

ON RESTIOS AND ROOFS

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What strikes foreign botanists as the most outstanding feature of the natural vegetation of the south-western Cape? If they have had the opportunity of exploring the local veld, they never fail to be impressed by the great predominance of tufted, reedy-looking plants that are seen everywhere in the fynbos, on the flats and in the mountains, rippling in the wind in undulating waves of dull green, brown and honey tints. Their minute flowers are borne clustered together in chaffy heads or spikes, at the ends of hard cylindrical stems, usually surrounded by papery bracts which may be straw coloured or in every conceivable shade of brown, rusty red, chocolate or ebony. In many parts of the south-western and southern Cape they so dominate the veld that they actually determine the physical character of the vegetation. The casual observer dismisses these plants (quite incorrectly) as 'grasses'; to the farmers and country folk they are 'Riete' or 'Biesies' but to a botanist they are members of an unusual but highly important austral plant family, the Restionaceae. Ranging across the southern hemisphere, members of the Restionaceae are found in Chile, the southern parts of Australia, New Zealand and in southern Africa, where the majority of the 300 or more species are further restricted to the southern extremity of the Cape Province. As these plants are neither true grasses nor reeds (Family Gramineae), nor sedges (Family Cyperaceae), nor are they rushes (Family Juncaceae), they are best referred to as 'restios' in popular language. (See "What is Grass?": Veld and Flora, December 1972.)

Restios must have been an acute disappointment to the early pastoral farmers at the Cape since domesticated grazing animals found them hard, sour and quite unpalatable. But, at a very early stage in the history of European settlement in South Africa, it was found that the restios were an excellent source of first-class thatch. On the 7th of June, 1652, just nine weeks after his arrival on the shores of Table Bay, Van Riebeeck made the following entry in his diary,

"Have been busy today cutting rushes or reeds (which we found in abundance in the down behind the rump of the Lion Mountain) for thatching dwellings."

A few days later, on the 13th of June, 1652, he comments further:

"Had another person start thatching today in a different manner using the reeds already cut; These are so fine and suitable for roof that it would be a pity if no one could be found among the men with a knowledge of thatching."

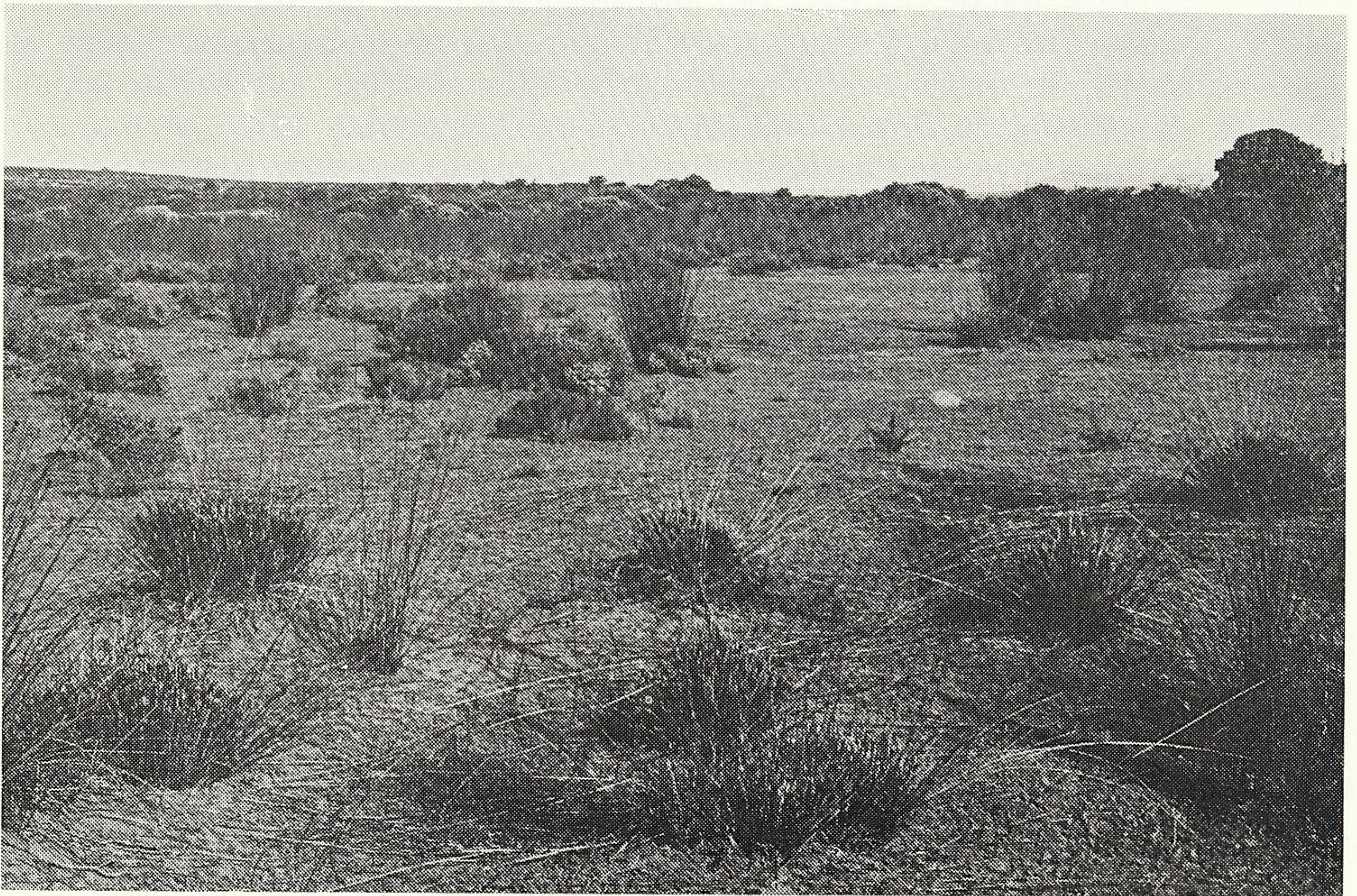
While we can never be quite certain which species of Restionaceae Van Riebeeck used, we may surmise that it was either *Thamnochortus spicigerus* or *Chondropetalum tectorum*, which must have been abundant on the Cape flats at that time. They can still be seen in a few places among the dunes along the False Bay coast between Swartklip and the mouth of the Eerste River. *Chondropetalum tectorum* was in such common use by 1772, when the Swedish botanist C. P. Thunberg arrived in Cape Town, that he suggested the very appropriate specific name—*tectorum*—of the roofs (Latin: *tectum* a roof), a name it bears to this day.

These two species probably supplied the building trade in the vicinity of Cape Town, Stellenbosch and Paarl with all its thatch requirements at least until the end of the 19th century and possibly even longer.

As the population increased, the outlying areas of the Cape were settled and developed, processes which brought the settlers into contact with a number of different species of restio. Thus, those restios having suitable physical properties for thatchmaking, were, in due course, utilised in domestic architecture. Since most restio species are endemic to specific areas, each of the major regions of the Cape had, and to a certain extent still has, its own characteristic species of thatch.

The predominant species in the west coast sandveld, *Chondropetalum tectorum*, supplied the Swartland farms. Today there are relatively few thatched homesteads in the area, although this elegant restio continues to hold its own as a roofing material for picturesque whitewashed strandhuisies of the sandveld, giving an air of charm to even the humblest shack. Porterville and Tulbagh too, would have drawn on *Chondropetalum tectorum* as their principal thatch species.

To the south and east, from Caledon and Bredasdorp to Swellendam and Mossel Bay, *Thamnochortus insignis* was used. This magnificent species is found throughout the strandveld of the southern Cape. Around Albertinia and Bredasdorp, *Thamnochortus insignis* is so abundant that it is still commercially exploited. At present it provides the thatch used in nearly all the thatching contracts in the Cape.



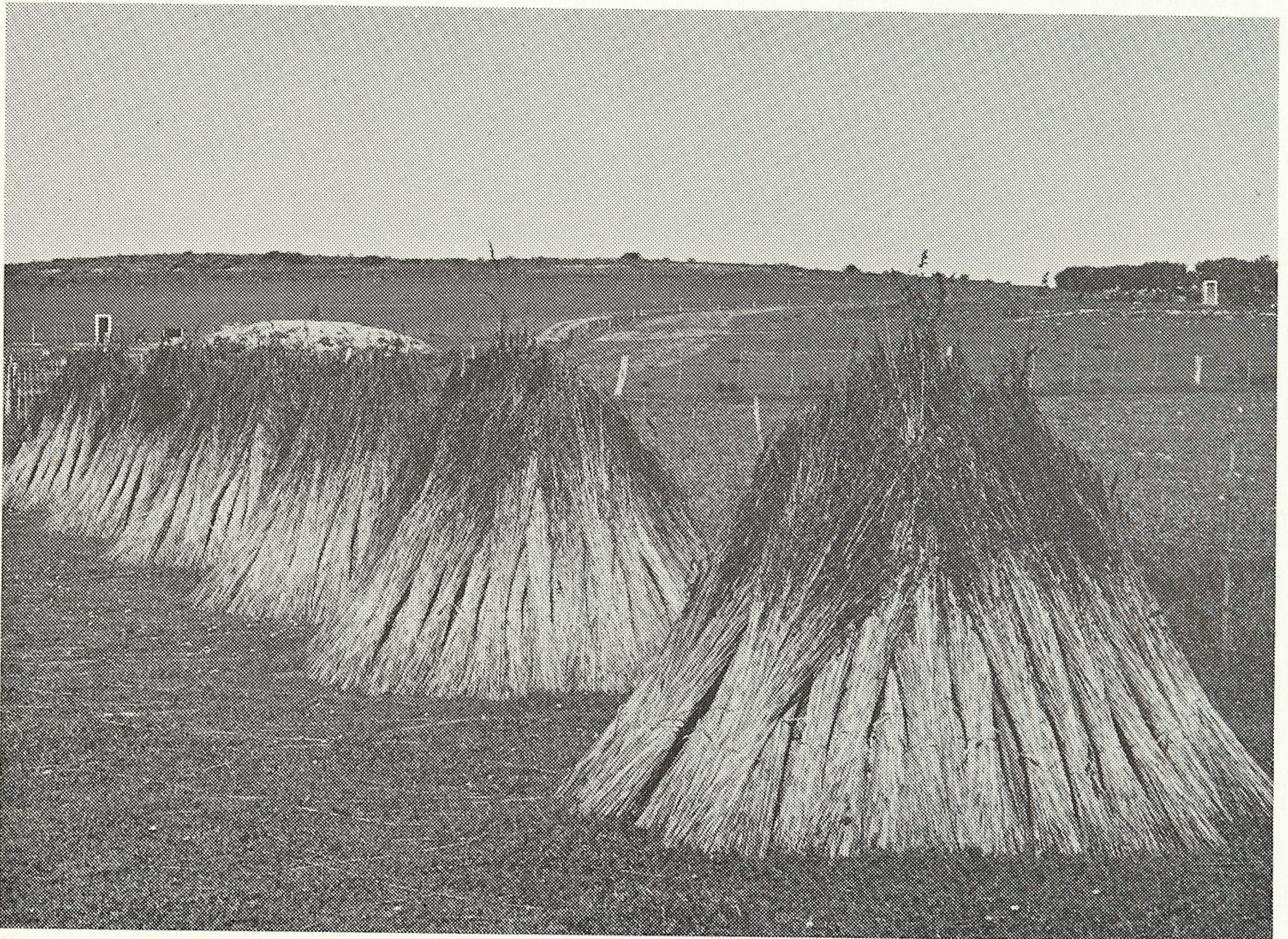
Thamnochortus insignis on the farm, Van der Stell's Kraal, between De Hoop and Bredasdorp. Mature plants growing in the veld, those in the foreground having been cut and removed for drying.

The long straight stems of *Thamnochortus insignis* are particularly hard and wiry, yielding thatch so superior in quality that the writer has even seen it being used as far afield as the Transvaal. A roof thatched with this species can have a life span of 20 years. Elim, near Bredasdorp, is a village in the heart of the thatch country that has for generations provided the men skilled in the specialised skill of thatching. Cutting and drying usually takes place in the early summer, at the end of the growth flush. The stems are severed above the base of the tuft and laid out to dry in the veld. They are then tied into bundles which, in turn, are gathered into stooks and stacked for a further period of drying. Another species occasionally used in the Elim district is *Willdenowia argentea*, but as this species is never abundant at any one locality it is rarely exploited for thatch-making any more.

Not unnaturally, the tall, straight-stemmed restios have been most sought after although smaller species like *Hypodiscus aristatus* have been used in some of the villages in the foothills of the Langeberg.

Similarly, the rather bushy, branched stems of *Cannamois virgata* are the favourite material for roofing rough shepherd's huts in the mountains, admirably weatherproof though giving a lumpy and somewhat uneven surface to the roof.

Thus different restios have been found to meet the requirements of numerous different roofs from the simplest to the most stately of Cape homes, adding a distinctive but subtle dimension to the Cape architectural tradition.



Stooks of *Thamnochortus insignis* drying in the sun.