

Preserving our Past

The view from my apartment is much like the view from other apartments in the Mid-Levels. Being on the 8th floor of what is now considered to be a low-rise building of only 15 floors, I look at a wall of concrete and tile in all directions. When my predecessor, Mr. Ha, moved into this apartment in the late 1960s, the building was brand new and would have dominated the skyline along that part of Conduit Road. Mr. Ha tells me that from the front rooms of the apartment he had sweeping views of the Harbour and from the back rooms there were uninterrupted views of Victoria Peak. Today, there are only sweeping views of hundreds of kitchen windows, scaffolding and air-conditioning units. My 'best' view from the apartment is the top 20 floors of the IFC building in Central, dazzling at night from its bright white lights.

Conduit Road is the last of the roads that run along the gradient of Victoria Peak and the last stop on the Mid-Level escalator. If I had lived in Conduit Road one hundred years ago the views would have been very different. In those days, the houses in this part of Hong Kong were grand indeed. The house next door to my apartment, at 1 Conduit Road, was called Marble Hall, due to its imported Italian marble staircase. Built in 1869 as the private residence of Sir Catchik Paul Chater (of Chater Gardens fame), Marble Hall was one of the finest buildings ever constructed in Hong Kong. However, it stood on this site for only 90 years. The Chater family left the building with the Hong Kong Government but it was damaged by fire during the Japanese occupation and stood derelict until it was demolished in 1953.

Marble Hall was knocked down just after St. Paul's College relocated from Lower Albert Road to this site in 1950. When our College came here we moved into buildings previously occupied by St. John's Hall, a residential college for men at the University of Hong Kong. St. John's Hall was later renamed St. John's College and you will find their campus today further along Pokfulam Road. The St. John's Hall buildings and the gardens were attractive and many old boys remember the flight of stone steps that formed the main entrance to the school from Bonham Road. The first new building that we constructed was Wong Ming Him Hall, opened in 1953, coincidentally the same year that Marble Hall was demolished. However, more and more boys wanted to come to St. Paul's College and there was an urgent need for more classrooms and better facilities. The old buildings of

St. John's Hall could not cope with all the students, so the decision was taken to rebuild.

The building we are sitting in at now was opened in 1965, as you will see on the foundation stone on the wall in the entrance. The original plan was for this building to for a much taller structure, running all the way from Bonham Road to Pokfulam Road, and housing 32 classrooms, the Hall, the Chapel and the Library. However, the slope of the land close to Bonham Road posed too many difficulties, so the decision was taken to reduce the size of this building and construct a new classroom wing running along Pokfulam Road. Within a short period of time, all the original buildings of St. John's Hall were gone, along with the gardens and trees.

This building is called The Stewart Building in memory of the brothers who were Principal's of our College for over 50 years; the Reverend Arthur Stewart and Colonel Evan Stewart. Their photographs are on the wall at the back of the Hall. You will find the commemoration stone thanking the Stewart Brothers for their service to our College on the wall in the Chapel. When this building was opened, forty two years ago, the views from the classroom windows were also very different to what we see today. The Chapel occupied the top floor and below was the Library, in what is the Geography Room today. Apparently, students were keen to go to the Chapel and the Library so that they could worship and study while looking over the Harbour.

What a dramatic change in only forty years! What we see today is the result of Hong Kong's relentless drive to build so as to cater for its growing population, commerce and industry. Unfortunately, much of the building has taken place as quickly as possible and as cheaply as possible. Too often, the new structures have no obvious architectural style. The tall, thin building in this photograph is an excellent example. What we see are twenty identical tiny square boxes, piled on top of one another. How could an architect design such a building and how could the authorities have let it be constructed?

We have heard a great deal recently in the newspapers and on television about the reclamation scheme along the foreshore between Central and Wanchai and the demolition of certain buildings and facilities. What is important in this debate is that we try to reach a balance between what we require today and what we wish to have in the future. The development of

our College on this site is a good example. The original St. John's Hall buildings were totally inadequate for a school of over 1400 boys. New buildings were required so the old had to go. The balance that was needed was to provide new buildings while trying to preserve as much of the old as possible, be that a building or part of a building or a garden or a special feature. Unfortunately, in the case of our campus the balance may not have been achieved as nothing of the old was kept.

The new will one day become the old. This is now the case with Wong Ming Him Hall. In 1953 it was the first building in the new St. Paul's College. Today, it is our oldest building. It would be very easy to demolish Wong Ming Him Hall and construct new facilities. But it would also be very easy to renovate the old building and keep alive our ties to the past. Maybe by keeping Wong Ming Him Hall we have an opportunity for St. Paul's College to say that history is important and to play our part by preserving a little piece of our heritage.

jrk