THE FORT ENGLAND CHAPEL

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When one examines the history of religious ministry at Fort England, it is quite surprising to find that the chapel as such was not built until 1861. This does not imply that Christianity was moribund there before that date. On the contrary, Fort England (as it is now called) was the site of the very first public worship ever conducted in Grahamstown, as early as 1820.

In those days it was known as the East Barracks, standing as it did on a pleasant ridge to the south-east, about three kilometres from the heart of the village. For some years it had been the military base of the Eastern Province, and the headquarters of the Cape Corps, a unit of Hottentot troops under White officers. Members of British regiments serving on the Frontier were also billeted there. The men's families lived on or around the site, and there was already a school for some 200 Hottentot children. But their spiritual welfare had been so neglected in this isolated place that the Government had not yet appointed a military chaplain.

When the Rev. William Shaw visited Grahamstown a few months after the British Settlers arrived, he found that the village had "neither church nor chapel, nor a religious minister of any denomination," and immediately set out to remedy the situation. He included the place in his circuit plan for regular visits and the training of itinerant preachers who could officiate in his absence. Inevitably his mission began with the garrison, who constituted the bulk of the tiny population. Furthermore, they had already been struck by the Methodist movement then sweeping through the British Army, particularly through the lower ranks. The Establishment was opposed to the new religion, and a soldier who embraced it at that time could not hope for an officer's commission. Nevertheless, the Barracks had its own handful of staunch Methodist converts, known at that stage as Wesleyans. Among them were two sergeant-majors named Lucas and Price, and these were the type of men on whom Shaw's ministry would depend.

Their faith was not only steadfast at headquarters. When sent out into the bush on long tours of duty they were not demoralised by the rough life, but maintained their character as good men and smart soldiers. Apart from direct evangelising, they tried by their personal example to eradicate the habit of swearing among the men, believing that it was not only blasphemous but did nothing to improve efficiency. In such small ways were the standards of Christian conduct upheld on a very wild frontier.

Thus it was at the East Barracks, on a Sunday in August 1820, that the Rev. Shaw held his first service in Grahamstown and preached his first sermon in the Eastern Cape. Soon the services became a regular feature, even when he was unable to attend. These were held at first somewhere inside the Barracks, but later Sgt. Maj. Lucas made a room available in his own home, just outside the garrison walls on the south side. Ratings and their families packed into the room until it could hold no more. And, as Shaw noted, even certain commissioned officers, finding it beneath their dignity to attend a Methodist meeting together with private soldiers and civilians, "used to indulge their curiosity, or seek religious edification, by listening to the preacher while standing outside near the door or window."

Thus far, the mission had been fruitful among the White troops. On Christmas Day 1820, Shaw preached in the Lucas home to about 20 people in English, and immediately afterwards, at their own request, to the same number of Hottentots in their own tongue (an early form of Afrikaans). One of the men prayed aloud after he had finished, and cried earnestly, "Oh Lord, send a teacher for us poor heathen!", meaning one who would live among them and give them regular instruction. This cry went straight to Shaw's heart, and he soon found that, adding together the Cape Corps and local domestic servants, there were close on one thousand Hottentots in Grahamstown. Many of them had spent some time on a mission-station, but, lacking any spiritual guidance, had sunk very low in "drunkenness, lewdness, and many other deadly sins."3

In 1823, Shaw wrote to his superiors in England, urging the need for "a school-room and chapel for the Hottentots of Grahamstown, to be erected near the Barracks. A great and good work might be done among them, but we cannot expect much without we have such a place." 500 rixdollars had already been subscribed, mostly by the men themselves, and a grant of £50 was now requested.

By that time, the first Methodist chapel was already flourishing in the centre of the town. It had opened in November 1822, with a united congregation of Europeans and Africans sitting together, plus "several members of our Hottentot society." There was also a Sundayschool with about 60 pupils, in which the classes were divided according to language. The fact that the East Barracks appeal was made after this dual opening suggests that, for some reason or other, the men of the Corps were unable to join their fellows in public worship, so that corresponding arrangements had to be made for them on the site.

The response to this appeal is not known. Presumably, the successful outcome would have been for the garrison to get their own place of worship at this early date. But Dr William Parrott, surgeon to the Corps, writing an account of the Barracks in March 1827, mentioned that they contained what he called "a schoolroom and church." The cavalry square comprised seventeen rooms of varying sizes, "appropriated to the accommodation of the staff and the troop sergeants who have families. Two are occupied as general barrack rooms, one as a schoolroom and church, two as orderly rooms," and so on. It is quite clear that this was not an imposing consecrated

- 1. G.E. Cory, The rise of South Africa I (London, 1910), p.388.
- W. SHAW, The story of my mission in South-eastern Africa (London, 1860), pp.100-102.
- 3. Ibid., p.98.
- 4. Ibid., p.120.
- . Ibid., pp.118-119.
- 6. A.H. TONKIN, Fort England, Annals of the Grahamstown Historical Society 1(3), 1973, p.49.

building, but just one rather humble room, used for schooling during the week and converted for religious use on Sundays, in the Nonconformist tradition. It could not be called a 'chapel' or 'church' in the accepted sense.

A decade later, the Cape Corps had become the Cape Mounted Rifles and distinguished themselves in the Sixth Frontier War. They moved to new headquarters at the Drostdy Barracks on the other side of town,7 where they were joined by cavalry of touring British regiments. Thomas Baines, visiting Grahamstown in the late 1840s, painted the redcoats as they marched down High Street on a Sunday morning, bound for Divine Service at St George's Church. This was now the garrison church, and already its walls were thick with marble tablets erected in memory of fallen soldiers on the Frontier.8 There was also a Colonial Chaplain at Grahamstown, ministering to both civilians and the military. The Rev. John Heavyside had held the post since 1833,9 but without examining the background one might wonder how seriously he took his duties.

The Anglican Church was scarcely established in the Cape Colony as yet, and until 1843 it was unable to hold a service without the governor's permission. 10 When the first Bishop of Cape Town toured his immense diocese five years later, he found that out of 5 000 nominal Anglicans, "between two and three thousand were out of reach of church services, and many of them in a most depraved condition."11

The position in the Eastern Cape, 960 kilometres from Cape Town, was understandably precarious. For fifteen years Heavyside had laboured alone to uphold the faith in Grahamstown, without a bishop to guide him in his disputes with the local people, and support him when his spiritual authority was overruled by rude governors and military officials.12

When Archdeacon N.J. Merriman arrived in 1849 to put the Anglican Church in the Eastern Province on a sounder footing, he immediately supported Heavyside in his ministry to the garrison. Together they visited the military hospital, but retreated when they found the Methodists already at work. 13 (Merriman established a very cordial relationship with the Methodists, especially with Shaw).14

Early in May 1849 a Sunday afternoon service was introduced at Fort England, formerly the East Barracks, then occupied by the infantry. Within a week, Merriman was approached by two men of the 91st regiment, one a corporal who wanted to take Holy Communion on Trinity Sunday, the other a captain asking for a set of family prayers. 15

The Hottentots of the Cape Corps (as Merriman called them) were a particular problem. Theirs was the only regiment which issued rations to the men's families, making them the most expensive troops on the army payroll. 16 But their spiritual well-being left much to be desired. In most cases, it was impossible to tell whether a soldier had ever been baptised, and funerals were usually conducted by Lt.-Col. Henry Somerset, their beloved commander, in the Cape Corps' own burial ground. Somerset called on Merriman and "discoursed on several plans which he had formed for benefiting the soldiers morally at least if not spiritually."17

Altogether, Heavyside's position was a delicate one, and Merriman himself confessed: "I have seen and heard quite enough to make me very unwilling ever to become a military chaplain."18 But he was, of course, always ready to minister to any soldiers he came across on his visitations. These were the famous journeys he made on foot, which often left him looking more like a common vagrant than a venerable divine. Once he arrived, dirty and travel-stained, at an isolated army camp, and was invited to dine with the officers. He found himself "ushered into a well lighted mess room with an abundance of men in red plush breeches and white livery coats trimmed with scarlet, with all the other ... appurtenances of gloves, cravats, etc., and this in the midst of the Amatola Mountains, lately the scene of so much hardship and bloodshed."19

Later Merriman settled in Grahamstown and gave his attention to a long-standing project, namely, the building of a second Anglican church, completed in 1859. This was St Bartholomew's Church in Market Street, on the Fort England side of town.²⁰

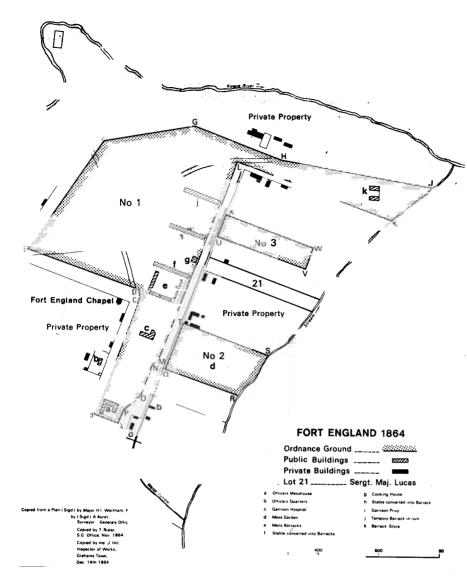
However, the new church was intended to cater for the artisan population, though one dusgruntled British officer, not otherwise taken with Grahamstown, called it "a pretty little building."21 The garrison church remained St George's, now elevated to a cathedral. It seems clear that, for at least twenty-five years after it opened (1834), the garrison at both barracks had to march into town for public worship.

Grahamstown had three Methodist places of worship by the time William Shaw left the country in the late 1850s. Writing his memoirs in England, he noted that two more were being planned, "each about a mile distant from the Commemoration Chapel, but at opposite extremities of the town ... the foundation-stone of one of these chapels, which is to stand at West Hill, was laid on Nov. 24 1859."22 Its opposite number still to come was the long-awaited Fort England chapel, on which work began the following year. While it is incorrect to state, as P.R. Kirby does, that this chapel was built during Shaw's ministry, 23 it was undoubtedly the last of the five local chapels planned at his instigation.

Here the foundation-stone was laid at the end of 1860. The function had been postponed owing to bad weather, but Monday 3 December 1860 was a fine summer day, with a light breeze lifting the flags that decorated the building-site. "The situation has been well selected," raved the Graham's Town Journal. "Fort England the infantry barracks of Grahamstown, a fort only in name - is erected on the summit of a gently sloping hill, about half a mile eastwards of the city; the military gardens, officers' quarters and pleasant outlook over the na-

- P.J. YOUNG, Boot and saddle (Cape Town, 1955), p.19.
- D.H. VARLEY and H.M. MATTHEW (eds.), The Cape journals of archdeacon N.J. Merriman, 1848-1855 (Cape Town, 1957),
- 9. Ibid., p.20 (note).
- Ibid., p.x. 10.
- Ibid., p.xi. 11.
- 12. Ibid., p.22.
- 13. Ibid.
- Ibid., p.23. 14.
- 15. Ibid., p.50.
- 16. Ibid., p.155. 17. Ibid., p.50.
- Ibid. 18.
- 19. Ibid., p.226.
- Ibid., p.214 and note.

 G.E. BULGER, Extracts from my South African journal ... 21. (Bungalore, 1867), p.41.
- 22. SHAW, op. cit., p.251.
- P.R. KIRBY, The Wesley Church organ, Journal of Methodist History Society 3(1), Apr. 1958, p.33.



Unique map showing the layout of the Fort England military barracks, the property originally occupied by Sgt. Maj. Lucas (Lot 21), and the Fort England chapel (opened 1861). The map was specially drafted by Mr. W.O. West of the Geography Dept., Rhodes University.

tive location and the valley, make it one of the most agreeable spots in the whole neighbourhood. The chapel is to stand on a slope facing the city immediately outside the boundary of the old Ordnance ground, and when completed it will be an additional adornment to the place, as it is to be a variety of the Gothic and will be of good materials. The size, according to the specifications, will be 35 feet by 24, and the cost of erection about £1 000. The architect engaged by the committee is J. Flashman Esq., and Messrs. Burnable and Son have the building contract."²⁴

A large District Meeting had just ended in the city, and a number of delegates had already returned home. Nevertheless the ceremony was a gala occasion for the Methodist Church. It was attended by the remaining delegates, all the ministers on the Grahamstown circuit, the building committee, the trustees, and the Sunday school children of all three population groups (White, Black and Coloured) belonging to the church in the city. They marched out to Fort England carrying banners in a colourful procession, and arrived to find a large crowd waiting on the site.

At about four o'clock the proceedings were opened

by the Rev. W. Impey, General Superintendent of Wesleyan Missions and son-in-law of William Shaw. Mrs. Richards, wife of the Rev. John Richards of the Grahamstown church, duly laid the foundationstone. (It has been obscured by later additions, but fortunately the paper quoted the inscription in full). What happened next was for many the highlight of the afternoon: "The venerable and revered William Shepstone, one of the oldest and most successful of South African missionaries, then addressed the assembly ... He said that unless he was very much mistaken, the site selected for the contemplated erection was within a hundred yards of the very first place in the whole neighbourhood in which a Methodist service had been held. the Rev. William Shaw having preached his very first sermon in Grahamstown in the home of a friend within the fort. This fact the revered gentleman regarded as giving peculiar interest to this occasion on which they had so happily met together that day."25

It was expected that the new chapel would take about six months to build, but it did not open for worship until Sunday 10 November 1861. No fewer than three services were held on the opening day, with Impey officiating in the evening. And in case anyone has missed an opportunity, another service was scheduled for the following Thursday

evening at a quarter past six. "Collections will be taken after each service," warned the Press. "As the chapel has been created principally to meet the demands of the military, a large portion of the sittings will be *free*. The liberality of a Christian public is earnestly appealed to, so that the Chapel may be free of debt at the end of these services."²⁶

Obviously the Methodists attached great significance to this tiny chapel on the outskirts of the city, just as Shaw himself might have done forty years earlier. The congregation he wished to serve had changed in character, and Grahamstown was no longer the frontier fortress it had been in those days. But the military of a new generation regarded it with pride as "the garrison chapel" and held special services each year to mark the anniversary of its opening.²⁷

Fort England itself had also changed in character. It was no longer merely an isolated military camp, but a desirable residential area, much sought after by civilians with little money and a taste for country life. They too were part of the chapel's congregation, and as the troubled sixties wore on they began inevitably to predominate. The military strength of the district fluctuated constant-

^{24.} Graham's Town Journal, 8.12.1860, p.2.

^{25.} Ibid

^{26.} Ibid, 9.11.1861. p.1.

^{27.} The Journal, 18.11.1867, p.1.

ly, with headquarters being moved back and forth from Grahamstown to King William's Town. Finally, as the Cape Colony advanced towards responsible government, the Imperial troops were withdrawn altogether (1870) and the barracks stood empty and desolate.

And so the Fort England chapel became the parish church for local citizens. It had always stood just outside the old garrison boundary, but now the ties with its old neighbour were severed. When the barracks were reoccupied and opened as a mental asylum (1875), the two institutions functioned quite separately. The Grahamstown Lunatic Asylum, only a stone's throw away from a chapel, had to make its own arrangements for religious worship and spiritual consolation.

This it proceeded to do, speedily and resourcefully. Before the first year was out, the Anglican Church had appointed a chaplain to the asylum. He was the Rev. W.H. Turpin, a well-liked man who held the post until at least the turn of the century, and was also rector of St Philip's in the location. Once down the years he managed to take six months' leave in England, and was welcomed by the Press on his return. "He is looking hale and hearty, and more substantial in the 'body corporate' than ever. We are glad to learn that he has enjoyed his trip to the 'dear old Home', which he had not seen for more than thirty years." ²⁸

The first services at the asylum were held in the chronic sick ward, and (again within the first year), the ladies of the entertainments committee raised the sum of £98 for the purchase of a piano and harmonium to accompany the services. ²⁹ The chaplain, for his part, raised funds for seats, a reading-desk and lectern. Dr. R. Hullah, the first superintendent, was quick to point out that none of these furnishings had been supplied by the government; they were entirely the outcome of voluntary contributions. ³⁰

In 1880, the chronic sick patients were moved to a new hospital of their own in the old Cape Corps barracks at the Drostdy. Their old Fort England premises were turned into a female ward, which became fuller and more cramped than before. Services continued to be held under increasing difficulties, but everyone longed for the addition of a dining-room or recreation room which would create a little more space.³¹ However, the eighties did bring a major breakthrough in spiritual matters.

It began with a row in the correspondence columns of the Journal, in which a certain patient took part. The root cause was the visiting public at the asylum, whose motives were not always of the best. Many people, it seemed, came out of sheer curiosity, to gape and giggle at patients as though they were exhibits in the zoo.³² As a result of this, a number of religious and charitable bodies became deeply concerned, the Young Men's Friendly Society for one.³³ They began to visit on a regular basis, gained access to the wards (something of a risk before the days of drug therapy), and focused the right kind of attention on the inmates.

Within a few years, a charming custom was in force. According to the annual report of the asylum for 1888 "flower Sunday, which is now an annual recurrence, occured in December, when several teachers and scholars from the different Sunday schools in Grahamstown visited the patients and gave each of them a bouquet. This is a kindly and pleasant custom, as it shows the patients that they are not entirely forgotten." 34

By the end of the decade a dining-room had been

built on, and the Inspector of Asylums could report: "The Chaplain holds a service every Sunday morning. Last Sunday 30 men and 18 women were present. Two patients attend services at a neighbouring chapel." (The Fort England chapel, normally out of bounds.)

In 1890, Dr T.D. Greenlees arrived to take over as superintendent of the asylum. A man of tireless energy and initiative, whose sense of the ridiculous was often aimed at himself, he was a pioneer of occupational therapy in the modern sense. His programme did not stop at picnics and seaside holidays; he developed a wonderful range of active occupations for the patients, including cricket and billiards, singing and dramatics, and even a printing-press and a self-supporting farm.

Spiritual well-being was high among his priorities, and he immediately noted that "a proper place of worship is urgently needed. This is the only asylum with which I am acquainted of its size that does not possess a chapel, but as far as our means will permit, the services have been made brighter. A new harmonium organ replaces the old instrument; a choir has been formed, and these changes have resulted in an improved attendance of patients, whose conduct during divine service compares favourably with that of any sane congregation." "The chaplain," he added, "regularly visits the wards and such patients as require his ministrations, and a record of these visits is kept for future reference." 36

A year later, the Rev. Turpin was being equally conscientious, although his duties had more than doubled. Another milestone had been reached: Fort England had resumed diplomatic relations with its old neighbour.

"We", wrote the superintendent, "now rent the Wesleyan chapel close to the Asylum, where services and choir practice are held twice weekly. Seeing the good that is already being done in this direction, it is hoped that the time is not too far distant when we will have a place of worship we can fairly call our own."³⁷ His determination reached fever-pitch when he heard, or gained the impression, that the trustees of the chapel were thinking of selling it, and he urged the government in the strongest terms to purchase the building made even more valuable by its proximity to the asylum. "If matters were skilfully negotiated, I am sure we could arrange satisfactory terms with the Trustees," he insisted.³⁸

Like so many pleas involving government money, this fell on deaf ears for many years to come. But the asylum continued to put the chapel to good use, and services became as important to the patients' therapy as they had once been to the garrison's morale.

By the turn of the century, Turpin was being assisted by the Rev. J. Pattison to carry out a most strenuous programme. "Morning service is held every Sunday, a short afternoon service every Friday, a monthly evening service, and an occasional special service in the

^{28.} Ibid., 26.12.1894, p.2.

GRAHAM'S TOWN LUNATIC ASYLUM, Annual report, 1876 (G. 22-77), p.2.

^{30.} *Ibid.*, 1878, (G. 31-'79), p.2.

^{31.} Ibid., 1880 (G. 51 - '81) p.2.

^{32.} The Journal, 27.10.1885, p.3.

^{33.} Ibid., 10.11.1885, p.3.

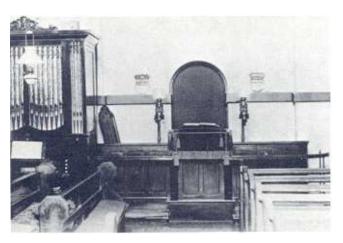
GRAHAM'S TOWN LUNATIC ASYLUM, Annual report, 1888 (G. 3-'89), p.19.

^{35.} Ibid., 1889 (G.20-'90), p.15.

^{36.} Ibid., 1890 (G.37-'91), p.44.

^{37.} Ibid., 1891 (G. 30-'92), p.40.

^{38.} Ibid., 1894 (G. 16-'95), p.61.



Part of the famous Somerset organ in the Fort England Chapel (c. 1890).

PHOTOGRAPH: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (A.G. 390)

wards. On alternate Sunday evenings there is a choir practice and service of hymn-singing in the hall.³⁹ Patients belonging to other denominations have their wants attended to by their respective clergymen, and Wesleyan and Roman Catholic services are held regularly. Occasionally some of the patients are allowed to attend church in Grahamstown."⁴⁰

It would be wrong to think of the asylum as a place of long-faced piety in which religion was the only diversion. But it is hardly a wonder that the congregation became too large for the chapel, so that Dr Greenlees made representation for a new one to be built. It is not known whether plans were ever drawn up, but it seems unlikely, for the South African War intervened just at that point. Before either the Cape Colony or the asylum had fully recovered, Dr Greenlees retired at his own request and went back to Britain (1907), saying that he felt no-one over the age of fifty should be left in charge of an asylum. 12

When the Union of South Africa took place, the asylum became a state institution known in time as the Fort England Mental Hospital. It was the Union government which, in 1912, eventually purchased the chapel from the Methodist community for the sum of £2 000 — only twice what it had cost to build fifty years earlier. Now it lay inside the fences put up to surround Fort England, and was intended for the Hospital's exclusive use. The local population was served by the new Wesley chapel (opened 1914) at the corner of York and Market Streets. The treasures from the old chapel were moved into it, including the collection plates and the famous so-called Somerset organ, ⁴³ a study on its own.

Another transferred relic was the silver trowel with which Mr Henry Wood had laid the foundation-stone of the Sunday-school at Fort England in 1895, thus fulfilling at last the Rev. Shaw's early dream of "a schoolroom and chapel" side by side. The Fort England Sunday-school had flourished until it "ranked with the best in town", and when the chapel was sold, it too was taken over by the Hospital. It became a school for the retarded children then being treated at Fort England, so that the nickname "the Schoolroom" lingered after the pupils had moved. In course of time the building became part of the Men's Therapy Unit at the Hospital, and as such still keeps up its long connection with education and training.

After so much early zeal, it is sad to find that the Fort England chapel as such fell into a long period of disuse, beginning in about 1925. When cracks appeared in

the upper structure, indicating that the foundations were sinking, the building was declared unsafe and de-consecrated. Instead it became a store-room: a repository for patients' suitcases and cabin trunks, and for packing-materials used by members of staff on transfer. 48

A member of the administrative staff of those days, now long since retired, has a tantalising memory of this room: "Among all this stuff — straw, packing-cases, hessian, etc. — was a tremendous quantity of miscellaneous papers and records of various kinds, some loose, but the greater part packed into boxes and nailed up. This stuff was dated from the last three decades of the 19th century right up to my own time (1930—). A lot of it had been ferreted through at one time or another in a search for Cape triangular stamps, and I was told that several had been found." 49

Perhaps it was the hint of buried treasure that made the authorities take another look at the site and contemplate its history. Be that as it may, the Historical Monuments Commission visited Fort England and recommended that the chapel be restored to its original purpose. The luggage and packing-materials were cleared out, the "miscellaneous papers and records" mysteriously disappeared (all attempts to trace them have so far failed), and the building was duly renovated. Benches for the congregation were made by the Hospital carpenter. A moth-eaten old harmonium was found somewhere in the hospital (possibly the one purchased by Dr Greenlees) and the bellows repaired so that it could once more accompany Divine Service. ⁵⁰

By the 1950s the Fort England chapel was again in use as a place of worship. Today services lare held there regularly by ministers of many denominations, and they and other church members visit patients in the wards. Certain patients are allowed to attend services in town, and 1981 saw the appointment of a hospital chaplain. He is the Rev. Athol Thompson, rector of St Barholomew's Church in Market Street.

It might seem that the old, familiar pattern is being repeated — with two major differences. Fort England is only a part, albeit an important one, of the chaplain's ministry to the sick in mind and body throughout the city. For today a mental patient is part of a community, not an isolated outcast, and is treated in hospital, not an asylum. There is also a deeper understanding of mental suffering among the public, and perhaps the Church is playing a more meaningful rôle in healing than it did a century ago.

- 39. The recreation hall, opened in 1894.
- GRAHAM'S TOWN LUNATIC ASYLUM, Annual report, 1897 (G. 28-'98), p.4.
- 41. *Ibid.*, 1899 (G. 25-1900), p.4.
- 42. E.H. Burrows, A history of medicine in South Africa up to the end of the nineteenth century (Cape Town, 1958), p.343.
- 43. Tonkin, op. cit., pp.48-49.
- 44. Shaw, op. cit., p.120.
- 45. L.A. HEWSON, They seek a city: Methodism in Grahamstown (Grahamstown, 1981), p.44.
- 46. The Institute for the Care and Training of Weak-minded Children was attached to Fort England (1895 – 1921). It was South Africa's first accredited institution for retarded children, who were later transferred to the Alexandra Institute at Maitland, Cape.
- S. MOREY, Reminiscences of Mr S. Morey re Fort England Hospital, p.1. (Manuscript in author's possession).
- 48. Ibid.
- Mr A.W.L. West, retired staff member, now of Port Alfred. Letter dated 8.1.1980.
- 50. Mr S. Morey, veteran staff member at Fort England.