

Hardship and Prosperity

It is not hard to imagine the difficulties that the first farmers faced here in the Cape of Good Hope. They were transplanted from a tumultuous, war-torn Europe, to a wild, untamed country. They came here with next to no possessions, often as single people, braving the new world in search of a better life. They had to fulfil hefty obligations towards the VOC in return for the lands granted to them. Their plight and poverty was depicted in a memorandum of 1744, which they submitted to their Governor, who was based in India.

1744 MEMORANDUM:

The Burgher Councillors and Heemraden of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein present the following petition to the Council, in the name of the Colonists subsisting as agriculturists; they wish it to be sent to India to be presented to Governor General van Imhoff and the Council there, and that the Council here may favourably mention it, and represent the poor and miserable condition of the farmers to the High Government, that they may the better succeed in their object. Signed by D. Malan, JP Giegeler, D de Villiers, Wt Louw, Pieter du Toit, Charl Marais, A Grové, HJ Prehn, JL Bestbier, G van der Byl and A Brink.

Memorial of burgher councillors and Heemraden of Stellenbosch and Drakenstein to Governor General v. Imhoff and Council at Batavia. Communicates the many complaints of the agriculturalists made to memorialist with the earnest prayer that their miserable condition may be represented to the High Government; that, according to successively issued placcaten of Governor H. Swellengrebel and the Political Council, dated 10 January 1744, the India Government on the 15th of October 1743, were pleased to order that wheat, hitherto priced at f7, to the great distress of the growers, who have handed to us the annexed statement which will show you the necessary annual expenditure to which the agriculturist must submit, before he is able should the harvest be favourable to supply 300 muids of wheat to the Company; - which quantity few can supply; - the generality being able to raise only a

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third of that quantity, and consequently having nothing left over for the support of themselves and families, excepting wethers, which are at present very cheap, because of their large number and the scarcity of money. Farmers that produce peas and beans live from 50 to 80 hours away in the Interior, and most of them have to buy their bread corn. It is the same with the viticulturists, who also grow very little corn and must buy it for their tables, having no suitable lands for it, as most of them lie at the foot of the mountains. You will also take into consideration that the failures of the crops in 1738, 1739 and 1740, so crippled the corn farmers that the three succeeding plentiful years did not enable them to recover themselves completely as to enable them to pay their arrear interest and other debts, incurred for blacksmiths, wagon makers, and other household purposes. The great mortality among the slaves, nearly a thousand of whom died during the last two or three years, the running away of others, the condemnation of many by the Court of Justice, the shooting down or killing of a considerable number by the Hottentots, - without whose labour agriculture cannot be carried on - hamper the agriculturist now more than ever, for their price is exceedingly high, it ranging from Rds150 to Rds300 each, for a good slave that can be used for agricultural purposes. God also often visits the land with various plagues; e.g. locusts in myriads, caterpillars, weevils, rust in the vineyards or honey dew in the corn, storm winds that often beat out the corn and other grain before they are ripe, water floods, and heavy droughts which parch up the corn in the fields and the grapes on the stocks before they are ripe, in consequence of which mishaps and crop failures, some farmers have been obliged to eat barley meal mixed and baked with pumpkins. Besides all this they are annually subject to mortality among the draft oxen, the result of hard work, bad food, and sickness. All these misfortunes are the causes of the pitiable condition of the farmers among whom there are not 20 who have not to pay the heavy interest of 6% for the capital, with which they have bought or mortgaged their farms, besides giving as sureties two landed proprietors, even in the case

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of persons supposed to be capitalists. We do not even mention those who have no slaves, or only one, and who, with their children must do all this heavy work, and herd the cattle; a portion of whom has to do with almost no clothing, and go about almost naked, not knowing where to scrape together as much as will enable them to buy a small piece of calico, as everything that the farmer is obliged to buy becomes dearer every year. Memorialist therefore pray that they may be assisted in their ruined condition, and that the price of wheat may remain what it was before, and that you may be pleased to buy the grain of this Colony, as promised by His Honour the Governor General (v. Imhoff) to the people here, that the poor colonists may be able to subsist, and not be completely ruined; as they have no other buyer for their grain than the Company, and know of nothing else that they can take in hand for the support of themselves and families. Memorialists have drawn up this petition as the result of the many complaints of the agriculturists that visit the Town from time to time.

Statement of expenditure necessarily incurred by a Cape farmer every year, before he is able should the crops be favourable to supply 300 muids of wheat to the Company, viz: 3 ox wagons at Rds 110 annually depreciating a third in value, f330; 3 ploughs at f100, depreciating one third in value f100; 2 harrows at f50 do for depreciation f33; For plough shares, coulter and sharpening them when blunt, f75; 60 or 70 draft oxen for 3 ploughs and harrows, of which annually about 12 die, valued at Rds 8 each. F288. The maintenance of 15 slaves for 3 ploughs, 2 harrows and cattle herds, f50. Each calculated for a year f750. For tar and train oil to smear the wagons for shovels, spades, picks, sickles, corn bags, cordage, etc, f200. Superintendent's wages f60. Total f1830. When therefore the tithes have been subtracted from the 300 muids, only 270 remain, and this quantity at f7 would only give f1890, so that little or nothing remains over. Besides the expenditure above mentioned, the farmers have also to pay annually Rds 24, as recognition for their loan places. It had formerly been Rds 12, but a few years ago was increased to Rds 24. Without them the farmer

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cannot depasture his cattle and on many of them there is no land that can be cultivated, or very little grass, so that they do not afford pasture for more than three months. Secondly ½ Rd for every morgen held on quitrent for 15 years, which, at its best, can only be cultivated 2 years in succession, when it has to lie fallow for 2 or 3 years afterwards. Thirdly Rds 3 cask money, for every leaguer of wine to the Company as contribution for the “Mouillie”, the Pont at Berg River, maintenance of the district’s buildings, mills, bridges, and other expenses – e.g. the milling of the bread corn, the reparation and maintenance of their houses, and whatever may be necessary for house-keeping, and clothing their families.

Reference:

Landdrost en Heemraden at Stellenbosch (L&H: Requesten IV) : 1744

The farmers at the Cape, furthermore, had a number of challenges in the first half of the 19th Century (c.1820-1840). There was a fluctuation in wine export prices, a rise of inflation, and a drop in the value of the Rijksdaalder. There was an increase in price of farming equipment. The harvests were poor due to snug beetles, anthracnose and mildew plagues. These troubles coincided with the emancipation of slaves in 1834, which created a labour crisis. By the end of 1840, most wine farmers were considered “poor”. (Oberholtser 1987:77)

But, the tides turned, and around about 1855 wine farming became profitable once more. The export prices were as high as 82 rijksdaalders per leaguer of wine. The Napoleonic wars in Europe had created a demand in Britian for South African wines. Preferential tariffs were instituted, and wine farms generally prospered. During this time the great “Cape Dutch” manor houses were built, enlarged or re-styled. After the preferential tariffs were lifted, the demand for export wine reduced. The railway line between Cape Town and Wellington was,

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however, completed in 1863, and the booming mining industry in the north of the country boosted the demand for wine and brandy locally. (Oberholtser 1987:79)

At the turn of the 20th century the phylloxera disease ruined the vines at the Cape to a great extent. Fruit farming replaced viticulture on many farms. Wine farming was built up again, but transformed from a largely family farm-based structure to cooperative wine making, such as through large companies like the KWV in Paarl or Distell in Stellenbosch, for example. Diamant did also produce grape harvests for the cooperatives. The werfs and buildings on the family farms deteriorated on many farms, as funding restoration was out of reach to most farms, except those bought up by the large corporations. In recent years there has been a trend among business people to invest in Cape wine farms, restore the buildings, sometimes build new modern cellars and produce farm labelled wine again. The restored farmyards have become popular tourism sites and are ideally suited to cater to the hospitality industry.