

The Border History Society would be betraying its chiefest trust if it were to relax in its efforts to preserve Gately House and to have it proclaimed East London's Town House - and this in spite of the daunting obstacles bestrewing our path of many turnings.

This property now owned by the Municipal Council, and situated less than two hundred yards from the main thoroughfare of the city, is a unique survival of the "Kaffir Frontier" era of East London. Cape Town has its Koopmans de Wet and Martin Melek Houses standing incongruously among modern city buildings; but both these historical relics are much the poorer from every point of view for no longer standing within their own original gardens, and because neither of them can boast an article of original furniture. They are consequently rather old fashioned museums containing many priceless treasures - let us admit it; but isn't it all a bit phoney?

Gately House is nowhere as old as either of these beautiful Cape Town institutions; but time will remedy that. The land upon which the house stands dates back to the very first sub-division of land for civilian use upon the East Bank, on the occasion of the settlement of the German Legion in Panmure in 1857. The original holder was the medical officer of the Legion, aptly named Lieut. Vix! The plot is marked upon the survey map prepared by Lieut (Sir Pomeroy) Colley of Majuba fame to whom the task of allocating these acre-lots was entrusted. The property is practically surrounded by the Queen's Park giving it the appearance of having quite recently been carved out of the indigenous jungle.

The fact that John Gately acquired this property and transferred his worldly goods from West Bank to east in 1867 constitutes a speculative venture of considerable historical significance for East London today. Gately must have been among the very first

civilians resident on the West Bank to realise that Sir Harry Smith's East London West was to become an anachronism with the passing of the era of the "Kaffir" Wars, and that the dawning era of commercial development meant crossing the river. Be that as it may; he was the first commercial man of substance to transfer his business interests to the East bank. For some years the unpretentious house he built, less than twenty years after the construction of Fort Glamorgan, was the most imposing residence on the east bank, until that other civic giant David Rees followed suit and erected a two-storeyed residence in what is now Park Avenue, so inaugurating its brief reign as East London's smartest residential quarter.

John Gately and Gately House belong to an era in Kaffrarian history which is not recorded in our historical works; but that is only because our historians naively adhere to the old fashioned idea that the Border's sole contribution to our national history was "Kaffir" wars up to the eve of the discovery of diamonds and gold, which events thrust commercial prosperity upon East London, in spite of itself.

But what if John Gately does not appear in our history books? The same will probably have little to say either about you or me in days to come! The real point is, surely, that we East Londoners know, even though the rest of the country apparently does not, that our city is the sixth ranking commercial centre in the Republic, and therefore a very important cog in our country's economic mechanism. But even we ourselves don't seem to realize what an amazing achievement this represents. We are inclined to overlook the fact that the basis of our local economy is not mineral wealth nor propinquity to the centres of mineral wealth, but a muddy river linked with the wealthy interior by a very indifferent rail and road system.

East London's commercial importance rests upon a foundation laid and consolidated, not upon the discovery of mineral wealth, nor upon the foresight of the Old Cape Government, but upon these early civic giants who badgered such formidable "nay" men as John X Merriman himself into nicknaming East London the "fighting port". It was in fact in token of surrender to the demands of an importunate John Gately that Merriman, then Commissioner of Crown Lands, coined that nickname.

Trace East London's rise as a commercial centre, and you will find that it coincides with the establishment of its Board of Municipal Commissioners in 1873 with Gately as Chairman and natural leader and that the foundations upon which East London's commercial life rests bear to this day the imprint of John Gately's guiding hand.

To-day Gately's house, inside and outside, looks exactly as though its master has stepped out for a few minutes and will return at any moment - that is, except for the very delapidated appearance of the building. Miss Mary Gately who still lives in the old home has with filial pride left everything down to the last article of original furniture where her father placed it. And what beautiful furniture too!

Miss Gately has offered to present all the furniture to the East London Museum on the condition that the house be preserved as a memorial to her father.

Is it conceivable that any municipality could be so irresponsible in its guardianship of its historical past, and so lacking in civic consciousness and pride as to reject such a gift? Yes, Alas! Our City Council has done so without the outspoken approval of East London's daily newspaper and the complicity of the Provincial Administration. All who should be our allies in preventing a proposed act of unforgivable vandalism have turned us down.

Gately House is to be bulldozed and the land converted into a car park.

Through the representations of our Society, the City Engineer and Council have admitted the fact that a car park of the required area can in fact be laid out on the spot without demolishing the buildings. The Council then offered to sell the property to the East London Museum for approximately R5,300 on condition that no request for any financial aid ever be made to it. As an additional R2,000 would be required immediately to repair the building, this was not a very generous offer. However it was taken up, and the Administrator's sanction was sought for the transfer of the property to the Museum - and refused.

Upon a second approach to the Council, it agreed to lease the property to the Historical Society at a nominal rental, the Society undertaking to raise all monies necessary for repair and maintenance by public subscription. This was squashed by the Administrator's refusal to allow the Trustees of the Museum to accept Gately House at a cost of R2 per annum on the score that the Administration could not afford to spend more upon the East London Museum than it was doing!

What next? We have found a few good friends on our City Council who have very kindly made yet another approach to the Administration. We hopefully await the outcome - while we keep our powder dry!

M.H. Taylor.