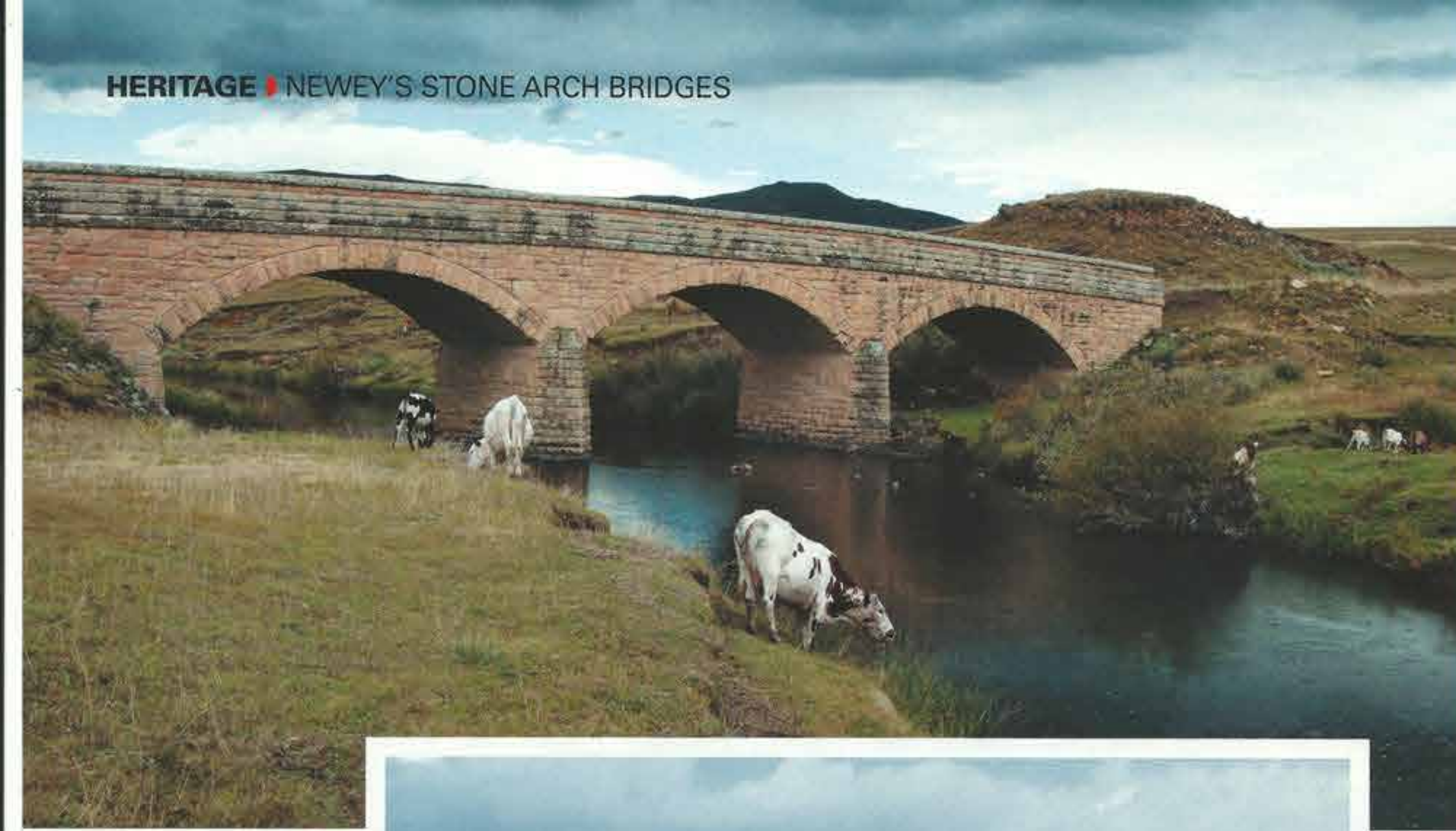


The Bridge over *the River Kraai*

... sends stone arch bridge spotters into rapture. So do the other seven bridges that join it along a route from the Queenstown district to the rugged mountains of Barkly East.

WORDS: MARION WELTBELD; PICTURES: MARION WELTBELD AND DENNIS WALTERS

Pretty Loch Bridge over the Kraai River is the favourite of stone-arch bridge spotter Dennis Walters.



ABOVE: The forgotten Long Kloof River Bridge at Barkly East languishes in a peaceful, pastoral setting. RIGHT: Golden wands of poplar light up the stormy landscape on the way to Barkly East. BELOW: The De Wet Bridge over the Karmemelkspruit was in use until the 1970s. BELOW RIGHT: His structure at Fort Beaufort was the only Joseph Newey stone arch bridge not included in our itinerary.



TOP: Dennis Walters in hacking mode, determined to clear the view of the last span of St Mark's Bridge. INSET: Civil engineer Joseph Newey built about 80 bridges in pioneering times in the Eastern Cape. LEFT: Wellies are needed to get the perfect shot of a stone bridge.

When a bridge spotter says, "Bring your gumboots," on a trip to see old stone country bridges, I reckon I'm in for an interesting time. But when he offers me a panga to complement my camera kit, I start to wonder.

Dennis Walters is more than an enthusiastic bridge spotter: he's spent 12 years researching *Bridging the Eastern Cape*, the book he's written about Joseph Newey, the engineer responsible for building some 80 bridges in pioneering times. They're scattered around the Eastern Cape and, while a number are still in use today, some of the best are forgotten, used mainly by cattle in places where the modern thoroughfare has shifted position.

I don't know that many people who drive around with a chainsaw in the back of their SUVs, but Dennis is not one to let an overgrowth of wattle spoil a good picture. "It took me four-and-a-half hours to clear the wattle at Xalanga Bridge outside Cala," Dennis tells me as we drive up the Friendly N6 from East London on our bridge-spotting expedition. "It was February too and the heat was bad, man."

A consulting civil and structural engineer in East London, Dennis is so in love with old road and rail bridges that he finds it hard to drive past one of them. "How about that one?" I point to a big railway bridge. "Ag no man, that's concrete. Anyone can build a concrete bridge," he declares.

The eight stone arch bridges on our itinerary were all built more than 100 years ago of locally quarried sandstone prepared by stone masons working with simple hammers and chisels. Dennis's hero, Joseph Newey, was an English civil engineer, who came to South Africa in 1873 to erect iron lattice girder bridges across the Buffalo River at King William's Town and at Committees Drift near Grahamstown. The talented son of an engineering family stayed on to design and build many more bridges, going on to become district inspector of Public Works Eastern Cape and later chief inspector for the Cape Colony.

Shortly before Queenstown, we turn off onto the R61 to Cofimvaba to view the first bridge. St Mark's Bridge is down a dirt track near the police station of the same name and we find a bunch of cows loitering on the lovely

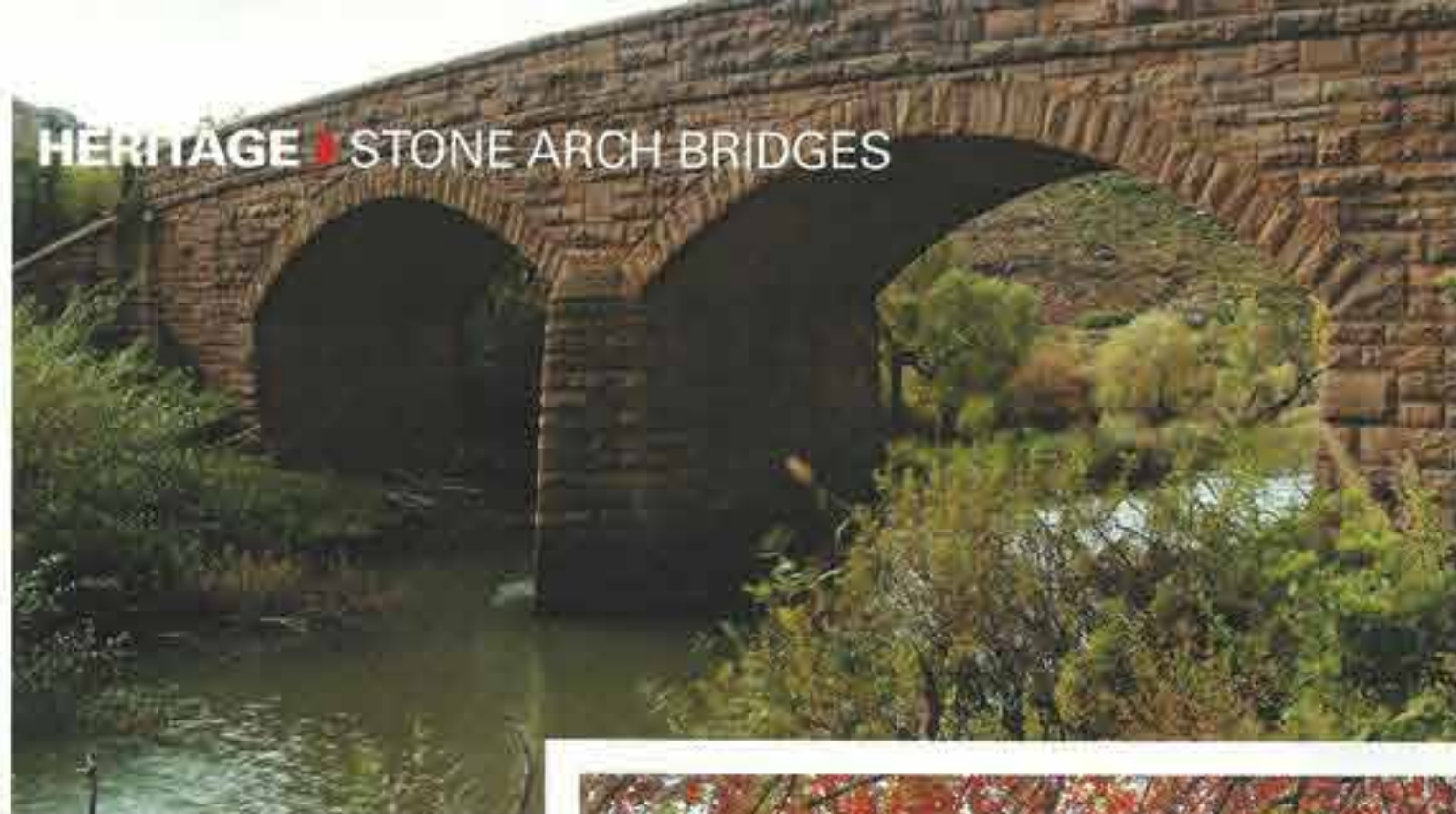
six-arch structure over the White Kei River. In 1880 this was the first stone bridge undertaken by Public Works, and Dennis says the hard sandstone provides the finest example of the stone mason's art. The single lane was quite adequate for ox wagons and horse-drawn carts. "Later, it was used for the railway and the parapet was lowered," explains Dennis, pulling out his chainsaw to deal with wattle trees obstructing the far arch. "Newey's travelling 'equipment' was a spider – a little carriage drawn by two horses, kind of like the sports bakkie of its day," says Dennis as we take to the road. Next up is the Xalanga River Bridge at Cala. We could take the easy route from Queenstown to Cala, but Dennis knows I'm a pass chaser, so he drives via Engcobo so we can meander over Satansnek, where the Eastern Cape Highlands, tail-end of the Drakensberg, punch the horizon with an alluring jumble of peaks.

Eventually, we stand on the banks of the Tsomo River outside Cala admiring the Xalanga Bridge. "Man, I love this bridge," declares Dennis, raving about the elliptical arches, elegant engineering ratios, and economics. This was Newey's own design, completed in 1890, and the single-lane bridge was in use until 2008, when a fat new concrete bridge right beside it was opened, spoiling our photos of the historic bridge. Unfortunately, Dennis's chainsaw is not up to dealing with that very concrete problem, but a few slices of his panga take care of some wattles obscuring our view upstream.

Pushing on up the R56, we compare the pretty three-arch Wildebeeste River Bridge at Ugie, with the charming Mooi River Bridge at Maclear. "They're almost identical," says Dennis. "They were built in 1898 using the same design; they even used the same formwork to build the three 40ft segmental arches."

The Maclear bridge is now used by pedestrians, and traffic at Ugie passes over the modern concrete bridge built right beside the old one, which now appears to be the private preserve of two happy pigs, wallowing in a big mud puddle at one end. Tramping through a bog looking for the best angle from which to photograph it, Dennis almost loses a gumboot to the sticky ooze and I'm very glad to be wearing mine.

The next day, we motor up Barkly Pass, the highest tarred pass in the country, with magnificent views of the aptly named Castle



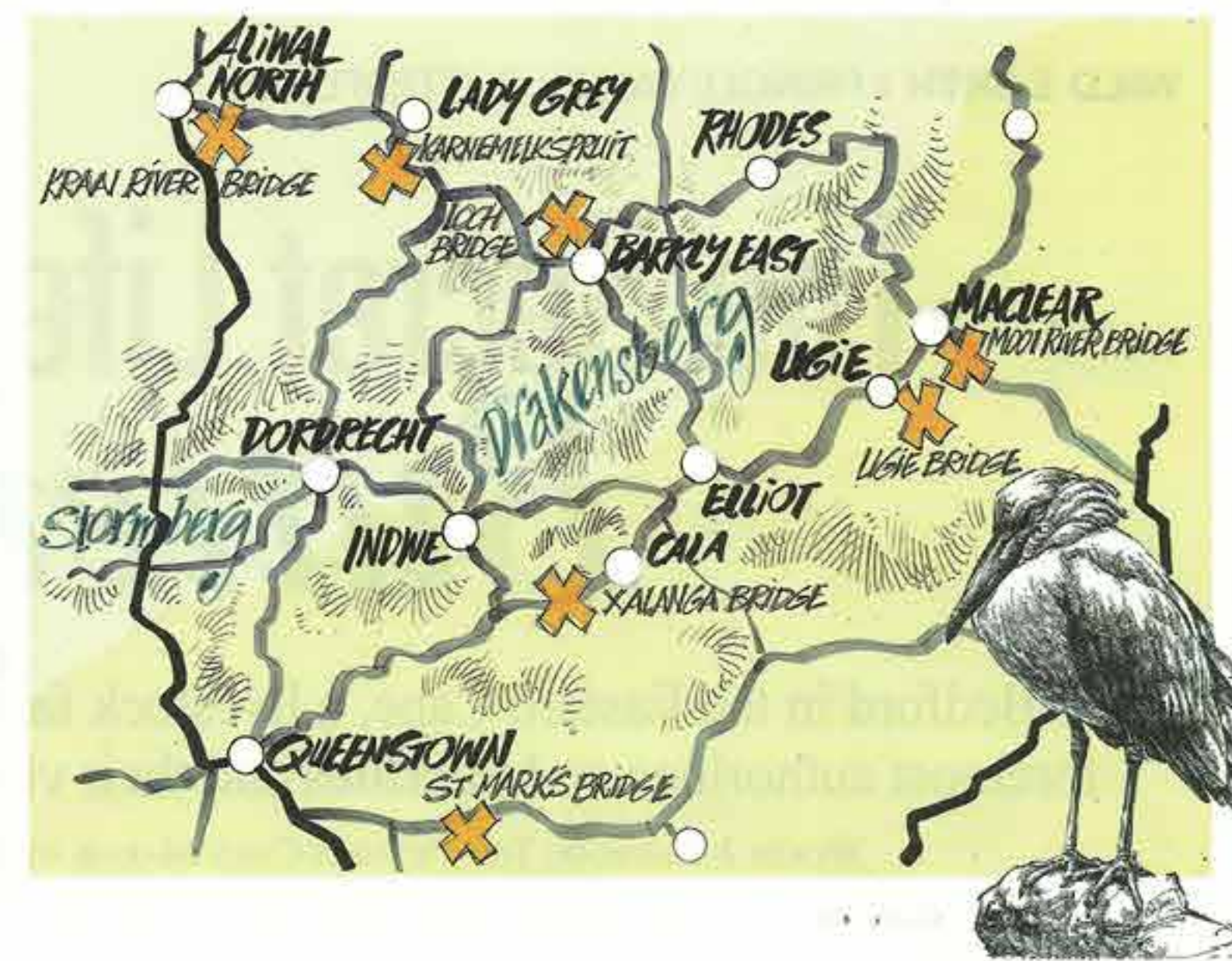
Rock. In deep valleys along the R58, poplars on stream banks are turning golden, like giant wands indicating the way to Barkly East, where dark clouds jostle the mountains. This is wild country, where tranquil trout streams can turn into raging torrents quicker than you can cast a fly.

Long Kloof River Bridge, past the sewerage works on the edge of the small town, is no less charming for being a mirror image of the ones at Ugie and Maclear. Once a vital link on the old road to the village of Rhodes, it spans the river, now forlorn and forgotten, its cobbled surface seldom trodden.

The Long Kloof River empties into the Kraai River, a fast-flowing home to a wondrous

number of fish. "The British army, en route to the border, was held up here in 1881 for three weeks when it was in spate," says Dennis as we admire Loch Bridge from his SUV, pretty amid the willows even in a cloudburst. Named after the governor of the Cape Colony when it was opened in 1893, Loch Bridge once carried all traffic to Lady Grey, but now is a back route to New England, used chiefly by those wanting to see the railway reverses up the mountain beyond it.

Bridge number seven is the De Wet Bridge over the Karmemelkspruit River, and just visible from the new bridge on the R58 to Lady Grey. However, the farmer is a mate of Dennis's, so we get permission to inspect it close up.



It's a dinky little thing, with just two arches curving gracefully over the river. We stride across it to go and see where the stone to build it was quarried just a few hundred metres away, but I spy a dark thundercloud hurtling towards us. "Run," I yell and we reach the SUV just in time to avoid icy sleet fresh off the mountains.

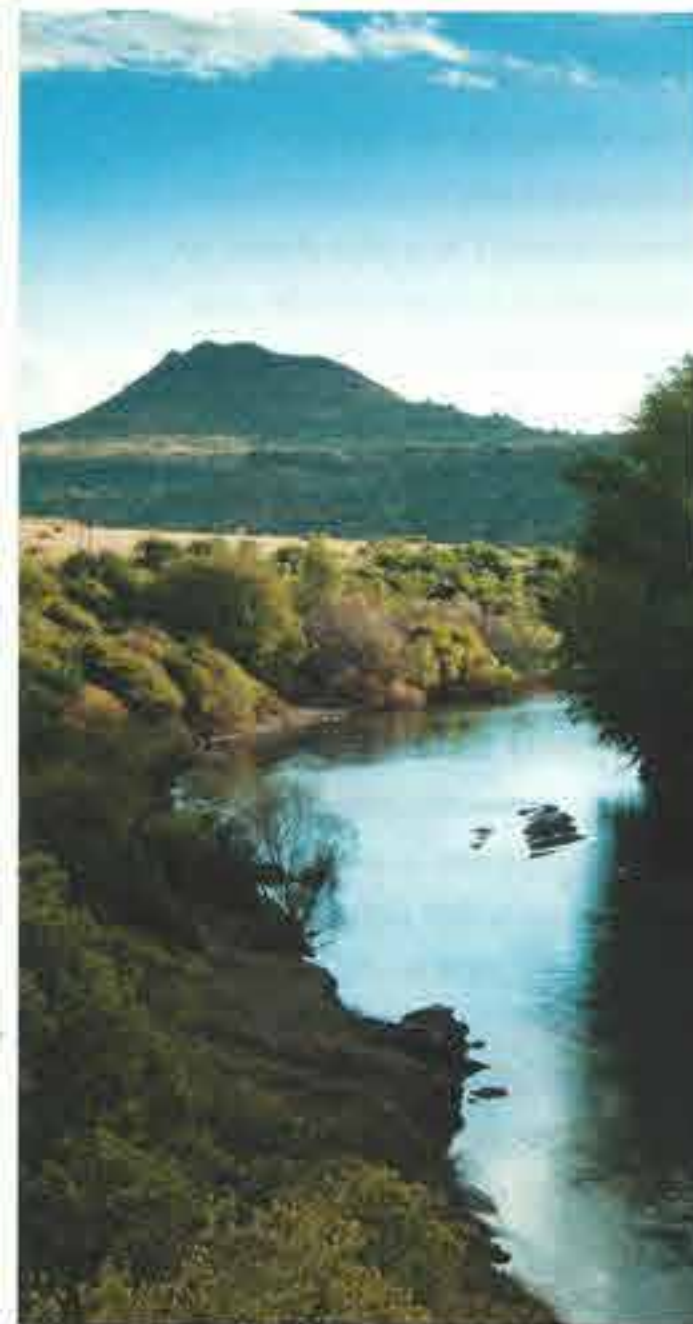
Last bridge on our agenda is the biggest and grandest: the Sauer Bridge on the R56 nearly 10 kilometres outside Aliwal North. It's high, with six semicircular arches, completed in 1881. "It's the kind of design the Romans used," says Dennis. The new concrete bridge beside it takes speeding cars and trucks to their destinations, but we choose to drive across the old bridge – and right into history. The Sauer Bridge forms

a grand entrance to Toll Inn, a B&B where the old stables and toll house have been converted into accommodation. Owner Anina de Beer takes us down to the river so we can stand right under the tall arches.

Newey's significant contribution to building the infrastructure of the Eastern Cape has long been unappreciated. "Apart from his stone arch bridges and iron lattice girder bridges, he also built a suspension bridge," says Dennis. "With the advent of motor cars, his single-lane bridges eventually became redundant. But Newey's legacy as a bridge builder of the highest order remains."

So which bridge does Dennis love most? He struggles with the question, like a parent asked to name a favourite child. He admits it used to be the Xalanga at Cala, with its graceful arches spanning the river so effortlessly. "But when they built the modern bridge next to it, they spoil the view," he grumbles. Finally, he concedes his favourite is Xalanga's twin: Loch Bridge. It presides over an unspoiled rural scene, its single lane still in use by fishermen, farmers and train spotters. "Man, it's beautiful," he sighs. ■

We are giving away 2 copies of *Bridging the Eastern Cape: The Life and Work of Joseph Newey* by Dennis Walters. SMS the word BRIDGE and your contact details, including telephone number and email address, to 48402 before 31 August 2014. SMSes are charged at R1.50 per entry and free SMSes do not apply. See Ts and Cs on page 100.



TOP: The twin arches of the dinky De Wet Bridge span the Karmemelkspruit near Lady Grey. ABOVE: Pretty in the autumn of its life: Maclear's Mooi River Bridge. LEFT: The Kraai River snakes through the valleys to join the mighty Orange River near Aliwal North. RIGHT: Dennis Walters is so besotted with bridges he's written a book about those built by pioneering engineer Joseph Newey. BELOW: The semicircular arches of the Sauer Bridge near Aliwal North carry the road high above the Kraai River.



The Wildebeeste River Bridge at Ugie makes a bit of a spectacle of itself.



Vital Statistics

- **St Mark's Bridge** over the White Kei near Cofimvaba: six segmental arches of 40ft (12 metres), completed 1880.
- **Xalanga Bridge** over the Tsomo River, Cala: five elliptical arches of 40ft, completed 1890. Replaced with an adjacent two-lane concrete bridge in 2008.
- **Loch Bridge** over the Kraai River near Barkly East: an exact replica of the Xalanga, completed in 1893. Still in use today.
- **Long Kloof River Bridge**, Barkly East; **Wildebeeste River Bridge**, Ugie; **Mooi River or Sivewright Bridge**, Maclear: all built using the same design of three 40ft segmental arches and completed in 1898.
- **Karmemelkspruit River/De Wet Bridge** near Lady Grey: two 40ft segmental arches,

- completed 1899. Superseded by a modern bridge in the 1970s.
- **Kraai River/Sauer Bridge** on the R56 nearly 10 kilometres outside Aliwal North: six semicircular arches, completed 1881.

Where to Eat

- It's best to take padkos as there are not many places to stop for a meal, and you can restock your picnic basket at supermarkets in Maclear and Elliot. **Anny's Cafe** in Lady Grey serves decent pub grub. 051 603 0066

Where to Sleep

- **Maclear Manor B&B** at the eastern end of the route thoughtfully provides small fridges and microwaves in bedrooms so you can eat from your picnic basket, but staff will cook dinner if

- you arrange it in advance. 045 932 1439, www.maclearmanor.co.za
- **Mountain Shadows Hotel** at the top of Barkly Pass has a cosy pub and dining room where guests can swap bridge-spotting tales. 045 931 2233, www.mountainshadowshotel.co.za
- **Lavender Place B&B** in Lady Grey is a delightful Victorian home, plus there's a garden cottage for self-catering guests. 051 603 0182
- **Mountain View Country Inn** is an old-fashioned establishment with an à la carte restaurant. 051 603 0421, www.ladygrey.co.za
- **Toll Inn** 10km from Aliwal North on the western end of the route boasts the Sauer Bridge over the Kraai River for its driveway into history. Family rooms with a kitchenette include two single beds in an upstairs loft. 051 634 2291/1541, www.tollinnquestfarm.com

Where to Play

- The Eastern Cape Highlands are a flyfishing paradise. There are more than eight high mountain passes to drive or cycle if you're up for a challenge, and plenty of hikes and birding opportunities in the mountain grasslands. www.rhodestourism.co.za, www.wildmountainadventures.co.za

Handy Contacts

- **Senqu Tourism** 051 603 0048 www.senqu tourism.co.za
- **Maloti Drakensberg Route** www.malotidrakensberg route.com