

## South Africa's Most Unique "House"

By

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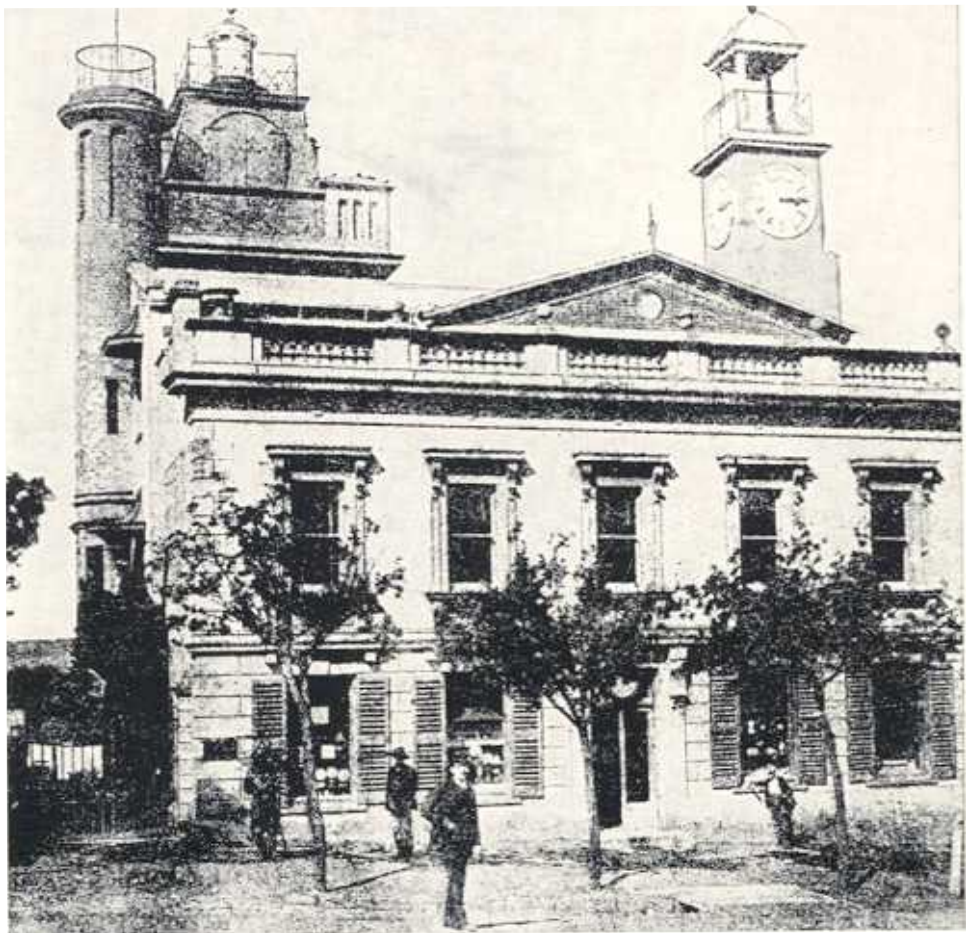
**O**N the east side of a street in Grahamstown, called after Lord Bathurst the Secretary of State for the Colonies at the time of the arrival of the 1820 Settlers, stands a "house" which is certainly the most unique one in South Africa, and one that must remain without counterpart in origin, shape, and in purpose, in the whole of the Union. It is Grahamstown's "Observatory".

Daily many hundreds of feet walk past the Observatory, also called "Tower House" or the "Camera Obscura"; but, like anything that has acquired the unfortunate *hall-mark* of having become part and parcel of the history of a town, this building, too, is now forgotten, or not known of by the public.

The first impression of the "house" is that it is an ordinary double-storey building with a Georgian parapet, and rather too ornate windows. Looking up, however, the viewer will see that the building rises into two strange turreted structures; the one on the left is round, looking something like a factory chimney, and the other one is square, rising as it were from a balcony-like structure. Both structures have railings round the top, while closed doors and long small windows apparently lead into the structures or into space.

I was taken by the owners of "Tower House" through the old wrought iron gates, very wide and very tall, down the alleyway, and entered the building through a side door which opened into a hall. In this hall starts the lovely teak spiral stairway which leads one to the first floor. On the landing of this last floor is the protrusion of the first half of a round wall, the other half being hidden behind a door in the wall through which one has to step. This entrance in the round wall is not more than 18 inches wide, leading to another stairway even narrower which rises into the air after the fashion of a corkscrew. At last, after a seemingly endless climb up in this vault, one steps on to the roof and into the square turreted structure (which could be seen from the front of the building) which housed the camera obscura.

For a few seconds I stood alone in the soft-falling rain and caressing breeze on the topmost pinnacle of South Africa's most unusual "house" at Grahamstown. Far below and around me lay the city and hills veiled in the silvery softness of the mist and rain. I was grateful for this quiet moment, and for my brief



encounter with the memory of the man who designed and built the "Observatory" in 1850, the first multiple storey building in the Eastern Province.

Henry Carter Galpin was born at Charmouth in England in Junie, 1820, and was trained as an architect and civil engineer. Due to severe exposure while surveying against time for a railway in the bogs of Kildare so as to supply data before the end of a session of parliament, his health broke down and he had to give up civil engineering. He took up his boyhood's hobby of clock-making and the making of jewelry as a profession. As his health continued to worry him, Galpin was at last persuaded by his physician to take a voyage to the Cape where he arrived aboard the *Herefordshire* (1,350 tons) at the beginning of 1848. Soon afterwards he entered for and won a R200 competition for the design of a green-house for the Gardens. As far as it can be ascertained this green-house is still there. In Cape Town he also met and married Miss Georgina Marie Luck; and as there was much talk then of the good prospects for a watchmaker and jeweller's business on the Frontier, especially among the regiments at Grahamstown, he and Mrs. Galpin set off for this frontier town where he started his business as Watchmaker and Jeweller in 1849.

Through the pages of H. C. Galpin's life there seems to be one incident which, most unfortunately, has probably become an historical inaccuracy, and is as such, recorded in the pages of history. This inaccuracy, according to the descendants of Mr. Galpin and according to the opinion expressed by other people, lies in the identification of the first diamond found in South Africa in 1867, an honour which is solely attributed to Dr. William Guybon Atherstone who, had he been alive at the time when this unshared honour was accorded to him by the recorders of the event, would certainly have objected to it. As is well-known, the trader O'Reilly had so much doubt thrown on the possibility of the stone being a diamond at Hope Town that he almost threw it away. But, at Colesberg it was suggested to him that the diamond be sent to Dr. Atherstone, Grahamstown's famous surgeon and geologist, for identification. Dr. Atherstone, who later was to gain considerable knowledge of diamonds, had at that time no personal experience of raw diamonds, and took O'Reilly's one to his great friend H. C. Galpin, the well-known jeweller of Grahamstown. Galpin, on being handed the stone felt the weight of it and picking up a jewellers file tried to mark it. He then tested it with a diamond pencil, and proclaimed it to be a diamond. The news of the stone being a diamond was reported by Dr. Atherstone. It is sincerely hoped that this matter will be cleared up once the Atherstone Diaries are edited and published.

H. C. Galpin had many scientific interests, chiefly in astronomy, geology, meteorology, apart from the fact that he was an exceptionally good craftsman as shown by his clocks, sundials, as well as jewelry, examples of which are still in the possession of his many descendants.

High up on a wall, now most annoyingly obscured to the public eye by other buildings and high roofs, is written in freehand, "The Observatory. Established in 1850". In principle the camera obscura is the same as a photographic camera with the difference, however, that it was used to provide people

an opportunity of seeing the surrounding landscape, but reduced to miniature size. The images thus seen through a camera obscura were thrown and picked up or revealed on the surface of a flat table.

Galpin's camera obscura was placed in the square turret built of bricks on top of the roof of the building. It now consists of only a circular apartment with a round and flat wooden table inside. The idea was that the viewer of the landscape and the person who worked the camera obscura step into this apartment after which the doors were closed to shut out any incoming light. The worker would then pull a rope which, in its turn again would pull away a heavy dark cloth, thus revealing a powerful lens in the ceiling immediately above the table through which light now streamed — and an exact representation in miniature of a portion of the surrounding landscape falls on to the table for the viewer to behold and enjoy. Another pull of the rope, and yet another circuit of the panoramic view is in view. It is reliably stated that not only did this instrument, described as a "combination of glasses and mirrors reflecting images on to a table", reveal the looked-at scene in every detail with leaves fluttering in the breeze and smoke rising from chimneys, but it also revealed the varying colours contained in the caught scene by the camera obscura.

This camera obscura was the town's only attraction at the time. And what an attraction this must have been to the Victorian citizens of Grahamstown! Mr. Galpin and his seven sons for a long time devoted a great deal of valuable time in showing visitors "this remarkable apparatus", free of charge. The public demand to view Grahamstown and its environments from the roof of Galpin's building eventually became a burden, and visitors were then charged 10 cents for "viewing".

On the other side of the camera obscura apartment was the Clock-Tower. From old photographs it would appear that the clock-tower was of a design commonly found on churches and post offices of the period. Alas, this complete structure was broken down. When the Dutch Reformed Church in Grahamstown was built some eight years ago the church council wanted *a very good* clock, and the ridiculously low price of R500 was paid for the one that was taken from Galpin's clock-tower; it is worth anything between R1,000 — R1,200. Another distressing fact came to light when I enquired after the whereabouts of the huge pendulum of the great clock which weighed 300 lbs. and had painted upon it Father Time with his scythe by the Grahamstown artist, F. T. P'Ons, and whose works of art are today more or less only found in museums and art galleries. I was informed that when the Observatory's once beautiful teak panelled interior with fire-places built of rich Italian marble (one can still be seen) was "knocked out" some thirty years ago to have it converted into flats, etc., the pendulum was removed by careless workmen who probably considered it to be rubbish.

The other turreted structure, and already described as looking like a small factory chimney, was a special apartment in which Mr. Galpin kept a telescope, a sextant, and various instruments with which he worked out the time from the sun every day; and when necessary, adjust the hands of the clock in the

tower-house according to his carefully worked out time. From the various accounts related to me by the family it is quite clear that Mr. Galpin "monopolised" TIME in Grahamstown as all the clocks and watches were daily set according to the time indicated on the clock-tower clock.

The owners of this building then took me to the back and pointed out the three tiers of verandahs, of which one level is sunk into the ground. This last level is used as a flat and although it was rather cold inside, no traces of damp walls or floors were found here due to the excellent ventilation system which was devised by the original owner of the building. One cannot help wondering, whether this back portion of the building, although surely not intended as such at the time by Mr. Galpin, could not be regarded as the first attempt at a block of flats in South Africa? In one of the two very narrow and seemingly unnecessary passages, one on each side of this flat, and built to introduce more light and air into the sunken apartment, I discovered Mr. Galpin's own wine cellar. It stands in an end corner, is made of wood, and has the quaintest door. The inside of this "cupboard" revealed an intricate network of wooden shelves, or rather wooden holders for bottles. The names of the different brandies and wines then used can still be discerned on the labels attached to the different sections. An authority on wine cellars in South Africa will find this one of unusual design and interest.

This building was the HOME of the Galpins. The front section of the "house", on the ground floor, was used for Mr. Galpin's watchmaker and jeweller's business, while the rest of it was taken up by the family, and *lived* in.

The question is why Mr. Galpin built himself a house which included a camera obscura, etc., in its design? The only feasible answer to this can be that of one of his grandsons who told me that it was probably due to Henry C. Galpin's "strongly mechanical turn of mind" which induced him to it so as to enjoy a more varied life.