

News

This week in Middelburg's history

St Joseph's Catholic Church

🕒 19 hours ago  **Theo Ligthelm** 📖 7 minutes read



📷 THE FIRST ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH IN ZUID STREET ON STAND 870 (PHOTO: (ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1994))

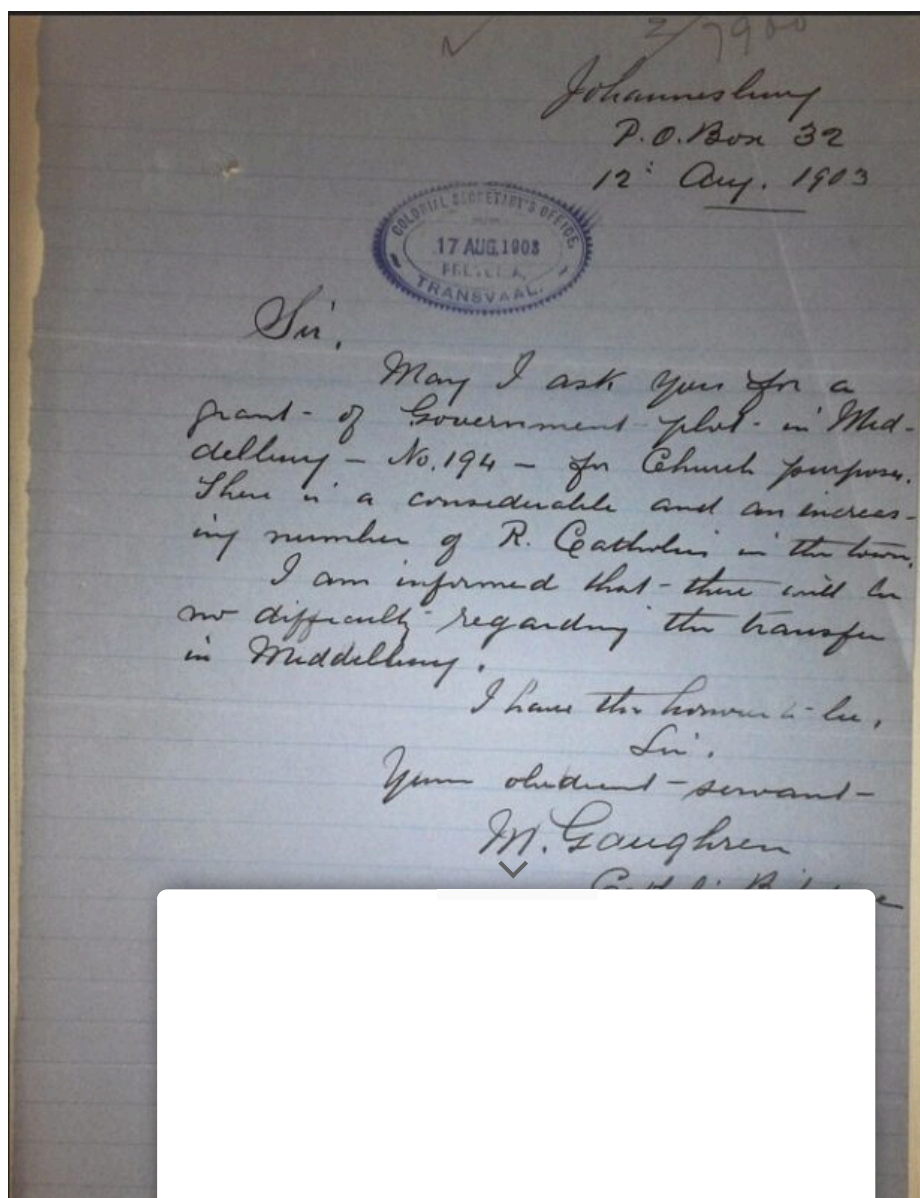
The impressive St Joseph's Catholic Church in Middelburg has an interesting history, interlinked with two wars. The first formal drive to establish a Catholic congregation occurred during the Anglo-Boer War, while the current church was built during the Second World War. On August 26, 1945, 81 years ago this week, the cornerstone of this building was laid.

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The presence of this Roman Catholic chaplain at the Imperial Garrison initiated efforts to establish a church. In August 1903, the Roman Catholic chaplain in Middelburg, Rev. George Ogle, requested that the Colonial Authorities transfer plots 193 and, later, 194 to the Catholic Church for ecclesiastical purposes. He indicated that the plots would be used for a church and a residence for the priest. On August 12, 1903, Bishop M. Gaughren, Roman Catholic Bishop of Johannesburg, wrote to the Colonial Authorities with the same request. These two plots were situated in Bhimy Damane Street, just east of the present Nederduitsch Hervormde Church.



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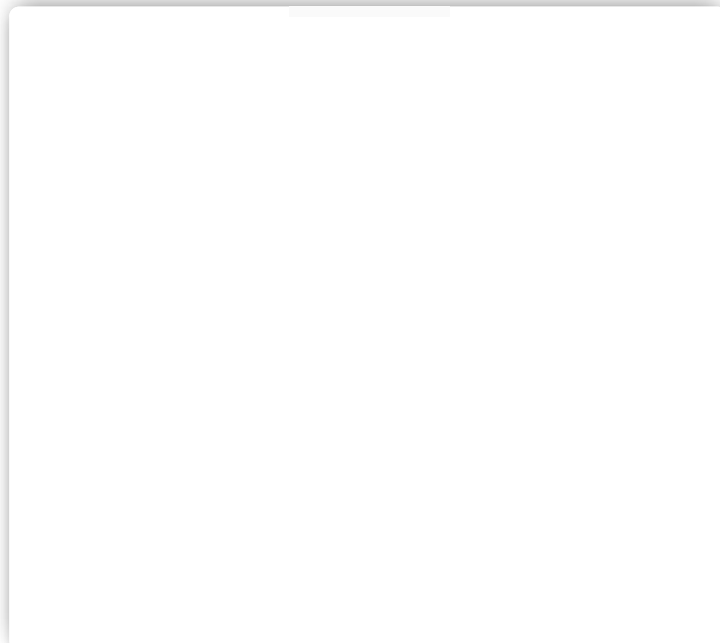
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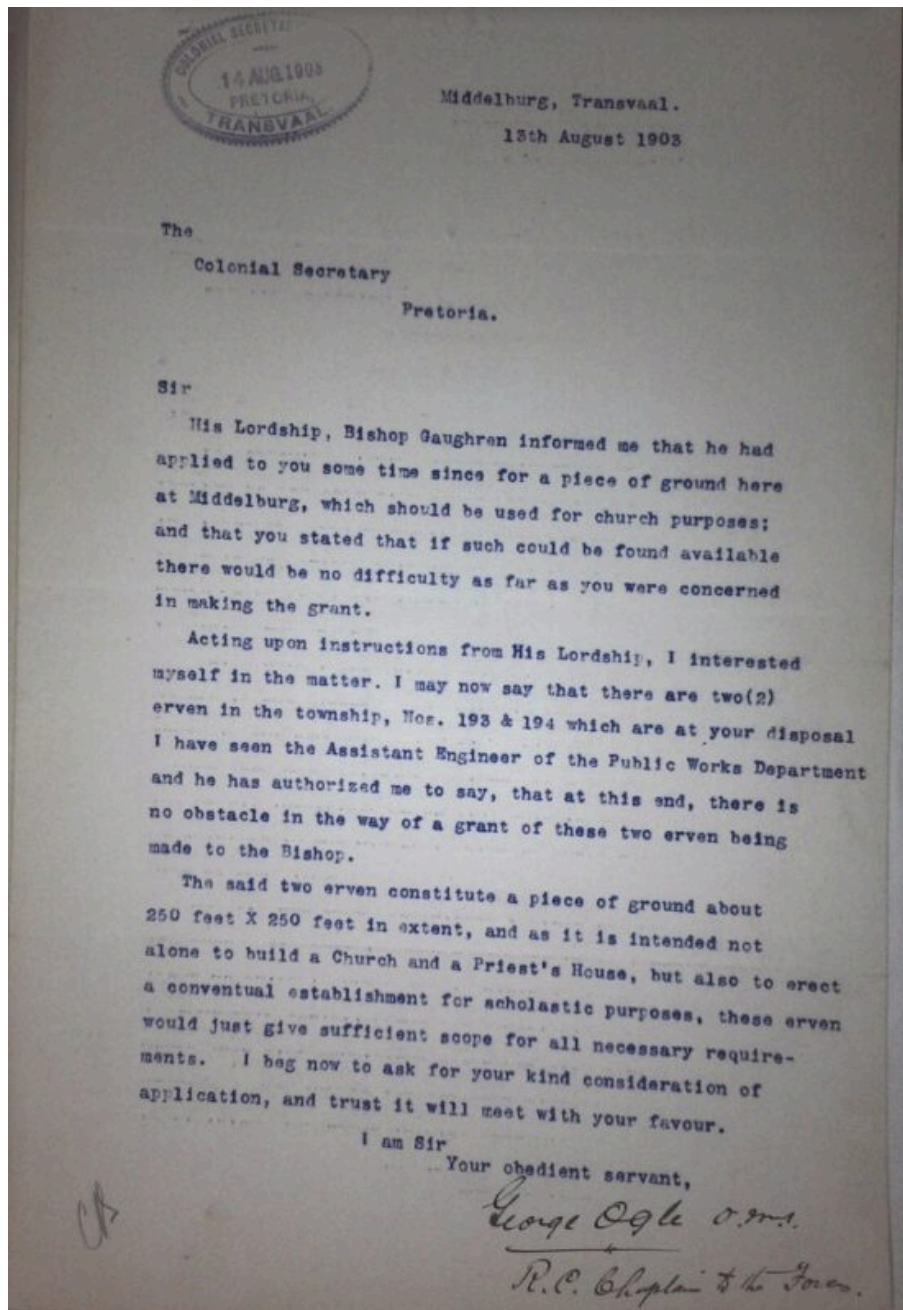
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that the plots were not needed for educational facilities. After much correspondence between the different Colonial Authorities, the request was altered so that the two plots would be made available to the church at a nominal rent and would therefore not become church property. The Royal Engineers indicated that the local priest had no objection to this arrangement.

Whether the plots were actually used is uncertain. However, it is mentioned that a small church building connected 'to the English Soldiers' burned down in 1918.

The Imperial Garrison left Middelburg in 1908, in the run-up to the First World War. This led to economic stagnation in the town and a drastic decrease in the number of residents and, consequently, members of the various churches.





LETTER FROM THE REVEREND GEORGE OGLE, CATHOLIC CHAPLAIN OF GARRISON
MIDDELBURG (COLONIAL SECRETARY, 1903)

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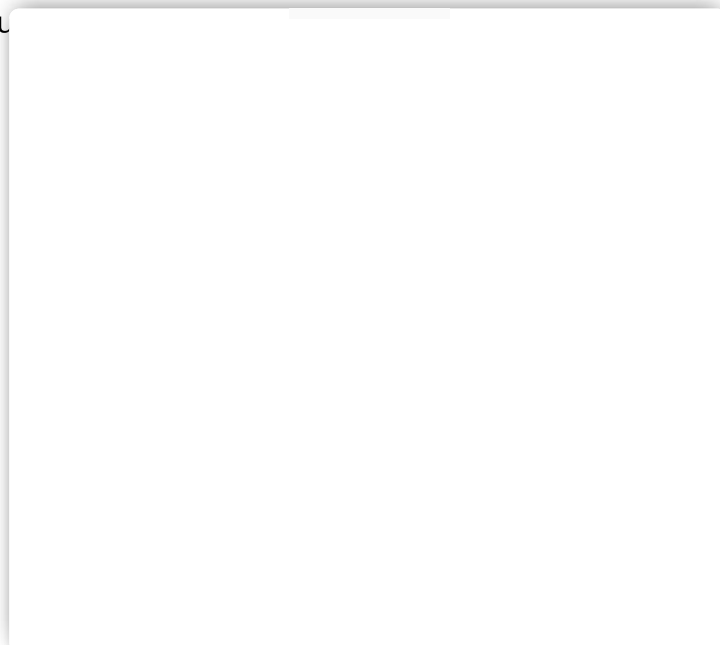
Catholic community until a new property was acquired in Cowen Ntuli Street.

This church was subsequently sold to the Old Apostolic congregation of Middelburg, which continued to use it until the late 1960s. After a new church was constructed for this congregation, the original building was repurposed as a hall. It was later demolished.

The First St. Joseph 's Church in Zuid street on stand 870 (Photo: (Roman Catholic Church, 1994))

Period 1935 to 1945

In 1935, an extensive strip of land was purchased that stretched from Cowen Ntuli Street all the way to Long Street. Whether the land was purchased or acquired from the City Council remains uncertain. The church then erected a simple rectangular church building bordering Cowen Ntuli Street on until 1946.



SECOND ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH BUILDING IN COWEN NTULI STREET (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)

The building still exists and currently serves as a kindergarten. A hostel was constructed on the northern side of the site during this period.

Period after 1945

During the early 1940s, as the congregation gradually increased in size, the decision was made to construct a new church building specifically designed for worship, located to the east of the original rectangular structure.

Sister Ambrosia, an Austrian missionary nun of the congregation, made sketches of the design for the new church building. The design was approved by the Bishop of Natal in Durban. The new church building was constructed on the site of the original structure. The new church building was designed in the style of the Cathedral in Lourenço Marques.

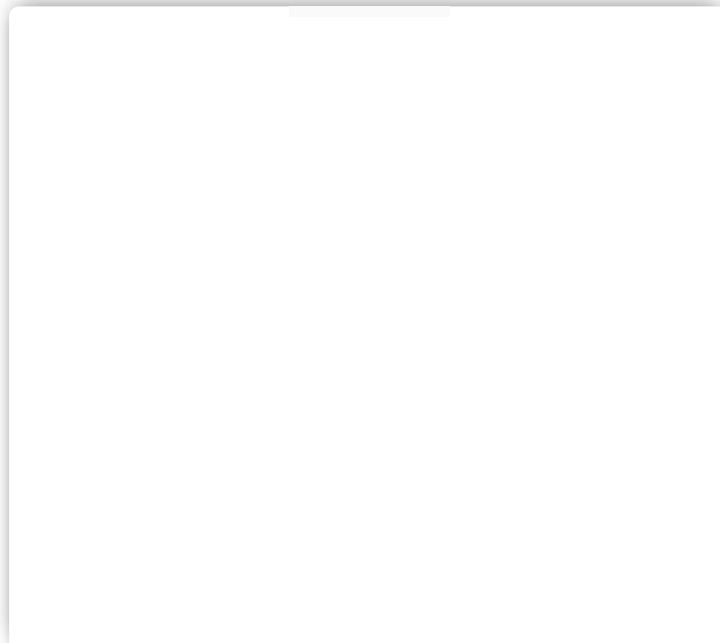
During the 1940s, the Afrikaans language was used to promote a sense of national identity in South Africa. The Afrikaans language was used to promote a sense of national identity in South Africa. The Afrikaans language was used to promote a sense of national identity in South Africa.

Due to this sentiment, the Smuts Government was very reluctant to accommodate German prisoners of war in the Union, but was willing to accept Italian prisoners. Through this action, the Union Government wanted to demonstrate its loyalty to the Allies, and specifically the British war effort, but also to help alleviate the labour shortage in the Union caused by the large number of troops deployed.

During this period, the Union accepted approximately 90 000 Italian prisoners, who arrived mainly via Durban Harbour. Although large numbers of these prisoners were illiterate and unskilled, some were craftsmen and skilled stonemasons or bricklayers.

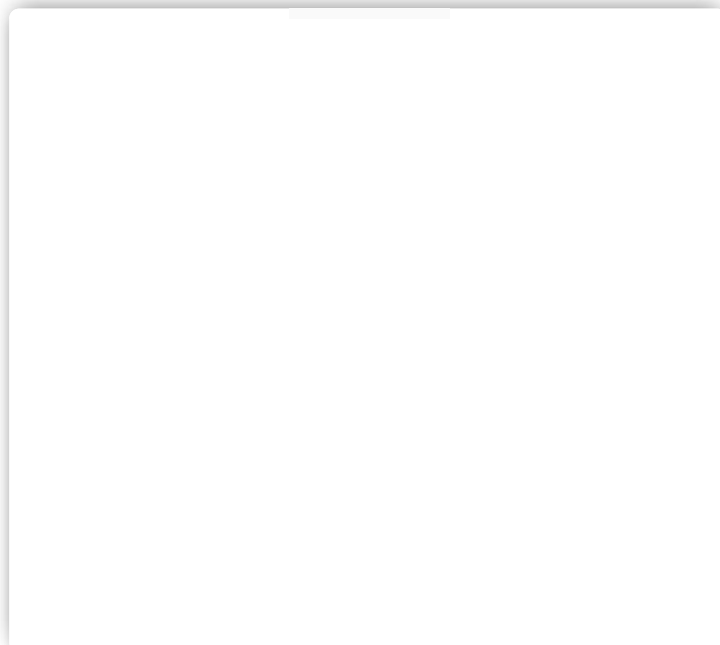
In line with the Geneva Conventions, these prisoners could be used as labour under specific conditions. Italian prisoners were placed into work teams to build roads, bridges and mountain passes, and to work on farms as farmhands.

A team of these prisoners was assigned to the Catholic Church in Middelburg to help construct the church. The existing stable building that once occupied the site was incorporated into what is now St Joseph's Church. The high quality of the workmanship and the skills of these prisoners are still visible today in this 80-year-old building.



CURRENT ART DECO-STYLE ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH BUILDING (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)

On August 26, 1945, the cornerstone of the new church was laid by Reverend Monsignor J. Riegler and on May 20, 1946, the blessing of the church took place by the Apostolic Delegate Martin Lucas.



CORNERSTONE OF THE PRESENT ST. JOSEPH; S CHURCH BUILDING (Foto: Rudi van Wyk)

Artwork in the church

This church building houses some of the most important and unique artwork in Middelburg.

One of the Italian prisoners of war, L. Finelli, was a gifted artist and is responsible for the remarkable murals in the church. In the alcove behind the altar, he painted the Crucifixion scene, with Mother Mary and John at the foot of the cross, the two crucified criminals, and a Roman soldier on horseback, all depicted life-size. In the arch above the altar is a representation of the Last Judgment.

These murals were painted in the 1960s.

ALTAR AND ALCOVE IN CURRENT ST. JOSEPH'S CHURCH BUILDING (Photo: Rudi van

On either side of the
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Two Angels in Relief by Edoardo Villa (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)

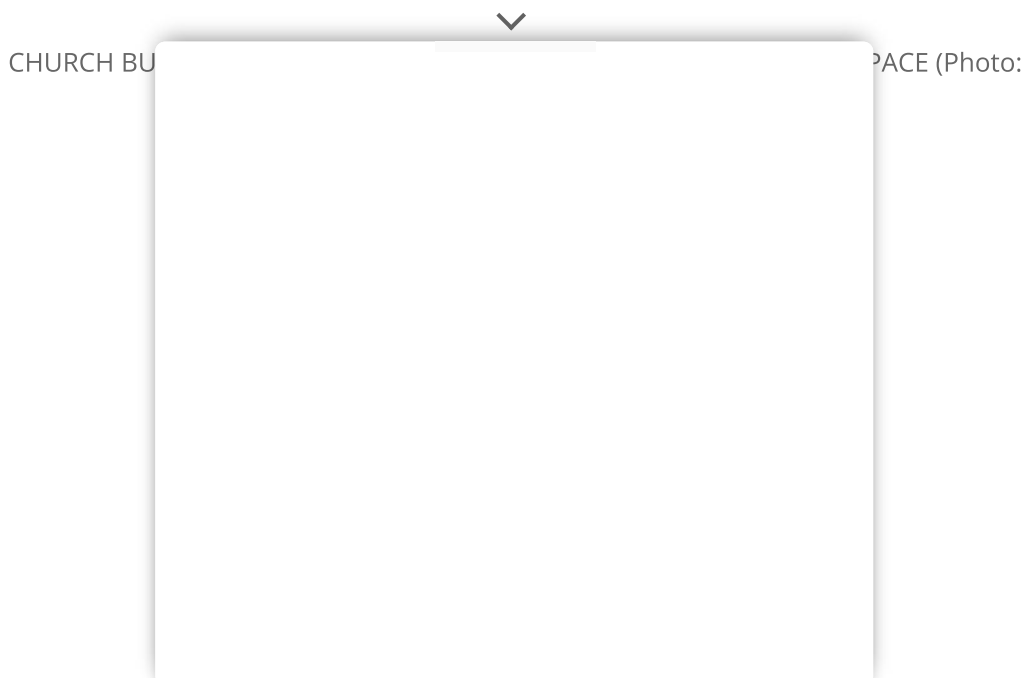


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The Prisoner of War Grouping that helped building St Joseph's Church. Edoardo Villa sits in front third from the left in Uniform (Photo: (De Klerk & De Kampen, 2012)

On the sides of the church are 14 framed paintings of the 14 stations of the crucifixion, according to Catholic tradition from the ancient church. These were also painted by Finelli.



Paintings by Finelli in the Church (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)





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Confession Space in the Church (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)



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St Joseph's Residence and Home for the Elderly

From 1935, the Catholic Church developed a hostel for boys on the northern side of the site, facing SADC Street (Long Street), under the leadership of Father Steidle. The architectural style suggests that the building may have been constructed as early as 1910. Whether the house was already on the site and was then converted into a hostel, or whether it was newly erected, is unknown.

The hostel provided accommodation for schoolboys and was managed by the Franciscan nuns.

Initial Hostel Building 1936 (Photo: (Roman Catholic Church, 1994) – Photo AI restored and coloured)

The hostel served as a boys' hostel for pupils at both Middelburg Primary School and Middelburg High School, which at that time was a parallel-medium high school. It was a day school for boys from the present-day Mpumalanga province.

During 1960, Middelburg High School was a parallel-medium high school for English-speaking pupils. It was a day school for pupils from Witbank to attend an English-medium school. The school had a hostel, Nel, which provided accommodation for boys.

Under Reitman, St Joseph's Home for the Elderly was involved in

the management of the home.

St. Joseph 's Church Building and Home for the Elderly (Photo: Rudi van Wyk)

Closing remarks

The congregation slowly expanded. In 1950, the first Catholic church was built in Mhluzi, followed by a church in Nazareth in 1975.



Office space
van Wyk)

Photo: Rudi



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