The Scout Mountain Club Hut

Extracts from the original Dommisse Hut Logbook and DC Peter James-Smith writings: On 29 March 1939, the 3rd Green & Sea Point Troop offered their services voluntary at the Round House Hotel fire. Their excellent co-operation greatly assisted the Forest Officer and left the impression that Scouts in the Peninsula could be of the greatest use and assistance in fire suppression. Messrs. Mosdell and Johnson take up this question on the Forest Officers behalf to Council. As a result, consideration of providing Scouts with headquarters in the form of a Club Hut on the top of Table Mountain was initiated.

In May 1939, Ranger Davies, the first appointed Forester on the mountain since January 1939 under the City Council, was instructed to explore and report upon a possible site. On 11 January 1940, certain old ruins inspected by Forest Officer A.J.J Loubser were recommended to Council as a possible Scout Club Hut. The site comprised an old ruin of walls only, measuring 28 feet x 11 feet near Reserve Peak at a height of 2 755 feet above sea level. Shortly after, Ranger Loubser joined the army and the Forest Station as such was closed down.

Early in 1941 a new Municipal Forester Hugo Brunt, wrote to Area (then Divisional) Headquarters, offering Cape Western a hut on Table Mountain in Diamond Valley. On 9 February 1941, Divisional (Area today) Commissioner Dr F.H. Dommisse and Carl 'Serpent' Rayner (the Area Rayner Trophy now bears his name) led a party from Constantia Nek up the mountain to inspect the hut. Members of the party were; members of the forestry department, Mr Halt of SA Mountain Club, Skipper Johnson, Kudu Quinn (the Area Quinn Trophy now bears his name), Anderson of 1st Mowbray, Dommisse's grandson Donald, a gang from Malmesbury Dudshot Dick Napper, Tiger Donaldson and four Scouts. It had rained the night before and Dudshot had to be convinced to leave his umbrella behind, as it meant bad luck and more rain to come. The hike took a little over two hours before reaching the hut, which was well off the beaten track. It was in a very bad state of repair, well ventilated due to the absence of a roof, but all were extremely enthusiastic at the prospect of a hut on the mountain and accepted the offer being made. It would become the Diamond Valley Hut and was not far from Nursery Ravine. After struggling to get a fire going, coffee, sausage rolls, sandwiches and salads were disposed of. The party then visited Reserve Peak to the north of the hut, from where magnificent views were obtained. A visit to the Wynberg Ranger followed and with permission, the excited party descended down Disa Gorge back to Constantia Nek. It was only in December 1941 that the City Engineer, finally on the suggestion of Ranger Brunt, sanctioned that the site should be placed at the disposal of the Scout Association and planning started.

From here on, weekend work parties toiled up the mountain. Ranger Brunt was extremely helpfully in provided timber from the Newlands Mill and advice on the stonework. Work parties were organised to lug and carry the wood up for the virtual re-construction of the hut, Kudu Quinn (later the Cape Western Scouter Editor for many years) was the main organiser at this stage. Progress was extremely slow and by November 1942 the Forestry Department threatened to give the hut to the SA Mountain Club, unless visible improvement was made. Work then began again in all earnest and 3 years later the hut was officially opened.

Tuesday 2 January 1945, two large parties, one under leadership of Divisional Commissioner Dr. Dommisse ascended Cecelia and another under leadership of ADC Wilfred Abbott ascended Nursery Ravine. The going was slow to accommodate senior members. The two parties, totalling 49 people,

met at the hut for the greatest moment in Scouting history about to take place. At 12 noon a 2 minute pause was observed after which the Scout flag was broken with due ceremony. The Divisional Commissioner Dr Dommisse then introduced Mr. Hugo Brunt, Chief Forest Officer to the Cape Town Municipality, to all present. He briefly referred to the development of the scheme and paid high tribute to the work done by ADC Wilfred C Abbott 'Lone Star' during the last 3 years and to Mr Cruttall who had donated the windows. The Scout Association owed a great debt to Mr Brunt for procuring the hut for the Scouts, he then asked Mr Brunt to officially open the hut.

Mr Hugo Brunt then named the hut 'The Dommisse Hut' (after the Divisional Commissioner) and officially declared it well and truly opened, to the accompaniment of three hearty cheers. A dedication Prayer followed by Rev Geoffrey Child ('Falcon' GS of 1st Beaufort West), before Mr Brunt continued. He referred to the early negotiations for the hut and to the excellent work of the 3rd Green & Sea Point Troop at a fire in 1939 at the Round House, Camps Bay, when they provided an efficient signalling and fire squad. He also referred to the fine co-operative spirit shown to Forester Perks, Groenewald and Taylor. He thought it would be possible to develop the area by building a swimming pool and later a telephone line to the Wynberg Rangers quarters, which the Scouts could assist in building. The area would be regarded as the Scouts Nature Reserve and hoped it would be developed in the truly international spirit of Scouting by the planting of trees from different parts of the World. He also hoped the Girl Guides would have a hut in the reserve. There was plenty of timber available to build a real backwoods log cabin. Other possibilities were a fire look-out tower and a separate hut housing meteorological equipment like a barometer, wind and temperature instruments.

Sir Herbert Stanley (Chief Scout's Commissioner) then spoke of the excellent opportunity provided to inspire the young minds of Scouts for a love of nature and the mountain. There was no better place to train a Scout, than this very spot. He also praised the work of Mr Abbott and those Scouts who had toiled to bring up all the material to complete the hut. He hoped the hut would be an inspiration to all who used it.

ADC Wilfred Abbott then mentioned the great help and assistance he had received from Mr S Hart and declared he had great pleasure in presenting Mr Hart with the Scouts Thanks Badge in appreciation of all the work he had done. Then it was time for a lunch break, after which Mr Brunt gave a yarn covering the vast flora and fauna found on and around Table Mountain, as well as their origins. The parties left for home shortly after, following different routes down. The weather had been excellent, with no wind, mist or cloud. A happy day spent in ideal surroundings and a fitting consummation to all those who had worked so hard to achieve this goal. - *end*

Mountain Hut For Boy Scouts

The Cape Times
Wednesday 3 January 1945

A weekend hut for the use of Boy Scouts, situated in Diamond Valley *(today Ash Valley)* near the Wynberg reservoirs on Table Mountain, was officially opened yesterday afternoon by Mr Hugo Brunt. Formerly a derelict Rangers hut, it is now named the Dommisse Hut, and was given to the Boy Scouts by the municipality two years ago for their exclusive use, on condition that they repaired it and, while in residence, kept a lookout for fires on that part of the mountain. All repair work was done by the Scouts, who carried the necessary material such as cement, flooring boards and roofing, up the mountain. The hut is about 50 feet by 20 feet, has a stone fireplace built by the Scouts and will hold about 20 persons.

From the beginning the Dommisse Hut was extremely popular and many maintenance parties followed. ADC Wilfred Abbott (passes away 1967 at the age of 90), Bunny Bennington (later also a huge asset in the development of Gilcape) with 4th Rondebosch and 3rd Green & Sea Point Rovers were the main dedicated workers. The hut was and still is situated in the isolated Ash Valley (used now by the Western Province Mountain Club), laying midway between the Hely-Hutchinson and Alexandra Reservoirs. The trolley track situated behind the Wynberg Ranger (then used but now closed to

hikers), became famous on 7 October 1946, when ATS AC Dorrington of 10th Cape Town set the record of ascending with full kit (not today's light weight packs) in 50 minutes and descending in 45 minutes – that's from the road below to the Dommisse hut and visa-versa. By the end of 1947 there were 7 Yellowwoods, 6 wild Olive, 6 wild Peach, 2 Willow and 2 Keurboom trees planted, the latrine completed and the area was slowly developing. (On record is a Graham Davidson, who single handed conveyed 10 bags of cement with a new wheelbarrow, from the Wynberg Rangers house to the hut on 1 May 1965). Many Scouts and Scouters have stayed over, many climbing the mountain for the first time as Scouts or Scouters via many different routes to reach this prime Scout oasis, which now holds many past memories of happy, sometimes sad, difficult, adventurous and fun Scouting.

From DC Peter James-Smith writings: Another big event came on 29 July 1951 at the Dommisse Hut, with the first inaugural meeting and establishment of the (SMC of SA) Scout Mountain Club of SA. Groups represented were 4th Rondebosch under Bunny Bennington, 3rd Green & Sea Point under Neville Weller and 1st Mowbray under Bushman Bentley. The following is taken from the log at the time; Hiked up Kasteelspoort in a strong north west gale and rain, conditions were almost arctic. Present: 1st Mowbray (4 Scouts, TS and ATS), Stan Rose, Bunny Bennington, Honger Hastings, Aap Thomas, Elder Weller and Miss P. Hastings. The SMC then elected was Chairman Neville Weller, Secretary Bunny Bennington, President Lone Star (Wilfred Abbott) with members Bentley, P. Hastings and opted were Pickles Koning, Eden Parker and R. Orton. - *end*

Although the hut was ideally situated and frequented weekly by many various Scouting parties, the site was extremely isolated. It was the type of place that when you arrived you were either lost, totally off course or stumbled upon it by a stroke of luck. It was not on the regular paths frequented by hikers, well off the beaten track, an ideal hidden site for Scouts, but then so also for vagrants to destroy without any interruption. In addition, water was scarce, and one reads from the log how water pools were sought out for water. After the start of the 1960's, vandalism of the hut and theft of equipment had reached such unbearable proportions, that Council was approached for another hut to use in place of the existing hut. This led to the obtaining of the present SMC Hut on Table Mountain.

From our Cape Western Scouter: On the weekend 26/27 September 1965 the Club held its final work meet at the Dommisse hut. It was a memorable yet sad occasion to those who had worked and striven to make the hut the amenity it has been to Troops who wished to spend a few days on Table Mountain. The new hut that had been used by Council workers, was now abandoned. It was situated close to the Woodhead Ranger, constructed of Table Mountain sandstone with a corrugated iron roof. It had 3 separate rooms, kitchen, open and fire area. An asset was chlorinated filtered water to the hut, which was piped and hand-pumped to a storage tank behind the hut from the Woodhead Rangers house.

On the Saturday, Rosebank Troop under Nigel Murray carried over mattresses, bricks, pots, the water urn and sundry small items to the Woodhead Reservoir wall. One youngster, not yet eleven, manfully carried over a small mattress, then came back and took two bricks - what he took on other trips I do not know, but we all admired his spirit. Thank you Nigel and the Rosebank boys. During Saturday night three members sleeping at the Hut had a visitation, no doubt from the vandals who had caused all our trouble. Unfortunately they were gone before we could find out who they were.

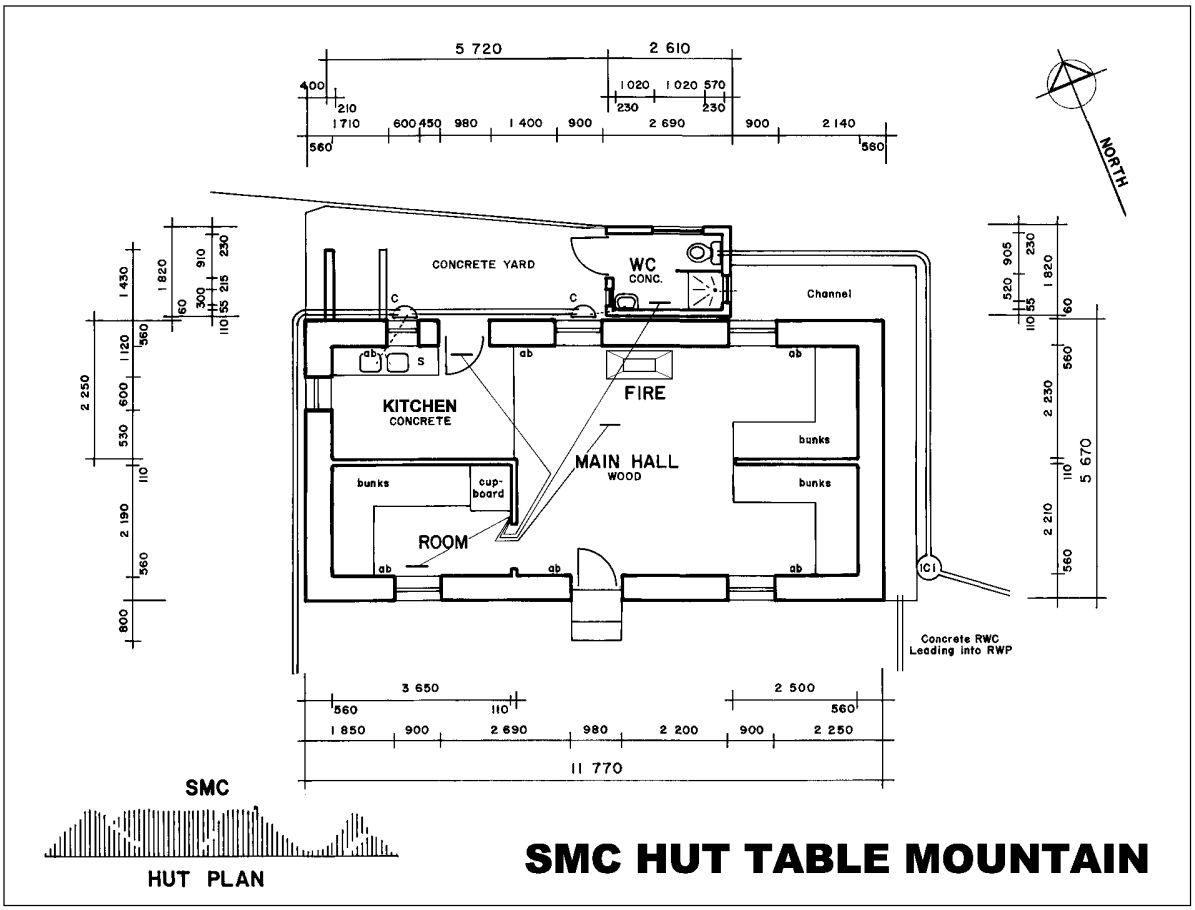
Sunday saw the main carrying - all our bricks (500) and the balance of our gear went to the wall. Ginger Jennings carried in one trip alone, 19 bricks, (152 lbs) then came back and took a box measuring at least 3 feet x 2.5 feet not heavy, but bulky. The support was not good, but sufficient for us to do what was required.

Boys form the 2nd G & SP got caught in heavy rain in Nursery Ravine and getting a thorough soaking wisely decided not to continue - thank you anyway for your attempt. The ladies also came to light and helped carry bricks and gear. On the Sunday one of our ladies kept a good fire going and provided a constant supply of boiling water for tea. The SMC would like to say a big "Thank you" to all those who made the effort to help with the removal.

On Sunday 4th October 1965, four members went up to carry over the grate and a few small items while Dassie Francis flattened tins in the dump and covered up the pit with soil. On arriving at the hut we found that our clever vandals had again entered through the roof, and presumably on Saturday night. They must have had a disappointment at finding an empty hut.

It remains to say thank you to the Rangers who moved this gear from the Woodhead wall by bakkie to the new hut, because without their co-operation we could not have achieved so much in so short a time. It is also time to pay tribute to all those who, over the years, have put in much hard work. It is ironical that their efforts should be brought to nought by vandalism. One day perhaps the perpetrators will be caught and receive their just desserts.

The work on the new hut presents a challenge to the Club and we hope with the help of the Movement to make it as much a show piece as was the old Dommisse. We appeal to Troops to have patience - Rome was not built in a day - but we can assure them that the new hut will be every bit as habitable as our old one in the space of a couple of years, or less. - *end*



Well, over the years following, many work parties have once again brought this, the second hut to be used by Scouting, back up to the amenity it is today. To date I have not managed to establish when or if there was another 'official opening ceremony' as was the case with the Dommisse Hut, so can only assume that we stopped using Dommisse and continued with the present SMC Hut in 1965. On making contact with some of the original and later SMC members, to trace the old records, I ended up being directed pillar to post and ending where I started. Thus either someone still has these records or they have since been destroyed – a huge shame if this be the case. Hopefully when they do show up, they will be handed over to our Heritage Centre for further reading and accurate recording.

The hut underwent considerable changes over the years, mostly carried out by a 'Hut Patrol' established in 1967. By 1968, there were 12 bunks with mattresses in 2 rooms, most of the flooring had been renewed and a firewood shed added at the back. Toilet facilities were an outside corrugated iron latrine shared by the SA Mountain Club and Scout Mountain Club.

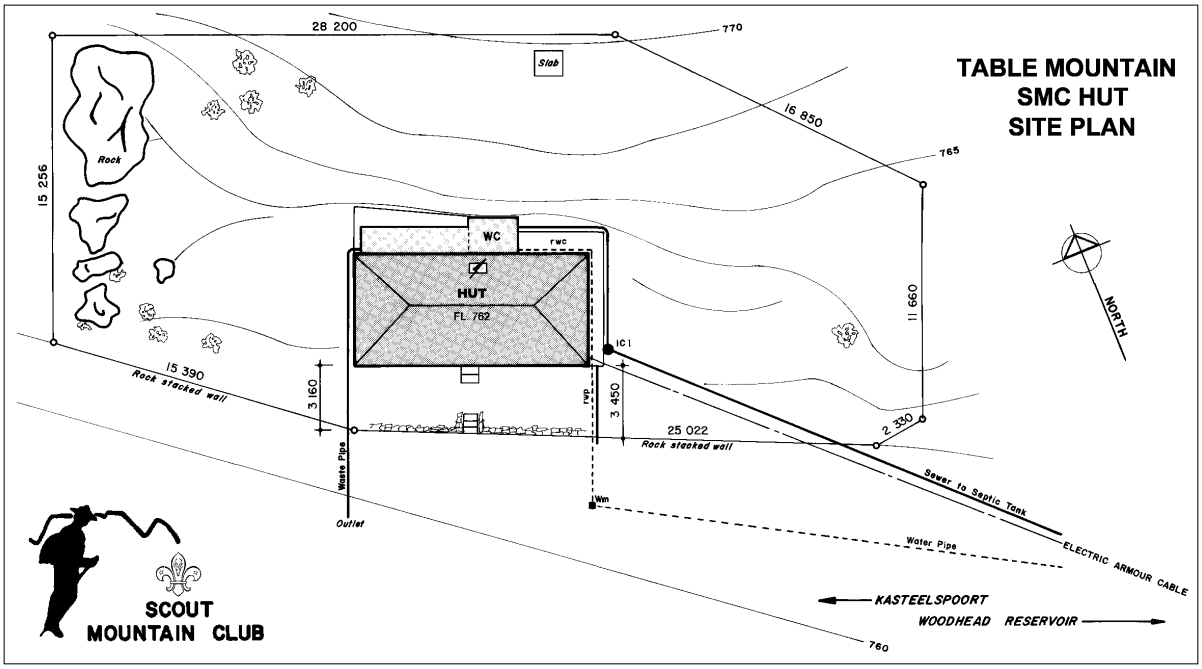
Extracts from report by Hut Patrol Leader Adrian Bethray 1970: What has happened at the hut? The old fireplace has been removed and a new improved one installed – no more smog! Walls have been knocked down and rebuilt, changing 4 rooms to 1 and 1 large one. The roof has been painted a beautiful green. Lawns have been planted and outside fireplaces completed. The entire site has been

fenced off and a gate added – very civilised indeed! 18 Bunks have been fitted, providing excellent sleep and rest – a rest home for the young on foam. Floors have been re-laid and ceilings repaired. Washing facilities and a flush toilet are to be added out back together with a septic tank – the only hut on the mountain to have such luxuries. (Application for Star rating are being made). New tables, chairs and shelves have been provided.

Who's working so hard? Working!? Nay, enjoying themselves, learning to be handymen without fear of wrecking Aunt Matilda's beautiful house. The Hut Patrol is having a ball. Plumbing, brick laying, demolishing, erecting to provide a hut of top class standards for South African Scouts. - *end*

Over the years following, the outside ablution at the back, together with a septic tank was added. The old hand pump mechanism was removed and converted to pressurised water from the Woodhead Ranger. Electric lights were added. The fireplace renovated to a jetmaster, then replaced and moved to it's present position. The roof was blown off and replaced numerous times already, windows replaced with burglar bars and the latest 'covered area' out back with an outside shower and upgrading of the ablution facility.

Since 1687, when the first 'plakaat' (notice) was posted by the Dutch East India Company, there has been a continuos 'fight' between various authorities as to ownership of Table Mountain. As one follows the history of the Mountain, various authorities have taken control of the mountain, each time passing new laws, but in the end failing to actually gain control or really achieve anything by ownership. Finally on 29 May 1998, Table Mountain is placed under the SA National Parks Board, officially proclaiming Table Mountain a contractual National Park. We almost lost the use of the hut shortly after as once again new laws followed requiring permits to enter the Table Mountain Area, restrictions on movements, etc, but once again as over the last 300 odd years, because of the vastness and openness of the terrain, the constant lack of funds and man-power, these laws are actually impossible to implement and once again not thought through properly or practical. Thus life goes on as before.



At present the SMC are the caretakers of the hut for the Cape City Council and the National Parks Board, with 825 Square meters area on lease (yes, we do not own the hut - quite the contrary to Forester Blunt's address in 1945 and the Cape Times report following pertaining to the Dommisse Hut). The lease at present runs for 25 years and is dated 1 January 1993. I wonder what 2018 will bring with the lease expiring? Who will have taken ownership of the mountain by then?

***From the Cape Western Website by Ian Web*:** The SMC Hut on Table Mountain is the best hiking venue available to Scouts in Cape Western Area. It is situated near the dams on the Back Table, with easy access from Kirstenbosch, Constantia Nek, Kloof Nek or Camps Bay. Hiking routes to the Hut include Skeleton Gorge or Nursery Ravine, the Bridle Path (or Jeep Track), Woody Ravine and Kasteelspoort. These routes take between 2 and 4 hours. Longer routes from Llandudno Corner or the main Table are also possible.

Staying over on Table Mountain is only allowed in four mountain club huts. The Scout Mountain Club (SMC) maintains one of these huts for use by Scouts and Guides, the others being the Cape Province Mountain Club Hut (CPMC), the South African Mountain Club Hut (SAMC) and Western Province Mountain Club Hut (WPMC) – the old Dommisse Hut. The hut is heavily used and is usually fully booked at weekends and during school holidays. Bookings are essential.

The hut has bunks for 18 people (12 in the main area and 6 in a separate room). Ablutions consist of a toilet, basin and shower (cold water only, though!) and a sink for washing. There are some sturdy wooden tables and benches, a steel fireplace for cooking. You should carry some firewood to the Hut as you are not actually allowed to collect wood on the mountain due to it now being proclaimed a National Park.

The stone building is more than 100 years old, and was originally built to house overseers during the construction of the Woodhead Reservoir in the 1890s. It has been in use by Scouts since 1965, prior to that, Scouts had the use of the Dommisse Hut elsewhere on the Back Table in Ash Valley. The area around the Hut is rich in history, and the nearby Waterworks Museum tells of the building of the dams, the old Camps Bay cableway and the railway from the top of the cableway to the old stone quarries.

The area around the hut is known as the 'Back Table', and in the evening the Hut has amazing sunset views. The Back Table is rich in fynbos including Gladiolas, Proteas and Restios (reeds). From the Hut you can do a morning's hike to Maclears Beacon or the upper Cable Station via the Valley of Isolation, or Southwards to Grootkop, the largest of the Twelve Apostles.

Weather on Table Mountain is difficult to predict and can become extreme at any time of year, so hikers should be well prepared, familiar with the route, and willing to turn back ("Plan C") if conditions are too extreme for the party. Heavy wind, thick mist and rain are possible at all times of year, and the Hut is a spectacular place to sit out a mountain storm. A rare snowstorm in July 1995 left a few inches of snow around the Scout Hut and a thick blanket higher up the mountain, the next snowfall came eight years later in August 2003.

To visit the Hut, the easiest routes are as follows:

- The Jeep Track from Constantia Nek: follow the track all the way to the Woodhead Reservoir and cross the dam wall towards Kasteelspoort. At the tap near the overseer's house, carry on past another council building (a modern Council Workers cottage) to the Scout Hut under two or three large pine trees.

- Skeleton or Nursery Ravine from Kirstenbosch: both ascents reach the Back Table at Hely Hutchison Reservoir. Take the concrete road past this dam to Woodhead, cross the dam wall and find the hut under the nearby pine trees.

- Kasteelspoort from Camps Bay or Kloof Nek Corner: from Kloof Nek, follow the Pipe Track along the contour until the Kasteelspoort turnoff. At the top of Kasteelspoort follow the raised path and you will see the hut off to your left.

For information on how to book the Hut, contact Cape Western Area HQ in Goodwood. Note that the Scout Hut may only be booked for the use of Scouts and is not open to the general public. Contravening this rule will forfeit our lease. - *end*

Article researched and written up by
André Foot - DC Kanonkop 2005

Acknowledgements *(for assistance received in compiling various articles)*
Bruce Sutherland - Ex-1st Muizenberg, Robert Callanan – 1st Bergvliet, Adrian Velaers - 1st Bergvliet Sea Scouts, Allan and Liz Broadley - 1st Pinelands, Ian Kellerman - 1st Naruna & Constantia, Michael Edwards - 1st Bergvliet, Howard Little - 3rd Pinelands, John Delport - Sea Scout Base, Ian Web - 1st Claremont, Jock Richie - Honorary Member, Mike Miles - 2nd Fish Hoek, Kevin Wall - Ex-Smc, Denzil Roberts - Scout Heritage Centre, Vena - Librarian Cape City Council archives, Telkom Touch Research Centre and The Argus.