

# The History of Claremont House

by Frank Molteno

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**Sir John Charles Molteno (seated) presides over wedding of Caroline to Dr C F K Murray at Claremont House, 1876**

## Introduction

For over half a century (1860s to the 1920s), Claremont House – which was not only a big rambling old house and garden, but which also had sufficient land for fruit trees, vines and a kitchen garden – was the Molteno family home in Cape Town. The author of this short piece is Frank, one of Sir John Molteno's sons and the one who eventually took over the estate in turn as his family's home. Frank was a land surveyor by profession. So he includes quite a bit of technical detail about how the estate changed hands in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries which I have omitted here. I have also taken small liberties with the text in the interests of readability, including letting Frank refer to himself in the first person. Dr Murray is Frank's brother in law, being Caroline's husband.

You can read other evocative descriptions of what the place was like elsewhere on this website.

**Robert Molteno**

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A short account of the Claremont House estate may not be out of place. The property was originally granted in the year 1778 by Governor Joachim van Plettenberg.... At that time the property received the name Weltevreden which means "well satisfied".... The estate was originally 60 morgen (rather more than 120 acres) in extent. At that date the Main Road is shown as running between the estate and the Stellenberg Estate....

It is not quite clear as to when the name Claremont was given, but when Charles Blair transferred it to Robert Waters on 21 April 1836, it is described by the name Claremont.... On 31 August 1841, the property was transferred to Robert Clunie Logie, who sold off Claremont House to John Charles Molteno (afterwards Sir John C. Molteno) but retained Greenfield House where he lived for some time. To one of his daughters, now Mrs Stegmann, some of the family – namely Betty, Caroline, Maria, Charlie, Percy and Frank – owe their first schooling.

The property, after having had various portions cut off, was transferred to me and the house with a certain amount of the land is still my property, though a portion of the land belongs to Percy Molteno.

Claremont House, as I first remember it, appears much the same in front, except that the dam was not cemented. But where the present kitchen and adjoining room now are, there used to be a yard with a very fine oak in it – this was removed to make way for these two rooms, which were used as bedrooms by some of us boys at the time. Then again, where the three rooms of the passage beyond the bathroom now stand, there used to be three very fine fig trees which yielded most excellent fruit. At that time there was a long covered passage called "the long passage" which led up to two detached rooms, one of which used to be our schoolroom. These two rooms have since been demolished, and the three present rooms off the passage were built and first used as bedrooms for some of us boys and one as a study.

The outbuildings were much the same as at present except that a cow stable existed fronting towards Pine Road. The ground at that time extended to the Main Road from Beaufort Villa to the Harfield Estate and included the houses on Molteno Road and Barkly House, all of which were built by Sir John Molteno. Then in 1876 the land from Pine Road to Station Road Kenilworth was acquired by him and later was sold off in building sites. At that time Harfield Road only extended from the Main Road to the railway, but Sir John laid out the extension of it right up to Kenilworth station.

I can well remember how the water from the spring at Kenilworth, which is now part of Dr Murray's property, used to be brought down to Claremont House in earthenware pipes for irrigation purposes. There was a storage dam at the back under those grand old firs and from there it was led in an open furrow into the fountain in front of the house and into the garden.

At that time what is now the paddock for the cows used to be a splendid orchard containing a large variety of most excellent pears. The swimming bath in the garden used to be filled from the excellent well at hand. In that bath most of us learn to swim, and many an enjoyable day was spent by us and our friends in that old garden with all its beautiful fruit. Where the lucerne field now is, there used to be a vineyard of about 4,000 vines of most excellent muscatel and hanepoot grapes. The two rooms facing this vineyard were fitted up as schoolrooms for Charlie, Percy and myself and there we were taught by Mr David Smith for about three years (1872 to 1873), until we were all three sent to the Diocesan College in July 1873.