

A sketch of colonial Umzinto

by Duncan Du Bois

THE name Umzinto derives from the Zulu *Umuziwe Zinto* – the home of things or events.¹ Patrick J. Maxwell and his wife were probably the first settlers in the Umzinto district in 1849, growing coffee and cotton.² However, Bunting Johnstone’s residence in the district may have predated that of the Maxwells. In 1861 he claimed to have been living in what was generally called Lower uMkomazi for thirteen years.³ As a settlement, Umzinto was little more than a hamlet until the 1880s. When he made his second tour of the South Coast in 1870, *Mercury* editor, John Robinson, described Umzinto as a “cluster of homesteads within gunshot of each other” which gave the “impression of a township”.⁴ Nonetheless, it was the chief area of settlement in what from 1865 was called Alexandra County.

Umzinto sprang into prominence in 1857 as a result of two apparently unrelated developments. One was the decision to open up the area south of the uMkomazi river by inviting applications for grants of Crown land. The other concerned the establishment of the first public company to operate in Natal, namely, the Umzinto Sugar Company.⁵

Crown land applications

In 1853 the *Mercury* remarked in an editorial on the need for a scheme “for throwing open the unoccupied Crown lands” in the Lower uMkomazi district.⁶ In 1856 the Resident Magistrate, Henry Francis Fynn, urged that such a policy be embraced, particularly as he desired what his colleagues in other counties enjoyed: a central office and

a house. The absence of settlers – there were only three, namely Bunting Johnstone, John Higham and John McKenzie – obliged Fynn to “locate myself with a wagon central to the few Europeans occupying the south bank of the Umkomaas”.⁷

Following the election of the first Legislative Council in March 1857, a committee was appointed to promote settlement of the coastal counties by means of Crown land grants. Although the idea was to attract British immigrants, dissatisfaction with the existing Byrne grants and news of the success of sugar on the coastal belt prompted many to take their chances and make a fresh start.⁸ Within a year Fynn’s sparsely populated world changed dramatically. There was a spate of applications for Crown land grants south of the uMkomazi river. Robert Mann, in his book *The Colony of Natal*, stated that by 1859 the number of colonists had grown to 93.⁹ As a result, Fynn informed the Colonial Secretary that he would be purchasing land and building a house near Umzinto “as the most central locality in the division” for his

magistracy.¹⁰ Two other developments indicated that officialdom endorsed Umzinto as the node for development: the estimates for 1858 indicated that £10 was allocated to a post office in Umzinto. This was followed by official sanction for the establishment of a cattle pound.¹¹ The Supply Bill for 1859 reflected a sum of £50 for a school in the Umzinto district.¹² Fynn also had additional support. A Justice of the Peace, James Arbuthnot, was appointed in November 1858.¹³ After seven years in the Richmond area, Arbuthnot took up a 600-acre grant on the north bank of the Mzinto river which he named Umzinto Lodge.¹⁴ The first social gathering to take place in Umzinto was a farewell public dinner hosted for Fynn in March 1860 to mark his retirement from the civil service. No details were stated in the *Mercury* report as to where the function was held or the attendance.¹⁵

Umzinto Sugar Company

When it was formed in 1857, the company’s directors were all based in Cape Town. According to its prospectus, the company had a capital



Umzinto Sugar Estate – the steam train (photograph courtesy of the Natal Agricultural Journal)

stock of £30 000.¹⁶ In terms of its Deed of Grant, Alexandra Farms, as it was registered, was granted 9 000 acres in the Umzinto area. Its plan was to lease those lands for cane growing and to crush the harvest at a central mill.¹⁷ In 1858, Umzinto became the first place in Natal to employ oriental labourers when a group of Malays and Chinese arrived to work on the sugar estate.¹⁸ But their stay was short-lived. Working for 10 shillings a month did not appeal to their hopes for a quick fortune.¹⁹ Despite the loss of their mechanical expertise, the sugar factory, as it was called, started operating in March 1860, producing sugar yields which, it was claimed, were unrivalled in the Colony. By 1861 the company had 150 acres under cane, of which 100 acres were ready for crushing.²⁰ Following his tour of the South Coast in 1861, *Mercury* editor John Robinson

described the factory as the biggest building in the Colony. With walls 20 feet high, an iron roof spanned the 150 feet length of the building which housed machinery “whirling around at the rate of innumerable miles per minute” and emitting a “deafening uproar”.²¹

The sugar enterprise also initiated the arrival of indentured Indian labour. Within weeks of the arrival of the first of these labourers in Natal in November 1860, the Umzinto Sugar Company was assigned 30 indentured Indians.²² Robinson noted that indentured Indians were also employed by Captain James Greetham and John Pearse of the Umzinto area, who had modest 30-acre cane fields.²³ Early in 1862 the Acting Resident Magistrate, R.B. Struthers, reported the first incident of suicide by an Indian labourer. Bootoo hanged himself on

UMZINTO SUGAR COMPANY.

THE Sugar Factory on this estate being now **COMPLETED** on a scale unequalled in the Colony for power and completeness, the Company are prepared to grant

LEASES

to intending Sugar Growers, of some of their **CHOICE LANDS** adjoining the Mill. The terms originally contemplated have been modified on the most liberal principle.

Rent for the first 2 years	Free
“ “ next 3 “	10s. per acre.
“ “ last 5 “	£1 “ “

10 years.

A first trial of Sugar making has already established the fact that for quantity and quality the Umzinto Estate yields no other, while the magnitude of the sugar enterprise in that favored locality makes it no longer doubtful that means will be found to save land carriage by shipping coast-wise, either from the Umcomas River, or some suitable spot on the beach nearer the estate.

The Company undertaking to cut and cart as well as manufacture the cane, very limited means will enable an industrious lessee to make for himself a competency in a few years.

Apply to

COQUI & WIRSING,
Agents.

Durban, 26th November, 1860.

an estate in Umzinto. According to Struthers, the incompetence of the Indian interpreter made it impossible to record intelligible depositions from Bootoo's fellow labourers.²⁴ Reference to the incidence of suicide amongst indentured labourers in the Umzinto area, which reached critical levels in the last 20 years of the colonial era, is made later.

Travel and transport

From Reunion to Port Shepstone the South Coast is traversed by 26 rivers. From the outset, settlement and development of the region was hampered by the absence of bridges and proper roads. As early as 1860 an editorial in the *Mercury* noted that "no part of Natal is so much in need of passable roads as the district about the Umzinto". Concern at this state of affairs resulted in the first public meeting in the Umzinto district. Chaired by James Arbuthnot of Umzinto Lodge, it was noted that the cost of transport from Durban to Umzinto was three times more expensive than transport from Durban to Pietermaritzburg, even though the distances were similar.²⁵ But 37 years would pass before the arrival of the railway at Park Rynie, some six miles from Umzinto, solved the area's travel and transport dilemma.

Untamed environs

Along the sparsely settled South Coast game, particularly buck, were still plentiful in the 1860s. Shooting for the pot was part of the lifestyle. Charles Hamilton, who travelled extensively around Natal in the 1860s, noted that at one planter's estate in the Ifafa area, probably that of William Joyner,

supplying the household with meat by shooting game was a full-time job for two of the planter's sons.²⁶ The business of shooting required gunpowder. In 1866, 45 residents in the Lower uMkomazi area petitioned for the establishment of a powder magazine at Umzinto. Their request was granted and Harry Wylde-Brown, clerk of the court at Umzinto, was appointed as dispensing officer.²⁷ In 1866, more than 5 000 pounds of gunpowder was sold to 61 permit holders in Alexandra County. A permit was required where purchases exceeded 10 pounds per annum.²⁸ The significance of that extensive use of gunpowder may be explained by Law 8 of 1866, which encouraged the destruction of "noxious animals", namely those which caused losses to livestock and crops. Heading the list was the leopard. A reward of £1 per leopard killed was offered. Hyenas, jackals and crocodiles rated 10 shillings per kill.²⁹ The death of Richard Pennington of the Umzinto district in February 1865 as a result of having been mauled by a leopard indicated the threat such predators posed.³⁰

Progress to 1866

The growth of the Umzinto settler population may be gauged from the fact that the *Blue Book* for 1862 recorded a membership of 80 belonging to St Patrick's Anglican parish.³¹ However, as the only Anglican church in the district, it is reasonable to assume that not all 80 members resided in the Umzinto area. Reverend Joseph Barker, who commenced his ministry in the area at the chapel on Umzinto Lodge at the invitation of James Arbuthnot in January 1861, presided over St Patrick's from 1866 to 1886.

The church building was completed only in 1869.³² A notice in the *Government Gazette* in August 1862 on the sequestration of the estate of John Pearse provides a further indicator of the evolving social structure of the area. Pearse was a hotel keeper in Umzinto.³³ The growing significance of the settlement was also reflected in the fact that by 1864 Umzinto enjoyed a thrice-weekly postal service from Durban.³⁴ By 1866, the colonial budget reflected a sum of £24 for adult evening classes in Umzinto.³⁵

Official interest in Umzinto was indicated by the personnel appointed to the court. Although there was no official building, the staff appointments were as follows: Resident Magistrate, James Dunbar Moodie, appointed 7 August 1860 at an annual salary of £300; clerk of the court, Harry Wylde-Brown, appointed 27 May 1861 – salary £155 per annum; interpreter, W.J. Arbuthnot, appointed 3 October 1862 at £125 per annum; Moonsaamy, Indian interpreter, appointed 2 May 1861 at £48 per annum.³⁶ In their fashion of doing things, the colonial administration prioritised the construction of a gaol ahead of a court room, calling for tenders in 1863 for the project to be undertaken on the Ida Vale property of Bunting Johnstone

near the Mzinto river.³⁷ The gaol, completed in September 1865, was the first public building erected not only in Umzinto but in Alexandra County, as the region was formally known after August 1865.³⁸ But five years later magistrate Moodie was still enquiring about the erection of his court house.³⁹ Not until 1873 was official mention made of the provision of offices and a court room for Moodie in Umzinto.⁴⁰

Social cohesion manifested itself via the formation of the Umzinto Rifle Club in February 1860, the first of its kind on the South Coast. Such organisations were regarded as essential to the security of colonial settlements and were established across the length and breadth of Natal. In 1903 there were 59 officially registered rifle associations.⁴¹ Shooting competitions became convivial occasions.⁴² In 1865 the Umzinto Mounted Rifles came to be known as the Alexandra Mounted Rifles, headed by Major James Moodie. Second in command was Captain Lewis Reynolds. Alexander Brander was the quartermaster.⁴³ Despite this element of organisation and social cohesion, Umzinto residents were reticent about the formation of a town board. In his reports for 1864 and 1866, magistrate Moodie expressed disappointment at

ALEXANDER BRANDER,
LAND AND COMMISSION AGENT,
UMZINTO.

BLACK, BAXTER & CO.
General Store,
U M Z I N T O .

being unable to make headway in that regard.⁴⁴

By this time annual horse race meetings were being held at Umzinto. They attracted punters from Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Held over two days, they featured handicap, hurdle and flat pony races. Evenings were spent dancing, singing and drinking, according to Charles Hamilton, who attended one such occasion. As accommodation was very limited, many of the women slept in wagons.⁴⁵ The retirement of the manager of the Umzinto Sugar Company, Mr Maclean, in 1863 resulted in a farewell function which lasted until the small hours of the morning and was described as the “happiest of all happy meetings which had ever been held at Umzinto”.⁴⁶

Hard times

The recession which took hold in Natal in 1865 did not manifest itself on the South Coast until 1866. Requisitions for indentured labour were cancelled⁴⁷ because of the state of the economy as debt began to close businesses and force planters to dispose of their farms. A correspondent for the Umzinto area noted that life was “almost at a standstill” and that “trade has been unusually dull”.⁴⁸ In January 1867 W.J. Aiken’s haberdashery and grocery store in Umzinto was declared insolvent.⁴⁹ Arrears on quitrents owed to the government by farmers in the district increased from £303 in 1865 to £550 in 1867.⁵⁰ As the diary of David Aiken showed, the tardiness or inability of one farmer to settle his debts potentially jeopardised the financial liquidity of others.⁵¹

The most serious setback to the Umzinto district’s economy was the liquidation of the Umzinto Plantation

and Trading Company, the name the Umzinto Sugar Company had been given after its Cape owners sold it to British investors in 1863. The financial slump in Britain discouraged the British parent company from further investment and in 1868 the company was placed under court supervision in London.⁵² On his tour of South Coast estates in 1870, John Robinson described the Umzinto Trading Company’s estate as a “monument of desolation and failure”.⁵³ In 1873, Lewis Reynolds bought the entire estate for a mere £5 000. After his death in September 1875, the Umzinto estate formed the basis of the company known as T. Reynolds and Sons, which was established by Lewis’s brother Thomas and his two sons, Frank and Charles, in 1877.⁵⁴ As such it proved a forerunner of the corporate structure which came to dominate the sugar industry from the 1890s.

Later years – politics

The absence of a bridge over the uMkomazi River not only retarded the development of the South Coast but contributed significantly to the isolation of the Umzinto district. Following Robinson’s tour of the South Coast and his enthusiastic support for the construction of a bridge over the uMkomazi,⁵⁵ John Bazley of *Nil Desperandum* estate on the Ifafa river, a man of considerable mechanical ability, made a prototype of the bridge needed to span the uMkomazi and exhibited it in Black and Baxter’s store in Umzinto in 1871.⁵⁶ But his efforts were in vain, the absence of a directly elected representative possibly adding to the neglect of the region’s infrastructure needs. Only in

September 1897, nearly six years after Bazley's death, was a bridge over the uMkomazi completed.

As the central settlement, Umzinto was witness to all the politics of the county. In terms of Law 1 of 1873, Alexandra and Alfred Counties became eligible for the election of a single representative in the Legislative Council.⁵⁷ Since the inception of representative government in 1857, the South Coast had been represented in the council by the Durban County representative. Initially it appeared that two candidates would contest the new seat: a Captain W. Lloyd and James Burnett Aiken.⁵⁸ Polling arrangements were the responsibility of Resident Magistrate Moodie who, despite the vast size of the constituency, requisitioned the residence of Alexander Brander in the Umzinto district as the sole polling station. August 25, 26 and 27 were the designated voting days.⁵⁹ But Captain Lloyd withdrew his candidacy and so, based on a requisition endorsed by 35 locals, Aiken was elected unopposed.⁶⁰

At his first public meeting in Umzinto, he described himself as "very diffident and unworthy to represent this important constituency" and expressed the view that Alexander Brander should have been the candidate.⁶¹ Despite those modest words, Aiken lost no time in making a name for himself in the council as a result of his controversial remarks on the proposed Welborne railway scheme.⁶² His penchant for controversy reached a climax as a result of remarks he made during a two-hour speech at a banquet in Umzinto on 3 June 1874. On that occasion he made derogatory remarks about his "up-country" colleagues in the council, recommended himself

as being worthy of a top government position and accused newspaper editors of having unacceptable power to influence public opinion. As a result the *Mercury* branded Aiken as "unfit for public life", while the *Witness* condemned his speech as "gasconading conceit".⁶³ After his tumultuous first year in politics Aiken's political career slipped into obscurity. The insolvency of his Maryville sugar estate obliged him to resign from the council in April 1877.⁶⁴

Umzinto's political annals included a fleeting visit by Britain's top soldier of that time, Sir Garnet Wolseley,⁶⁵ on 29 July 1875 in his capacity as Administrator of the Colony of Natal. Appeals by Alexander Brander, who chaired the meeting, for Wolseley to expedite the infrastructural needs of Alexandra County came to naught.⁶⁶ Brander was a stalwart of the Umzinto district having settled there in 1859. From 1865 to 1882 he served as Field Cornet. His involvement in civic matters, which included agitating for Alexandra County to have its own, directly elected representative in the Legislative Council, earned him the epithet "Father of the District".⁶⁷

Thomas Reynolds, who represented the South Coast from 1880 to 1885, was the first elected member whose residence was in Umzinto. Originally from the North Coast, he sold his Oaklands estate there in 1881 and made Umzinto his permanent home. His investment in the district laid the foundations of the Reynolds Brothers empire, which came to dominate the sugar industry on the South Coast after his death in 1885.⁶⁸

Robert Montgomery Archibald was undoubtedly Umzinto's most distinguished political son. He moved



*Robert Montgomery Archibald
(photograph courtesy of Honour without
riches: the story of an Archibald family
by Ruth Gordon [Durban, 1978])*

from the Isipingo area to Umzinto in 1872. By 1875 he had established his own trading store, Archibald and Co., which later had branches in Equeefa, Ixopo and Highflats. In time he came to own five farms in the Umzinto district and established a reputation for reliability and integrity.⁶⁹ From 1890, when Alexandra County was first permitted its own representative in the Legislative Council, until 1910, when Natal became part of the Union, Archibald represented his district and county. From 1903 to 1910 he held the post of Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. A correspondent in the *Mercury* described him as follows: “There is no man in Alexandra County more esteemed than the senior MLA, Mr R.M. Archibald. His kindness and courtesy to everyone, his interest to all that concerns the county are too well known.”⁷⁰ In the 1906 election, his final one, Archibald received the

highest number of votes any candidate ever achieved on the South Coast – 208.⁷¹ He passed away in 1913 and is buried in the cemetery at St Patrick’s along with his wife, Mary.

Although Frank Reynolds was prominent and indeed dominant in the sugar industry, the same cannot be said of his role in the Natal Legislative Assembly, where he represented Alexandra County alongside his fellow Umzinto resident, Archibald, from 1902 to 1906. In 1903 he recorded the second worst attendance record – 49 absences from the assembly. His final two years in the assembly were no better.⁷² His failure to contribute in the assembly debates resulted in the following unflattering observation: “The member for Alexandra County has apparently taken a vow of perpetual silence. It would seem he has no opinions on any subject.”⁷³

Gold fever

From February 1887 until 1890 there was ongoing speculation about investment in auriferous prospects in the Umzinto district. A “golden valley” on a farm belonging to the Reynolds brothers triggered a huge interest in gold speculation. By April 1887 a business called Alexandra Central Syndicate had been formed. The Royal Hotel in Umzinto announced that it was making “considerable additions” to its capacity in order to accommodate prospectors and “other curious types” who were venturing down to Umzinto.⁷⁴ In Durban the Exchange Mart in West St advertised a variety of camping gear, marquees and tents for those headed to the “Umzinto Gold Fields”.⁷⁵ In September 1887 another company was floated, the Alexandra Gold Mining Company, with a capital

of £35 000. The Reynolds brothers were among the major stakeholders.⁷⁶ Although no substantial gold yields were forthcoming, speculation continued, reaching a peak when it was reported in 1888 that a “well-defined auriferous reef” had been located at Dumisa in the Umzinto district. Natal Lt-Governor Sir Arthur Havelock attended the opening of the mine along with 100 guests.⁷⁷ But production was disappointing – a mere half ounce per ton of crushed ore. As a result, by September 1891 the mine was closed and its equipment auctioned off. However, small-scale prospecting continued for a time in the area.⁷⁸

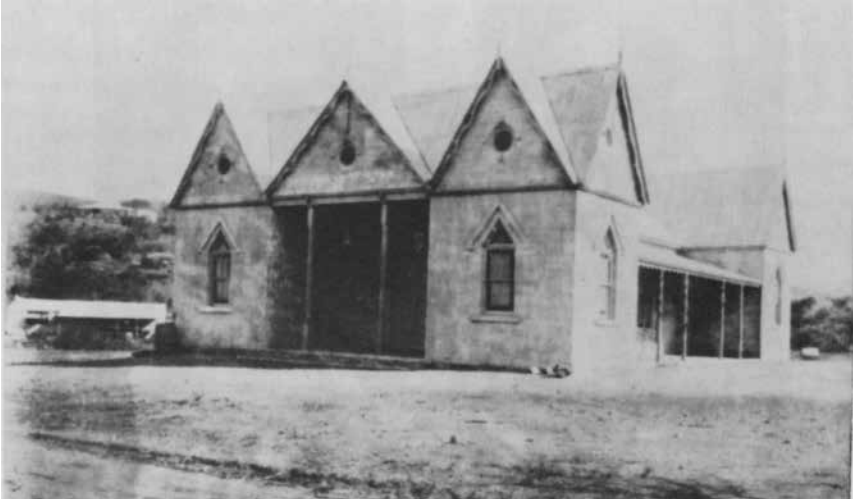
Social life

The first attempt at holding a public ball took place in the Umzinto school in 1874. The dance, attended by about 100 people, commenced at 8pm and “was kept up with unabated vigour till day light did appear next morning”.⁷⁹ As an indicator of progress and prosperity, the venue for the 1875 ball was Umzinto’s newly erected Royal Hotel.⁸⁰ Social cohesion manifested itself on the occasion of the death of Lewis Reynolds. There was a large turnout for his funeral and burial at St Patrick’s.⁸¹ By 1879 St Patrick’s had a membership of 100 white worshippers with an average of 60 attending the Sunday service.⁸²

At the time of the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879, Umzinto was one of seven designated defence districts in Natal. As a result, a defence laager was built containing two ammunition magazines. A review of arms conducted in late 1878 found that Umzinto had the only weapons on the South Coast – a collection of 50 carbines.⁸³ Some 30 settlers from Alexandra County were drawn off “to the front” during the hostilities.⁸⁴ At an entertainment evening in the school room in Umzinto in March 1879 in aid of the War Relief Fund, £6 was raised.⁸⁵ When the volunteers returned after an absence of eight months, 170 colonists came to Umzinto on 27 August 1879 to celebrate the return of their men. Festivities commenced with horse races and athletics. Supper was served at 10pm and described as an unprecedented spread. The dance which had commenced at 8pm went on until very late.⁸⁶

Besides horse racing, cricket was an integral part of the recreational calendar. Although Denis Barker in his book *Umzinto Cricket – the first 100 years* cites 1878 as the year in which the club was formed,⁸⁷ a report in the *Mercury* on 11 January 1877 referred to the Alexandra Cricket Club as having been founded around 1873. Amongst the 19 founding members were three of the five sons of the late James Arbuthnot. The Volunteers’ Memorial Hall was built alongside the cricket ground. It was officially opened on 1 January 1883. Two days later, it was the venue of a ball attended by 100 locals. “Dancing kept up with unabated spirit until daylight” thanks to the efforts of the pianists, who included Mrs Mary Archibald.⁸⁸ The building was 50 feet in length, 24 feet in breadth and





The Volunteer Memorial hall (taken from the Main Road between the two Banks, about 1911). (Photograph courtesy of Umzinto Cricket: the first 100 years by Denis Barker (Durban, 1979))

16 feet in height. It had four large side rooms and verandahs and could seat 150 people. It cost £1 600 and was entirely funded by the local Umzinto community on ground donated by the Reynolds family.⁸⁹ Completing the hub of the county's social and sporting life were the tennis courts.

A report published in January 1886 noted that "lawn tennis has become quite an institution.... Indeed there is so little excitement or pleasure for the ladies in a country place.... The proper carrying out of a tennis club becomes an inestimable boon to the whole district." The report went on to state that large numbers of ladies came out to play on Wednesday afternoons and that the tennis club had over 70 members.⁹⁰ A visitor to Umzinto in 1884 remarked on the fullness of the social calendar. Balls, parties, picnics, cricket and tennis matches, fishing excursions "follow each other with amazing rapidity".⁹¹ The ladies of Umzinto were the first in the Colony to form a Revolver and Rifle Club.

In May 1895 40 ladies signed up for shooting practice.⁹² Following the ending of the siege of Mafikeng during the Anglo-Boer War, a week of rejoicing and recreation took place in Umzinto. It featured cricket and tennis matches including a grand finale cricket match on the Saturday of that first week of June 1900 in which the men played left-handed against the ladies.⁹³

Umzinto was also the host of the first agricultural show ever held on the Natal coast. This occurred in February 1886 and saw 300 exhibits on show – all of them produced in Alexandra County. For that it received an accolade from the *Mercury*, which expressed pleasure at "what could be done in a district so far removed by natural configuration from the centres of the colony".⁹⁴ By the time the third show was held in 1894, the number of exhibits had grown to 580 and by 1899 as many as 720 exhibits were on show.⁹⁵ Until 1904, when Victoria County staged its first agricultural

show, Umzinto's show was the only one of its kind on the coast.⁹⁶

Telegraph and rail links

In 1879 Durban had telegraphic links with Delagoa Bay and London (via Aden).⁹⁷ Durban was also linked with Stanger up the North Coast.⁹⁸ But there no such links with the South Coast and its chief settlement, Umzinto. During 1882 and 1883, four petitions were presented by Thomas Reynolds to the colonial legislature requesting the construction of a telegraph line linking Port Shepstone and Umzinto with Durban. Colonial Engineer Albert Hime, however, proved the stumbling block on each occasion claiming either that the expense involved was not justified or that there were other parts of Natal which were also awaiting a connection.⁹⁹ Finally, in 1884 the Council agreed that a telegraph line should be constructed as far as Umzinto. Commenting on his achievement, Reynolds said: "Half a loaf is better than no bread."¹⁰⁰ In 1887 Umzinto's telegraphic link became a reality. "We congratulate our friends down south at being brought in rapid touch with the civilised world," opined the *Mercury*.¹⁰¹

Deprived as the area had been of roads, bridges and railways for nearly 40 years because the South Coast did not have the investment appeal which Northern Natal had with its coal fields, the arrival of the railway at Park Rynie in December 1897 was quickly exploited by one hotelier in Umzinto. Knox's Hotel offered an ox-bus service, as it was called, for visitors disembarking from the midday train at Park Rynie station to be taken to Umzinto.¹⁰²

The fact that the routing of the

main South Coast line did not pass through Umzinto was the subject of considerable controversy during 1896. As the seat of the county magistracy and the hub of county commerce, local residents were outraged that the engineering survey for the railway showed Umzinto as being served only by a branch extension. At a public meeting in Umzinto on 12 March 1896 it was resolved that the South Coast line to Port Shepstone had to pass through Umzinto.¹⁰³ As late as November 1896 Umzinto residents were still fuming at what they regarded as an insult to their status.¹⁰⁴ But the engineering contractors, Messrs. Middleton Bros, made it clear that the hilly nature of the immediate coastal interior dictated that for engineering and cost reasons the line had to proceed along the seashore.¹⁰⁵ Controversy continued to dog the establishment of a rail link to Umzinto. There was considerable opposition in the Legislative Assembly to the projected cost of £40 000 for the six-and-a-half mile extension from a point three-and-a-half miles south of Park Rynie through hilly terrain to Umzinto.¹⁰⁶ Only in 1899 was an appropriation of £35 000 approved (Act 2 of 1899) for the construction of the branch line. On 8 August 1900, 60 special guests were aboard the first train to travel from Durban to Umzinto, a distance of 51 miles.¹⁰⁷

Unrest and abuse

Reviewing the outcome of the referendum on the Union issue in June 1909, the *Mercury's* Umzinto correspondent stated: "Alexandra County was almost solid for Union and everything passed off very quietly, as everything usually does in this place."¹⁰⁸ With reference to the

preceding three years, that statement was not entirely correct. For in 1906 Natal was convulsed by a backlash from sections of the African community which climaxed in the Bambatha rebellion. The imposition of a new poll tax as part of the austerity measures the government took to increase revenue in the face of economic recession was met by resentment among the African population. The killing of two white police officers during a confrontation with an armed impi near Richmond triggered a highhanded response from the colonial militia. A field force under Colonel Duncan McKenzie carved a swathe of destruction as it headed southward towards Umzinto in February 1906, burning kraals and seizing livestock.¹⁰⁹

At Umzinto McKenzie confronted Charlie Fynn and his indunas over their refusal to pay poll tax. After imposing a fine of 1 200 cattle, sentencing 38 of Fynn's men to fines, floggings or gaol sentences and imposing the death sentence on five of them, McKenzie's field force withdrew.¹¹⁰ A report in the *Mercury* of 17 March 1906 noted that peace and quiet had returned to Alexandra County. Subsequent reports confirmed that trend and that "good humoured" Africans were paying their taxes.¹¹¹ Nonetheless, the episode constituted the most serious scare which Umzinto experienced during its colonial existence.

Within the Reynolds Bros sugar estates in the Umzinto district at this time, a different kind of threat was occurring and had been occurring for over 20 years. It involved overwork of indentured Indian labour and poor diet. As a result, desertion, suicides and the death rate on those estates exceeded those on other estates. At its worst, a

death rate of 60 per 1 000 occurred when the rate in the colony was 15 per 1 000.¹¹² This case constitutes a topic in its own right in that it involves the attempts by the Protector of Indian Immigrants, James Polkinghorne, between 1902 and 1908, to expose and to halt the abuse of human rights on those estates. However, despite an official inquiry into Reynolds Bros' treatment of its indentured labour in Umzinto and despite the eventual success of Polkinghorne in obtaining the dismissal of Charles Reynolds in 1908 from his position as manager of Reynolds Bros, socially and politically the whole saga was a non-event in the Umzinto district. What was a massive scandal involving the most powerful family on the South Coast passed as if nothing had happened, indicating the extent of the social, political and economic influence which the Reynolds exercised.

Indian presence

Indifference to the plight of Indians as labourers was matched by disdain for the idea that they should be regarded as settlers once their labour contracts were completed, or accepted as such because they had immigrated to Natal to establish businesses. As early as 1884, there were complaints about the commercial competition Indians presented to white store owners in Alexandra County.¹¹³ Although the *Blue Books* do not specify the number of Indian-owned shops in Umzinto, the fact that Indians owned nine of the 15 stores in the County in 1883¹¹⁴ meant that they probably owned the majority of the stores in Umzinto. Archibald, a store-owner himself, ascribed the proliferation of Indian traders to the purchases his fellow white colonists

made from Indian shops and hawkers. “They encourage them in every possible way,” he claimed.¹¹⁵

Despite their marginalised and controversial presence and status, there were occasions when Indians put colonial society to shame. In April 1902, “an enthusiastic and enjoyable function took place at the Plough Hotel in Umzinto”. On the eve of his transfer from Umzinto to Harding, Indians of Alexandra County made a presentation to Sergeant E.P. Blake of the Natal Police. Blake was presented with a dressing case by the local Indian schoolmaster, Mr Paul. In his address, Paul expressed gratitude to Sgt Blake “for the several acts of kindness shown to us during your stay in Umzinto in which you blended justice with mercy”.¹¹⁶

Final colonial years

In May 1894, promoting the Bill to extend the railway south of Isipingo, Thomas Keir Murray, the Minister of Lands and Works, stated with great accuracy, as things turned out, that “the beautiful spots along the seaside in a few years time will develop into favourite seaside resorts”.¹¹⁷ Although Umzinto as the hub of Alexandra County had enjoyed prominence in most aspects of South Coast life,¹¹⁸ the extension of the railway to Port Shepstone by 1901 produced a new focus of economic development. From Scottburgh to Port Shepstone a property development frenzy occurred as seaside resorts sprang up. Umkomaas, or South Barrow as it was known until 1924, already had four hotels by 1905 and had established itself as a destination of choice amongst holiday-makers. In 1905 it also became the first settlement on the South Coast to obtain town

board status. Thus Umzinto came to be eclipsed as the hub of the region.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Umzinto District Record Book, Scottburgh Magistrate’s Court: letter from E.J. Smith.
- 2 Hattersley, A.F., *The British Settlement of Natal*, (Cambridge, 1950), p.101-02. Maxwell arrived in Durban aboard the *Gwalior* on 24 December 1848.
- 3 Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, (PAR), CSO 131, No. R491, 1 April 1861.
- 4 *Natal Mercury*, 14 March 1871.
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- 27 PAR, CSO 244, No. 544, 3 March 1866; CSO 249, No. 1017, 2 May 1866.
- 28 PAR, CSO 264, No. 43, 28 February 1867. The dispensing of gunpowder was regulated by Law 11 of 1866. Africans were not permitted to purchase gunpowder unless they had been granted a permit by the Secretary for Native Affairs. That provision also applied to their ownership of firearms. PAR, CSO 178, No. 1360, 27 May 1863.
- 29 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1019, 7 August 1866.
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- 33 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XIV, No. 721, 26 August 1862.
- 34 PAR, CSO 214, No. 144, 18 January 1865.
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- 36 *Colony of Natal Blue Book*, 1863, p. M36.
- 37 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XV, No. 755, 28 April 1863.
- 38 PAR, CSO 242, No. 336, 31 January 1866; CSO 229, No. 1647, 10 and 21 August 1865. The County was named after the Princess of Wales.
- 39 PAR, CSO 369, No. 1079, 31 May 1870.
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- 41 Natal Legislative Assembly, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. LXII, 1904, p. 15-16.
- 42 *Natal Mercury*, 10 January 1861.
- 43 *Government Notice* 121, 1865. At a shooting competition against the Natal Carbineers in Umzinto in 1863, Alexander Brander was the most successful marksman. *Natal Mercury*, 7 August 1863.
- 44 PAR, CSO 214, No. 144, 18 January 1865; CSO 264, No. 43, 28 February 1867. Only in 1950 was Umzinto finally proclaimed a township. *Natal Government Gazette*, Proclamation No. 9, 22 February 1950.
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- 55 *Natal Mercury*, 8 August 1871.
- 56 *Natal Mercury*, 12 September 1871.
- 57 *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXV, No. 1421, 15 July 1873.
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