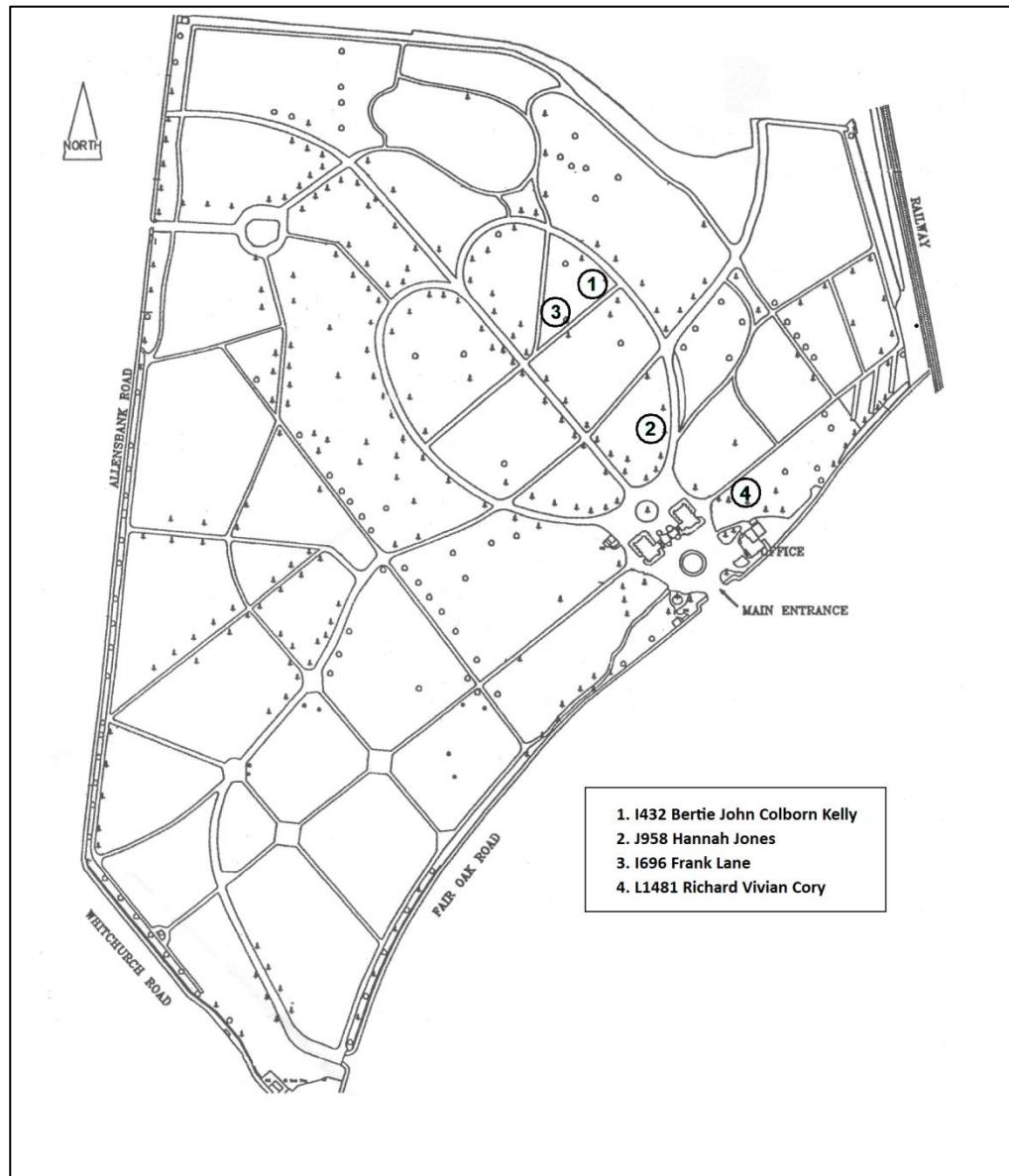


# THE BOER WAR in CATHAYS CEMETERY



**The Friends of Cathays Cemetery**





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# Introduction

On strolling through the Cemetery one cannot but notice the many bright white Commonwealth War graves in their Portland stone. These memorials represent the many fallen in the two World Wars in Europe and further afield. Every now again one comes across a memorial dated between 1899-1890, the second Great Boer War. This conflict has always intrigued, a distant colonial war with exotic sounding names, and a period of history only lightly covered in general reading material.

## Magersfontein & the Kimberley Siege

There is a large white marble memorial in Section I to a number of soldiers from the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.



One states on Plot Number I432:

BERTIE JOHN COLBORN KELLY  
SERGT 91<sup>st</sup> A & S HIGHLANDERS  
KILLED IN ACTION AT MAGERSFONTEIN  
11<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 1899  
AGED 28 YEARS

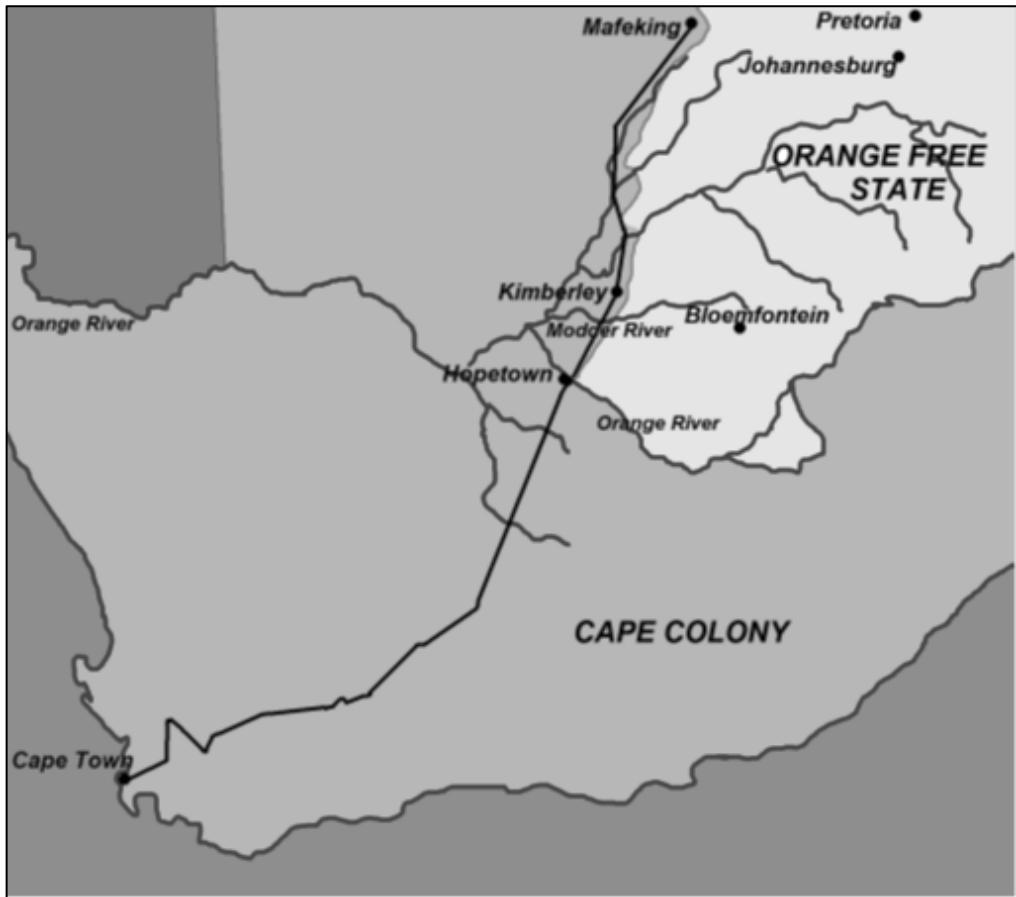
Close by in Plot Number J958 is:

JAMES WILLIAM JONES 1901 AGE 32,  
HANNAH 1900 AGE 34 AT CAPE TOWN,  
DIED FROM THE EFFECTS OF THE KIMBERLEY SIEGE

At first glance and without a sparse knowledge of the events of the Boer War, one would not relate these two graves. However they both relate to the Campaign to relieve the Siege of Kimberley, Cape Colony, late in 1899.

## The War Begins

The start of the Boer War saw the Boer forces from the Orange Free State and the Transvaal besieging the large cities of Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking. Kimberley at this time was a large diamond mining town and Cecil Rhodes, former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896, moved to into the city in a calculated move to raise the political stakes on the government to dedicate resources its defence. The military wanted to assemble a large force to take the Boer cities of Bloemfontein and Pretoria, but they were compelled to change their plans and send three separate smaller forces to relieve the sieges of Kimberley, Mafeking and Ladysmith.



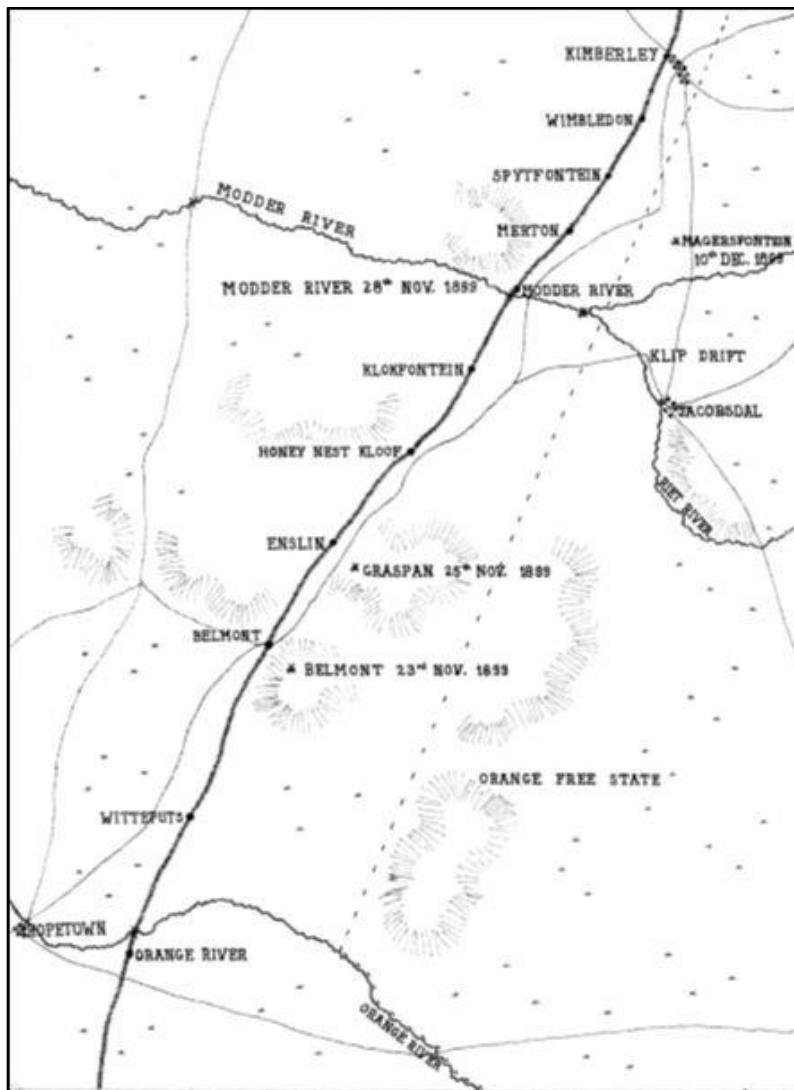
A large British army corps under General Redvers Buller arrived in South Africa and was dispersed to three main fronts. Buller himself advanced from the port of Durban in Natal to relieve the besieged town of Ladysmith. Buller had been born on his father's estate in Devon in 1839, and like most like most young officers of the time, knew nothing about his profession and took little interest in it. Only that should he find himself in combat he should act bravely. He took an active part in the Zulu War of 1879, winning the Victoria Cross. He also participated in the relief of Charles Gordon besieged at Khartoum. However it had been fifteen years since Buller had taken part in a battle.

It fell upon Lieutenant General Paul Sanford, Lord Methuen to lead the division to the relief of Kimberley. He was a tall man with a determined chin and drooping moustache. He was liked by his fellow officers, was conscientious and hard working. His only defect was he wasn't very clever.

Methuen's plan was to push directly through the Boer defences with frontal attacks, based on his desire to defeat his enemies in open battle, to demoralise them by winning a decisive victory. It seemed sensible therefore to hug the main Western Cape railway north up to Kimberley, to preserve supply lines.

## The British cross the Orange River

In November 1899 Methuen crossed the Orange River and entered the Orange Free State.



## Battle of Belmont 23 November 1899

November 23rd 1899 saw the first battle at Belmont as Methuen advanced up the railway against General Cronje commanding the Boers with heavy loss on both sides, but the Boers were routed. A Boer force of about 2,000 men had entrenched on the range of Belmont kopje to delay their advance. Methuen had sent the Guards Brigade on a night march to outflank the Boers, but due to faulty maps the Grenadier Guards found themselves in front of the Boer position instead. Assaulting the Boers over open ground, the British suffered about 200 casualties out of the 2,000 strong force, before coming to use their bayonets.



*The Battle of Belmont November 23rd 1899*

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20540 USA LC-DIG-pga-01879

## **Battle of Graspan 25 November 1899**

A small Naval Brigade stormed a Boer hill top position at Graspan held by Koos De la Rey to the east of the railway line covering the approach to Enslin Station. The Boers numbered around 3,000 men, equipped with a heavy gun, five field guns, a Maxim 1 pounder ‘pom-pom’ and a Maxim machine gun and 300 commando Transvaalers newly arrived from Kimberley. There was an initial artillery exchange with the British guns silencing the Boer guns. British reinforcements were hurried in and after a bayonet charge the Boers left their positions. The Naval Brigade had suffered 101 casualties from 365 men. The railway line beyond Enslin had been torn up by the Boers and had to be re-laid.

## **Battle of Modder River 28 November 1899**

On Tuesday 28th November 1899 the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders arrived by train as Methuen planned to cross the Modder River. The Boers however used Guerrilla tactics whilst defending the River, something not considered “Cricket” by the British forces. Methuen wandered the battlefield and gave no order of any importance, whilst the British troops had to lie down on the battlefield in the full sun to avoid the Boer fire from their hidden defences. Later in the day leading a party of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders down a gully, Methuen was shot in the thigh. Due to constant harassing artillery fire, the Boers fell back. The Boer leader De la Rey decided to retreat in the night.

## **Battle of Magersfontein 11 December 1899**

For twelve days Methuen sat inactive by the Modder River. Two more Highland battalions arrived, the black Watch and the Seaforths. It was claimed at the time that there were almost as many kilts as trousers in the army. The Gordons, a battalion of the Scots Guards were also present. In command of the Highland Brigade was Major Wauchope, known to his men as “Red Mick”, the only clean shaven officer in the British Army. Meanwhile Methuen had been in contact with the forces inside Kimberley via searchlights and heliographs and knew the besieged town was no immediate danger, so he was in hurry.

An interesting side note should be made that the engagement made an early use of an item invented 25 years earlier by the American Joseph Glidden, and was to play a huge part in a future war – barbed wire. It had been strung out by Boer farmers, so at this time it was not used deliberately in a defensive manner.

However the Boers decided to make a stand outside Kimberley. Lord Methuen had failed to perform adequate reconnaissance in preparation for the impending battle, and was unaware that the Boer General De la Rey had entrenched his forces at the foot of the hills rather than the forward slopes as was the accepted practice.

## Frank Lane at the Battle of Paardeberg 1900



Frank died on the first day of Battle of Paardeberg, on Bloody Sunday of 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1900, a day of high Imperial casualties in the Second Boer War. He was in the 38<sup>th</sup> Company, Royal Engineers and is remembered on the grave in plot I696.



ENGINEERS. ROYAL ENGINEERS. LT FRANCIS GERALD STAPLETON COTTON.  
230-CPL J MORRIS SAPPERS F LANE D MURPHY S ROGERS T J DAVIES E J WEST R T MANNEY H BASKERVILLE

*F Lane Inscription in Remembrance on the Boer War Memorial outside the old City Hall Cardiff*

The **Battle of Paardeberg** or **Perdeberg** ("Horse Mountain") was a major battle during the Second Anglo-Boer War, fought near Paardeberg Drift on the banks of the Modder River in the Orange Free State near Kimberley.

Lord Methuen had advanced up the railway line in November 1899 with the objective of relieving the besieged city of Kimberley (and the town of Mafeking, also under siege). Battles were fought on this front at Graspan, Belmont, Modder River before the advance was halted for two months after the British defeat at the Battle of Magersfontein. In February 1900, Field Marshal Lord Roberts assumed personal command of a significantly reinforced British offensive.

The army of Boer General Piet Cronjé was retreating from its entrenched position at Magersfontein towards Bloemfontein after its lines of communication were cut by Major General John French, whose cavalry had recently outflanked the Boer position to relieve Kimberley. Cronjé's slow-moving column was intercepted by French at Paardeberg, where the Boer general eventually surrendered after a prolonged siege, having fought off an attempted direct assault by Lieutenant General Herbert Kitchener.

## **Battle of Poplar Grove 7 March 1900**

The Battle of Poplar Grove was an incident on 7 March 1900 during the Second Boer War in South Africa. It followed on from the Relief of Kimberley as the British Army moved to take the Boer capital of Bloemfontein. The Boers were demoralised following the surrender of Piet Cronjé at the Battle of Paardeberg. General Sir John French's cavalry attacked the Boer force from the rear while mounted infantry and horse artillery attacked from the right flank. The Boers abandoned their positions in panic before the cavalry.

The Relief of Kimberley took place on 15 February 1900. After the Battle of Paardeberg on the Modder River, the Boer commander, General Cronje, surrendered on 27 February. Christiaan de Wet was appointed as commander-in-chief of the Orange Free State. He gathered his commandos at Poplar Grove, about ten miles upstream of Paardeberg and on the way to Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State. De Wet hastily assembled his burghers in sangars which straddled the Modder River along a line of hillocks, about ten miles wide. On 7 March President Kruger of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek arrived at Poplar Grove to visit his remaining burghers. No sooner had he arrived than it was reported that Lord Roberts had commenced his advance on Bloemfontein. Kruger was bundled back into his cart and sent on his way.

French's plan was to make a wide sweep around the six thousand Boers' left flank, without making contact, and then attack them from the rear. The infantry and the artillery would then attack them from the right. French, the cavalry division, some mounted infantry units and the horse artillery with 42 guns, carried out their order. But the Boers "did not behave like well-bred pheasants". Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote of it: "The plan of action was based, however, upon one supposition which proved to be fallacious. It was that after having prepared so elaborate a position the enemy would stop at least a little time to defend it."

A panic had seized the Boers. When they saw the cavalry at a distance, they all fled. De Wet and his officers tried in vain to stop them. They eventually stopped at Abraham's Kraal, some 18 miles from Poplar Grove. There they resisted the advance quite bravely the next day, but that night they fled to Bloemfontein. Again the commandos were placed in defensive positions, ready to prevent Roberts from taking the capital. That night De Wet visited all the commandos. "An excellent spirit prevailed among them", De Wet was to write later. When he reached the southern positions, it was a different matter. One of the commandos had simply abandoned their position.

When the fighting started the next day, the Boers once again abandoned their positions and fled northwards.

## **Battle of Driefontein 10 March 1900**

The Battle of Driefontein on 10 March 1900 followed on the Battle of Poplar Grove in the Second Boer War between the British Empire and the Boer republics, in what is now South Africa. In the first half of 1900, the British made an offensive towards the two Boer republic capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria. The Boer forces under the command of Christiaan de Wet were holding a 7-mile (11 km) line covering the approach to Bloemfontein. Lord Roberts subsequently ordered a division under Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly-Kenny to attack the position from the front, while Lieutenant General Charles Tucker's division moved against its left flank. The Boers were subsequently forced to withdraw losing 124 men killed and captured, while the British lost 82 killed and 342 wounded.

The battle of Driefontein was the last attempt to prevent the British under Lord Roberts from occupying Bloemfontein, the capital of the Orange Free State. The Boer position in the Orange Free State had collapsed very quickly. Only four weeks earlier their main army had been camped at Magersfontein,

blocking the direct route to Kimberley. On 11 February Lord Roberts had begun his great flank march, which had seen Kimberley liberated on 15 March, and the army from Magersfontein captured at Paardeberg on 27 February. A first attempt to stop the British advance had failed with hardly any fighting at Poplar Grove on the 7<sup>th</sup> March.

In the aftermath of the rout at Poplar Grove, President Kruger had made valiant attempts to rally the fleeing burghers, but only 1,500 of the 6,000 men from Poplar Grove could be convinced to stay. Under the command of Christiaan De Wet, with assistance from De La Rey, the Boers organised a new defensive line at Driefontein.

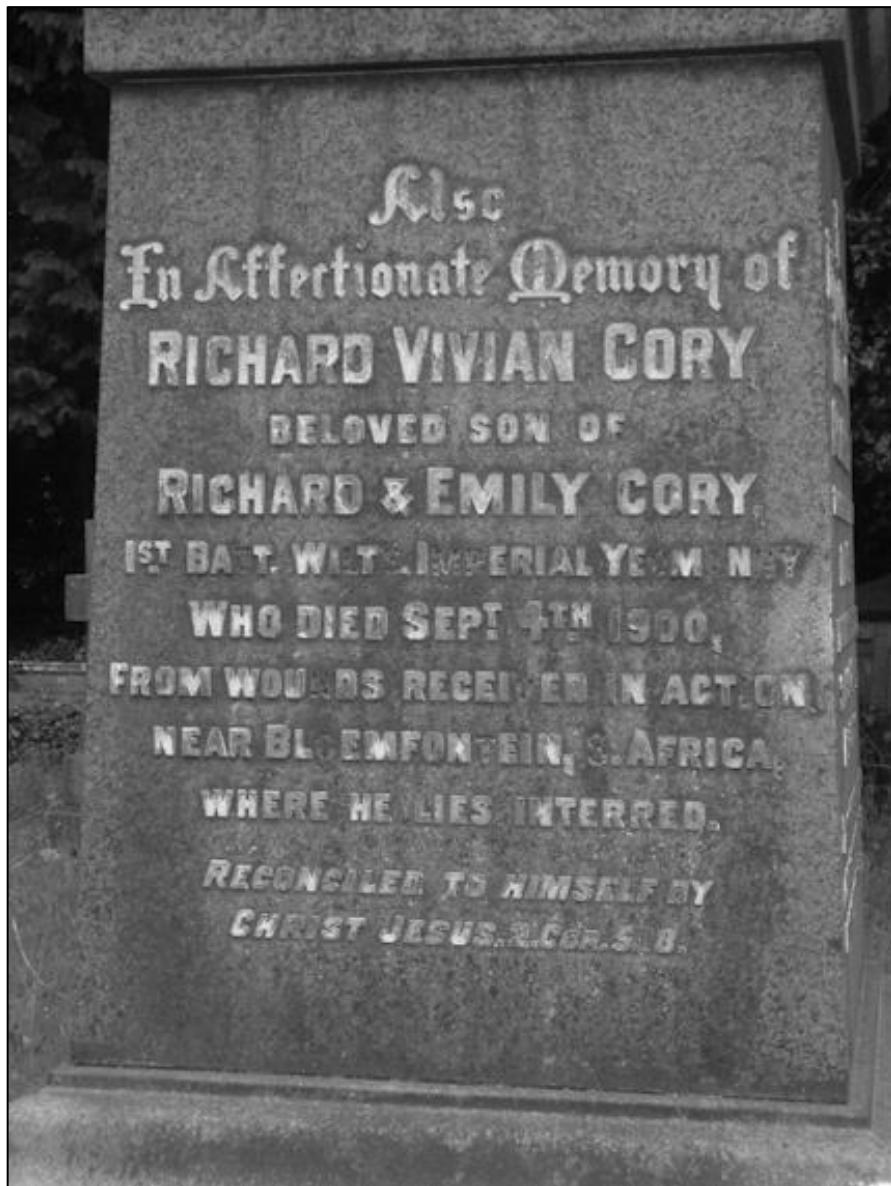
This time they fought, and fought well. Lord Roberts organised his men into three columns and attacked along the entire Boer line. Despite being heavily outnumbered, the Boers managed to hold on all day, but as darkness fell the British had seized the northern end of the Boer line, and were threatening the southern flanks. Once again the burghers fled – De Wet described it as a panic. This time there was no stopping them. Three days later the British captured Bloemfontein without facing any more significant resistance. British losses at Driefontein had been 82 dead and 342 wounded. Boer losses were at least 102 dead and 22 captured. To the British it began to look as if the war would soon be won.

## **Occupation of Bloemfontein 13 March 1900**

On March 13th 1900, Lord Roberts occupies Bloemfontein. The column proceeded at noon on the 31st of August by train to Bloemfontein, where they arrived at eight o'clock in the evening, proceeding to the Rest Camp for the night, which they spent under canvas for the first time during the campaign. The next day orders were received to march at seven o'clock, the same troops as before being required to make a forced march to Ladybrand to relieve the garrison there, who had been shut up for three or four days; so the force marched to the Waterworks, a good 20 miles, passing the scene of the disaster at Sanna's Post. Next day the column marched to Thaba N'Chu, a long 19 miles, and camped to the west of the town; they moved next day at five in the evening, and, after a bad march at night, reached camp at Andriesfontein at two o'clock in the morning. After resting until three in the afternoon, the column proceeded to Zonderzorg, about 13 miles, marching again the next day at seven o'clock in the morning towards Ladybrand, where the Boers were found in position at Plat Kop on the left of the road.

But they retired discreetly before the fire of the 39th Field Battery and one of our pom-poms, and signal messages were received about 11 a.m. from Colonel White that he had reached Ladybrand with his Mounted Infantry; so the infantry column was then halted, and eventually returned to camp.

## Richard Cory at Bloemfontein



**Richard Vivian Cory** is interred at Bloemfontein, South Africa but mentioned on the Cory memorial (plot L1481). The son of Richard and Emily Cory, he joined the 1st Battalion Wiltshire Imperial Yeomanry, formed early 1900, but died from wounds received in action on 5th September 1900 in the Ladybrand District, Leeuw River, South Africa.

## Guerrilla war (September 1900 – May 1902)

The British were forced to revise their tactics. They concentrated on restricting the freedom of movement of the Boer commandos and depriving them of local support. The railway lines had provided vital lines of communication and supply, and as the British had advanced across South Africa, they had used armoured trains and had established fortified blockhouses at key points.

They British now built additional blockhouses, each housing 6–8 soldiers and fortified these to protect supply routes against Boer raiders. Eventually some 8,000 blockhouses were built across the two South African republics, spreading out from the larger towns along the principal routes.

The British also implemented a "scorched earth" policy under which they targeted everything within their controlled areas that could give sustenance to the Boer guerrillas with a view to making it harder for the Boers to survive. As British troops swept the countryside, they systematically destroyed crops, burned homesteads and farms and interned Boer and African men, women, children and workers in concentration camps.

The last of the Boers finally surrendered in May 1902 and the war ended with the Treaty of Vereeniging signed on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1902.



*Inscription to Hannah Jones, Kimberley Siege*



