

## THE OLDEST TREE IN SOUTH AFRICA

An oak tree dating back to the 17th Century with a diameter of four metres (and a circumference of 12,66m) on Anglo American Farms' historic Vergelegen Estate near Somerset West, is thought to be the oldest specimen in South Africa.

Commenting on the tree, Dr John Rourke, head of the Compton Herbarium at the National Botanical Institute at Kirstenbosch and a member of The Board of Trustees of the Vergelegen National Heritage Trust, said, "The Common or English Oak (*Quercus robur*) was probably the first exotic tree species planted in South Africa. This first planting is believed to have taken place during the administration of Jan van Riebeeck in 1656.

"Numerous oaks were later planted by Simon van der Stel and his son Willem Adriaan between 1679 and 1706. The oak tree growing on Vergelegen is assumed to have been planted by Willem Adriaan van der Stel. It is not possible to date the tree in the usual way by counting growth rings, since the central part of the trunk has rotted away. Only the outer part of the tree with its bark remains.

"The tree is supported by metal stays, and fortunately has been carefully treated over the last 100 years, preserving it for posterity. Oak trees do not normally survive for more than 200 years in this country due to the mild climate.

"The venerable old oak at Vergelegen is therefore very special and we are indebted to previous owners and Amfarms for the steps they have taken to preserve the heritage of not only



Dr John Rourke, head of the Compton Herbarium at the National Botanical Institute, Kirstenbosch, with Vergelegen's historic oak tree.

this gracious relic of the past, but all the other old trees on the estate as well," commented Dr Rourke. He said preservation of the environment had been high on their agenda since they purchased the farm in 1987.

Apart from the oak tree, Vergelegen also has a number of giant camphor trees, known to have been planted between 1700 and 1706. They are the oldest living officially documented trees on the subcontinent planted by Europeans. These majestic Chinese camphor trees were probably brought to the Cape from the East. They have been declared national monuments.

Willem Adriaan van der Stel is also thought to have planted the white

mulberry tree (*Morus alba*) which has survived for nearly three hundred years. This tree was probably imported by Van der Stel for silk worm production, and is reputed to be the oldest mulberry tree in the country. This mulberry has also been affected by the passage of time and is propped up to prevent damage.

Vergelegen has a unique layout, based on the baronial style present in Europe at the time of Willem Adriaan van der Stel. The beautiful octagonal garden, vast flowing lawns and parkland surrounding the homestead, are an amalgam of South African historic landscaping. The actual agricultural

land is some distance from the homestead, which is unusual.

Amfarms have ensured that this uniqueness is preserved, incorporating the rich heritage of the homestead, the gardens and the agricultural land. When the estate is eventually opened to the public, people will be able to go on a trip of progressive discovery through this beautiful corner of the Western Cape.

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