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History and Tourism

e-mail: [eabrink@telkomsa.net](mailto:eabrink@telkomsa.net)or [ilifaresearch@telkomsa.net](mailto:ilifaresearch@telkomsa.net)**ST LUKE'S GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH  
ERF 3225, 7 Riverside Lane  
ONRUS RIVIER, WESTERN CAPE****ASSESSMENT OF THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

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## **ASSESSMENT OF THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

### **ST LUKE'S GREEK ORTHODOX CHAPEL**

**ERF 3225, 7 Riverside Lane,  
ONRUS RIVIER, WESTERN CAPE**

#### **STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Although it is not older than 60 years, the Greek chapel in Onrus is of cultural significance because:

- It is the most southern and smallest Greek chapel in southern Africa
- Its unique location in the residential area of a rural seaside village
- Its aesthetic, which is an authentic representation of Greek ecclesiastical architecture.
- Its links with the Greek Orthodox Church of South Africa
- Its links with the local community as a site frequently used to celebrate important moments in their lives; e.g. weddings, christenings and funerals. Community involvement is also evident from the large range of donations of icons and other objects to the chapel
- Its enduring value as site of celebration of significant life stages
- Its value as a local tourist attraction
- The fabric and decoration of the chapel, which has been carefully selected, is intact and well-maintained. A number of these are of artistic merit.

It is therefore recommended for declaration as a local heritage site.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE**

The site includes the structure (a chapel) erected on the south east corner of erf 3225, 7 Riverside Lane, Onrus River. The boundaries include to the south the municipal street boundary of erf 3225, to the east the boundary separating erf 3225 with the erf immediately to the east, to the north and west - a strip of three (3) metres of land measured from the northern and western exterior walls of the chapel.

A land surveyor will peg the boundaries of the site accordingly, once a positive outcome of this nomination has been proclaimed in the Government Gazette.

#### **BACKGROUND**

St Luke's Chapel constructed on the south east corner of the erf 3225 at 7 Riverside Lane, Onrus River. The church was built on the private initiative of the owner of the land, Ms Maxie Steytler and co-habitant, Ms Tertia Knaap, both artists.

The chapel is named after and dedicated to St Luke the patron saint of physicians, painters, the weavers of Bologna and as the winged ox he is also the patron saint of butchers. The name was selected since, the owners are respectively a weaver and a painter. The name also links historically with a leper colony, which existed in the Hemel en Aarde valley to the north of Onrus during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst living in the valley, lepers used the river as access to the sea for fishing activities, hence the connection to physicians and healing.

His Grace Pavlos Vamavas of the Greek Orthodox Church, Cape Town, sanctified it as a Greek Orthodox Church in a special ceremony conducted on 14 May 1983. From time to time the Church also conducts services in the church, mostly in October of every year to celebrate St Luke's Day, which falls on 18 October.

It is the most southern and one of the smallest Greek Orthodox chapels in South Africa and the only chapel of its kind in the Overstrand Municipality and the Western Cape.<sup>1</sup> As such it has become a feature in the local community and is regularly used for;

- Weddings – on average 20-30 per annum
- Funerals
- Christenings

Not only members of the local community, but also couples from further afield have use this chapel as a wedding venue. About thirty weddings per year are conducted in the chapel, half of those being those of overseas visitors, e.g. Australia, Canada, Sweden, Germany, etc. One local couple that had married in the chapel, subsequently held the christening ceremony of their three children in the chapel. The wedding ceremony celebrating the re-marriage of former President, FW de Klerk was conducted in the chapel on 8 November 1998.

Since its completion in the early 1980s it has become a tradition for members of the local community to gather at the chapel on New Year's eve to attend a small service and to see in the New Year. Attendance increases annually. In addition, after his retirement, in 1983 as local minister, Rev Charles Stephenson of the United Church in Hermanus 'adopted' St Luke's and conducted services on a regular basis.

In addition, the chapel has become a local tourist attraction. To minimise vandalism, visitors' entrance to the chapel is by appointment only. The annual number of visitors ranges between approximately 400 per annum.

To date the chapel has regularly featured in local magazine articles as well as television programmes on the area. These include for example, in South Africa the Argus (5 June 1983), Rapport (22 November 1987), Fair Lady (23 October 1991) and in Greece, Athini (Feb/March 1991, no 375). The chapel also regularly featured on local television programmes dealing with this portion of the coastal belt of the south-western Cape.

### **Architectural features**

The small domed chapel, designed by the architect, Jack van Rensburg measures 3.160m x 4.770m x 4.850m. The chapel was constructed by a local retired builder Mr Koos Smit who had sufficient expertise to solve the problem of construction the circular nose end of the chapel.

In line with architectural traditions of the Greek islands where other examples of such chapels can be found, fenestration consists of small stain glass windows designed by Leo Theron, an artist well-known for the design and construction of large stain glass windows. The main entrance of the chapel faces west, the doors designed and made

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<sup>1</sup> J Oxley, Places of Workshop in South Africa, p.88-89

by Tertia Knaap, who also carved the stone rails separating the altar from the congregation and the altar itself from local sandstone.

A bench was installed on the exterior northern wall between two buttresses facing a retaining wall. This is of seating height and according to Father Platon Meimerakis of the Greek Orthodox Church, this arrangement is typical of Greek island tradition, where legal matters and disputes are settled between members of the community overseen by the hierarchy of the church.

The bell in the bell tower is a genuine antique ship's bell bought in Cape Town and its counter weight is derived from bog oak of the fishing vessel, the *Danie Theron* which sank in the Hermanus harbour in 1983.

### **External features**

The chapel, which was constructed on the foundation of the water reservoir of the former Onrus Hotel, dating back to the early twentieth century. This forms a manmade mound of rock and is the focal point at the northern end of Green Street. It is surrounded by fruit bearing olive trees and other indigenous vegetation, e.g. wild olive, Carissa, Leucadendron, etc. A labyrinth is located to the west of the chapel.

### **Interior decoration**

Over the years eminent members of the Hellenic community in Cape Town and other interested individuals made numerous donations of icons to the chapel; both contemporary and antique.

1. A Hellenic businessman from Cape Town, Mr Mortakis, commissioned four icons for the chapel. These represent Christ, Mary, Hosios Lukas, the church founder and St John.
2. A carving of St Luke made in Greece (Mr Voutsas, architect of the Greek Orthodox Church in Johannesburg).
3. Five stained-glass windows made by the South African artist, Leo Theron, donated by the owner, the artist and the architect of the chapel, Jack van Rensburg.
4. Two plaques by the sculptor Milton Barberton, built into the entrance doorway.
5. An enamelled Greek cross donated by the South African actress Anna Neethling Pohl.
6. A small bronze plaque of the winged ox by the sculptor Bruce Arnold.
7. An old bronze triptych donated by the South African fine artist, Erica Berry.
8. An icon of Christ donated by a Greek couple who married in the chapel.
9. A yellowwood bible case donated by Lea Neumark.
10. Blue Russian candleholders donated by Sheldon and Annemarie Moulton.
11. Numerous other personal icons donated by a variety of visitors.
12. An oil lamp, purchased on the Greek island of Patmos, donated by the architect Jack van Rensburg.
13. A wooden crucifix donated by the Archbishop of Thessaloniki.

### **Degree of significance**

According to Section 3 of the South African National Heritage Resources Act Of 1999 cultural significance should be evaluated in the following manner;

***(3) Without limiting the generality of subsections (1) and (2), a place or object is to be considered part of the national estate if it has cultural significance or other special value because of—***

***(a) its importance in the community, or pattern of South Africa's history;***

The chapel is of importance to two communities in South Africa. It plays an important role in the Greek Orthodox Church of South Africa, by whom it was sanctified soon after its construction in 1983. Members of the church, as well as the local community donated a considerable number of the internal fittings and decorations and uses its for services.

It also plays an important role in the local community who uses it on a regular basis for important social and religious occasions such as weddings, christenings and funerals. Donations by the local community as well as local artists also indicate their involvement in the chapel.

***(b) its possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of South Africa's natural or cultural heritage;***

The small size and geographical situation of the chapel in a residential area a small seaside town is uncommon and unique. It is rare to find a Greek chapel, constructed strictly according to traditional building practices found on the Greek islands, in such a location. No other Greek chapel can be found in a similar location in South Africa. Should protection by means of declaration, as a local heritage site not be forthcoming, its continued existence could be jeopardised.

***(c) its potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of South Africa's natural or cultural heritage;***

Given its construction according to traditional Greek ecclesiastical building practices, and authentic interior fabric, the chapel has the potential to yield information about the Greek Orthodox Church and religious practices in an area where such information is not easily located.

***(d) its importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class of South Africa's natural or cultural places or objects;***

Since it was constructed strictly within a Greek architectural tradition, it is both a rare and unique example of such architecture and religious practices.

***(e) its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group;***

As an example of good Greek ecclesiastical architecture it is a particularly pleasing example of the Greek aesthetic.

***(f) its importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period;***

As a uniquely private enterprise by two individuals, it is significant because it demonstrates a high degree of creative achievement in the creation of not a copy, but of a unique interpretation of Greek chapel in South Africa. Its construction outside Greece is testimony to a technical achievement.

***(g) its strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;***

It has a special association with the Greek Orthodox Church of South Africa, as a unique chapel, which it uses from time to time. It also has a strong association with the local community as well as visitors who use it for important events such as weddings, christenings and funerals.

***(h) its strong or special association with the life or work of a person, group or organisation of importance in the history of South Africa;***

It has a limited association with FW de Klerk whose second marriage was conducted in the chapel. In 1990, as president of South Africa he was responsible for the freeing of former president Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of numerous political organisations. After 1994, he also served as deputy president of the newly democratic South Africa.

***(i) sites of significance relating to the history of slavery in South Africa.***  
The site has no significance in terms of the history of slavery in South Africa.

## **THE BURRA CHARTER**

### **Cultural Significance**

#### ***Burra Charter: Article 1.2***

***Cultural significance means aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations. Places may have a range of values for different individuals and groups. (Cultural significance may change as a result of the continuing history of the place. Understanding of cultural significance may change as a result of new information.)***

Although it is not older than 60 years, the Greek chapel in Onrus is of cultural significance because of :

- Its size and unique location in the residential area of a rural seaside village
- Its aesthetic presentation, which is an authentic representation of Greek ecclesiastical architecture
- Its links with the Greek Orthodox Church of South Africa
- Its links with the local community as a site frequently used to celebrate important moments in the lives of its residents.

### **Associations**

#### ***Article 1.15***

***Associations mean the special connections that exist between people and a place. (Associations may include social or spiritual values and cultural responsibilities for a place).***

The chapel has a special connection with the Greek Orthodox Church of South Africa. As a place where important ceremonies, such as weddings, christenings and funerals have been conducted ever since its construction, the chapel also has a special

connection with the members of the community who have chosen to use it in this manner.

### **Meanings**

#### ***Article 1.16***

***Meanings denote what a place signifies, indicate evokes or expresses. (Meanings generally relate to intangible aspects such as symbolic qualities and memories.)***

The chapel has meaning as a unique example of Greek ecclesiastical architecture found in a rural environment in South Africa. It also has an enduring meaning as a place where ceremonies significant in the lives of its users have taken place over several decades.

### **Fabric**

#### ***Article 1.3***

***Fabric means all the physical material of the place including components, fixtures, contents and objects. Fabric includes building interiors and subsurface remains, as well as excavated material***

The fabric of the chapel, which is in full use is intact and is well maintained. All the interior and exterior fittings and decorative elements in the church contribute greatly to the character and ambiance of the chapel. Internal decoration and artworks are of high aesthetic quality.

Signed

Elsabe Brink

24 September 2006

### **POST SCRIPT**

Miss Maxie Steytler died in 2012 and Tertia Knaap died in 2017.

The house was bought from the estate by a niece of Maxie Steytler, Mrs Henriette Latsky from Johannesburg.

The house was sold in December 2022

The curator of the Greek chapel is Mrs Elsabe Brink, also a niece of Ms Steytler. She acted as curator of the chapel until the sale of the house. She was assisted by Mr Andre Albertyn, a neighbour who took a keen interest in the chapel.