

Life in old Brenton on Sea

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Old Brenton on Sea

Brenton on Sea originally did not fall under the Knysna Municipality, but reported to the Divisional Council. The only thing that they supplied was water and they sometimes maintained the roads. Brenton on Sea had a factotum who looked after the maintenance of some of the infrastructure and he sometimes had his hands quite full.

There's a in the drinkwater!

Brenton on Sea's water was pumped from a well and stored in a reservoir. The reservoir was really just a big cement dam with a corrugated iron roof over it and was situated on the northern side of the main road, a little bit off the road just before the present community hall. This reservoir is still in use today, but today it is filled from the municipal supply, which is pumped via a pipeline, which goes under the railway bridge from Knysna.

There was always a problem with the water supply, much more than today. One year when the holiday people arrived, and remember there were only a handful of houses, they noticed that the water had a peculiar, quite disgusting smell. Then hair started coming out the taps and a few days later pieces of decayed skin were delivered with the water. On closer inspection it turned out that a bushbuck had fallen through the roof of the reservoir and drowned. Nobody noticed until the water usage increased during the holiday season.

Another time the water supply stopped completely. The pump had broken and a new part for the pump was needed. In those days, for unknown reasons, everything had to be ordered from Mossel Bay, and took about 3 days or more to get to Knysna. The spare part was duly ordered and a few days later was being installed by the Brenton factotum. Unfortunately, he dropped the part during the installation and watched it tumble down into the darkness of the well. Another part had to be ordered from Mossel Bay and the whole performance repeated. This took another week. On another occasion, the old Brenton Hotel had also run out of water. This happened during the peak holiday season in December, and to keep the toilets flushing, each hotel guest was issued with a bucket and asked to collect sea water for flushing. One of the guests was the well known Afrikaans morning radio show host Fanus Rautenbach. He was invited to visit the Brenton Hotel in the hope that he would provide some much needed publicity, but not of this kind!

Septic tanks and rubbish dumps

Each house had to provide its own septic tank to take care of sewage. Old Brenton on Sea still has the septic tank system even today. Building a septic tank, or a 'french drain', was quite an art. First a hole had to be dug in the ground (luckily we are on sand). A cement lining was then required. Then it had to be filled with round stones, and an overflow had to be constructed, and obviously it had to be connected to the household toilets. A concrete roof had to be added with a trapdoor which could be opened in case of problems. Soil was then used to cover the whole thing and most people planted a lawn over it. This could cause problems as the roots would grow into the tank and block it. During the December holidays when each house had many people in it, the septic tank would not cope and the 'honeysucker' had to be called from town to solve the problem.

Today only Extension 1 has a proper sewage system, but even that is not a real sewage system. The sewage is contained in a large tank next to Steenbras Street, and pumped from there to the treatment plant at the old garden refuse site. During busy holiday times this tank also gets full and has to be pumped out a few times a week (or day).

At first every household had to dispose of their own rubbish. Every holiday we dug a huge hole (luckily Brenton on Sea is built on sandy soil) and all the 'rottable' household rubbish were dispatched in there. At the end of the holiday the contents was burnt and the hole was filled in. Later the Divisional Council dug a huge hole between Steenbras Street and the current Fisherman's Walk. Rubbish was then collected and thrown in there. The rubbish was burnt from time to time. Yes, the people next to Fisherman's Walk are living on a rubbish dump!

Lamps, fridges and stoves

Electricity only arrived in Brenton on Sea in 1984. In the early days paraffin lamps and candles were the order of the day. A more modern lamp, a so-called Coleman lamp, became popular later on. My task as a teenager was to fill up the lamps with paraffin every evening at dusk. The old fashioned lamps were easy – one could see where the paraffin level was in the glass bowl, but the Coleman lamp was another story. It had a copper reservoir and had to be filled using a funnel. Invariably the reservoir overflowed. I am sure our house's wooden porch was saturated with paraffin and would have gone up in flames if a spark came near it. Lighting the normal paraffin lamps were easy – you just removed the glass chimney, lit the wick and put the chimney back on. The Coleman lamp was another matter. First the lamp had to be 'pumped', which caused a high pressure in the paraffin container and basically created a paraffin 'gas' coming out of the small openings around which the mantle was fastened. (Much like a gas lamp). It had a small container in which methylated spirits was put. The meths was lit using a match, and when a nice flame had developed, the lamp valve was opened. The idea was that the paraffin gas would ignite and make the mantle incandescent, but often there would be a bit of an explosion with flames everywhere and a panicked person running outside with a ball of flame.



Old Coleman paraffin lamp

Fridges were another problem. During the very first holiday in our house in Brenton on Sea we didn't have a fridge. Instead we had a canvas cooling bag which we hung outside the house in a shady spot. There was a water compartment at the top, with a mesh compartment at the bottom. Items such as milk and butter were stored in the mesh compartment, which had two shelves. Water from the canvas compartment at the top would drip down the side, the wind would evaporate the water and thus cause a cooling effect. It worked quite well but of course there was no freezing compartment and you couldn't keep things fresh for more than a few days. Vegetables like potatoes, carrots and onions were buried in the sand to keep them fresh.

Paraffin fridges were popular, but they came with their own problems. The paraffin was in a flat tray under the fridge and there was a little pilot light that was supposed to be burning all the time. When the fridge wasn't working the first thing one did was to get down on all fours to check the pilot light. Our friends, the Grundlings had a paraffin fridge and they said the most time that they ever spent on their knees was during holidays in Brenton checking whether the paraffin was lit or not.

Hot water was not a problem, most people had gas geysers. You just had to make sure that the wind had not blown out the pilot light. And of course everyone had a gas stove. Washing machines? You washed by hand.