



Photo: Sheneete Marntten

Worcester Drosty Museum

# WHEN FIRST WE PRACTICE TO DECEIVE

## – DUBIOUS AND DUTIFUL ARCHITECTS

BY: **ROGER C FISHER**

*Oh, what a tangled web we weave  
When first we practise to deceive!*

It sounds as if it should be Shakespeare, but these lines are in fact taken from *Marmion*, an epic Scottish poem by Walter Scott about the Battle of Flodden Field (1513), published in 1808. And it was written at around the same time as some episodes I wish to relate.

I actually borrow the line from the title of a book by Owen Pryce Lewis, *When First We Practise: The Life of Jan Michiel Endres, Surgeon* (1989; Simonstown: Simonstown Historical Society). The rather bland biography of the 18<sup>th</sup> century-born Endres, as recorded in the

Dictionary of South African Biography, does not reflect the racy account of a somewhat dubious character as interpreted by Durban-born and Cape Town-based architect and lecturer Pryce Lewis, who was responsible for documenting Endres's Simonstown premises. His is the story of a surgeon, ours of his contemporary 19<sup>th</sup>-century architects.

In the same decade of Endres's death occurs the arrival of the 1820 British Settlers and the planning of facilities in the Albany District of the Eastern Cape Frontier, as Bathurst was meant to be the administrative centre of this

district. The design of a new Drosty of the time is attributed to the provisional magistrate, Major Charles Trappes, in 1820. The foundation stone was laid on 9 November 1820. The contractor was one John Mandy. The costs of the project soared, probably due to Trappes's extravagant plan for his residence. However, it was Mandy who was to bear the brunt of this and he was dismissed. Thomas Mahoney (1785–1834) was appointed in his place. Work continued at a leisurely pace, in Mahoney's words 'getting on nicely', but by the time Lord Charles Somerset summarily suspended Bathurst as seat of the magistracy

on 8 February 1822 and moved it to Grahamstown, the Drostdy was left half-completed.

It was determined that the building should serve as a school, but Mahoney's procrastinations exasperated the authorities. Lewcock (1962: 238) laments in his tome that he does not have enough space to relate the litany of complaints against Mahoney 'which never succeeded in disturbing his unruffled calm'. When Herman Schutte (1761–1844) did a tour of inspection in 1824, the works were found to have fallen into a bad state of repair, the local quarried and hewn roof slate having soon degraded. When finally completed after the death of the resident schoolmaster, it became home to the government chaplain, grander than the pastorie. 'Indeed, there was certainly not a house to equal it in the eastern part of the colony, either for comfort or for fashionable elegance' (Lewcock, 1963: 239).

It was originally a 14-room building constructed of locally burnt brick. In 1827 the roof was rebuilt and covered in imported Welsh slate, the first such use of this material in South Africa. Now only a wing survives, incorporated into a private residence. Mahoney was to come to a sticky end. He had arrived from London in the Cape in 1820 as leader of a party of 16 English colonists as 'sole proprietor ... architect, surveyor and engineer'. He was of the first of the 1820 Settlers to be murdered on Christmas Eve in the Sixth Frontier War (1834–1835) on his farm Clay Pits near Grahamstown, the traditional source for white clay used ceremonially by the Xhosa. The British authorities saw no good reason why they should have this for free and imposed a tax on its excavation. Mahoney, as implementing agent for the Crown, paid the price!

The Drostdy of Worcester is the subsequent project and focus of our attention. This was intended for one and the same Landdrost Trappes, now promoted to Colonel. Lewcock (1963: 257) presumes him to have had as much of a hand in its design as he had in Bathurst because of the strong resemblances between these designs. This is the major surviving work of its designer, the government architect William Oliver Jones. So grand was the conception that, much as with the Bathurst episode, by the time it was half-completed, the allocated funds were exhausted. Colonel Trappes

obtained permission to appoint a man of his own nomination, Samuel Flemming, to further supervise its erection. Completed and occupied in 1824, it is considered the finest Regency building in the Cape. Its extravagance gave rise to rumours that Lord Charles Somerset had meant to use it as his shooting box and built it at the expense of the Crown. Of palatial size, dominating the town down the length of the main street, the Drostdy is the epitome of authoritarian town planning.

The design architect, William Oliver Jones, is thought to be the historically notorious figure named Oliver the Spy, operating in England in 1817. The *Leeds Mercury* disclosed that an instigator and informer of this name had been employed by the British government in order to discover the Luddite leaders of insurrections and riots in industrial districts of England that occurred after a temporary suspension of civil rights in Yorkshire from 1812 to 1817. In his article in the *Leeds Mercury* exposing William Oliver, the journalist Baines described him as a 'prototype of Lucifer, whose distinguishing characteristic is first to tempt and then to destroy'. Thirty-five of the men arrested after Oliver's debriefing were charged with high treason. Brandreth, the ring leader, and two others were originally sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered, but the quartering was remitted – small comfort when dead. Another 11 men were transported for life. Jones (if indeed alias Oliver, alias Richards) was among several well-known informers, many of whom were enabled to leave the country under state protection. It was thought that Oliver the Spy had been given employment in South Africa, and when Jones arrived at Cape Town in 1820, it was generally believed that he was the notorious agent.

He came to South Africa in 1820, recommended to Lord Charles Somerset by Goulburn of the Colonial Office in London as 'a builder, but no architect'. In his new-found homeland, he operated as a builder and contractor in the Cape from 1820 to about 1825. His friendship with John Melvill, government inspector of buildings and well connected with the London Missionary Society, in the light of his possible origins as noted by Lewcock (1963: 260-1), is ominous since Somerset later claimed in correspondence, when the authorities found themselves at odds with the missionaries, that he had

informants, whom he cared not to name. Melvill, however, was to recommend Jones as his deputy in 1821 (Lewcock, 1972: 301) and replacement after Melvill resigned from office to become a government agent at Klaarwater, his aim being to help the distressed Griqua people as a deacon of the Independent Church.

Melvill resigned his government post in 1826, but remained as a missionary at Klaarwater, thereafter at the settlement of Philippolis, being there seven years before moving to Hankey, where he stayed for a further seven years (1831–38). Almost blind by 1846, Melvill moved to George, where he died. Jones had succeeded Melvill on 5 January 1822. Although he was not personally involved with the building of the Drostdy, when Lord Charles Somerset discovered the exorbitant overspending, it was Jones who bore the brunt of his rage. In July 1825, he was suspended for his inadequate accounting, after which he was demoted to government overseer of works. We can only assume he had served his nefarious purpose.

These tales remain an odd combination of personalities. If Jones is our spy, then he had that charisma that helps seduce unwary and earnest citizens. I retell these episodes from the past, mindful of the fact that it is not so much that history repeats itself, but rather that human nature has since changed but little.

#### REFERENCES:

I am indebted to the masterful research of Ronald Lewcock of this period in South Africa's architectural history, as well as information provided by Wikipedia and [www.artefacts.co.za](http://www.artefacts.co.za). In addition, the following are sources for facts or quotes:

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