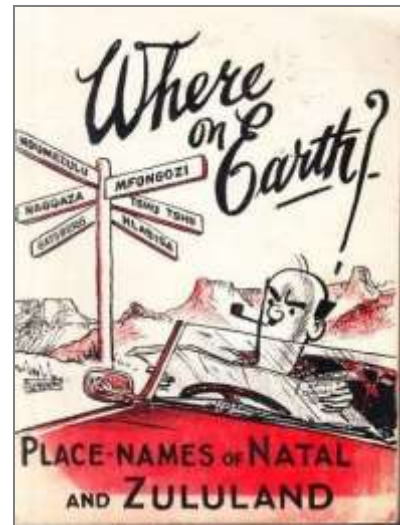


Umbilo Road Walk, 28 May 2023

Introduction: Arthur Gammage

Don Stayat as “the Wayfarer” had a Talk of the Day column in the Daily News. He had an enquiry about some place names, including Winklespruit. With readers, he began a search of names in the Province, and published *Where on Earth: Place Names of Natal and Zululand* in 1971. Illustrated by Jock Leyden, with a cartoon drawing of Wilbur on the cover.



The Umbilo River was originally known as River Avon. The Zulu name refers to a boiling sound the waters made. The part of Umbilo Road for our walk is in the suburb of Congella, Umbilo Road itself is in lower Glenwood. Congella is said to be a corruption of “kwaKangela amangengane” which means “the place where a watch is kept on the destitute vagabonds”, and refers to a military outpost established by Shaka near the Bay of Natal to keep an eye on the Luthuli people who had settled hereabouts. In 1838 DC Toohey planted Natal’s first cotton-seed at Congella which was also the site of several kilns which produced a crude lime cement by burning sea shells. Congella was the scene of early settlements and “military operations”.

Early plans for the Townlands of Durban, especially Thomas Okes’ plan of 1846 show the town layout, on the north edge of the Bay, bounded by Pine Street, Grey Street and Stanger Street and outlying settlements, one towards the Umgeni River, one near the Umbilo River, some plots at the centre of the Berea Ridge and the Congella “dorp”. Botanic Gardens block was also included. The English settlers’ town was low-lying and marshy; Congella was a promontory on drier land, probably a good fishing spot. So it has been speculated that the Boers had first choice. There was a short cross road called Lime Street. Commodore Road, associated with a Congella Yacht Club, survives.

The old maps show the first road along this strip as Congella Road, and this fed into Smith Street, which was the original “high street”. An 1850 update of the Okes plan labels two roads to PMBurg, the southern long way around and the more direct route over the Berea. Later the name would be associated with the “Old Smokey” power station.

The 1860 railway from Durban’s Market Square to the Point harbour was not economical – the same trip could be made by cart or wagon. The first extension was north to the Umgeni Quarry to transport stone for harbour works, which helped keep it going. From 1875, the line was extended west and then south to South Coast Junction (Rossburgh) and inland. With the discovery of gold at the Witwatersrand in 1886, the race was on to reach Johannesburg by rail.

Into the 20th century came the reclamation of land for the building of Maydon Wharf, completed c1910. This greatly widened corridor accommodated some large facilities, the grain elevator, abattoir, factories,

workshops and warehouses. Also municipal hostels. Along the inland edge came a mix of service industries and residential buildings, notably Mt Royal on Dunkirk Place, Corporation flats, hotels – the Congella and the Willowvale, several churches.

From our home at Escombe, Umbilo Road was our main route to Durban, another being through Cato Manor. So I passed this way countless times, going past the park opposite Willowvale Hotel with no idea of its history as the passive resistance site of 1946. It was proclaimed a heritage site on the 50th anniversary. The bronze badge was delivered to our office to put up on site.

Or for a change Dad drove along Maydon Road and we counted the bumps over the railway siding crossings. I heard that this was in an edition of the Guinness Book of Records – was it about 25 of them?

We also used the railway, the stations being Escombe, Malvern, Poets Corner, Hillary, Bellair, Sea View, Rosburgh, Umbilo, Congella, Dalbridge, Berea Road, Durban. I only learned much later that Dalbridge was so named for the footbridge over the station, starting opposite Dalton Road. Once I wrote down from the station name boards the distances from Durban and the altitudes and drew a basic graph.

Much of the development took place through the early decades of the 20th century, including the Art Deco period. So the prevailing styles include a few pure Art Deco, others with elements thereof, Style Moderne with rounded street corner forms, a couple with Spanish or Mediterranean features also known locally as Berea style, others Brian Kearney would classify as Vernacular style of the Union period.

Architects that we have been able to identify include well known names: AA Ritchie-McKinlay, associated with Berea style, W Barboore, Arthur Cross, Clement Fridjhon, Geoffrey le Sueur, WJ Cornelius. There are some groups of significant buildings, some pairs on opposite sides of the road. Conditions vary from very good to rundown or neglected. It is encouraging that there are very few vacant properties. There are damaged patches of sidewalk paving awaiting repair. The original sandstone kerbing is intact in good condition.

Old stone kerbs for sidewalk
outside Glenariff, 96 Umbilo Road



Information from *A Revised Listing of the Important Places and Buildings in Durban*, Brian Kearney 1984 is acknowledged with thanks.