



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OX WAGON COLLECTION

STRAIGHT RAIL BUCK WAGON ("BOKWA")

This wagon was built by R. Symons ("Buffalo Carriage Works") in 1935 in his workshop in King Williams Town, restored and fitted with a half tent and restored by E. Holm in 2002.

Symons only used axles made by Oldsbury in Wednesbury. He built mainly heavy wagons for hunters but also ran advertisements in Xhosa, since many of his customers were black chiefs. He was very enterprising and offered a variety of services, even rentals! He also patented several small improvements on buck wagons. He started his factory in 1878, and the works still operated in 1938, turning out more than 3 000 wagons.

This wagon is a "straight rail 16 footer" as roads improved wheels of wagons could be made smaller, making the grid above rear wheels unnecessary (from there "straight rail"). The "voortang" is a "tolletjie tang" with 4 spindles, an improvement on the "Natal Tang" which Symons adopted after 1920. The brake is a standard "Natal" crank-type. The wheels are extremely sturdy, and provided with exceptional "tolletjie" spokes – a traditional ornament harking back to 18th century "Kakebeenwa" spokes. A wagon like this could take a pay load of up to 7 tons.

The 2 rivets binding the arms of the rear tong have large round heads – a particular Symons feature.



TRANSPORT RIDER BUCK WAGON (“BOKWA”)

Another Symons wagon built in 1924.

This is a traditional large wheeled full sized (18 foot) transport wagon, fitted with the wide half tent favoured by long distance transport riders (original frame) restored by E. Holm 2016. (Axle mark reads “Symons” but the real maker is Oldroyd).

The transport riders would load their freight and then live in the tent on top of the load, often for several months travelling from the Cape to Kimberley or Johannesburg, and later from Kimberley to Rhodesia. Although the “agtertang” lacks the large rivets (later repair?) the wagon shows two more Symons characteristics: the square base plate on the hook on the buck beam, on which a small water barrel or cooking pot was hung, and the shaped front end of the “langwa”.

The wagon has a 4 “tolle-voortang” and standard Natal crank brake. Wheel grids are squared, and there is a special steel bar outside railings to fasten load. Side kists are for spare “rieme, stroppe” and small tools. Floor and railings are the original Oregon Pine.

Transport riding (as dramatically described by Fitzpatrick in Jock of the Bushveld) was the major industry in South Africa for nearly a century, due to the delayed construction of a rail network. Already before the Anglo-Boer War, there were an estimated 100 000 wagons busy on our roads!

Note the “wheel tax” plates which had to be bought and displayed on the side of the buck-beam (levied from 1917 – 1975) by each province.



FULL TENT BUCK WAGON (“NAGMAALWA”)

A full sized transporter (18 foot) built by Symons still featuring the old fashioned “Natal” “foretong” and “Cape” type brake. This brake has the screw and handle of a smithing-vice,

and not a crank. The rear assembly is unusually strapped to the buck beam, not lying loosely in a “W” iron. Also, the “langwa” can play loosely in a cradle, not tapped into the rear assembly.

The wagon was restored by van Niekerk, from whose famous collection it was obtained. It was again restored in 2016 by E. Holm, and fitted with a full tent, in the style farmers favoured for traditional “nagmaal” and “Geloftefees” gatherings up to the 1950’s. Full tented wagons were used as mobile homes, much like the famous Kakebeenwa of the 19th century.

The Cape type brake was certainly conceived by simply using parts of a smithing-vice. It had the disadvantage of often pinching your fingers on the “throw-through”, winding was slower, and it pulled from the body of the wagon to the wheels) rather than the axle to wheels like the Natal brake). This meant a lot of movement and slack had to be taken up.

Side tool boxes are with the half-round door in front, typical of wagons built in the Eastern Cape.



BUCK WAGON, STRAIGHTRAIL (“KAAL BOKWA”)

Large (18 foot) transport wagon, probably by W.G. Glennie of King Williams Town, who was a Scotsman like most Eastern Cape wagon makers. He built from 1880 to 1920, and was famous as one of the best builders.

This wagon dates from 1934 and is one of the sturdiest models built, probably capable of loading up to 10 tons. Note that the buck beams are extra high and from hardwood, not Oregon Pine. Wheels have oversized hubs, spokes and felloes. Rims are 3½ inch wide. Rails have extra metal strips on top for protection and steel rings for load fastenings on outside. The rear “tolle” of the foretong are square and solidly mortised into the frame.

The wagon originates from the van Niekerk collection, which restored and repainted it in a particularly old fashioned flower design. These wagons were also called “blommewaens” (flower wagons). The tool boxes are flat-lidded, unusual for Eastern Cape wagons which usually have the half round front door.

The “langwa” can move in a ryder at the back allowing for slightly more swing in the front assembly.



BUCK WAGON (KAAL BOKWA)

One of the Symons' first wagons (1897) with axles by Gilpin, before Symons apparently switched to buy only Oldbury axles. One of the rare surviving wagons pre-dating the Anglo Boer War. The brake is the Cape-type, the foretong Natal-type and the wheel grids are rounded with only one cross-bracket (later flat on top with at least 3). It is a full sized (18 foot) wagon.

The wagon originates from the famous van Niekerk collection, who also restored and painted it. Wagons like these were the standard “trucks” on farms, but many transporters travelled with a train of 3 – 6 wagons, of which only one needed to be tented. On these open wagons the load was covered with a tarpaulin (“boleseil”).

Unusual features are the “throw-up” step at the back, which is more common on full tented travelling wagons. The turntable in the front consists of four brackets, on later wagons abandoned in favour of round full circle turntables. Brake blocks consist of a hardwood permanent block (“skilpad”) to which the often replaced friction block of soft wood (willow, coral tree, protea) is tied with thongs.



BUCK WAGON (“KAAL BOKWA”)

This full sized (18 foot) wagon has a foretong with square and round tole. It is most likely by Merryweather of Pietermaritzburg. Axle date is 1919, maker Brockhouse & Co. Restored by E. Holm, 2016.

Merryweather was known for superior craftsmanship, and designed the arched yoke (which never took off because it was too expensive). He started his factory in 1863 and closed in 1939. It is known that he had an apprentice burn out all bolt-holes in wood to prevent rust and wood rot – a real perfectionist!

Another feature which distinguishes Merryweather wagons from those of the Eastern Cape are the three-slat-railings (Eastern Cape wagons have an outer slat and broad inner plank). This design with 3 slats was also used by wagonmakers in the Western Cape (e.g. Phillips and Retiefs de Ville in Paarl).

The brake is the crank “Natal” type, but suspended from metal riders (rather than riders bolted through beam). Also note how the side hook on buck beam differs from the Symons wagons.



TROLLEY (“BLOKTROLLIE”)

This wagon design originated in England and was introduced to South Africa by the 1820 Settlers and later the East Cape Scottish Wagon Makers. They were not well suited for rough roads, lacking the “langwa” and the pliable construction of the Kakebeenwa. They had the advantage of sturdy buck-beams and side railings, doubling the load area. The British brought in many trolleys in the Anglo Boer War, but their cross-country convoys soon switched to buck wagons.

An unknown E-Cape wagon builder had the brilliant idea of mounting a trolley body onto a Kakebeenwa chassis, and this the buck wagon was born – combining the best properties of both!

Trolleys were built in all sizes, and were drawn by horses and mules. They were therefore usually sprung, with a brake on the driver seat. This specimen is extra heavy and designed for oxen – as testified by the rear brake. It lacks springs, and could probably carry 2-3 tons on a paved or good road. These springless trolleys gave an extremely bumpy ride, like a Bokwa. The front axle took the full pulling force and had to have an elaborate and heavy turntable. This model got the name “Block Trolley”.

This trolley, by an unknown maker, has axles dated 1934 made by unknown maker.

