

INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE S. THOMAS' COLLEGE, GURUTALAWA OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION

Headmaster's Address

GENTLEMEN,

Your presence here this evening is a demonstration of your loyalty to the School, for which, all of us who work at Gurutalawa are enormously grateful. When one lives and works so far from the centre of things, one does not get the opportunities one would like to meet and to keep in touch with the Old Boys of the School. Were nothing else to come of this meeting, it would be worthwhile in itself just because it provides an occasion for us to be together.

In this connection, it is my pleasant duty to thank the Warden for allowing us the use of the hall, and for arranging for the provision of tea. He has always taken a keen interest in Gurutalawa, and has himself been largely instrumental in its survival after the war. During his short period as Headmaster there, he laid the foundations on which the school has been built. We owe him an immeasurable debt of gratitude for that work, so faithfully performed.

Our business here today is to establish an Old Boys' Association for past members of the staff and boys of the school. One object in doing so is to help Old Boys to keep in touch with one another and with the school. How this is best to be effected will be the task of the Executive Committee to decide. One suggestion that has been made is that in addition to the holding of an Annual Old Boys' Day, the association should establish a register of Old Boys' Addresses, and that those whose names appeared on that register should receive an annual news letter from the school. The other main object of the association is to rally round the school all old members who wish to uphold and help it by every means in their power.

To achieve these ends it is necessary that the Constitution and Rules should be drawn up and that officers should be appointed to control the activities of the Association. Most of our meeting today will be concerned with these matters, but before we embark on doing so it may be useful if I remind you of some salient points in the history of the school and its needs.

In February 1942 Mr. and Mrs. Leslie de Saram announced their intention of giving Gurutalawa Farm, its livestock, buildings, equipment and furniture to S. Thomas' College. I well remember Warden de Saram returning to College and telling me of this amazingly generous offer. Knowing something of the agricultural experiments Mr. Leslie de Saram had been performing on his farm I asked if he wished us to use it as a farm school, or for agricultural research, and received the reply that we were to use the gift in whatever way would best further the interests of the College, and that no restrictions whatsoever would be imposed.

The offer had hardly been accepted when its value was driven home to us by the pressure of current events. The military authorities had been looking round to find suitable buildings for use as hospitals, and the Minister of Education had urged the selection of S. Thomas' College, as being specially suitable, (so I was informed by Colonel Carr, who subsequently took over the College and his story was confirmed by a Senior Government Official who had been concerned with the requisitioning of schools and to whom I appealed to allow us to retain the use of our buildings.) As it happened the College was in fact taken over at five days notice, and the Warden decided to use Mr. Leslie de Saram's gift as a mean of providing accommodation for some of our boarders. Mr. De Saram himself, went to Gurutalawa to help supervise the conversion of the building for school use.

I myself arrived in Gurutalawa on April 9th with instructions to take charge there. Mr. Leslie de Saram, Mr. Isaacs, his Farm Manager and I, had a busy time preparing for the arrival of the boarders, and the Warden joined us as often as his work in establishing the Gatambe branch of the College permitted. On May 12th the first batch of boarders arrived, about 55 in number, and there began one of the happiest periods in the school's existence. Crowded though we were (with boys sleeping in the corridors and masters in the bath rooms), we were more like a large family than a secondary school. The standard of work was exceptionally high, and even the weaker boys made rapid strides as a result of working in such small classes. Games were played with enthusiasm on our six acres of sloping patnas, a mile from the school. Our other activities included hiking, scouting, gardening, and physical training all of which were taken very seriously. In the evenings we assembled in the common room, and when there were no literary society meetings, we played games such as carrom and bridge. That was our start, and now I must pass on to an important development in 1944. At this time it was decided to close the Gatambe branch, and to have one boarding house and that at Gurutalawa. Mr. Shirley d'Alwis volunteered to act as honorary architect, and soon the Gurutalawa boys were busy making contour surveys of the building sites, and levelling the area which was later to become the quadrangle and junior dormitories. Even the ladies on the staff took a hand in the latter work, and vast quantities of earth were shifted to what is now the chapel lawn. Mr. D'Alwis produced an ingenious and pleasing design, and on July 26th the first stone was laid. The work was badly retarded by heavy and continuous rain and when on January 8th 1945 the boarders were due to arrive the buildings were still far from complete. In the end the Seniors only were allowed to come and the Juniors followed two weeks later. The Seniors found it hard to settle down under such primitive conditions, and there was much discontent, and a poor standard of discipline. To those of the staff who had known the happier conditions of the previous two years life become quite a nightmare. However the completion and occupations of the senior dormitory block eased the situation, and living conditions improved steadily. Even so, we still had to use a cadjan shed as a dining hall for months to come.

The end of the war came unexpectedly, and found us with our building programme far from complete. There was a very real expectation that Gurutalawa would be closed down altogether. In spite of this, the work of building the chapel, and extending the hall was continued and completed.

In the first term of 1946 the day-boys resumed work in the Mount Lavinia buildings, and in the second term the boarders returned there. However, rather surprisingly, some 110 boys elected to stay in Gurutalawa. The present Warden was left in charge, and the possible closing down of the school was postponed for reconsideration at a later date.

The erecting of the dormitories at Gurutalawa has cost money and had run S. Thomas' College into debt. A Thomian Fair was held at the race course in the third term, and sufficient funds were raised to clear off the building debt. Back in Gurutalawa the school prospered under Mr. Davidson's control, and the numbers started to go up. As a result the Board of Governors sanctioned the completion of the classroom block of buildings. The discipline and loyalty of the boys were greatly improved, and once again the atmosphere was one of happiness. It was sad for Gurutalawa when Mr. Davidson had to return to Mount Lavinia at the end of 1947, but he had laid the foundations of a good school well and truly, and it could look forward with some confidence to a bright future.

Nevertheless it was clear that if the school was to maintain its numbers, and to compete with other schools of its type, many amenities would have to be provided. Arrangements which could be tolerated in a time of war were hardly good enough under normal conditions. Though the School had been freed from debt, it was left to embark on its future life with buildings and equipment which would have been regarded as far below standard by the bigger schools. We realized that if we were to return our boys, we would have to make some attempt to improve things.

As long as the boys saw that we were not content with conditions as they were, they would be willing to put up with inconvenience and discomfort. The list of urgent requirements was formidable, and we viewed it with no little dismay. We did make a start to meet some of the most urgent requirements, but before we had gone far our work was interrupted by the classroom fire on November 3rd. This involved us in heavy and unexpected expenditure, since we not only had to replace the class rooms and their furniture, but had to re-roof the dormitories and chapel with asbestos instead of mana grass thatching.

It is not my object to give you a history of the school, but rather to show you what are our needs, and how they came into existence. I can therefore pass over the incidents of the next few years, and merely draw your attention to the improvements effected in the course of them. One of our great handicaps was the approach of the Centenary of S. Thomas' College, and the launching in Mount Lavinia of the Centenary Fund. It was suggested that we should not start a building fund during the time for which the Centenary fund was in operation. When at length we found it still collecting money in 1952, (and later) we decided to wait no longer and appealed for our own needs. By that time, we had (through our staff, parents and old boys) contributed some Rs.5,000/- to the Centenary fund, whilst the two prep schools also contributed most generously. When at last it was started after the 1952 Prize Giving our fund was most generously supported by Old Boys and parents and later Captain G C Harper was instrumental in collecting large sums of money with which to provide many of our needs that still remained unsatisfied. However his enthusiasm outran his caution, and some of his efforts could well have waited until funds were more abundant. Anyone studying the enclosed list of improvements will appreciate how much he successfully attempted.

What of the future? With the rise in prices it is more and more difficult to make our fees cover our expenditure and there is no possibility of our devoting any of our fees to college improvements. I myself am unable to provide any substantial financial help, and it is up to the friends of the school to do what they can to continue what has been begun. None of you are as yet very wealthy, and ambitious schemes are out of the question, but there are many things which you may feel able to undertake. Our bigger requirements are a good Laboratory, and a School Hall, and these will, I fear, have to wait. Amongst the smaller matters are a roof to the Squash Court, more cupboards and furniture for the dormitories, improvements of the washing arrangements, changing and drying rooms for use after games. Common rooms, deep litter fowl houses for the farm, paving the chancel of the College Chapel as a memorial to Father A.C. Hobson towards which a gift has already been received, and so on. The time may well come when the Kitchen will have to be enlarged again. With the advent of teaching in the three language media, far more classrooms are essential, and for example on our present time table there are two periods in the week when nineteen masters are teaching simultaneously, whilst seventeen classes at the same time are common enough. Several small classrooms are needed for their proper accommodation. If our numbers continue as at present extra dormitory accommodation is also urgently needed.

If you can help us, even if only in a small way, you will be doing something to hand on to others the sort of education that you yourselves enjoyed and to see that your successors in the school are better provided for than you were.

Once again let me thank you for coming to this meeting, and express my hope that this will be the first of many such meetings.

PROGRESS IN THE BUILDING AND FURNISHING OF S. THOMAS' COLLEGE, GURUTALAWA FROM THE TIME OF ITS FOUNDATION

1942 - Gift of Gurutalawa farm to the College. Adoption of rooms to act as a Science Laboratory, and a staircase to act a lecture hall. Servants' quarters built, and lavatories constructed. A bakery was built.

1943 - Construction of the small swimming bath.

1944 - Levelling of the site of the present quadrangle, and the survey of all the building sites by the boys and staff. Work started on the Junior dormitory block. Classroom site levelled partly by the boys.

1945- Erection of temporary cadjan dining hall. Junior dormitory block completed. Senior dormitory block started and built. Chapel built. Extensions completed to provide the present dining hall. Classroom plinth completed, and a mana grass roof erected on props.

1946 - The flower garden was laid out anew, and especially the part below the senior dormitories, under the guidance of Mrs. C.H. Davidson.

1947- The classrooms were provided with walls.

1948- Three thousand rupees worth of furniture was purchased at a sale in the Naval Camp at Diyatalawa. The sick room was extended and a separate surgery provided. The kitchen, pantry and store room were entirely rebuilt. An Esse Cooker was purchased for the kitchen. A dining hall was built for the servants. The old isolation rooms and office block, were converted as the servants' quarters. The old kitchen and store room were partly demolished and the rest converted into a science laboratory. A new lighting engine was purchased and fitted. The buildings were extensively rewired and an electric pump was purchased to provide a water supply. A start was made on the provision of water borne sanitation for the senior dormitories. A new bungalow was provided for the married staff. New poultry houses were constructed for the farm. Temporary classrooms were arranged. The walls of several dormitories were pulled down and rebuilt with larger windows, to provide adequate light and air.

1950- The classrooms were rebuilt and re-roofed. Fresh furniture was provided in the dining hall, and the dining hall furniture moved to the classrooms. The benches in the chapel were replaced by chairs. The choir were provided with stalls. The mana thatched roofs were replaced by asbestos ones over junior dormitory block and the chapel. Work was resumed on the leveling of the playing field, though only by hand and at a slow rate. New bookcases were provided for the library. A further electric pump was bought. For senior dormitories, a new water storage tank and a wash house were built. In the senior dormitory block, one master's room and some dark storage rooms were pulled down, and the building divided into three dormitories. Night lavatories were also equipped for the senior dormitories. A petrol gas machine was bought and a building to house it was erected near the science laboratory. The laboratory was fitted with gas connections. Work on a larger swimming bath was begun.

1950- A combined desk and cupboard was designed for the Junior dormitories, and the provision of such desks was begun. A new staff bungalow was built. The walls in Winchester house were plastered for the first time.

1951- Garnier and de Saram Junior dormitories were plastered. More dormitory furniture was provided. The new library was built. A section of the guest house was enlarged to provide accommodation for married staff. A one-meter spring board was fixed in the Swimming bath. A dairy room was built for the farm. The boys levelled the drill ground and volley ball court. A telephone connection was obtained. Mr. E. Scott started on the erection of the swimming bath filtration plant. A high diving stage and a three-meter spring board were erected. A ceiling was constructed for Winchester house. The nine-acre pasture was leased and cleared for weeds, and the nine tic-polongas which resided there ! The Chapel roof was decorated.

1952- The old firewood shed was enlarged and provided with a cement floor for use as a

woodwork classroom. The necessary benches and tool were purchased for the use of the classes. A temporary sheep shed was erected near the pastures. The work on the swimming bath filtration plant was finished.

1953- The substitution of bunks for beds in some of the junior dormitories was begun. The object of this was not so much to increase the accommodation as to provide room for table tennis and carrom. The Matron's room was rebuilt, as it seemed in danger of collapse. The "Assault Course" was made.

1954- Mr. E. Scott carved the statue of St. Francis and erected it above the door of the chapel. The old tuck-shop was modified and furnished for use as a Co-operative Store. On the playing field the Pavilion was built. The first half of the Headmaster's bungalow was completed. A new sick room was constructed over the former Headmaster's quarters, and provision made for a surgery, matron's room and an isolation ward. The woodwork shed was extended to make room for a puppet stage. The boys started work on the levelling of a site for a squash rackets court.

1955- This year we concentrated on the provision of more furniture, especially for the library, the office and the dormitories. The office itself was enlarged and provided with a verandah. Another electric pump was bought and fixed. A new garage and a set of stables were erected. The bus garage was rebuilt and enlarged. A bungalow adjoining the compound was taken over and modernized for the Farm Manager. Another dormitory received its cement floor. The senior night lavatories were re-roofed. The water system was overhauled and defective pipe were replaced, specially those serving the senior dormitories. Another 'married quarters' was extended for Mr. & Mrs. Scott. A new bathroom was provided for one of the staff bungalows. A room in the filter house was improved for the use of a member of the staff and was given a ceiling. The Co-operative Stores were extended to provide space for the customers to sit in comfort, and the new room was furnished. The boys began work on the foundations of the squash rackets court. Work was done to improve the rain water drains. A new soakage pit was provided for the senior dormitory septic tank. Work on the second half of the Headmaster's bungalow was begun. The carpenter's workshop was reconstructed. The woodwork of the college was repainted. The entrance drive was improved, and so were the garden paths.

1956- The remaining senior dormitories were equipped with ceilings. New quarters for the staff were added, and existing quarters were enlarged. A cottage was built for one of the senior servants. The Headmaster's bungalow was completed except for the provision of ceilings. The Electrical Department completed our connection with the generators at Laxapana, and considerable rewiring was required in consequence. The fitting of low pressure fluorescent lamps in the dormitories was completed. Work on the levelling of the playing fields was begun.

1957- The task of levelling the playing fields was completed. The boys gave up the rammed earth method of construction for building the squash court and started making building blocks instead.

1958- The turfing of part of the playing field was undertaken and finished. However the resulting surface was so rough that it was only suitable for football. The last dormitories with rough floors and without ceilings were given the necessary provision. The work on the squash court was completed, and its use begun. Very considerable improvements were effected in the gardens under the supervision of Mr. P.Y. Ambrose. The Winchester House washing place was rebuilt and furnished with new wash basins. Running water was laid on for one of the staff rooms. Extra dormitory furniture was provided. Some of the rooms in the Headmaster's bungalow were given ceilings. Some of the staff rooms were improved and given red cement floors.

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