

CAPE TOWN'S MUNICIPAL SERVICES A CENTURY AGO*

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How pleasant was it to have lived in Cape Town a hundred years ago? Admittedly the early 1880s were boom times. Property prices soared, and some 800 new buildings were constructed between Sea Point and Wynberg each year. However, a serious smallpox epidemic was attributed to badly constructed drains and poor sanitation. Conditions in the young city left much to be desired, and many of the problems were a direct challenge to the City Engineer's Department of the time.

In order to visualise the extent of the Municipality of Cape Town, the detailed plan of Cape Town of that period by A. Wilson, at a scale of 1:2400, is most helpful. The municipal boundary extended from the top of Table Mountain to Table Bay, and from the military lines between Fort Knokke on Woodstock Beach to Zonnebloem Farm, westwards across the City to include Green Point Common. The boundary extended over Kloof Nek to include the Round House and Clifton. (Green and Sea Point was a separate municipality). The total population of the city was just short of 40 000 people. Above the botanical gardens and Roeland Street, where the new town prison had been built, were large homes surrounded by spacious gardens, from which the suburb Gardens got its name. Higher up the slopes the farm Oranjezicht belonging to the Van Bredas, with its many fruit trees, was still thriving, as were smaller farms round Table Valley.

Two very important buildings were under construction. These were the Standard Bank building, being constructed on a corner of the Grand Parade, on leasehold land, and the new Houses of Parliament facing Grave Street (later Parliament Street). Horse trams trundled from Sea Point through the centre of the city to Toll Gate, with a branch line up Long Street to Mill Street, and some 200 licensed cabs plied for hire in the city. Streets in the town centre were lit by gas (introduced in 1848), albeit poorly, for the pictures of the period indicate that lamps were only situated on street corners. The S.A. Turf Club had its headquarters on Green Point Common, where races were held. Within the perimeter of the racecourse, boating was enjoyed on the vlei.

The Town House in Market Square (now Greenmarket Square) housed the Town Council and municipal officials. Meetings of the Town Council were held every few days, and the record books of the meetings provide interesting information about the activities of the City Engineer's Department.

During the year under review, T. Cairncross was appointed city engineer and superintendent of waterworks, in succession to J.S. Swallow, "at a salary of £400 per annum with an allowance to keep a house". It is recorded that the other important posts in the Department were assistant city engineer, "Clerk, Draughtsman and Storekeeper", chief artificer, and superintendent of fire engines.

The main problem facing the city engineer was undoubtedly the shortage of water. Residents were advised that supply to part of the town would be restricted to between

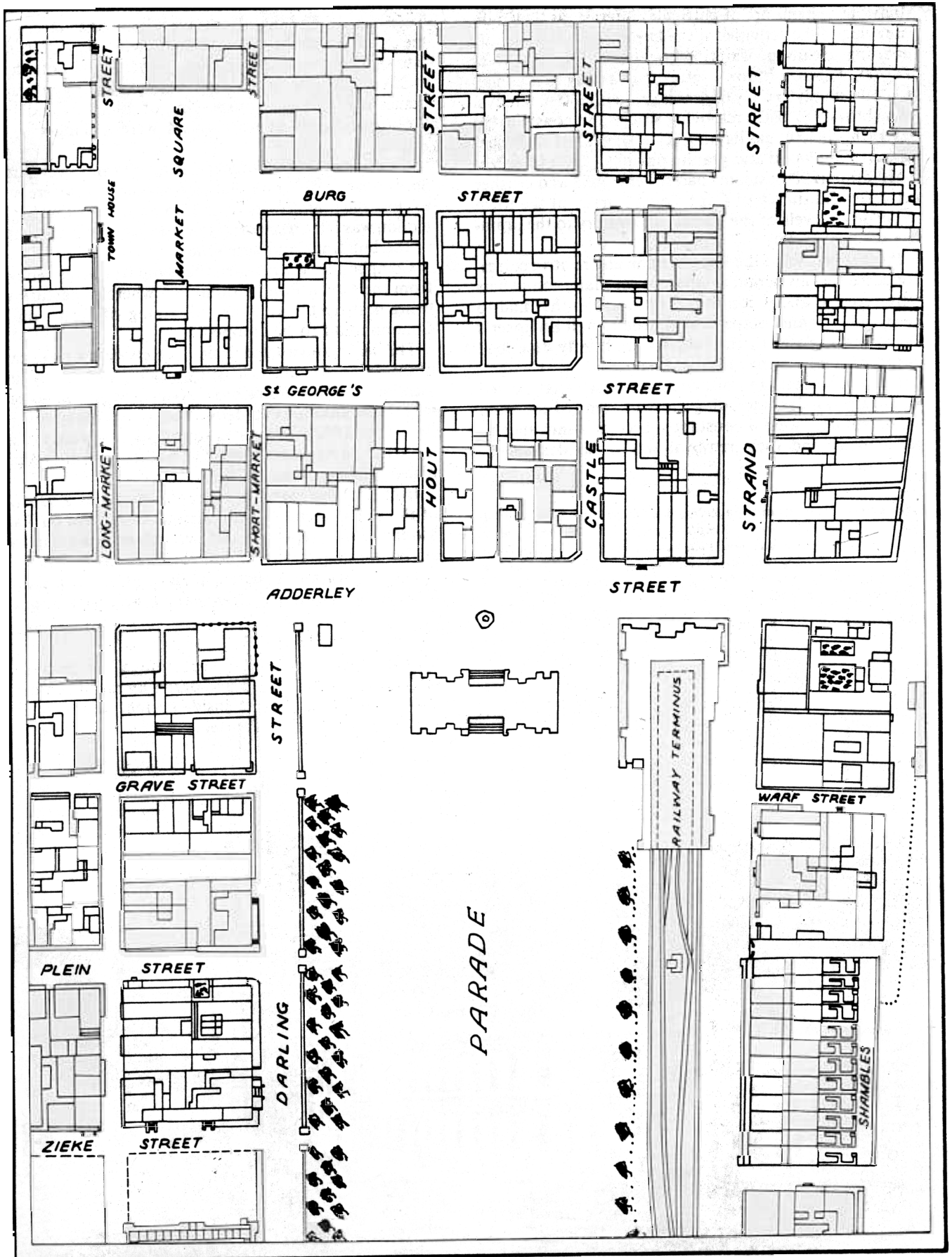
9 am and 12 noon, and the remainder of the town would receive from noon to 3 pm. Besides having to supply the inhabitants of Cape Town, this water was required to replenish the many ships rounding the Cape at that time and the thirsty steam locomotives of the Cape Government Railways. Springs on the northern slopes of Table Mountain were the only supply; this water was stored in the old water house (now demolished) in Hof Street and in the two reservoirs that may still be seen below De Waal Park. For decades the Town Council tried in vain to purchase the water rights of the Oranjezicht farm. Two acts of Parliament (1877 and 1882) enabled the Municipality to expropriate a portion of the farm as a site for a new reservoir, subsequently named the Molteno Reservoir, and to impound the water from its remaining springs.

It took four years to build this "huge" earthen reservoir, partly by excavation and partly by raising embankments on three sides. The inside surface was lined with stone pitching and concrete. Work on the reservoir, designed to store 50 million gallons (227 megalitres), was commenced in 1877. However, as it neared completion, leaks were soon discovered; during the ensuing months the water level was lowered and numerous repairs were carried out. On Sunday morning 27 August 1882 a serious leak appeared, which spread rapidly, and the reservoir was breached, causing serious flood damage to properties in the Gardens and flooding many streets in the city below. Fortunately there was no loss of life. The reconstruction and repair of the reservoir was only completed in 1886, and it has served the city faithfully since then.

Another major problem facing the city engineer was the maintenance of the dusty roads, which quickly turned into mud after rains. The cost of paving roads by the methods then used, i.e. woodblocks or stone setts, was prohibitive, so little was done beyond filling up potholes, wetting the surface with sea water, and compacting by roller. The Municipality's first steam road roller was purchased in 1882.

Public health was also an important concern of the city, brought to a head at intervals by epidemics of typhoid caused by local insanitary conditions and by smallpox or bubonic plague introduced from outside. For example, water closets had first been introduced to the Mill Street area in the 1850s. These discharged into open sloots leading to the main stormwater drains which connected with the primitive system of covered sewers in the town below to be discharged finally into the Bay; sewage seeped into the surrounding soil or was dammed up in the drains by uncontrolled building alterations or the dumping of rubbish. Most of the municipal area was unsewered,

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Extract from Wilson's map of Cape Town of this period showing the Grand Parade, the Town House on Market Square and the shambles. The lone building on the Parade is the Commercial Exchange. The Standard Bank was about to be built.

however, and the conditions under which night soil buckets were collected and emptied gave ample opportunity for the spread of disease.

The repair, cleaning, and watering of the dusty streets was a recurring matter. During May 1882 it was recommended that Dock Road be paved with granite blocks. Horse droppings contributed to a major (by today's standards) fly problem.

On Wednesday 11 January 1882 the draft "Estimates

for Public Works" were presented to the Town Council. Many of the items are of particular interest, as they indicate some of the activities of the Department at that time: repairing, cleaning, watering streets and planting trees (£1 700); removal of town refuse (by railway to Bellville) (£2 350); supply and lay of granite gutters (£300); removal of night soil (£1 050); removing stoeps and constructing pavements (£300); gas lighting (£2 000); glazed stoneware pipes (£500); wood and granite paving (£250); Ebenezer Road drain (£900); steam road roller engine and crusher (£1 750); and survey of Cape Town (survey of the town to lay down levels of the streets preparatory to the drainage scheme) (£200).

Further perusal of the Record Book and relative correspondence for this period is informative. Many complaints were received about conditions in the town that had to be attended to and rectified by the then small Engineer's Department. Some of the subjects are briefly described in the paragraphs that follow:

The "obnoxious and obstructive stoeps" that existed on most sidewalks, including those of some of the main thoroughfares, were a constant source of annoyance to pedestrians, and their removal was often demanded.



Greenmarket Square showing the Metropolitan Methodist Church and the Old Town House. The church, completed in 1879, is the only example in Cape Town of a full-blown high Victorian town church. The Old Town House was erected in 1755 as a burger watch house. It was used in succession by the Burger Senate and the Municipality of Cape Town until 1905 when the City Hall was completed.

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (AG 979)



Complaints that washing was being done in the open watercourses and that drains were being discharged into the canals had to be attended to. The dumping of rubbish into the watercourses was also the source of complaint.

Street inspectors reported that projecting overhead cranes used for the transporting of goods to and from the upper floors of warehouses were a danger to the public.

Conditions at the butchers' shambles in lower Strand Street were so offensive that recommendations were made to close the premises as from 15 November 1882, but the motion was later rescinded after improvements were made to the buildings and surrounds.

Complaints were received that sand was being removed from the Green Point Common "whereby pasture was being destroyed" and the "dumping of filth" on the Common had to be stopped.

The badly constructed drains, which were a main cause of the "offensive and disgusting odours", are many times mentioned. These drains probably contributed in no small way to the smallpox epidemic that only abated towards the end of 1882. Cemeteries round the city were full and a site for "a new necropolis" at Maitland Road (Woltemade) was proposed.

Even in those early days tree-planting was a function of the Department. Several serious bush fires on Table Mountain were reported, and two rangers were employed at five shillings a day to control bush fires.

The fire station, situated in Burg Street, housed the City's horse-drawn fire engines which were then manually



St George's Street circa 1875. Note the stoeps, open sloods, inadequate street lighting and St George's Church (later Cathedral). The Cathedral, modelled on the Neo-Grecian St Pancras Church in London, was finally demolished in 1957. None of the buildings shown remain today.

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (M 669)

operated. During the year the Town Council agreed to acquire its first steam-operated fire engine to cope with the increasing number of fires. It is reported that the fighting of fires was often hampered by "a scarcity of hydrants".

These were indeed eventful years for the City Engineer's Department. The problems encountered were in most respects very dissimilar to those of today. **C**

SOURCE LIST

ARCHIVAL

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