

# The story of Blairgowrie

## 1. Origins

One has to appreciate the description of Blairgowrie on [www.sa-venues.com](http://www.sa-venues.com), which describes the suburb as "...set virtually in the heart of the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. A fairly old suburb its houses are quaint, large and leafy. Nothing much happens in Blairgowrie, which is a good thing, as it's essentially a place where people return at the close of business to hang their hats and rest up. It is a cozy, tree-lined neighbourhood with a slightly bohemian feel." - A very accurate depiction of our suburb if you discount the "nothing much happens in Blairgowrie" part. Can other suburbs tell stories of roaming hyenas and coffins on the pavement? Be that as it may, the story of Blairgowrie is intricately woven with the fabric of Johannesburg and the story of the northern suburbs of the city, particularly Craighall.

Very little is known about the area before settlement by white farmers in the middle 1800s. Jean Beater<sup>1</sup> makes mention of a conversation with Ms Amanda Esterhuysen, an Archaeologist at Wits University, who mentioned evidence of a Stone Age site uncovered in a donga in Craighall Park. No specific details of this site were recorded. She goes on to state that access to sustained water sources from the Braamfontein Spruit, as well as the topography of the area (specifically the Koppie in Craighall Park with its "360 degree views across the veld and beyond") would have made the area a prime settlement for the original inhabitants of the Highveld.

The recorded history of our area starts with the arrival of "Boers" in the area of present day Randburg as a consequence of the Great Trek of 1838. One such early farmer was J Labuschagne who in 1860 owned the farm Boskop<sup>2</sup>. On 06 June 1865, part of this farm was demarcated as the farm Klipfontein<sup>3</sup>, a full 26 years before the establishment of Johannesburg in 1886. Shortly after, in 1891, William Grey Rattray purchased a section of Klipfontein and named it Craighall after his hometown in Scotland. Rattray's portion of Klipfontein incorporated what is the present day Craighall, Craighall Park and Blairgowrie<sup>4</sup>.

According to various sources, Rattray mostly farmed on his newly acquired land. In fact, besides Craighall, he also owned a portion of the farm Driefontein<sup>5</sup>, sections of which later became the suburbs of Bryanbrink, Vandia Grove and Kengsington "B". According to information on the Craighall Residents Association website<sup>6</sup>, the current location of Blairgowrie was mostly used for agricultural purposes to provide Johannesburg with fresh produce.

Besides his farming business, Rattray recognised the potential of the area to offer the residents of the dusty mining town of Johannesburg an escape to the country. One must remember that in those days, a journey from Johannesburg to Craighall would have taken at least an hour! He constructed a stone weir to dam the Braamfontein Spruit thus creating a lake that offered city dwellers recreational facilities such as boating, fishing and picnic spots. The weir is still in existence today and visible a short distance upstream from the Conrad Drive bridge. The dam

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<sup>1</sup> Beater, J. Assessment of the Significance of the Road Reserve Situated Adjacent to Erven 163, 168 and 169 North Road & Beaufort Avenue Craighall Park, Craighall Residents Association. 2005. P4

<sup>2</sup> [www.icon.co.za/~antondekker/html/body\\_randburg.html](http://www.icon.co.za/~antondekker/html/body_randburg.html)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Beater, J Assessment of the Significance of the Road Reserve Situated Adjacent to Erven 163, 168 and 169 North Road & Beaufort Avenue Craighall Park, Craighall Residents Association. 2005. P4

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cra.org.za/files/022f00b9-4efc-4e7d-b245-36d7cec5c6f1--ebf7802a-e2a8-4981-af75-2b8e0ef0cd96/craighall-history-overview-v2.pdf>

itself later silted up. According to the Craighall Residents Association<sup>7</sup>, the Randburg City Council reconstructed the dam in 1982, but the first summer rains put paid to their efforts. A few years later in 1902, Rattray made available plots for residential use, which would gradually developed into the suburbs of Craighall and still later Craighall Park. Rattray apparently named the estate Craighall after his birthplace in Blairgowrie, Scotland. According to the Craighall Residents Association website the suburbs took long to develop: "Sales were initially slow as the suburbs were seen to be too far out of town to be fully viable"<sup>8</sup>.

This could explain why not much information could be sourced about the development on the portion of Rattray's farm that would later develop into Blairgowrie. Liz Delmont, a resident of Craighall Park, kindly provided a short extract on the origins of our suburb from a book by Anna Smith<sup>9</sup>. According to this source, Blairgowrie originated when Mrs Doris Grey McChesney, a daughter of Rattray, first applied on 21 October 1938 to establish the township on a portion of Craighall on the farm Klipfontein No 4. For what ever reason, the Johannesburg City Council objected and Grey McChesney made a new application on 25 April 1940. This time her efforts paid off and the township of Blairgowrie was "gazetted" on 20 August 1941.

According to Smith, only part of the newly established township was within the municipal boundary of Johannesburg. This was confirmed by long-term Blairgowrie resident, Lorenza Brickhill, who recalls that the Randburg and Johannesburg portions of Blairgowrie were in separate municipalities with the border being Kangnussie Street in circa 1973.

Smith noted<sup>10</sup> that the council minutes of 20 October 1942 recorded that street names in Blairgowrie were chosen without consulting the City Council. Consequently, some street names were duplicated and it was left up to the Council to suggest the following alternatives:

- Cheviot to be named Coburn Road
- Inverness to be named Ivydene Road
- Perth to be named Pitcairn Road
- Braid to be named Benyon Road
- Brooklyn Drive to be named Barkston Drive

She also states, citing a personal communication from the Manager of Blairgowrie Estates Ltd dated 28 October 1960, that Mrs McChesney named the suburb after her father's birthplace which was Craighall in Blairgowrie, Scotland.

## 2. Residents reminisce

This section is intended to provide the current residents of Blairgowrie with some insight into the story of our suburb as recalled by current and former residents and is work in progress. Any contributions to this section will be most appreciated and may be e-mailed to [Robert@uweso.co.za](mailto:Robert@uweso.co.za) or [lbrickhill@gmail.com](mailto:lbrickhill@gmail.com).

Lorenza Brickhill shared the following recollection of the suburb from the early seventies:

*My husband purchased the land we live on in Blairgowrie, and then had the house built for occupation in 1962. In 1973 I met and joined him and have been living in the same house every since. The roads were tarred and the shopping centre at the Corner of Susman and Conrad Drive (the current Blairgowrie Plaza) had an OK Bazaars, as*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cra.org.za/history.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cra.org.za/files/022f00b9-4efc-4e7d-b245-36d7cec5c6f1--ebf7802a-e2a8-4981-af75-2b8e0ef0cd96/craighall-history-overview-v2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> With great appreciation to Liz Delmont of Craighall Park, who provided the author with this extract from: Johannesburg Street Names, A Smith 1971 Juta pages 51 and 52

Best  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid

well as a Nel's Dairy outlet, Randburg Pharmacy and Stella's Haberdashery. The centre was much smaller than now and the doctor's and dentist's rooms were on the ground level. The parking area was accessed by via a ramp from Susman Drive.

In our immediate area, IR Griffiths Primary School was already built, but the property next door to it was open veld. The complex of shops at the corner of Barkston and Susman drive, comprised of the "Nearby Supermarket" which was run by two brothers, as well as a vegetable shop operated by a Portuguese family, a Total service station, hair salon and a Laundromat.

Most of the houses had no fencing or walls and all roads in our area were tarred. I recall us sitting on my little verandah at the time, and being able to see the car lights of competing vehicles in the nine our endurance race at Kyalami – just a memory that I can recall.

Facebook entries on the Facebook page of the Blairgowrie Community Association also provide interesting anecdotes:

**Jed Kemery** wrote: We just helped sell a house in Holland Ave that the lovely owners built 47 years ago! They told me that Holland Ave was a dirt road then and that if it had rained very badly on a Friday or Saturday evening whilst they had guests, the guests couldn't leave  
November 16, 2013 at 8:04pm

**Kevin Somerville** wrote: The roads were mostly dirt at that stage and there were no street lights. In fact when we moved in  
November 17, 2013 at 7:19am

**Yvonne Efthymiades** wrote: My father was the first house owner (7 Malcolm) in Blairgowrie Randburg, sometime in 1962. We could see all the way to Tara and the Sandown Vet through a valley of pine trees. We made friends with all  
November 17, 2013 at 10:10am

**Mary Sumner** wrote: The original farm belonged to my Aunt's father and some other partners of his including someone called Conrad. He was Gordon Mackay and the family home was called Balvicar (still there in Hyde Park). My Aunt is Jean, her husband (my uncle) was Keith, her brother Malcolm and there are some roads also named after other members of the Mackay family as well as the family of Conrad.  
February 6, 2013 at 4:39pm