

THE GRAHAMSTOWN CITY HALL — THE TALE OF TWO FOUNDATION STONES

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Pop went the cork from a bottle of champagne and the content of bubbly liquid was poured on the floor. In a ceremony reminiscent of the launching of a ship, the City Hall of Grahamstown was declared officially opened by Councillor Samuel Cawood on 4 May 1882. And well might Grahamstown celebrate, for it was 70 years since it had been founded by Colonel John Graham and 45 years since municipal government had been introduced; and now the town had finally acquired a permanent home for its municipal offices and a hall big enough to cater for the needs of the citizens.

The first meeting of Municipal Commissioners for Grahamstown took place in Beale's Hotel on 21 June 1837.¹ The date is an important one in the history of Grahamstown. On that day the control of its civic government was transferred from the hands of overworked government officials to the hands of a board elected by the inhabitants of the town to whom it was responsible. With no money in the municipal coffers, but with confidence in the future, the Commissioners resolved at their first meeting to hire the west wing of the Commercial Hall as a Town Office for the sum of £45 per annum and to appoint Mr Joseph Latham town clerk at a salary of £80 per annum. The Commissioners also dealt with many trivial but practical matters which concerned their own comfort. They discussed the precise details of the furniture requirements for the Town Office and called for tenders for three tables, twelve chairs, and a cupboard.² Only after the revenue was more stable did they venture a few months later to buy some holland blinds and, rather necessary in the days of top-hats, a set of hat pegs.

The Municipal Commissioners were clearly tolerably satisfied with these conditions until January 1850 — there were other more pressing needs to tackle. But in 1850 the Commissioners decided to sell Scotts Barracks which the colonial government had given them as early as 1839 to be sold to raise funds to build a town hall. The property market was clearly very bad at the time, no doubt because of the fierce frontier war which began in December 1850; hence the property was still unsold as late as June 1851. The Commissioners then decided to call for written offers for the property, and at the same time called for tenders from people willing to sell property suitable for municipal offices and situated in the vicinity of St George's Church.³

Several offers of property were made to the Commissioners. The most favourable of these was one by the Rev. William Shaw on behalf of the Wesleyan congregation. They offered to sell the old Wesley Chapel to the Municipal Commissioners as a town hall; but a few days after the offer had been made Shaw felt obliged to withdraw it on the grounds of popular opposition. However, the Commissioners were keen to buy the property and asked Shaw to let his offer stand for another fortnight while they consulted the Attorney General, William Porter, to see if they could make the purchase in terms of the General Municipal Ordinance of 1836.⁴

Porter ruled that they could buy the Wesley Chapel provided local municipal regulations existed which per-

mitted them to make such a purchase. Should no municipal regulation exist then Porter told them that one would have to be passed to give them the authority they desired.⁵ Grahamstown had no such municipal regulation; hence it was obviously necessary to pass one and that meant calling a public meeting — an action which clearly the Commissioners hoped to avoid because they went ahead with their plans to buy the property without getting the necessary authority. They simply sold Scotts Barracks for £600 and used the money to buy the Wesley Chapel.⁶

The purchase of the Wesley Chapel was condoned by Robert Godlonton⁷ — “Moral Bob” — the proprietor of the *Graham's Town Journal* and for many years the leading politician of Grahamstown, and himself a Wesleyan. He argued that opposition to the purchase of the Wesley Hall for a town hall was not justified and that the money had been well spent. He thought that the Commissioners had got an excellent building for public meetings and municipal purposes without calling on the ratepayers for additional funds. Moreover, he argued, since the citizens of Grahamstown were keen on separating the government of the Eastern Cape from the government in Cape Town and should Grahamstown as a result become the capital of a new colony or separate province, then the Wesley Chapel would be found to have materially increased in value and could be sold at a profit and thereby contribute towards the building of a town hall “compatible with its prospective importance”.⁸

Godlonton's advice might well have been wise and in the best interests of the town, but his denominational affiliations suggested he was partisan: hence the opposition mustered behind a newspaper that had been set up in 1840 to rival Godlonton's *Graham's Town Journal*, viz. *The Cape Frontier Times*. Letters to the editor of *The Cape Frontier Times* criticised the Commissioners for in-

Cape Archives Depot (CA), Minute Book of the Municipal Commissioners of Grahamstown (hereafter M.B.), 21.6.1837.

2 *Ibid.*

3 M.B., 20.6.1851.

4 CA, Letter Book of the Municipal Commissioners of Grahamstown (hereafter L.B.), 12.7.1851.

5 *Cape Frontier Times* (hereafter C.F.T.), 23.9.1851.

6 L.B., 12.7.1851.

7 Godlonton (1794 — 1884) was a member of John Baillie's party of 1820 Settlers. He was trained as a printer in Great Britain and in 1834 he became editor of the *Graham's Town Journal*. Subsequently he had extensive business interests connected with publishing both within and beyond the borders of the Colony. His newspapers helped to shape political opinion. He first served on the Legislative Council in 1847 and continued to be prominent in Cape politics until 1878. For further details see W.J. DE KOCK and D.W. KRÜGER (Eds.), *Dictionary of South African biography II* (Cape Town, 1972), pp.263 — 266.

8 *Graham's Town Journal* (hereafter G.T.J.), 20.9.1851.

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curing a heavy debt for the municipality at a time when other municipal utilities required a higher priority. For instance, Thomas Nelson, a prominent Grahamstown citizen and at one time a municipal commissioner, wrote that the streets needed repairing and the town lighting, a night watch was desirable, and a sufficient supply of water was required.⁹ The editor of *The Cape Frontier*



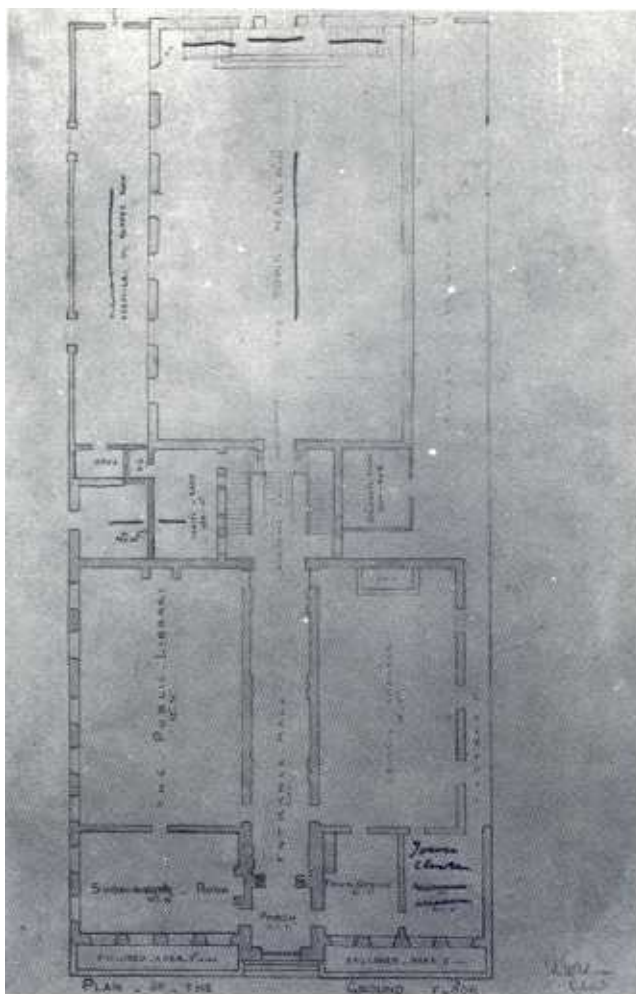
Sketch of the "proposed Jubilee Memorial Hall and Tower, 1870", suggesting that originally the Tower and the Hall were intended as a memorial to the 1820 Settlers.

ORIGINAL SKETCH IN POSSESSION OF THE CORY LIBRARY, RHODES UNIVERSITY, GRAHAMSTOWN

Times himself did not attack the expediency of the purchase of the Wesley Chapel, but the way in which the Commissioners had made the purchase. "They have violated the law to carry out their design, and they have done it in the teeth of the opposition of the Attorney General," he wrote.¹⁰

Matters came to a head when 67 citizens of Grahamstown signed a formal protest against the purchase of the Wesley Hall on the grounds that the Commissioners had neither the legal authority to make the purchase nor the funds to do so and could not bind their successors in office to pay off the debt.¹¹ The protestors obtained a Supreme Court interdict "to restrain the transfer of the Wesley Chapel to the name of the Commissioners of Grahamstown, and of mortgaging, or otherwise charging as security any property belonging to the Municipality."¹² The interdict was made permanent with costs, but Judge S.M. Bell hinted in his judgment that the Commissioners should seek an amendment to the General Municipal Ordinance to give them the power they needed to buy property.¹³

The trustees of the Chapel were quite prepared to co-operate with the Commissioners and wait until they had the necessary legislative authority to buy their property¹⁴, and in the meantime leased it to them with an option to purchase. A general meeting of citizens was called for 26 April 1852. Two motions were put: one sought the confirmation of the purchase; the other maintained that it was inexpedient at that time to buy any building whatever as a town hall.¹⁵ The first motion was defeated and the second one was carried on a vote by a show of hands.¹⁶ The minority demanded a poll, and a referendum was held over two days. The ballot was not a



Ground floor plan of the Grahamstown City Hall, 1882.

ORIGINAL PLAN IN POSSESSION OF THE ALBANY MUSEUM (1820 SETTLERS' DIVISION), GRAHAMSTOWN

secret one and only 120 out of a possible 400 citizens favoured the purchase.¹⁷ In an analysis of the voting Charles Pote pointed out in a letter to the editor of the *Graham's Town Journal* that 105 out of the 120 voters were Wesleyans and that only ten Wesleyans had voted against the purchase. Pote argued that this was conclusive proof of sectarian bias, especially since six of the nine Municipal Commissioners were Wesleyans. Of the remaining three, two were Baptists and one was a Jew.¹⁸

William Shaw was clearly disturbed by the controversy. In an open letter to Pote, he maintained that religious sectarianism need never have entered the controversy but that the opposition had used this means because they were unable to get up "sufficient steam" without it.¹⁹ But in the face of the opposition and without proper legal authority the Commissioners decided to drop the purchase they had proposed. So eager were they to put the dispute behind them that they asked the Rev. Shaw to take over the Chapel again in two months instead of three

9. C.F.T., 1.6.1851.
10. C.F.T., 23.9.1851.
11. *Ibid.*
12. C.F.T., 14.10.1851.
13. L.B., 25.11.1851.
14. *Ibid.*
15. M.B., 26.4.1852.
16. *Ibid.*
17. G.T.J., 22.5.1852.
18. *Ibid.*
19. G.T.J., 15.5.1852.

as required by contract. Shaw raised no objection to the request on condition that £5 was paid to him to refit the fixtures on the floor of the Chapel. The Commissioners agreed and promptly set about finding new accommodation.²⁰ Rooms belonging to Mr Mandy in Bathurst Street were decided upon²¹ and their lease was approved by a general meeting of inhabitants.²² These premises remained the headquarters of the municipality until they moved into the present City Hall in 1882.

One reason why the Commissioners sought incorporation in 1861 was to strengthen the financial powers of the municipal authority. But even though the municipal status was enhanced by Act No. 29 of 1861 and hence from July 1862 Grahamstown had a mayor and councillors, the financial position through the 1860s and 1870s was parlous to say the least. First there was drought, then the army left in 1870, and the discovery of diamonds drained away men to Kimberley — one mayor, Reuben Ayliff, even stayed on the diamond fields so long that he was temporarily unseated.²³ This was serious for Grahamstown. Many houses stood empty.²⁴

Gradually, however, the fortunes of the town began to change. Already important as the seat of a division of the Supreme Court, Grahamstown's educational institutions had begun to develop. Moreover, the town had also become something of a manufacturing centre: there were gun factories, tin factories, saddlery and harness-making, brass and iron works, boot and shoe factories, a soap and spirit factory, and large wagon and cart-making establishments. Indeed so flourishing was Grahamstown by 1882 that it was difficult to hire a house — large or small — for either love or money despite the fact that 100 houses had been built in the previous two years.²⁵ The Grey Dam and the Douglas and Hamilton Dams built in the 1860s had secured the water supply for the time being and the absence of comment in the press suggests that the roads were reckoned to be in a fairly satisfactory state.

It was then on an upswing in the economy that the Grahamstown City councillors had finally resolved to build a city hall on a site they had purchased as early as 1862.²⁶ When it was known that Sir Bartle Frere, (an immensely popular governor in Grahamstown because of his support for confederation) was coming to Grahamstown the councillors asked him to lay the foundation stone — an invitation he willingly accepted.²⁷ The day was fixed for 28 August 1877.

The occasion was one of great pomp and circumstance. The Governor arrived the day before the great event. James Butler recorded in his journal that he had seen Grahamstown on business days and holidays at all times of the year but never before had he seen such excitement in the town.²⁸ When the next day dawned the site in Church Square was the focus of attention. Three tall masts had been erected on the site; these were decorated with evergreens, flags flew from the top, and generally a great quantity of bunting floated around. James Butler, who was something of a puritan, thought it was a monstrous waste of bunting.²⁹ Seating was prepared for some 300 ladies on a raised platform, and the foundation stone itself was suspended by a pulley from the summit of three scaffold poles bedecked with evergreens.³⁰

The ceremony was to take place at noon and by 11h00 many ladies had taken their chairs and a crowd had begun to gather in the Square; but the Governor arrived an hour late because he had been delayed at the telegraph office in the transmission of messages.³¹ There was no grumble at the delay and there was an assumed

recognition that the urgent business of government must take precedence over local ceremony.

The vice-regal procession lined up on the Drostdy grounds and made its way down High Street to Church Square. The Governor was accompanied by an escort of mounted cavalry and a detachment of some 700 people from what were collectively described as the Friendly Societies: The Good Templars, four Masonic Lodges, the Orangemen, Foresters, Odd-Fellows, Albany Brethren, True Templars, and St Patricks — all with banners brightly shining in the sun.³² It must have been a very colourful procession. James Butler comments that he thought the regalia of the Good Templars was extravagant but that they had appeared modest by comparison with others. Two orders, he observed, wore ostrich plumes in their hats while the Odd-Fellows and others carried their mystic signs and emblems.³³

There had been some argument about the order of precedence of the several societies beforehand, but on the day friendship seems to have triumphed over controversy and co-operation marked the occasion.

Once the procession had arrived at the site in Church Square the Mayor made a few introductory remarks and handed the Governor a silver trowel with ivory handles, made in Grahamstown by the firm of J.S. Wilcox of Bathurst Street. The Governor accepted the trowel, laid the stone in a workmanlike manner and began his speech. Clearly he could not be heard at any great distance for when he began to speak the band struck up "God Save the Queen". After that slight technical hitch the Governor continued his speech and the *Journal* records that he received applause from those who were within hearing.³⁴ Even if the crowd had been unable to hear the Governor they nevertheless gave him three hearty cheers before he climbed into his carriage to take his leave for the Market Square where he opened a bazaar in aid of the Clock Chamber of the Cathedral Tower. When he had gone the Friendly Societies continued to parade the streets but, James Butler noted, the children from the Wesleyan Sunday school were marched off to the Shaw Hall and were treated to buns and ginger beer.³⁵

Gradually the handsome building began to rise though some modification of the decoration became necessary on grounds of expense. The style of architecture is Italian and a bold parapet with cornice surmounts the whole of the street and some 6 m of each side elevation. In the centre of the street façade stands the tower 4,5 m wide and extending out from the building with an open-arched portico over the pavement. It is 30 m high

20. M.B., 18.6.1852.

21. M.B., 25.6.1852.

22. M.B., 28.6.1852.

23. *G.T.J.*, 26.8.1870.

24. *G.T.J.*, 4.5.1882.

25. *Ibid.*

26. The title-deed is in the Albany Museum (1820 Settlers' Division), Grahamstown. The original grant was made to Lieut. George Patton on 7 June 1816. The municipality bought the property from William Wright.

27. City Council, Grahamstown, Minutes, 15.8.1877.

28. *Jim's Journal*, The Journal of James Butler: Entry for 27.8.1877.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *G.T.J.*, 31.8.1877.

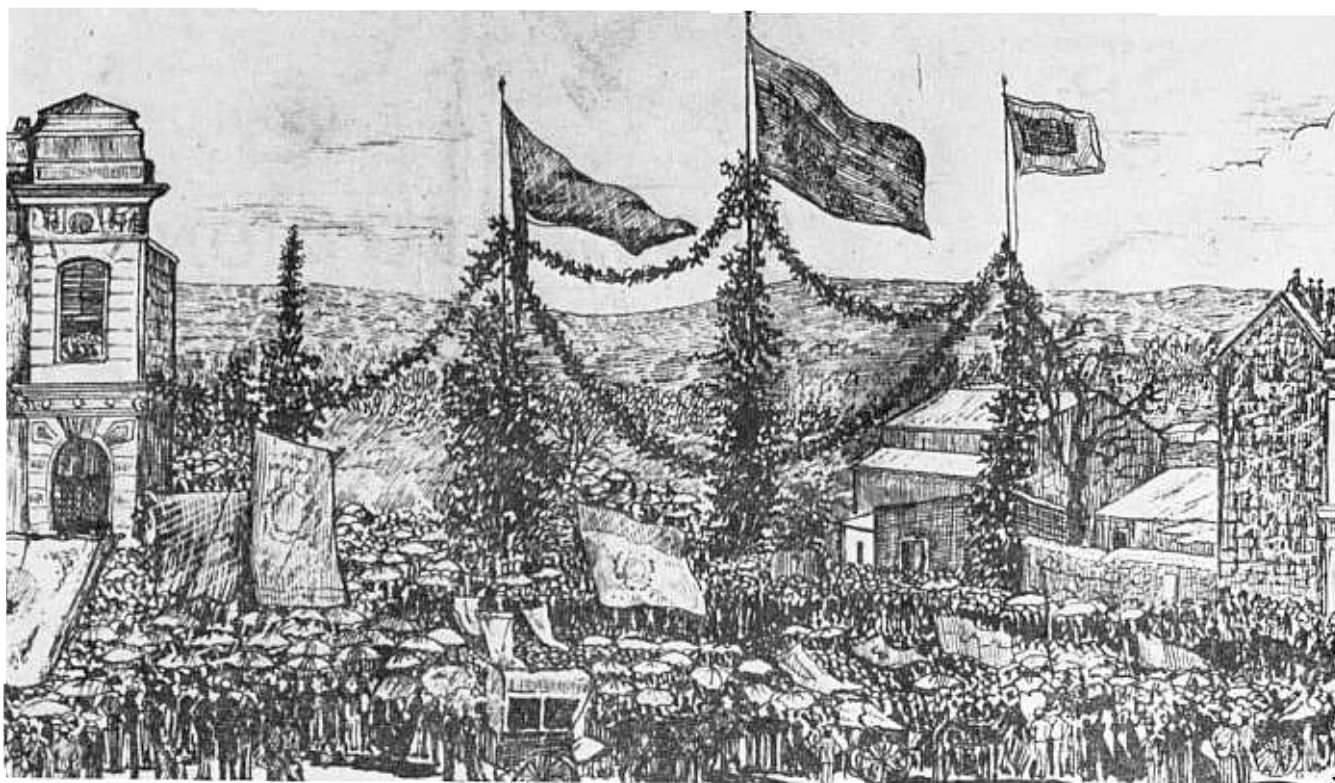
31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Jim's Journal*, 28.8.1877.

34. *G.T.J.*, 31.8.1877.

35. *Jim's Journal*, 28.8.1877.



Laying of the foundation stone of the City Hall, Grahamstown (28 August 1877).

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM (1820 SETTLERS' DIVISION), GRAHAMSTOWN

and has a mansard roof with ornamental dormers and iron railing with corner finials on the top.³⁶ The tower is a prominent feature of the City Hall but it is not generally known that it is not technically part of the building, and thereby hangs the tale of the other foundation stone. When Councillor Samuel Cawood opened the City Hall on 4 May 1882 he was very careful to point out that the tower was separate and that not one penny of the cost of its construction, £1 500, had come from the rates because the tower is a monument to the memory of the Settlers of 1820 and was built and paid for by the committee which had organized the jubilee celebrations in 1870.³⁷

The main entrance to the City Hall, however, is under the archways of the Jubilee Memorial Tower and through a double iron gate which had been turned out in a local foundry. The building and the gates were designed by Mr Sidney Stent. The building housed not only a city hall but an elegant council chamber and town offices on the right of a long corridor, and on the left of the corridor was the library and reading room. Accommodation for the Albany Museum was provided upstairs.³⁸

The Council Chamber was considered by the *Journal* to be the handsomest room in South Africa set apart for the deliberations of a municipal legislature. It was 15.8 m broad, very lofty, and fitted with costly furniture made by English artisans out of best white oak. The *Journal* reported that careful citizens would be glad to know there was little danger of the polished tables being soiled, as councillors were not permitted to use ink. With typical Victorian eloquence the report went on to state that "the comfort of the high-backed cushioned armchairs, and the aesthetic appearance of the room with its dark dado, has an extra-ordinary effect in cultivating a flow of rounded periods, and brilliant metaphors. When the duplex lamps are lit in three suspenders, and the patent Venetian blinds closed, the flow of reason goes on merrily till 9

p.m." I do not know whether the coming of electricity has led to change because today council meetings usually continue until very much later than that, the flow of rounded periods and brilliant metaphors has been lost if ever it really existed, and citizens then as now question the flow of reason in their city councillors. More down to earth: the *Journal* recorded that the City Hall had cost £15 300 to build, the furniture in the Council Chamber cost £451-15-3d; the furniture in the offices cost £200, the Venetian blinds £61, and the lamps £23.³⁹

The foundation stone of the Jubilee Memorial Tower was laid on 23 May 1870 by Robert Godlonton in his capacity as chairman of the Jubilee Committee. An unknown poet commemorated the event — the second stanza is the best:

That pale pilgrim band is gone,
That on this shore with trembling trod,
Ready to faint, yet bearing on
The ark of freedom and of God.⁴⁰

Some seven to eight thousand spectators watched the ceremony in Church Square. It was a ceremony which not only recognized past achievement but clearly had faith in the future because fund raising, for what was then described as the Memorial Building, was only launched at a banquet on the evening after the stone had been laid! At the banquet, the dean of Grahamstown handed out blank promissory notes with gay abandon and with some success. One donor, Mr Penn, gave in kind. "Silver and gold have I none," he said, "but such as I have I give. I'll be good for a ton of good soap."⁴¹ By the time the 1870 celebrations were over the committee had £1 257 in cash and promises and Mr Penn's ton of good soap which was valued at £40.⁴²

36. *G. T. J.*, 31.8.1877.

37. *G. T. J.*, 4.5.1882.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, Scrap book of Alice Shone.

41. *G. T. J.*, 25.5.1870.

42. *G. T. J.*, 15.6.1870.

Support for the Jubilee Tower was not unanimous in the Eastern Cape. Professor W. Maxwell⁴³ tells me that Queenstown felt the money should be spent on a university college to be sited in Queenstown, and that James Collett (whose diary she is editing for publication) thought he was subscribing towards an agricultural hall. The Fort Beaufort branch of the jubilee fund generally objected to an ornamental building which was principally, if not wholly, for the benefit of Grahamstown.⁴⁴ But the *Journal* held that the memorial building must be a worthy monument and a true work of art: "Let us have no unmeaning heap of stone and mortar — no huge pile of ugliness, no bald piece of mere utility — no stuccoed sham, no huge room with a pasteboard front." What was wanted was a structure to remind the rising generation of the considerable contribution made by the Settlers to the land of their adoption.⁴⁵

At the inauguration of the Tower on 24 May 1882, 1 600 Sunday school children marched in procession from the Drostdy to the City Hall accompanied by the band of the First City Regiment, the Grahamstown Artillery, and a detachment of cadets. Leading the procession was an open carriage in which rode Robert Godlonton, by then an old man of 88 years, and the Civil Commissioner and Resident Magistrate, Charles Hugh Huntly.

The procession was greeted by a vast crowd that had assembled on Church Square. Some people peered through the windows of the stores opposite the City Hall while others had vantage points on the roof. The Square itself was again festooned with bunting and flags, and the Royal Standard fluttered in the breeze from a rope which had been suspended across the Square. The Union Jack flew majestically from the summit of the Tower.⁴⁶

At precisely 13h00 the surviving Settlers took their seats in the front row. There were very few of them left. There was old George Wood, the first mayor of Grahamstown, feeble in body but firm in spirit, Mrs James, Mr Peter Bowles, Mr Timm, Mr Cawood and Mrs Ayliff, and they were joined by Mrs Sketch whose parents had settled in the colony in 1807. George Wood and Godlonton shook hands but were unable to speak from emotion. Godlonton who had laid the foundation stone twelve years before was now the oldest surviving settler, and to him fell the honour of inaugurating the tower. After his speech had been read for him by Mr Huntly three cheers were given for the Settlers and the ceremony concluded with the National Anthem.⁴⁷

Theoretically, then, the tower has no connection with the City Hall though nobody to-day would think of them other than as a unit. Initially a room in the tower on the level of the first floor of the main building was reserved for the use of the Jubilee Memorial Committee.⁴⁸ Today it is used by the staff of the Town Clerk's Department. The critics who thought that the tower would be purely for the benefit of Grahamstown were quite right. Yet at the time of the inauguration the jubilee committee defended itself from the charge of localism and asserted that it did not honour only those settlers connected with Grahamstown but everyone throughout the country who was a descendant of an 1820 Settler.⁴⁹

The celebrations in 1882 ended with a concert in the City Hall; it opened with a chorus, the words and music of which had been written by the Rev. H.H. Dugmore (who in 1870 had delivered the mammoth commemoration lecture) and is called *Prospect and Retrospect*.⁵⁰



Inauguration of the Jubilee Memorial Tower, 24 May 1882.

PHOTOGRAPH: CORY LIBRARY, RHODES UNIVERSITY, GRAHAMSTOWN

"Hail to the day that's dawning
In gladness o'er the land;
The clouds that dimmed the morning,
Break off, on every hand.

But with the bright sun shining o'er us,
And with happy days before us,
With our children round us smiling,
And the hours with love beguiling;

Let us think on those who passed away,
Ere the lowering cloud had parted,
Who toils and dangers braved for us,
The sad and weary hearted.

Our fathers bore the heat,
And the burden of the day,
O never from our hearts,
Shall their memory fade away."

Despite one abortive effort, Grahamstown now had a city hall and the Jubilee Memorial Tower. These buildings mark the achievement of more than half a century of progress not only in the history of Grahamstown but in the history of the British Settlers of 1820. They were practical men and women who built exceeding strong so that we might not only be reminded of their endurance but also enjoy the benefits of their labours. ■

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44. *G.T.J.*, 9.5.1870.

45. *G.T.J.*, 30.5.1870.

46. *G.T.J.*, 25.5.1882.

47. *Ibid.*

48. *G.T.J.*, 25.5.1882.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*