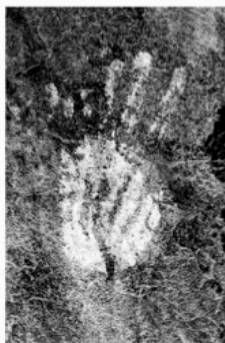


The History of Cogmans Kloof



An example of an early Khoekhoe handprint. It has 'nestro' lines, made by painting shapes of red paint onto the palm of the hand before pressing the hand to the rock.

How Cogmans Kloof got its name

The name of the scenic kloof that links Montagu with towns along the Breede River valley is derived from the name of a former Khoekhoe leader, Cochoqua, a name that means "narrow cheeks". The people led by Cochoqua were known as the Cochoqua.

The Cochoqua were one of the most influential Khoekhoe groups, living in two clans under separate chiefs and numbering about 20 000 people.

The Cochoqua were settled in the Saldanha Bay region, but after the Dutch arrived in the Cape in 1652, the Cochoqua migrated and settled in the area around present-day Ashton and Montagu.

The kloof between the two towns was named after the Cochoqua. This name went through several iterations: from Cochoqua to Cockmans to Cogmans and, finally, Cogmans.

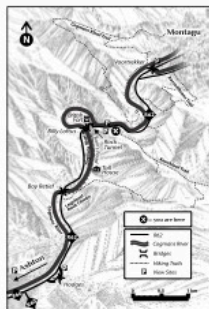
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Around 1760, pressure from Dutch settlement once again caused the Cochoqua to leave their home. They migrated north in search of new hunting grounds and pasture. They eventually settled in the vicinity of the Gariep (Orange) River.

Today, only scattered archaeological artefacts and the name of this route through the Langeberg Mountains remain as reminders of the Cochoqua people.

The Khoekhoe people (pronounced kwe-kwe as in question) had an unmatched knowledge of the veld they lived in – both as a source of food and of medicinal plants used for healing. The Langeberg mountains boast a particularly large variety of indigenous medicinal plants. For more information, visit the medicinal herb garden at the Montagu Museum or scan the QR code.



All about the Cogmans Kloof Interpretive Signs...

The highly informative signage along the road through Cogmans Kloof was commissioned as part of the recent extensive upgrade and realignment of the R62 between Ashton and Montagu.

The signs are located in the rest areas along the route – one of the most beautiful mountain passes in the Western Cape. They describe the geology, history and some features of the pass as well as giving good insight into the reasoning behind the upgrades to the pass and construction of the Ashton Arch bridge.

The signage plinths were designed to complement the extensive stone walls along the pass. The content of the signs themselves were compiled by the invaluable contributions of local volunteers.

Many Montagu residents gave their input – among them were Jeanne Biesenbach, Ronel Preston, Irma Jordaan, Rudi Allmayer, Richard Davies and Leon Steenkamp. Extensive use was made of the Montagu Museum Archive at the Old Mission Church for information on the signage.

The graphic design and final layout were executed by Montagu resident, Lemmy David, with topographic drawings by Diane Schearer.

Recreation in Cogmans Kloof



The start of the Keurkloof trail from the base of the valley.

The Water Source in Keurkloof

This picturesque 3km-long kloof that joins the Cogmans Kloof Pass is a well-known local landmark. A strong spring a kilometre up the kloof was a major source of drinking water for both the towns of Montagu and Ashton during the early 1900s. The water was captured in a small storage dam and piped to the two small towns. The system was upgraded in 1939, however, the spring's importance was later overtaken by other water sources that were needed to meet the requirements of the district's growing population.

Keurkloof was once a favourite recreation area for Montagu residents, but in recent decades the water from the spring has diminished. The picnic area was closed and the kloof is reverting to its former natural state.

Hiking and Rock Climbing, two of Montagu's great attractions

In the years since the early 1990s, Montagu has become a rock-climbing mecca, attracting local and international climbers. Many of the best climbs, including routes that range from easy to among the most difficult rock climbs in the country, are up the sandstone crags of Cogmans Kloof and adjoining Keurkloof.

Easy access from the road, an untamed wilderness area and breathtaking mountain scenery are drawcards for rock climbers from all over the country and the world. Cogmans Kloof and the surrounding mountains and kloofs also boast many scenic hiking trails.

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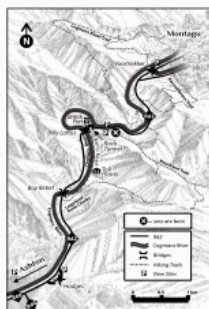
Scenic Trails

The Cogmans Kloof hiking trail is just over 12km long and tracks a circular path on the north-eastern slopes of the gorge. It offers walkers superb views of the surrounding cliffs and their amazingly contorted rock strata.

The Aasvoëlkraans hiking trail is just over 3km long and can be completed in under two hours. It climbs steeply to a point overlooking the north side of the kloof, with fine views of Fort Sidney and Bain's tunnel.



Montagu, surrounded by mountains with well-developed rock climbing routes, is a popular destination for local and international adventures.



Fort Sidney



Fort Sidney – strategically positioned above the narrowest section of the Cogmans Kloof pass, guarding the road below.

Following incursions by Boer forces (aided by Cape rebels) into the Cape Colony in late 1900, the British built a series of forts atop strategic mountain passes to block the movement of Boer commandos. The Montagu area was no exception; Fort Sidney is one of several fortifications built on high spots around the town to deter the Boers, who were mounting guerrilla raids on many small towns in the Cape Colony.

This fort, built in 1901, was named after Lt. Col. Sidney of the Royal Field Artillery, who was in charge of British forces stationed in the Montagu area at the time.

The fort was garrisoned by a company of Gordon Highlanders, survivors of the famous battle fought a year earlier at Magersfontein near Kimberley. The soldiers were billeted in a camp at the foot of the Kalkoenkrantz on the other side of the tunnel, near the former road building camp of Thomas Bain.

Construction

Construction of the fort was supervised by a local stonemason, William Robertson. The mortared stonework formed a rectangular structure about 10m long and 4m wide. The 40cm thick walls are 2m high with a simple opening on the west end to serve as an entrance. There are 21 rifle ports built at intervals into the walls, with indications that the fort once had a roof that drained into an internal water tank.

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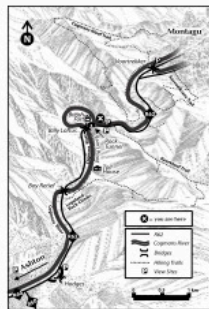
National Monument

Because of its unique position and reasonable state of preservation, Fort Sidney was declared a national monument in 1999.

The Anglo-Boer War

The Anglo-Boer War broke out on October 11, 1899 and ended on May 31, 1902. It was fought between the British Empire and the independent Boer states of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republic.

Fort Sidney did not see any action during the war. Along with five other forts in the area, manned by members of the Montagu Town Guard, it appears to have made the Boer and rebel commandos cautious about venturing too close to the strongly-defended town. Visit the Montagu Museum, or scan the QR code, for more information.



Hodges Bridge



Hodges Bridge, circa 1950, was for many years affectionately referred to as 'Hortjesbrug' by the district's residents.

Hodges Bridge, located at the south-western end of the kloof, was the first road bridge built in the spectacular Cogmans Kloof. It was opened in early 1872.

The bridge was named after Frederick Hodges, who was the resident magistrate in Robertson and chairman of the divisional council at the time. Mr Hodges was instrumental in obtaining funding for the construction of the bridge from the Cape government.

The official opening ceremony, on January 10, 1872, was a momentous occasion. Residents of Ashton and Montagu, and even Robertson, turned out to witness Frederick Hodges, accompanied by an honour guard of 30 horsemen, declare the bridge open for public use.

Construction

Hodges Bridge actually consists of two bridges, or what are known today as culverts.

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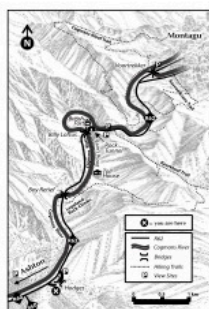
Each bridge, built with stone masonry, has a rectangular opening for the watercourse. The bridge decks (or roofs of the rectangular openings) were made of Yellowwood beams but have since been partially replaced and supported with reinforced concrete.

On the bridge section nearest to Ashton the motto 'Unity is strength' was inscribed and, on the other, the message 'Welcome to Montagu over the Hodges Bridge' was written.

The Pass

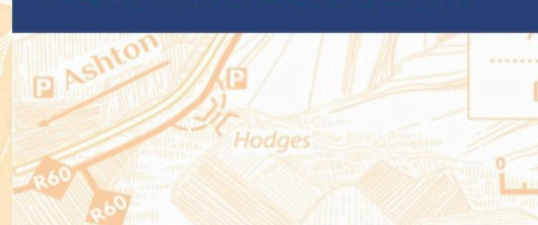
In 1877, five years after the opening of Hodges Bridge, Thomas Bain finished building the road through Cogmans Kloof, giving the residents of Montagu, and neighbouring areas of the Little Karoo, more direct access to the western parts of the Cape Colony. More information about Bain's road construction is available on a similar sign, located close to the Cogmans Kloof tunnel.

The road was re-aligned in the 1950s, and the latest road reconstruction was undertaken between 2015 and 2021.



Boy Relief

THE SIGNS IN COGMANS KLOOF



The Geology of Cogmans Kloof



The Cogmans Kloof cliffs rise to a point 500 metres above where you are standing. They comprise quartz-rich sandstones, which are hard and extremely resistant to weathering.

The intensely folded rock strata of the crags to the east of this point are a striking example of why the parallel mountain ranges that run for more than 800km across the southern regions of South Africa are called the Cape Fold Mountains.

The strata were originally horizontal, formed from sediment that settled between 480 and 400 million years ago on the floor of what was then a vast alluvial plain.

Much later, between 280 and 230 million years ago, the region was subjected to intense compressional

forces, which geologists believe were directed in several pulses from the south towards the north. This tremendous pressure, applied over some 50 million years, caused the strata to bow and bend into the contorted shapes and patterns visible today.

The sandstone is part of the Table Mountain Group (TMG) of rocks. High resistance to weathering means that TMG rocks tend to form the high ground across the region, although nature is constantly wearing it down through intense erosion involving rivers, rain, wind, rockfalls and earthquakes.

The most recent major moment in the geological history of Cogmans Kloof occurred between 150 and 90 million years ago, when a 5000-metre downward displacement along the south of the Worcester Fault resulted in the juxtaposition of rocks of greatly differing ages.

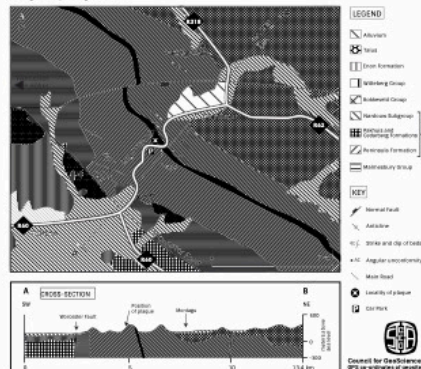
The fault runs eastwards from a point just west of Wolseley, through Worcester and Robertson and beyond. Sudden movement along the Worcester Fault in 1969 caused South Africa's largest earthquake in historical times, which registered 6.3 on the Richter Scale.

Cogmans River Floods:

In January 1981, nature delivered a strong reminder of the powerful forces that shaped the Cogmans Kloof. Heavy rains across the southern Karoo caused the Keisie and Kingna rivers to flood.

For more information about the floods, look out for similar signs at the Ashton Bridge as well as the Voortrekker Bridge at the entrance to Montagu.

Geological Map of Cogmans Kloof



Geomorphology - the power of the Cogmans River

The striking appearance of the gorge, with its high peaks and steep rock faces on both sides, is testimony to the erosive power of the Cogmans River, which runs through it. This river starts just above the northern end of the gorge, at the confluence of the Keisie and Kingna rivers, and flows past Ashton to join the Breede River 18km further downstream.

Geologists believe the river may well have existed prior to the uplift of the Langeberg range and was able to erode downwards at a pace equal to that of the rise of the land.

When the downward erosion of the main river channel halted or slowed, the stream would tend to cut sideways, widening the gorge. When erosion of the main channel resumed, the terraces on the side remained. You are standing on such a terrace, reading this sign.

Montagu Floods

The Montagu area has experienced at least 10 major floods since the town's establishment in the early 1850s.

1867

The first recorded flood was in 1867, when the Keisie River burst its banks and swept away vineyards below the town. Twelve people died in this event. This flood left the kloof impassable for weeks, which prompted the Cape government to commission the construction of the pass.



Flood waters in Cogmans Kloof as seen in 2003, when some sections of the pass were completely submerged under the flood waters. The road has since been reconstructed entirely, with four retaining walls and two replacement bridges, to reduce the risk of future flood damage.

1981

The most severe flood to affect the Montagu area occurred on January 25, 1981, a date remembered in South Africa for one of the worst natural disasters in the country's history.

Torrential rain across parts of the Western Cape caused widespread flooding. In Laingsburg, 100km north-east of Montagu, a major part of the town was swept away and more than 100 people lost their lives.

In Montagu a flood of water and debris tumbled down the Keisie River, obliterating parts of the Montagu hot springs before inundating lower parts of the town. Thirteen people lost their lives and millions of Rands worth of property was damaged. The ferocity of the flood was such that bodies were swept through Cogmans Kloof and recovered downstream of Ashton.

The road through the gorge was impassable. Left without electricity, drinking water and telephone connections, Montagu was effectively cut off from the rest of the country for days.



The approach road to the previous Boy Relief Bridge washed away in 2003. The bridge and the pass were rebuilt in 2017-2021 to withstand larger floods.



After major floods, the pass through Cogmans Kloof was impassable and emergency road repairs were undertaken each time. The new road has a higher alignment in many places which improves its resilience against flood damage.

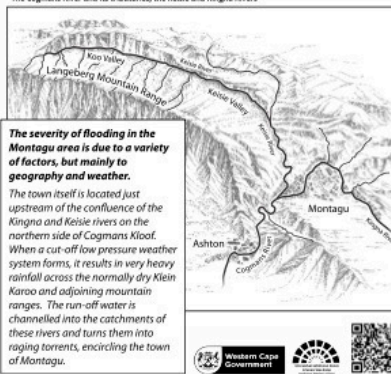
2003

Another disastrous flood struck on March 24, 2003. Between 200mm and 300mm of rain had fallen over the Keisie and Kingna rivers' catchment areas in the preceding 18 hours. Both rivers broke their banks, and the inundation of a large part of the lower town and adjoining agricultural lands and infrastructure caused significant damage. This was so severe that Cogmans Kloof was closed for 16 days. Montagu was declared a disaster area and helicopters ferried emergency supplies to the town.

2008

The most recent flood occurred on November 12, 2008. 120mm of rain fell on the town over three days, while the Koo Valley to the north-west received between 360mm and 500mm. This water was channelled down the Keisie River and through the town, causing extensive damage and sweeping away the footbridge linking the suburb of Montagu West to the rest of the town. On this occasion, the town was cut off for three days.

The Cogmans River and its tributaries, the Keisie and Kingna Rivers



The severity of flooding in the Montagu area is due to a variety of factors, but mainly to geography and weather.

The town itself is located just upstream of the confluence of the Kingna and Keisie rivers on the northern side of Cogmans Kloof. When a cut-off low pressure weather system forms, it results in very heavy rainfall across the normally dry Klein Karoo and adjoining mountain ranges. The run-off water is channelled into the catchments of these rivers and turns them into raging torrents, encircling the town of Montagu.

Floods and the Ashton Arch

Over the years, flooding of the Cogmans River has periodically devastated Ashton and the surrounding farmlands.

The floods of 1981 and 2003 caused major disruptions to local economic activities.

In January 1981, the well-known Ashton cannery factory was busy with its peak summer harvest when the factories were flooded between 1m and 2m deep.

High-water marks can be viewed in some buildings. It was recorded that nearly 50% of the wine grapes were lost that year.

Further downstream in the area of Van Loveren Wines, the river flow was reportedly more than a kilometre wide.

In 1937, the Cape government constructed two bridges over the Cogmans River on the Ashton Main Road at a cost of £5 600.

The bridge over the main channel was 100m long. It consisted of 5 earth-filled concrete arches resting on concrete piers and abutments. It had a roadway width of only 10 Cape feet (3.14m), with 2ft gravel shoulders, allowing single-lane traffic only.

The second bridge crossed a second stream of the Cogmans River about 50m to the west. It was a single span bridge only 8m long, but was 5.7m wide to match the adjoining road width.

To allow two-way traffic, the narrow main bridge was widened to 10.3m in 1951 at a cost of £10 800. The piers were widened to support additional concrete arched walls. Cantilever beams were added to form the wider bridge deck. The second bridge was buried under the upgraded road approaches, because by that time, the river had converged into one main stream.

The new Ashton Arch, consisting of 4 traffic lanes and 2 pedestrian pathways, completely replaced the old bridges. It is wider, longer, and higher than its predecessors, promising better flood resilience and a long service life.

Construction of the Ashton Arch

The new Ashton Arch is a tied-arch bridge. The roadway deck is carried by steel hanger cables suspended from the two reinforced concrete arches, while each arch is anchored by a horizontal tie-beam located between the road lanes and the pedestrian paths. Since the bridge is self-anchored with its forces in balance, it allowed the bridge to be constructed in a temporary position adjacent to the road and then moved transversely into its final position. This ensured minimal disruption to traffic during the bridge construction.

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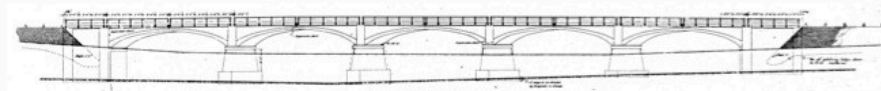
COGMANS KLOOF



A view of the new Ashton Arch under construction, with the previous bridge still in use.

A key improvement of the new bridge is the absence of supports in the river. Due to the arch form, the new bridge has a single span of 110m, which significantly improves the hydraulic performance when compared with the previous four large piers that supported the historic bridge.

The Ashton Arch has a design life of 100 years and will be able to withstand a 1-in-200-year flood without overtopping. It has become a landmark of Ashton, complementing the scenic route and paying homage to the road's history by preserving the arch bridge form.



An extract from the 1936 construction plans of the Cape Provincial Administration showing the elevation of the multi-arch bridge.

The Road through the Pass

The first safe route through Cogmans Kloof, which links the western end of the Little Karoo to the Breede River Valley, was built by renowned road engineer Thomas Bain. It took him five years and was completed in 1877.

Prior to this, the district's residents traversed the kloof (gorge) by following the river. This was a perilous trip across axle-breaking terrain, involving several crossings of deep sandy drifts and the ever-present threat of a flash flood.



The historic Cogmans Kloof Pass. Bain opened up a route along the mountain side to avoid the difficult river drifts, with deep sand in places and large boulders in others.



The original road through Cogmans Kloof, which was built by Thomas Bain.

It was such a flood, which claimed the lives of 12 locals in 1867, that prompted the Cape Colony government to take action.

First, the western section of the road in the vicinity of Hodges Bridge was built and opened in 1872. Thereafter, from 1873 to 1877, Bain built the remainder of the road, including the small unlined rock tunnel. The rock formation was very hard and folded into near-vertical strata, which hampered the blasting.

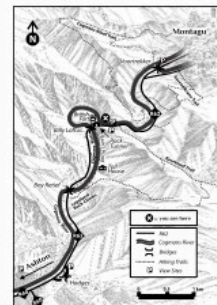
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The opening of the pass in 1877 was cause for great celebration among the district's residents. Later, the Toll House was built about a kilometre from the tunnel, towards Ashton.

Bain's road remained in use well into the 20th century. In 1931, the road was one of the first country roads to be tarred. In 1951-1952, the road was re-aligned and three new bridges were built. From 2015 to 2021, the road was upgraded and two of the bridges were reconstructed.

Sections of the road built by Bain, including its dry-stone retaining walls, have survived the harsh conditions in Cogmans Kloof. Testimony to Bain's eye for a safe route is the fact that his road remained intact following the disastrous flood of 1981, and once again successfully carried all traffic through Cogmans Kloof until repairs to the 1950s road were made.



The Ashton Arch has a design life of 100 years and will be able to withstand a 1-in-200-year flood without overtopping. It has become a landmark of Ashton, complementing the scenic route and paying homage to the road's history by preserving the arch bridge form.