

THE BLAAUWKRAANTZ BRIDGE

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On the 27 August 1884 the first railway engine crept across the Blaauwkrantz Bridge to the lusty cheers of the workmen and other spectators.¹ This was a momentous occasion for Albany since it marked the penultimate link in the railway line between Grahamstown and what some businessmen argued was Grahamstown's natural outlet to the sea, Port Alfred on the Kowie River.² As early as 1862 residents of Lower Albany had petitioned the government for a railway between the two centres³ but it was only when George Pauling, a famous railway builder in Africa and in other parts of the world, took up the project that it was executed.

The Cape Government agreed to pay a subsidy of £50 000 for the construction of the railway line but the rest of the money — some £300 000 — Pauling had to find himself.⁴ He immediately sailed for England and took with him full particulars of the trade of Grahamstown and Port Alfred and the district through which the railway would pass.⁵ His figures were able to show that the trade through Port Alfred had expanded in the previous decade but the deciding factor in persuading businessmen to support his venture was, he thought, a photograph enlarged to six feet in length showing thirteen vessels lying in the river at the wharves constructed by the government. The photograph "made a beautiful picture depicting the Kowie River as a beautiful but busy harbour."⁶ A company was floated to build the railway and Pauling returned to the Cape forthwith.

Pauling records that the survey of the railway presented many difficulties. "A very bad piece of country had to be crossed and it took some time before it was decided to cross the worst spot on the route called Blaauwkrantz, about 13 miles from Grahamstown, by a high level bridge."⁷ One old man, W. Campbell, reminiscing about a journey by wagon through Blaauwkrantz Drift commented that Africans believed that demons and ghosts inhabited this deep forbidding gorge and always insisted on waiting for a time before entering to appease the spirits. "It was a frightening place," he said, "for the silence was deep and brooding." On the occasion described by Campbell the driver clapped his long whip the sound of which rang through the valley and the whole party waited with baited breath until an answering clap from a wagon-driver at the bottom of the gorge told them that it was safe to proceed.⁸ The decision to build a bridge must have seemed to some people as if the White man's engineering skill was a challenge to the spiritual world of Africa and superstitious folk may well have wondered at the consequences of this assault on the world of spirits.

The bridge was designed by A. Ande and A. Buchanan, civil engineers, and the iron work was made by Messrs A. Handyside and Co., a firm of manufacturers in Derby, England, and carried to the Cape in the little ships that docked in the Kowie River.⁹ The iron pieces were then carried to the site by the railway which had been laid from Port Alfred to the Blaauwkrantz. Here Mr Parker, who was the representative of Messrs Handyside and Co., and some 35 men were busily engaged in laying down the plates. Each piece fitted exactly into the place

assigned to it, and, commented *Grocott's Penny Mail*, "every plate as placed is destined to add strength and durability to the whole structure."¹⁰ The last section was laid on 2 August 1884 and so accurate were the calculations that over the whole length of the bridge there was only 3 millimeter variation from the original specification.

The completed bridge drew the admiration of everybody. It was built on the cantilever principle with a central span of 230 feet (70,15 m) and two on either side of 61 feet 3 inches (18,68 m).¹¹ Pauling says that the span was 300 feet (91,5 m) above the bottom of the gorge¹² but in this he was clearly in error. *Grocott's Penny Mail* reporter says it is 185 feet (56,4 m) above the bed of the river,¹³ and this figure is roughly substantiated by an examination of the ordnance Survey Map.¹⁴

The bridge appeared to be frail but in fact it was in its "lightness" that its strength lay. The *Grocott's* reporter commented that it was thus constructed "so as to resist the force and fury of the wind which sometimes comes howling with terrific violence through the gorge."¹⁵ Yet the mass of the bridge was almost 2,5 tons per meter.¹⁶

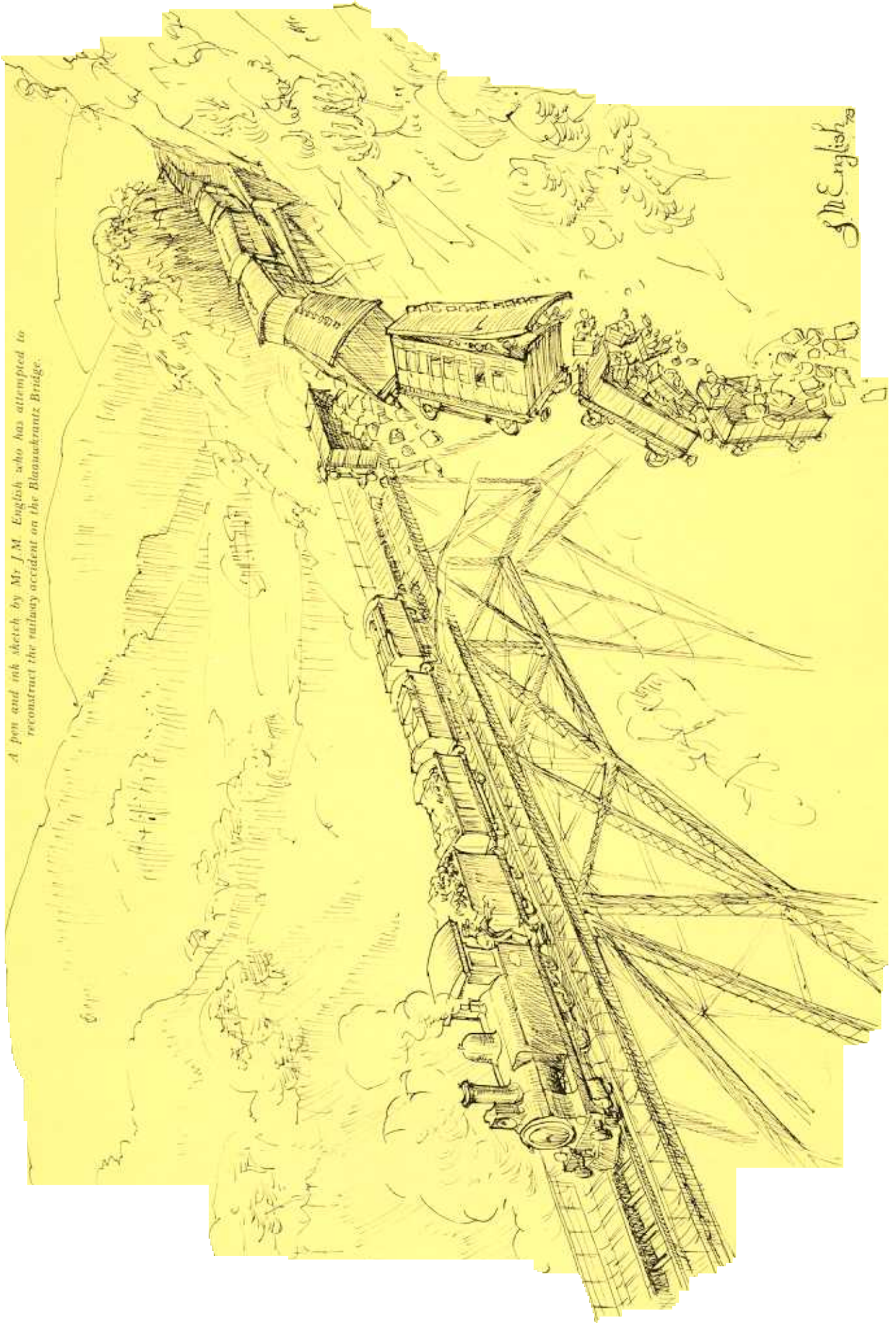
While the bridge was being built the construction engineer was careful to take proper precautions in case of accident: he had a net strung under the bridge to break the fall of anybody who might miss his footing; and a surgeon and stretchers were always on hand during working hours. In the event the precautions were unnecessary as no accident of any kind occurred during the course of its construction.¹⁷

When the bridge was completed a party of officials travelled down the line from Belmont (near Grahamstown) to Blaauwkrantz and, on arrival, found an engine

1. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 29.8.1884.
2. The final link was a distance of 4 km.
3. G.D.R. DODS, *Nineteenth century communications in the Zuurveld*. (M.Sc. thesis, Rhodes University, 1960).
4. E.W. TURPIN, *Basket work harbour: the story of the Kowie* (Cape Town, 1964), p.97.
5. G. PAULING, *The chronicles of a contractor* (Reprint: Bulawayo, 1969), pp.36–37.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Article entitled 'High Street became a market' published in the *Cape Argus* 1952 and reprinted in *The Coelacanth: The Journal of the Border Historical Society*.
9. TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p.98.
10. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 13.8.1884.
11. TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p.98.
12. Pauling, *op. cit.*, pp.37–38.
13. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 13.8.1884.
14. Grahamstown Sheet 3326 B.C. Compilation Sheet is 1:18000 Topographical Sheet 1271 3326 F6.
15. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 13.8.1884.
16. TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p.98.
17. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 13.8.1884.

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A pen and ink sketch by Mr J. M. English, who has attempted to reconstruct the railway accident on the Blaauwkrantz Bridge.

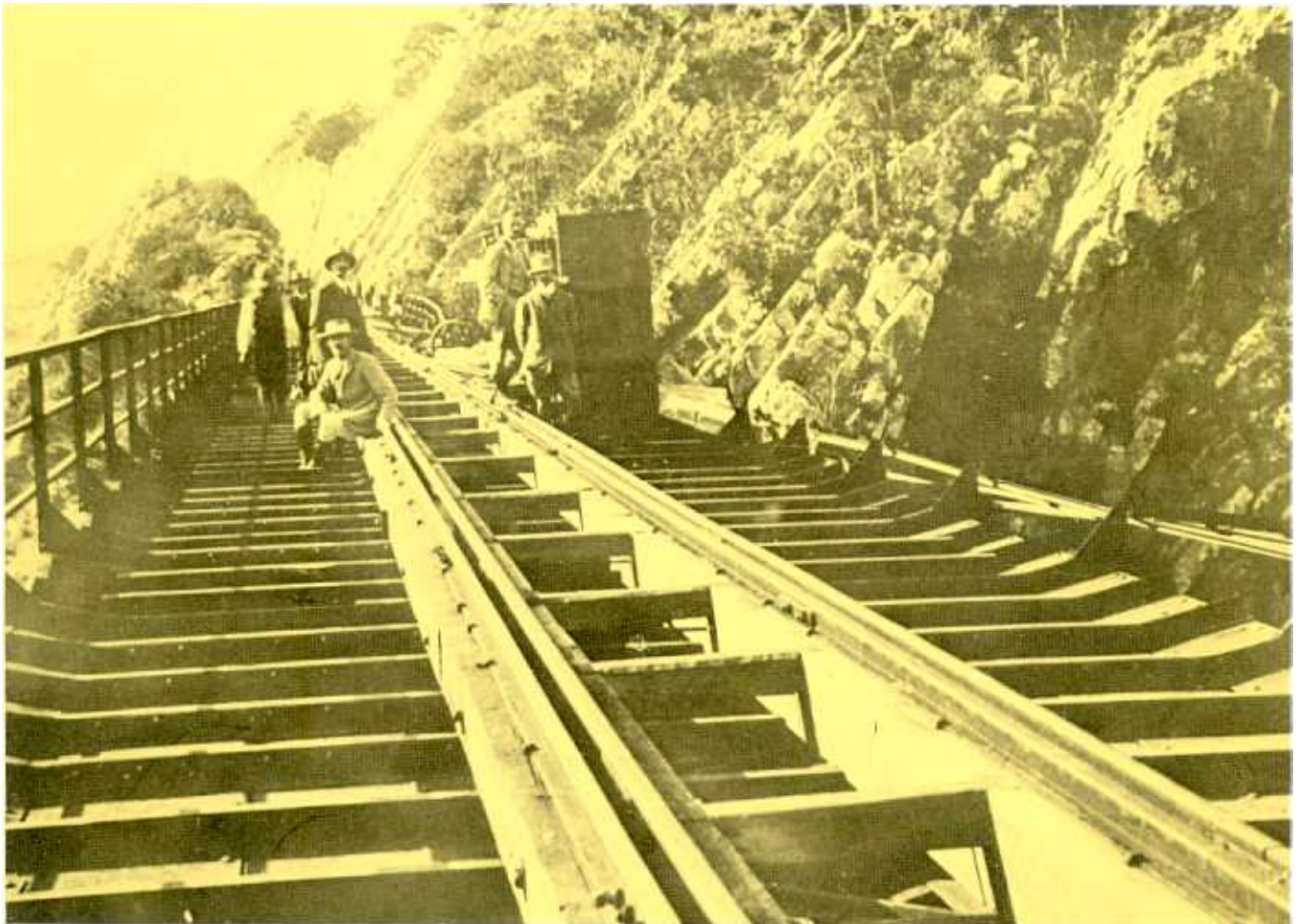


and trucks laden with heavy rails and sleepers waiting for them on the Port Alfred side of the bridge. The officials¹⁸ climbed onto the footplate of the engine which, with Mr Begbie at the controls, slowly but surely steamed across the bridge and then proceeded merrily on its journey to Belmont with the material for completion of the railway line from Belmont to Grahamstown.¹⁹ The official testing of the bridge took place only some ten days later and proved the quality of the workmanship.

There were five tests altogether. First, two engines coupled, stood on each end of the cantilevers or side spans of the bridge; secondly, four engines, coupled, stood in the centre of the bridge; thirdly, four engines, coupled, and sixteen loaded trucks with a mass of more than 300 tons went slowly over the bridge; fourthly, the same engine and trucks ran over the bridge at nearly 40 km per hour; fifthly, the four engines, coupled, ran quickly on to the bridge and were brought to a sudden halt in the middle. The results of the tests were very satisfactory: in deflection there was only 13 mm of movement and less than 6 mm of lateral movement.²⁰

Two passenger trains ran each way every day at first but within five months this had been reduced to one regular daily passenger train, leaving Grahamstown in the morning at 08h45 and arriving at Port Alfred at 11h45 and returning in the afternoon at 15h15 and reaching Grahamstown at 18h45. On Saturdays and Stock Fair days an additional train was run in each direction to cope with a heavier demand.²³ Single fares from Grahamstown to Port Alfred were 11/- First Class, 7/6d Second Class, and 5/6d Third Class. Over the weekend an excursion fare was offered of a return ticket for the price of a single ticket.

One example must suffice to show the importance of the Kowie line for the tourist industry.²⁴ On Boxing Day (26 December) 1884 some 300 people swarmed around the box office at the Grahamstown station to buy tickets for a trip to the sea. The crowd on the platform was swollen by friends who had come to wave goodbye to their more fortunate friends. The festive mood was enhanced by the presence of a band. The train eventually pulled out of the station half an hour late while the band played

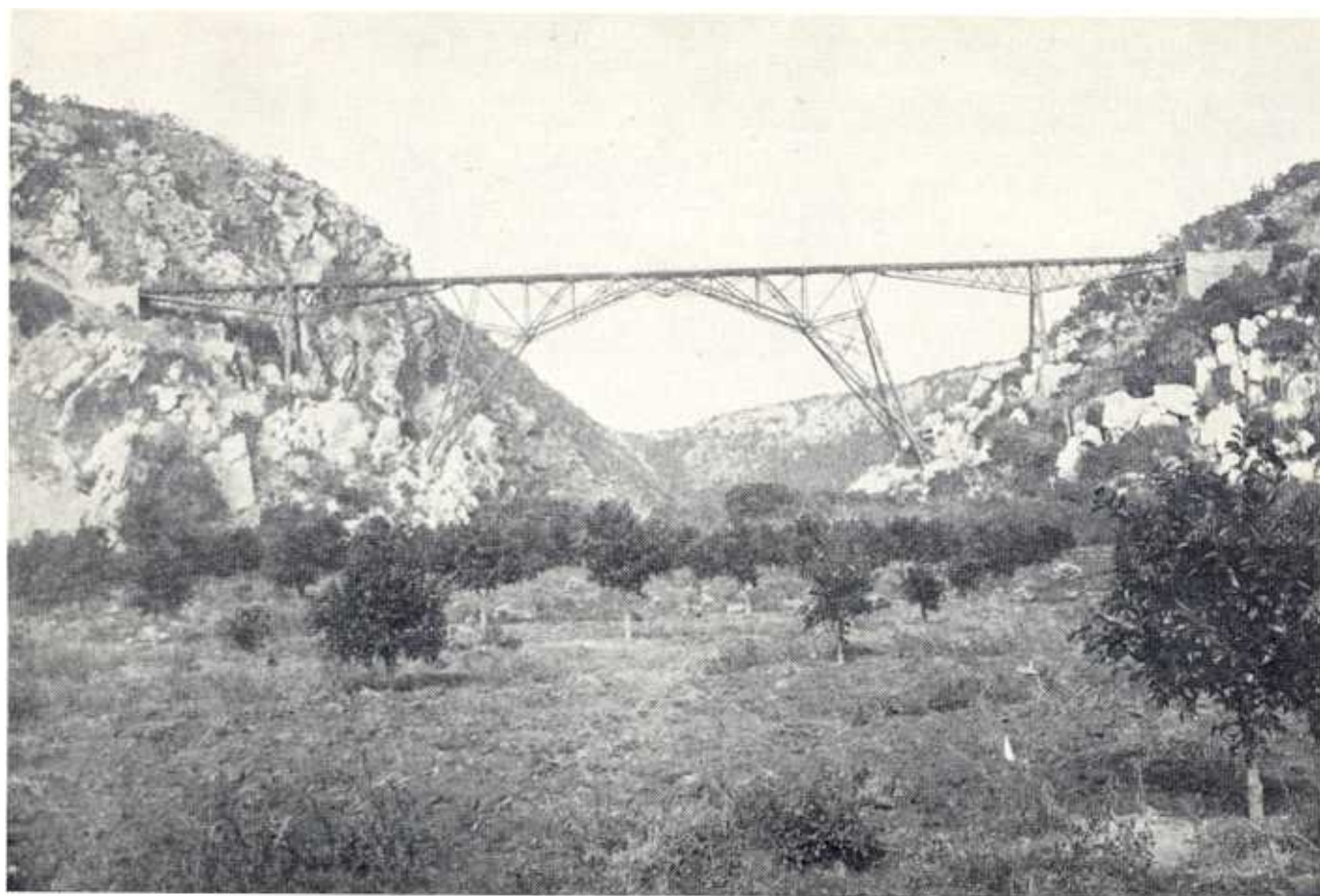


The railway line soon proved a boon to farmers and businessmen in Grahamstown and Port Alfred. Produce could more easily and more speedily be carried to the markets of the two towns. The first through train carried 400 bags of flour for one firm and 3¼ tons of paper for Grocotts.²¹ Passenger traffic greatly stimulated Port Alfred's tourist industry. At first the trains left from a temporary railway near "the native location" but by 1 December 1884 trains were able to use the Government station and the line was linked to the Cape Government Railways's system.²²

A close-up of the scene of the railway accident on the Blaauwkrantz Bridge, April 1911.

PHOTOGRAPH: DR C.G.A. CORY

18. They were Messrs Cooper (the Company's Chief Engineer), Drennan (Government Engineer), Hopkinson (The Contractor's Engineer), and Lowe (Traffic Manager).
19. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 29.8.1884.
20. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 8.9.1884.
21. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 10.9.1884.
22. *Cape of Good Hope Annexures, 1885*: Report of the General Manager of Railways for 1884.
23. *The Port Alfred Budget and Shipping Register*, 25.3.1885.
24. *The Eastern Star*, 31.12.1884.



A side elevation of the old Blaauwkrantz Bridge.

PHOTOGRAPH: DR C.G.A. CORY

"Auld Lang Syne" to the cheers of those who had come to wave farewell.

When the train arrived at the Blaauwkrantz the travellers were given ten minutes to inspect the new bridge. Some tried to climb down to the valley below and were almost left behind. Once the journey was resumed the band struck up its music again and the party wound their way towards their destination.

The arrival of the train in Port Alfred was as jolly as the departure from Grahamstown: they were greeted with fog signals and cheers and the band played a lively tune. With the band in attendance they all marched off to the river, both banks of which were festooned with bunting and lined with people. The band went aboard a lighter which anchored midstream and from which they continued to provide music suitable for the carnival spirit that prevailed. Entertainment included aquatic sports, a rifle contest, a cricket match and a dance in the evening. Some folk went out to sea on a tug and though some were seasick a great number of fish were caught and sold to the public on return to shore.

Clearly the opening of the Kowie railway line added to the amenities of Albany. A comment in *Grocott's Penny Mail* suggests that appetites were stimulated by a visit to the sea and this in turn must have brought profits to those who fed the holidaymakers. "To those who, eleven months out of twelve, vegetate in towns, a few days' ruralizing at the sea-side proves a powerful stimulator of the gastric juices, and rounds of beef, legs of mutton, steaks and chops, not to mention vegetables and other concomitants of every well-regulated meal — are wont to disappear like chaff before the wind when submitted to the tender mercies of a healthy individual to whose appetite a keen edge has been given by the invigorating ozone to be inhaled from the salt sea waves."²⁵

Both passenger and goods traffic were most encouraging at first but regrettably not sustained. Within two years the Kowie Railway Company was in liquidation but managed to continue in operation until the railway line was eventually taken over by the South African Railways in 1913.²⁶ Unfortunate too is the fact that the Kowie Railway and the Blaauwkrantz Bridge are remembered less for a happy occasion such as the excursion in late December 1884 than for the subsequent disaster in April 1911.

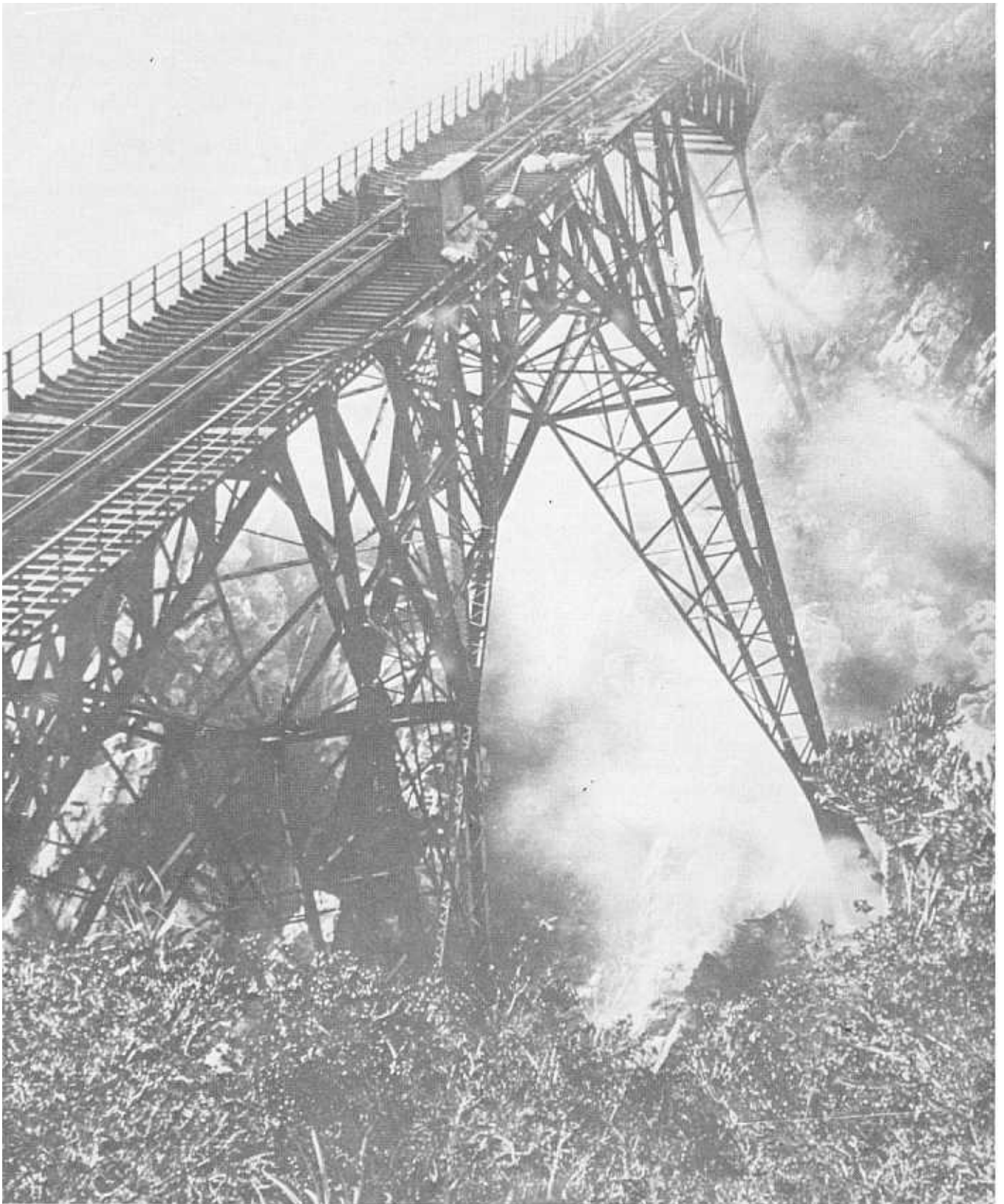
On Saturday 22 April 1911 an engine and two trucks hurried into the station in Grahamstown. An overwrought engine-driver reported to the station master that disaster had struck his train on the Blaauwkrantz Bridge.²⁷ Apparently all had gone well on the journey from Port Alfred until a truck left the rails some 220 meters before reaching the bridge. Towards the centre of the bridge the truck, which was carrying stone to build the cathedral in Grahamstown, turned over and broke the neck of the buffers which detached it from the front of the train. The sudden impact of the rear coaches against the overturned truck caused them to topple over the side of the bridge and turn somersault before being dashed to pieces on the rocks below. A carriage roof, a door and a lampholder were detached in the fall and were found hanging on the side of the bridge.²⁸ Twenty-eight people were killed and twenty-two were injured,

25. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 19.12.1884.

26. TURPIN, *op. cit.*, p.100.

27. *Ibid.*, pp.100—101.

28. *The Journal*, 25.4.1911.



The Blaauwkrantz Bridge was not seriously damaged by the railway accident of April 1911.

though it appears that subsequently one or two of these may have died from their injuries.

What is remarkable is not that so many died as the fact that some survived. One little girl (Hazel Smith) was discovered in the girders. Two witnesses²⁹ of the accident

heard a voice calling "Mummy" and looking up into the bridge they saw a little girl seated on one of the cross beams of the girders. The two men climbed up to the child and brought her down by handing her from one to the other while the other climbed below.³⁰

Mr Davidson and Mrs Leslie Palmer.
Memorial edition of *Scott's Penny Mail*

11.

One newspaper reporter suggested that the truck carrying the stone had been overloaded and that in consequence the truck was too heavy for the rails and had pushed them out.³¹ The magistrate who conducted the inquest carefully examined the point but he gave as his decision simply that the derailment was due to poor maintenance of the railroad and of some of the rolling stock.³²

The bridge itself stood the strain well. Some rails were ripped up and the hand-rail on the south side was bent.³³ Within a few days the bridge was tested, found to be intact, and was again opened to rail traffic.³⁴

The dead were buried and life in Albany returned to normal though the memory of the disaster still lingers.

Some alarm was caused to passengers travelling on the Port Alfred/Grahamstown line one evening in 1926. As a train was crossing the Blaauwkrantz Bridge two severe explosions were heard. Some of the occupants of one of the coaches were discussing the disaster of 1911 at the time, and the loud bangs clearly suggested to them that they were about to be overtaken by a similar fate. Fortunately they were not. The explanation for the bangs probably lay in the blasting operations connected with the construction of a new bridge, but they clearly all had a nasty fright.³⁵

The old bridge was unable to cope with increased traffic and in particular with the use of heavier rolling stock. In 1924 Robert Henry Struben, the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Albany told Parliament that train loads had to be broken to enable traffic to cross the bridge and he suggested that the old bridge should either be strengthened or replaced.³⁶ His recommendation was taken up and a new bridge was constructed at a cost of £29 000. This was part of a greater undertaking for the improvement of the track between Alicedale and Port Alfred. The old bridge was constructed to carry engines of 53 tons drawing a train of 120 tons; the new bridge could carry traffic approximately three times as heavy as before.³⁷

The new bridge was constructed without interrupting rail traffic. This was accomplished by interlacing the new bridge in the old and removing the old one only when the new one was completed — only the buttresses on either side remain of the old bridge.³⁸ The new structure consists of four spans carried on trestles. The total mass of the bridge is 612 tons.³⁹ The stronger bridge accelerated the service between Port Alfred and other rail heads and made possible through trains for Johannesburg and Kimberley.⁴⁰

The official opening of the new bridge took place just fifty years ago on 23 June 1928. The Mayor of Grahamstown (Councillor J.C. Rae, M.P.C.) performed the opening ceremony in the presence of the Mayors of Port Alfred and Bathurst and was witnessed by a large crowd principally of children who were taken to Blaauwkrantz by special train.

On this occasion arches of green foliage were erected at each end of the bridge and on either side flew the Union Jack and the National flag. A wide band of ribbon was stretched across on the Grahamstown side, which an engine coming from the direction of Grahamstown broke through amid the cheers of the on-lookers and the explosion of detonators.

Mr Rae addressed the gathering. He paid tribute to those responsible for the building of the old bridge which had served the community for forty-five years. He ob-

served that the area owed a great deal to their enterprise but because it had been undertaken as a private venture the project was naturally limited in its scope. Since 1913 the railway had been state-owned and the greater resources of the state made greater development possible. The old bridge had served its day and generation; the new one, he hoped, would stand as a monument to the strength of the hands that had built it.⁴¹

Fifty years later it still stands a monument to half a century of continued use in the service of the district of Albany. Passengers and goods are still faithfully carried across the bridge to their several destinations. The steam engines that draw the trains across it attract the occasional steam engine enthusiast. These steam engines belong to a rapidly diminishing form of transport. Hence the bridge like the steam engines, may well have to give way to further progress or become an anachronism in an age of very heavy diesel or electrically powered engines.

31. *The Journal*, 25.4.1911.

32. *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 8.5.1911.

33. *The Journal*, 25.4.1911.

34. *The Journal*, 27.4.1911.

35. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 24.6.1926.

36. SOUTH AFRICA, HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY, *Debates*, 31.7.1924, c.116-117.

37. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 25.6.1928.

38. *Ibid.*

39. U.G. 23/29, Report of the Railways and Harbours Board for the year ending 31 December 1928, p.46.

40. *Grocott's Daily Mail*, 25.6.1928.

41. *Ibid.*