

Warden of S. Thomas College: Rev. John Charles Puddefoot

By Premasara Epasinghe

The 17th Warden of S. Thomas College, Mount Lavinia assumed duties on 10 July 2009. His investiture was held at the Chapel of the Transfiguration by the Rt. Rev. Duleep De Chickera, 14th Bishop of Colombo. President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Lady Shiranthi Rajapaksa attended the ceremony, as their three sons had studied at S. Thomas College, Mount Lavinia. Namal, Yoshita and Rohita Rajapaksa created history. All of them became Rugby captains. Today, Namal Rajapaksa is a parliamentarian.

Rev. Puddefoot was born in North London. His father was an engineer who served in Nigeria for some time. Later, he returned to London and served in the Royal Air Force during WWII. His mother hails from a family of mathematicians. Rev. Puddefoot's parents lived in Kent and later moved to Devon, South West of England. He started schooling at a tiny country school and was one of the 36 students there. At the age of 11 years, he entered a Grammar school.

The little schoolboy, John Charles Puddefoot was interested in sports. He was a fine sprinter, who won the 440 yards at the local sports meet. He played cricket and soccer. He never played rugby football for his college, but later when he joined the Eton College staff, he coached rugby and became a rugby referee of repute!

Rev. Puddefoot had a knack for mathematics as a child. But he had a funny experience once. When he was about 11 or 12 years, he found he could not get on with his Maths teacher. He did not understand what she was teaching. Later, the teacher changed. The new teacher motivated him. Thereafter, mathematics became his favourite subject. In later years, he entered the University of Oxford and became a student of mathematics.

Rev. Puddefoot started his professional career as an insurance man. He became an actuary one who calculates Insurance risks and the premium by studying mortality and the frequency of accidents, fires, etc. Soon, he found that Insurance was not his line. Thereupon, he obtained a degree in theology and served six years in the Anglican Church, in the Diocese of Durham, Chichester. Later, he was offered the post of mathematics teacher cum Chaplain at Eton. Thus, began the distinguished career of a brilliant educationist.

Rev. Puddefoot was in charge of the curriculum development programme of Eton College. He became Deputy Head after 18 years. He was a firm believer in sports and other co-curricular activities. He taught mathematics for 8 years and served as Head of Mathematics for 10 years.

After he had been at Eton for nearly 25 years, he thought of a change. In his email he saw an announcement that there was a vacancy for Warden at S. Thomas College, Mount Lavinia and applied. It was an Etonian, James Chapman, who started STC in 1851. The

mathematics department was started at Eton College, in the year that S. Thomas College was established in Ceylon.

When I asked Rev. Puddefoot to compare Eton with S. Thomas College, he said Eton College was one hundred percent a boarding school, whereas STC was not only a boarding school but took day students as well. "At S. Thomas, we have an enormous responsibility, because the boys enter at the age of 5 plus, and leave College at 18 or 19. At Eton, students enter at 13 and leave by 18."

He stated that Thomians could always match the students of Eton College. "We teach children Sinhala, English and Tamil at STC. First, they think as Thomians. When they go out to the world, they think as Sri Lankans, not as Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Burghers or Malays. At S. Thomas College, we have no class, creed, colour or religious differences. It is a microcosm of the Sri Lankan society and all of them live, learn, play and interact as one family."

Rev. Puddefoot stressed the value of sports and co-curricular activities. "It is not merely passing an examination that matters. When you go out to the world, you have to face challenges. Even at Eton, we encouraged students to participate in sports even during the period of examinations. There must be a balance in studies and sports." He made special mention of the enormous publicity that school sports get in Sri Lanka. "In England, the most important school sports event is the "Big-Match" between Eton and Harrow. This match is played at Lords - the epicentre of Cricket. The annual encounter which has a history of more than a hundred years, is witnessed only by about 1000 spectators. Today, its just a one day affair. The English dailies do not devote more than a column inch or two to this important match."

Rev. Puddefoot said: "Students should participate in all school activities, academic as well as other co-curricular activities which include sports. By this, they learn to tackle things that they do not know. In education, dreams begin with a teacher, who believes in his student, who tugs and pushes and leads his student to the next plateau. Education is an investment in a persons future, and the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. The teacher should establish a relationship with students. First, get to know them. Develop their analytical skills. Make them think. Develop their creativity. Dictating notes in the class is not the main role of a teacher. Teachers should be committed, disciplined and dedicated to the worthy cause of teaching. "You must never give up on a child," Rev. Puddefoot said.