

A photograph of a landscape with a fence in the foreground and a mountain in the background under a blue sky with white clouds. The fence is made of wire mesh and is supported by a wooden post on the left. The background shows a dry, open landscape with a large, flat-topped mountain in the distance.

# FENCES AND FORTUNES

John Sweet Distin Esquire's tale of fortune and fences began with a splash when he arrived in South Africa in 1846 after jumping overboard in Table Bay.

*By Heather Dugmore*

**There's a modest white gravestone in the old cemetery in the Eastern Cape town of Middelburg. Situated halfway between Johannesburg and Cape Town, this Karoo town is the resting place of John Sweet Distin Esquire, formerly of Tafelberg Hall.**

Few speak of him anymore, but his name spans the length and breadth of farming in South Africa, for he is attributed with erecting the first stock fences in our country, pioneering a revolution in livestock management.

It is hard to believe there was a time when there were no stock fences here; a time when no one even knew how to erect these fences that are now intrinsic to our national landscape.

With no local skills available, Distin brought in a man from Australia to fence his farm, Tafelberg Hall, which he bought in the mid-1800s, having made a great deal of money as a trader in the Eastern Cape.

Distin's tale of fences and fortunes began with a splash when he arrived in South Africa in 1846 after jumping overboard in Table Bay as his ship left the harbour, and energetically swimming to shore.

The story goes that Distin and his parents were returning to England from New Zealand when their ship docked at Table Bay. As they departed, their 20-year-old son made up his mind to try his luck in South Africa rather than return to that dreary place. With that, he jumped overboard.

He joined the British army for a while, made a bit of cash fighting what they called the Kaffir Wars, and subsequently established his trading business that financed his love of farming and the purchase of Tafelberg Hall.

So firmly did he advocate the need to divide livestock farms into fenced off stock camps for veld rejuvenation and animal health in the 1860s, that he put it before parliament and, in so doing, lost the parliamentary seat he held over the fencing question.

Defeated in parliament, Distin headed back to his farm and set about fencing his own farm. If others wouldn't listen, he would go it alone.

At the time, no one wanted to concede that the vast coffers required for fencing were a necessity, until overgrazing and disease forced the government's hand many years later, when the Act regulating

the erection and maintenance of dividing fences was passed in 1883.

Distin's 'first fence', now a national monument, is still standing taught and strong, tethered to the original sneeze-wood fencing poles at the foot of a statu-esque table-shaped mountain several kilometres outside of Middelburg.

You cannot miss Tafelberg should you find yourself travelling on the road between Middelburg and Cradock: a mountain that tells the tale of a remarkable man of energy and enterprise who once walked these plains.

A man described alternately as "a most progressive farmer" and "rather eccentric with vivid blue eyes, a red face and a temper to match."

"He was not the first or the last owner of Tafelberg Hall, which dates back well over two centuries, but he was certainly the most interesting," explains the calm-mannered current owner of Tafelberg Hall, William Asher as he leads the way down the cavernous passage of the old Herbert Baker mansion where he and his 24-year-old son, Gareth reside.

Tafelberg Hall has been in their family since 1947 when William's father, Allan Asher, bought the farm two years before William was born.

If ever there was an opportunity to inhabit an Austen novel where the fields are replaced with Karoo veld, and the gentlemen protagonists are Messieurs Asher Senior and Junior, Tafelberg Hall is it.

We enter a vast room with a polished sprung floor that was once a ballroom, and head across to the dining table where bottles of chutney, Worcester sauce and mustard await the next meal.

There is no lady of the house here now, just a trusty cook and housekeeper who dusts the billiard table, straightens the old photo titled "Basuto shearing team Tafelberg Hall 1903", and neatens the two men's single beds.

It's a bachelors' den now, devoid of the cushions and curves ascribed to 'a woman's touch'. Not that a lady or two don't visit on occasion. On the contrary, the Ashers hosted a ball here recently for the local church when Tafelberg Hall once again supped on the laughter and intrigues of the fairer sex.

Just as it had so many years before when Distin's wife, Selina, renowned for her love of all things beautiful, had transformed her Karoo home into an oasis of sociability and grace.



“There were many balls then, and it was about time we had one too,” William Asher explains. “Everyone was turned out in their finest and we had ballroom dancing and even an instructor to help people along.”

It goes without saying, according to the conventions of a good Austen hero, that William abstained. “No, no, I did not dance,” he shakes his head.

On the dining table he has laid out the history of Tafelberg Hall, told through cuttings from the *Middelburg Echo*, once a thriving newspaper with an editorial office in town, and books that tell the stories of the great Karoo farms.

All speak of the grandeur of Tafelberg Hall, with its mill, granary, shearing house, carriage house, blacksmith’s shop and extensive labourers cottages.

Extending 20 000 hectares, it was a showpiece of modern farming methods at the time, headed by a man who believed in buying in the best breeding stock, from his extensive ostrich flock to his sheep.

Accounts from the day describe how it was hard to believe Tafelberg Hall was in the heart of the Karoo, as it resembled a villa in Cape Town’s leafy precinct of Rondebosch. It had terraced gardens pat-



terned with roses, vineyards, and hundreds of fruit and nuts trees – quinces, pomegranates, loquats and almonds.

Distin cleverly created a system of dams dug sufficiently deep to prevent rapid evaporation, which maximised the flow of water throughout the farmstead.

The grand gardens are no more, the labour and upkeep would be far too intensive, but the mood of what came before lives on in the atmosphere at Tafelberg Hall and in the view across the plains to distant dreams.

Distin's dreams came to an end at Tafelberg Hall when he lost his fortune through a combination of the ostrich feather slump and his wild, spendthrift progeny. He had 11 children, including seven sons, most a great disappointment, lacking the ambition and ingenuity of their father and far more interested in parties.

On one occasion they were sent to Cape Town to sell livestock, but instead of bringing home the considerable cheque, they booked out the Mount Nelson Hotel, hired a band and spent the money on a party to top all parties.

Distin ultimately went bankrupt and in 1898 he was forced to sell Tafelberg Hall, handing over the keys to his kingdom.

The next owner was a man from Johannesburg named Robert Struben, who had made his fortune as one of the first men to discover gold on the reef.

Struben demolished the old homestead and had Herbert Baker design the house that stands today, as a fitting dwelling for his high society wife. They didn't last long in the Karoo, as she considered herself to be several cuts above the local community, creating a self-inflicted isolation she could not bear.

A century later, Tafelberg Hall resonates with the characters who have inhabited its halls. The Ashers keep the homestead intact, constrained by the exorbitant costs of historic restoration. They recently replaced the expansive corrugated iron roof and constantly debate which of the giant trees surrounding the house need to be felled to protect its foundations.

Gareth, a graduate from Grootfontein College of Agriculture, unquestionably sees his future here.

"I enjoy farming and the simplicity of the lifestyle," he explains. "The city is no

place for me. One building looks exactly like the next and what do you do after work each day? Here you can take a walk in the veld.

He has no desire to go overseas. "I was born here so why would I want to leave? Wherever you go, it's hard work and I would rather work hard here where I fit in. People who don't like it here must pack up and go. The rest of us will get on with life here at home."

Here at home is where the old suitcases are stacked in the fireplace that is no longer used, and the giant leather bellows in the once active smithy shop lie sealed with dust.

Much has changed at Tafelberg Hall, but much has not. The sheep and cattle continue to graze in the fenced camps that Distin designed, and the grand presence of Tafelberg reminds all its inhabitants of the changes it has witnessed over millions of years.

"Life changes wherever you are, sometimes fast, sometimes in more subtle ways," says William. Then he smiles calmly once again. "That modest white gravestone in the old cemetery in Middelburg says it all."