



The Camphor Avenue in 1930.

A quiet walk – down the Camphor Avenue

by Graham Duncan and Elaine Campher

Planted by Cecil John Rhodes sometime between 1895 and the turn of the century, Kirstenbosch's shady Camphor Avenue has over the decades grown into one of the garden's most impressive features, along with several other exotic trees such as the magnificent Atlas Cedar above Pearson's grave, the Moreton Bay figs and, of course, the English oaks. These and other exotic species are retained at Kirstenbosch for historical and aesthetic reasons but, as nature takes its course, are not replaced. We feel sure though, that the

Kirstenbosch Camphors, now almost a century old and probably still in their prime, will welcome visitors into their dappled domain for many years to come.

The Kirstenbosch estate was acquired by Rhodes in 1895 and left to the nation on his death in 1902. The avenue of camphors forms just a small part of the old dirt road laid out by Rhodes from his Groote Schuur estate along the eastern boundaries of Table Mountain, almost to Constantia Nek, and which he lined with various exotic trees. Today giant Moreton Bay figs from the Australian east coast (*Ficus macrophylla*, Family Moraceae) tower over the road from the National Botanic Institute head offices to the Kirstenbosch Gardens offices, and the Camphor Avenue begins just above the old main gate, rising sharply and terminating just as one rounds the first bend to the Compton Herbarium. Several magnificent camphors do however, still grow just below Van Riebeeck's famous wild almond hedge (*Brabejum*



The Camphor Avenue today.

stellatifolium, Family Proteaceae — planted in 1660) and in the immediate area up to the top gate.

The camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*, Family Lauraceae) is a native of Red China, Taiwan and Japan and is a source of commercial camphor, obtained by boiling its woodshavings in water. Two exceptionally attractive features of this long-lived evergreen tree, apart from the extravagantly spreading crown in mature specimens, are its beautifully sculptured bark and its flush of new reddish foliage in early spring, accompanied by the small bunches of minute yellow flowers. When handled or bruised, the mature bark and foliage emit a strong smell of camphor.

From the Kirstenbosch top gate towards Constantia the road takes a gradual dip, and here Rhodes planted his Spanish chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*, Family Fagaceae), of which numerous elderly specimens still survive. The chestnuts continue past Klaassenbosch and end a

short distance before the entry to Cecilia Forest Station.

The “new look” Camphor Avenue

For many years these wise old camphors have had to be content with a rather monotonous mat of miscellaneous *Agapanthus* about their roots, but recently one side of the avenue has been considerably upgraded with the construction of log terraces and the planting of a wide variety of shade-loving ground covers, herbaceous perennials, bulbous plants, shrubs and trees. In the near future, the “logging” of the other side of the avenue will be undertaken which will facilitate the planting of many more interesting shade-loving indigenous plants. This terracing, using sturdy logs carefully anchored together, has proved very successful here and elsewhere in the garden, and is due to the expertise of our Head of Horticulture, Mr John Winter, and our Head Foreman, Mr Dicky Bowler, with the energetic “new development gang”. Assisting us with the planting and general

maintenance of the area are Imeraans Davids, Brian Hendricks, Moses (Thysie) Eksteen and John van Schalkwyk. Wooden benches have been placed in the avenue affording some shady peaceful views and are proving popular with visitors, particularly during the hot summer months.

A list of species successfully established in the avenue and suitable for shaded gardens in the southern suburbs of Cape Town is available from the author.



Acknowledgements

We thank Mr John Winter for his guidance and encouragement with this project, and Sophie Olivier, Ernst van Jaarsveld and Yvonne Reynolds for their assistance.

Bibliography

- Compton, R. H. (1965). *Kirstenbosch, Garden for a Nation*. Tafelberg, Cape Town.
- McCracken, D. P. & McCracken, E. M. (1988). *The Way to Kirstenbosch. Annals of Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens Vol. 18*. National Botanic Gardens, Cape Town.
- Rycroft, H. B. & Ryan, R. (1980). *Kirstenbosch*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town.