

# The face of South Africa

By Maré Mouton

*This picture has many stories to tell. The house, on the farm Renosterkop near Struisbaai, is deemed the oldest extant building on the Agulhas Plain. As all old houses in the area, it contains timber from shipwrecks, notably a ship's mast used as a ceiling beam. (The Agulhas Plain is extremely rich in fynbos plant species, but offered no natural supplies of timber – many stories are told of early farmers lighting a fire on the shore to lure a ship onto the rocks or sandbanks in order to obtain wood for a new house that was being built.)*

*The main story is about the man on the bench: Hercules Wessels, known to many as "Oom Herklaas". We first met him early in 2004, when he helped us find the forgotten wagon route over the Houwhoek Pass above Bot River. This photograph was taken on a trip through the Strandveld in August of that year, when Oom Herklaas introduced us to the historic farms in the area: Raterivier, Rietfontein, Springfield, Renosterkop, Brandfontein and Aasfontein, all steeped in history.*

*Hercules was born on the farm Karsrivier outside Bredasdorp, where he himself later farmed. He also worked for a fertilizer company, but his main interest all his life was the history of the Overberg: he was instrumental in the founding of the Shipwreck Museum in Bredasdorp and played a major role in saving the historic Agulhas lighthouse, apart from initiating a number of tourism projects. In 1988 he followed in the tracks of the earliest travellers by crossing the Hottentots-Holland mountains along the Gantouw Pass, in an ox-cart drawn by oxen that he had trained. His wagons and oxen subsequently took part in the 150th anniversary of the Great Trek all over South Africa.*

*Oom Herklaas's wife, Elza, passed away in October last year, and he followed her in March 2009. Without his expertise and willingness to help, we at Village Life may never have ventured into historical research.*

