

It was in the heady days of the great diamond rush in the year 1877 that Britstown came into being. Fortune hunters paused here in their frenzied dash to the fabulous diamond field, and a settlement mushroomed to provide fresh horses, fodder, refreshment and accommodation. Soon even a concertina virtuoso made music for happy dancers lubricated by the local brew. First the Fuller and Gibson coaches and then others stopped here. By the time Britstown gained municipal status in January, 1889, a railway line already snaked across the Karoo to carry would-be diamond diggers through to Kimberley.

Livingston's friend

The small haven of Britstown, along the diamond route across the plains, was named after a man who loved the Karoo, Hans Brits. He once accompanied Dr David Livingstone, famous son in law of the great missionary Robert Moffat, on a journey to the north. Livingstone originally came to South Africa to help the Moffats at their mission in Kuruman, and it was on a journey to the north that he met Brits.

They took a liking to each other, and Brits decided to travel with him. But, Livingstone did not get on with the Moffats, so he soon announced his intentions of travelling deeper into Africa, a decision that led to him becoming probably the continent's most famous explorer. Brits decided against a life of exploration and returned to the Karoo.

Diamonds provided the spark

Hans Brits then settled on a farm he named Gembokfontein, which is where Britstown now stands. Soon after the discovery of diamonds at Hope Town and Kimberley, Brits realised that he and his neighbours could earn good money serving the growing traffic along the Diamond Route. So Brits arranged for a town to be laid out on a portion of his farm.

As a tribute to him, it was named Britstown. The thinking was to establish a point between Victoria West and Kimberley that could provide travellers on the Diamond Route with accommodation and refreshments as well as fresh horses and fodder.

A link with the gold mines

Then, in 1877, a group of men, headed by T.P. Theron, purchased a section of Hans Brits' farm to establish a community center with a church. This accomplished, they handed over the management of the fledging settlement to church wardens. Traffic through the town increased when gold was discovered in "The Ridge of White Waters" in the old Transvaal Republic.

Many of the fabled mining magnates, such as Cecil John Rhodes, passed through Britstown. In time, the town became a major junction on the road to the then South West Africa (Namibia).