

Lake Dunbar – The failed dam of King

When looking at the demure Dunbar Lake, located 5 km outside King William's Town on the Buffalo River, one can hardly believe that it was once meant to be the main water supply to the Eastern Cape town. What started as a mission station later became a military settlement, with the first town council appointed in 1861. Mission founder, John Brownlee, was the first to cut a furrow (about 2 miles in length) from the river to supply the mission station with water. When the military moved in they took over the furrow. Despite the proximity of the Buffalo River, water supply to the young King William's Town was often

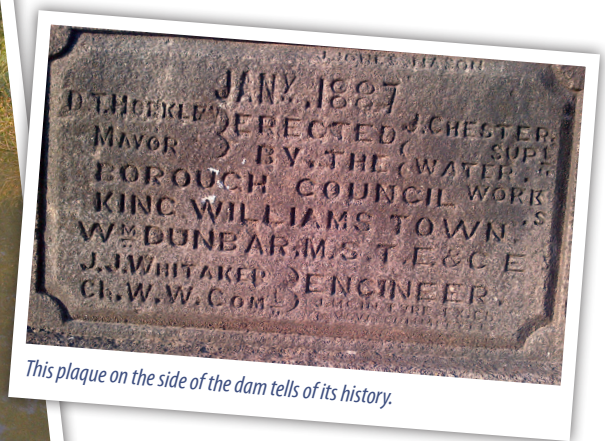
erratic. With the appointment of Borough Engineer, William Dunbar, in 1881 it was hoped the situation would change. Dunbar was enthusiastic that he could not only improve the town's water supply, but improve its economic situation as well. He envisaged a series of locks on the Buffalo River so that boats could sail up to the forests and timber could be 'floated downstream'. However, his dam was severely criticised since its final cost turned out to be three times the original estimate of £4 000. Its water also turned out to be muddy and unsuitable. The dam was finally completed in 1888. In the end, Dunbar was criticised so much he chose to

resign (he subsequently went to work for the Johannesburg Waterworks Company). Lake Dunbar did not turn out to be the end of King William's Town's water woes, but for a while it was a popular boating spot – that is until a severe flood washed away the boathouse in the 1890s. In 1900 it was stated that Lake Dunbar would remain a 'white elephant' unless its water was piped to town. Pipe-laying started in 1903 and the pipeline was in use until about 1970. The dam was superseded by Maden Dam in 1910.

- With thanks to Clint Lentz and www.bassfishing.co.za for information and photographs.



Lake Dunbar is still a spot for bass fishing.



This plaque on the side of the dam tells of its history.



Dunbar's dam originally held about 9 Ml of water.