

# THE CONSTRUCTION AND USE OF GRAHAMSTOWN CATHEDRAL'S TOWERS

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St George's church, which in 1853 became the Cathedral Church of the Anglican Diocese of Grahamstown, was built between 1824 and 1830.<sup>1</sup> It was a plain building in the Georgian style with a substantial west tower rising to 36,6 m, or 3 m higher than the level of the nave roof.<sup>2</sup> This tower helped to lend an ecclesiastical air to the building and from about 1830<sup>3</sup> seems to have contained at least one bell.

## NEED FOR A PUBLIC CLOCK

There was, however, another use to which the tower could be put and this may have been in men's minds from the very beginning. Certainly by the mid-1840s it was being claimed that the tower had been "left off 20 or 30 feet lower than it ought to have been"<sup>4</sup> and that this omission should be rectified by raising the tower so that it could house a public clock.

Clocks had been housed in British and European church towers for some centuries and it is quite possible that Grahamstown Anglicans thought their church incomplete without one. They were certainly prepared at this time to raise £250 towards installing a clock in the tower if the governor would contribute £500.<sup>5</sup> This move failed.

The idea of a public clock in the St George's tower attracted wider support than the enthusiasms and needs of local churchmen. The church vestry was aware in September 1849, when it formed itself into a committee to raise funds for a clock, that it would be a "Town Clock".<sup>6</sup> This view was shared by the secular authorities when in June 1853 the town clerk approached the vestry about placing a clock in the tower.<sup>7</sup>

St George's tower had several advantages as the home of a town clock. The church stood, as does its present-day successor, in the centre of the town, in the midst of its High (or principal) Street. The tower was large, of significant height and believed to be capable of being raised higher. A clock placed there would be readily accessible to all inhabitants and especially to businessmen and officials who needed a time standard for their daily work.

The problem they faced was not the scientific one of how it could be determined what the time was. It was rather a social problem of how an agreed standard of local time could be communicated to all the inhabitants.

This can be illustrated well by the case of *Rex vs A.J. McKenzie* which took place in 1834. Mrs McKenzie, a canteen-keeper, was charged with breaching Ordinance 93 by selling liquor after 21h00. The signal which she claimed to have heard and needed was the nine o'clock ringing of a church bell.<sup>8</sup> John Box, a witness at the trial, had used his own watch on the night in question but did not know if it was accurate or not as he regulated it to his "own time". Witness James Marooney had no watch but knew when it was 20h30 because he heard the bugle signal while he was still in High Street outside the inn. He also heard the nine o'clock bell ring and had asked the sentry on duty outside the public offices what time it was at 22h30. S. Allen, a constable, explained to the court that his watch regulated the ringing of the church bell. He set his watch "by the dial" and sent people from the prison at about 20h55 each evening to ring the bell. On the night in question his watch

was right by the dial. The magistrate hearing the case, clearly assumed that it was possible for citizens to know when it was officially nine o'clock. He however agreed that with the existing variety of time signals and practices, confusion could easily result.<sup>9</sup>

It was obvious that a better time signal was needed. The skills to provide it came initially from the troops stationed in Grahamstown. In 1863 a councillor said that the town had had nearly 50 years of military time-keeping,<sup>10</sup> though at first this probably took forms like the bugle signal mentioned earlier. By about 1838 the firing of a signal gun at 09h00 from Fort Selwyn on a hill above the town had been started.<sup>11</sup> It gave the official time to which clocks and watches were to be regulated. This gun was clearly audible and its discharge could be seen in the town below. Though public and business life in Grahamstown was no longer as much at the mercy of private time-keeping as it had been, all problems were not solved.<sup>12</sup> If comments in the local press are to be taken at face value the artilleryman who fired



The old St George's Cathedral from the north-west, c. 1860.

PHOTOGRAPH BY: VAN DER RIET COLLECTION, CORY LIBRARY

<sup>1</sup> C. GOULD, *Grahamstown Cathedral: a guide and short history* (Grahamstown, 1924), pp. 19-25.

<sup>2</sup> Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown (CL), MS 16 604, *Grahamstown Cathedral: Vestry Minutes*, vol. I, p. 260.

<sup>3</sup> CL, MS 16 758, *Grahamstown Cathedral: Papers about the fabric and furnishings*, folder No. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: Folder No. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> CL, MS 16 604: *Vestry Minutes*, vol. I, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252; also CL, MS 16 758: Folder No. 9.

<sup>8</sup> The inn was in High Street and the bell was probably in St George's Church.

<sup>9</sup> *Graham's Town Journal*, 6.3.1834.

<sup>10</sup> M. GIBBENS, *Two decades in the life of a city: Grahamstown 1862-1882* (M.A., RhU, 1982), pp. 160-161.

<sup>11</sup> *Cape Frontier Times*, 4.12.1849 and *Graham's Town Journal*, 15.12.1849.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



St George's Cathedral from the east, before the tower was raised for the clock.

PHOTOGRAPH: DIOCESAN ARCHIVES, CORY LIBRARY

the gun was not always accurate; obvious problems could also arise between the man who set his watch by the gun and the man who either did not hear it or failed to adjust his watch — especially if the firing of the gun was not always regular.

A public clock which could be seen and heard by all whenever a time check was needed would have clear advantages over a signal gun. However desirable a public clock might be, nothing actually happened for a long time. The problem seems to have been largely one of money. The vestry had resolved to raise funds in 1849,<sup>13</sup> while in 1853 the town clerk suggested a public subscription for that purpose. Early the next year the vestry appointed a committee to raise funds and in October 1854 Messrs Maynard and Krohn offered £10 each if the clock was placed in the church tower. By April 1859 only £7/2/9 had been collected towards raising the tower but apparently nothing to pay for a clock.<sup>14</sup>

## A CLOCK TOWER?

In the meantime new factors had emerged which were to play their part in determining the future of the tower. In 1853 St George's Church had become a cathedral but it can have fitted few people's idea of what a cathedral should look like. The very word would have conjured up images drawn from the medieval cathedrals of Britain and Europe. John Armstrong, the first Bishop of Grahamstown, described his cathedral as "plain and uninteresting in the extreme" and pleaded that a "better and worthier structure [be] reared as our cathedral".<sup>15</sup>

So began the moves to rebuild or replace the old building. Inevitably such rebuilding would be in the medieval style of the European cathedrals, once again in fashion as part of the Gothic Revival.<sup>16</sup> The old tower thus faced two possible fates — it might be adapted to house the town clock, if the money could be found for one, or it might be replaced by the new Gothic spire of a 'worthier' cathedral.

In 1860 an opportunity seemed to present itself of combining both projects. Prince Alfred, the second son of Queen Victoria, was visiting the Cape Colony amidst widespread public interest.<sup>17</sup> The vestry proposed to ask him to lay the foundation-stone of what was to be called the 'Alfred Tower'.<sup>18</sup> This new tower would be in the Gothic style to a design by Joseph Flashman, an Eastern Cape architect.<sup>19</sup>

If the vestry was hoping, as seems likely, that the royal involvement would promote fund-raising for the project they had to face a major problem. The governor, Sir George Grey, pointed out that it would not be "proper" for Prince Alfred to connect himself with the project unless funds had already been provided for its completion.<sup>20</sup> The vestry accordingly decided that it would take a loan of £2 000 "to be repaid out of subscriptions to the Tower as they are collected".<sup>21</sup> This was, perhaps, a slightly dubious proceeding since it relied on the subscriptions reaching £2 000 before the loan had to be paid back, or Grey's objection would not have been met. It was, however, actively supported by Henry Cotterill, second Bishop of Grahamstown.

Dubious or not, the move succeeded and on 9 August 1860 Prince Alfred duly laid the foundation-stone of the new tower in the presence of a large crowd. It is clear from a contemporary report that a complex scheme was being inaugurated. The 'Alfred Tower' was being erected not only to the glory of God and for the adornment of His House but also for the benefit of the citizens. The tower was designed to receive a peal of bells and a public clock which was to be under the sole custody and control of the municipal authorities. The new tower was furthermore intended to be the first stage of a complete new cathedral in the Early English Gothic style.<sup>22</sup>

In the event, none of this was translated into reality and beyond the foundation-stone nothing actually happened. It seems to have become necessary to repay the loan by November 1861<sup>23</sup> as subscriptions did not reach the required level.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>13</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. I, pp. 167, 252, 260-262 and 272.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348-349

<sup>15</sup> GOULD, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> For the influence of the Gothic Revival on Anglican church-building at this period, see B.F.L. CLARKE, *Church builders of the nineteenth century: a study of the Gothic Revival in England* (London, 1938), especially chapters IV and VI.

<sup>17</sup> *The progress of His Royal Highness Prince Alfred Ernest Albert through the Cape Colony ... in the year 1860* (Cape Town, 1861), especially pp. 36-44.

<sup>18</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. I, p. 364.

<sup>19</sup> Flashman († 1871) had been a clerk in the Surveyor-General's Office in Grahamstown. He subsequently settled in Queenstown.

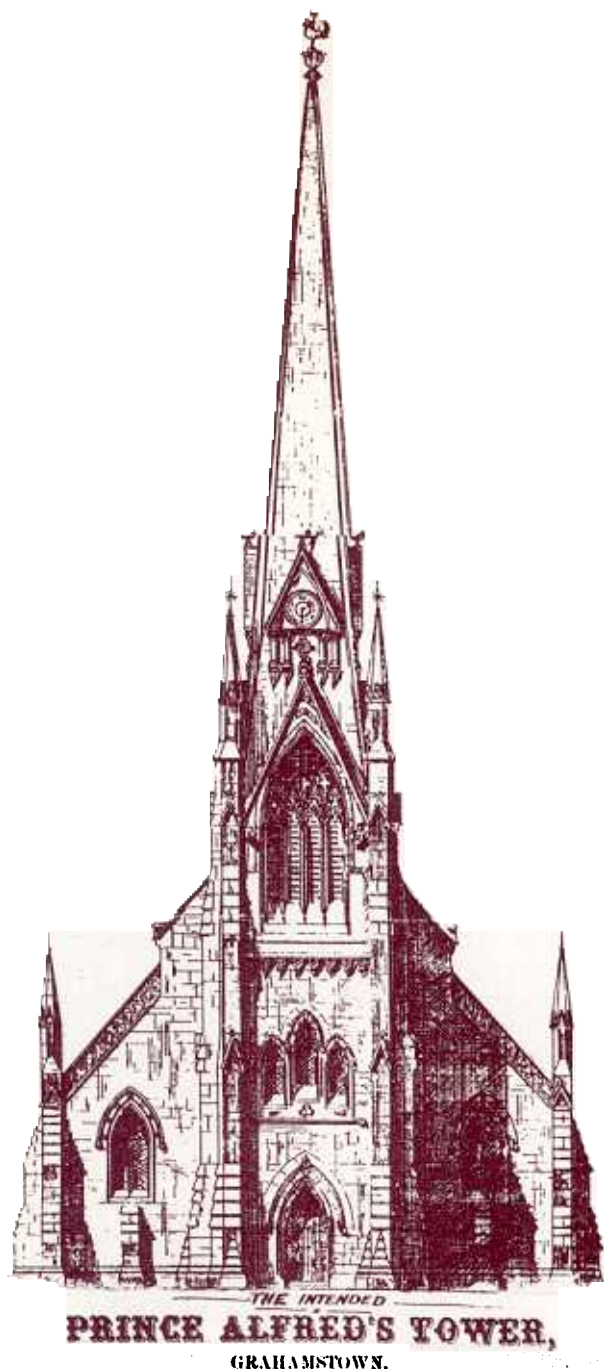
<sup>20</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. I, p. 365.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 365-370.

<sup>22</sup> *Graham's Town Journal*, 9.8.1860.

<sup>23</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. I, pp. 382-383.

<sup>24</sup> *Eastern Star*, 29.1.1876.



Joseph Flashman's design for the proposed 'Alfred Tower' for St George's Cathedral.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALBANY MUSEUM, GRAHAMSTOWN

Certain ideas had, nevertheless, been born. A scheme had been devised whereby a clock could be paid for by public subscription, housed in St George's tower and cared for by the municipality. Gothic style plans for an improvement of part of the fabric had been produced and the idea of a gradual replacement of the whole building introduced.

In July 1861 the vestry went further and took the important step of asking the bishop to approach George Gilbert Scott in London "for a design for the remodelling of the Cathedral in keeping with the Alfred Tower".<sup>25</sup> This was a bold move for Scott's was one of the great names in contemporary architecture<sup>26</sup> and his career was to be crowned with a knighthood and burial in Westminster Abbey.

Not surprisingly Scott, who was described in the *Eastern Star* as the "greatest living master of Gothic architecture in the world"<sup>27</sup>, was subsequently appointed architect of the proposed new tower, in the place of Flashman whose work

the same paper dismissed as "local architecture and carpenter's Gothic".<sup>28</sup> By May 1868 Scott's plans were far enough advanced for local architects to make comments in some detail on them.<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile the public clock scheme made no progress and, indeed, no actual changes were made to the existing tower. In 1862, however, the pattern of time-keeping in the city was jolted when the troops left, taking their signal gun with them. The city council tried to buy a replacement gun but failed and was forced to hire a bell-ringer who, with the permission of the Roman Catholic bishop, Patrick Moran, would ring a 21h00 signal on the bell of St Patrick's Church.<sup>30</sup>

A time signal given on a church bell could not be as effective as the signal gun. So when the troops returned in 1864 Grahamstown could once again rely on the gun only to be forced to re-employ the bell-ringer for St Patrick's at 10/- a month when the troops left again, this time finally, in 1870.<sup>31</sup>

## AT LAST A PUBLIC CLOCK

It is probably no coincidence that in the wake of the upheavals over the signal gun and its final loss, a successful town clock fund with its own committee was at last established. The cathedral vestry too had played its part and agreed to "cordially co-operate in the proposed effort".<sup>32</sup>

By August 1872 affairs were sufficiently far advanced to necessitate an agreement between the vestry and the committee appointed for the clock fund. The vestry, for its part, sanctioned the raising of the tower to receive the clock. The agreement further envisaged that trustees or another "public body" would be appointed to care for the clock on behalf of the citizens who had subscribed for it once it had been erected. These trustees were guaranteed access to the clock at all reasonable times to wind, set and maintain it and the bells on which it was to strike. Both parties agreed that the clock should not be removable so long as the cathedral existed or a new one was built on the same site "equally suitable to display the said clock". The vestry suggested that the "care and custody" of the clock should be vested in the town council of Grahamstown, as had been proposed for the 'Alfred Tower' before.<sup>33</sup>

At a meeting of the 'Town Clock Committee' in January 1873 it was reported that the £500 needed for the clock and a bell had been raised (including a contribution of £50 from the municipality). Two tuning forks had been sent to England, presumably so that the tone of the new bell would blend with those of the existing cathedral bells. All waters were not, however, smooth. A tender for raising and beautifying the tower for £400 was rejected on the grounds that the 'Town Clock Committee' had no right to spend public money to embellish the cathedral — it could only spend up to £200 to accommodate the clock.<sup>34</sup> This clearly indicated that there were those who were watching closely to see

<sup>25</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. I, p. 378.

<sup>26</sup> CLARKE, *op. cit.*, chapter VIII.

<sup>27</sup> *Eastern Star*, 15.1.1874.

<sup>28</sup> CL, MS 16 645/1, Grahamstown Diocesan Archives: Scrap-book with undated cutting from *Eastern Star*.

<sup>29</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, pp. 76-77.

<sup>30</sup> GIBBENS, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, pp. 120 and 122.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43 and 122-123.

<sup>34</sup> *The Journal*, 8.1.1873.

that a particular church did not gain any private advantage from a public scheme!

The clock itself was ordered from Thwaites and Reed of London. It had four copper dials (2.1 m diameter) and included a bell on which the hours were to strike; the half and quarter hours would strike on the two bells already in the tower.<sup>35</sup> The clockwork and bell were packed into nine cases and shipped on 28 April 1873 from London, reaching Port Alfred on 15 August. There the cases were transferred to wagons for the journey to Grahamstown.<sup>36</sup>

Remodelling of the tower had begun earlier in the year and was virtually complete by June.<sup>37</sup> The erection of the clock could be entrusted to H.C. Galpin, a local watchmaker and jeweller, by early September, shortly after all the cases had arrived in Grahamstown.<sup>38</sup> By October 1873 it could be reported that "this piece of town property is now in working order". This did not include the striking apparatus which was not fully operational until 22 November but then every citizen participated in the convenience of "having a standard of time in a conspicuous situation".<sup>39</sup> Not only that, but the appearance of the main street had been improved! A familiar problem had however arisen in that the final cost of the project had proved to be over £800<sup>40</sup> and the 'Town Clock Committee' delayed handing the custody of the clock to the municipality until the full sum had been raised.

In the meantime the cathedral was exploring the increased possibilities for church bell ringing which three bells provided. They were expected to give forth a "merry peal" and the new bell, "though not rung properly with a swing" was pronounced to have a splendid sound.<sup>41</sup> On Old Year's Night 1873 the old year was rung out and the new in during a midnight service in which the ringing of the bells was combined with organ and choral music.<sup>42</sup> If the extended tower had become in one sense the public clock tower, such activities were an unavoidable reminder that it was also the parish bell tower and that the new bell, bought for the clock, had been drawn into parochial use.

At long last the city had got its public clock; the St Patrick's bell-ringer could be paid off and the artilleryman was no longer needed. So matters might have been expected to rest until the Anglicans succeeded in raising enough money to rebuild the cathedral — an event which, considering the problems over raising the comparatively minor sum for the clock, might be expected to only take place in the distant future.

## A NEW CLOCK TOWER

In fact, the whole question was re-opened quite soon. After barely a year the bell-ringer was back at St Patrick's ringing a time signal at 09h00 and 14h00.<sup>43</sup> The problem was that the old tower had become unsafe but opinions were divided as to the causes. The additional weight of the raised tower, the sway imparted by the ringing, in particular of the new large bell, and rain damage through the open bell-tower windows were suspected.<sup>44</sup> The vestry, on being informed that the tower was considered dangerous, consulted three architects. One pointed out that the tower was basically safe but suggested precautions and further observation, one said plainly that it was unsafe and the third would give no written opinion.<sup>45</sup>

In early December 1874 the position seems to have deteriorated following heavy rains. The dean and vestry, fearful that the tower *might* fall within hours or minutes, made

an approach to the city council. This proved to be a contentious move<sup>46</sup>, as in some quarters it was seen as an attempt to pass responsibility for the safety or removal of the tower to the council when it should have been a church matter. Yet, the problem was not a purely parochial one as the tower had been raised to accommodate the public clock, and the city council had been involved in the town clock scheme from an early date. After consulting further builders (who confirmed that the tower was dangerous) the council requested the removal of the clock and ordered the tower to be made secure or removed at the expense of the Anglican Church.<sup>47</sup>



Sir Gilbert Scott's tower during construction, showing the wooden scaffolding used.

In December 1874 while the old tower was being taken down, a public meeting was held to decide what to do about the clock and the cathedral tower if it was still to be used to house the clock. At this meeting several tower schemes were in the air.<sup>48</sup> The dean, F.H. Williams, favoured the tower proposed by Scott to inaugurate a new Gothic cathedral as well as housing the public clock. Bishop N.J. Merriman wanted a 'Prince Alfred tower' built to keep faith with promises made to the prince in 1860. Others believed that the planned 1820 Settlers Jubilee Memorial Tower could be adapted to take the clock or supported a public clock tower but were unhappy with the cathedral connection.

<sup>35</sup> CL, MS 16 758: Papers about the fabric ..., folder No. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Eastern Star*, 15.8.1873; *The Journal*, 22.8.1873.

<sup>37</sup> *The Journal*, 18.6.1873.

<sup>38</sup> *Grocott's Penny Mail*, 5.9.1873.

<sup>39</sup> *The Journal*, 17.10.1873 and 28.11.1873.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.11.1873.

<sup>41</sup> *Eastern Star*, 14.10.1873 and 11.11.1873.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.12.1873 and 6.1.1874.

<sup>43</sup> GIBBENS, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>44</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, pp. 167 and 171f.

<sup>45</sup> The architect's responses are recorded in the Vestry Minutes cited above.

<sup>46</sup> *Eastern Star*, 11.12.1874.

<sup>47</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, p. 178.

<sup>48</sup> *Eastern Star*, 18.12.1874; *The Journal*, 18.12.1874.



*Grahamstown in the 1890s; the towers of St George's Cathedral and the City Hall are prominent.*

PHOTOGRAPH: DIOCESAN ARCHIVES, CORY LIBRARY

These schemes were not necessarily mutually exclusive but few Grahamstonians were in a mood for compromise. Reuben Ayliff's suggestion that the Jubilee Tower and cathedral public clock tower be combined was rejected by the meeting, its opponents including some who supported both the towers but wanted separate structures. Merriman rejected any tower not called 'Prince Alfred', while Williams rejected a 'Prince Alfred tower' apparently because he saw this name as linked to the original Flashman plans. A councillor suggested that the cathedral/clock tower be built on the cathedral site though detached from the cathedral building to make its special status as a public structure clear. But even this plan found little favour.

In the end a new tower committee was set up to raise the funds for Scott's tower on the cathedral site as a combined cathedral and public clock tower. This committee's campaign proved to be a success: the cathedral donated £1 850, while Dean Williams and Samuel Cawood, who was himself a Methodist, undertook a very successful fund-raising trip to Port Elizabeth.<sup>49</sup> However, this joint venture did not proceed without problems. On 13 January 1876 the dean raised the foundation-stone laid by Prince Alfred and re-laid it with an additional document repudiating any connection between the new tower and that proposed in 1860.<sup>50</sup> This raised a storm of protest. Some claimed that Prince Alfred was being insulted, others questioned the right of the dean to make such a move without consulting the 'Tower Committee', the City Council of Grahamstown or the citizens. The very status of the 'Tower Committee' became an issue. Was it in control of the whole venture or was it, as the dean claimed, merely a fund-raising body? If he was correct, who was in control?<sup>51</sup>

The problems faced were not only organisational. Local builders were being asked to construct what was claimed to be the tallest building in South Africa in an Early English (13th century) style, using an unfamiliar material — concrete — under the ultimate direction of a distinguished but distant architect.<sup>52</sup> The challenges of erecting a structure on this scale using wooden scaffolding must have been considerable. Small wonder that mistakes were made. In 1878, for example, Scott's plans were misinterpreted and the spire was "drawn in too suddenly" leaving the tower deformed by "twists and hunches" for about 9.1 m at the top. The hip buttresses had also been shortened and to crown it all, the weather vane on top did not turn and had to be removed and repaired. These errors were rectified by early 1879,<sup>53</sup> but in the latter stages of building, the 'Tower Committee' ran out of funds.<sup>54</sup> By September 1879 the vestry had

therefore taken responsibility for completing the work, which could only have strengthened its claims to control the tower.

Despite all problems the tower, on which work had begun in 1876, was finally completed by February 1880.<sup>55</sup> It cost about £5 171 excluding £1 200 for a ring of eight bells, which was raised separately.<sup>56</sup>

## HOUSING THE PUBLIC CLOCK

Most of 1879 was spent replacing the clock. It had to be fitted into its new home and made to strike on three of the eight new bells. In the end the council paid £50 to the vestry to undertake the work. Technical problems had been overcome by 26 November when the hands were attached by using an "ingenious cage" suspended from the windows above the clock faces.<sup>57</sup>

On 14 November 1879 the vestry and city council reached a formal agreement on the terms on which the clock would be housed in the tower. It stated that the clock belonged to the "citizens and public of Grahamstown" and would remain their property. The council would act as trustee "of the due regulation, custody and ordinary maintenance and repair" of the clock. Council employees would have access to the clock at all reasonable times. Provision would also be made in the tower for the "lodgement and setting up in order" of the clock. It was finally stipulated that once in position, the clock should not be removed by council resolution.<sup>58</sup>

So Grahamstown finally had its public clock safely housed and the cathedral had a Gothic tower. The agreement between council and cathedral has proved a lasting one and is still in force over a century later. The 57 m tower dominated the old nave of the cathedral to such an extent that it must have proved a powerful incentive to the replacement of the whole structure as Dean Williams had proposed. This began in 1890<sup>59</sup> and is at present not quite complete as the south wall of the old nave remains.

<sup>49</sup> *Eastern Star*, 5.3.1876; *Eastern Province Herald*, 5.3.1876; CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, p. 191.

<sup>50</sup> *Eastern Star*, 21.1.1876.

<sup>51</sup> See especially *The Journal* and *Grocott's Penny Mail* of 21 January 1876 and succeeding issues; also CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, pp. 190-192.

<sup>52</sup> GOULD, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> *Eastern Star*, 24.1.1879.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 26.9.1879.

<sup>55</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> GOULD, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Eastern Star*, 26.9.1879.

<sup>58</sup> CL, MS 16 604: Vestry Minutes, vol. II, p. 232f.

<sup>59</sup> GOULD, *op. cit.*, p. 36.