms, as well as the original walnut paneling in the dining room, and of exceptional merit are the Victorian fireplaces, chimney pieces and door-case furniture in the majority of the rooms. The finishes and interior decoration, particularly of the billiard/music room, are probably among the finest surviving examples of the Art Nouveau and the Arts and Crafts movement in South Africa. The London firm of James Shoolbred & Co were commissioned to furnish and decorate the house. James Shoolbred & Co of Tottenham Court Road were decorators, manufacturers and retailers of high quality furniture and works of art, on a par with Heal's. They were particularly noted for good quality work in the 'Old English', 'Moorish' and 'Anglo-Japanese' styles. In this instance not only was the best in furnishings and decorations sent out of the Free State from London but also a bevy of English craftsman to install and complete the decorations. James Shoolbred & Co. presented their final account in April 1893. This 105 page account still in Prynnsberg archive (on loan), lists all the furnishings, paintings, carpets, silverware, ceramics, etc. purchased and the craftsman's charges down to the

finest detail. It is undoubtedly the most comprehensive record of the decoration and furnishing of any pre-1900's South African house. More remarkable is that the great majority of the work then done to the interior of the house still survives intact today, leaving it in a remarkably original state.

The Manor house area is roughly estimated at 2000 square meters and comprises the ground floor, the entrance hall, the Dining room, the Drawing room, the Breakfast/Morning room, the west veranda, the Smoke room/library the green bathroom and the WC, the Moorish corridor leading to the West garden, the Day nursery, the Yellow bedroom (the workroom), the housekeeper's room, the cellar, the kitchen Entrance corridor, the kitchen, the pantry, the Dairy, the Outside bathroom west side, the Boiler room, the main staircase and the top floor, the Japanese room, the Rose bedroom, the Blue lattice bedroom, the Boudoir, the White bathroom & WC, the Lobby to the dressing room, The Dressing room, the Lily bedroom, the Main bedroom, the Lobby to the Blue Bathroom, the Blue Bathroom, the Night nursery, the Box room, the Top floor balcony, the West spare bedroom, The monument room, the Glass staircase, the Billiard / Music room.

### **March 16 1894 Report in the Bloemfontein Gazette**

*Following a visit to Prynnsberg, the country correspondent of the Gazette in an article dated March 16, 1894, wrote,*

‘When we came in view of the place, I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought myself at home in Europe in view of a lovely house built in various styles of Old English architecture. The whole is surrounded by grand trees, the background formed by a mountain. An adventure of rare Cypresses leads in a grand sweep up to the house from which descend three flights of stairs leading in its turn to terraces filled with beautiful flowers.

While I gazed at the fairy-like sight, the creator of all this walked as unassuming by my side as if he was only one of its tenants. I did not know what to acknowledge more, the immense amount of labour or the immense amount of capital spent. Both combined have produced a grand home.

On my entrance into the hall, the symmetry of the interior struck me, buhlwork chairs and sofas were scattered about, armor of Indian workmanship covered the wall, beautiful statues stood about, in short the whole ensemble made a most picturesque impression. It was the first time I ever trod on parquet in the Free State, Brussels carpets and runners lead up a staircase of stone let into the wall, and unsupported but by the balustrade...The views from the balconies were varied and quite distinct. My pen fails to describe them. I imagine myself in Seville or Madeira, when an orange grove, intermingled with marble statues and terracotta's met my eye. The Drawing Room window overlooked this part of

the garden. A fountain is wont to throw up jets of sprinkling water in the midst of a flower garden underneath this window.

The ground on which the house stands was obtained by blasting out of the solid rock. Thus the whole building is embedded in the mountain-side, and water is laid on throughout the whole, provided by a reservoir high up on the mountain. There is also a swimming bath. Around the front of the house runs a verandah on which the different rooms open with French windows.

## **DESCRIPTION OF ROOMS**

### The Entrance Hall:

Originally decorated in the 'Moorish' taste, the oak parquet flooring is bordered in walnut with interlaced hexagons. The imposing front door of teak is inset with fine Victorian stained glass panels decorated with flamingos, birds and berried foliage. The hall leads through the 'Moorish' corridor which is elaborately fitted with 'Cairene' segmented 'Musharabiyeh' spandrels on cluster-column supports.

### The Dining Room (currently the coffee room)

This magnificent room, like the Boudoir and Drawing Room, retains much of the decorative treatment given to it by Charles Newberry. The oak parquet flooring is bordered with inter-linking walnut panels. The room retains its original honey-coloured figured-walnut paneling with conforming chimney-piece. The over mantel, inset with mirrored plates with tiered shelves designed to incorporate porcelain figures, is an especially distinctive feature. The French windows are in teak and the original curtain poles, picture hanging rail and ceiling paneling survive. The walnut two-door serving hatch leads through to the Kitchen. The grained-walnut dining room door retains its original stamped and engraved brass door-case furniture. The Victorian brass gadrooned bell-pushers are in place either side of the chimney-piece.

### The Drawing Room (currently the dining room)

With its original gorgeously rich flock wallpaper, silk curtains, curtain poles and outstanding chimney-piece, this room is a powerful evocation of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Adam revival taste. The gold ground pomegranate and acanthus flock wallpaper and magnificent chimney-piece incorporating an over mantel, twin fire-side seats and brass bell-pushers are an interesting survival of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The hearth and opening are applied with possibly Minton Sevres pattern glazed tiles. This room contains much of its original character and special note is the 24ct. gold-leaf decoration lavishly applied throughout. The intricately cast and pierced gilt-brass door-case furniture is original and the craftsmanship throughout is to a very high standard. The French windows are in teak with original brass handles and locking mechanisms.

### The Morning Room:

The oak parquet flooring is continued from the Drawing Room. This bright and airy room retains its original grained anaglypta 'Old English' revival linen-fold paneling incorporating a chimney-piece and galleried door-case. As with many of the other rooms, the original Crosthwaite's brass and blackened-iron grate with Doulton tiles, the original curtain poles and stamped brass door-case furniture survive in situ.

### The Smoke Room/Library:

Originally this room was divided by a wall along the join of the parquet flooring. The most conspicuous and important feature of the room is the splendid bay window of teak which incorporates in the upper part, fine Victorian stained glass panels decorated with elaborate stamped brass door-case furniture, are original.

### The "Moorish" Corridor:

Of particular note is the 'Cairene' segmented spandrels incorporating 'Musharabyeh' on the cluster-column support which is an exceptional example of the 'Moorish' taste. The original curtain pole above the teak French windows which open out onto the West Garden and the Arts and Crafts hammered silvered-metal hanging lanterns and original oak parquet flooring survive.

### The Day Nursery:

This room is complete with the original oak parquet flooring with distinctive outer border, anaglypta geometric panelling, Crosthwaite's grate and chimney-piece with integral oval overmantel mirror. The original ceiling rose, curtain poles and stamped brass door-case furniture survive. The tiles either side of the grate are lacking.

### The Yellow Bedroom/Work Room:

The original oak parquet flooring, Crosthwaite's grate and chimney-piece incorporating an overmantel mirror, stamped brass door-case furniture and long curtain pole remain in situ.

### The Housekeeper's Room:

The original curtain pole and stamped brass door-case furniture survive.

### The Staircase Hall and Staircase:

This magnificent staircase of cantilevers design with its polished mahogany handrail, pierced and cast-iron banisters is remarkable for being one of the earliest cantilever staircases in the Free State. The stone steps are divided by the original stamped brass stair-rods and the decorations include the original chandelier, gun-metal curtain pole and two walnut-framed mirrors, carefully placed in order to observe unwanted visitors at the front door and so that Victorian ladies descending the staircase could adjust their dress. The original oak parquet flooring survives in situ.

#### The Japanese Room:

The original oak parquet flooring is banded in walnut throughout. The gold-leaf “chrysanthemum” design wallpaper, pressed to simulate leather, is a remarkable survival. The Japanese Room was originally hung with Japanese wood block prints and decorated with bamboo furniture, and indeed James Shoolbred’s trade catalogue of 1874 shows an Anglo-Japanese bedroom. The teak French windows open into the Balcony, the curtain pole; lacquered paintwork and gold-leaf square sectioned frieze are original.

#### The Rose Bedroom:

The curtain pole and ceiling rose are original.

#### The Blue Lattice Bedroom:

The original ceiling rose (now detached), curtain pole, chimney-piece with overmantel mirror and Crosthwaite’s brass and cast-iron grate with Doulton tiles remain in situ.

#### The Boudoir:

This magnificent room, in a remarkable state of preservation, is perhaps one of the finest examples of the Adam revival style in South Africa. The craftsmanship throughout is of exceptionally high quality and the 24ct. gold-leaf decoration everywhere gleams as brightly today as when it was first applied. The outstanding feature of the room is the magnificent chimney-piece which is delicately carved and gilded, echoing the Adamesque motifs of the ceiling with their intricate panels of strap work, scrolls and anthemions, all combining to give an impression of grandeur and great wealth. The oak parquet flooring incorporates a magnificent geometric border of mahogany, walnut, ebony, holly and oak. The original sky-blue flock wallpaper with a design of lovebirds and musical trophies is repeated again, at great cost, in the Victorian stained glass panels above the bay window. The original Crosthwaite’s gilt-brass and blackened cast-iron grate, window seat (lacking upholstery), curtain pole and sliding gilt-brass draft excluding portiere rail and door-case furniture survive in situ. The splendid room is a ‘tour de force’ of revivalist decoration and its virtue lies in its grace and calculated opulence.

#### The White Bathroom:

The original Victorian enamelled deep bath with its unusual plunger, W.C. with polished mahogany seat and porcelain handled pull remain in situ. (Part of the original stained glass window is in the Housekeeper’s Room).

#### Lobby to the Dressing Room:

#### The Dressing Room:

The oak parquet flooring, curtain pole and brass door-case furniture are original.

#### The Lily Bedroom:

The main feature of the room is the splendid painted lily frieze here attributed to Winifred Newberry (1880-1959), the eldest daughter of Charles Newberry. The oak parquet flooring, chimney-piece and the integral overmantel mirror are original. The

room retains much of its original character and of special note is the splendid bay window.

The Main Bedroom:

The main features of the room are the magnificent Rococo revival plaster ceiling with central foliate patera (part lacking) and the Adam revival chimney-piece and overmantel mirror decorated in off-white and picked out in gold-leaf and inset with two pen and ink classical female designs by Winifred Newberry. The oak parquet flooring with key-pattern border, curtain pole, door-cases and brass door furniture are original.

The Lobby to the Blue Bathroom:

The Blue Bathroom:

The original Victorian enamelled deep bath, shower attachment and fitted washstand remain in situ.

The Night Nursery:

The most conspicuous feature of the room is the frieze of animals from Noah's Ark, by family tradition said to have been painted by Rudyard Kipling whilst staying as a guest one Christmas at Prynnsberg. The Crosthwaite's grate and curtain poles are original and remain in situ. One of the window panes is engraved with initials 'J.D.N.' for John Daniel Newberry who was killed in the First World War.

The Box Room:

The Top Floor Balcony:

The magnificent arched trellis and lattice-work are remarkable survival from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The West Spare Bedroom:

The Muniment Room (Apple Bedroom):

The original Crosthwaite's grate and curtain pole remain in situ.

The Glass Staircase:

The covered staircase is a notable feature of the house, the stone steps retaining their original brass stair-rods (in the Housekeeper's Room). The glass staircase has been totally restored

The Music/Billiards Room:

The magnificent room has been described as 'one of the finest rooms in South Africa'. The parquet flooring, chimney-piece, leaded windows, grained anaglypta lined-fold panelling, banquette, curtain poles and door-case furniture are original and remain in situ. A remarkable feature of the room is the original painted frieze of Egyptian Nile lilies and

the large painted lunette of the ‘Temple of Philae’, here attributed to Winifred Newberry. The chimney-piece in the style of Voysey is perhaps the most impressive in the house and manufactured in oak and applied with silvered-copper mounts and spheres, inset with mezzotints, the ‘Garden of the Hesperides’, ‘Solitude’ and the ‘Bath of Psyche’ after Frederic, Lord Leighton, P.R.A. (1830-1896), and is an outstanding example of the Arts and Crafts style. The magnificent pressed steel barrel-vaulted ceiling moulded with square and oval blank cartouches and the original silvered-metal adjustable ceiling pendant survive in situ. The room was built circa 1904 and is the grandest of the interiors at Prynnsberg and offers outstanding acoustics for musical events.

## **THE PARK AND GARDENS**

The property faces north and is set back from the main road R26 with a substantial driveway leading along an outstanding avenue of Deodar Cedars, one of the special charms of Prynnsberg. The original wrought-iron entrance gates (temporarily removed for conservation), with carved stone piers, initialled and dated ‘CN/EN 1891’ (for Charles and Elisabeth Newberry), remain in their original location. The visitor, proceeding on a slight gradient, comes to an incomparable view of Prynnsberg silhouetted against the mountain and framed through clumps of trees on either side. Little has changed of this view since Charles Newberry’s day. Proceeding to the front of the house, passed a magnificent Doulton stoneware dolphin fountain, circa 1890, the visitor ascends stone steps on three flights to the main entrance and veranda with teak columns running along the front of the house to magnificent Victorian gardens, laid out by William Nelson beginning in 1881, with dressed and cut sandstone paths, walkways, terraces, staircases and pools. It is recorded that Mr Willis, who laid out and planted the botanical gardens at Maritzburg, supervised the planting of the nurseries and the plantations at Prynnsberg.

### The Courtyard:

The Courtyard can be floodlit at night and there is an area of hard-standing for parking. The immediate out buildings comprise a double garage with electricity; a single garage with electricity; a workman’s hut with electricity; an engine room; stables with loose boxes and stone floor and a donkey stable and a dovecote.

### St. Saviour’s Church:

This exceptional sandstone Anglican Church was dedicated in December 1898 and completed in 1903. With a roughly estimated area of 300sq.m, it has a magnificent Oregon pine scissor-beam roof and beautiful stone carvings. The church is complete with original ‘Angel’ altarpiece, here attributed to Winifred Newberry (1880-1959), stone fountain also designed by Winifred Newberry. Oak-cased organ, pews, altar table, Bishop’s chair and lectum and Vestry is complete with cupboard and chest for vestments, robes, etc. (an inventory can be supplied on request). The gardens were laid out by William Nelson.

St. Saviour's Vicarage:

An exceptional sandstone property built in 1904 with a roughly estimated area of 300sq.m, comprising: A Sitting Room, a Dining Room, two Bedrooms, a Kitchen, a Pantry and a Bathroom. The gardens were laid out by William Nelson.

The Manager's House – 'Arran'

A delightful sandstone property which was initially occupied by the Estate Manager with a roughly estimated area of 250sq.m.

St Andrew's Church:

An imposing sandstone building built in 1904 with a roughly estimated area of 400sq.m.

The Hoek Stables:

A sandstone building of loose boxes, the iron work stamped 'St Pancras Ironworks London'.

The Large Farm Shed and Garage:

This building currently stores the Estate portable Fire Engine (for use on trailer or tractor).

The Sandstone Out Buildings:

The Workshops and Machine Shed:

## **FARMING AND GAME**

The Estate comprises 1233.4142 hectares of grazing land and forestry with a herd of approximately 146 blesbok, together with various other antelope.

The core commercial focus of the farm is its beef herd comprising a mix of Bonsmara , Red Angus and Boran.

## **SERVICES**

Eskom:

Telephone:

Water:

## **DIRECTIONS**

From Clocolan proceed on the R26 for about 6km, towards Ficksburg and the property will be seen on the right hand side.

