

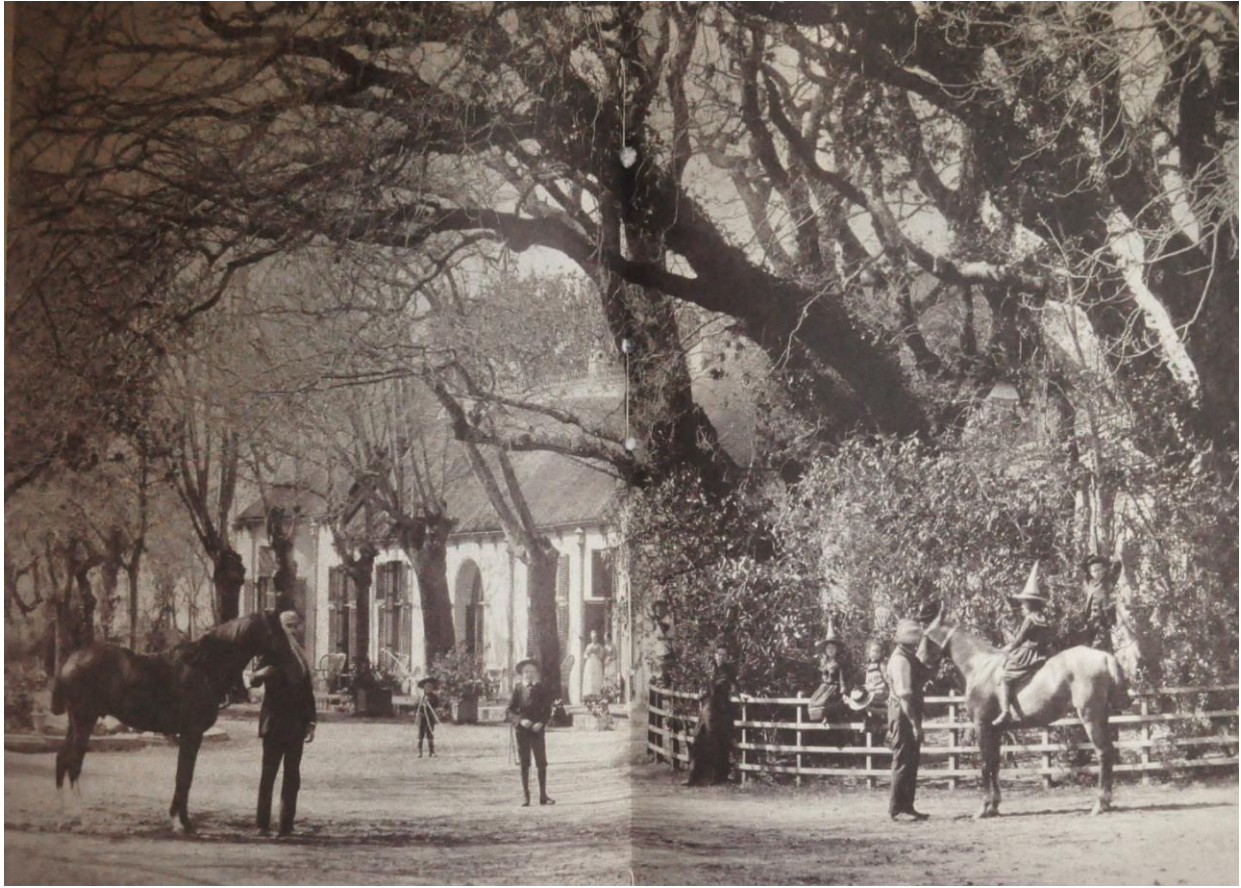
Life at Claremont House, 1880-1885 Recollections by Admiral V B Molteno

Source: extracted from Francis Hirst's unpublished biography of Percy Molteno



**The entrance to Claremont House
from the Main Road**

Claremont House was seven miles out of Cape Town. It was approached by two very fine oak avenues. It faced Table Mountain, three or four miles distant, of which it had a lovely view. It had spacious grounds of at least a hundred acres. There was a vineyard with splendid quality grapes, and orchards which contained quantities of all varieties of fruits - pears, apples, plums, greengages, apricots, peaches, nectarines, guavas, loquats, custard apples, bananas and dates. But the greater part of the property was covered with the natural Cape vegetation of silver trees, proteas, heaths and wild flowers which abound there.



The children playing in the grounds of Claremont House

It may be of interest to mention that we had three entirely distinct species of guavas at Claremont House, two of which I have never seen anywhere else in all my wanderings in Africa, Ceylon, China and Japan. One was a bright red fruit, the other a pale yellow with a quite soft inside – and much smaller than the common guava which has a firm-fleshed, seedy interior. Also there was a roseapple, an apple-like fruit outside with one large stone [inside]; the smell of the fruit was exactly like rose leaves. There were two tennis-courts and two very rough fields on which we used to play cricket with the Bissetsⁱ and Tredgolds, who lived nearby.

Claremont House made an ideal home for a large family of boys. Some five to ten miles away, on the then quite uninhabited Cape Flats,ⁱⁱ there were numerous *vleis* (or lakes), the homes or breeding places of wild duck and all sorts of water fowl, as well as snipe and buck (small antelope). During the holidays there were constant shooting expeditions out on the Cape Flats, with muzzle-loaders. I cannot remember any blank days.



**Looking over the Cape Flats
towards False Bay from Wynberg
Hill near Claremont House**

When you left Claremont House grounds, the countryside was absolutely uninhabited - with the exception of four or five small farms – for twenty to twenty-five miles out on the Flats towards the Hottentot Holland Mountains. The only roads were sandy tracks. Even between Claremont and Table Mountain at that time, there were very few houses and hardly any cultivation. The inhabited parts were along the main road to Simonstown, the naval station; and out at Constantia there were a good many large wine farms.

The family formed a little colony at Claremont. The next two houses to the south belonged to the Bissets and the Alports. Aunt Betty (Mrs Bisset, née Jarvis) was a younger sister of our mother. She had five sons and one daughter. My mother's elder sister, Sophia ('Aunt Sophy') had married my father's business partner, Percy John Alport. They had no children, but my Uncle Alport contributed not a little to our enjoyment of country life. He was very fond of horses and sheep, imported breeding rams, kept a stud of racehorses, and was often successful on the Turf. Our grandfather, Hercules Jarvis, with an unmarried daughterⁱⁱⁱ and a widowed daughter, Mrs Blenkins ('Aunt Annie') and her two sons, lived half a mile away to the south of Claremont House.

On the north side – in the very next house – lived our sister Caroline, who had married Dr. Murray, and contributed to the family circle seven boys and [two] girls, one of whom [May Murray Parker], a great

favourite with Percy and his wife, has made several contributions to this book. Beyond the Murrays lived the Andersons, the third and youngest of our sisters, Maria, having married T J Anderson. They had three sons and a daughter. This completes the colony of Moltenos and their relatives in the days of Percy's boyhood and mine.

But our pleasures were not confined to Claremont! Ten miles off at Kalk Bay, then a small unspoilt seaside village on the way to Simon's Bay, my father had bought a house to provide the family with sea air and recreations. It only held about eight children at a time, and was very popular; for it provided us with fishing and bathing and long walks over the mountains, where a variety of game was to be found. One [Mr] Auret, a Dutchman, ran fishing boats and one or two sailing boats on Muizenberg Vlei. He had five or six sons, who were staunch allies of the family in all boating and fishing expeditions.



**Kalk Bay, some 15 miles south of
Cape Town, in the late 19th
century**

My brothers and sisters all rode. My father always kept five or six riding horses at Claremont, as well as two or three pairs of Cape cart horses for transport purposes. (The Cape cart, then a common vehicle, is now as extinct as the dodo, or the London four-wheeler.) My three elder brothers, Charlie, Percy and James, had their own riding horses; but we younger ones had to share, and on hunting expeditions the question [of] who was to be left without a mount often caused friction and sore feelings. All over the Cape Flats and the foothills of the Hottentot Holland Mountains, Cape jackals were hunted with fox-hounds in the winter months, and we Molteno boys rode with the hounds.

At Claremont, we kept five or six cows and a number of pigs. Besides racehorses and rams, Uncle Percy Alport imported prize pigs. These arrivals of well-bred animals excited much interest among us. The garden at Claremont was managed by a white gardener and an old Malay^{iv} called Moos, assisted by three or four Kaffir or Hottentot 'boys'.^v The horses were looked after by two white grooms. Partly

because of the garden and live stock [and] partly because of my father's position as Prime Minister of Cape Colony, Claremont House – though not so fine a specimen of architecture as some of the old Dutch houses – was a good deal visited, not only by local politicians and officials, but by British and foreign travellers. Occasionally, a Kaffir chief and his headmen from one of the native territories would be shown over the place, dressed in skins and feathers and carrying assegais.

Editor's Notes

ⁱ The Bissets, a large South African family of Scottish origin, are related to the Moltenos as a result of the first Bisset to emigrate to the Cape in the 19th century, James, having married – like John Charles Molteno – one of Hercules Jarvis's daughters. Several generations of Bissets and Moltenos have grown up together in the Cape since that time.

ⁱⁱ The Cape Flats were a sandy expanse stretching between the mountains of the Cape Peninsula and the Hottentots Holland, and between Table and False Bays. The constantly shifting dunes were later stabilised by the planting of Port Jackson and *rooikrantz* bush. Today this 20 mile-wide expanse is largely covered by houses, much of it self-built shacks, that comprise Greater Cape Town.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aunt Emmie Jarvis.

^{iv} The Cape Malays were descended from Javanese Muslims whom the Dutch East India Company had imported from its South East Asian colony in the previous century.

^v Racism in the late 19th century, like other social attitudes, became embedded in derogatory language. White South Africans, along with colonial Britons in other parts of the world, often referred to indigenous African men as 'boys'. Another frequently used term was 'kaffirs', which ironically had previously been used by Muslims to refer to unbelievers regardless of colour. What is striking in Barkly's account, however, is that the subsequent 20th century South African equation – domestic worker = a person not of European extraction – did not yet obtain as a universal rule. Wealthy European families employed a mix of employees in the home and as farm-workers, including fellow Europeans, descendants of slaves from Africa and Asia, and indigenous South Africans of varying ethnic identity.