

## Tracking Down the Genesis of the Trinity Church in Gaborone

*Edited by Sandy Grant\**

### Introduction

This correspondence was put together for *Botswana Notes and Records* some time ago but somehow got lost! It had its origins in my ‘discovery’ that Trinity Church was regarded by some of the more knowing as one of Gaborone’s most architecturally distinguished buildings. I had not even been aware! I was surprised that the name of its architect was not known and indeed that no attempt had been made to find out. The result was this correspondence, mainly with Revd. Alan Butler.

29 February 2008

Sandy Grant to Revd. Alan Butler in England

Let me get at my ‘new’ interest. As of the later part of last year, I have been drawn into teaching part time for the Architecture Department of University of Botswana (UB). They have had architects, but they have not had historians and they have certainly not had historians with an interest in local historical architecture. So, suddenly, after all these years, I am drafted in. Almost immediately I am told by a senior academic there that one of the most distinguished buildings here is Trinity Church - but he has never been able to discover who was its architect.

I was flattened. I have always admired the Church but had never heard anyone suggesting that it was so architecturally distinguished. All these years!!! When I raised this notion with Derek [Jones] recently he told me a) that the architect was Francis Green, then of Swaziland, b) that the design had won an award - but couldn’t provide details and c) that whilst he had always been well aware of its architectural reputation, he had never felt it proper to say so.

I must say that I have occasionally come across this kind of strange modesty and way of thinking - but its effect is surely to deny to others what should be known. Anyway, let’s not get drawn into that particular issue. Can you give me a bit more information about the Church? Who is/was Francis Green -if alive can he be contacted? What was the award? How was the design worked out - i.e. who wanted what? It might be helpful too to know what F. Green had pulled off prior to Trinity and what he did after it?

17 March 2008

Butler to Grant

Only a few weeks ago I lent friends my copy of your book about traditional architecture.<sup>1</sup> I think it is masterly. I am pleased that someone is thinking about more modern buildings too. Francis Green has died but I am in regular correspondence with his brother Robin, R.H. Green, in Cape Town. As soon as I receive a reply, I will send his address to you.

Derek Jones and I were sent to Gaborone in January 1965 by our churches to establish a church presence there on an ecumenical basis. A number of Government buildings were already erected, but not occupied, and no private building had started. We shared a feeling of urgency about our task. One of the first priorities was to build a church, and a design for a simple, one story building, was obtained and circulated. I cannot remember who we approached nor details of his plan, but perhaps Derek may still have drawings and be able to remember. One thing I can recall clearly was that when I showed the design to a senior colleague in Gaborone he said, ‘Is that all you are going to build for us, Father, a *pondokkie*?’ We realised that we would have to think again.

I knew Robin Green from my first posting at Kuruman, where he had been building a new road to

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Vryburg. Francis was his brother and he had been working on architectural projects in the Transvaal where he had attracted the attention of the security police and was obliged to leave South Africa for Swaziland. We thought we might help him in a difficult period, and that he might be the person to help us with a new plan.

Derek and I went to see him in Swaziland though any thought that he might 'need' us was weakened by seeing along the road a large building site with a notice, 'Francis Green: New Palace for King' outside. Francis, nickname Flick, received us graciously, whilst mentioning that he was not a believer and that he would be unable to cross South Africa to Botswana without getting into further trouble with the police. He was very thorough, grilling us about our expectations, 'Do you want windows?' he asked, 'and what do you want them for?' The city planners had given great importance to the conviction that most movement around town would take place on foot and calculated the 'flow patterns' that would result. In the event there was a surge of vehicular traffic and the church might appear to have its back facing the traffic.

He was mindful of our need to limit costs, and incorporated the two ministers' houses to his design, with their deep mosquito proof boxes which were a great success. He reckoned that the area of each box should equal the area of the window plus the area of the netting, to ensure the maximum airflow. The houses were extremely comfortable to live in. His thoughts about pedestrians did not exclude motorists either. I remember he had us plant trees along the frontage with Independence Avenue to give those passing by a feeling by their height that they were in a cathedral. Hilda my wife picked up jacaranda seeds in Mafikeng, planted them first in beer tins then in Klim tins and finally in the ground. They are still growing. The tower and bell have an interesting history too, but I must not go on.

*21 March 2008*

E. Baniassad to Grant

The account of how they came to appoint Green is wonderful and leads us in the piece that you suggested we might write - perhaps as a possible monograph - to want to follow up some of the details in it. I hope we get to see the drawings, and I wish Alan would in fact 'go on' about the Tower and bell's history, and also as much detail as he can recall about the whole project.

*21 March 2008*

Grant to Baniassad

Derek Jones found his 'lost' drawings of the Church after I had phoned you. Of course, they were never lost, merely put back in the wrong place! Yes, I intend following up Alan Butler about the tower and bell -and anything else. There must be a great deal. Even the design of the furniture.

*23 March 2008*

Grant to Butler

Good of you to reply -and to make such cheering comments about our Decorated Homes book. But back to Trinity. I hope that you do not mind that I passed on your response to Essy Baniassad, who hails, I am told from Iran. He is a visiting Professor at the Department of Architecture at UB. If anyone can bring the architectural quality of Trinity to light, it is he. I suggested that he should write an article about it - but he changed this idea to a joint effort. Flattering and generous but because I would enjoy doing it, I am not about to complain.

Now, you will note Essy's request that you do 'go on' about the tower and the bell(s) -which I endorse. But there are other questions which prompt themselves. Such as, for a start:

1. Anglicans and Congregationalist would presumably have had different historical ideas about the layout and design of a church. If this is/was so -and it's only an assumption on my part, how were those differences resolved?
2. When you first met him, Francis Green must have asked you about your basic requirements. Do you remember what they were? You mentioned windows - but there must have been other questions.
3. Do you remember how these were changed/altered/amended as the dialogue progressed?
4. There must have been sticking points and problems that arose and needed to be overcome. What might they have been?
5. So much must have been dictated by the sort of budget that you had available to you. Presumably this began as relatively modest but increased as you were able to generate additional support and understanding. Can you explain how this process worked itself out -and who provided the funds to build the Church -something I ought to know but don't!
6. I am not sure of its importance, but I will nevertheless ask - how much of the initiative for this church came from outside and how much from the local community - given that this was relatively so small?
7. How now do you see the balance between Francis Green and yourselves? Which of you led? Did he suggest and you two discussed, argued, compromised, agreed, rejected? Or did he follow your joint line of thought?
8. Was the church fully utilised in terms of its original conception - and as designed and built? It's hard to express this idea -but did the dream match the reality?
9. A building of this kind cannot be detached from its furnishings - given that both, in this instance, came simultaneously. You two must have spent hours discussing such detail - if nothing else, who supplied the still very impressive fittings?
10. Your own cryptography came, I seem to remember, as a later addition. How come?
11. Anybody can look at a given building as a building pure and simple without regard for the way that it was used. But Gaborone in 1965/66 was an experimental society in a particularly nasty part of the world - I think that you will understand me. The Trinity vision set out to match the new Botswana vision - to try and put into effect the ideals set out by the country's political leadership. Your new church building was the base from which you were very specifically called to respond to [President Sir] Seretse's [Khama] quest for a new kind of society. Obviously, you understood this -and perhaps discussed it with him/and or [Lady] Ruth [Khama]? How did you respond?
12. It may be that you and Hilda feel that this question takes you away from the building as a building. But to approach any building in this way is to lose sight of its purpose -and anybody should know that Trinity had a very special and certainly unusual role and responsibility. To remove that part is to lose the essence of the whole. This should be enough to try your patience.

7 April 2008

Butler to Grant

Thank you for your letter and for the news of Essy Baniassad's interest. Have you made contact with Derek Jones? He will know what happened to the original correspondence, drawings etc. You may remember the Gaborone Broadsheet. We kept two copies for the file, one of which should be with the Trinity Church papers, and I have a second set here. I also have an article I wrote in January 1970 for Pro Veritate, the South African ecumenical paper, entitled 'United Scheme in Gaborone: A Welcome Contrast' and will send a photostat of this, as well as some of the Broadsheet issues, by airmail before the month is out.<sup>2</sup> Now for the questions you raise in your letter of 23 March:

1. Historically speaking Congregationalists and Anglicans, like other denominations, had different views about many things but the Gaberones Scheme, as we called it, was based on the conviction that in the new capital the Churches should emphasize the things that unite us, and not do anything apart that we could do together.
2. The architecture and the furnishings were to be amongst the most important expressions of this commitment, and we discussed them at length with Francis. He worked quite quickly, and we were delighted with his drawings when they came. Besides expressing our newfound unity as Christians, his proposals would give us a church that belonged to the new Gaborone in which we would be living and working. The fact that Costains, the main contractors for the city, won the contract for Trinity Church was also significant in the early stages. Besides the drawings, Francis made a model which was unexpected but excited us at the time. Though the model was later destroyed a small photograph of it was included in the appeal pamphlet, 'Free Land', I am sending you a copy of it.
3. Costains tender of £27,000, was a lot of money at the time and some reductions were made to ancillary buildings to effect savings but I do not think they had a permanent effect on the design. One economy that might have done so would have been to postpone the erection of the tower. This seemed an obvious move but when the contract was examined the price was calculated on the volume of concrete and was very small. I seem to remember £200. Had we decided not to build it at the time it was unlikely it would have been done later, and the price would have been much greater. Sometimes our contact with the contractor was too close. The foreman did not like the rough finish of the interior walls or the impressions made by the wooden shuttering, and one day when we went on site, we found he had smoothed them out on our behalf. The concrete bench ends, based on the style of the French architect whose name I cannot spell, 'Corbusier' somehow, they got painted!
4. It is hard to remember other sticking points though one or two design faults emerged later. We were all conscious of the dry climate and shortage of rain, if you remember; Independence came after a long drought. Flick suggested that rain falling on the main roof, should be canalised and sent through channels on top of the terraces into large, splash boxes either side of the main entrance. Unfortunately, the rain was very late in coming, there were leaks, much moisture evaporated on the hot, tin roof and by the time the residue reached the splash boxes, they were full of cigarette ends. Subsequently they were filled up with sand. Something else that caused trouble was the provision of large, metal lift up doors. These were required to close off the terraces from the rest of church when attendance was small. Flick searched a long time to discover doors of the correct dimension and adapted his design to fit them. The doors were very heavy and soon afterwards they were replaced by glass doors.
5. The 1966 appeal pamphlet, entitled 'Free Land', shows cost of church contract was to be £27,000 of which £10,960 was already promised by the participating Churches, £3,900 by the World Council of Churches [WCC], and the balance £12,138 was being sought locally. The help secured by the World Council of Churches came largely by the good offices of ZK Matthews who was still working at WCC Geneva or had only just left to go to New York.
6. Whilst construction of the capital was in progress Government approached the churches which had a presence in what was then still Bechuanaland - and the Gaberones Scheme was the joint response of some of them. The Anglican church and the LMS [London Missionary Society] appointed Derek and me as their ministers in Gaborone and with their approval we worked together on a united basis. The other churches showed interest but adopted a wait and see stance.
7. Francis 'followed our joint line of thought'.

8. Unfortunately, the dream only partially followed the reality. The Anglican Church in the BP [Bechuanaland Protectorate] was thin on the ground, without its own bishop and divided between two provinces; with dioceses based outside the country, in Kimberley and Bulawayo. Whilst these dioceses authorised Anglican acceptance of the Gaberones Scheme a number of Anglicans living in Botswana opposed the plan feeling it would hinder the expansion of distinctly Anglican structures in Botswana. Lady Khama came to feel strongly about this, as did Bishop Mize when he came to stay in Botswana.
9. Yes, the furniture, the altar bench, the lectern, candlesticks, candelabra etc, were made for Trinity Church; the latter made by students of the BTC [Botswana Training Centre] The carpenters bench expressed our commitment to carry the Eucharist into daily life. The candlesticks with their common measurements expressing the idea of unity in diversity, like two shoes making one pair, or like a knife and fork finding their place through the distance that separates them. I was particularly proud of the lectern designed for us by Flick - indeed I think I have the original drawing for it though I cannot put my hand on it at the moment. The design for the lectern grew out of our multilingual worship, from keeping the two Bibles in balance and respecting each other. One can call to mind various other problems. Flick intended the concrete surfaces to be left as the masons made them, but one day the foreman said we would be pleased to see he had them smoothed out. There were problems about light fittings which some judged utilitarian. They were replaced quite quickly. The design of the seating was influenced by the French architect Corbusier.
10. When we first saw the design, I suggested that a plant of some sort might be induced to grow inside the tower but we could not find anyone to advise us. There were no nurserymen in the Gaborone in those days, and no one had heard of Cornwall's Eden Project and in the end I came up with the idea of a passage from St John's Gospel, 15 vv 11-17. I was influenced in doing this by Ralph Beyer's 'Tablets of the Word' in the new Coventry Cathedral. I think I finished this in time for the opening of Trinity, November 1966. As I said earlier, I did not keep the file copies of correspondence with Flick, but I have found a scrap of a letter I sent to him which may be of interest and is among the papers I have sent you today by post.
11. You expressed very well our intentions in establishing the Trinity Scheme and building as we did. Seretse backed us all the way and Derek had a good relationship with him. Unfortunately, Ruth was not so convinced and gave encouragement to those Anglicans who wanted nothing to do with the Scheme. One day I was in State House talking to the President when Lady K came down the stairs with Simon Morapedi one of those who was opposed to Trinity. When Simon had gone, Seretse said to Ruth, 'Why do you listen to the devil's advocate?' You mention how Botswana was in 'a particularly nasty part of the world' but the causes were not entirely political. Very powerful changes were going on in the churches. Vatican II had just happened, 'Honest to God' had been written and been adversely criticized, not always by people who had read it either. The tensions between Churches had a fruitful side though. I remember Bishop Murphy bringing the new Papal Nuncio to visit Trinity Church, who said that if the changes under Vatican II had been decided earlier the Catholics might have also become involved. Bishop Murphy blushed a bit when the Legate said that. He was no friend of unity!
12. It has been good to call to mind some of those long distant events, and to recognise that Trinity stood for something that was important, and however truncated, still stands for something today. In the 1970 copy of Pro Veritate that I sent you, the Lutheran Minister, said that although like others his congregation was building its own facilities in Gaborone, 'every congregation appreciated that something was being attempted that was good' at Trinity. Had we not met Flick, or had his design been less profound, the Scheme might have failed at the outset, but I believe our meeting with him was providential.



13. I said that I could have said more about the tower. Brian Wilson helped us with this. The bell was paid for by the Anglican Diocese of San Joachim. We could only afford one bell and Brian designed it to fix under the roof as part of our wanting to gain the maximum impact with it. If you look at the bells in the RC Cathedral tower you will see they have more bells but they do not have the same physical focus. I think Derek saw it cast at the Mears and Stainbank Foundry in Whitechapel - the oldest company in England - established in 1570. The firm also cast the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, and Big Ben in London. Appropriate for a new democracy, I thought.

It was good to hear further about the recognition Trinity is receiving. Have you made contact with Francis' brother? I did read in an old letter, that Flick and Eve Murray-Hudson were in the same year at Cape Town University. He may remember more about the award. He and his brother were married to two sisters.

*14 August 2008*

Mrs Lene Green to Grant - by posted letter

Herewith some information about my husband's brother, Francis Green, and his career as an architect. We would certainly be interested to know how you use the information. We visited the Butlers in Gaborone many years ago and were most impressed by Trinity church. It is very pleasing that Francis' creativity and talent may receive some recognition.

*29 August 2008*

Grant to Butler

At last, I have had a response from Lene Green, re Francis. Later, I will scan it and get a copy off to you but as of now, it seems to me a bit sad - as well as thin. Seemingly they are not too well informed about his professional career and achievements and have had to scratch around. Totally missing is any indication as what Francis was doing in the Transvaal when you first met him. You referred to his engagement on various projects without specifying what these might have been. Also, there is no further information about his award for designing Trinity.

Essy Baniassad has once again left for other climes, he comes in and out of UB in disconcerting fashion - but this time around, I did manage to pin him down to explain why Trinity is architecturally of such interest? He showed me his slides and went through them one by one. The outcome? Very much a lecture on architecture and an architect's point of view - in other words specific to one professional group. Am not at all sure if or how this could be converted into something which could be better understood by the man in the street - such as me! But that's the challenge. And opportunity. But I wish that we were moving a little faster.

*30 August 2008*

Grant to Baniassad

Recently received. It's of interest although still a bit thin. Lots of gaps - so I have asked more questions. 'Francis Green was born in Johannesburg in 1935. He studied architecture at the University of Cape Town, from which he received the degree of Bachelor of Architecture in the mid-1950s. Together with colleagues he set up the firm of Bijl, Green & Todeschini which designed and built his parents' home in Mbabane, Swaziland (Emadwaleni) and undertook design work for the owner of La Perla restaurant in Cape Town, including his home in Llandudno, Wales.

Francis spent 1958 in Milan, where he did his practical year at the studio of Zanusso. He returned to South Africa in 1959 and shortly thereafter moved to Swaziland, where he designed some private houses

and also the State House for King Sobhuza for the Independence Celebrations and the Independence Stadium. It was while he was living and working in Swaziland that he designed a house in Johannesburg for his brother (6a Sixth Avenue, Parktown North) and the church in Gaborone.

He subsequently returned to Italy and studied sculpture for a year in Florence, thereafter, settling in the United Kingdom. At that time he set up a new partnership with his old friend, Giuliano Todeschini (Quantic Associates) which specialized in low cost housing. Sometime later Francis retired from practising as an architect and began to take an interest in the performing arts, in particular dance. He was involved with various international dance therapy groups and spent the last years of his life as part of an arts therapy community in Cornwall. It was there that he met his untimely death in 2000 in a rock-climbing accident. His ex-wife and four children have lived in the United Kingdom for many years'.

*23 August 2008*

Grant to Mrs Lena Green

Many thanks for your just received letter of the 14th and for the information about Francis. Alan Butler told me via e mail how he came to meet Francis which mentions that Francis was then engaged on architectural projects in the Transvaal but gives no further idea as to what they might have been. Would you know what those projects might have been? Of slightly less relevance, although of obvious interest, is the reference to Francis' problems with the security police -not unusual at that time! What was that about?

Alan also mentioned that Francis got an award for his design of Trinity Church but could provide no details. I would like to pin that down -can you help?

I did tell you I think that it was Professor Essy Baniassad, visiting Professor in the Department of Architecture at the university here, who first mentioned that Trinity Church is architecturally of such great interest. He is constantly on the move but before he flitted off again, I did manage to pin him down. In architectural terms, what makes Trinity of such great interest? With the slides he had taken, he took me through the building, bit by bit. So, I understood -at long last. But his is an entirely architectural, very professional, very specific kind of opinion/appreciation which will not easily be shared with the unprofessional general public. So, my first job is to get him to write his professional essay and then see how I, and maybe others, can contribute ideas about it from different viewpoints. Am not sure how long this will take. Longer than I had hoped, I assume.

Lastly, I have several times read through the information you provided about Francis and find something a little sad about it - but cannot pin down why I have this impression. Maybe it is simply your reference to his untimely death. Or perhaps that this should have happened when he was still, in today's terms, relatively young. But then again, maybe this is none of my business.

Again, my thanks for your help - and if you could add to what you have already provided, I would be most grateful.

*1 September 2008*

Mrs Lena Green to Grant

I left a lot out of the story of Francis' life as I understood that you wanted details about his life as an architect. But you are right, his life was not entirely happy. This often seems to happen to people with a great deal of creative potential, doesn't it?

#### **Endnotes**

1. *Grant, S and Grant, E. 1995. Decorated Homes in Botswana. Sandy and Elinah Grant. Mochudi: Phuthadikobo Museum.*
2. *Pro Veritate, 15 January 1970. Volume VIII No. 9*