
CHAPTER

4

Steering the School in the Right Direction

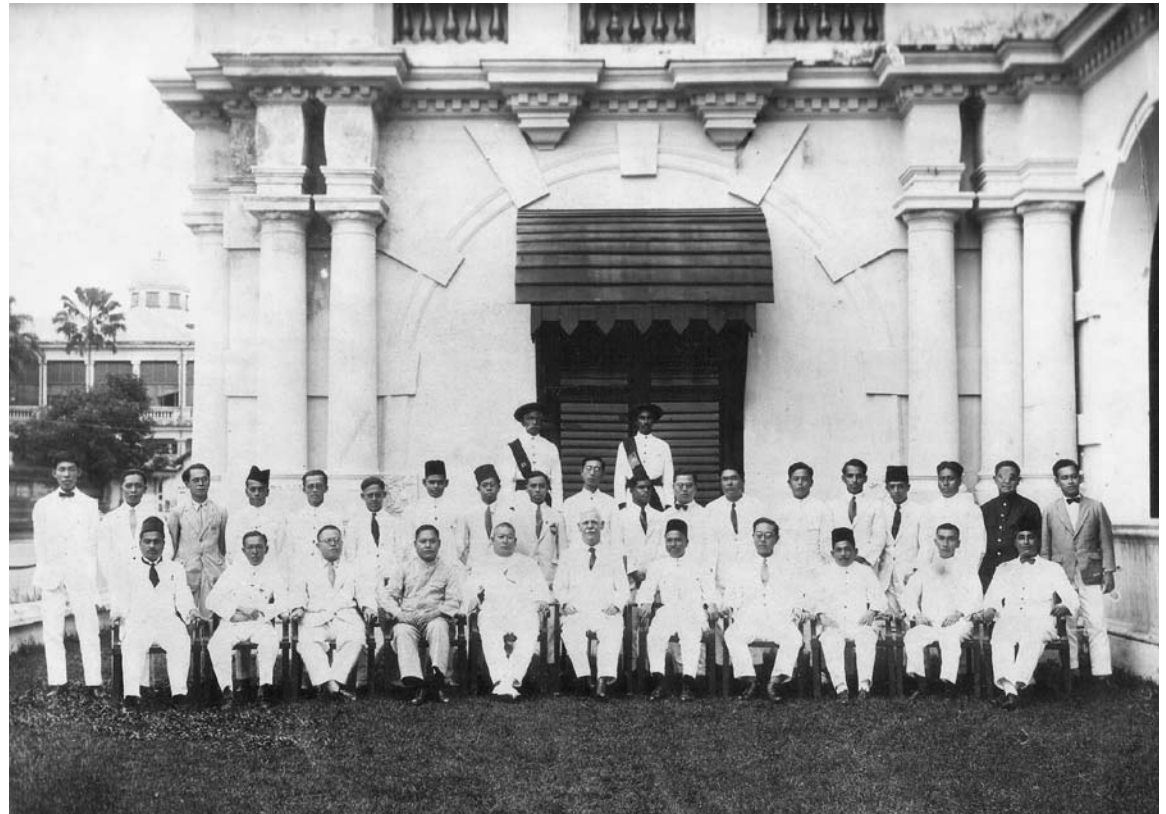
HEADMASTER AS HEAD HONCHO

Without a doubt, a school and its reputation hinges on the way it is run. That role is largely the responsibility of its headmaster or headmistress, more popularly referred to nowadays as principal.

Much like a chief executive of a company, the headmaster's task is to create a conducive environment that brings out the best of his charges and seal the school's name.

In other words, he has to set the tone for the school, inspiring its teaching staff to carry out their duties well while inspiring students to do their best.

According to records, the headmasters of Penang Free School's early years were a rather motley bunch without the proper training or experience to run a school. For instance, its first headmaster, **J Cox** was the owner of a printing press. Yet, despite the mismatches, the school operated well enough – there was discipline and English classes were conducted.



Headmaster William Hamilton (1925–1926) (centre) and his staff.

In 1853, the first step towards appointing more suitable candidates as headmaster was made when an elementary schoolmaster from England **J Clarke** was brought in to head the school. Further progress was later made when the school's board of directors decided the best means of raising its level of education was getting a university graduate to be headmaster.

CHALKING UP ACHIEVEMENTS

The first headmaster of this calibre was **William Hargreaves** who took on the position in 1891.

Under his guidance, the school started to make its mark. Enrolment went up, pupils were grouped into classes according to age and educational standards were improved. During his 13-year term of

office, 10 students from the school won the coveted Queen's Scholarships. The school soon began to establish a reputation for being tops in education unrivalled by any other institution in the province and even in all of Malaya.

Taking over from Hargreaves was **Ralph H Pinhorn** from 1905 to 1925. He proved to be just as dedicated and conscientious. With the help of his able assistant, HR Cheeseman, Pinhorn put into place a system of organisation still practised today. This was the introduction of sports and extra-curricular activities to supplement academic learning. Student participation was actively encouraged as the goal was to instil in the boys qualities of leadership, resourcefulness and responsibility.

So a School Games Club for football and the 1st School Cadet Corps were set up. Cricket, badminton and hockey were introduced along with gardening, singing and basketry. A Debating Society was

formed and scouting was started, both under the charge of Cheeseman.

More things were in store for the school. One was expansion as the school was getting overcrowded by 1919. A year later, the running of the school was taken over by the Government – a significant step that would enable greater development since Government funding would be made available.

Towards the end of Pinhorn's tenure, the school was operating at full capacity so plans were made to move to bigger grounds at a new 30-acre site in Green Lane provided by the Government.

In 1925, **William Hamilton** took over as headmaster until his retirement a year later. Although his term of office was short, Hamilton actually wielded a great deal of influence in the school as he had been a teacher for 35 years before rising to take over as headmaster. He was known as Second Master Lieutenant Hamilton and was a mathematician. He introduced the

cadet corps in 1906 and was an inspiration for his students. So respected was he that upon his retirement, the members of The Old Frees' Association (OFA) of Penang wrote him a letter honouring him for his work and dedication. They pointed out how he had overseen the completion of the new school buildings at Green Lane and how he would be sorely missed. The letter, written on 29 December 1926 was signed by then president of OFA Penang Khoo Sian Ewe and its honorary secretary Ong Hock Chye.

On 1 January 1928, Penang Free School as it stands today was inaugurated. With its move to new premises, it became a secondary school while its former building continued to take in primary students. It was renamed Hutchings' School and served as a feeder school for the new secondary school.

INSTILLING ESPRIT DE CORPS

The headmaster then was **DR Swaine** who had taken over a year earlier in 1927. He

launched a new House system for sports and extra-curricular activities. Students were grouped into five Houses – brown, yellow, blue, green and red, all named after prominent figures associated with the school. They were Hargreaves (brown), Hamilton (yellow), Pinhorn (blue), Wu Lien-Teh (green) and Cheeseman (red). Today, the system has expanded to include three more Houses – Tunku Putra (orange), Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin (purple) and P Ramlee (grey).

With this system, a student would be attached to a particular House from the time he joined the school to the time he left. All the Houses would compete with one another in games, sports and other extra-curricular activities. In cheering for their House, it was hoped that students would develop team camaraderie, loyalty and a sense of fair play.

Under the charge of **MR Holgate** from 1931 to 1933, the school saw the establishment of yet another tradition –



He was headmaster when I was doing my School Certificate. He was a very upright person and although he was feared he was also looked up to. Through him, we got to learn about the principles of fairness and fair play.

Heah Hock Heng

Hotel developer and architect on JE Tod, headmaster from 1951-1957

the awarding of school prizes for scholastic achievements. Holgate also expanded the range of sports that could be played, introducing students to rugby, basketball, swimming and volleyball. The school held the firm belief that it was not just academic studies that maketh a man but that participation in games and sports helped in

character building. Hence the introduction of “Additional Sports” which comprised a list of activities that required compulsory participation from all students — a practice that is still adhered to today.

School life proceeded smoothly before it was rudely interrupted by the outbreak of World War II and the occupation of Penang — and much of Malaya — by the Japanese from 1941 to 1945. The school buildings, which were taken over by the Indian National Liberation Army, were left in a shambles when they moved out. Furniture and equipment went missing. Worse were the loss of precious school records and other documentation. In 1945, **Koay Khye Teong** was appointed acting headmaster with the task of rehabilitating the school with an enrolment of 603 students.

Two years later, when **D Roper** was appointed headmaster, the school’s restoration was complete and it resumed its mantle of Malaya’s foremost educational

institution when its students scored 78.5 per cent of passes in the Cambridge School Leaving Examination results of 1946.

INTRODUCTION OF SIXTH FORM CLASSES

In the 1950s, Penang Free School entered a new phase in its educational offerings when Sixth Form classes (Lower and Upper) were introduced for Arts and Science to prepare students for entry into universities. As part of the two-year programme, the school went co-educational when it admitted girls (from St George's Girls' School) for the first time. These changes were made during the time of **JE Tod** who was headmaster from 1951 to 1957. Despite cutting a stern figure, he had the interests of the school population at heart as he increased the type of games and sports available and formed more clubs and societies to create more opportunities to get all students involved.

Hotel developer and architect Heah

Hock Heng remembers Tod well. "He was headmaster when I was doing my School Certificate. He was a very upright person and although he was feared he was also looked up to. Through him, we got to learn about the principles of fairness and fair play."

OF NURTURING AND CREATING BONDS

Taking over from Tod was **JMB Hughes** in 1957, the year when Malaya became independent. He proved to be a very popular headmaster who touched the lives of many of his students with his caring nature and friendly disposition.

Many Old Frees speak fondly of him describing him as "sociable and frank". As Senior Consultant of the Department of Plastic Surgery at Singapore General Hospital (SGH) Lee Seng Teik put it, "We had a special relationship with headmaster Hughes. We were close to him as he got to know us well. He came to all our activities

as he was interested in all of them. When I was in the Scouts movement and we had a jamboree he would come outfitted in our scouts' uniform. The headmaster's house was next to the sports pavilion facing the school field which was used for playing cricket and other activities. His home became like an open house as we could go in after games.

"He was an exceptional headmaster. I was a senior prefect at the time he was appointed and I found I could discuss any subject with him, even my personal aspirations."

"He was very nurturing as a headmaster. His life was dedicated to the school. Even when we played cricket on Saturdays and Sundays, Hughes would come around to the sports pavilion to watch. His wife, who was part of the teaching staff, was equally supportive," observed tennis coach Tan Poh Seng.

Retired military captain Neo Kim San adds, "He had a personal interest in me and took me under his wing, perhaps because



Hughes was a stickler for punctuality though. He used to say, 'To be late is rude.' This must have rubbed off me as I am on time for all my appointments! He took great pride in the school too and made sure that all the grounds were well-maintained, including even the grass in the quadrangle, which was cut with razor blades.

Neo Kim San

Retired military captain on
JMB Hughes, headmaster from 1957-1963

of my miscreant ways, and helped me to differentiate right from wrong. He was like a father to me and introduced me to poets like William Wordsworth whose poems like *Imitations of Life* I would read often as they had passages that helped me through life. He called me a wee bairn (the Scottish word for child).

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Hughes was so popular that after

his retirement in 1963 and his return to England, Old Frees invited him back to Penang and Singapore to catch up with his former students on at least three occasions, with all chipping in to foot the bill. On another occasion, Old Free Ng Kong Yeam, owner of travel agency Sino-America Tours, organised and partly sponsored a trip of several Old Frees to the UK to visit Hughes.

FIRST ASIAN HEADMASTER

In 1963, the year when Malaysia came into being, **Tan Boon Lin** made history by becoming the school's first Asian headmaster. It was an appropriate choice as he himself went through the portals of the school as a student in 1939 and later as a teacher in 1951.

He kept true to the spirit of the school in maintaining its traditions and standards of excellence just as those who came before him did.

"I remember well the 'click clock' sounds of his steps as he walked along the corridors inspecting the school, the staff and students," said obstetrician and gynaecologist Wong Peng Cheang.

Recalls part-time school counsellor Huang Mei Sin, an Old Free from 1966-1967, "Dato' Tan Boon Lin was a headmaster who showed leadership. The leadership of a headmaster is important in any school and it had a critical role to play in Penang Free School.

"Going from a convent school to the Free School, I found out how things were different between them when it came to how extra-curricular activities were run. In the convent, there was a lot of hand-holding whereas in PFS, we were given a sense of leadership and responsibility to do

most of the things ourselves.

“When I was a teacher, I myself put this into practice at the various schools where I taught.

“I am still in touch with Dato’ Tan and when I shared with him about how I learnt responsibility and leadership during my two years in PFS, he said he got this himself from the British headmasters.”

Since then, of the 14 Asian headmasters that have steered the school, six others have been Old Frees:

Goon Fatt Chee, R Visvanathan, G Krishna Iyer, Goh Hooi Beng and Jalil bin Saad who was appointed in 2012 after a 20-year gap, and the current headmaster **Omar bin Rashid**.

The prominence of the school in Penang is reflected in the streets around it bearing the names of its best known headmasters: Jalan Hargreaves, Jalan Hamilton, Jalan Pinhorn and Jalan Cheeseman. ■

The Headmasters

1816-1821: Mr J Cox

1821-1822: Mr Churcher

1822-1826: Mr Porter

1826-1828: Mr Anchant

1828-1843: Mr JC Smith

1843-1846: Mr Bruton

1846-1853: Mr Fitzgerald

1853-1871: Mr J Clark

1871-1891: Mr George Griffin

1891-1904: Mr William Hargreaves

1904-1925: Mr Ralph H. Pinhorn

1925-1926: Mr William Hamilton

1927-1928: Mr DR Swaine

1929-1931: Mr DW McLeod

1931-1933: Mr MR Holgate

1934-1939: Mr LW Arnold

1941-1945: **WORLD WAR II**

1947-1950: Mr D Roper

1950-1951: Mr PF Howitt

1951-1957: Mr JE Tod

1957-1963: Mr JMB Hughes

1963-1969: Dato’ Tan Boon Lin

1969-1971: Mr Poon Poh Kong

1972-1974: Mr KG Yogam

1974-1979: Dr. Goon Fatt Chee

1979-1983: Mr R Visvanathan, P.J.K.

1983-1988: Mr G Krishna Iyer

1988-1993: Mr Goh Hooi Beng

1993-2000: Mr Hj Ismail bin Ibramsa

2000-2001: Mr Hj Abdul Rahman bin Salim

2001-2004: Mr Arabi bin Sulaiman, PKT

2005-2006: Mr Hj Mohd Yusof bin Omar

2006-2011: Mr Hj Ramli bin Din

2012-2016: Mr Jalil bin Saad

2016-present: Mr Omar bin Rashid

Headmasters of Penang Free School



W Hargreaves
1891–1904



RH Pinhorn
1904–1925



W Hamilton
1925–1926



DR Swaine
1927–1928



DW McLeod
1929–1931



MR Holgate
1931–1933



LW Arnold
1934–1939



D Roper
1947–1950



PF Howitt
1950–1951



JE Tod
1951–1957



JMB Hughes
1957–1963



Tan Boon Lim
1963–1969



Poon Poh Kong
1969–1971



KG Yogam
1972–1974



Goon Fatt Chee
1974–1979



R Visvanathan
1979–1983



G Krishna Iyer
1983–1988



Goh Hooi Beng
1988–1993



**Haji Mohd Ismail
bin Ibramsa**
1993–2000



**Haji Abdul Rahman
bin Salim**
2000–2001



Arabi bin Sulaiman
2001–2004



**Haji Muhammad Yusof
bin Omar**
2005



Haji Ramli bin Din
2006–2011



Jalil bin Saad
2012–2016



Omar bin Rashid
2016–present

Steeped in Traditions

■ School Speech Day

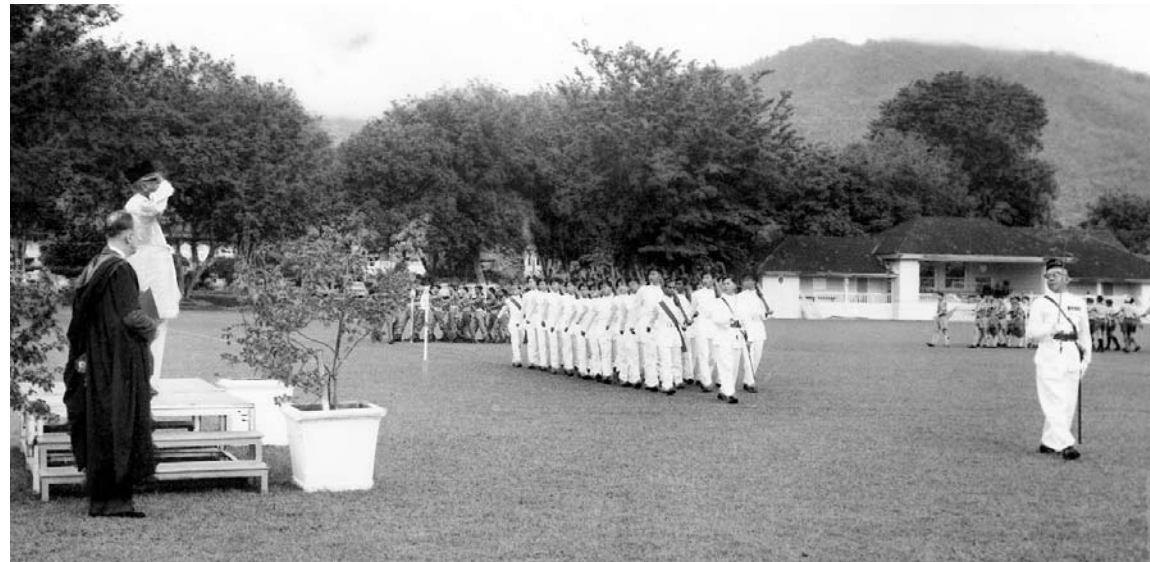
It is celebrated every year on 21 October, the anniversary of the school's founding. It begins early in the morning with a dedication ceremony conducted at Reverend Sparke Hutchings' tomb at Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, led by the school headmaster and a non-Muslim prefect, presided over by an Anglican pastor.

The memorial service is followed by a day of parades by the school's uniformed groups and performances by the school band.

"It is a very grand affair," recalls Lee Eng Hin. "It begins with the Governor of Penang inspecting the Guard-of-Honour formed by the Army Cadet Corps.

"The uniformed groups led by the Army Cadet Corps then perform a march-past before the Governor and the VIPs. We were all in ceremonial white. As the Company Sergeant Major, I led the platoon with Captain Tan Boon Soon in command."

When the march-past is over, the



School Speech Day was a grand affair with the Governor of Penang inspecting the Guard-of-Honour.

governor and guests are escorted into a room to sign the visitors' book. They then enter the School Hall with everyone standing at attention and take to the stage to hear the National and State anthems being played.

At the conclusion of the formal ceremony, the highlight of which is the

prize-giving to all the top students, other activities follow, including making a beeline to acquire the school's annual magazine, a much sought after souvenir and collector's item.

■ School Assembly

The school assembly is a weekly tradition that is held every Monday morning. It starts with the ringing of the first bell at 7.25am – a call for all students to gather in the School Hall according to their forms and attired in their complete school uniform including tie.

The second bell rings to announce the entrance of the headmaster while the School Captain calls the school to attention. There is a hushed silence as the headmaster walks in; when he reaches the stage, the teachers stand to attention, followed by the headmaster.

The National and State anthems are sung after which the teachers take turns to address the school to talk about activities in the coming week and of any achievements accomplished. The headmaster then delivers his speech keeping the audience informed on school developments.

At the end of the speeches, the School

Rally is played after which the school population is called to attention again until the headmaster leaves the hall, followed by the teachers. The School Captain then dismisses the students.

Describing the school assembly as a dignified occasion, consultant radiologist Chin Wah Seng remembers how proceedings would be livened up if there was a visitor. He recalls, “In my last year at school in 1961, I was elected head prefect or school captain and my job was to call the school to attention.

“Sometimes when we would have a visitor, there would be a lot of excitement all around. Once we had the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King) visiting us. I remember escorting him through the school. It made my day.”



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Chin Wah Seng
Consultant radiologist

■ The Cheeseman Elocution Contest

Named after Scoutmaster Cheeseman who helped form the Debating Society, this keenly participated competition, open only to Upper Form students, is held at the end of the first semester. Each class has at least one speaker as representative and participants have the liberty to choose their own topic for debate. Marks are awarded for the contents of speech, fluency of presentation, use of expressions and poise.

Organised by the English Language Department, this annual event provides a grooming stage for students wishing to try their debating skills in the more challenging national “Youth Speaks for The Nation” elocution contest.

■ The Annual School Sports

The annual school sports take place in the last week of the first semester. It kicks off with a parade followed by the School Athletics Captain reciting the School’s Sport Oath. Then the fun starts with a slew of events of which the hotly contested inter-School invitational relays, the Old Boys’ race and the tug-of-war finals are the highlights.

Competition on the field among the athletes representing their various Houses extends off the field as well as each House tries to make their House shed — the focal point of activity — more colourful and better decorated than that of their rivals.

After the completion of activities and before the prize presentation ceremony, an interval ensues during which another important event takes place.

With the school’s scouts forming a Guard-of-Honour stretching from the Sports Pavilion to the School Hall, guests including the Governor of Penang, other



The School Band is one of the best in the land as it is always invited to lead other school bands on National Day.

VIPs and proud parents file to the hall for “High Tea” after which they return to the Pavilion for the presentation of trophies, shields and plaques.

Then the School Band strikes up to conclude Sports Day by playing the National and State anthems. It is a befitting finale as the band is one of the best in the land as it is always invited to lead other school bands on National Day.



The PFS badminton team, 1952.



The PFS rugby team, 1951.



Celebrating achievements on the field.



Membership in the PFS soccer team is coveted among students.