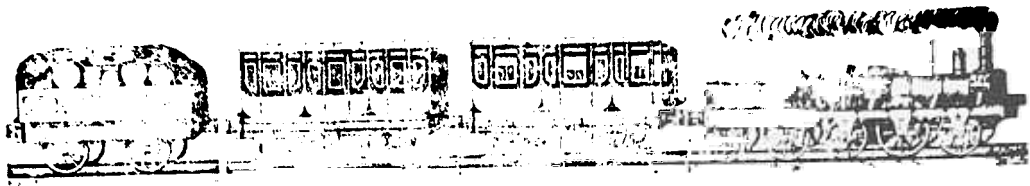


# WHEN THE RAILWAY CAME TO GRAHAMSTOWN

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## Opening of the North-Eastern Railway GRAHAMSTOWN.

The opening of the railway between Alicedale and Grahamstown on 3 September 1879 was a red-letter day for Grahamstown. It marked the culmination of a project initiated by Grahamstown businessmen twenty-three years earlier to link Grahamstown by rail to the harbour of Port Elizabeth.<sup>1</sup> By the time the railway came, however, enthusiasm for the project had waned in favour of another one — a railway to the harbour of Port Alfred. None the less, the opening of the railway-line between Alicedale and Grahamstown was celebrated in a manner befitting the importance of the occasion and in expectation of its enhancing the commercial prospects of Grahamstown.

On the evening of 2 September the first passenger train to steam into Grahamstown station arrived without ceremony although it carried some important guests for the official opening the next day — among them Mr Wyld, the resident magistrate of Port Elizabeth, and his family.<sup>2</sup> This train was piloted by Mr Watson, the chief engineer, and Mr Rose, the district engineer, both of whom, no doubt enjoyed a professional warmth of pride in an achievement safely accomplished, for — as pictures published in one British newspaper (*The Graphic*) show — the terrain through which the railway passed called for considerable professional skill.

Though there was no official welcome for this train, it arrived in a Grahamstown already prepared for the next day's festivities. The Dundas Bridge was decorated for the occasion and flags flew from many of the stores and houses in the city. Every hotel and boarding house was packed to capacity and many visitors were accommodated in private houses.<sup>3</sup>

On the morning of 3 September "a well-dressed, expectant and hospitably-disposed crowd"<sup>4</sup> assembled at the station to see the first train pull out of the station at 11h00. There were so many people milling about the platform that in the view of the reporter for *The Journal* "the obstruction thus caused was sufficient to make an irritable man insane."<sup>5</sup> The several dignitaries nevertheless made their slow way to the carriages with infinite patience.

The mayor and city councillors of Grahamstown had a saloon carriage to themselves, but the members of the Chamber of Commerce seem to have been less well provided for: they had to wander up and down the train in

search of seats and, according to *The Journal's* reporter, "looked like a house divided against itself."<sup>6</sup> One carriage carried the band of the 1st Cape Volunteer Regiment whose music added to the festive atmosphere.

Eventually all were aboard and ready for the ceremonial journey to Atherstone and back. The doors of the carriages were locked and then, possibly for dramatic effect, the spectators were given five minutes to gaze in through the windows at the lucky passengers. Then the guard blew his whistle and slowly the engine began to pull the train out of the station. It moved out beneath a triumphal arch erected for the occasion and passed between a dense crowd of animated spectators who lined the banks on either side. Two young men on horseback however obviously intended to demean this great occasion for "the iron horse". They rode beside the train and were clearly able to keep pace with it until it reached the flats outside Grahamstown. When, to release pressure, the engine emitted a blast of steam and the engine driver blew the shrill whistle, one of the horses was startled. It swerved suddenly and in doing so unseated the rider. This retribution gave smug satisfaction to the reporter of *The Journal*. "Oh! what a fall was there, my countrymen," he commented. "When we last saw the conspirators they were in pursuit of a riderless horse dashing over the flat with stirrups wildly flying."<sup>7</sup>

G.D.R. DODS, *Nineteenth century communications in the Zuurveld* (M.Sc. thesis, Rhodes University, 1960), p.164.

2. *The Journal*, 5.9.1879.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

\*I should like to express my thanks to Mr Michael Berning and Mrs Sandy Fold of the Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, for their help and assistance.

Atherstone, a distance of 21 kilometers, was reached in 55 minutes. But once there the assembled gathering had simply to mark time. A special train from Port Elizabeth with which they were supposed to connect was 1½ hours late. The advantage of having the band with them was keenly appreciated. Besides listening to it the only other thing to do was admire the decorations which relieved the ugliness of the station and reflect on a motto conspicuously fixed to the side of the goods shed — “Labor Omnia Vincit” — Work conquers all. This motto was considered appropriate because of the hard work required to bring the railway line into operation. Three deep cuttings had had to be blasted through solid rock, tunnels excavated, and a bridge of loose rock built over a deep ravine:<sup>8</sup> all projects now taken for granted, but considered remarkable a hundred years ago.

When the special train from Port Elizabeth could be heard approaching Atherstone, the Grahamstown passengers instead of preparing to give it a rousing welcome scurried back into their coaches. Grahamstown’s mayor, Mr George Reynolds, called them all back to give the incoming train a reception befitting the occasion. A few responded to the call and took up positions on the platform with the mayor, city councillors, and the band, though most seem to have remained glued to their seats possibly fearful that the train might return to Grahamstown without them.

The special train soon came puffing into the station to be greeted by hurrahs from the group assembled on the platform. There were sixteen carriages pulled by two engines and pushed by a third. The leading engine was “gorgeously emblazoned” and appropriately bore the name *The Settler City*.<sup>9</sup>

Soon the two trains were coupled and an impressive train of twenty-five carriages drawn by two engines and pushed by one set off for Grahamstown. Mr Rose, the district engineer, and some of his staff travelled in the leading engine.

The scene at Grahamstown station as the train rolled in was one of great confusion. The platform was packed with spectators who had come to witness the historic event. Clearly the science of crowd control was unknown



No. 448 is said to be the railway engine used to bring the first train into Grahamstown.

in Grahamstown and no effort was made to prevent a crush. In the words of *The Journal* reporter, “The position was most uncomfortable.”<sup>10</sup>

However, if the spectators fared badly, the passengers in the twenty-five carriages were worse off. Because of the mob on the platform they were unable to get out of the train for a full twenty minutes after arrival. And when they did leave, they had to push their way through the crowd. Passengers from Port Elizabeth had the additional burden of luggage to find and carry.

The arrival of the train, says *The Journal* reporter, “was certainly a relief to the minds of many in the train (and out of it) who were thinking of the embankments, curves and inclines, by which the precious cargo was coming; of the enormous weight; and the bare possibility of some awful upset.”<sup>11</sup> Yet the relief at the arrival of the train could not have been greater than that experienced by the chief engineer and his staff whose work had been carefully watched and reported upon by the press. Some delays were due to faulty management but others were thought to be the fault of politicians who favoured the development of railways in the western province over those in the east. Hence Mr Watson the chief engineer,

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*



The first train arriving at Grahamstown, 3 September 1879.  
PHOTOGRAPH, 1820 SETTLERS MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN



A short railway embankment, Ross's Camp.

PHOTOGRAPH: 1820 SETTLERS' MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

who performed the opening ceremony, must have done so with more than ordinary pleasure.

One reporter described the achievement in detail. Two miles outside Alicedale the line made two sharp curves through a short cutting into the 300 foot long New Year's River Tunnel which is cut through hard shaly rock. From the tunnel there is a seven-mile rise on a gradient of 1 in 40. On one stretch of the line only half a mile long there is a short cutting, a steep embankment 70 feet high at the centre line, a tunnel of 150 feet, with the strata of rocks at a very awkward inclination, another embankment, and a big cutting from which 17 000 cubic yards of hard white rock had been blasted. On the Grahamstown side of this difficult half-mile the line reaches its highest altitude of 2 500 feet above sea level. From this point, through an 800 foot tunnel, the line descends almost continuously some 750 feet into Grahamstown. The first view of Grahamstown from the line, this reporter said, "is the finest to be had, with its white and yellow houses intermixed with trees, its tall cathedral spire, behind which are the native locations, with their lines of huts showing the slope of the hill, and over the right looking well up the Kowie valley, with its hill-behind-hill right away into the blue atmosphere."<sup>12</sup> This view of Grahamstown was captured by the picture published in *The Graphic* of 10 May 1879.

The building of this line was no mean achievement

Grahamstown from just below the railway-line, May 1879.

PHOTOGRAPH: 1820 SETTLERS' MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN



for Mr Watson and his team. Mr George Hudson, the Civil Commissioner of Albany, read a telegram of congratulations from the Colonial Secretary (the Hon. J.G. Sprigg) and called for three cheers "for the success and prosperity of the line."<sup>13</sup> These were given with enthusiasm and the crowd began to disperse. Those who had paid a 10/- (ten shillings) admission fee made their way to tiffin in the goods shed.

The inevitable speeches at the tiffin had a decidedly political flavour. Speakers were generally critical of the ministry of John Molteno<sup>14</sup> which had fallen in February 1878 and were full of praise for the ministry of J.G. Sprigg, M.L.A. for East London<sup>15</sup> and an easterner like themselves.

When the railway had first been sought in 1856, the citizens of Grahamstown had asked for the construction of a line to Port Elizabeth,<sup>16</sup> but by the time it was opened in 1879 their primary concern was to have a line to Port Alfred. To the cheers of the crowd, Mr Cawood, M.L.A. for Grahamstown, asserted: "The Ministry and the country must fully understand that Grahamstown will never rest and never be satisfied until we have secured our railway to the Kowie. This is our natural outlet; give us this and we will not murmur about our geographical position."<sup>17</sup> The clue to the change of heart lies, I think, in the next sentence. "The line finished that day," said Mr Cawood, "was a line from Alicedale to Grahamstown and not from Port Elizabeth to Grahamstown." Therefore the people of Grahamstown would not rest until they had obtained a line to the Kowie.<sup>18</sup>

No thought or consideration was given to a line to the Kowie in 1862, for example, when a prominent Grahamstown businessman George Wood (jr.) and 849 others presented a petition to parliament in support of a railway

12. Albany Museum, Grahamstown: Cutting of a report by Ned Swain, attached to a copy of the programme of festivities.

13. *The Journal*, 5.9.1879.

14. Sir John Charles Molteno was Prime Minister of the Cape Colony (December 1872 – February 1878). He was also M.L.A. for Beaufort West (1854–1878) and Victoria West (1880–1883). See W.J. DE KOCK and D.W. KRÜGER (eds.), *Dictionary of South African biography II*, pp.482–485.

15. Sir John Gordon Sprigg, M.L.A. for East London (1869, 1872–1903 and 1908–1910) and Cape Prime Minister (February 1878 – May 1881, November 1886 – July 1890, January 1896 – October 1898, and June 1900 – February 1904. DE KOCK and KRÜGER, *op. cit.*, pp.698–700.

16. DODS, *op. cit.*, p.164.

17. *The Journal*, 5.9.1879.

18. *Ibid.*

line between Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown. They claimed that the wagon route between Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth was inadequate for their trading requirements and was impeding commercial progress. They estimated that each year more than a thousand oxen died on that route from accidents and lung-sickness. They reckoned that given these disadvantages the working expenses and interest on capital spent on building a line would be more than covered by the goods traffic and passenger returns.<sup>19</sup>

William M. Bowker and 31 others submitted a counter petition because they did not think that the trade of Grahamstown could sustain the line. They claimed that the staunchest advocates for railways in Grahamstown were men who owned no property and were only birds of passage who looked for trade from the spades of navvies to replace the lost bayonets of the military.<sup>20</sup> The headquarters of the military had been moved to King William's Town<sup>21</sup> and they argued that Grahamstown businessmen were simply looking for a new market. In due course Bowker and his fellow petitioners considered that East London or some other port on the Transkei coast would replace Grahamstown as the principal centre for the Transkei trade and that this would materially affect the railway as a paying scheme.<sup>22</sup>

What lay behind the controversy was the way in which the construction of the line was to be financed. The government proposed to raise the capital required upon the security of the colonial revenue and upon the security of the landed property in the districts through which the railway would pass. Individuals who possessed property in the district to be served by the line were therefore obliged to provide a sub-guarantee for the loan. Hence if the railway-line was not a paying proposition individual landowners would suffer materially. Transport riders used this threat of the sub-guarantee to support their own weakening position, but the increasing death of oxen owing to lung-sickness and to road accidents, and the crippling effect of drought undermined their opposition.<sup>23</sup>

In the event it was never necessary to apply the sub-guarantee in the eastern districts, for by the time the building of the railways in the eastern districts had begun the revenue of the colony was sufficient to meet all costs.<sup>24</sup> But until 1866/7, when the first diamond was discovered and identified, the hidden riches of the interior were unknown and the necessity of raising large sums of capital to build a railway through the difficult terrain of the eastern districts must have been intimidating.<sup>25</sup> The Cape Town—Wellington line opened in 1862 did run at a loss. In 1863 the loss amounted to £1 906, and in 1864 rose to £5 092<sup>26</sup> and railway stock sold at 52% of its face value.<sup>27</sup>

The Grahamstown—Port Elizabeth line was, however, a long time coming. Easterners complained that the government favoured the western districts and they were politically jealous of the Cape Town—Wellington railway,<sup>28</sup> but this does not necessarily mean that there was deliberate discrimination against the Eastern Cape. There was a great deal of controversy about which route the line should take and, in the dismal financial climate of the 'sixties, it was not easy to raise money. Only in 1869 (i.e. after the discovery of diamonds) a parliamentary select committee unanimously concluded that it was "imperatively necessary, for the sake of colonial enterprise and advancement, that public undertakings should be no longer delayed."<sup>29</sup>

But still the line to Grahamstown was delayed. Graaff-Reinet wanted to be connected to the port and the rich diggings too. The two towns attempted to make a deal,<sup>30</sup> but local desires had in the end to give way to the wider colonial interest for a line between the port and the diamond diggings. The Railway Act of 1874<sup>31</sup> provided for a railway-line to pass through the Bushman's River valley to Cradock, and Grahamstown was to be linked to this by a branch line. The mayor, Mr S.C. Cronwright, and 1 334 others petitioned the Legislative Council to retain Grahamstown's place on the main trunk line<sup>32</sup> — but to no avail. A start was made on a branch line through Hell Poort but, after £3 000 had been spent on it, this one was abandoned in favour of a shorter line from Alicedale.<sup>33</sup>

The near approach of the railway to Grahamstown introduced an element of disorder to which Grahams-town was not accustomed. Some English navvies were included among the 380 labourers building the track,<sup>34</sup> they sometimes visited Grahamstown. "Navvies," commented *The Journal* on one occasion, "have some very good points. In fact", it said with typical patriotic prejudice, "in him [a navvy] are latent many of the finest characteristics of the Englishman". Yet in Grahamstown it was what *The Journal* considered his weaknesses that were exposed because, it was thought, in England he drank beer whereas at the Cape he drank brandy.<sup>35</sup>

These comments had been made by *The Journal* because three navvies had been brought before the local magistrate and charged with disorderly behaviour. The accused had gone to a circus and during the performance one of them flourished a revolver and pointed it at the company. He had been removed from the circus tent by a constable. Two of his mates followed him outside. A scrummage in the street followed in which "revolvers and a knife played a part ill at harmony with peace." One witness at the trial alleged that the accused had been drinking at Mr Wood's hotel and that subsequently they had set upon him, robbed him of a quantity of his night's purchases and fired a revolver at him. The accused were remanded by the magistrate. *The Journal*, commenting on the case, observed that unless reasonable recreation could

19. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Cape Parliamentary Papers (Annexures to votes and proceedings)*: A. 33/1862.

20. *Ibid.*: C. 16/1862 (Petition of W.M. Bowker and 31 others, landholders and occupiers of land, district of Albany).

21. *Graham's Town Journal*, 25.3.1862. Order was given to move to King William's Town immediately.

22. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Cape Parliamentary Papers (Annexures to votes and proceedings)*: C. 16/1862 (Petition of W.M. Bowker and 31 others....)

23. DODS, *op. cit.*, pp.169—170.

24. *Ibid.*, p.171.

25. M. ROBERTSON, *Diamond fever* (Cape Town, 1974), pp.22—23.

26. See I.M. MURRAY, *Early railway development in the Cape Colony, 1853—1886* (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1928), p.15.

27. *Ibid.*, p.17.

28. J. STEAD, *The development and failure of the Eastern Cape separatist movement with special reference to John Paterson* (M.A. thesis, Rhodes University, 1974), p.59.

29. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Cape Parliamentary Papers (Annexures to votes and proceedings)*: C. 6/1869.

30. DODS, *op. cit.*, p.199.

31. Act 19/1874.

32. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Cape Parliamentary Papers (Annexures to votes and proceedings)*: C. 6/1874.

33. DODS, *op. cit.*, p.199.

34. See *The Journal*, 28.7.1876.

35. *The Journal*, 28.8.1876.

be provided the peace of Grahamstown would be seriously disturbed in the approaching twelve months.<sup>36</sup> Clearly the labourers on the line brought some disorder into the life of the town; but this story also illustrates that Bowker was right in 1862 when he prophesied that the navvies would provide an alternative to the military as a market for Grahamstown's merchants, albeit only temporary.

Once the route to Grahamstown was fixed there remained the question of the terminus. Four possible termini were seriously considered: the drostdy grounds, a site near Christ Church, another near the present West Hill Station, and a site behind the Albany Brethren's Hall.<sup>37</sup> One city councillor, Mr Barr, wanted the railway brought into Church Square and a railway station built on the site of the present city hall.<sup>38</sup> Fortunately this proposal received very little support. Another site considered was the cricket ground (City Lords) but this too was turned down because the water facilities for steam engines were inadequate.<sup>39</sup>

The site in the vicinity of the Albany Brethren's Hall was chosen because it was close to a much-frequented outspan, close to the main road to the frontier districts, and close to the business part of the city; it also had plenty of room to build warehouses, and was near a 'vlei' which even in time of drought afforded a never-failing supply of water.<sup>40</sup> The convenience of the site for the continuation of the line to the Kowie was also a strong recommendation in its favour. After lengthy negotiations the brethren accepted an offer of £350 as compensation for the ground expropriated.<sup>41</sup>

Once the site was fixed upon, the Grahamstown public was anxious to hasten construction by a public ceremony for the turning of the first sod to build the station. Citizens were asked to close their businesses at 12 noon on 10 April 1878 "to give éclat" to the ceremony.<sup>42</sup> The gentleman asked to perform it was that doughty city father, the Hon. Robert Godlonton. According to *The Diamond Fields Advertiser*, the ceremony was likely to be his last activity before he retired from public life.<sup>43</sup> He performed the ceremony "in a thoroughly workmanlike manner," records *The Journal*.<sup>44</sup> The important feature of the ceremony was the satisfaction it gave Grahams-townians at seeing the spot desired by them "definitely selected and authorized by government."<sup>45</sup> *The Journal* commented that the position was an admirable one "both for its present purpose as a terminus to the Alicedale line, and for a starting point to the Kowie railway when circumstances permit that branch to be taken in hand."<sup>46</sup> This little ceremony, however, proved to be premature.

The site for the station was chosen but a route had still to be fixed to bring the rail track from the outskirts of the town to the station. A plan submitted to the city council by the railway engineer brought the line from behind the stables of Oatlands Park up the middle of Francis Street crossing Fitzroy, Caroline and Burton Streets, turning off at Caldecott Street, and instead of terminating at the rear of the Albany Brethren's Hall as anticipated when the ceremony for the turning of the first sod took place, the track continued out on to the flat for some few hundred yards.<sup>47</sup> Apparently the small extension to the line was required because there had to be a straight line of sufficient length leading to the terminus.

The plan aroused a good deal of indignation on the part of the owners and occupiers of property in Francis Street.<sup>48</sup> Their representations were satisfied when it was agreed to route the track some 30 yards higher up but still

terminating beyond the Albany Brethren's Hall and near to the cemetery.<sup>49</sup> Citizens hoped this was not an ill omen and that like the dead this would not be the end of the line, but that the track would continue to Port Alfred. However, the railway had come to town and Grahams-townians then as now were never at a loss to celebrate an occasion.

Besides the ceremonies at the railway station there were several other functions to mark the occasion. A ball was held in the Albany Hall with music by the band of the First City Regiment. The Oddfellows Society held a ball too. The Grahamstown Musical Society gave a concert in the Albany Hall where all 300 seats seem to have been sold to townsfolk; hence visitors to town were unable to be accommodated. The organist at the cathedral rose to the occasion and gave an impromptu and much-appreciated organ recital in the cathedral to those unable to hear the concert.<sup>50</sup>

The occasion was a happy one but the dream in Grahamstown was for the extension of the line to Port Alfred. Grahamstown businessmen nurtured a hope that some of the business of the Diamond Fields would be directed through Port Alfred<sup>51</sup> and that ipso facto Grahamstown would find itself on a trunk line to the interior.

The extension of the line to Port Alfred, however, was delayed five years. When it did come it was the achievement of private enterprise though aided by government.<sup>51</sup> It would seem that since the Kowie Railway Company went into liquidation within two years of the line's opening, those with a broader perspective of colonial needs had a better assessment of this investment than local prejudice would admit. Even though Grahamstown was on a branch line, evidence of the receipts for passenger and goods traffic suggests there was substantial local support for the line.

In the twentieth century the line through Alicedale is still the link to the outside world and it is not the line to the Kowie which provides the greater commercial opportunities for Grahamstown. Perhaps indeed in this age of oil shortages we should even be thankful that the line has not been modernized and that one of the pleasant anachronisms of Grahamstown is that it still lives in the age of the steam engine. ■

36. *Ibid.*

37. CAPE OF GOOD HOPE, *Cape Parliamentary Papers (Annexures to votes and proceedings)*: G. 3/1878; *The Journal*, 17.3.1876.

38. *The Journal*, 17.3.1876.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

41. Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, MS 7056: Minute book of the United Albany Brethren Society, 28.1.1880, p.72.

42. *The Journal*, 8.4.1878.

43. *The Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 6.4.1878.

44. *The Journal*, 12.4.1878.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *The Journal*, 9.8.1878.

48. *The Journal*, 11.9.1878.

49. *The Journal*, 30.9.1878.

50. See *The Journal*, 5.9.1879.

51. *Ibid.*

52. The Cape Government agreed to pay a subsidy of £50 000, but the rest of the money — some £300 000 — had to be raised by a private company.