

A brief history of donkeys in South Africa

Below are some of the words you will find in the information that follows. The words close to each other go together in the texts that follow.

domesticate	origins	thresh	furrow	upright	beam
honour	large-scale farms	small-scale farmer	rural		
destructive	promotion of	massacre	canals	actively	
discouraged	compact	in preference to			

Beasts of burden

Donkeys are often called beasts of burden. Any animal used to pull or carry things is called a beast of burden. Animals used to **carry** things on their backs are also known as **pack** animals. Animals used to **pull** things are called **draft** animals.

The first people to use pack animals in South Africa were the Khoekhoen. They used cattle to **carry** their goods, to ride on and for fighting wars. In the 1600s when the European settlers arrived, they used oxen to **pull** their wagons and ploughs.

Donkeys originate from wild asses found in Africa and Asia. Africa had two different types, the Nubian wild ass from the north and the Somali wild ass from the east. Donkeys were domesticated about 5 000 years ago. They were used as pack animals in the Sahara Desert before camels that came to Africa for the first time (from Arabia) in the third century. Despite their African origins, the donkeys that arrived in South Africa for the first time in 1656 came from Europe. They were used both as **pack** and **draft** animals on farms.

Donkeys on farms

Donkeys have been used on farms since they first came to South Africa more than 300 years ago and they are still used in rural areas in exactly the same way.

Ploughing

Before seeds can be sown, the ground needs to be prepared by ploughing. Donkeys can pull a small plough guided by someone holding onto the handles. The plough digs into the earth, turns it and leaves a little furrow.



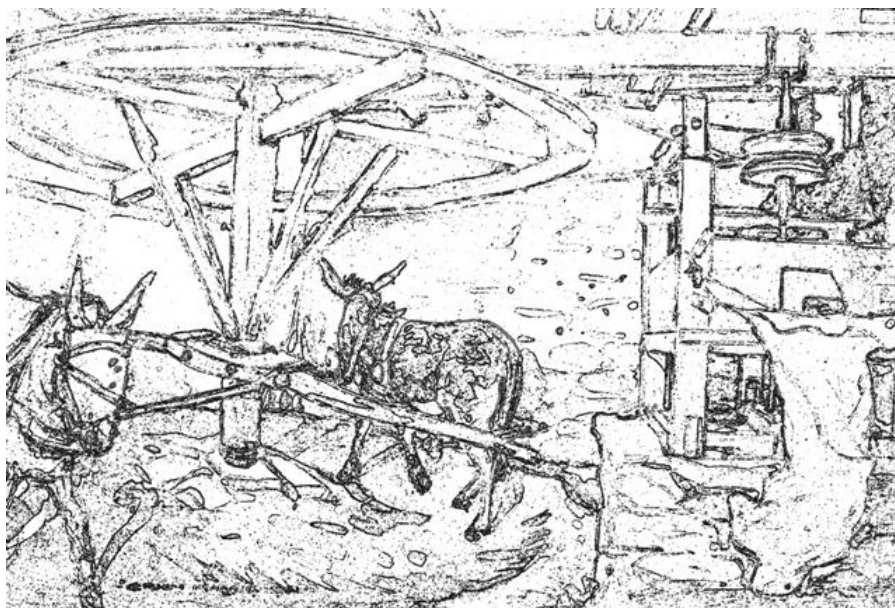
PHOTO © PETA JONES

Early wheat farmers

At the beginning of the twentieth century farmers in the Namaqualand area in the Northern Cape and in the North-West provinces used donkeys to thresh wheat. The wheat ears were placed on a floor specially made for threshing. Donkeys were used to step on the ears of wheat and in this way the ears were separated from the stalks.

The horse-mill

Around the same time almost every farm in Namaqualand had a horse-mill. Although it is called a horse-mill it was also worked by donkeys. The mill is a wooden machine with a large upright beam to which the donkeys are attached. They walk in a circle and the beam turns a large wheel above which turns a smaller wheel. This wheel drives the stone, which grinds the grain into flour.



Donkeys on the mines

Donkeys were not only used on farms. In Polokwane there is a statue of a donkey that honours the role that donkeys played in mining gold.

This is what is written on the plaque.

DONKEY BY JO ROOS
BURDENED WITH THE INDUSTRY OF GOLD,
THE DONKEY CARRIED PIETERSBURG
THROUGH THE MINING ERA, 1871–1892
PRESENTED BY PIETERSBURG DIST.
AGRICULTURAL UNION 1986.07.31

Donkeys were also used in asbestos and diamond mining in the Northern Cape. In Kimberley the donkeys pulled little wagons called coco-pans. The coco-pans had small wheels that ran along a track – almost like a tiny train on a railway track. The donkeys carried the special soil called kimberlite, in which diamonds could be found, from the mine to outside. The kimberlite was then spread out on the ground and broken up by hand. After that machinery was used to separate the rough diamonds from the remaining soil.

Donkeys and water

Dam-building donkeys

For over 100 years donkeys have been used in the Karoo for **building dams**. A team of six to eight donkeys work together to pull a type of scraper that scrapes the ground and picks the earth up at the same time. A person needs to guide the scraper as the donkeys pull. The donkeys can work on dams that are difficult for modern machines to reach, and their hooves can compact the earth far better.

Uppington

There is a statue in Uppington that honours the donkey and the role that it played in the development of the town's water system.

Uppington is a town situated in the Northern Cape province. As it is a very dry area, the town was first developed on the banks of the Orange River. In the early 1880s pieces of land were given to people to start farms. Abraham September, a freed slave, also received land. With the help of donkeys Abraham dug canals to lead the water from the river to the land. Some of those canals are still being used today.

The statue of the donkey in Uppington shows a donkey working a water lift or pump, known as a **bakkiespomp**. The water lift consisted of two wheels, a small wheel and a bigger one with steel buckets attached by chains. The donkey was attached to the smaller wheel by a pole. He walked in a circle and made the small wheel turn. The cogs of the small wheel joined the cogs of the bigger wheel and made it turn. As the big wheel turned, the buckets scooped up the water from below.

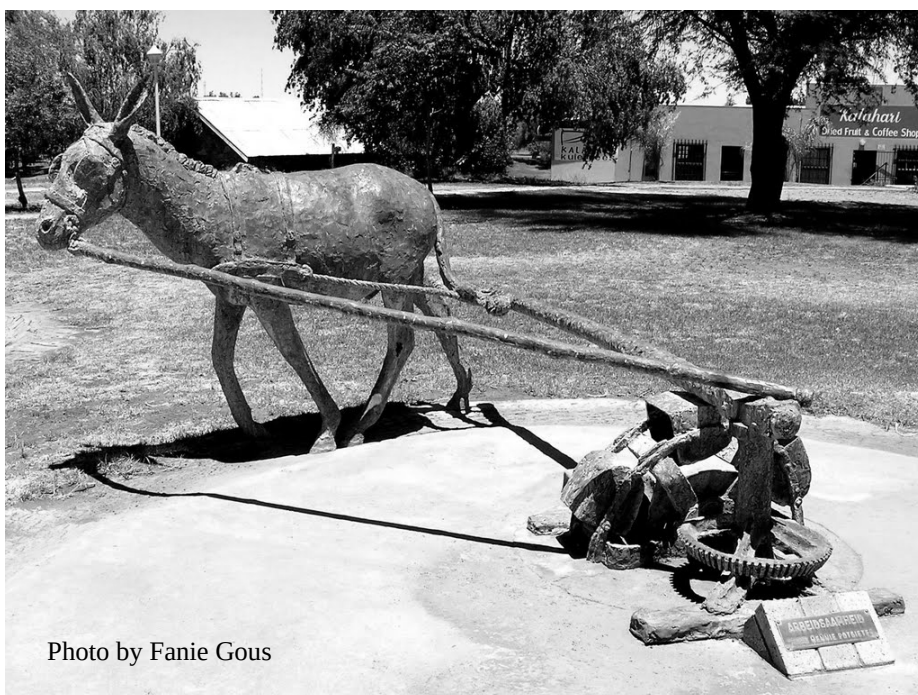


Photo by Fanie Gous

A sad time for donkeys

Donkeys were used as beasts of burden on farms in South Africa for about 300 years. With the use of fuel and the tractor, large-scale farms no longer relied on donkeys so they were no longer as valued as they had been.

In the second half of the twentieth century the use of donkeys was actively discouraged. Some of the reasons include a lack of knowledge about the usefulness of donkeys, wrong beliefs about donkeys – for instance, that they are destructive, as well as the promotion of fuel-driven vehicles like tractors and bakkies in preference of animals. In Thaba 'Nchu in the Free State donkeys were banned and in the then-Transkei they were taxed more than cattle.

But probably the saddest period in the history of donkeys in South Africa was the massacre of thousands of donkeys in Bophuthatswana (a former homeland, now part of the North-West province) in the early 1980s. It was believed by some people in power at the time that there were too many donkeys. Many people whose donkeys were shot during this time lost their means of survival.

Transport

Carts

Donkeys were used to pull carts and wagons for hundreds of years before cars were invented, and they still do today. The big difference between carts and wagons of the past and those used today lies in the wheels. Today the wheels have tyres that are filled with air, but in the past the wheels were made of iron.



Sledges

If you didn't own a cart, a good way to transport goods was using a sledge. A sledge is a vehicle without wheels that slides over the ground. A y-shaped branch or trunk of a tree makes a good sledge. Some farmers used to move to a different place when the seasons changed. Then donkeys pulled a sledge carrying their belongings. The sledge was not allowed to be pulled on the wagon road as it damaged the road so they had to travel through the veld.

The Karretjiemense



Photo by Mike de Jongh

The people known as the Karoo Karretjiemense own donkeys that pull carts. These carts carry all their possessions, because like their ancestors, the Khoekhoen and the San, the Karretjiemense are always on the move. They move between the sheep farms of the Great Karoo where they have worked for more than a hundred years as sheep shearers, and continue to do so. Their travels take them through the provinces of the Western, Eastern and Northern Cape.

The Karretjiemense can be compared to travellers who move from campsite to campsite with their caravans, setting up camp each time. There is one huge difference – the Karretjiemense are very poor. Their car is their donkeys and their caravan is their cart. Their carts have been made from old or broken-down horse carriages and motor cars. When they set up camp they make their shelter more comfortable by adding pieces of corrugated iron, wood, hessian and plastic to the cart.



Photo by Mike de Jongh

In the past, farmers allowed the Karretjiemense to set up camp on their farms during shearing time. Recently, however, few farmers allow them to camp on their farm. The Karretjiemense camp on empty land next to roads or on any land they can find that does not belong to farmers. The donkeys graze freely in the area close to the camp. Donkeys, unlike horses, can eat a varied diet consisting of grass, shrubs and leaves. Therefore they survive very well in the semi-arid Karoo where there is little grazing.

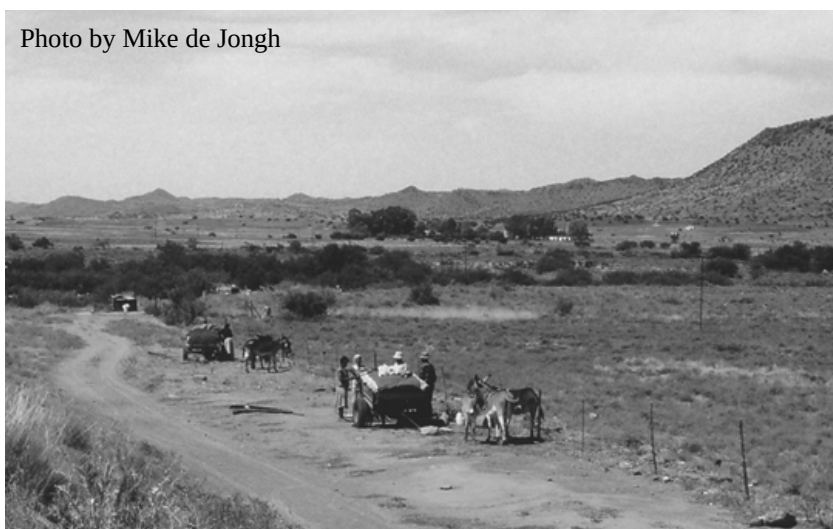


Photo by Mike de Jongh

Every donkey that belongs to a family has a name. It is the job of the youngest son in the family to name a foal that has been born. The Karretjiemense would not be able to live as they do without their donkeys that are very valuable to them. Donkeys are hardworking, intelligent and easy to manage when they are well cared for and appreciated.