What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?
One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.
(Book of Ecclesiastes - Verse 3 and 4)
Historical background
Ratelrivier, situated in the western section of Agulhas National Park, is one of the most iconic heritage sites in the Park. It has a rich and colourful history which stretches as far back as the Late Stone Age with evidence of middens along the river beds and potshards in the cemetery, into the early 21st century. Ratelrivier is situated in the Bredasdorpse Rooistrandveld which was part of the Caledon district in 1838.

Late Stone age
Evidence of human movement since the Stone-ages in the form of middens along the river and a potshard in the Ratelrivier graveyard was found.

Matthys Lourens, Strandveld pioneer
Jan Laurens or Johannes Lorenz (pronounced as Lourenz), originally from Rostock along the Oossee in Germany, immigrated to the Cape before or around 1698 as a soldier. He married Anna Elizabeth Michels, daughter of Matthys Michels and Catharina Ustings [aka Tryn Ras] on June 23 1698. They probably went to live on his father-in-law’s farm in Joostenberg plain until around 1705 went the farm Stuk Land [later Nabygelegen] in the Wamakersvallei was granted to him by WA van der Stel. Jan and Anna’s third child, Matthys, born in 1708, also called Rostock, after the family’s place of origin, became the ancestor of the Overberg Lourens family. He first married Maria Beukes, 8 August 1734, and began farming on Zoetendals Valle in 1746. They did not have any children. After her death in 1751, he married Dina Maria Uys, daughter of Dirk Cornelis of Buffeljagtsplaas, on December 19 1751. In 1753 the first Overberg Lourens, Johannes Matthys, was born. Six more children (3 sons and 3 daughters) were born until 1766 after which the family increased substantially. According to available archival records Matthys Rostock received over time grazing rights on the following farms in the Strandveld: Rhenosterkop 1745, Vogelvallei 1746-92, Zoetendals Vallei 1746 to 1794 (1792), almost 50 years, Ratelrivier and Rietfontein 1755, Vogelstruiskraal 1762 to 1792, Geelerug 1780, Papenkuilsfontein 1790. At different times he had grazing rights on both Rhenosterkop, 1757-1759, and at the mouth of the Ratel River, 1755-1757.
18th century site – Lourens and Swart era

The history of Ratelrivier dates back to 1745 when Matthys Rostok Lourens received a piece of land as a loan farm called Buffeljagsrivier aan de Ratelrivier. He was the first European to settle at Ratelrivier. In 1795 Johannes Jochemus Swart (1754-1778) obtained grazing rights and in 1831 Hans Jacob Swart (1786 – 1835) bought 1 875ha (2 343 morgen). He was the first freeholder (eendomsreg). He passed away in 1835 and his wife, Catharina, was an active farmer for the next 25 years. During the ownership of the Swart family in the 1830s there was an incident between Mrs Swart and a slave after which he cursed the farm. The diagram of the quitrent grant to Hans Swart dated June 16, 1831 shows a well-established farm with a centrally placed t-shaped homestead and outbuilding. This was probably built by Lourens when he was living at Ratelrivier from 1745 or when it was his loan-place or a stock post for Buffeljagsrivier farm or Zoetendals Vallei at the time. The Swart family, thus, also lived in this house until the farm was sold to the Van Breda family. The wagon road from Dirk Uyskraal passed in front of the house. A water furrow passed the house from the fountain from which the water for the werf flowed towards the vegetable garden. Near the foundations is a stone-walled kraal. An ash-midden was found on the north-western corner of the milking shed, as well as towards the kraal. The foundations of this building were found where the 20th century milking shed was built near the vegetable garden. A 1938 aerial photograph shows a lopsided t-shaped structure.

Van Breda era

The first Van Breda to buy a section of the property in 1869, was Dirk Gysbert Van Reenen Van Breda, second son of Michiel Van Breda of Zoetendals Vallei. He sent his son, Dirk Gysbert with his young wife, Jacoba Alida Morkel and family to live on Ratelrivier. The main homestead was most probably built by the Van Bredas, a rectangular structure at first and added on over the years. The 1938 aerial photograph shows two rectangular structures alongside each other. They lived a good life of hunting parties with receptions the order of the day. Dirk Gysbert was known for his violent and unruly personality and actions. The couple was extremely jealous of each other and the social life brought about numerous altercations. One evening, in 1871 during a dancing party, Mrs Van Breda was dancing with a Scotsman which led to her death later that night after her husband shot her in the passage. After this incident he scratched the following message on one of the front window panes: 1871 Hard year can never be forgotten D Breda. He was later tried and found guilty in 1874, three years after the incident. The farm stayed Van Breda property until it was sold to William Fletcher in 1898.
**Fletcher Fry era**

In 1898 William Fletcher bought Ratelrivier from a syndicate which was at that time being managed by a Mr Hughes – he was an uncle to Ron Philip of sheep dog fame. The estate stretched from Hagel kraal (Pearly Beach) to and including Brandfontein, a total of 20 806 ha with 22,6km of coast. The Fletchers were a respected and affluent family and continued their luxurious Cape lifestyle at Ratelrivier. In spite of the wealthy lifestyle the Fletchers were very popular among the locals. There were regular visitors to the farmstead and it was a hive of social activities which included hunting parties. The Fletchers had only one son, William Anthony, who died in 1916 during World War 1 in Mesopotamia. Six months later William Fletcher also passed away. Stephen Fry visited Ratelrivier as a child and was much loved by the Fletcher family. Mrs Fletcher asked him to manage the farm after her husband’s death. Stephen managed the farm until his death in 1939. Fletcher Fry finally sold Ratelrivier to Clive Corder in 1946.

**Horses and stables at Ratelrivier**

William Fletcher bought race horses from overseas and successfully bred with them. His horses raced on all the important tracks and had their own colours. Stephen Fry was at one time his official jockey. In 1902 Petrus Arnoldus Swart Van As built a large stable complex for Fletcher with individual Oregon pine stalls for the stallions. On one side was a wagon-shed and on the other side fodder rooms and harness rooms. The buildings are built with limestone with thatched roofs. The ceilings were also Oregon pine. William loved horse riding and he always used one of his best horses. Each day after tea the groomsmen would bring two saddled horses to the garden gate for Stephen and Ethel Fry to go riding. They rode all over the farm and returned towards evening when the grooms unsaddled the horses, brushed them down and watered them at the same stream where watercress was gathered and where the wash houses were situated. One of the foremen was Hennie Geldenhuys. He was in charge of the horses and the stables, but was also the huntsman. (SOURCE: *The History of Ratelrivier*, as told by Nell Naudé neé Fry; pictures from Naudé family album; P. Van As picture supplied).

**Bottom stables**

There were two sets of stables, one for racehorses and one for the work horses. The bottom stables for the work horses were changed into living quarters, a wagon-shed, smithy, school room and garages. It is suspected that the section nearest to the main house, might have been the first house built on this werf.

**Ratelrivier’s hunting dogs**

Ratelrivier had a pack of fox hounds used for hunting jackal, lynx and any other vermin which caused sheep losses. The pack includes a “scenting dog”, a whippet for speed to set the pack off to give chase. They could be heard miles away! The hounds were well bred, mostly from imported stock from the United Kingdom. They were housed in a beautiful stone built and thatched kennel. Each had its own yard to run around in, enclosed with wire mesh fencing and a low wall. There were eight kennels – one for mothers and puppies, one for young hounds and the others for older dogs. At the end of the building was a kitchen where the dogs’ food was cooked, carcasses of sheep or crushed barley and bones. Adjoined this was a bedroom where a man slept to be near the dogs at night. The pack consisted of between 12 and 20 hounds. They did not always all go hunting, but were kept fit by exercising regularly. Moonlit nights were a “picnic” because anything that moved outside the kennels would set the hounds barking. The nursery window and spare room window of the main house were about 200 meters from the kennels. Many guests would ask not to be put in these rooms because the hounds kept them awake. The family never heard a thing, because to them it was part of the farmyard noise. At the time the hounds were looked after by Hennie Geldenhuys. He was the official huntsman and also in charge of the horses and stables. He lived in one of the workers’ houses which were called “the Huntsman’s House”. After him Gawie Lourens was appointed as the official huntsman.
Ratelrivier, a self-sustaining farm
In the early 1900s Ratelrivier was a self-sufficient little community with about 11 to 14 white families working on the farm. Employees included a farm manager, bookkeeper, secretary, school teacher, blacksmith, stable hands, shepherds, groomsmen, gardeners, dairy workers, a nurse and general labourers who all saw to the necessities of the day. Apart from vegetables there was also a variety of fruit trees to care for. There was not much in the way of flower gardens. (Adrian Ackermann) There were figs, quinces, apples, pears, mulberries, lovely pomegranates and grapes. The grape vines were covered with fine wire mesh to keep out birds. Stephen Fry, on the farm from 1917 until his death in 1939, had a big planting programme which included wheat. This was milled at the farm’s own mill for flour for every household, and it made lovely bread! The laundry was washed in the stream that ran in front of the house by one of the farm women. The "wash house" included a big wooden box which was sunk into the stream. The washing was immaculate – bleached in the sun – ironed and starched to perfection and whiter than white. The farm also had a shop run for the convenience of the farm people.

Sheep farming at Ratelrivier
The highlight of the farming year was the shearing – also done during the September holidays because the children loved to be around and Fletcher was being schooled to be a farmer. Stephen Fry farmed with 8000 sheep and many horses. About 30 shearsers from Elim were mustered particularly for Ratel River. The same shearsers came year after year and they were well paid and fed and they looked forward annually to the get-together. We had extra white men (about 10) to sort the wool which was baled in huge hessian bags and trodden down by foot so that the bales more or less weighed about 300lbs (150kg). Wool was paid for by the pound. A special kitchen, pantry and scullery were built and a team of cooks prepared the food for the shearing team. They were given three hot meals a day, morning tea and enjoyed an afternoon coffee break. The shearing shed was about 500m from the kitchen and a cart and a pair of horses were laid on to transport the food to the waiting team. The shearing shed was a large beautiful stone building with a thatched roof; the road to the shearing shed with its red gate could be seen from the window of the sitting room. It was subsequently knocked down and the dressed stone was used for other buildings by various owners later. The shearing took about a week; about 1500 sheep were worked per day. Everything seemed to run on oiled wheels.

Ratelrivier’s school
There were fourteen families employed by William Fletcher. He started and maintained a government sponsored school on the farm for all the children, and employed a teacher. In October 1918 Stephen Fry married Louise de Villiers, then the teacher at Ratelrivier School. Many years later the Fry children also attended the same school. Their teacher was Lulu Van Breda related to the Zoetendals Valley Van Bredas. The school was housed at different stages in the bottom stables and in one of the worker’s houses.

Farm workers
The servants were all “white” from the 14 families that lived on the farm. They lived in four semi-detached cottages which were built at the same time as the stables - 1902.

(SOURCE: The History of Ratelrivier, as told by Naudé néé Fry; pictures from Naudé family album; P. Van As picture supplied).
Ratelrivier graveyard
The graveyard is situated on a high rise in a milkwood stand a few hundred metres south-west of the werf. It was in this graveyard where a potshard from the Stone-age was found. It is thus a very interesting graveyard and a site which was also used by pre-colonial people. The people buried there are shipwreck victims – an unknown French ship’s captain and his wife, as well as a number of other drowned seamen washed up on the beach - one known as Die seeman se graf. It is unknown which grave. Jacoba Alida Van Breda, murdered wife of Dirk Van Breda, is buried there, but the grave was never identified properly. Other people buried there are Fletcher family members, Fry family members, Gildenhuys family members, Nigrinie, Oupa Ouland Germishuys and children’s graves. Some of the graves had cement crosses which were badly vandalized. The Fletcher and Fry graves are covered with engraved cement slabs. Other grave decorations are bottles, a porcelain pot, wooden board. In total there is about 25 graves.

Fry Memorial stone (1940)
Cyprus trees were planted along the entrance road in memory of Stephen Fry who died in September 1939. A memorial stone reading These trees were planted in loving memory of Stephen Fry 1940 marks the site.

William Henry Anthony (Tony) Fletcher
At the outbreak of WWI, Tony Fletcher, William Fletcher’s only son, volunteered and was sent to Mesopotamia in the Middle East, where he contracted an illness from which he died in 1916. The father took the death of his son badly and six months later he died – it is said from a broken heart.

De Saumarez De Havilland era
In 1950 Lord Vincent De Saumarez bought Ratelrivier and Springfield. His family stayed on Springfield and appointed farm managers to farm with sheep and cattle on both farms. The couple brought books, antique furniture, paintings and tapestries from Shrubland Park and developed both farms as bases of English culture. Lady De Saumarez preferred Ratelrivier and went to live permanently on Ratelrivier after her husband’s death in 1969. She lived on her own until her daughter took her back to Britain where she died in 1985. Lady de Saumarez shared her husband’s passion for gardening and at Ratelrivier she cultivated an English garden. She restored the outbuildings and servants’ quarters, built a swimming pool and wrote two books.

Ratelrivier was again used as a holiday farm when the De Havilland family rented the farm from the De Saumarez family from 1991 and lived there until the farm was bought by SANParks in 2003. The De Havillands managed Ratelrivier as a nature reserve.
Harry Bolus and Ratelrivier

South Africa has been the destination of botanical explorers from about 1592 and established, unbeknown to them, the beginning of a significant bio-cultural heritage for South Africa. Plant populations found and identified from those days are recognised as historical scientific artefacts, but the link between the first collections made by early botanists and the scientific heritage value of these collections has not been made in the South African context yet. Currently Carly Cowell of the Cape Research Centre is busy with a study which aims to establish the scientific heritage of type plant collections in the Agulhas National Park before 1914. Three farmsteads, today part of the Agulhas National Park, were visited by botanical explorers in the 1800s, namely Ratelrivier, Rietfontein and Rhenosterkop. These botanists made the Elim Missionary station their base from where they conducted exploration and collection trips to the neighbouring farms. From the type specimens it can be seen that there were two major collection times when travel to the Agulhas Plain was suitable, namely April before the heavy winter rains and December, once the wetlands had dried out sufficiently for travellers to pass through. In September 1894 Harry Bolus left the Cape for Elim. On October 4 he drove over to Ratelrivier where he met up with Mr and Mrs Hughes, who at the time managed the farm for the Ratel River Estate Consortium. He proceeded to do botanical work along the roads and fields near the farmstead. During his visits to the farm he was told that Mrs Hughes liked wild flowers and kept what remained around the homestead intact.

During the 1894 collection trip to Ratelrivier area Harry Bolus collected 14 type-plant specimens in total. His friend, Rudolf Schlechter, collected 18 specimens. Bolus collected mainly in the western part of the Agulhas Plain around Elim and Ratelrivier, while Schlechter ventured further eastwards and collected near the Southern Tip, Rhenosterkop and Brandfontein. In all Bolus collected 40 types and Schlechter 106 on the Agulhas Plain. To date 29 of the 32 species which had been collected inside the boundaries of the Agulhas National Park have again been found. These have Red Data statuses from critically endangered to threatened. At a national and global scale these plants are rare as well as having a heritage value within the park. (SOURCE: COWELL, C. 2014. Critical moments for botany on the Agulhas Plain. Unpublished).

Ratelrivier meant to become a future conservation area

Over the years Ratelrivier has meant different things to its owners. During the Van Breda-family era in the 19th century the Ratelrivier farmstead was frequented by regular visitors and was alive with social and hunting parties. The Fletcher family took over the farm towards the end of the 19th century and especially Steven Fry always had a love for nature. He regularly took his children horse-riding and he taught them “veld lore, the names of the wild flowers, where to find them, when and how to pick them. He was way ahead of his time when it came to conservation of flora and fauna. Everything that creeps or crawls or flies or runs or swims was important, but especially “his” buck, Bontebok, until they were removed in 1936 to the Bontebok Reserve, then on the Zeekoeivlei property. The little “bokkies” meant just as much to him - duikers, vlakbokkies, rhebok and steenbok”. When the Corders took over in 1946 they used Ratelrivier as a holiday farm. In 1950 Lord Vincent De Saumarez bought Ratelrivier. Lady Du Saumarez preferred Ratelrivier and went to live permanently on Ratelrivier after her husband’s death in 1969. She passed away in 1985 and after this period Ratelrivier was used as a holiday farm again. The De Havilland family rented the farm from the De Saumarez family from 1991. They established a wildflower business from the fynbos and cleared the infestations of alien plants. They re-fenced the property and established a private nature reserve, notable for its Bontebok and Micro frogs. They lived there until the farm was bought by SANParks in 2003. Descendants of farm workers remember the vleie full of Thatching reed, Eleagnia sp, Painted ladies, Gladiolus sp and Chincherinchees, Ornithogalum sp and the water with Geelbekeendjies, Yellow-billed Duck, Anas undulata flying in in droves during the rainy season. After extensive alien clearing and restoration to the wetlands, Ratelrivier as a prime conservation area is becoming a reality. (SOURCE: The History of Ratelrivier, as told by Nell Naudé, neé Fry; pictures from Naudé family album).
Ratelrivier, shipwrecks and shipwrecked people

The first recorded shipwreck on the Cape Agulhas coastline

_Soetendalsvlei_ is named after the first documented shipwreck on the Cape Agulhas coast. During the night of August 23 1673 the VOC ship, _Zoetendaal_, a Dutch flute, ran aground on the rocks in a bay. By daybreak the survivors started to walk towards the Cape and arrived at a big lake with fresh water. They were so grateful that they named it after their ship, _Soetendalsvlei_.

Before settlement

Ratelrivier area has a history with shipwrecks since before people decided to settle there. In 1722 the _Schonenberg_ wrecked in the bay which is known today as Struisbaai. The Cape Government sent rescue teams to salvage what was left of the cargo and to bring back survivors. They set up camp along the shores of the _Zoetendaals Valley_ fresh water lake. On December 7 at 09h00 they started their return journey from _Zoetendaals Valley_ after waiting for the other loaded wagons to arrive from the shipwreck. It was at about that time that 10 of the 13 men they had met at Klopper’s place (_Uijlen Craal Rivier_) three days ago, arrived on their way back to the wreck as ordered. At sundown they arrived at a small river situated between _Zoetendaals Valleij_ and _Buffeljagt River_ where they spent the night. This river is more than likely the _Ratel River_ that was later to become a prominently known landmark for ships that were lost along this coastline. (Herbert, 20.)

Following the trail of shipwrecks around the Ratel River estuary

Just off the coast where the Ratel River runs into the sea are some very treacherous reefs where there might be more shipwrecks than people are aware of. To the south-west is Quoin Point which was also the graveyard of many ships.

Nicobar

On July 11 1783 the _Nicobar_, a Danish East Indiaman, wrecked on Quoin Point. Local farmers looted the cargo which washed up on shore near Ratel River.

Jessie

The _Jessie_, a British vessel, stranded at Quoin Point on October 7 1829. The survivors got away on two boats of which one was driven landwards and beached. The other boat drifted eastwards. Part of the hull and cargo were found at the Ratel River estuary, guarded by local farmers of which one was a Mr Swart.

Barbara Gordon

In 1853 the _Barbara Gordon_, a British barque, wrecked on a reef near Ratelrivier. Six people drowned.

Eastern Province

On June 26 1865 the _Eastern Province_, a British iron screw steamer, ended up on a reef from which they could not loosen themselves. The passengers were taken to a sandy bay. One of the passengers saw a stone wall in a distance and walked towards it. It was the farmstead of Mr Van Breda of Ratelrivier. All the survivors were taken to the farmstead.

North East

On December 31 1872 the _North East_, British iron screw steam brig, wrecked during stormy weather at the Ratel River estuary. All on board survived.

Gloria Deo

In 1882 the Italian barque, _Gloria Deo_, wrecked near Ratelrivier. All on board survived.

Grace

On June 4 1822 the _Grace_, a British vessel, caught fire and the passengers had to leave the ship. They landed safely at the Ratel River estuary. Hans Jacob Swart, owner of Ratelrivier farm, received and helped them at his house.

Duchess of Buccleugh

In stormy weather on June 13 1850 the _Duchess of Buccleugh_, a British barque, lost her rudder and ran ashore near the Ratel River estuary. All the passengers survived.

La Souvenance

The _La Souvenance_, a French barque, wrecked in May 1871 on the off-shore reefs near the Ratel River estuary. After a search for days the wreck was found near the Ratel River estuary after corpses washed up on the beach at Struisbaai. Nobody survived.

R. P. Buck

The American barque, _R. P. Buck_, wrecked in heavy fog near the Ratel River estuary on April 4 1877. Everyone on board survived.

Cumaria

The steam ship _Cumaria_, after it struck a reef on July 2 1900, reached a bay at the Ratel River estuary and sank.