

## Sheila Langden Henderson (1922–2017)

SHEILA Henderson quietly passed away in her sleep on the evening of Sunday, 19 March 2017 at the Juana Maria Old Age Home in Ladysmith, a place which she had been instrumental in founding. The *Ladysmith Gazette* hailed her death as ‘The passing of an icon’.

Born Sheila Davies, she was the daughter of Donny Davies, a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian* tasked with covering football and, in particular, the Manchester United team. Donny Davies died in the Munich Air Disaster in 1958 when a plane carrying the team crashed. To the end of her days, Henderson was a loyal supporter of ‘Man United’.

When World War II broke out, Henderson was in France, studying at Grenoble University. She made it back to England on a fishing boat via Brittany and the Channel Islands. From 1940–1943 she was a student at Oxford University, acquiring an MA degree in French language and literature.

In 1946 she came to South Africa to teach French and History at St Andrew’s School in Bedfordview, Johannesburg. In the following year she met Charles Henderson, who farmed at Balbrogie in the Washbank district north of Ladysmith. They had a military wedding in All Saints’ Church, Ladysmith in January 1948.

Charles Henderson was a member of the South African Senate for many years and his wife was an ardent supporter and organiser of her husband’s political activities. She was also very active in local community affairs, for instance in the Women’s Section of the Elandsplaagte Farmers



Association. She was a member of the committee for the building of St Margaret’s Church, Elandsplaagte. She taught French at Dundee Convent and later also taught at the Elandsplaagte Primary School which was also attended by her children.

A defining feature of Henderson’s life was her passion for history. She was *the* authority on the local history of Northern Natal and a mentor of such well-known individuals as the late David Rattray of Fugitive’s Drift. She was responsible for encouraging the Ladysmith Women’s Institute to produce the *Klip River Annals*, a major research project on the history of the Klip River area. She was an honorary curator for the National Monuments Council for many years. In 1975, she was appointed to the Natal Provincial Museum Services Advisory Board, a body which she served as vice- and chairperson over the years. In 1979, with the centenary of the Anglo-

Zulu War, she was instrumental in founding the Dundee Museum. It moved onto its current site, the Talana battlefield, overlooking the town, in 1983 and was renamed the Talana Museum, with its main building, the Henderson Hall, named in her honour. She chaired the museum committee and the subsequent Board of Trustees until 1992. The Anglo-Zulu War Centenary also prompted her to focus her attention on the needs of the Rorke's Drift community and she

was responsible for raising R250 000 for the development of schooling and infrastructure there.

Henderson was honoured with a Gold Award from the Simon van der Stel Foundation and the Paul Harris Fellowship Award from Dundee Rotary. Charles Henderson predeceased her. She is survived by five of her six children, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

JACK FROST