

Close



## Rail tunnel was built in 1911 but never used

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By BRIAN McLEAN

THIS is a fascinating story of a bridge that was never built and a tunnel that was never used.

It all started around the time of the First World War in the region of Lady Grey and on the 2000 hectare farm Karmmelkspruit, named after the river which stretches through the region.



In the early 1900s vast tracts of railway line were laid stretching from Lady Grey to Barkly East but traversing the rugged terrain and especially the Witteberg Mountain range was not an easy task.

For instance trains were expected to go around the side of the mountains but because of the sharp turns which they were unable to navigate, different sections were built.

This meant a train having to enter one section, reverse, then head off on another section of rails until a similar situation occurred.

The plan was for the train to go up and around the mountain .

Finally it was decided a tunnel had to be built through the mountain and a bridge spanning 400m to 500m over a gorge, leading to the tunnel, be constructed and the parts shipped out from England.

The tunnel, the construction of which fell to the old South African Railways, was completed in 1911 but not everything went according to plan regarding the bridge as the ship bringing it out to South Africa sank after being torpedoed.

According to farm owner Ian Cloete, a second bridge was commissioned and built but the vessel transporting it was ordered to turn back to Britain to be armour plated.

Today the 50m tunnel, built from slabs of sandstone, stands derelict, the entrance hidden by shrubs and trees. On the other side the tunnel, on the north, the gorge still waits, while down to the right, sections of railway track can still be seen glistening in the harsh sunlight.

Until eight years ago sections of the railway line were still used, but after a train derailed killing three school children all activity ceased.

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