

BACKGROUND TO FLAME LILY PARK by **Vernon Corbishley**

28th September 2001

Hello to Doug and Molly Barlow-Jones. Doug was a foundation member of Flame Lily Shellhole and I think he reminded me that probably we are the only two left and his wife, Molly, was a foundation member of the Ladies Committee.

Over the years, a number of people have asked me about the origins of Flame Lily Park and to cover this, one has to go back to the AGM in September 1970 at the Flame Lily Shellhole. The meeting was attended by the Provincial Old Bill of that time, Ron Macgregor and the District Old Bill, Ivan Pearce.

After closing the meeting, a small group began discussing two points, which were raised during the meeting:

- a) the advice by Bartle Road Committee that there was no space to make substantial further expansion and
- b) an incident that I had related about Unilever's acquisition of a building on the Victoria Embankment to provide future office space. The Group had given the tenants six months notice, rent-free and all but one of them availed themselves of the offer. At the end of the six-month period, an ex-serviceman of the First World War vintage refused to move on the basis that he required accommodation of an equivalent nature at the same rental. Considering these problems, I said to the group around the table that we ought to consider doing something for the Second World War generation by providing some form of housing. If Bartle Road was full, what was going to happen to the rest of our chaps when they needed shelter and furthermore, if things went wrong in the Rhodesias and there was a large influx from there, where would those people live? And this was said in 1970.

At this stage, one or two of the group put money on the table and said, "There's a contribution towards building the next complex". At the end of the discussion, they wanted to know who would take responsibility for the money and get on with the job. As the Old Bill of Flame Lily Shellhole, I had no option but to respond to their glances and pick up the R4,00 from the table and accept the charge to see that the job was done, and I am still responsible today.

Following this incident, the Shellhole formed a sub-committee and decided to form a welfare organisation. It also inquired of MOTH GHQ whether it would support the concept. Investigations had shown that Government would lend money at low interest rate for the building of housing but the National Chairman of that time took legal advice which led to the feeling that government finance was "tainted" money and should not be used. Consequently, and for the time being, MOTH GHQ did not give its support to the Flame Lily Shellhole project.

In spite of this, the Flame Lily Shellhole went ahead and registered a welfare organisation under the name of The Flame Lily Ex-Servicemen's Cottage Association. This took time and about a year later when the process was completed it was decided then to carry on with our project. Later, after discussions with several members of MOTH GHQ, it was decided that the Order should reconsider its position and a conference was held in Kimberley to discuss the future of all cottages. There, it was decided that MOTH should take over the Flame Lily welfare number and change the name to The MOTH Ex-Servicemen's Cottage Association. This, then, was the beginning of MESCA.

A number of other Cottage Associations had also registered welfare numbers and they were requested to give up their numbers and come in with the MESCA concept.

While this was going on, the Flame Lily Committee in Durban had been inspecting the available land in and around Durban to find a suitable site for building and opportunities were considered in Durban North, behind the University, at Bellair and numerous other places but to no avail. At this time I was doing quite a lot of travelling and I lived in Kloof and I used to drive up and down Stella Road and I used to say to myself if ever that site was available that would be ideal for the future Flame Lily Park. One day there was a notice up on that site when I drove past "For Sale" and fortunately we were able to commence the negotiations with the St Philomena Orphanage (in Malvern) for the acquisition of their site. We had discussions with the Catholic authorities and they agreed that we were a possible buyer but at the same stage there was another person requesting to buy and we had to have a bit of an auction. We had to refer the matter to the Municipality of Queensburgh for a decision by the Councillors as to whether they would go for the property developer who would demolish all the buildings on the site and start again or whether we would get it. Eventually the ballot of the Councillors showed a majority of one in favour of Flame Lily who acquired the site for R202 500 for the 14-acre site.

This all happened in 1975 at which stage we had no funds. The "Skiffle" group of Flame Lily Shellhole, which had been formed by Bert Mirfin and Dennis Matthews, had raised R10 000 and the Ladies' Committee of Flame Lily Shellhole had also generated R10 000 from their operations. So with that R20 000 because the ladies agreed to give us the R10 000 we were able to put a deposit down on the purchase of this site. Then we had a problem we had to find a further R180 000 and to this end, discussions took place with the SA Legion. It was prepared to lend us R40 000 on the basis that we would provide accommodation for patients who could no longer go back to their homes after leaving Addington and other hospitals and who needed some sort of "respite" care. We undertook to investigate the problem and see what we could do if we took over this site to meet that problem of respite care.

With a shortfall of ± R140 000 and while fund-raising was going on, an approach was made to Moth Harry Oppenheimer and he was asked if he would be prepared to make a donation of R100 000. I was privileged to visit his small house at Umhlanga Rocks late on a Saturday afternoon to find Uncle Harry and his wife listening to the radio commentaries of horse races in which some of their horses were running. This was in 1975. Harry poured a drink for me and a sherry for his wife while he took a soft drink for himself. After listening to what I wanted to do he said he couldn't do anything personally but referred me to his "Anglo American Chairman's Fund". An application was submitted and the fund advanced us the amount of R13 500 per annum for five years, this being the interest on R100 000 at a ruling rate of 13.5%. In typical Moth fashion we then went to Natal Building Society for a loan of R135 000 and we were prepared to pay them interest of 10%. They agreed because the boss man of the Natal Building Society was an ex-serviceman, and he supported us in our approach. It was not too difficult to make up the difference of twenty odd thousand Rand we were required to pay and took occupation of the site on the 1st January 1977.

It may interest you to know that the first visit paid to the site was undertaken by eight people – the Bissets, Corbishleys, Porters and Swansons – so the eight of us came here and we went round the site - by then the grass in front of what is now Lord Louis was about six or seven foot high and we

wondered what are we letting ourselves in for - this derelict site, the buildings are derelict. A number of people said to me at that time you are crazy this place ought to be knocked down flat and start again. But we felt we could do something with the buildings.

At this point, it may be interesting to note that the early committee consisted largely of representatives of Flame Lily Shellhole but also included Bert Atkinson from Red Duster/Three Tonner, Derrick Cahill of Journey's End, Tom Corbishley from Red Tab and there was support from the District via Gordon Hossell although he did not attend meetings. Other members of the body were Jimmy Williamson who was very prominent in the early days; he was the General Manager of Payne Brothers and did a lot of work in organising the first tenants of Flame Lily Park; Jimmy Gilligan who had been a member of "Three R's" Lottery in Northern Rhodesia. There were also a number of others who have since left. Once we got organised and the contact was made with Shrapnel Shellhole and Dick Baldock joined the committee and efforts were made to get others to come forward to support us. Later, such prominent Moths as Hector Harcombe and Dick O'Toole came in to join the committee.

As soon as we took occupation of the site, a working party came out every Saturday, Sunday and Public Holiday to convert the existing buildings into flats. This work went on for some months and we were able to open our first block of eight flats in October 1977. This first block was named "Flame Lily". Now Shrapnel Shellhole which had been formed recently, took an interest and built, by converting an existing building, three more flats which is known as "Shrapnel House". While this was all going on we used to come out here and the ladies used to bring along cakes and sweets and Horace Porter used to make lunch for us and we used to do that originally in Lord Louis and then subsequently in a building that we knew as the Lebanon. When we took over the site the nuns said we cannot give you full and vacant occupation as we have committed ourselves to a group who call themselves the Lebanon and they look after waifs and strays of children of all race groups and they have lived on this site. When we came here they had pigs, cats, dogs, chickens and goodness knows what. We used to say if you can't beat them join them. It was surprising how many of the young ladies in this group were pregnant and the pigs were pregnant and the chickens laid eggs so there was quite a lot of fun we had with the Lebanon people and fortunately they left us after about a year.

We proceeded with further alterations to existing structures and as the complex expanded with work being carried out by our own chaps, we were able to take in more residents. The first tenant on site was Len Brown, who, as many of you know, was a prominent cricketer and a footballer for South Africa. He was our first tenant and he stayed in what is the annexe to the Old Homestead. At that time there was a Coloured school master who lived in the Old Homestead and he used to caretake the site even though we owned it. He did not stay very long and when he left Len Brown was on his own. To fund-raise, we had a Ladies' Committee that worked very hard and our appreciation goes out to the ladies who have helped us over many years and without their help we could never have built this place. The first big fete that we had was held in 1978 and, in this, we had the support from the Shellholes in the Durban and District Dugout but also from as far afield as East Griqualand and Howick. Particularly, we had the support of Lion Shellhole in Howick who ran a competition with a view to raising enough money to build its own block of cottages and we have the block here which commemorates the Shellhole in Howick the Lion Lodge is a result

of their hard efforts. Before we could build the Lion Lodge on that portion of the site there was an old building which was the hall for the African school that existed here prior to our arrival and the Ntambama block was the classrooms of that African school. When we wanted to extend we had to demolish that hall and we had to get a substantial bulldozer in to knock it down because they used a good quality cement in building in those days and it took some work in knocking it down and removing the rubble. We decided to leave the classrooms and convert that building with the addition of an extra flat in between the two double blocks that were there and we made that into Ntambama and underneath the one block is the Shellhole. We decided the foundations were deep enough for us to have a dugout underneath Ntambama and that is where the Twilight Shellhole is today. Ntambama block was endowed by the Shellholes in Zululand District Dugout.

While all this was going on, an approach was made to Government to obtain funds for building more units and to pay off the debts we had already incurred as a result of our own financing. By the end of 1978 we were housing some 30 persons on the site. The Government came through with a loan of R400 000 and we were strongly reprimanded for building in advance of authority rather than in retrospect. In typical Moth fashion, we accepted the caution and said we would never do it again. Subsequently, however, we have frequently repeated the "offence". We have always had very good co-operation with the Welfare Department which allowed us to get away with quite a lot in this way confirming actual buildings as "as built" plans.

It will be interesting to note that one of the early tenants in Flame Lily block was a chap called Jack Blignaut and Jack Blignaut was instrumental in enquiring shouldn't we have a Shellhole on this site as we have 30 odd Moths here. Jack Blignaut was the first Old Bill of the Twilight Shellhole. It is a very successful Shellhole with over 100 members still meeting on this site and I am sorry to tell you I am the sole remaining person alive from the foundation of the Shellhole. I would love to have many of those other chaps still here today. During this time we had a caretaker who looked after the affairs of the site. He was a Moth but unfortunately he passed away when I happened to be overseas and there was a bit of a hiatus. Dick O'Toole who was on the committee came forward and said look I will be the caretaker until Vernon gets back and then we can decide what to do. Dick O'Toole who lived in town used to come out here every day to caretake the site, and Dick O'Toole was a stalwart Moth and we still miss him.

By this time, we had a formal arrangement with a professional architect, an engineer, several surveyors and the like. Building went on and over the years we have borrowed more than R3m for this purpose. We were never scared to borrow money. Several other Shellholes were beginning to take an interest in this project and those that met at the DLI Club came forward with money to convert the old structures. So the "Combined Ops Block" was endowed by the united efforts of Edwin Swales VC, Spitfire, Didley Eye, Third Brigade, Flame Lily and Twinkle Shellholes and the DLI Regimental Association.

This was followed on shortly afterwards by the Better 'Ole Shellhole in Pinetown building a block and then the Sappers Flame block which came as a result of the efforts through the years of the Sappers who did a tremendous amount of electrical work in the original buildings that were converted. They did all the electrical work and put in the main power lines. We are very grateful to the Sappers and we learnt today that Roy Purdham who was a leading light in the Sappers at that time is far from well and he has had a slight stroke and we are very sorry to hear this.

We used to have parties in what is now Lord Louis. It was the dormitory block for the Coloured Orphanage that was here and we used to get the “Skiffle” group along and they used to provide the music. We used to let our hair down and have a ball.

I remember a group Ipi Tombi from Zululand and they really pounded that floor of the old Lord Louis block on that occasion. On another occasion we had a party for our residents. We arranged that we would have the party at 6 o’clock and we laid on food. By the time quarter to six came there were no eats left for the rest of the party, but we had to just go without food because the tenants had climbed in. This is the sort of thing that went on in those early days.

Well we thought we would do some fund-raising so we entered on to a scheme whereby Moth units could endow maintenance; with R1 700 for a single flat and R2 500 for a double flat they were able to ensure their maintenance in perpetuity. There are a number of blue plaques around the Park and you will see the names of Shellholes – “this was endowed by” – and that’s where this originated. In particular, the Shellholes in East Griqualand embarked on substantial fund-raising to endow five or six double flats in this way and we would like to compliment them on their efforts. Previously, I have mentioned Lion Shellhole in Howick and “Lion Lodge” arises from the competition that was organised and generated some R16 000. Overall, we have enjoyed the support of many Shellholes in our fund-raising efforts and our Ladies Group, with their fetes and other means; have brought in many thousands of Rand. Wry smiles were seen at the District meetings when we first mentioned that we were trying to raise our first “quarter of a million Rand”. It is interesting to note we have just completed the 26th “quarter of a million Rand”. That is R6 500 000 from those small beginnings way back in 1978. We could never have succeeded with this were it not for the efforts of the ladies and donations from Moth Shellholes.

By that time we were operating from the Lebanon building with Horace Porter cooking the Sunday lunches and I remember on one occasion somebody said this was very nice fish – what sort of fish was it Horace? – he said shark. But we thoroughly enjoyed it. The Lebanon leaked like a sieve and when we were cooking in the kitchen Lesley will tell you that we were always in fear of our lives because the power supply would often cut off and if there had been a heavy rainstorm there was water everywhere and we were all scared of being electrocuted. We decided with our expansion that Lebanon was expendable and we pulled it down and replaced it with a building known as “The Pebbles” and another building known as “Lester Heights” and these names were coined by my sister-in-law, Pam.

T	Thelma	P	Pauline/Pam	L	Lesley	H	Hilda
H	Hilda	E	Ethel Halvey	E	Eileen	E	Effie
E	Eileen	B	Beryl Selby	S	Sanna	I	(All the
		B	Barbara	T	Thelma	G	other
		L	Lesley	E	Ethel Halvey	H	helpers such as
		E	Effie	R	Ruth	T	Zoempie, Freda
		S	Sanna			S	Et Al)

So you can see that we have recognised the efforts of the ladies over the years by names of buildings coming from them and also “Milady Mews” this is recognising the efforts done by the ladies so we have not overlooked their efforts.

There was a time when we found that one of the caretakers in the “Old Homestead” site was taking in some paying boarders. We felt that perhaps we were meeting the requirements of the Legion in looking after people for “respite” care. Quite clearly, this was not the case as there was really no demand for this type of shelter for respite care; a far greater need existed in housing people on a permanent basis. Therefore, the committee decided to refund the R40 000 to the Legion to enable them to use the money for other projects and they were off our backs as far as respite care was concerned.

We have a number of other buildings the “Oppenheimer” block was obviously named after Harry Oppenheimer who advanced that initial money to allow us to get off the ground. A number of people misunderstand “Trust House” they say well that must be the Trust Bank – it has got nothing to do with the Trust Bank they never helped us at all but the GHQ Trust fund loaned us money and we built up building to recognise the GHQ Trust fund and that is why its Trust House.

I remember Lesley and I were on an overseas trip and we came back to the airport and we were met by two or three cars with committee members in them and they said you have got to come with us and they brought us to the Park and they said look at that steeple. It had been redecorated. It had been in a shocking state but it had been painted. Asked who had painted it and they said Jimmy Williamson. The general Manager of Payne Brothers apparently got the scaffolding up and he tied broom sticks to each other with a paintbrush at the end and he used that to paint that steeple - you can see how high it is and he virtually did it on his own with the help of one or two Africans and that is the sort of man or men we had helping us here. He was our first secretary and you see his photograph somewhere through there – an elderly gentleman smoking a pipe. That was Jimmy Williamson and we recognise his efforts over the years. The church was derelict when we came here it leaked like a sieve and when we borrowed money from Government we were able to convert it into a Service Centre, put a decent floor in. Some kind Moth was going to help us – there was a sort of an edifice in here that was in front and he decided to climb in with his 14 pound hammers and knocked it to pieces until we managed to stop him. By then it was too late and the pulpit and the other things that were here were knocked to pieces by this keen Moth. He went round telling people that this place was built by Italian prisoners of war – this hall had nothing to do with Italian prisoners of war. This church was built by Coloured youths under the supervision of a European architect and this was built in the early days of the Second World War so if you hear anything about this hall being built by Italian prisoners of war you will know it is not true.

By this time we were accommodating 15 people in the “Old Homestead” but we found that, as they grew older, we were having difficulty in placing them in “Frail” institutions. Therefore, the committee took a decision to erect a Frail-Aged Home and borrowed R1 000 000 to cover this and new servants quarters. What is a million between friends!! We embarked on this project in 1984 and, for practical reasons; the Frail Aged Home was opened in March 1986 and has been going well ever since.

We found that the Government had only permitted us to finance and build for fifty patients and we knew that the need would be far greater than this. We decided to build an extra floor at our own expense for “economic” residents and, after a further period of concentrated fund-raising, this

additional floor to accommodate in all just over eighty people and this, with the Old Homestead, enabled us to look after just on 100 people, in the Old Homestead and the Frail Aged Home.

At about this time, a philanthropist entered on the scene in the form of Moth Cecil Renaud who made a donation of R1 000 000 to us. This enabled us to pay off the debts we had incurred in adding the extra floor in the Frail-Aged Home (about R400 000) and he asked us to install a second lift and to extend the Frail-Aged Home to care for more individuals. We have now achieved this; the lift is in place and there is room for another seven residents. The official opening of this Frail-Aged Home took place in November 1989 and was attended by Moth Cecil Renaud and various dignitaries of the State and Province. You might like to know that just before this official opening we looked around us and saw the wilderness that existed where the builders had been building round about this hall and the offices at the back and I think a group of ladies got together and said right we have got to create an instant garden and in the space of a week they produced a garden just outside the office at the back here and that was all done from builders rubble in next to no time and I think prominent in that building exercise was Sanna Morrow, Lesley and other ladies. They said we could not have an official opening with a wilderness at the back there because someone might take a walk around.

We are now accommodating between the Old Homestead and the Frail-Aged Home a total of 127 people plus "respite" beds for a further 4 people. We at this stage also built, as this was a focal point, a service centre with a shop, a library, workshops and the like. We had our ladies running in the old Lebanon days workshops and when that was knocked down we had to find a new home for them and the shops at the back here were built to provide them with the wherewithal to carry on with their fund-raising and we have never regretted that as they have done such a magnificent job for us.

In addition, 59 double and 122 single sub-economic flats had been provided with Government's help to give shelter to 240 persons but nothing had been done for "economic" residents. We embarked on a scheme to build "garden cottages" which are double flats. We have seventeen of these now and also we have converted the old dormitory block of the "Lord Louis" by the addition of nine economic one-bedroom flats. More recently, to meet the needs of economic residents we built a "halfway house" (in other words, somewhere between being able to run a home and the needs for Frail-Aged) we have built Crawford House to house fourteen people in eleven rooms and to honour the memory of the original General Secretary of the MOTHS, Jock Crawford and his son who lived in Red Duster/Three Tonner we endowed the block to honour the Crawfords and that's where Crawford House name comes from. At the same time, we built three additional flats underneath this "House". We were never short of ideas I can tell you and when we were talking about Lord Louis when we converted the flats there we had been using Lord Louis as a storage area but when we decided to build flats there we had to find somewhere to store things and boy oh boy did we scramble and look around and eventually we found the odd corners here and there and we have found ways and means of storing many things in odd buildings around the site.

And because we seemed to be successful in spite of the views of the original Queensburgh Council the Municipality in the early days when by one vote they agreed we could come on site they came along to us and said look we have approached all the other welfare organisations in Queensburgh to ask them to take over the Queensburgh Haven but no body is interested would you take it over so we said certainly. We are never scared to take over a project to look after our senior citizens

and we took over the control from them, and we did this in November 1990 and renamed it Victory Park, as Victory Shellhole was adjacent. This consists of 24 bed-sitter doubles and 20 rooms, and can accommodate 68 persons in addition to the caretaker's flat. So you must see that people recognised that we were successful and came forward and asked us to take on additional challenges.

By now we were looking after 485 persons should every bed be occupied. In fact, as some units are occupied by only one person, the number is nearer 465 on our official books. So from those early days when Len Brown was the first tenant we are now looking after 465 people including the Frail-Aged.

To finance Flame Lily Park sub-economic flats and the Cecil Renaud Frail-Aged Home we borrowed just a small sum of R4.7m from Government at a very low rate of interest. By 1992 we had reduced this debt to some R3 800 000. Government then gave us the right to pay this off at a favourable discount rate of approximately 25% and Moth Headquarters loaned us the money to avail ourselves of this offer to be free of any Government debt and with the change in circumstances I am sure you will agree that we had to be free of Government debt. About this time we acquired an additional five acres of land adjacent to Piet Retief Road making the total area of Flame Lily Park some thirty acres. (12 Hectares).

We then embarked on an expansion programme by building 24 two-bedroom life-right flats and converting our staff quarters into 3 double and 12 single flats, which entailed a capital outlay in excess of six million Rand. We raised about half of this amount by selling off the life rights to the flats. With the loan from MOTH GHQ and a further loan of R1 500 000 from BOE Ltd we were able to finance these extensions to the Park. With strict financial controls over the past six years we have not only liquidated our borrowings completely but have also invested R2 million in Eskom Stock. So you can see that we have been prudent in the way we have gone about the financing of the Park. We have buildings here, which at book value amount to something like R17m, so from those days when we had a deposit of R20 000 we have book value of buildings and land of R17m and a replacement value of something like R40m.

This has only been possible as a result of our continuing fund-raising efforts by means of fetes, sales from our fund-raising shops and with the great help of the ladies and donations from Moth Shellholes together with bequests from deceased estates. Since 1975 our fund-raising has totalled over R6m and this has enabled us to clear our liabilities other than money due to life right tenants. We are now making provision to meet this continued liability to the life right tenants because if everybody left at the same time and we had to raise R3m we would have to scratch wouldn't we, so we are creating some sort of reserve to meet that liability.

When we started operating our Frail-Aged Home and our Service Centre we received annual subsidies from the Department of Welfare amounting to R1.4 million. This has now dwindled to approximately R600 000. In consequence we now have an operating deficit on our Cecil Renaud Home of some R700 000 per annum. If it were not for our fund-raising and donations we would face closing this home.

In those early days a phrase was coined to the effect that "if one did that, the Lord would provide". In the words of our architect, Chips Jackson, "We have kept the Lord busy for many years".

We did not fear approaching a project like this because there was a sound committee and we believe we had the support of MOTH and other ex-service bodies. There has been great help, not only from the Legion, but also from the Sappers and Air force Associations.

One of the factors that swayed the Queensburgh Municipality as well as the Catholic authorities to permit our taking over the Orphanage site in preference to a cluster housing builder, was our offer to maintain the grave (on site) of the original Mother Superior and to enclose it within a Garden of Remembrance. Our promise has been kept and, in that same garden, stands the SAS Memorial, which was brought here from Rhodesia. Engraved on that memorial stone are the names of forty odd members of the Special Air Services who fell during the Rhodesian Campaign. The Garden of Remembrance is the scene of the Annual Service on Remembrance Sunday.

I believe that a project like this in which we have put something like 25 years work cannot be dismissed in an hour. The number of people that have stayed here over many years and have put in a wonderful job in erecting this memorial to the ex-servicemen of the Second World War we hope will live for many years. On the wall of remembrance we have plaques, which are remembering and respecting the memory of those people that have worked hard for this place and we put the plaque up in their honour. We have had people come and say they want to buy the right to put up a plaque on the wall and we say no you have to earn that right and there are many people that have earned that right but I think there are probably heading on for 100 plaques on that wall. Those in white are people that served on the management committee and even there we must have at least a dozen of white plaques there so those are the people who have put in there labours over many years and have been called to higher service.