



The Deep Dive Series– Interesting History
about the History of Hillary/Mount
Vernon/Bellair
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Heritage, Conflict, and Topography: A Comprehensive Historical Analysis of Hillary, Bellair, and Mount Vernon

1. Geographical and Administrative Context

1.1 Topography and the "Beautiful Air"

The suburbs of Hillary, Bellair, and Mount Vernon occupy a distinct geological and climatic niche within the greater Durban metropolitan area. Geographically, this precinct is defined by a series of undulating ridges and valleys situated between two major river systems: the Umbilo River to the north and the Umhlatuzana River to the south.¹ This specific topography has historically dictated the settlement patterns, transportation routes, and even the nomenclature of the area.

In the mid-19th century, the coastal flats of Durban (Port Natal) were notorious for their stifling humidity and the prevalence of sub-tropical diseases, particularly during the summer months. The ridge line that hosts Bellair and Mount Vernon offered an immediate topographical escape. Rising sharply from the coastal plain, these hills provided a cooler, more salubrious climate that was highly prized by early colonial settlers. This climatic advantage is permanently encoded in the toponymy of the area; "Bel lair" is derived from the French *Belle Aire*, translating literally to "Beautiful Air".² This designation, dating back to 1847, was not merely poetic but functional, signaling the area's utility as a health retreat and residential sanctuary away from the fever-ridden marshes of the bay.²

The terrain is rugged, characterized by steep gradients that would later pose significant engineering challenges for the construction of the railway and road networks. The suburbs are not situated on a flat plateau but rather cling to the spurs of the ridge, creating a distinctive urban morphology of winding roads and terraced properties that overlook the river valleys below.⁴



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1.2 Administrative Evolution: From Colonial Farm to Queensburgh

The administrative identity of these suburbs has undergone several metamorphoses, reflecting the broader political shifts of South Africa. Initially, the area fell outside the boundaries of the original Borough of Durban, which was delimited by the Umbilo River, the Umgeni River, Ridge Road, and the Indian Ocean.² Consequently, Bellair, Hillary, and Mount Vernon were regarded as part of the "Durban District" rather than the town proper until the consolidation of outlying areas in 1932²

The drive for municipal autonomy in the mid-20th century led to a significant consolidation. In 1924, four distinct residential townships —Malvern, Escombe, Northdene, and Moseley — combined to form the town of Malvern.⁵ This entity was further transformed in 1952. To commemorate the accession of Queen Elizabeth II to the throne, the municipality was granted borough status and renamed **Queensburgh**.³ While Hillary, Bellair, and Mount Vernon are often discussed in the context of Queensburgh, they retain distinct historical identities that predate this amalgamation.

The region serves as a critical corridor connecting the port city to the interior. The N2 freeway and the M7 (Solomon Mahlangu Drive) now cut through or near these suburbs, linking the industrial south of Durban to Pinetown and the N3 highway.¹ However, historically, it was the "Old Main Line" of the railway that served as the spinal cord of development, a theme that will be explored extensively in this report.

2. Early Settlement and Colonial Land Grants

The transition of the area from indigenous territory to colonial farmland began in the mid-19th century, driven by the British colonial administration's strategy of land grants to loyal subjects and immigrants.

2.1 The Bellair Farm and George Christopher Cato

The "Bellair Farm" is the foundational land unit for the suburb. Its history is intimately tied to **George Christopher Cato**, a towering figure in the history of Natal. Cato, who would become Durban's first mayor, was awarded vast tracts of land, including Cato Manor and portions of Bellair, by the British Crown in 1847.⁷ This grant was a reward for his loyalty and services to the Colony of Natal, specifically his resistance against the Voortrekkers who had established the



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Republic of Natalia in 1839.⁷

Cato's ownership links the suburb to the turbulent transition from Boer to British rule. During the conflict of 1842, Cato had been imprisoned in the stocks at Pietermaritzburg by the Voortrekkers for his pro-British stance.⁷ His subsequent land acquisition in Bellair was a direct result of the British consolidation of power in the region.

The farm itself has a rich, somewhat wild history. Prior to the name "Bellair," the area was known as "Saunder's Kraal".² Records indicate that the farm was once the residence of the family of **John Dunn**, the famous "White Zulu" chief who rose to prominence as an advisor to King Cetshwayo. A tragic local narrative recounts that John Dunn's father was trampled to death by elephants on the property around 1847.² This incident serves as a stark reminder that in the mid-19th century, despite its proximity to the port, Bellair was still a frontier zone inhabited by megafauna.

2.2 The Hillary Family: Yeoman Roots

The suburb of Hillary takes its name from **George Hillary** and his family. George Hillary was a "Byrne Settler," part of a scheme orchestrated by Joseph Byrne to encourage British emigration to Natal in roughly 1849–1851. While initially allotted land at Verulam, George Hillary returned to England before making a permanent migration to South Africa in 1858.³

George Hillary married Ellen Groom in August 1858 at St Paul's Church in Durban. His profession was recorded as "Yeoman of Sand Hill," suggesting a background in farming and a status of respectable independence.³ The couple established a homestead in the area, and over time, the cluster of residences and the railway halt that served them adopted the family name. The persistence of the name is a testament to the family's prominence in the early social structure of the district. George Hillary died in May 1900 and was buried in the Hillary Family Graveyard on Coronation Road, a private cemetery that remains a significant, though threatened, heritage site.³

2.3 Mount Vernon and the Hooper Dynasty

While Bellair and Hillary have geographical or agricultural origins, the name "Mount Vernon" is a complex layering of transatlantic homage and family genealogy, centred on the **Hooper family**.

The name appears to have a dual derivation:



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1. **The American Connection:** It pays tribute to Mount Vernon, the plantation estate of George Washington in Virginia, USA. This reflects a common colonial practice of borrowing prestigious names from across the English -speaking world to lend dignity to new settlements.⁸
2. **The Hooper Patriarch:** More intimately, the name honours **Vernon Edward Hooper**, a revered patriarch of the Hooper family who died in Durban in 1954. The name "Vernon" became a patronymic tradition within the family, passed down as a middle name to almost every male descendant.⁸

The Hooper family's connection to the area is further solidified by military service. The crest associated with the Mount Vernon estate (which also has viticultural links in the Cape) incorporates the rank insignia of **Noel Vernon Hooper**, who served as a Sergeant Major in an anti-tank regiment during World War II.⁸ This interweaving of family history, military service, and suburban identity is characteristic of the area's development.

3. The Iron Spine: The Old Main Line and Railway Suburbs

The development of Hillary, Bellair, and Mount Vernon cannot be understood without analysing the Natal Government Railways (NGR). The construction of the "Old Main Line" transformed these isolated farms into "railway suburbs," allowing residents to commute to Durban for work while living in the healthier air of the hills.

3.1 Engineering the Gradient

The railway line from Rossburgh (historically "South Coast Junction") to Pinetown was officially opened on **September 4, 1878**.⁴ This route roughly followed the path of the old Voortrekker Road, which had been the primary wagon track to the interior.⁴

The engineering required to bring the line up from the coast was substantial. The ascent from the flats of Rossburgh to the ridge of Bellair involved steep gradients and tight curves. One particularly steep section was known as "Jacob's Ladder," a name evoking a difficult climb to heaven, which necessitated a deviation in 1907 to ease the operational burden on locomotives.¹¹ The rugged terrain meant that the railway did not take a straight path; it wound through the topography, creating a distinct rhythm of stations that defined the suburban



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nodes: Sea View, Bellair, Hillary, Poet's Corner, Malvern, Escombe, and Northdene .⁴

3.2 Bellair Station: A Forgotten Victorian Masterpiece

Bellair Station, constructed in 1899, represents the zenith of colonial railway architecture in the region.¹² At the time of its construction, it was designed to be a civic statement, reflecting the confidence of the late Victorian era.

Architectural Significance:

Heritage architects describe Bellair Station as "possibly the most significant Victorian station 'still in use' between Durban and Pietermaritzburg".¹² It was designed to be admired, featuring elaborate detailing that distinguished it from the more utilitarian halts along the line. It was officially declared a National Monument (now a Provincial Heritage Site) in recognition of its value.

Current State of Decay:

Despite its protected status, the station has fallen into a state of "criminal" neglect. Recent reports describe a structure in peril:

- **Structural Integrity:** The "learning tower" (a distinctive ventilation turret) atop the roof is disintegrating and at risk of collapse.¹²
- **Vandalism:** The bronze National Monument plaque has been stolen. Windows are smashed, ceilings are broken, and the gutters are choked with vegetation.¹³
- **Heritage Crisis:** Conservationists contrast this neglect with the massive expenditure (over R350 million) on the newer Umkhumbane Cultural and Heritage Centre nearby, arguing that the maintenance of existing colonial heritage assets is being sacrificed for new, often unfinished, projects.¹³

3.3 Poet's Corner: The Enigma of the Line

Between Hillary and Malvern lies a halt with the evocative name "**Poet's Corner.**" While the specific poet after whom it is named remains elusive in the provided records, the station itself is a beloved landmark of the Old Main Line.¹⁰

The Locomotive Bridge:

A unique feature of Poet's Corner is its footbridge. In a display of adaptive reuse typical of railway engineering, the main girder spanning the tracks was constructed from the underframe of a scrapped Class FD Modified steam locomotive.¹⁴ This physical integration of rolling stock into the static infrastructure serves as a tangible link to the steam era.

3.4 Operational History and Anecdotes



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The "Old Main Line" was notorious among railwaymen for its operational difficulties due to the steep grades.

- **The GEA Incident (1970):** The section between Poet's Corner and Malvern was particularly unforgiving. In October 1970, a massive **Class GEA Garratt** locomotive, hauling a load that was technically 40 tons overweight, became "well and truly stuck" on the gradient between these two stations. The train had to be split to clear the section, causing major disruption. This incident led to a change in policy, where double-headed **Class 14R** locomotives were used for heavy trains instead of the single GEA.¹⁴
- **Commuter Life:** For decades, the rhythm of life in Hillary and Bellair was dictated by the train schedule. Residents would travel to the "Old Durban Station" in the city centre, perhaps stopping at the station café which was renowned for its silver service and excellent coffee.¹⁵ The line facilitated a lifestyle where one could work in the humid port but sleep in the cool hills.

4. The Anglo -Boer War (1899 –1902): Logistics and Refugees

While the major battles of the Second Anglo-Boer War occurred further inland at Ladysmith and Colenso, the suburbs of Bellair and Hillary were deeply integrated into the British military's logistical and medical support network.

4.1 The Railway as a Military Artery

By 1899, the railway line through Bellair was the lifeline of the British war effort. It was the sole route for moving troops, heavy artillery, and supplies from the port of Durban to the front lines. Conversely, it was the route down which the wounded and prisoners of war flowed back to the coast.¹⁶

The Bellair station and its surroundings would have witnessed the daily passage of hospital trains—converted rolling stock designed to transport casualties to the hospital ships waiting in the harbour or to the stationary hospitals in Pinetown and Durban.¹⁷

4.2 Concentration Camps: The Myth and Reality of Bellair

There is often confusion regarding the location of concentration camps in the Durban area. Historical records clarify that the primary camp for Boer civilians was located at **Merebank**,



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south of the Umhlatuzana River, rather than in Bellair itself. ¹⁹

The Merebank Camp:

- **Scale:** It was the largest camp in the British system, housing approximately 9,000 people.
- **Conditions:** Unlike the highveld camps, Merebank was humid and swampy, leading to different health challenges for the internees. ¹⁹
- **The Bellair Connection:** While the camp was not in Bellair, the logistical support for it — including the transport of internees — utilized the railway infrastructure that serviced Bellair and Sea View. Furthermore, refugees and displaced persons often moved through these suburbs, and local families would have been acutely aware of the humanitarian crisis unfolding just across the valley. ²⁰

4.3 The Stainbank Family at War

The local gentry were active participants in the conflict. **Herbert Munro Stainbank**, of the Coedmore estate, served as a "Colonial Scout" and was a member of General Warren's personal escort. ²¹ The Colonial Scouts were irregular units raised in Natal, prized for their local knowledge and riding ability, essential for navigating the rugged terrain that confused the regular British Army.

5. World War II: The Gateway and the Graveyard

The strategic importance of Durban as a port city during World War II brought the global conflict to the doorsteps of Hillary and Bellair. The area became a hub for coastal defense, medical evacuation, and military burial.

5.1 Hillary Cemetery: A Pan -African Military Necropolis

One of the most significant, yet often overlooked, historical sites in the area is the military plot within the **Hillary Cemetery**. This site differs from many other Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemeteries in South Africa due to the specific origins of the soldiers interred there.

The West African Frontier Force:

The cemetery contains the graves of soldiers from the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF), including members of the Gold Coast Regiment and the West African Artillery.²²



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- **Context:** These troops were likely in transit. Durban was a vital refueling and replenishment port for convoys moving troops from West Africa to the campaigns in East Africa (Abyssinia) and the Far East (Burma).
- **Cause of Death:** Historical analysis suggests that many of these soldiers did not die in combat in Durban but succumbed to illnesses such as blackwater fever or tuberculosis, or died from accidents while their ships were in port. ²⁴
- **Significance:** The headstones, made of Rustenburg granite, bear not only the standard Commonwealth details but often specific markings requested by families or regimental badges that distinguish them from South African troops. ²⁴ This highlights the multinational nature of the British Empire's war effort and Durban's role as a pivot point in the global movement of forces.

The Nova Scotia Tragedy and Italian POWs:

The cemetery also serves as a memorial to a specific maritime tragedy.

- **The Event:** In 1942, the troopship *SS Nova Scotia* was torpedoed by a German U-boat off the Natal coast. It was carrying over 700 Italian Prisoners of War (POWs) from North Africa. Hundreds drowned.
- **Burial and Exhumation:** Many bodies washed ashore or were recovered at sea and were initially buried in a mass grave or individual plots at Hillary. While 118 bodies were later exhumed and moved to the Italian POW Church in Pietermaritzburg, the Hillary Cemetery retains a memorial and the graves of 35 Italian soldiers who died in the province. ²⁵

5.2 Coastal Defences and Logistics

The ridges of Bellair and the surrounding high ground were integrated into Durban's coastal defense network.

- **Observation Posts:** The high ground offered clear sightlines over the harbour and the Indian Ocean, making the area ideal for observation posts to spot U -boats or enemy aircraft. ²⁵
- **Mule Logistics:** A fascinating logistical detail involves the transport of pack animals. Mules destined for the Burma campaign were corralled in Durban (specifically at Stamford Hill, but moving through the transport network). When U -boat predation became too high, specialized fast ships like the *Silandia* were employed to run the gauntlet to the Far East. ²⁶

5.3 The Stainbank Sacrifice (WWI & WWII)

The Stainbank family of Coedmore again paid a heavy price. **Dering Stainbank** lost his two



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eldest sons in World War I. ²⁷ This tragedy altered the line of succession for the Coedmore estate, which eventually passed to the third son, **Kenneth Stainbank**, after the war. During WWII, **Noel Vernon Hooper** (of the Mount Vernon Hoopers) served as a Sergeant Major, was captured at Tobruk, and made a dramatic escape through Eastern Europe, a story that became part of the family's —and the suburb's—lore.⁸

6. Coedmore Castle and the Stainbank Heritage

Bordering Bellair and Yellowwood Park lies the **Kenneth Stainbank Nature Reserve** and its centerpiece, **Coedmore Castle**. This estate is the most significant heritage precinct in the area, offering a window into the Victorian colonial lifestyle and the natural history of the region.

6.1 "Castle Lite": Architecture and Construction

Built in 1885 by Dering Stainbank, Coedmore is often whimsically referred to as "Castle Lite".²⁸ Despite its modest size compared to European castles, it is a substantial stone homestead that dominates the landscape.

- **Construction:** The building was constructed from stone quarried directly on the estate. Stainbank employed two Scottish stonemasons from Aberdeen to execute the masonry, a project that spanned three years.²⁹
- **Interiors:** The castle serves as a time capsule, retaining much of its original 19th-century furniture, family portraits, and silverware. It remains under the ownership of the Stainbank family descendants, though it is situated within the public nature reserve.³⁰

6.2 Mary Stainbank: The Sculptress of Ndaba Nkulu

Coedmore was the home and workspace of **Mary Agnes Stainbank** (1899–1996), one of South Africa's most significant female sculptors.

- **The Studio:** Her studio was located in a converted cowshed on the estate, known as *Ndaba Nkulu* ("Great Matters"). Here, she produced a vast body of work that was often ahead of its time, blending European modernist influences with African subject matter. ³¹
- **Conservation:** The Mary Stainbank Memorial Gallery has been established in the old cowshed to house her collection, which is regarded as the largest intact body of work by a single South African artist. ³¹



6.3 Environmental Heritage

The 253-hectare **Kenneth Stainbank Nature Reserve** was established in 1963 when Kenneth Stainbank donated the land to the people of Natal. ³⁰

- **Flora:** The reserve is famous for its towering **Yellowwood trees**, which gave the neighbouring suburb of Yellowwood Park its name. These trees are remnants of the coastal forest that once covered much of the Durban ridge.
- **Fauna:** The reserve hosts zebra, bushbuck, impala, and blue duiker, preserving the biodiversity that George Cato and the early settlers would have encountered. ³⁰

7. Socio-Political History: Legends and Dispossession

The history of these suburbs is not just one of colonial elites; it is also a history of working-class struggle, racial dispossession, and persistent urban legends.

7.1 The Indian Community and the Group Areas Act

Prior to the 1950s, the valleys around Bellair, Sea View, and Cato Manor were home to a thriving Indian community. These residents, often descendants of indentured labourers, were the market gardeners of Durban, cultivating the steep slopes to supply the city with fresh produce.⁴

Economic Life:

The community developed its own economic infrastructure. The Ballaram family, for instance, owned a fleet of buses ("Umhluzana Bus Services") and a general dealer store at the corner of Sarnia and Stella Roads.² This provided mobility and commerce independent of the white-dominated railway administration.

Dispossession:

The implementation of the Group Areas Act (1950) shattered this community. The act designated Bellair, Hillary, and Sea View as "White" areas. The Indian families were forcibly removed to townships like Chatsworth. The Ballaram family lost their properties and their bus depots were dismantled.² This period represents a violent rupture in the social fabric of the area, erasing a vibrant community from the landscape.

7.2 The Legend of the Bellair Gold Mine

A persistent local legend concerns the existence of a gold mine in Bellair.



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- **The Myth:** Oral history suggests that two brothers (possibly named Roper) discovered gold near **Blairmont Avenue** or behind the old **Bellair Hotel** in the late 19th or early 20th century.²
- **The Reality:** While geological evidence for viable gold deposits in the area is scant, the physical existence of a shaft is corroborated by a mid -20th -century incident. A newspaper report from the era detailed a cat falling into an abandoned mine shaft in Bellair, requiring a rescue by the fire brigade.² This confirms that prospecting did occur, likely leaving behind dangerous, if unproductive, excavations that fuelled generations of childhood myths.

8. Summary of Key Historical Data

8.1 Timeline of Major Events

Era	Year	Event	Impact on Hillary/Bellair/Mount Vernon
Colonial	1847	Bellair Naming	Area named "Belle Aire"; Cato granted land.
	1858	Hillary Settlement	George Hillary settles; establishes family homestead.
Railway Age	1878	Line Opens	NGR Old Main Line opens; suburbs begin to develop around stations.
	1885	Coedmore Built	Construction of the Stainbank castle begins.
Boer War	1899	War Begins	Railway becomes military artery; Bellair Station built.



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Union	1924	Malvern Formed	Consolidation of townships into Malvern.
WWII	1942	<i>Nova Scotia</i> Sinking	Italian POWs buried in Hillary Cemetery.
Apartheid	1950	Group Areas Act	Forced removal of Indian market gardeners; segregation enforced.
Modern	1952	Queensburgh	Municipality gains borough status and new name.
	1963	Reserve Proclaimed	Kenneth Stainbank donates land for nature reserve.

8.2 Heritage Sites at Risk vs. Preserved

Site	Status	Condition	Notes
Bellair Railway Station	Provincial Heritage Site	Critical/Ruined	Roof turret collapsing, vandalism, neglected maintenance.
Coedmore Castle	Protected (Nature Reserve)	Good/Preserved	Interiors intact; managed by family/Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.
Hillary Cemetery	Municipal Cemetery	Variable	Military graves generally maintained; civilian



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			sections vary.
Hillary Family Graveyard	Private	Threatened	Reports of desecration and neglect. ⁶

9. Conclusion

The history of Hillary, Bellair, and Mount Vernon is a microcosm of the broader South African narrative, encompassing colonial expansion, technological transformation, global conflict, and racial engineering.

The **railway** serves as the central protagonist in this story. It was the railway that conquered the topography, transforming the "beautiful air" of the ridges into accessible suburbs for the Durban elite and working class. The decline of the railway's prominence in the face of road transport and the "New Main Line" mirrors the gradual fading of the area's Victorian grandeur, symbolized by the decay of the once-magnificent Bellair Station.

The **military history** reveals the area's role as a "hinterland of empire." It was not a battlefield, but a place of healing (hospitals), logistics (transit camps), and burial. The graves of the West African soldiers in Hillary Cemetery stand as a poignant reminder that the hills of Durban were a crossroads for the world during the global crises of the 20th century.

Finally, the **social erasure** enacted by the Group Areas Act reminds us that the "white suburb" identity of the late 20th century was an engineered reality, superimposed over a diverse agricultural community of Indian market gardeners and indigenous inhabitants. As modern Durban grapples with heritage preservation, the contrast between the protected Coedmore Castle and the crumbling Bellair Station highlights the challenges of maintaining this complex, multilayered legacy.

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