

THE SCHOOL ON THE HILL

ONE BARNES (1926-1968)

by W R Coles

*When afar and asunder, parted are
those who are singing today.*

THESE WORDS from the school song of Harrow, Sir Winston Churchill's old school, come to mind as I write of Barnes from 1926 to 1968, the nearly 43 years I lived and worked there. Truly, my companions and the children of my early years are all parted afar and asunder. Yet, like St Luke, it seems good to me, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account that new generations may know the truth concerning things.

Barnes - before 1926

Just about 100 years ago, people began to think that education for their children should be provided by Government. Before that, there were schools mainly for the rich. For the poor, there were very few schools and those were mostly provided by the Church and charitable people. In the early 1700s, many such schools were established in England. So it was that when the Rev Richard Cobbe was appointed Chaplain to the Honourable EastIndia

Company's factory at Bombay that he founded in 1718, in a building not far from the present Cathedral of St Thomas in the Fort, a small free school where 12 poor boys were housed, clothed, fed and educated by just one school master. That Charity School was the grain of mustard seed from which the mighty tree of Barnes had sprung.

A hundred years passed by before another East India Company Chaplain, the Venerable Archdeacon George Barnes, realised that the Charity School could not possibly meet the needs of the hundreds of children at that time without any education. So he appealed for funds and started the Bombay Education Society (BES) in 1815, the oldest Society in the city interested in the welfare and upbringing of children. To start with, a small school was taken over. Numbers grew rapidly until it was apparent that new school grounds and buildings were essential. A large airy site at Byculla was given by Government for the construction of the school. This time, the girl students were also provided for. New school buildings were opened to students in 1825.

One of the copper plates commemorating the opening is now displayed on the wall of Evans Hall, Devlali. The other copper plate remains with Christ Church School, Byculla, which, with the parish church, stands on part of the land given originally to the BES school. Much of the land was later sold to help build Barnes. A photograph of the old school building used to hang on a wall in my

office at Devlali. I hope it is still there. When I arrived in India in September 1926, I spent a night in one of the Byculla school buildings. The buildings have long since been demolished to make room for modern blocks of flats.

The BES schools, as they were popularly known in the past, were primarily boarding schools for Anglo-Indian boys and girls, mainly belonging to the Anglican Church. However, day-scholars were also later admitted, from all castes and creeds. For another hundred years, there seems to have been little change. Then in the early 1930s, the BES amalgamated with the Indo-British Institution, which had been founded by the Rev George Candy, circa 1837. Byculla was by then crowded and unhealthy. Plans, initiated by Sir Reginald Spence and Mr Haig-Brown, to move the boarding part of the schools away from Bombay (now Mumbai) to the cooler and healthier Deccan Plateau began to take shape. More than 250 acres of land were purchased at Devlali for the boarding wing.

On 17 November 1923, Sir George Lloyd laid the foundation stone of Evans Hall. Less than two years later, on 29 January 1925, a special train brought the first boarders to Devlali. With old time ceremony, in the presence of many distinguished guests, Barnes was declared open by Sir Leslie Wilson, then the Governor of Bombay and the patron of the BES.

Barnes – 1926 to 1968

This short historical sketch explains much of the present Barnes. It is still primarily, and I hope it always will be, as long as there is need, a place where the poor Anglo-Indian children of the Anglican and Protestant Churches can be given a good upbringing and sound education. It is still a Church school where Christian ideals are practiced and imparted. It is a boarding school, the largest in Western India. It has along and proud record of service to the community that goes back in time to almost 300 years or so. More has been added over the years and more still will be added in the future but the school will not, I am sure, belie its history.

The memory of founders and benefactors is preserved in the names of the buildings: Barnes, Candy, Spence, Haig- Brown, and Lloyd. Other names are also remembered, such as Greaves House is named after Sir John Greaves, a prominent Bombay businessman, the founder of a firm called Greaves Cotton. He was the Director of the BES from 1930 and the Chairman of its Managing Committee from 1939 to 1949.

Royal House commemorates Harry Royal, an old boy of the BES school from circa 1900 to 1910, who became an important officer of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Honorary Treasurer of the BES for many years. Other old students may be honoured in a similar way in time to come.

Tom Evans

One name is yet to come and, to me, the greatest of them all, the Rev Thomas Evans, familiarly but not irreverently, known as Tom Evans or just Tom. After being the Headmaster at the old schools at Byculla, since 1910, he became the first Headmaster of Barnes. Without Tom, Barnes would probably not have survived its early years.

His portrait hangs on a wall in Evans Hall, which we named in his memory when he retired in 1934. I remember Tom as a short, around five feet two or three inches tall, plump, round-faced man, with a merry twinkle in his blue eyes and a determined chin. That twinkle could change in an instant to a steely blue stare that few could outface.

The chin seemed to jut out further at that time. It would be hard to find a more determined and dedicated man than Tom. He moved to Devlali in 1925. While architects planned, committees discussed, and contractors built, it was one man, Tom, a resolute, little man, apparently tireless, who really brought Barnes into being.

He controlled, checked, and at times drove around his school staff and the students, servants, workmen and the members of the Managing Committee till it was all complete.

In 1932, Tom became a priest. His attitude mellowed down and he became more embracing, though still, at times, the schoolmaster in him broke through. In his fifties at this time, he was as active as many young men half his age. He was extremely hard to beat at tennis; he climbed the surrounding hills, including Broken Tooth and Kalsubai.

On his return to England, he served as a country parish priest for nearly 30 years. He died on 16 April 1962. Truly, it could be said of him, as of St Paul, 'he' had fought a good fight and run a straight race.

Barnes in 1926

The buildings were the same as they are now but only that they looked new, raw and bare in 1926. There were no gardens at that time. The few trees were small and far apart.

There were two separate and distinct schools, one for boys and one for girls, and no one was allowed to forget that. A boy who looked at a girl was in danger of severe punishment. There were separate classes for both genders. In Standard 9th, the top class (equivalent to Standard 11th today), there were four boys sitting for the Senior Cambridge and perhaps two girls. The student numbers in other classes, especially the girls' classes, were small. There were about 250 boarders in all and only a dozen day scholars.

No Indian languages were taught at the school. The boy students learnt Latin and the girl students French. Not much in the way of Sciences was taught and there was no division into Arts and Sciences in the top classes. Besides the Senior Cambridge in Standard 9th, there was the Junior Cambridge in Standard 8th and the Preliminary in Standard 6th. All the boarders were Anglo-Indian or European. Among the day-scholars, perhaps, there were half a dozen Indian children.

The boy students wore white shirts and blue shorts as they do now; but instead of shoes, they wore ammunition (Ammo) boots, the type

used in the army. These boots weren't very comfortable but were good for playing football. In the athletic sports, most students ran in bare feet. The girl students wore a blue frock as much below the knees as now above. What they wore underneath is quite unbelievable; they wore knickers and bodices, long stockings, at least two petticoats besides other garments for the colder weather. Above all, for both boys and girls, and staff, toupees were compulsory. It was a punishable offence to be seen outdoors without one. Everyone was firmly convinced, doctors included, that sunstroke lurked for bare heads in the sun.

It was possible to feed children on less than 10 rupees a month. Prices were low for everything and salaries were small too. Our servants earned about 10 or 12 rupees per month compared with nearly 90 rupees per day that they get paid today.

In the school hospital, children were often ill with malaria. That, with toupees and other things, is almost unknown now.

The children's dining hall was upstairs in the big hall. The food was brought upstairs from the kitchens by hand lift.

Similar to the present times, boys and girls never seemed to be contented with their meals and would find fault either with the quality or the quantity of food. So in the 1920s, young people had similar complaints as they have now and it will continue to be like that till the

end of time. At lunch time, the staff had their meal on the stage facing the children. For dinner, a very formal occasion, students were expected to wear evening clothes: dinner jackets and stiff shirts for the men and long frocks for the ladies. There was a special staff dining-room where the juniors had to take turns in sitting at the high table with the Headmaster and his wife – a seemingly terrifying ordeal at first.

Most of the games played then were same as they are played now, but without badminton, volleyball or baseball; instead there was some tennis. Unlike today, there was no swimming-pool at that time; just a stream, which had no water when it was most wanted in the hot weather. Yet there was as much laughter and happiness then as it is now, but perhaps not so much studying then as it is now.

The Army Cadet Training – 1927 to 1947

As an extension of the Auxiliary Force India (AFI) and the Great Indian Peninsula Railway Regiment (GIP Rly Rgt), the Cadet Company of Barnes School had a strength of two officers and 60 cadets. The Officer Commanding was Lt A A Anthony and Lt W R Coles was the Officer Second-in-Command. Although it may sound a little rigmarole but it was a very real part of life at the school from 1927 to 1947. All the senior boys had to join as cadets as soon as they turned 15.

The cadets wore regular army uniform: khaki shorts and tunic, grey shirts (everyone called them grey-backs), 'Ammo' boots and everlasting putties that had to be continually wound and unwound and rolled up tightly. And, of course, extra-large army toupees, with the GIP flash. As accessories, there were webbing belts and shoulder straps, ammunition pouches, haversacks and knapsacks; real bayonets and rifles. They seemed to weigh a ton to the new recruits. The armoury was in the steel-doored room next to the science laboratory and the clothing store was in the room leading off the present Standard 10th Science classroom. Parades were held on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings - before breakfast. There was endless polishing of boots, belts and buckles. Thank goodness, the buttons and badges were black.

Company - Attention! Slope - Arms! Present - Arms!

Punctilious smartness was drilled into every cadet before a ceremonial parade; and no amateur stuff was tolerated. A regular Staff Sergeant from the army put the Company through its paces; every cadet chucked out his chest at the Guards of Honour for Lord Brabourne, Sir Roger Lumley and others. Boots were useful for their click when smart turns to right or left were ordered, but their weight on route marches, with resulting blisters, caused such pain!

Highlights of the year were the shooting classification and the annual camp with the rest of the battalion. On the 25 yards miniature .22 range in the school, the early training was done. Then came the annual

classifications into 1st, 2nd and 3rd class shots. This was done with live .303 ammunition on the military ranges. The kick of the recoil bruised many a shoulder. The butts party, whose duty was to look after the targets and signal back the scores, took more delight at waving the red flag for a miss than at planting the white disc over the bull.

We did not live under canvas in camp every year but we nearly always joined in on the big field day, the final parade and all the sporting events. One of the darkest secrets in the history of Devlali remains how, one year, Devlali was captured by the Barnes Cadets. Boxing night saw at least half a dozen Cadets matched against the privates and corporals of the other companies of the Regiment.

With the coming of the war (WWII), in 1939, those AFI certificates gained in school became very valuable. The victory in WWII, in 1945, was closely followed by India's independence in 1947.

On the very morning of 15 August 1947, all AFI units were disbanded forthwith by an express telegram. So passed a phase of Barnes that will not return!

The 1930s

The 1930s were times of stringency and change. I was married while on furlough in England. The first news we heard on our arrival at Barnes was of a money crisis. All over the world, there was a

depression. Trade was bad everywhere. Businessmen went bankrupt. Many people lost their jobs and those who kept theirs had their salaries reduced.

Barnes was affected like everyone else. Apart from the general world-wide trouble, the school had for the first six years at Devlali not paid its way. Every year there were deficits running in tens of thousands of rupees. Because of that, we still owed the builders more than 6 lakh rupees, and every year there was interest to be paid amounting to over 40,000 rupees. So, a hard period of austerity had ushered in.

Many of the original staff left around these years. Mr Evans decided to retire in 1934 and I succeeded him as Headmaster in May 1934. I was only 30 at that time and not very experienced. Ahead stretched years of the strictest economy but, gradually, we cleared our debts and learned to live within our means. By 1939, we were beginning to build up the reserve funds. In 1937, we started the Employees Provident Fund.

It was in the early thirties that our first Indian boarders were admitted. We dropped Latin and French. For a time, we taught Urdu; then Hindustani, as preached by Mahatma Gandhi. Lastly, we settled for Hindi. To start with, neither majority of the parents nor the children took kindly to Indian languages. Eventually, we were reconciled to one language and, in addition to Hindi, we had to introduce Marathi too. We did feel that we were badly dealt with.

The winds of change were blowing. Common sense too dictated that we should be reoriented.

With the change in languages, came education about Indian history, emphasis on India on the whole and Asia in geography. For nature studies, about the birds and the beasts, the trees and flowers of India took the place of robin red-breasts, oaks and daffodils.

Co-education became complete in these years, partly as a matter of financial expediency but fundamentally as a matter of principle. The kindergarten classes had always been mixed. Now we added an extra class yearly till all our classes had boys and girls.

My own family was growing up. Rosemary, born in 1932, began attending school. James, born three years later, suffered from dysentery when he was only a few months old and never properly got rid of the germ. In 1935, my wife and I, with the children, enjoyed a six months' furlough in England. Those were the days of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany. Storm clouds of war were gathering thick and fast. In India, the struggle for Independence grew fiercer year by year.

World War II & Devlali

At first, it seemed the war would pass by Devlali but it was not long before changes came. Overnight, part of our school compound was requisitioned and all the land to the west, where we used to have our cross-country runs, around Surprise Hill, was put out of bounds to form part of the new School of Artillery, with its ranges stretching to

Square Top and beyond. From a small peacetime garrison of two or three hundred, Devlali and the surrounding area eventually became an enormous Transit Camp, holding at its maximum 70,000 men. They came from Australia and New Zealand, only to be quickly on their way again to the deserts of North Africa. Regiments came from England to go always further east to Burma or Malaya.

Amongst these men and elsewhere, Barnes was well represented, as more and more old students joined the Forces, mainly the Army, though also the Air Force and the Navy. Older girls became nurses or joined as Women's Auxiliary Corps (WAC). Younger men on the teaching staff went off to enlist in the Forces. Gradually, it became more and more difficult to find teachers. Retired men and, in some cases, misfits had to be engaged as teachers. At times, classes had to be combined, since no teachers were available at all. While the roll of old students in the Forces grew, from time to time, the sad news of casualties, prisoners of war and deaths on active service arrived. The Military Hospital expanded fivefold to deal with the mounting toll of wounded men sent back from the fighting areas.

Towards the end of 1941, and at the beginning of 1942, war came close to India with the capture of Burma by the Japanese. Of the civilians from Rangoon and other Burmese towns, who managed to escape by air or ship or by trekking over the mountains, some came to Barnes - children and adults both. Three teachers and some matrons joined us in this way.

At one time, it seemed there was nothing to stop the Japanese coming into Assam, Bengal or even further. For a period, they had command over the sea. It was considered possible that planes from an aircraft carrier might bomb Bombay and Devlali. So at Barnes, we set to dig trenches, erect blast walls, learn First Aid and undergo training in Air Raid Precaution (ARP). At any hour of the day or night, the Headmaster could be seen, and heard, cycling around the compound, blowing on a whistle. At the first shrill blast, everything had to be stopped, even a meal, and all had to troop off to their Air Raid Stations. Thank goodness, this phase did not last long.

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