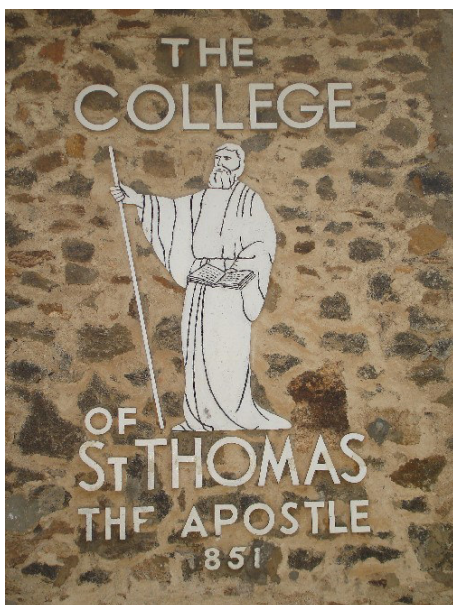


**This Article “The Hills are Alive!” is the complete and unedited version written by an Old Boy who wishes to remain Anonymous. However, this Article appeared in the Daily Mirror, Letters Section of December 22, 2009 and was erroneously attributed to the Head Master.**

'THE HILLS ARE ALIVE!'

STC AT GURUTALAWA TO THE FORE...

'The College of St. Thomas the Apostle, 1851'. The very name of the place, artfully interwoven with an attractive mural, reminds one of the long history of S. Thomas' College in Sri Lanka. But it is not at Mount Lavinia – nor at Kollupitiya or Bandarawela – that this title puts one in mind of the great traditions of Thomian education. That honour goes to a unique institution at Gurutalawa. And every stakeholder of this 'School in the Hills' is at pains to make it clear that here is S. Thomas' College at Gurutalawa – not just a branch, but the very school itself!



Students, staff and alumni have good reason to stake this claim to distinction. The roots of STC at Gurutalawa lie deep in the soil of Sri Lanka's pre-Independence history. In the throes of a world war, the second such in two decades, the Royal Army stationed

in then Ceylon requisitioned the premises of S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia for military purposes. Keen not to discontinue its mission to educate young men meaningfully, the College – under the leadership of the legendary Warden Canon R. S. de Saram and his Sub Warden Dr. R. L. Hayman – set out to establish the school at a property donated to S. Thomas': a 45acre spread of fertile land at Gurutalawa, a flourishing farm... belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Leslie de Saram –

relatives of the redoubtable Warden – the good benefactors. Their generosity enabled the setting up of S. Thomas' at Gurutalawa.

To this day, 'The School in the Hills' bears distinct marks of its Thomian identity. The same name, flag and colours, and school motto identify the campus at Gurutalawa with its parent institution. In this respect, while S. Thomas' Preparatory School, Kollupitiya and S. Thomas' College, Bandarawela are branch schools, 'Guru' (as it is affectionately known) has a special symbiotic relationship with 'The School by the Sea' – indeed, it shares the same ethos. And regular interaction with its sister schools (or 'brother schools',

as local idiom has it!) only serves to distinguish and consolidate the sense of self that boys from Gurutalawa seem to proudly possess.

Nestled in the rolling hills of Boralanda and steeped in the salubrious climate of the Welimada plain, STC Guru has good reason to nurture and cultivate a distinct identity. Since its beginnings, it has been a school that relates closely to an agricultural milieu. From the school's inception in May 1942, the College Farm has played a significant role in the development and sustenance of the campus. The cultivation of a mixed basket of vegetables (plus, of course, fruits and flowers) has not only supplied provender for the boarders' tables, but has also been the mainstay of the Farm Shop that serve both college and community. A farming background naturally necessitates that an agricultural education is inculcated in both the boarders and day-scholars. And the livestock (cattle) as well as poultry (chickens) ensure that the dining fare is not short of fresh milk courtesy Guru's farm cows, to say nothing of eggs and chicken! Interestingly, in keeping with the Thomian spirit of making men out of boys at an early stage, the students are involved with the selection of foodstuffs for the meals – and even have a reasonable say in the preparation of the menu...

Life at STC Guru is relaxed, but responsibly regimented. All activity pivots on the school bell and its clarion call to rise and shine – from work and study to play... wake-up call at five o'clock is followed – after an invigorating shower – by scholarly preparation ('prep') at six, after which there is breakfast at 7.30 a. m. From 8.00 in the morning there is the first session of school, with a break for tea at ten o'clock. Study sees a second session from around 10.30 a. m. to 12.30 p. m., at which time lunch is served. The pristine environment and pure mountain air enables afternoon school for Guru scholars, at a time – one o'clock to circa 2.30 p. m. – when their colleagues in the low country would sweat and toil... and after a restful interlude, the entire student body must turn out for sports between 3.30 and 5.30 p.m. Evening prep is from six o'clock to 7.30 p. m.; and following dinner at eight and prayers half-an-hour later, the young wards of S. Thomas turn in – with 'lights out' in the respective dorms being between nine o'clock and 10 p. m., for junior and senior dorms.

Guru is not all about work and play... it supports and encourages a host of extra-curricular activities: from hikes up the adjacent hill to treks to nearby Horton Plains via Ohiya, and Diyatalawa; through nature-oriented hobbies facilitated by a Wildlife Club and Young Zoologists Association; to more outdoorsy activities such as cadetting, scouting and swimming. For the lithe athlete, there's the swimming pool (probably one of the oldest in Sri Lanka – and yet another legacy from the renowned Hayman himself) and the swimming team that has grown up around it – to say nothing of sporting pastimes such as cricket and football. The crème of the crop, though, is the stables and the four handsome horses quartered there – a delight for active youth with an equestrian bent... and for more scholarly young thinkers, there is an IT lab, a library and the school museum. All of which serve to underline the ethic that not only is a sound mind in a sound body a prerequisite for a complete education, being an all-rounder – in the best Thomian tradition – is the aim and watchword of the staff and administrators of S. Thomas' College Gurutalawa.

Building on the foundations established by reputable educationists associated with STC Guru – such as Dr R. L. Hayman (Sub-Warden at Mount Lavinia and Headmaster at Gurutalawa) and the Revd. Canon A. J. Foster, both Oxbridge men – is its present Anglican Priest-Headmaster: the Revd Marc Billimoria (himself an Old Thomian), who fulfils many roles in the School. They set the benchmark; he seeks to raise the bar. Fr. Marc is ably assisted by a set of dedicated faculty, whose ratio to students is high... especially to enable a more attentive style of teaching, with personalised attention – a necessary facet, since Guru has grown from a small campus of 150, in five classes, to a sprawling institution of nearly 500 scholars from Year One to GCE ‘O’ Level. Also at hand to provide spiritual guidance, to say nothing of being a father-confessor to mischievous young men (“boys will be boys!”) is Revd. Harold Goodchild, the School's Chaplain Emeritus, who has been associated with this establishment since 1964 and now presides over the Boarding House as Senior Boarding House Master.

While the Christian world-view continues to shape the school and underpins its ongoing educational ministry, an atmosphere of religious freedom prevails. Although daily prayers in the charming little chapel of St. Francis of Assisi are part of the common round, it is no trivial task to arrange for special meditation programmes on Poya Days, for instance. And Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim boys integrate well into the genuinely multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi linguistic milieu of Guru... so much so that here is a crucible from which not just Thomians, but true Sri Lankans who are agnostic to race, caste and creed will emerge.

And when such fledglings are ready to leave their homely nest at Gurutalawa, the tenor and timbre of all-round education will guarantee them a better shot than most of securing admission to S. Thomas’ College Mount Lavinia – a privilege often denied of a logistical necessity to others outside the Thomian family. Then, when they have completed their careers at the ‘School by the Sea’, they are free to go on to join the ranks of illustrious scholars, civil servants, businesspeople and professionals who have had their early education at Guru... and gone on to shine in their respective fields.

While it is a little-known fact that a comprehensive education for girls, too, was always part of the Thomian ethic at Gurutalawa, parents and guardians of young ladies for whom safe, secure and meaningful schooling is a must will draw inspiration from the model that the Blanchard Dorm at STC Guru implements: co-education (classes conducted together with the boys) with responsibility (separate sports and recreational activities). As a matter of interest, a local teledrama based on Enid Blyton’s much-loved *The Naughtiest Girl in the School* series was filmed here!

Be that as it may, there is little doubt that all things considered – location, calibre of teachers and assistants, long-standing traditions, educational ethic, safe and secure environment, value-for-money fees and outstanding potential career prospects – S. Thomas’ College Gurutalawa offers one of the finest schooling opportunities in the island... especially for working parents seeking a suitable boarding school. One may

certainly look forward to great endeavours and greater accomplishments from STC Guru in the years to come...

Esto Perpetua!

-An Old Thomian

