

Thomas Reynolds, South Coast MLC 1880–1885: A profile

by Duncan Du Bois

FROM September 1880 until his death in June 1885, Thomas Reynolds, as the elected representative of the South Coast, was the conduit through whom the South Coast community expressed their needs and wishes. Born in 1820, he arrived in Natal in 1850 with his brother Lewis and settled in the Umhlali district on the North Coast. By 1856 Thomas was producing rum (known locally as “Umhlali water”) at the *Chaka’s Kraal* mill. In 1863 he purchased *Oaklands Estate*.¹ Within the Victoria County community he was prominent during the 1860s as a captain in the Umhlali Rifle Guard and as a member of the Victoria Coast Railway Committee.²

Following Lewis’s death in 1875, he moved to the South Coast to pursue the

sugar interest his brother had acquired in Umzinto. In July and August 1877, Thomas was acting-resident magistrate in Alexandra County.³ In that year with his sons Frank and Charles, he established T. Reynolds and Sons based in the Umzinto district while continuing to maintain his business interest in Umhlali. In 1880 he accepted a petition signed by 40 local residents (including his sons, Frank and Charles) to contest the Alexandra and Alfred Counties seat in the colonial legislature.⁴ Meanwhile, backed by 36 local residents, William Hawkworth, the sitting member of the Legislative Council (MLC), advertised his intention to contest the election.⁵ His candidacy was endorsed by two prominent members of the settler community – Samuel Crookes and William

Bazley – whereas Reynolds enjoyed the support of, *inter alia*, the county field-cornet and chairman of the Alexandra Association, Alexander Brander.

With sugar interests on both the North and South Coasts, Reynolds was a man of means.⁶ At a public meeting in Umzinto he let it be known that financially his Umzinto Sugar Estate had “a substantial balance on the right side”. After the meeting, electors were invited to the Royal Hotel to enjoy a “harvest home celebration” at which food and drink flowed freely in what could be described as an election sweetener.⁷ The outcome of the election, held in the final week of September, saw Reynolds triumphant.⁸ Hawksworth, however, appeared to suffer from sour grapes, subsequently accusing Reynolds of being out of touch with his constituents. He based his claim on the fact that Reynolds had not held a public meeting prior to the commencement of a new session of the legislature. In reply, Reynolds pointed out that the legislature had not met for nine months and that no one had approached him to hold a meeting during the two months he had been in Umzinto. Hawksworth’s strictures were endorsed by 21 local planters and in all probability were a veiled criticism of the fact that Reynolds continued to spend a great deal of his time on his *Oaklands* Estate in Victoria County.⁹ This may explain why by the time of the 1882 election the *Mercury’s* Alexandra County correspondent referred to Reynolds as “The Lord of *Oaklands*”.¹⁰ His retort to this was: “I have been told I represent a cantankerous constituency ... which may be rather troublesome.”¹¹

Reynolds’ tenure as the South Coast’s representative coincided with an unprecedented spate of public interest in a wide variety of issues. Whilst



Thomas Reynolds

disappointment and lost opportunities characterised the experience of settlers on the South Coast during the 1870s, it certainly did not dampen their will to see improvement in their surroundings, nor did their isolation from the rest of the colony diminish their readiness to express opinions on matters of general interest. Attesting to this was the fact that between 1880 and 1885, 18 petitions emanated from the settlers of Alexandra and Alfred Counties concerning a wide range of issues. By taking into account the frequency with which petitions were presented on particular issues, it is possible to appreciate the extent to which those issues constituted a priority in the lives of communities. Four of the 18 petitions concerned the need to establish telegraphic links between the South Coast and Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Three petitions urged the establishment of a separate magistracy in the Lower Umzimkulu district of Alfred County. Another three involved harbour works and the grant-

ing of fiscal status to Port Shepstone as a shipping port. Two petitions appealed for the construction of a bridge over the Mkomanzi. Two were concerned with general colonial issues – opposition to the restoration of Cetshwayo as Zulu king and a call for magistrates to be given the power to inflict corporal punishment; two involved matters in Umzinto, one concerned a road linking the coastal Mkomanzi area with its interior counterpart and one referred to the layout of a township at Port Shepstone.

uMzimkhulu shipping

Reynolds's first initiative as the South Coast's new representative was to move a motion in the Legislative Council on 2 December 1880 seeking provision in the 1881 Budget for improvements to the uMzimkhulu river mouth. He did so in the knowledge that a petition on the same topic, signed by 88 South Coast residents, had already been submitted to the Governor, Sir George Colley.¹² In moving his motion Reynolds argued that the opening of the river to shipping was a "progressive step in the development of the resources of this Colony" which was the result of private enterprise. In noting that in the previous seven months the *Somtseu* had delivered 354 tons of cargo, he called on the government to become involved in further improvements to the river mouth so as to make it navigable in all seasons. Reynolds rejected the view that river shipping would facilitate smuggling, contending that if that was the case, wagon transport would also be suspect. His motion was seconded by Samuel Crowder of Durban County.¹³ But Colonial Secretary Lt. Col. C.B.H. Mitchell and Colonial Engineer Captain Albert Hime asked that the debate be postponed until further information

from William Bazley was forthcoming regarding construction of a 400-yard training wall which Hime estimated could cost £2 000.¹⁴

Public pressure on the government to improve the mouth of the uMzimkhulu received a further boost when a second petition on the subject, signed by 92 merchants and traders, was tabled in the council on 9 December.¹⁵ In the debate on Reynolds's motion, J.R. Saunders of Victoria County heartily endorsed the proposal that public funding should steer the project towards a conclusion and that local enterprise should be compensated for the £548 in costs that had been incurred.¹⁶ When the debate was resumed on 14 December 1880, Colonial Engineer Hime endorsed Bazley's plan to construct a training wall at the mouth so as to assist in defining a navigation channel. After detailing the specifics of the construction, Hime revised the estimated cost to between £8 000 and £10 000. But council members were unhappy about the lack of finality on the costs, resulting in Reynolds withdrawing his motion with the intention of bringing it back in another form.¹⁷ Changing his approach, on 16 December Reynolds moved that the Governor prepare a report on the works carried out at the mouth of the uMzimkhulu and the improvements desired. In motivation he argued that as a developed port the uMzimkhulu had the potential to attract large-scale settlement; that other steamers would become involved in trade and that the cost of transporting goods to East Griqualand would be reduced by a third. Harbour development on the uMzimkhulu would "show the world that we are not the sleepy people in that part of the country that we are supposed to be", Reynolds declared.¹⁸



The original Umzinto Courthouse – now used as a SAP office – very well preserved and recently renovated

Roads, a post office and a township

The council's slow and tepid response to the issue of works on the uMzimkhulu was also reflected in its reaction to other South Coast requests. At the same time as Reynolds was motivating the case for the uMzimkhulu, he was also exhorting his colleagues in the council to place an additional sum of money on the 1881 Estimates for the road from Isipingo to Ifafa. "I think the needs of this district are as great as any in the Colony," he argued, claiming that bad roads increased transport costs by five shillings per ton. But Hime's response

was that his Budget did not cater for road hardening and the construction of weirs.¹⁹ A year later, the Administrator, Sir Evelyn Wood, stated that, subject to council approval, weirs would be constructed over the Umbogintwini (today's eZimbokodweni) and Lovu rivers.²⁰ But the Colonial Engineer's Report for 1882 showed that the only road work south of Durban was the construction of a weir at the wagon drift on the Mlazi River in Durban County.²¹ Again, Alexandra and Alfred Counties were neglected.

Reynolds's request for a Post Office at Izingolweni in the Mtamvuna area of lower Alfred County was met with derision and disdain by some council members. Hime objected, saying that there were too few settlers in the area to justify the expense of £12 a year on a post master. George Sutton of Pietermaritzburg County said he had never heard of the place while Frederick Moor of Weenen thought the House could do no wrong in striking out a place "which has such an unpronounceable name". But after Colonial Secretary Mitchell explained that the store owner at Izingolweni had been acting without payment as postmaster for some time, Reynolds's request was approved by the council by nine votes to five.²²

Following receipt of a petition signed by General Sir John Jarvis Bisset and 24 other inhabitants of Lower Umzimkulu,²³ requesting the laying-out of a township at Port Shepstone, a select committee, chaired by Reynolds, was convened to examine the prospects of the area. Published in November 1881, the committee's report provided an extremely positive and comprehensive insight of the Lower Umzimkulu area at that time. Amongst the key observations were: the successful service provided by the *Somtseu* which, in 18 months, had transported 1 470 tons of goods at a saving of £4 per ton; that the *Somtseu* placed Durban within eight hours of the uMzimkhulu whereas the overland journey by wagon took eight days; the existence of 4 000 acres of fertile land on the banks of the uMzimkhulu which was highly suited to sugar cane and coffee; the prospects for increased trade with East Griqualand; and "an inexhaustible supply of the purest lime for building and other purposes". The report claimed that 50 *bona fide* pur-

chasers were ready and willing to take up erven on which to erect stores and warehouses. It proposed that 200 erven of an acre each should be laid out on the south bank of the river.²⁴

Magistracy for Lower Umzimkulu

In June 1883 a fresh request for a separate magistracy was registered by means of a petition submitted by General Sir John Bisset and 103 residents of Lower Umzimkulu, many of them Norwegian settlers. The petition cited the 50-mile distance from Harding and that the absence of an immediate authority encouraged lawlessness. The initial response of the government was that "under the present circumstances" the request "could not be entertained".²⁵ When Reynolds took up the fight in the Legislature on behalf of his constituents he claimed that within a 10-mile radius the white settler population in Lower Umzimkulu numbered 600.²⁶ He contended that it was "the duty of the government to see that communities are given protection which a magistracy affords". Regarding the issue of finance and affordability, Reynolds argued that with the fines levied, magistracies were almost self-supporting. Several council members supported Reynolds's plea. They included Liege Hulett of Victoria County, Harry Escombe, John Robinson and Benjamin Greenacre of Durban Borough and Theophilus Shepstone jnr of Pietermaritzburg County. In Robinson's view, the establishment of a magistracy would increase the attractiveness of the area for colonisation. But Hime, who was Acting-Colonial Secretary, felt the government should not deal "piecemeal" with such requests but rather that the approach should be via a "comprehensive system for the establishment of one or more magistracies

annually”. This led Shepstone to remark that if Hime’s policy was followed, “we will have to wait a long time”.²⁷

When, during the 1884 council sitting, Reynolds linked the subject of a separate magistracy in Lower Umzimkulu to the need for a telegraph line, the response of Colonial Secretary Mitchell was blunt and dismissive. He said there was no “likelihood” of a separate magistracy being established as long as the area remained “a hamlet”.²⁸ After noting correspondence between the magistrates of Alfred and Alexandra counties in which they endorsed the relocation of the Alfred magistracy to a more central place, Reynolds amended his earlier motion accordingly. But to no avail. Mitchell pointed out that relocating a magistracy was “no light thing” and that consideration would have to be given to the construction of a gaol on the new site.²⁹ That was the last occasion in which Reynolds attempted to persuade the council to recognise the magisterial needs of the lower South Coast. Following his death in June 1885, the new MLC for the South Coast, General Bisset, renewed the struggle but only in April 1889 was a separate magisterial district established in Lower Umzimkulu.

Official indifference

Reynolds faced an uphill struggle against officialdom during his five-year tenure. For it seemed that no matter what the South Coast requested, the colonial government always had a reason for objecting and denying.

In this regard, the *Mercury* provided an accurate summary of the frustrations in an editorial published on 19 November 1884: “Mr Reynolds, when giving an account of his stewardship last session was hampered by the fact that he

had not succeeded in securing, as he deserved to secure, the proper recognition of his constituency’s needs. The plea he has so persistently put forward to the House was one that ought to have commanded a better reception”

When G. Young applied for the position of postmaster at Port Shepstone in 1883, Assistant Colonial Secretary F. Seymour Haden’s reply was that the “government has no present intention of making the appointment”.³⁰ When a request was made for a polling station to be situated at Port Shepstone for the 1883 elections as the only one in the county was 50 miles away at Harding, Haden’s response was to question if it was “legally necessary”, while Attorney General Michael Gallwey stated that he could “give no opinion on the necessity” of an additional polling place.³¹

The struggle for a telegraph link

Walter Peace in his book *Our Colony of Natal*, published in 1883, provided a list of the telegraph offices in existence at that time. Although the network was fairly extensive and reached as far as Newcastle in the north, Ixopo in the south and up the North Coast as far as Stanger, the telegraph line for the South Coast reached no further than Isipingo.³²

The first petition on the subject was from General Bisset and 35 other residents of Lower Umzimkulu. Submitted in March 1882, they requested the erection of a branch line from Kokstad to Harding and Umzinto. Their concern was that the Alfred and Alexandra magistracies should be able to communicate with Pietermaritzburg and Durban. James Sivewright, the general manager of the Telegraph Department, estimated the cost of this line at £12 500 with annual maintenance charges at around £950. In his reply to the petitioners he



St Patrick's Anglican church, Umzinto; opened in 1863

said he could not recommend the extension as “the time has not yet arrived at which the importance of these coast settlements would warrant government going to the large expense” of providing that service.³³ Sivewright gave the same reply to a second petition submitted in April by J.B. Aiken and signed by 72 Alexandra County residents. That petition asked for a coastal link from Durban to Port Shepstone.³⁴ But nothing further came of those appeals.

On 19 June 1882 a third petition for the erection of a telegraph line to the Cape via Umzinto and Port Shepstone was submitted to the Legislative

Council by Francis Staunton and 37 others.³⁵ The nearest telegraph points to Port Shepstone were Ixopo and Isipingo, both more than 60 miles distant.³⁶ But in presenting the petition Reynolds encountered firm opposition from Colonial Secretary Mitchell, who argued that besides the cost of £12 500 to erect the line, the upkeep of £970 per annum would far exceed the annual usage, which he calculated at some £400 to £450. Also militating against the project was what Mitchell described as the “very scattered community” of the southern districts. In support of Reynolds, J.R. Saunders of

Victoria County argued that the lack of population did not justify an area being denied a telegraph service. Inexplicably, Reynolds then withdrew the petition instead of allowing it to go to a vote.³⁷ For that he was taken to task by the writer of the “Alexandra Letter” in the *Mercury*, who accused him of having been “frightened” by Mitchell and of ignoring the needs of a whole string of coastal settlements.³⁸

The next test Reynolds faced in representing his constituents’ demands for telegraphic connection came with the submission of a petition by David Aiken and 51 others in August 1883.³⁹ On that occasion Reynolds proved resolute, deprecating the “ignorance manifested in this House with reference to the nature of the [South Coast]”. He claimed the figures given by Mitchell the previous year were greatly exaggerated; that the cost of a line from Isipingo to Port Shepstone was no more than £6 500 while upkeep was minimal. Promoting the Lower Umzimkulu area, Reynolds claimed that land sales amounting to almost 125 000 acres proved that the district warranted a telegraph service.⁴⁰ For the bold defence of his constituency Reynolds received praise from the *Mercury*, which asserted that the potential of Lower Umzimkulu was such that before long no part of South Africa would be “more prosperous or progressive”.⁴¹

But once again Colonial Engineer Hime proved the stumbling block to the installation of infrastructure on the South Coast. “Circumstances are hardly in such a state as to warrant the construction of this telegraph line at the present time, and I would very much prefer it if this motion were withdrawn and brought forward another year,” he stated. Mitchell echoed Hime’s feelings,

pointing out that Harding and Greytown were also not connected by telegraph. Reynolds countered their negativism by pointing out that not only would the line be self-supporting but that as an outlying district his request should be met “with special consideration”.⁴² For once the elected members supported Reynolds and the vote of 12 to 11 in favour of the South Coast offered a glimmer of hope of getting the item on the Estimates for the following year.⁴³

The 1884 session of the Legislative Council saw Reynolds moving a motion to have a sum “as may be found necessary” placed on the Estimates for 1885 for the construction of a telegraph line from Isipingo to Port Shepstone. In so doing he reminded the council that lack of funds had been the only reason his previous request had not been implemented. On that occasion Mitchell’s line of reasoning proved quite disingenuous: in the same breath he denied the need for a magistracy at Port Shepstone, while citing the absence of one as his reason for opposing the need for a telegraph line. John Robinson supported Reynolds, arguing that since the council approved a line to Greytown it could hardly be averse to constructing one to Port Shepstone, particularly as the two lines had been twinned as a project. He also pointed out that having located the Norwegian settlers in Lower Umzimkulu, the government was obligated to rectify their isolated state by bringing them into contact with the rest of the Colony. Hulett of Victoria County was also adamant that Port Shepstone should be telegraphically linked, claiming it was “doubly necessary” compared to Greytown. After further discussion a compromise was reached: a line would be built as far as Umzinto. In accepting this outcome, Reynolds said that “half a

loaf is better than no bread”.⁴⁴ Yet nearly 18 months after his death, the *Natal Advertiser* reported on 25 November 1886 that work on the telegraph line had not commenced and that a survey had still not been made of the terrain. Finally, in February 1887, a telegraph office opened in Umzinto.⁴⁵

Applying for fiscal port status: 1883

Despite apparent official indifference towards Reynolds’s constituents when it came to prioritising their financial interests, the colonial government acted with alacrity in appointing a Customs officer on the uMzimkhulu. This was to ensure that the appropriate revenue was paid on all goods brought to Port Shepstone by ship. But for local residents, the logical development was for Port Shepstone to be declared a fiscal port so that goods could be sent directly from there to Cape ports and vice versa instead of having to pass through Durban first, which not only wasted time but also increased freight charges because of the extra distance involved. In August 1883 a petition was received from David Aiken and 33 others proposing fiscal port status for Port Shepstone.⁴⁶

In motivating the request, Reynolds remarked: “We have a Customs House Officer at Port Shepstone but no Customs.” In noting that two steamers, the *Somtseu* and the *Lion*,⁴⁷ were providing a regular service to the uMzimkhulu, and that with the settler population having increased to over 600, local commercial interests would want to be able to import and export goods directly instead of having to route their trade through Durban for reasons of Customs handling. But the government opposed the petition on the grounds that there was insufficient trade to justify the expense of establishing a customs port.⁴⁸

Samuel Crowder of Durban County felt that the South Coast was asking for too much too soon and should be patient. John Walton of Newcastle dismissed Port Shepstone as a mere “roadstead” and scorned the idea of any direct trade being conducted from the uMzimkhulu. As a result Reynolds’s motion on behalf of the petitioners was lost.⁴⁹

Applying for fiscal port status: 1884

Unbowed and under pressure from yet another petition from residents of the Lower Umzimkulu district to get the government to change its mind,⁵⁰ Reynolds renewed the case for a fiscal port at Port Shepstone during the 1884 session of the council. Accusing the government of putting “impediments in the way of anything that will develop the resources of the colony”,⁵¹ he asked for the Customs Ordinance to be relaxed so that produce from the South Coast could be shipped directly to Cape ports from Port Shepstone and from Mzinto Bay.⁵² He noted that the Norwegian settlers were disappointed that they could ship their potatoes and mealies to Durban only.⁵³ Henry Binns and Thomas Garland of Victoria County endorsed Reynolds’s request. John Robinson of Durban Borough argued that it was “particularly important” that Port Shepstone be made a port in the “fullest sense of the term” so as to be able to compete with Cape ports and to “nullify the disadvantages under which we are placed by the fiscal action” of the Cape government. But, in predictable fashion, Colonial Secretary Mitchell opposed the idea using the excuse that it would lead to gun-running when in actual fact he was already on record as stating that, in the government’s opinion, the time had not yet come for Port Shepstone to have fiscal port status.⁵⁴

Wary of the tactics of the likes of Mitchell and Hime, Reynolds withdrew his motion.⁵⁵ Five days later, on 9 September 1884, he requested the Governor to introduce a Bill to allow for the shipment of goods directly from Mzinto Bay and Port Shepstone. In motivation Reynolds referred to “the depressed state of the sugar interest” and said that 200 tons of sugar which had already been bought by Cape merchants was languishing in a warehouse on the uMzimkhulu. Despite Mitchell’s pledge that all would be done to expedite Reynolds’s request, on 23 September when Reynolds asked when the government would be bringing the Bill, he was told that it was too late in the session to introduce such a Bill to the business of the council.⁵⁶ Undaunted, Reynolds gave notice that he wished to suspend the Standing Orders so as to amend the Customs Ordinance of 1855 to include reference to Port Shepstone and Mzinto Bay as export ports. Having gained approval to suspend the Rules of Order, Reynolds then put forward his own Bill calling for Port Shepstone and Mzinto Bay to be declared export ports.⁵⁷

What turned out to be his last session in the council also produced his finest moments as he demonstrated passion and determination in striving to achieve an economic lifeline for his constituency which was so isolated and neglected. But Colonial Engineer Hime found difficulty with Reynolds wanting two Customs points, the duplication of facilities weighing too heavily on the Public Works budget. In addition, he doubted whether the extent of exports from these two points would justify the expenses involved. When Thomas Garland of Victoria County urged an adjournment of the debate so that the finer details could be hammered out in

committee, Reynolds demurred, stating that he wanted his Bill to advance as a matter of urgency. “If anything would drive a man out of his seat in this House it would be the way anything I introduce here is treated. I don’t reflect upon the government, because they are bound up in red tape I am very disappointed at the way I have been met.” Despite his appeals to the council to appreciate the depressed state of the sugar industry,⁵⁸ the competitive threat posed by Mauritius to Natal’s sugar exports and the £3 per ton saving which fiscal port status would bring to the South Coast, the motion for his Bill to pass its Second Reading was lost by 10 votes to seven. Colonial Secretary Mitchell insisted that “nothing but a well-considered alteration of the present law will carry out the Honourable Member’s wishes”. Until then, the produce from the South Coast would have to be cleared through Durban and the issue deferred to the 1885 session of the council.⁵⁹

The plight of Reynolds’s constituents was reflected in letters and reports. “A general feeling of dullness” was how a local correspondent described the mood of the area as a result of the government having disallowed the establishment of a fiscal port on the uMzimkhulu.⁶⁰ In an editorial, the *Mercury* asked “why our executive is so indifferent to the development of the Umzimkulu and of Alfred County as a settlement?”⁶¹ One letter writer described the official stance as “callousness” which had resulted in all the petitions being “relegated to oblivion”.⁶² “Shall a whole district be doomed without cause to stagnation and poverty?” the *Mercury* enquired.⁶³

Applying for fiscal port status: 1885

Reynolds continued his fight for a fiscal port in the correspondence columns of

the *Mercury*. In a letter published on 3 February 1885 he stated that “every thinking man in the colony is with me when I say that from whatever cause this permission was refused, the injury done was greater than could have been contemplated”. Referring to the government as “obstructionist”, he claimed that the refusal of the government to sanction a fiscal port at Port Shepstone had resulted in the loss of thousands of pounds as planters on the Alexandra coast had entered into an agreement for their sugar to be shipped directly to East London and Port Elizabeth. Reynolds’s remarks came in the wake of a meeting of the Land and Immigration Board at which a Captain Charles Hitchens had commented that a saving of £2 per ton could be realised on maize sent directly from Port Shepstone to East London if fiscal port status was granted. Hitchens also claimed that in the previous six months some £6 000 worth of produce had been sent out of Port Shepstone.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, a positive development in the situation occurred at the February meeting of the European Land and Immigration Board when it was agreed that a subsidy of 10 shillings per ton would be paid on produce from Port Shepstone bound for export to Cape ports but which was first shipped to Durban. It was also agreed that port charges on such produce would be waived.⁶⁵ In welcoming this news the *Mercury* noted, derisively, that the Colonial Secretary had “withheld his opposition to the plan”. In devoting a lengthy editorial on the plight of settlers on the South Coast and by discussing their specific needs – a telegraph, an independent port, a new magisterial district and a bridge over the Mkomazi – the paper displayed a focus and an “advocacy”, as Reynolds termed it,⁶⁶

towards the South Coast which no other region enjoyed.⁶⁷

Elements of handicap: the Mkomazi – the pont, shipping, a bridge

The frustrations of the residents of Lower Umzimkulu with the lack of service delivery by the colonial government were similar to those at the northern end of the region. In 1874 a sum of £500 was placed on the Estimates for a bridge over the Mkomazi but nothing ever came of it. The river continued to prove a barrier to access and mobility in the 1880s, as it had at any previous time. The continued absence of a bridge meant that reliance on the pont and on the occasional visit by a steamer was crucial to the wellbeing and mobility of the residents of Alexandra County. In 1881 they found themselves handicapped because, after just four years, the pont had rotted away. In raising the issue in the council, Reynolds slated it as “an utter disgrace” and demanded to know from Colonial Engineer Hime how long the new pont was “likely to serve the public benefit”.⁶⁸ Although the new pont (made of Oregon pine) was in service by October 1881,⁶⁹ by 1884 it had rotted, forcing wagons to have to ford the Mkomazi at the drift.⁷⁰ The South Coast’s needs then suffered relegation, if not elimination, from the programme of public works as a result of the growth of coal mining in Northern Natal in the early 1880s.⁷¹ To facilitate the transport of coal and the concomitant trade, a spate of bridge-building took place in that region.⁷²

In February 1885 it was decided at a public meeting in Umzinto to appoint a committee to gather information and statistics on transport traversing the Mkomazi in order to motivate a petition to the government for a bridge over the



The Reynolds family plot in the St Patrick's cemetery

river. According to Reynolds, during the cane crushing season up to 120 wagons were crossing the river each week.⁷³ Responding to this news, the *Mercury* opined supportively: “Considering how lavishly bridges have been provided in other districts, it would be churlish to refuse a bridge across a river that ... is a great hindrance to traffic”.⁷⁴ On 12 May 1885, Thomas Reynolds presented his final petition to the council. Signed by 99 inhabitants of Alexandra County, it listed six reasons why a bridge over the Mkomazi was overdue. They were: (1) the lack of a bridge was retarding progress; (2) the pont was serviceable

during only certain river conditions; (3) the tidal nature of the river limited the times when fording was possible; (4) flash-flooding endangered the use of the pont; (5) the Mkomazi was a barrier to a major roadway; (6) the County derived little benefit despite the taxes it contributed.

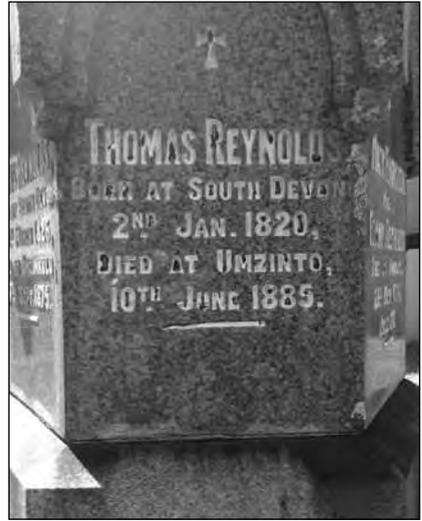
In his stereotype response, Colonial Engineer Hime flatly rejected that “the want of a bridge over the lower Mkomazi is a great, or indeed any, drawback on the progress of the county”. He also insisted that the pont was “adequate to the requirements” and that flash flooding was rare. To cap it all, he claimed

the financial condition of the colony “did not entertain the cost of a bridge”, the wide and sandy nature of the river bed entailing great expense in construction.⁷⁵ Only after 1897, as the railway was extended south of Umkomaas village, was a bridge constructed over the Mkomazi.

Reynolds and human rights

Indicative of the settler preference for harsh punishment of criminal or refractory conduct were a series of petitions presented to the Legislative Council in 1883 calling for magistrates to be empowered to order whipping as a punishment for recalcitrant Africans. Two of the petitions came from residents of Weenen County. The third petition was submitted by Charles Reynolds and 52 others of Alexandra County.⁷⁶ At that time magistrates had to seek the Governor’s assent for whipping as a punishment. In motivating the petitions, Thomas Reynolds said that to do away with flogging was to show ignorance in how white people needed to deal with “native races”.⁷⁷ Exploitation of labour, in order to realise optimum financial returns, was fundamental to the way his son, Charles, ran the Reynolds estates. Even before the Wragg Commission began its inquiry into the employment conditions of indentured Indians in 1885, the Protector of Indian Immigrants, Louis Mason, was aware of human rights abuses on Reynolds’s Umzinto estate. In 1884 and 1885, one of the overseers, C. Edgar, was twice convicted of assault yet Reynolds declined to dismiss the man.⁷⁸ Mason was also aware that the Reynolds sugar interests were the most extensive and affluent in Alexandra County.⁷⁹

Thomas Reynolds himself was opposed to the establishment of the Wragg



Thomas Reynolds’ tombstone at St Patrick’s church, Umzinto (his brother Lewis Reynolds’ name visible on the side of the stone)

Commission. In his view it would be “as rotten an egg as ever laid” which would not produce any benefit. Instead, Indians should be compelled to indenture for two terms, “kept in a state of continued activity ... and then allowed to go back” to India.⁸⁰ His disapproving and critical attitude was reflected in his sons’ submissions to the Wragg Commission. Charles described the visits to his estates by the Protector as “obnoxious” because they led to insubordination. As a result, he had more labourers punished in one month than he had in six months when the Protector did not visit. He objected to being asked to remove himself from a meeting addressed by the Protector, claiming that such a request was “impertinent”. In Charles Reynolds’s view the law did not provide sufficient punishment for absentees who ought to be sentenced to terms of imprisonment with a spare diet.⁸¹ Overall, he felt “coolies are too much protected now and that the pro-

tection system is overdone". Like his father, he felt that all Indians should be kept in agricultural pursuits and not allowed to own stores.⁸² Despite his hardline views, the Commission saw no ill in Reynolds's refusal to withdraw while the Protector was addressing his labourers and expressed pleasure at the "arrangements for their comfort and welfare".⁸³ In so doing the Wragg Commission unwittingly drew a *cordon sanitaire* around the Reynolds's estates which facilitated their exploitation of indentured labour for the next 20 years.

Political engagement

During the five years that he represented Alexandra and Alfred counties in the Legislative Council, Thomas Reynolds was exposed to far more political demands and pressures than his two predecessors, J.B. Aiken and William Hawksworth. The 18 petitions referred to at the outset provide an outline of the scale and variety of issues he faced. Whereas other counties enjoyed dual representation, Reynolds was the sole representative of two counties.⁸⁴

With vigilant County Associations at work within both counties, Reynolds found himself under constant pressure to promote and follow up on issues. Sometimes these were misguided. In October 1881 he was obliged to present a petition signed by 58 Umzinto residents opposing the conversion of the Resident Magistrate's private residence into a hospital for Indians. The petition resulted from a public meeting at which outrage was expressed at the prospect of the magistrate being deprived of his residence and having to reside in a "kaffir hut".⁸⁵ But Reynolds's spirited oratory on behalf of his constituents was met with a blunt rejoinder from Colonial Engineer Hime who told him

that he had the wrong end of the stick. The residence was a private one built by the previous resident Magistrate, Dunbar Moodie, as the government did not provide magistrates with houses. It had been on the market for many months before it was purchased by the Indian Immigrant Trust Board which saw it as being suitable for a hospital. "I think the Honourable Member has been carried away by the zeal of his constituents," Colonial Secretary Mitchell observed.⁸⁶

As a member of the Natal Native Commission, Reynolds spent little time in his constituency during January and February 1882 as he attended sittings of the Commission in other parts of the colony.⁸⁷ A general election followed soon afterwards, in which responsible government was the key issue. It proved very divisive. Critics of the political status quo, such as William Hawksworth, who had opposed Reynolds in the election of 1880, wanted constitutional change for Natal because of what was termed "imperial blundering" regarding the Anglo-Zulu war and the war against the Transvaal in 1881. As Hawksworth put it, "our best interests have been trifled with by Downing Street".⁸⁸ A public meeting on the issue in Umzinto on 5 April ended with a split vote: 15 against and 15 in favour of responsible government. Reynolds sided with those opposed to change. For that he earned the wrath of the *Mercury*, which labelled him a "refusalist".⁸⁹ Hawksworth immediately decided to oppose Reynolds, running under the slogan "measures, not men".⁹⁰ But on polling day Reynolds won narrowly by 10 votes. The political rift in the community was exacerbated by a claim that Reynolds had accused the polling officer in Umzinto of collusion with his opponent. Reynolds was reported

to have apologised, grudgingly, for his remarks.⁹¹

Initially Hawksworth indicated that he would again challenge Reynolds when requisitions for the 1883 election were announced.⁹² His chances were given a boost at a public meeting in Harding which endorsed him unanimously and slated Reynolds for “lukewarmness” in promoting a branch telegraph line to Harding.⁹³ But within days Hawksworth announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy. He gave two reasons: he wanted Reynolds “to complete his work” and to avoid an “unnecessary demand on voters” as there was talk that there would be a further election soon giving each county its own representative.⁹⁴ As a result, Reynolds was unopposed. But Hawksworth’s attitude to him did not soften. In a letter published in the *Mercury* he referred to Reynolds as “the member for Cloudland” because Reynolds had declined to pursue a petition Hawksworth had submitted concerning a voters’ roll anomaly. Reynolds’s response was that the council was not the proper tribunal for such matters and that he would take it up privately with the Governor.⁹⁵

The issue of separate representation for the two South Coast counties was undoubtedly a sensitive one. (Whereas all the other counties each had at least two council members, Alfred and Alexandra counties combined had only a single representative, a situation that persisted until 1890). The Resident Magistrate for Alfred County, James Giles, commented in his report for 1884 that he hoped for “a whole visible Member of Council instead of a share in one (meaning Reynolds) whose face he never sees”.⁹⁶ In one of his last public meetings Reynolds faced a vote of no confidence when, on 8 December 1884,

the residents of Harding castigated him for wanting to relocate the magistracy from Harding to Lower Umzimkulu. They were also furious because Harding had yet to be connected by telegraph.⁹⁷ Notwithstanding the prevalence of narrow, parochial views, there were those in Alfred County who resented the fact that Reynolds was not a resident of their County. Moreover, his task as the lone representative of the two southern counties was often a thankless one. When in April 1884 he asked for an additional Medical Officer for Alexandra County as one doctor could not possibly fulfill the roles of District Surgeon as well as serve as Indian Medical Inspector,⁹⁸ the response of the Colonial Secretary was unsympathetic. Alexandra County, Mitchell wrote, was not that badly off considering the District of Ixopo had been without a Medical Officer for years.⁹⁹

Described by his grand-daughter, Molly, as a “tall, good-looking, bearded man with a great sense of humour and a fine wit,”¹⁰⁰ a ruptured liver ended Thomas Reynolds’s life on 10 June 1885.¹⁰¹ Hawksworth’s desire that he “should complete his work” went unfulfilled. Indeed, for all his efforts to obtain a telegraph connection, fiscal port status for the uMzimkhulu, a separate magistracy in Lower Umzimkulu and a bridge over the Mkomazi, Reynolds was unsuccessful. Yet in his endeavours he succeeded, singlehandedly, in bringing the profile of the South Coast into prominence. As a sugar pioneer he was the first to introduce tramlines into the cane fields of Alexandra County.¹⁰² Tramlines, which resembled a mini-rail system, not only greatly assisted the haulage of cane from the fields to the mill, but, of equal importance, they reduced the lapse in time between the

harvesting and crushing of cane. To obtain maximum juice yields, cane needed to be crushed within a day of it being cut.¹⁰³ Reynolds's innovative introduction of tramlines subsequently became commonplace. Historically, therefore, he belongs in the same category as Michael Jeffels of Isipingo and James Arbuthnot of Umzinto in pioneering sugar and settlement on the South Coast.

NOTES

- 1 Reminiscences of early Umhlali, MSS Umhlali, Killie Campbell Manuscripts (KCM); R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest: the founding of the South African Sugar Industry*, (Durban, 1964), 66; 180; 322. Despite the money he made from the sale of his rum, Reynolds stated in the Legislative Council in 1883 that liquor should not be sold to Africans and Indians as it had a "demoralising tendency". See: *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 97.
- 2 CSO 198, No. 509, 20 April 1864; CSO 222, No. 970, 7 June 1865.
- 3 CSO 602, No. 2693.
- 4 *Natal Mercury*, 18 August 1880. Reynolds's third son, Arthur, did not migrate to the South Coast. He managed Glendale mill in Victoria County. See: R.F. Osborn, *Valiant Harvest*, 325.
- 5 *Natal Mercury*, 7 September 1880.
- 6 Despite the depressed state of the sugar industry in 1883, Reynolds invested £17 000 on a new mill and plantation called *Umhlanga*, situated between his Umzinto and Equeefa estates. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, GG 44.
- 7 *Natal Mercury*, 24 August 1880.
- 8 With a few votes from Alfred County outstanding, Reynolds received 62 to 27 for Hawksworth. See: *Natal Mercury*, 28 September 1880.
- 9 *Natal Mercury*, 30 August 1881 and 14 September 1881.
- 10 *Natal Mercury*, 31 May 1882. The epithet was out of date as Reynolds sold Oaklands in 1881. George Wirsing, the co-owner of Canonby Estate with Lewis Reynolds before its sale to Natal Plantations Company in 1869, labelled Thomas Reynolds a "spiteful personality" in a letter published in the *Mercury* on 9 November 1876.
- 11 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. III, 1881, 112.
- 12 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 246; CSO 786, No. 4659, 29 November 1880.
- 13 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 246–247.
- 14 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 248.
- 15 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXX, 1880, 229.
- 16 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 328–329.
- 17 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 371–373.
- 18 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 417–418.
- 19 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 283.
- 20 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXI, 1881, 32.
- 21 *Natal Blue Book*, 1882, F111.
- 22 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 200.
- 23 This article retains the traditional colonial spelling of Lower Umzimkulu for the district while uses the orthographically-correct spelling of uMzimkhulu for the river.
- 24 Natal Legislative Council, Sessional paper, no. 13, 1881; *Natal Government Gazette*, XXXIII, no. 1914, 15 November 1881.
- 25 CSO 912, No. 2396, 12 June 1883; 27 July 1883.
- 26 Reynolds may have been exaggerating as the total number of white settlers in the whole of Alfred County for 1883 was stated as being 623. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, T4.
- 27 Natal Legislative Council, *Debates*, VI, 1883, 496–9.
- 28 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 774. Public pressure on Reynolds to pursue the issue came in the form of a petition from 44 family heads (all Norwegians) who emphasised that the distance of Lower Mzimkulu from Harding was frustrating their needs for legal service. The response of the Governor-in-Council was that financial circumstances precluded the establishment of a separate magistracy. CSO 976, No. 3357, 8 September 1884.
- 29 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 777.
- 30 CSO 899, No. 1023, 16 and 20 March 1883.
- 31 CSO 902, No. 1378, 9 April 1883, 13 April 1883; CSO 904, No. 1580, 26 April 1883.
- 32 W Peace, *Our Colony of Natal*, (London, 1883), 149.

- 33 CSO 852, No. 1462, 22 March and 27 April 1882.
- 34 CSO 853, No. 1536, 17 and 29 April 1882.
- 35 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIII, 43.
- 36 W Peace, *Our Colony of Natal*, 149.
- 37 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. V, 1882, 72–73.
- 38 *Natal Mercury*, 22 July 1882.
- 39 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIV, 1883, 271.
- 40 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 457–458.
- 41 *Natal Mercury*, 8 September 1883.
- 42 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 579–580.
- 43 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIV, 1883, 447.
- 44 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 575:773–775.
- 45 *Natal Mercury*, 4 February 1887.
- 46 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIV, 1883, 297.
- 47 The *Lion*, a new ship of 140 tons, arrived from London early in 1883. See: *Natal Witness*, 5 March 1883.
- 48 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 400–401. Under clause 30 of Ordinance 6 of 1855, Durban was the only port of entry and clearance into Natal. Any goods not brought through Durban were subject to forfeiture. The produce statistics for 1884 in Alexandra County make nonsense of the claim that there was insufficient trade: 3 940 tons of sugar, 39 048 gallons of rum, 19 600 pounds of coffee, 4 480 pounds of cayenne. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1884, X4-5.
- 49 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 401–402.
- 50 CSO 963, No. 2004, May 1884. Signed by 55 residents the petition was accompanied by letters of support from General Sir John Bisset and H.T. Bru-de-Wold, Captain of the Mzimkulu Mounted Rifles (12 and 13 May 1884).
- 51 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 686.
- 52 On 5 September 1883 Reynolds stated in the Legislature that private enterprise – the Victoria Wharfage Company – was developing a facility for shipping sugar from the beach at Mzinto Bay. In 1862 Colonial Engineer Peter Paterson had noted the potential of this bay for shipping using surf boats to reach a steamer anchored offshore. See: Document No. 33 presented to the Natal Legislative Council 14 July 1862; *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VI, 1883, 458.
- 53 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 686.
- 54 CSO 963, No. 2004, 20 June 1884.
- 55 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 686–688.
- 56 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 734; 861.
- 57 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 869.
- 58 The price of sugar per ton in London was £10 to £12 per ton compared to £23 late in 1883. See: *Natal Mercury*, 6 March 1885.
- 59 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 870–872.
- 60 *Natal Mercury*, 18 December 1884. In the 1886 season, 1,400 tons of sugar was shipped from Mzinto Bay. See: *Natal Mercury*, 27 January 1887.
- 61 *Natal Mercury*, 23 December 1884. See also: letter from “GK,” in *Natal Mercury*, 23 December 1884.
- 62 Letter to the Editor, *Natal Mercury*, from “Nunc aut Numquam,” 6 January 1885.
- 63 *Natal Mercury*, 7 January 1885.
- 64 *Natal Mercury*, 16 and 17 January 1885.
- 65 *Natal Mercury*, 12 February 1885.
- 66 Letter to the Editor, *Natal Mercury*, from Thomas Reynolds, 3 February 1885.
- 67 *Natal Mercury*, 13 February 1885.
- 68 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. III, 1881, 12.
- 69 *Natal Mercury*, 20 October 1881.
- 70 Letter to the Editor, *Natal Mercury*, from “X,” 23 October 1884.
- 71 R. Edgecombe and B. Guest, “An introduction to the pre-union Natal coal industry,” in B. Guest and J.M. Sellers, (eds.), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony* (Pietrmaritzburg, 1985), 311–312; CSO 764, No. 2926, 27 July 1880: Report on coal deposits in Dundee.
- 72 *Natal Mercury*, 7 July 1883; *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, FF94. Bridges over the Incandu and Sundays rivers in Northern Natal were opened in May 1883; there were bridges under construction over the Ingagani near Newcastle, the Little Sterkspruit near Greytown and over the Tongaat in Victoria County.
- 73 *Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1885.
- 74 *Natal Mercury*, 13 February 1885.
- 75 CSO 1019, No. 2173, 12 and 15 May 1885.
- 76 Natal Legislative Council, *Votes and Proceedings*, Vol. XXXIV, 1883, 298, 311–312.

- 77 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, VI, 1883, 330, also 32–6. Other prominent figures who favoured flogging were John Robinson and James Hulett. Only Harry Escombe disagreed. According to S. Pete and A. Devenish: “White settlers in colonial Natal seemed to possess an almost blind faith in the power of corporal punishment to control black offenders”. See: “Flogging, fear and food: punishment and race in Colonial Natal,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, March 2005, 5.
- 78 P.R. Warhurst, “Obstructing the Protector,” *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, VII, 1984, 31. In 1884 the sugar market was very depressed. In a letter to Killie Campbell, dated 28 January 1952, Molly Reynolds, grand-daughter of Thomas Reynolds, claimed “true British grit and determination” enabled the Reynolds brothers to survive those depressed times “and make progress”. See: Reynolds Family, MSS, KCM.
- 79 *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, GG44.
- 80 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. VII, 1884, 280. Very few Indians re-indentured after serving five years. In 1883, for example, not a single one re-indentured out of 4 548 who obtained discharge certificates. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1883, FF47.
- 81 A spare diet comprised one bowl of unsalted rice a day.
- 82 Wragg Commission Report in Y.S. Meer, *Documents of Indentured Labour, Natal, 1851–1917*, (Durban, 1980), 420–421. Frank Reynolds said he supported all his brother had stated. By 1885, of the 18 stores in Alexandra County 12 were Indian-owned. See: *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1885, B62.
- 83 Wragg Report in Meer, *Documents*, 254–255.
- 84 Weenen County had 374 electors yet qualified for two representatives while Alfred and Alexandra counties with 373 electors had only a single representative. Victoria County with 615 electors had three representatives. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1885, M5.
- 85 CSO 826, No. 3859, 24 October 1881.
- 86 *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. III, 1881, 112–113; CSO 826, No. 3859, 10 November 1881.
- 87 The Native Commission Report was published in the *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1971, 31 October 1882.
- 88 Letter to the Editor, *Natal Mercury*, 22 March 1882, from E.W. Hawksworth.
- 89 *Natal Mercury*, 10 and 11 April 1882.
- 90 *Natal Mercury*, 11 May 1882.
- 91 *Natal Mercury*, 19 and 31 May 1882.
- 92 Advertisement, *Natal Mercury*, 16 April 1883.
- 93 *Natal Mercury*, 4 May 1883.
- 94 *Natal Mercury*, 5 and 7 May 1883.
- 95 *Natal Mercury*, 22 October 1883.
- 96 *Supplement to the Blue Book for the Colony of Natal*, 1884, B43.
- 97 *Natal Mercury*, 17 December 1884.
- 98 The Indian population of Alexandra County in 1884 was stated as being 2 584. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1884, B59.
- 99 CSO 959, No. 1631, 24 and 28 April 1884. The Alexandra County Association made the same appeal for an additional MO in a letter published in the *Mercury* on 23 May 1884.
- 100 Letter from Molly Reynolds to Killie Campbell, 28 January 1952. Reynolds Family, MSS, KCM.
- 101 *Natal Advertiser*, 13 June 1885. In its obituary, the *Mercury* (12 June) remarked that the name of Thomas Reynolds was a household word on the coast. Yet surprisingly no details about his funeral were published nor was there any comment from South Coast residents on his passing.
- 102 Letter from Molly Reynolds to Killie Campbell, 28 January 1952. Reynolds Family, MSS, KCM. Reynolds purchased the tramlines in 1880. He sought a refund of Customs duty on them because, he claimed, they were solely for agricultural purposes. But George Rutherford, the chief Customs Officer, stated the tramlines could be used for a “variety of purposes” and “therefore, were liable to duty”. Colonial Secretary Mitchell endorsed Rutherford’s view. Reynolds had paid the duty on 26 June 1880. See: CSO 760 No. 2554, 7 and 15 July 1880. In the Legislative Council, John Robinson supported Reynolds’s request for a Customs duty refund arguing that “tramways proved a great facility, if not a necessity, to the sugar enterprise”. See: *Debates of the Legislative Council*, Vol. II, 1880, 508–509. Tramlines were introduced in the cane fields of the Reunion estate in the Isipingo area in 1877. See: *Natal Blue Book*, 1877, JJ4.
- 103 P.D. Griggs, “The origins and early development of the small scale farming system in Queensland 1870–1915,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1997, 50.