

Henry Wells - Civic Leader (1876-1884)

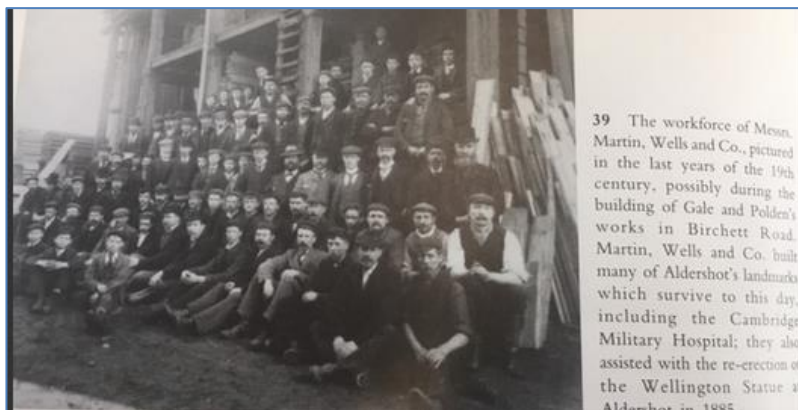
Henry was moving from the position of being purely a builder and starting to shoulder responsibilities for the town he was so actively engaged in building. On 15 April 1876 he is recorded for the first time as becoming a member of Aldershot Board of Health and Sanitary Authorities. He is reported as 'although being a new hand proved himself, in connection with the school board, to be well acquainted with the management of public business'.

At a meeting of the Local Board of Health on June 10th 1876 Henry is already making his voice heard representing the residents of Aldershot. He is reported to have questioned the reason why Aldershot did not have a Stipendiary Magistrate and resident Magistrate's Clerk, instead of residents having to travel to Odiham for a Magistrates Court hearing.

In 1878 Henry is recorded as living in Edward Street, in probably one of the new houses he has recently built.

Henry's opinions however were not always greeted with agreement, as illustrated in a letter to the *Sheldrake Military Gazette* October 12 1878. A Mr. H Dougherty challenged the Local Board especially Henry Wells as having told the complainant to "go away' and not to turn the place upside down by barking like a dog in the street". It appears that Henry was somewhat more forthright than some expected.

It was not all plain sailing for Henry as an owner. There are numerous reports in the press of proceedings at the local Magistrates Court where employees and others are brought in front of the Magistrates to answer for a multitude of minor offences, primarily theft, from both Martin, Wells and Company but also from the Army who were often the client for the works being undertaken. Often the sentence incurred included Hard Labour. An example was reported in the local press that a Police Constable Mayne stated, in Court, that at 5pm on 20th November 1877, he had observed the prisoner John Wiseman, leaving North Camp with a pot of paint. He followed at a distance and then asked him where he had obtained the paint. In answer to several questions, it was ascertained that he worked for Martin, Wells and Company and was going to work at North Camp the following morning. The prisoner was then taken to the station on suspicion of stealing the paint. Upon arrival at the station, Mr. Wells was there. The prisoner then stated that in fact he was going to use the paint for himself. He had worked for Mr. Wells for 3 years and had borne good character. The Magistrates sentenced the prisoner to three weeks imprisonment with hard labour.



39 The workforce of Messrs. Martin, Wells and Co., pictured in the last years of the 19th century, possibly during the building of Gale and Polden's works in Birchett Road. Martin, Wells and Co. built many of Aldershot's landmarks which survive to this day, including the Cambridge Military Hospital; they also assisted with the re-erection of the Wellington Statue at Aldershot in 1885.

That Henry Wells had incorporated his company of Martin, Wells and Company into the essence of the town of Aldershot is illustrated at the meeting of the Local Board of Health September 20th 1879. Here tenders for the lighting, paving, channelling and generally making of roads in the district were discussed. It was agreed that though Martin, Wells and Company's tender was not necessarily the lowest, their tender should be accepted as the firm employed hundreds of men and contributed largely to the rates, whereas if the money went out of the town nothing further would be thought about it.

During 1879 Martin, Wells and company undertook a very large and prestigious building project that can still be seen today, the Cambridge Hospital in Aldershot. The hospital design was based upon that of the Royal Herbert Hospital in Woolwich and is grand in scale and design. It was built at a cost of £45,758. The design of the building appeared to follow the design principles established by Florence Nightingale following her experiences in the Crimean War. The main central block had a central corridor stretching 528 feet (161 metres) with medical wards on both sides and on two floors offering tall windows to provide lighting and air circulation. The building was heated to give a constant temperature. It was named after Prince George, Duke of Connaught and Cambridge, a cousin of Queen Victoria and Commander in Chief of the Army.

In an address to the 24th Regiment at their departure to Zululand on March 1st 1879, Henry, as Chairman of the Aldershot Board of Health, expressed the town's admiration of the regiment, wishing them success in their forthcoming campaigns.

Later in April the same year Henry was elected to the Local Board of Health. This Board was responsible for such issues as unsanitary dwellings, emissions, sewers, street cleaning and paving, water supply, public lavatories, and burials. This role would bring Henry into the many aspects of running a fast-developing town.

The following year in April 1880 Henry Wells again stood for the position of member on the Aldershot Board of Health. As predicted prior to the election, Henry romped home and was elected together with Mr. Lazareck. Henry was fast making his way into the hierarchy of Aldershot society. However, his reasons were not purely ego-enhancing or profit-making. Henry was a steadfast church member and he proved over and over again in his life that he was deeply committed to helping his fellow man.

The following year, on 26th July 1880, Edward Martin in company with Henry and his brother George Wells attended the laying of the foundation stone by the Duchess of Connaught accompanied by her husband Prince Arthur, the Duke of Connaught, for the new St. Marks Church in Farnborough, where Martin, Wells and Company were again the builders. They had entered into a contract on 10th May to build a chancel and nave to accommodate 370 persons at a cost of £2000. As was normal with such events at this time, the ceremony was followed by a luncheon provided in a large marquee where their Royal Highnesses were accompanied by 200 ladies and gentlemen in waiting and the principal gentry of the surrounding neighbourhood. Henry was most certainly at the pinnacle of local gentry having become the most sought-after builder for projects in the fast-growing Aldershot areas, and rubbing shoulders with royalty, gentry and all and sundry who really mattered.

With Aldershot expanding and gradually becoming a town, moves were afoot to incorporate outlying areas into the town's sphere of influence. However not all inhabitants agreed with this idea. Henry Wells certainly made his point in a letter to the *Sheldrake's Military Gazette* stating that Aldershot ratepayers should not be called upon to fund improvements to draining and paving of streets in the parish of Farnborough or North Camp, by the incorporation of those areas; this should be the responsibility of persons living in that area.

Henry was fast pursuing many different aspects of life in Aldershot. In May 1881 the Aldershot Local Board of Health proposed that he should become chairman the next year. He had already taken the role in 1877 in the absence of its then chairman Mr. Clinton. So, he was recognised as a force that was helping the community for the better.

Henry's interest in licensed premises appears to have continued despite becoming a major building contractor. In September 1881 a Mr. Eve applied for a license to operate an off-licence in Edward Street on behalf of Henry Wells. After some discussion in the Aldershot Petty Sessions, it was agreed to issue the licence.

The care Henry showed for his workforce is demonstrated in September 1881 where a Coroner's report showed that a carpenter in the employ of Martin, Wells and Company, had a fall and died due to being struck by a scaffolding pole. Henry Wells is reported as paying for the funeral and allowing his entire workforce to attend.

By 1882 Henry had become the Chairman of the Aldershot Board of Health, after only a few years serving as a member. He was showing his prowess in many aspects of both business and civic life, believing in his ideals for the future of the town.

Not all was work for the Wells family and employees as shown in the *Farnham Herald* of Saturday June 24th 1882, where a cricket match between a team from Martin, Wells and Company was playing at the Recreation Ground in the High Street. One team was headed by Henry's eldest son Alfred, then 20 years of age, and the other team comprised of company carpenters. Inevitably the match was followed by the essential evening dinner, this time at the Cannon Hotel.

On a stormy and wet Saturday 15th July 1882, the entire 80 branches of Martin, Wells and Company employees set out on the very first General Outing (called a Beanfeast in the local paper). They embarked on a Southwestern Railway train from Aldershot Town Station to Portsmouth. Upon arrival at Portsmouth, the happy band divided into groups, some entering the dockyard to view the warships, others intent on beach activities whilst the remainder set out on a sea voyage to Ryde on the Isle of Wight. The party sat for dinner at Cawte's Hotel at Southsea. Henry Wells provided a 'handsome Contribution' to the excursion fund but was unable to attend himself as he had a prior engagement having to be at Swanley for the laying of a corner stone for the new Home for Little Boys. Although no evidence can be found, it would appear that Henry Wells may well have been involved in the construction of the Home, that was eventually opened by the Prince (later King Edward VII) and Princess of Wales.

The following week saw the opening of the Aldershot Brewery built for the owner Mr. Sheldrake by Martin, Wells and Company. The brewery was situated close to the town's railway station. As was common at the time, the official opening was followed by a substantial luncheon at the nearby South Western Hotel in, appropriately, The Malt Room. Needless to say, Henry was one of the guests.

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MARTIN, WELLS, AND CO.'S BEANFEAST.

The second annual beanfeast of the employés of Messrs. Martin, Wells, and Co., builders and Government contractors, of Aldershot, was celebrated on Saturday, 7th inst., the place of resort selected this year being Margate. Favoured with the loveliest of weather the employés and several visitors, the party numbering about 350, assembled in the best of spirits at a quarter to seven at the Aldershot Town Station, where they found a special South Eastern train in readiness to convey them to their destination. No time was lost in entraining, and punctually at five minutes to seven the special steamed out of the station amidst the ringing cheers of the excursionists and those who had congregated to witness their departure. After a short stay at Ash and Guildford, where the number was augmented, a start was made in earnest for Margate, the excursionists settling themselves down to pass away the time in the manner best suited to their especial tastes and convenience. This was easily effected, by some in admiring the beautiful scenery, by others participating in various games, in saluting the workmen in the brickfields on the line of route with a friendly "pug up," and, when the county

dinner. At 12.30 about 300 of the company repaired to the Foresters' Hall, Union Crescent, where Mr. F. A. Lilley, proprietor of the Queen's Arms Hotel, had prepared a really excellent dinner, which was heartily enjoyed by everyone, the invigorating sea air, after the long railway ride, having had an almost visible effect upon the landsmen's appetites, and Mr. Lilley's catering left nothing to be desired. The chair was occupied by Mr. Henry Wells, a member of the firm, who was supported by Mr. John Wells, Mr. A. Wells, Mr. G. Wells, junr., Mr. H. Hacker, Mr. C. Bateman, &c. Mr. E. W. Galsworthy occupied the vice-chair, being supported by Mr. J. Webster, Mr. J. Carrington, Mr. Frank Brown, &c. Dinner over, Mr. Hacker proposed "The Queen and the Royal Family," which was heartily received. The Vice-Chairman then proposed "The Army, Navy, and Reserve Forces," coupling with the toast the names of Warrant Officers Blane and Hitchings, and Corporal Webster, 2nd Volunteer Battalion the Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment (applause). Warrant Officer Hitchings, R.E., replied on behalf of the army, and remarked that it was a good thing for Aldershot there was such a firm as Martin, Wells, and Co. (applause). Corpl. Webster in replying for the Reserve Forces, said the volunteers generally were up to their full strength. The Aldershot contingent of the Farnham Company mustered about 50 members, but what they wanted at Aldershot was a gentleman with plenty of money to come forward as a lieutenant (applause). The Vice-

it was properly represented to the firm they always got justice (applause). He had much pleasure in coupling with the toast the name of Mr. Henry Wells. The toast was drunk with musical honours Mr. Wells, who on rising was loudly cheered, said the manner in which they had proposed and drank the health of the firm of which he was a humble member was a source of great pleasure to him. Such a gathering was what he might call a "localisation," and he was pleased to see so many happy and cheerful faces. He hoped they would all unite together and pull one way, as they must quite understand that without that Martin, Wells and Co. must fall to the ground, but so long as they (the employers and employed) stuck to each other they were like a bundle of sticks (applause); a man might break a single stick, and one by one break every man in the firm, but so long as Martin, Wells and Co. and their workmen did that which was right they would never break them (loud applause). There was one thing he wished to impress upon the minds of the younger ones present, and that was never to say "I can't," but always to say "I'll try," and as long as they did that he knew they would be right. He recollected a gentleman telling him that 30 years ago, and it had never left him from that day to this (applause). He had always wished and tried to do his best for his fellow creatures as far as he was able. They might think he was selfish, but when he was doing his best for those around him he was doing the best for himself (cheers). He had never known people who had envied others to have prosperity, but he had known those who have tried to help themselves (applause). If they all did that they could not go wrong, and there must be plenty of trade. In conclusion he