

**THE HEADMASTER'S REPORT PRESENTED AT THE 49TH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF
THE S. THOMAS' COLLEGE GURUTALAWA OLD BOYS' ASSOCIATION
16TH FEBRUARY 2008**

Gentlemen,

Good evening and welcome. It is truly encouraging to see so many of you here this evening and I hope I would not be wrong in saying that your presence is an indication of the loyalty you feel towards your alma mater. So perhaps I should say 'Welcome Home' – 'Welcome back to the bosom of the mother that nurtured you' as a boy and sent you out as a man. I trust that you have been comfortable over the past 24 hours and that you have enjoyed meeting old friends, visiting old haunts and reliving those care free days that we will never forget. We at Gurutalawa always look forward to renewing the relationship between past pupils and the School and we are grateful to the number of past pupils who have stood with the School through thick and thin, particularly through her troubled times.

The year under review has been one in which our primary goal has been the recovery and revival of the School. You are all aware of the facts: the Board of Governors had almost decided to close the School at the end of 2006 due to the severely crippling financial crisis. Words are insufficient to measure the debt all those associated with Gurutalawa owe to Jacques Huyghebaert whose timely intervention saved the School from that fate in its 65th year of existence. As far as I am concerned as Headmaster, I can honestly say that had Jacques not continued to journey with me as Advisor and Financial Controller I would have found my position here quite untenable. He has made my job a lot easier and his breath of vision for the School is one that inspires me on a daily basis. It is interesting that often in Thomian history the most significant contribution to the continued existence and growth of our Schools has been made by non- Sri Lankans and non-Thomians like him.

It would be remiss of me if I did not place on record my thanks to our Episcopal Visitor the Bishop of Colombo who has been a very regular visitor and is in constant touch with me by phone and email. I must also record my thanks to Mr. Christo Gonawala, Manager of the School, who has also rendered us great service as the Staff Representative to the Board of Governors. All of us will be sad to see him go as he ends his term of office on the 31st of March. The Board of Governors has made a significant contribution both monetarily and otherwise to the recovery of Guru since the start of 2007 for which I thank them. In my induction speech I warned the Board that I shall not let them forget Guru and I am sure that the Board will never again give step-motherly treatment to this School!

This would be an appropriate occasion for me to express thanks to the past pupils of the School who have been a source of great support and encouragement to the School over the years. I am well aware of the role played by the OBA. Those who have contributed have done so with no expectations except serving the best interests of the School of their boyhood at heart. An OBA or Past Pupils' Association has a very significant part to play in the life of any School. The pioneer Headmaster of STC at Gurutalawa, the much revered Dr R. L. Hayman at the inaugural meeting of the STCG OBA held in 1959 summarised the primary objectives of such a group as being a. *for past members of the school to keep in touch with one another and with the School* and b. *'to rally round the School all old members who wish to uphold and help it by every means in their power.'* I am sure you will agree with me that this two fold aim is as much the same today as it was 49 years ago. Founded in

1959 the STCG OBA will soon celebrate its Golden Jubilee. I am sure the incoming Executive Committee will want to get ready for a suitable event or events to celebrate this significant milestone. I hope someone will come forward and volunteer to write up the history of the OBA to coincide with the celebrations.

The Recovery of the School

1. Financial

As it now stands the financial recovery and viability of the School is assured. With Jacques Huyghebaert's administrative expertise and acumen for financial management the School is financially healthy. I have assured old boys of financial accountability and transparency and with Jacques help we have put in place systems that will hopefully ensure this. Through the solidarity of an old boy we have been able to network the office computers and install the MYOB accounting package. We have advertised for an Accountant and are in the process of going through a number of applications. We have not used our over draft facility for many months now and as at last Thursday I can with the greatest confidence assure you that we are no longer running at a loss and are on an even keel. The fact that we have done away with the admission fees has not had an adverse effect as the secret of survival has been recognised now as growth in numbers of students who will pay their regular monthly fees. The majority of the arrears are in accounts of children who were admitted prior to 2007 and parents who find that Rs 7000/- per month is excessive are realistic enough to take them out of School before they run up large sums of arrears.

2. Numbers & Admissions

The number enrolled as of today stands at 526 an indication that the strategy advocated by Jacques Huyghebaert has been a success. As mentioned the economic recovery and viability of the School has thus been ensured.

In January 2007 our numbers stood thus

Boarders 180

Day Scholars 101

As of today our numbers stand as

Boarders 335

Day Scholars 191

We have crossed the 500 target and are continuing our admission drive. Our catchment area is the entire island other than places from which travel is impossible. We have children from the deep south, from the plantations, from Mannar, the Eastern province, Colombo, Kurunegala, the coastal belt above Colombo etc. We have children of all ethnic communities, all faiths, all classes. While we have had day girls among the students from the 1970s as of 2007 we have been admitting girls to the Boarding and there is a great demand for this facility. Our new admission policy is enabling this School to offer a Thomian education to a range of children who would not normally be considered for admission at either Mount Lavinia or Colpetty and I believe that this is wholly in harmony with the aims and objectives of the School Bishop Chapman founded in 1851 that was extended here 66 years ago.

3. Standards of Discipline and Education

The standard of education and discipline is on the ascendancy. While milestones such as the G. C. E. Ordinary Level Examination are crucial in the life of a student and we need to focus on preparing our children to obtain good results, the goal of a School like this must surely be to produce integrated persons of sound character which is an intrinsic part of the Thomian system of education. Albert Einstein has written that Education without character is more likely to produce well trained dogs than harmoniously developed persons. This is akin to our Founder's vision when he began the School at Mutwal and no doubt was Dr Hayman's when he developed Bishop Chapman's philosophy here at Guru by combining with it the philosophy of Gordonstoun School with its emphasis on the rough and tough outward bound element. In keeping with these ideals of our founding fathers I am happy to inform you that the standards of discipline at Guru, while not perfect yet are definitely an improvement on what Jacques and I found here when we took over last year. As of July 2007 the internecine warfare between the Grade 10s and Grade 11s is at an end. There have been no major acts of vandalism or violence since that time and we did not have to sack anyone to achieve that result. Last years O/Level batch, the Class of 2007, left the School at the end of their time with their heads held high and having earned the admiration and respect of their juniors and teachers. I can only describe the transformation of bitter foes into friends as miraculous. Although the cane has been outlawed by the state and its opponents would have us believe that it is a violation of a child's rights to be caned, the rest of the Code of Discipline as is traditional for a school within the Thomian Family is being adhered to as strictly as we are permitted to do under the present restrictions and I make no apologies for that. Any student who is unhappy with our code of discipline can easily find a school where he or she can do what they want the way they want!

We now have 52 teachers. We have recently employed new teachers and our classroom standards can only get better. Social realities often dictate how we go about recruitment and thus we cannot seem to find male teachers as willing to come to Guru as the lady teachers. The academic staff are giving the School their fullest cooperation and we look forward to a further raising of the standards of teaching and learning as the years go by. Our 2006 O/Level results were satisfactory.

As of January 2008 we have introduced a number of ways that we hope will enhance the quality of education at Guru. The system of dividing classes on ethnic lines is no more. The Thomian way of mixed classes and sets has been introduced and is working as well as can be expected when anything new is introduced. We will have to fine tune over the next one year. Open parents' days for parents to meet the teachers of the children, the appointment of Faculty Heads to enhance the quality of teaching of individual subjects, monthly tests, are some other systems that have been put in place this year. In addition as we will not be allowing children leave for private tuition we are planning to offer our O/Level students weekend seminars in all the major subjects over the coming months to prepare them as they will be the first batch to sit the new syllabus exam and also the first batch in which some will be sitting for the exam in English.

4. Infrastructure Development

As you are all more than aware practically all the buildings of the School had been badly neglected over the years due to the lack of funds. We have been paying attention to a number of these buildings over the past

few months. We have drawn up a list of priorities and we are working to that plan as and when funds are available. Our monthly income is for operational expenses only and for any development projects we depend on external funding. Up to now we have been able to do a number of things with help from the Bishop, the Board, the other three Schools of the Thomian family, the other Church schools, individual old boys here and abroad, the STCG OBA, the OTAUK, and other well wishers. The new toilets in the Blanchard Dormitories for Girls has been sponsored fully by Ladies' College, Colombo. The OTAUK has given us the funds for a similar set of new toilets for the Keble Dormitory boys' section. You have been staying in the Junior Dorms and would have noticed the brand new night toilets completed just in time for you to christen them! And paid for fully by the STCG OBA. The Bishop and the Board have paid for the urgent work that was carried out in the Headmaster's Bungalow prior to my coming in. They have also given us 1 million towards repairing our old water tanks and building a much needed large storage tank so that even in the drought months we will have clean water. Leslie de Saram's two tanks on our premises and on Gonagala hill have been cleaned and are usable again. A number of smaller jobs have also been done that are too numerous to mention. All the money has come from outside. Some examples: The pool engine is working again thanks to the dedicated help of an old boy and his friends. Another old boy and his group have donated a Dialog TV connection, while a senior member has paid approximately Rs. 135,000/- towards the purchase of new books from M. D. Gunasena's for the Canon R. S. De Saram Library.

The Classrooms need repair and renovation. Through the generosity of one of our old boys D. Mangala Premachandra we have our first Model Classroom in Grade 8 A at the cost of Rs. 50,000/- . One of our old girls from the early 80s has come forward to sponsor a similar model classroom for Grade 1. Just this afternoon an old boy who saw the model classroom pledged to sponsor two more classes on the same lines and we hope to take up his offer to do up two Upper VI classrooms. If anyone is interested in sponsoring such projects please speak to me afterwards. I have placed at the entrance a desk and a chair from the model classroom. It costs Rs 1500/- per set and some of you may wish to donate one or two sets to other classes where we have a shortage of chairs and desks. The new bunk beds in the dormitories cost Rs. 8000/- each and any would like to donate towards the purchase of these. There is a great deal that has been done. Although I am an optimist, I am also a realist and I know that there is still a great deal left that has to be done. We cannot do it all at once or alone. We need all the support that we can muster if the campus is to be one that we can once again be proud of.

5. The Staff

As mentioned in the past, it is the Staff of a School that make things happen. 'Great Teachers' make Great Schools' and thus Teachers are in my view the most important people for they are the ones in whose hands our children's future lies. We must take care of our Teachers, see that they enjoy a sense of worth and uphold their dignity and the dignity of their vocation. This evening I am appealing to the OBA to find some way of to motivate the staff and encourage them in their task here on the lines that the OBA and PTA do this at Mount Lavinia. Some sort of an incentive scheme or annual felicitation would do wonders to boost morale. I want to place on record our thanks to them for their dedicated service to the School. In this connection I must thank the Coordinating Supervisor Mr G. Nesaseelan, the Sectional Heads of the Upper, Middle and Lower Schools Mrs. Sita Jayasekera, Mr K. M. T. Pushpakumara and Mr V. W. Dikkumbura, and the Supervisor of the

Amity (English Medium) Programme Mr Panini Edirisinghe as well as all the academic staff for their support and cooperation in developing the standards of education here. We still have a long way to go but we are getting there.

The Support Staff occasionally need to be reminded of the need to perform their duties in order that they may fully enjoy their privileges. But they too have more or less begun to support the School.

6. English Development

The development of English at Gurutalawa is a priority, but the usual obstacles prevail – namely the fact that English is often second language to our children and the lack of competent and trained teachers of English. Steps are under way to particularly develop standards of English at Lower School level. Our own Panini Edirisinghe is a great asset to the School as the Coordinator of the English Development Programme together with our friend Mr. Patrick Hall, an English teaching Consultant who is advising us gratis.

7. Sports and Facilities

We have a number of sports and games listed. However, I have been disappointed at the lack of interest and facilities for Sports and Games. As a result children have been idle after School and it is when they have been idle that problems of discipline have arisen. Again our problems are to do with resources and here too we have been appealing for assistance. I want to record our thanks to the STCG OBA for the donations of sports good received over the year. We still need instruments for our Western and Hewisi Bands. Those of you who were with us yesterday for the Sports' Meet would have seen our Band. Most of the instruments were borrowed from STC Bandarawela.

8. Societies & Clubs

Again the number of Societies and Clubs we have does not reflect or represent the actual activities of these groups. They have been dormant and have been restricted to one or two periods a week during school. This is inadequate and certainly not part and parcel of the Thomian tradition. We have begun to revive these activities that are an integral part of the Thomian education system.

9. Boarding

The Boarding system that is the backbone of the School has not been functioning as it should over the past years but as of January this year the House System has been fully revived along traditional lines. I am deeply grateful to Fr. Harold Goodchild for having consented to act as Senior Boarding House Master, and to the Prefect of Discipline and to the other House and Dorm Masters for their cooperation and support extended to me in maintaining good order in the Boarding House. Things are much better than they were, but due to over crowding we have still not been able to get complete uniformity. It is our intention to restore fully some of the better traditions of the Thomian Boarding towards which end I have invited members of the STCG OBA to extend their advice and support. On Jacques' recommendation I am also seriously contemplating creating a full-time post of 'Boarding Administrator' when our finances permit to overlook the activities of the Boarding

House. I believe that if we are to ensure high standards here and if we are project STCG as a premier Boarding School in the country we would have to look at the possibility of an entirely new way of being a 'boarding'.

9. Blanchard Dormitory for Resident Girls

The Board of Governors has approved admission of girls to the Boarding. Although there are facilities for up to 50 girls the Board has permitted us to have a maximum of 20 for the time being. They are housed in a wing of the Keble Dormitory that has been renamed 'The Blanchard Dormitory' and the girls are under the care of a full time Matron.

10. The College Farm & Shop

We continue to generate sufficient eggs, milk and chicken for our own consumption but our vegetable cultivation has been dormant for a while. From a 'No egg' situation in January last year we now have an average of 4 to 5 thousand eggs per week. The excess is sold in the nearby towns. We are looking for a suitable person to be Farm Manager to run the Farm more professionally. All the eggs, chicken and milk that you have consumed so far were from our Farm. As of today the Farm figures are as follows:

Layers	995 (average 800 eggs per day)
Broilers	673 (3 batches of 101 days, 67 days, 38 days)
Milking Cows	5 (40 bottles per day, with only 1 session)
Cow	1
Bulls	2
Calf Heifers	2 (born 2006), 2 (born 2007),
Calf Bull	1 (born 2008)
Total	13

The Farm Club will be revived during the next half-term to enable the children, especially those offering Agriculture to gain some practical exposure.

The College Shop too will be radically reorganised this year to provide all that is necessary for children and staff living on the campus. We would like to stock College memorabilia as well as other things a child would have to purchase on admission in the Shop.

Conclusion

The past is history. While we must remind ourselves of history from time to time to avoid the pitfalls of repeating past mistakes we must now look to the present and the future however uncertain it may be. We must break free from the culture of blame that plagues Sri Lankans. We need to move on and move forward. Dwelling on the past and what might have been will only serve to either leave us very disappointed or deeply resentful people.

What of the future? In 1959 at the 1st General Meeting of the STCG OBA Dr Hayman himself provided an answer that I fully endorse and would use to conclude my report tonight.

‘What of the future? With the rise of 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.’

You are welcome to help in any way that is possible. You can help financially, you can help with practical advice and guidance, you can help with criticism that is constructive and helpful – but please offer help. Of course once you have offered, then in the Thomian way allow me to take it or to leave it. For that is how it must work. In my general letter to the membership I have given you certain assurances as an Old Thomian and as a Priest that I hope you will accept in good faith. As old boys *now* is the time to rally round the old school. Seize the moment. Join us. Help us to raise Guru to the position it once enjoyed. Be part of this great enterprise. This School is bigger than all of us. You all owe the School much for what the School has given you. I end with the words of Sir Henry Newbolt.

‘We will honour yet the School we knew,
The best school of all;
We will honour yet the rule we knew,
Till the last bell call.
For working days or holidays.
And glad or melancholy days,
They were great days and jolly days,
At the School we handed on - THE BEST SCHOOL OF ALL!’

Thank you & Esto Perpetua!