

OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

THE HOUWHOEK RALLIES

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

THE Houw Hoek Inn has been a landmark in the Cape for well over 200 years. In May 1798 Lady Anne Barnard and her husband Andrew, the colonial secretary, set off on a month's leave into the wilds of Swellendam.

On their second day they were confronted with the precipitous Hottentots Holland Kloof, the only route to the Overberg. She was shocked by the plight of their draught oxen, about fifty of them were needed to pull the wagons up the 'almost perpendicular' incline, and to force extra effort the drivers resorted to the whip and prodded the creatures with knives. Eventually they made the summit and at dusk reached the tollgate at the foot of the Houwhoek mountains. The party spent the night on the farm Arieskraal at the home of Arie Joubert and his wife, who shared their evening meal of boiled chicken 'fit for an emperor'. These were the humble beginnings of the Houw Hoek Inn.

By the 1820s some 4 000 wagons were using the appalling Hottentots Holland Kloof each year and the farmers of the Overberg were crying out for new route up the mountain. Sir Lowry's Pass, a much more reasonable incline along the face of the slope, was built in 1830



The entrance to the Houw Hoek Inn in 1914, on the left the huge bluegum tree

by Major Charles Michell. The new pass was opened amid great celebrations, Michell demonstrated the ease by which his route could be negotiated by dashing up the pass in a cart drawn by two horses.

The Houw Hoek Inn was licensed

in 1834, making it the oldest licensed hotel in South Africa. An upper story was added in 1860, Lady Duff Gordon slept there a year later while travelling to the Caledon Spa. She described the structure as 'a mud cottage, half inn, half farm', kept by Mr Beyers, a German ex-missionary. The parlour was a tiny room with a mud floor and the two

bedrooms still tinier and darker, each with two huge beds which filled them entirely. But the food was excellent and the beds 'all clean and no louses'. In 1848 Mrs Beyers had given birth to a daughter, Maria, and a bluegum tree had been planted to commemorate the birth. The tree is now 11.2m in circumference and



Sidney Benjamin's 7 hp Panhard, Houwhoek Trials, 1904



S.H. Adams' 10 hp Lanchester



A view of the hotel gardens

still guards the entrance to the inn.

The hostelry has built up a superb history. Many years ago Henry, a local farmer, killed himself on the way home from the inn one night and his ghost still haunts the premises, frightening the night porters. At one stage a young lad who, on his way abroad, left a bank note on the ceiling of the bar so that on his return - possibly broke - he could again enjoy the delights of the cellar. Others followed his example and there is now an impressive collection of old currencies on display. The bar had a large brass bell that hung from the creaky wooden ceiling. Above it was room three, the honeymoon suite; the ringing of the bell was the cue for the patrons in the bar to break into spontaneous applause!

In 1902 the railway to Caledon was opened, the train stopped briefly at the Houw Hoek Inn and meals were served to the passengers on the platform. As part of the Automobile Club of South Africa's programme of events for 1903, the energetic Jack Rose proposed that a 100-Mile club run be held on Monday 9 November, King Edward VII's birthday. It was to be a Reliability Trial from Greenmarket Square in Cape Town, over Sir Lowry's Pass to lunch at the Houw Hoek Inn, and back to the milestone at Maitland. The proposal was adopted with enthusiasm and on the morning of the trial the first of the fifteen entrants left the square at 8 am. Each vehicle had an official observer on board and the cars were timed up Sir Lowry's Pass.

It turned out to be a hot and hazardous day, with temperatures of between 90 and 100°F in the

shade. An Oldsmobile caught fire and was only just saved from destruction. The gradients up the pass were quite a challenge and the road, particularly the section between the Steenbras and Palmiet rivers, was very rough. To add to all this, the competitors found that the carriage trade was out to get them and had deliberately positioned broken bottles along the route. Given these conditions it is not surprising that only five cars completed the event successfully. The fastest time up the pass was an impressive 12 minutes 19 seconds by Sidney Benjamin in his 6 hp De Dion Bouton while the slowest was a rather incredible 104 minutes 19 seconds by Yankee Jenkins in his 6 hp Rambler, who understandably was disqualified at Houwhoek for arriving late. Only two cars were awarded the non-stop certificate for

both the outward and homeward trips, a 10 hp Lanchester owned by S.H. Adams, in 5 hours 24 minutes, and a 6.5 hp Gladiator driven by Charlie Rorich in 6 hours 13 minutes. Some of the cars had broken down and at least thirteen members and their wives spent the night at the Houw Hoek Inn. Nevertheless the event had been a great success and was repeated annually for the next three years.

The Crankhandle Club was founded in July 1955 and a year later the members decided to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Houwhoek Trials. The club magazine, the Klaxon, featured a colourful description the first of these rallies.

'Houwhoek Run - December 8 and 9, 1956.

This took the form of a two-day outing to the Olde Coaching Inn at Houwhoek and about 30 Club members took part either in veteran or vintage cars or as passengers.

The gathering point was the area near the Wynberg fire station. Here, the following cars assembled: Angus Kinnes' E.M.F., Desmond Baumann's Lagonda, Frank Thompson's Renault, Jack Holmes' Bentley 4.5, Rudi Reitz's Maxwell, Count Luccio Labia's Siddeley Special, Robert von Holdt's Chrysler and Bill Williams' Model T. Mrs LeCoq Moir, George Kinnes and Andre du Toit also turned out in more modern machinery. The cars set off in convoy Houwhoekwards about 3 pm and moved along

steadily until just after Faure when Angus Kinnes' passenger thought he was hearing ominous knocks. Everyone came to a halt to investigate, but when it was found to be a false alarm, all did a smart about turn and settled down to tea at Faure.

The convoy got under way once again - losing Count Labia on the way (he had to get back to town) but at the foot of Sir Lowry's Pass, Angus Kinnes had trouble with his fuel pipe. Nothing serious resulted for after running repairs nothing untoward was reported and all cars arrived at the Houw Hoek Inn.

From this point onward, your chronicler finds himself probing into the mists... he can quite clearly recall that one or two bottles bearing the title 'Chianti' came into the picture. It seems, also, that imported bottles of vintage port also figured in the proceedings but how and why... perhaps this is a topic best left alone. Suffice it to say that a thoroughly enjoyable time was had by all.

Jack Holmes and Cecil Harris returned to town after dinner - oh yes - and the dance that followed leaving the rest of the party to find sleeping places in various places of the hotel. One member saw fit to drag a garden seat into the lounge under the mistaken impression that there was no other accommodation available. (In fact, a double bedroom went vacant that night. That is something else we are not too clear about).

....continued overleaf



Crankhandle Club cars in front of the Houw Hoek Inn, 1960