

Cape Town's WWI Mayor - Sir Harry Hands

Sir Harry Hands was 'hands on' and knew how to get things done. He started a street-tradition-of-remembrance that is still observed more than a hundred years later throughout the world.



Mr. Harry Hands K.B.E. (Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire) was the Mayor of Cape Town from 1915 to 1918. He was a capable 'War Mayor' and rendered sterling service to recruiting in South Africa during the Great War (WWI). Mr. Hands was awarded the Order of Leopold of Belgium. His wife, Aletta Cathrine, was the daughter of Mr. P A Myburgh, a member of the Legislative Assembly of the Cape Colony. They had three sons and a daughter. (Debrett's. Baronetage, Knightage and Companionship 1945 pg. 1045 – knights). The family lived at Talana in Claremont, Cape Town.

Mayor Harry Hands was an incorporated accountant of the firm Hands and Shore with offices at 106 St. George's Street, Cape Town which was within walking distance of the City Hall. He was also the first accountant of the Old Mutual.

In February 1918 an important 'Conference of War Recruiting Committees of the Union of South Africa' took place in the City Hall. As a result of that conference a special recruiting drive was begun on April 8. The drive was inaugurated by church services throughout the city and suburbs. The official service was held at St George's Cathedral and was attended by Mayor Hands and the councilors (Mr. and Mrs. R. R. Brydon included).

Twelve days later, on 20 April 1918, Mr & Mrs. Hands received a telegram notifying them that their eldest son Captain Reginald Hands had died of wounds received while fighting on the Western Front. He was a gunner and the Commanding Officer of the 73rd Siege Battery, South African Heavy Artillery. The Hands family was devastated.



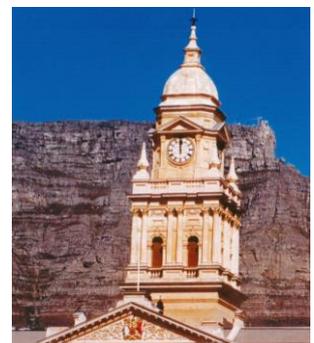
Captain Reginald Hands



R. R. Brydon JP "The Gift of Citizens"

Bereaved Mayor Hands was sitting in his chambers below the clock tower of the City Hall in the company of his friend, councilor Robert Brydon. They heard the 11:00 Westminster Chime followed by the slower definite hour strokes of the clock in the tower at 11:00. A full hour later the two friends were still sitting in the same room when they heard the shot of the Noonday Gun, fired from Signal Hill. Mr. Brydon took matters in hand and suggested a silent street pause similar to that of the Angelus prayer tradition observed daily at noon at many churches. The gentlemen were in immediate agreement. The familiar sound of the shot of the Noonday Gun could become the signal to start the

silence instead of the peal of church bells. Mayor Hands immediately agreed. The two men discussed, planned and thought through the details. Any mayor is in a position to get things done in a remarkably short space of time because they know the correct people and channels.



Clock tower of the City Hall, Cape Town, at noon when the guns on Signal Hill fired and still fire daily

On Monday May 13, 1918 the bereaved Mayor had the following message published in the Cape Times:

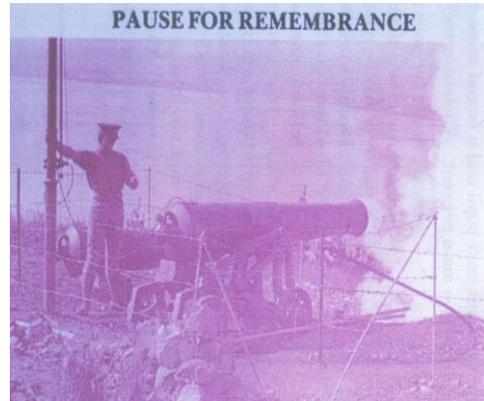
Pause for three minutes.

In some places in the Union it has been the practice during the past few weeks to call halt at midday in order to direct the minds of the people to the tremendous issues which are being fought out on the Western Front, and to afford a minute or two for silent prayer for the forces of the Allies engaged there.

This seems to be an excellent example to copy. And I now appeal to all citizens to observe the same practice in Cape Town as from tomorrow (Tuesday). Upon the sound of the midday gun all tramway cars will become stationary for three minutes and other trams should halt wherever it may be, for the same period.

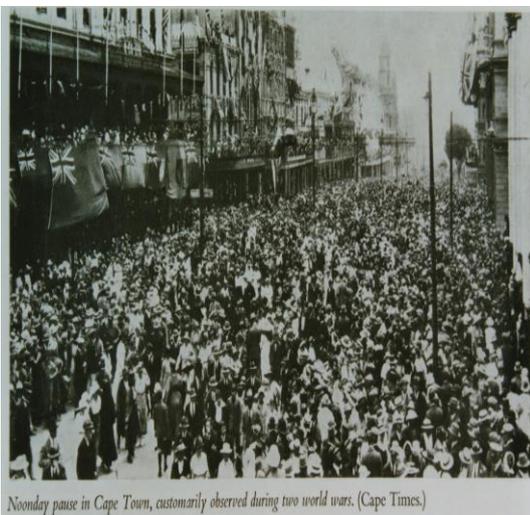
Pedestrians are asked to remain standing wherever they may be when the gun sounds and everyone, however engaged, to desist from their occupations and observe silence for this short spell. Employers can greatly assist by advising their staff to this effect. I cannot conceive anything more calculated to bring home to us the critical time through which we are passing and it's responsibilities for all of us and I hope most fervently that all our citizens will help to make the recognition of the solemnity of the occasion as real as possible.

*(Signed) H. Hands
Mayor of Cape Town*



During the first trial observance, Mayor Hands stood with his head uncovered in the center of Cartwright's Balcony during the pause. "He afterwards expressed intense gratification at the impressiveness of the short ceremony but also felt that the trial period of a 3 minute pause was too long. Mayor Harry Hands therefore had the following message published in The Cape Argus on 14 May 1918:

"His Worship decided that the pause will retain its hold on the people if it is **altered to two minutes instead of three**, and that this change will not in any way diminish the power of its appeal. Consequently the pause will be two minutes tomorrow, when Bugler Biccard will again sound 'The Post'." (Cape Argus 15 May 1918)



Noonday pause in Cape Town, customarily observed during two world wars. (Cape Times.)

This short official ceremony was a world first. Its effect and value to all concerned was recognized immediately by "the Reuter's correspondent in Cape Town who cabled a full description of the ceremony to London. This was distributed all over Great Britain and re-cabled to the other Dominions. Within a few weeks Reuter's agency in Cape Town received press cables from London stating that the ceremony had been adopted in two English provincial towns and later by others, including towns in Canada and Australia... by Armistice Day (the ceremony of the two minute silent pause of prayer and remembrance) was in the air everywhere and spread of its own accord without much prompting."

Mayor Hands was admired for his courage in supporting so many demands on his time under such personally tragic circumstances, for example, The Delville Wood musical memorial service that was held in the City Hall on 18 July 1918. The observance of the daily midday Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance continued for a full year until 14 May 1919 (Minutes – The Corporation of the City of Cape Town, 9 September 1918).



Mr. Harry Hands retired from office at the end of his term, in September 1918. He was none the less on the balcony of Cartwright's and stood next to the bugler for the Last Post ceremony during the Peace Celebration on 2 August 1919.

Sir Harry Hands was knighted for his service during WWI and as noted in the 'South African Lady's Pictorial' dated July 1919 page 5, "for his services as chairman of the Recruiting Committee, he did splendid work and it is **due to him that the impressive Mid-day Pause was introduced.**"

In due course the other two fighting Hands sons returned and were demobilized.

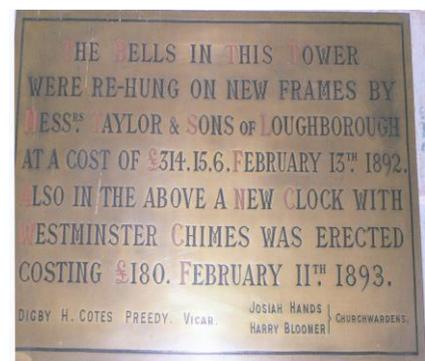


The Hands family received, as did most of the families of fallen soldiers, the large Memorial Plaque (Dead Man's Penny) honouring the memory of Reginald Harry Myburgh Hands. Unfortunately a mistake had been made with his fallen son's name. The plaque was minted in memory of Reginald Henry Hands and not Reginald Harry Myburgh Hands. Sir Harry, being the gentleman that he was, wrote to the relevant department in London. The error was corrected and a second Memorial Plaque issued. Family members still have both Memorial Plaques.

On 10 October 1926 Sir Harry Hands attended the special service held in Cape Town, which was timed to synchronize with the ceremony at the unveiling of the Delville Wood Memorial in France. This ceremony at the Noonday Guns of the Lion Battery on Signal Hill was arranged by the South African Heavy Artillery Association. The service was conducted by Lieut.-Col. the Rev. C.E.S. Bull, MC and followed an appropriate and impressive ceremony. The Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance followed the "Last Post" and was broken by the sounding of the "Reveille". To the strains of the Artillery March the regiments departed.

Another important fact concerning the Hands family is that Josiah Hands, father of Sir Harry Hands who lived in King Norton, England, was a warden at St. Nicholas Church.

Josiah Hands had been much involved with the installation of the clock and the 10 bells of the carillon which sounds the Westminster Chime of Big Ben, the very bell that starts The Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance every Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day. The same Westminster Chime was installed in the City Hall, Cape Town where his son Sir Harry Hands, the War Mayor of Cape Town, initiated and organized the first public observance of the Two Minute Silent Pause of Remembrance during World War One (WWI).



One of the prayers associated with the Westminster Chime rang true for the Hands family:

*“Oh Lord our God
Thy children call
Grant us Thy peace
And bless us all.”*



Benjamin Harry Hands born 06-11-2012 is a descendant of Sir Harry Hands. He was photographed on the military memorabilia of Ken Hands, son of Sir Harry Hands and brother of fallen Reginald Hands. Ken Hands was one of the 3 sons of Sir Harry Hands who fought in WWI. Family pride and knowledge of the accomplishments of their predecessors are evident in this photograph.

J. C. Abrahams (Tannie Mossie)