

The Okiep copper district, Namaqualand: European's earliest mining efforts in South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

"Copper! It is a malleable, enduring metal that has served man for untold centuries. Certainly it has served Namaqualand well. More than anything else it has made Namaqualand what it is, and to mention the one without the other is to censor history".

(Steenkamp, 1975)

The Okiep copper district covers an area of approximately 3 000 km² and is situated in the Northern Cape Province and includes the towns of Springbok, Nababeep, Okiep, Concordia and Carolusberg. The geographic region is referred to as Namaqualand. The copper mines in the Okiep district of Namaqualand are steeped in South African mining and geological history. The Dutch colonialists discovered the deposits in 1685, although the indigenous Africans may have previously worked copper there for several hundred years. The first mine to be opened by Europeans in South Africa is located in the Okiep district and the first South African mining company was formed there in 1852 to mine copper from the deposits. Other notable 'firsts' for the region are that the first South African geological report and first geological map produced in this country describe and depict the Namaqualand copper fields.

Several famous 18th and 19th century explorers visited the copper deposits before the first mining activities began in the mid-19th Century. Amongst these were famous geologists such as W.G. Atherstone, Andrew Wyley and E.J. Dunn, and also Andrew Geddes Bain and Charles Bell. Bain produced the first geological report published in South Africa. Bell was the Surveyor General in the Cape Colony at the time and in 1855 visited the Okiep mines and the Cornish miners who were already working the deposits. (Bell is well known amongst philatelists as he designed the famous "Cape Triangular" stamps).

Today, the Okiep copper district is virtually devoid of mining activity. The fluctuating copper prices, coupled with a remote and hostile setting, have collectively caused varying degrees of success and failure in the 150-year ("modern") history of the mines. Derelict and abandoned mining apparatus, some imported from Cornwall, can still be seen scattered around at a few of the old mines. Nevertheless, there are some national monuments declared in the region including the discovery site of the copper ore outcrop by Simon van der Stel in 1685, and some of the preserved mining equipment from the late 19th century. This Namaqualand region is probably more famous for its early spring flowers than for its cultural and economic history. Although there are proclaimed sites of historical and mining interest in the region, perhaps more could be done to capitalise on this rich and diverse mining landscape.