

FORT ENGLAND AS A MILITARY BASE

Sally Sampson, B.A.

Fort England, on the south-eastern boundary of Grahamstown, has been a mental hospital for more than a century. Before that, as the name implies, it was a military fort, of which almost nothing is known today. Yet it was once the principal garrison of the Eastern Province and saw fifty years of military service before it was abandoned. Its story dates from the beginnings of Grahamstown itself.

When Col. John Graham planned his tiny frontier settlement in 1812 he naturally considered the troops who had fought in the recent campaign and who would now be left to defend the Zuurveld. They fell into two main groups: there were the Imperial troops, British regiments who came and went on duty, and whose temporary quarters formed the nucleus of the settlement; and then there was the Cape Regiment, formed and trained by the Colonel himself, consisting of Hottentot soldiers under White officers.¹ Already they had proved to be a crack fighting unit, ideally suited to bush warfare. Now they would be the permanent force on the frontier. They and their families would need a home.

Accordingly his plan for Grahamstown included "three Military Posts around which it is recommended to plant a Population." First on the list was "the Head Quarters of the Cape Regiment, and formerly a loan farm occupied by the deceased Lucas Meyer ... the spot selected on which to build the barracks is an elevated tongue of land, formed by the Kowie and another stream which joins it below the barrack ..." The site occupied fifty acres of delightful country, well watered and wooded, suitable for both cultivation and pasturage. The roads to the area were "tolerably good and capable of improvement." The historian Sir George Cory adds a footnote to this: "The barrack and site here referred to is that of Fort England."²

In 1815 the military base was moved from the centre of the village to this site, some two miles to the south-east. The barracks were erected on a ridge known as the Wit Rug, overlooking the Kowie River and the eastern approaches to Grahamstown. They were known as the East Barracks, or the Wit Rug Kamp. The walls were built of soft brick, while windows, doors, and other joinery were sent up from Uitenhage.³ The stone was obtained from a quarry on the hillside.⁴

Building had hardly been completed when the Barracks saw direct action at the Battle of Grahamstown on 22 April 1819. Thousands of Xhosa warriors, spurred on

by the warrior-prophet Makana, swept across the Fish River, intending to wipe out the little village of some thirty buildings and drive the White man into the sea. Everything had been carefully planned with the aid of a spy who acted as interpreter in the British camps. To meet the invasion there was a total armed force — including every able-bodied man in the settlement — of not more than 300 Whites.

The Xhosa army attacked at three points. Makana himself led the attack on the East Barracks, which was defended by 60 men of the Royal African Corps under Lt. Cartwright. The warriors swarmed up the ridge, up the garrison walls and into the heart of the Barracks, before their onslaught could be checked. Over a hundred dead bodies lay in the inner square when the firing eventually ceased.⁵

Meanwhile, on the marshy plain below, the troops were running out of ammunition. Legend has it that the day was saved by a woman, Mrs. Elisabeth Salt, whose husband was in charge of the guns. She is said to have walked to the Barracks alone, through wild bush overrun by the enemy, and returned carrying a keg of gunpowder. On the way back she encountered a mob of yelling warriors, who allowed her to pass unharmed and so accomplish her mission. There seems to be no authentic record of the incident, though it has been commemorated on a local monument.⁶ But it is certain that Mrs. Salt did exist, and played a decisive rôle in the battle. She was given a farm for her services.⁷

The coming of the 1820 Settlers is often seen as a direct result of the Battle of Grahamstown. In reality the British government had been contemplating a frontier

1 A. B. TONKIN, *Fort England*. *Grahamstown Historical Society Annals* 1(3), 1973, p.57.

2 G. E. CORY, *The rise of South Africa I* (London, 1910), pp.250—251.

3 R. B. LEWCOCK, *Early nineteenth century architecture in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1963), pp.194—195.

4 TONKIN, *op. cit.*, p.53.

5 CORY, *op. cit. I*, pp.388—390.

6 The Grahamstown Centenary Memorial in High Street.

7 *Graham's Town Journal*, 21.9.1850 (Obituary).

Fort England Barracks (1863) with the Officers' Mess in the foreground.

PHOTOGRAPH: 1820 SETTLERS' MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN





The west plaque on the Grahamstown Centenary Memorial in High Street, depicting Elisabeth Salt's heroic deed. Some of the warriors have lost their spears!

settlement for years. Lord Charles Somerset, who had mooted a scheme in 1817, now raised the matter again more forcefully, "hearing in various quarters that a good part of our overflowing population is in want of the first necessities of life." The essential policy for success, he believed, was "to occupy a frontier with strong posts of cavalry, and to organize colonization in the rear, which by spreading over a very fine and fertile country, shall (*sic*) at no distant period be sufficiently strong to defend itself against aggression."⁸

The 1820 Settlers, so blissfully ignorant of frontier conditions on arrival, soon discovered that self-defence was a hard reality. In October 1822 the Albany Levy was raised among the men of the district.⁹ They had to report for periodic military training and exercise, and hold themselves ready for regular service. This Levy, together with the other local units that were subsequently formed, was the direct ancestor of the Grahamstown First City regiment.¹⁰ The Settlers and Xhosas quickly established the typical pattern of border conflict, with raids and reprisals, plunder and hot pursuit, sometimes flaring into open war. From the Settler viewpoint the years 1820–53 represented "one continuous campaign with sporadic outbursts of peace."¹¹

The East Barracks, as might be expected, feature in Settler memoirs. John Ayliff recounts a trying journey he made on foot with some friends, only to find that there was no bread on sale in Grahamstown. Some British soldiers they met in the canteen took them to the Barracks, where they learnt that the day's rations had all been eaten up. Finally a sergeant, who was sewing a button onto his trousers, gave them four pounds of bread from a haversack under his bed, an act of kindness which Ayliff said he would never forget.¹²

The Rev. William Shaw, the famous Methodist minister among the Settlers, lost no time in conducting a

religious mission to the Barracks. One of his flock, Sgt.-Major Lucas, built himself a house outside the garrison walls, complete with a large room in which services could be held. They were always well attended, with eavesdroppers listening outside the window.¹³ Thus the present Fort England was the earliest site of organised public worship in Grahamstown.

There was also a school for some 200 Hottentots, the children of servicemen,¹⁴ but equipment was so scarce that they learnt to write in boxes of wet sand fetched from the river.

The Army doctors were another important influence. The legendary Dr. Andrew Smith doubled up for a while as District Surgeon of Albany,¹⁵ when no civilian could be found to fill the post. He had a plot of land near the Barracks,¹⁶ and this was probably where he ran the first free dispensary in South Africa.¹⁷

Up to 1825 attempts to establish another barracks in the heart of Grahamstown had failed, and the men were sent to join those at the East Barracks, where extensive alterations were in progress. Lt. James Rutherford, a military engineer, drew up the new plans, "complete with two long single-storeyed ranges of barracks buildings, built of brick and roofed with thatch, and a new mess-room." At the suggestion of Lord Charles Somerset, 'Military Artificers' were sent out from England, "owing to the scarcity and exorbitant prices of workmen on the frontier."¹⁸ Their handiwork was incorporated into later buildings and has survived to this day.¹⁹

Dr. Parrot, surgeon to the Cape Corps (as it was then called), wrote a lively account of the Barracks in 1827: they were built in the form of two hollow squares, housing 158 cavalrymen and 151 infantrymen, and besides the usual appointments there were also "the schoolroom and church," as he calls it, the tailor's and saddler's shops, and the hospital some distance away; down the hillside ran the officers' plots of land, each with its own little cottage and garden, but despite the recent alterations internal conditions were rather less attractive.

The hospital was badly equipped and in-patients had to provide their own utensils, the non-invalid being little better off. The men's sleeping quarters were damp and unhealthy, and many cavalry soldiers slept in the straw next to their mounts. Fatigue and patrol duties were severe and drinking was rife in the Corps, among men and women alike.²⁰ There is no mention of recreation or entertainment.

In 1828 the Cape Corps was disbanded and replaced by the Cape Mounted Rifles (CMR). The old name continued in popular use, and probably most of the old members re-enlisted in the new unit,²¹ which (as the

8. Cape Archives Depot (CA), G.H. 23/5, Despatch No. 20: Lord Charles Somerset – Earl Bathurst, 22.5.1819.
9. R. GRIFFITHS, *First city: a saga of service* (Cape Town, 1970), p.1.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. J. AYLIFF, *The journal of 'Henry Hastings', Albany Settler* (Grahamstown, 1963), pp.63–65.
13. W. SHAW, *The story of my mission in South-eastern Africa* (London, 1860), p.102.
14. CORY, *op. cit.* I, p.388.
15. P.R. KIRBY, *Sir Andrew Smith* (Cape Town, 1965), p.17.
16. *Ibid.*, p.26.
17. *Ibid.*, p.19.
18. LEWCOCK, *op. cit.*, p.249.
19. TONKIN, *op. cit.*, p.53.
20. *Ibid.*, pp.49–51.
21. *Ibid.*, p.52.

CMR) became one of the best-known units in the Empire, unique in several ways. Though mounted for more effective fighting in the bush, the men were rated, paid, and largely equipped as infantry.²²

In 1832 Lt.-Col. Henry Somerset (son of Lord Charles), a well-loved commander, went to England on leave. His departure was marked by a regimental ball at the Barracks, the first of many events on the site to be covered by the *Graham's Town Journal*. The town itself was just twenty years old, and the reporter wondered what its founder, Col. Graham, would have said to the spectacle. The guests were all in fancy dress, which resulted in the most unlikely partners dancing together — Chief Dingane with a Welsh peasant girl, and so on. Two mysterious intruders disguised as drunk Irishmen provided a little horseplay, while the chef put the finishing touches to a supper offering "all the delicacies of the season."²³ Clearly, the Army was bringing a certain tone to frontier society.

That year the Barracks were renamed Fort England, in honour of the new Commandant of the Frontier.²⁴ He was Lt.-Col. Richard England of the 75th regiment, an Irishman born in Canada and the son of an influential general.²⁵ He made himself instantly popular by putting his men onto road-works in the Albany district.²⁶

The following March he attended an important function: the laying of the foundation-stone of the Commercial Hall in High Street. The men of the 75th lined the street and their band headed the procession. At the elegant banquet that evening Col. England replied to the toast of 'the Commandant of Caffraria,' and expressed "the great satisfaction he had experienced in all his intercourse with the inhabitants."²⁷

For once, the frontier seemed quiet and orderly. Relations between the civilians and the military were cordial. Trade was building up. The people of Albany may well have thought that, after so many difficult years, they were at last embarked on an era of peace and prosperity. The Christmas of 1834, in fact, promised to be the most enjoyable the Settlers had yet spent. It was a time of plenty and families were gathering from far and wide to celebrate. Then, on 21 December, the Xhosas invaded Albany again, on a scale never known before.²⁸ At least ten thousand of them poured across the Fish River, burning homesteads, driving off cattle, murdering, plundering and laying waste the countryside. Fourteen years of heart-breaking toil, wrote one Settler, were undone in ten days.

As village after village was abandoned, the survivors fled to the local stronghold, driving the remaining livestock before them, and Grahamstown became a refugee centre overnight. Every available space was filled with fugitives of all races. Every back yard and garden was a cattle-kraal.²⁹

Col. England's first task was to call a public meeting, together with the Civil Commissioner, and introduce emergency measures. A Committee of Safety was appointed. All roads leading in from the east were heavily guarded by the military in daylight hours, and at night by armed inhabitants. St. George's Church was turned into a powder magazine and arms depôt, and rapidly became a shelter for women and children. The avenue leading to the church was blocked by wagons, flanked by a pair of cannon. Arms and ammunition were issued to all who could carry them, and soon the town had 800 able-bodied men ready to defend it.³⁰

Meanwhile Col. Harry Smith, military commander of the Colony, was making his epic ride from Cape

Town (nine hundred and sixty kilometres in six days) ahead of the relieving forces. Intercepting their mail-cart from Grahamstown he read a despatch in which Col. England mentioned the possibility of the troops having to evacuate the town. He arrived with a low opinion of his subordinate, which worsened when he saw the town's amateurish defences. The two men were on bad terms from the start. Years later Smith recalled: "The officer in command of the 75th regiment had taken great care of the barracks, distanced half a mile or more, but was averse to detaching troops to the defence of Grahamstown."³¹ A comment which, however unjust, indicates the clash of personalities.

Col. Smith abolished the Committee of Safety and proclaimed martial law. He opened all the barricades, established fresh alarm posts, and formed a volunteer unit which he put through a strenuous course of training, after which, as he put it, "men moved like men, and felt that their safety consisted in energetic obedience."³²

When the army set off on its campaign into Kaffirland Col. England was put in command of a division, but clashing with Smith at the outset over a question of policy, he asked to be sent back to Grahamstown³³ and spent the war commanding the 'first line' of defence, which re-occupied forts and posts, patrolled the district, and generally maintained law and order.

However, Col. England was not overlooked at the signing of the peace treaty, whereby expansion to the east of the Fish River was made official. He was one of the Commissioners appointed to re-settle the Xhosa tribes scattered by the war,³⁴ and later became Government Agent to the Fingo.³⁵ Before leaving the frontier in December 1837 he was warmly praised by the Lt.-Governor of the Eastern Province, who testified that the Colonel had performed a most difficult task at a vital time. "His judgement, humanity and self-possession were peculiarly instrumental in saving hundreds from destruction and maintaining the peace of the frontier."³⁶ And so Col. England passed from the scene, not without glory.

Since the war of 1835 had finally shown up the need for a strong, properly-equipped headquarters on the frontier, the Grahamstown drostdy was taken over and a new barrack wing added; this formed the nucleus of a new complex, completed some time after 1840, which eventually contained ordnance stores, offices, a military hospital and jail, and the new cavalry barracks. The CMR moved in there, evidently in 1838, when Grahamstown was proclaimed their official headquarters.³⁷ Three years later they were given their colours

22. T.J. LUCAS, *Camp life and sport in South Africa* (London, 1878), p.vi.

23. *Graham's Town Journal*, 12.7.1832.

24. *Graham's Town Journal*, 15.6.1832.

25. J.E. LEHMANN, *Remember you are an Englishman* (London, 1977), p.149.

26. *Graham's Town Journal*, 28.9.1832.

27. *Graham's Town Journal*, 7.3.1833.

28. H.H. DUGMORE, *Reminiscences of an Albany Settler* (Grahamstown, 1958), pp.50–51.

29. *Ibid.*, p.52.

30. *Graham's Town Journal*, 23.12.1834.

31. H. SMITH, *Autobiography*, ed. by G.C. Moore Smith (London, 1903), p.378.

32. *Ibid.*

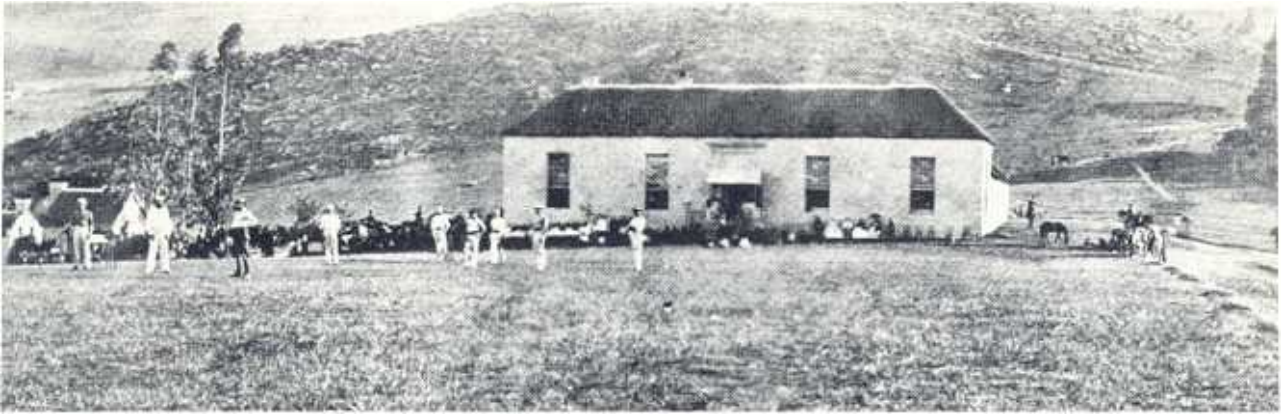
33. LEHMANN, *op. cit.*, p.150.

34. CORY, *op. cit.* III, (1919), p.216.

35. *Ibid.*, p.228.

36. C.A., G.H. 8/5, 24.10.1837.

37. P.J. YOUNG, *Boot and saddle* (Cape Town, 1955), p.19.



Cricket at the Officers' Mess, Fort England.

PHOTOGRAPH: 1820 SETTLERS' MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

and raised to an Imperial regiment.³⁸ The Cape Mounted Rifles could now be joined by any soldier who had served his time in the British Army.

Fort England, on the opposite side of town, became just another military post, but it was still occupied by the infantry battalions of British regiments serving in the area. Among them was the 91st, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who arrived in 1843.

A vivid picture of life on the Frontier was given by Mrs. Harriet Ward, wife of an officer in the 91st, who accompanied her husband to all his posts, recording her experiences in a local paper (the *Cape Frontier Times*)³⁹ and at least one British periodical (the *United Services Magazine*).⁴⁰ She afterwards published a runaway best-seller about her time in Africa, which ran into several editions.⁴¹ Mrs. Ward spent the early part of the War of the Axe (1846–47) in Grahamstown, while her husband was in the field. Her book captures the tension of waiting for news and opening letters with trembling fingers, “while shots echoed along the hills and through the kloofs above the town, and the sky above us and around us was lit with the fire from the devastated homesteads of the Settlers.”⁴² The enemy was so near that an attack on the town was expected.

On 22 April, anniversary of the Battle of Grahamstown, Mrs. Ward and her neighbours took their households to safety in the Drostdy Barracks. Two momentous nights followed, but to the great disappointment of the young people, there was no attack.⁴³ Later her family took a cottage on the hill near Fort England, “misnamed a fort,” where some of the 91st were in quarters. Here the position seemed even more vulnerable. “Walked down to the end of the green to look at our defences. Sorry things!” she wrote. “A square of thatched barracks more like huts than houses, containing sometimes no more than fifteen soldiers, some of them left here as ineffective ... no picquets at the end of town for want of men.”⁴⁴ But fortunately the Wards all survived the war and saw Chief Sandile brought to Grahamstown as a prisoner.

The next war (1850–53) was fought mainly in the Amatola Mountains, far away from the town. Sir Harry Smith, now Governor of the Cape, again rushed to the scene to take command. He was hampered by many factors, such as a rebellion in the Hottentot ranks of the CMR, and was recalled before the end of the campaign, to be replaced by Sir George Cathcart. The war dragged on, with bitter fighting in the mountains. An officer invalided out of the CMR reported that the hospitals were packed with able-bodied men, debilitated in their prime

by fatigue, exposure, and the poor army diet.⁴⁵

It must have been heartening to see fit, powerful soldiers enjoying a sports day at Fort England a few years later. These were men of the 13th Light Infantry who had recently fought in the Crimea. On Easter Monday 1857 they entertained the Grahamstown public to a full day of sporting events and contests. Many of the races, one is glad to learn, were open to NCO's and ratings. The last event was a two-mile walking race in heavy marching order, in which each competitor carried a weight of up to 24 kg. Sgt. Austen, the hero of the day, scored yet another victory and was awarded 10 shillings in prize money.⁴⁶

Capt. Bulger of the 10th Foot was not impressed by the appearance of Fort England in 1860. “The barracks are inferior, and very small; there is only accommodation for three hundred men, and this consists of narrow stone houses with thatched roofs. The officers' quarters are detached cottages, prettily enshrouded in trees, but they are in very bad repair, and not watertight; the mess-house is the only respectable building among them, and it, though good and spacious, is not in the best state of repair.” But according to him, Grahamstown was still “the Head Quarters of the Army in South Africa, which be it known, consists of four regiments of infantry and the Cape Mounted Rifles.”⁴⁷

Fighting days were not yet over, but with steady colonial expansion the frontier had shifted hundreds of kilometres to the north-east. The military in Albany felt able to relax somewhat and indulge in balls, concerts, picnics, cricket-matches — all the traditional gaieties of a garrison.

The army's importance to trade and commerce in Grahamstown became all too evident when in March 1862 the order was suddenly given to move headquarters to King William's Town immediately.⁴⁸ Capt. Bulger, whose own unit was posted to Keiskamma Hoek in the Amatolas, felt that “the ruthless rending from the last relic of civilised life ... was something quite unprepared

38. *Ibid.*

39. S.M. MITRA, *Life and letters of Sir John Hall* (London, 1911), pp.177–178.

40. D.W. KRÜGER and C.J. BEYERS (eds.), *Dictionary of South African biography III* (Cape Town, 1977), p.831.

41. *Ibid.*

42. H. WARD, *Five years in Kaffirland I* (London, 1848), p.225.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 238–246.

44. *Ibid.*, II, p.20.

45. LUCAS, *op. cit.*, p.189.

46. *Graham's Town Journal*, 15.4.1857.

47. G.E. BULGER, *Extracts from my South African journal ...* (Bungalore, 1867), pp.40–41.

48. *Graham's Town Journal*, 25.3.1862.

for," while some of his brother officers were thrown into the deepest despair. "Time alone can tell whether our destiny be for good or evil," he wisely concluded.⁴⁹

To the town's merchants and tradesmen the move was an unmitigated evil. Trade declined so greatly, and they protested so strongly at the loss of their market, that the Governor was obliged to rescind the order.⁵⁰ In the latter half of 1864 headquarters moved back to Grahamstown. This was an era of economic depression, retrenchment, and political upheaval, and the future of the Imperial troops in the colony seems to have been constantly uncertain.



The Wesleyan Chapel, Fort England (c. 1890).
PHOTOGRAPHE: CAPE ARCHIVES DEPOT (A.G. 388)

Meanwhile Grahamstown had continued to develop despite the slump. Fort England had grown from an isolated military camp into a residential area of attractive smallholdings, with suburban needs. The Wesleyan Church built a chapel for the local residents in 1861, at an estimated cost of £1,000. It stood on the hill-top just outside the boundary of the fort — less than a hundred yards from the spot where the Rev. Shaw had held his services many years before, and is still in use today as a place of worship, forming a continuous link with the earliest times.⁵¹

With the establishment of the Grahamstown municipality Fort England became an electoral ward, expressing the need of such things as an area constable, a proper water-supply and a bridge. These were all to be met in some measure during the 1860s. Water proved to be the most complicated problem, shared with the rest of the town. Cattle and outside persons were now using the stream that watered Fort England, so that the supply was both polluted and drastically cut.⁵² The water shortage became so acute that the garrison had to be reduced. The construction of a small reservoir in the kloof behind the fort was proposed, and then delayed,⁵³ until finally the Lt.-Governor, Sir Percy Douglas, gave permission for the military to build a larger reservoir, subsequently named after him, for the whole town.

The 5th Fusiliers, the regiment then in occupation, finished the job by late March 1867,⁵⁴ shortly before embarking for home. They had been "the favourite regiment,"⁵⁵ always obliging and well behaved, and their departure was greatly lamented. The *Journal* believed that by building the Douglas Reservoir they had "stamped their presence on South African soil in almost indelible characters." The residents of Fort England presented a

flattering address, ending with the hope that "in whatever clime, and wherever situated, you may be enabled to maintain, as British soldiers, the same noble and unblemished character."⁵⁶ The tributes summarised the love and esteem in which the redcoats had been held, in Albany at least, for so many decades.

These were not in fact the last troops at Fort England, which remained occupied until 1870.⁵⁷ But already change was in the air. Britain was gradually withdrawing

The Fort England Chapel (1979).

DRAWING: JOAN ENGLISH, BY COURTESY OF THE FORT ENGLAND HOSPITAL



the Imperial troops, leaving the Cape to manage her own defence after she had obtained responsible government (1872). Famous regiments disappeared from the scene, and were replaced by colonial counterparts.

The CMR was disbanded in England in 1870.⁵⁸ Its place was partly filled by the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, who in 1878 assumed the name of the Cape Mounted Riflemen as a South African unit.⁵⁹ The many local units formed in Albany down the years found their counterpart in the Grahamstown First City Volunteers, formed in October 1875.⁶⁰

By that time Fort England had already opened her doors to a new type of occupant (September 1875) and begun a fresh chapter in her history. But that is another story. ■

49. BULGER, *op. cit.*, pp.54–55.

50. *The Journal*, 29.4.1864.

51. *Graham's Town Journal*, 8.12.1860.

52. *The Journal*, 26.12.1865.

53. *The Journal*, 3.1.1866.

54. *The Journal*, 27.3.1867.

55. *The Journal*, 11.1.1867.

56. *The Journal*, 26.4.1867.

57. TONKIN, *op. cit.*, p.52.

58. YOUNG, *op. cit.*, p.70.

59. *Ibid.*, p.86.

60. GRIFFITHS, *op. cit.*, p.34.