

Hillcrest and its contribution to Natal Education

The town of Hillcrest, with an official population in 1985 of 5 291,¹ a borough register in 1987 of 1 345 properties and an estimated municipal expenditure in 1987-88 of approximately R1 million,² lies amid the hills, thirty five kilometres west of Durban, on the old main road to Pietermaritzburg. Many of its residents commute daily to the multifarious enterprises of the Pinetown-Durban conurbation. Hillcrest has enjoyed town status only since 1971 and the older inhabitants, who once retired to the country, recall nostalgically the village days, when no traffic lights were necessary and when a single store served the needs of the entire community. Even among these senior citizens, however, are few who can remember the days when Hill Crest (as it was originally written) had as many as five schools and made a significant if small contribution to education in Natal.

The Hillcrest railway station was (in times pre-metric) recorded as being 2 225 ft above sea-level.³ The climate, therefore, is temperate and less taxing, especially at midsummer, than the humidity of the coast. The entire region, furthermore, is well watered, with numerous streams draining in the north to the Umgeni and in the south to the Umhlatuzana, which rises a few kilometres north-west of Hillcrest, behind the eminence known as Botha's Hill. Many farm names in the area (*Sterkspruit, Langefontein, Buffelsfontein*) attest to the abundance of water, which is supplemented by characteristic seasonal mists, keeping the hills green even in the grip of winter.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the area has long attracted human settlement. The building of the Key Ridge-Mariannahill toll road, which was opened in 1986 and which passes down the Umhlatuzana valley several kilometres south-west of Hillcrest, led to the discovery of an extensive site of stone-age occupation believed by the investigator to go back 120 000 years.⁴ The nearby Shongweni Caves were certainly providing shelter for hunter-gatherers a thousand years ago and possibly considerably earlier.⁵ During the tribal turmoil of the early nineteenth century, the Umhlatuzana valley was the haunt of cannibals⁶ and, when Allen Gardiner travelled through the district in 1835, he found abundant evidence of recent habitation, although the countryside appeared deserted.⁷ And, as the farm names quoted above reveal, the Voortrekkers (after the battle of Blood River) established their traditional 2 500 hectare holdings on the same hills.

By the time of the British annexation of Natal, the main road from capital to port was well established and well used.⁸ New settlers travelling inland, government agents on official business, merchants seeking the trade of the

interior, Boers from Transorangia carrying hides and wool to Durban, detachments of redcoats from the garrisons, clergymen on pastoral journeys, all moved along the road upon their various occasions. Many of them sought refreshment at a small inn in the shadow of Botha's Hill, which was at times so full and so noisy that discriminating guests preferred to sleep in their own wagons.⁹ This hostelry, opened very soon after British rule began and for a while run by Cornelis Botha, one-time harbour master of Port Natal under the Volksraad, represents the earliest known white settlement in what was to become the town of Hillcrest.¹⁰ On the other side of Botha's Hill, a Boer named Hans Potgieter farmed *Assagay Kraal*.

In 1850, although the main road was busy, the country round about was still sparsely populated. The tribesmen had not yet re-emerged from the security of the Valley of a Thousand Hills to the north-east and many of the Boer settlers (but not Potgieter) had joined the Second Trek out of Natal. The English eye of Thomas Phipson was plainly gladdened by the evidence that Potgieter was taming the wilderness. 'Some portions of ploughed lands, and herds of cattle grazing,' he wrote in 1851, 'give life to a Natal landscape usually deficient in these adjuncts.'¹¹ George Mason, too, was struck by the contrast between Potgieter's farm and the surrounding countryside, describing it as 'a pretty picture when contrasted with the barren steeps and wild craggy peaks by which it is walled in all round.'¹²

Mason, however, more than Phipson, had a countryman's feel for the land he was crossing. Commenting on the veld between Field's Hill and Botha's Hill, he remarked: 'Here the character of the country completely changed, the soil became good and almost free from bush; the grass was shorter and less rank than near the coast, and thickly interspersed with brilliant flowers of scarlet, blue, white and purple.'¹³ Allen Gardiner's observation fifteen years earlier was similar. He wrote of 'the downs being extensive and elevated, the soil dry, and the grass shorter and better than that produced on the lower grounds nearer to the sea.' Gardiner added another comment which would prove prescient. He described the country as 'uninteresting to the traveller but likely one day to be held by the grazier in great estimation'.¹⁴

But for the time being the grassland around present Hillcrest was in its original undisturbed condition. One traveller provides information of which the late 20th century observer needs to be specifically reminded: 'A fine grassy plain but trees almost wholly disappeared till a short way before reaching Mauritzburg, except in the remote kloofs.'¹⁵ There are today so many introduced trees in the area that to visualize it as treeless requires a deliberate effort of the imagination. Guided by the work of Professor Tainton and his associates, it is possible to conclude that the grass to which the early travellers made reference was predominantly *Themeda triandra*, or *rooigras*, characteristic in Natal of undisturbed veld.¹⁶ The wildflowers mentioned by Mason are less easy to identify, particularly as his journey was made in the middle of winter, when few flowers other than those of the aloes are in evidence. What is clear, however, is that until then human settlement had made little impact on the environment. Mason's party encountered antelope along the way¹⁷ and, just a few years earlier, the innkeeper at Botha's Halfway House was being troubled by predators, so that some of his guests sat up half the night in a fruitless vigil.¹⁸

These conditions continued for several decades. That avid naturalist and inveterate collector, Henry Harford, travelling through the haunts of his youth on Welch's omnibus in 1879, longed 'to get out of the bus and have a look around again with the gun and net.'¹⁹ In the same year the railway from Durban reached the district,²⁰ being carried to the capital in 1880. This technological advance had the effect of temporarily reducing the importance of the wagon road, as may be deduced from the closure, about this time, of the old Halfway House. The construction of a station at Botha's Hill, furthermore, meant that the earliest trains passed through the area which was to become Hillcrest without even a scheduled stop.

The discovery of minerals in the interior, however, was soon to have its effect even upon this part of Natal. The development, particularly of the Eastern Transvaal goldfields and later of the Witwatersrand, led to a boom in transport riding and before long the road to Pietermaritzburg had resumed its role as an important artery. Many Natal entrepreneurs, black and white, entered the increasingly lucrative trade. Some built up extensive businesses, sending their freight wagons vast distances with cargoes of great diversity. One of these men was William Gillitt.



William Gillitt, owner of the farm *Albinia* at the time of the establishment of the village.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

William Gillitt²¹ (whose names were dynastic, confusingly shared by his father and son) had emigrated with his parents from Buckinghamshire as a boy of ten or eleven in 1849. The family settled at Wyebank, near Field's Hill, and in 1865 young William married Elizabeth, daughter of William Swan Field. About 1870, Gillitt purchased a 500 acre portion of the property *Everton*, on which he established his own farm, *Emberton*. Around this

farm, in the slack winter months of the next eighteen years, he built a solid stone wall unusual in Natal. In 1879 he allowed the NGR to establish a watering-point at what was to become the station of Gillitts, not far from the *Emberton* homestead.

It was Allen Gardiner, as noted earlier,¹⁴ who had observed that the time would come when the grazier would be interested in the veld of the plateau. As Gillitt's transport interests increased, so he acquired more and more land around *Emberton*, partly at least to provide grazing for his teams of draught oxen. One of the farms he bought lay directly west of *Emberton* and bore the name *Albinia*. It was named after the original inn at the foot of Botha's Hill.²² On the survey plan of 1849 it is described simply as the 'Property of Capt. Murison' and on the Watts map of 1855 as '*Albinia*, Capt. J. Murison'. There is no evidence that Murison ever occupied the farm. In all probability he was a speculator, like the Cape businessman, Collison, who (according to the 1855 map) owned three farms south of *Albinia*. At all events, it was on *Albinia* that the village of Hill Crest was later established.

It is difficult to establish with any precision the sequence of events before the village was established. The only documentary evidence readily accessible is a draft of a letter written by William Gillitt in 1895 and still in the possession of his descendants.²³ Some time earlier than 1895, Gillitt had granted permission for a store to be built on *Albinia*. By 1893,²⁴ the leaseholder was an Italian immigrant by the name of Fregona. The store was strategically sited beside the main road to Pietermaritzburg, at the junction with the road from Shongweni in the west. A few kilometres away towards the capital, another road led east to the Zulu reserve of Inanda. And past *The Waggoner's Rest*, as Fregona called his emporium,²⁴ rolled not only freight for the goldfields and farm implements for the Free State but also trade goods and illegal guns for Pondoland and the Transkei, before they turned south at Umlaas Road.



ERNEST L. ACUTT, J.P., C.M.G.
1875-1927

Ernest Acutt was later elected Mayor of Durban.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

The name given to the establishment and the fact that in his letter Gillitt referred to it as an hotel indicates that some transport-riders at least used Fregona's as a stop-over, although Gillitt's subsequent comment, 'it is more a general store than anything else',²³ clearly suggests that the comforts offered were only rudimentary. The store must by that time have enjoyed a certain local trade also, because into the district had moved some small farmers, several of them with German surnames and perhaps younger sons from the New Germany settlement in search of land. Others were black tenants or squatters whose huts could be seen from the main road. That Gillitt had earlier granted an acre of land for the building of a church not far from *The Waggoner's Rest* suggests that the area had become reasonably well populated.

It was this small centre of civilisation which caught the eye of an enterprising Durban estate agent, Ernest Acutt, whose father Robert, had founded an auction mart at the port in 1852. Acutt and his brother had just decided to concentrate exclusively on the property business and to give up auctioneering.²⁵ Ernest Acutt, within a few years to be elected Mayor of Durban, negotiated with William Gillitt, in January, 1895, the fifty-year lease of a block of land 512 acres in extent and bounded on the east by the main road, with the road to Shongweni as the southern boundary. The agreement is set out in the letter referred to above.²³ Acutt undertook to pay a monthly rental of £7, to be responsible for any taxes which might be placed on the land and to fence the block with wire and iron standards. For this undertaking, he acquired the right to sublet the land to 'respectable tenants' (sic) and the hope of a substantial profit.



Some of the early residents of Hillcrest beside a typical wood-and-iron cottage.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

Ernest Acutt divided the land into stands of varying size and became the first to build a house there. Very soon other Durban businessmen and professional people had followed his example, erecting wood-and-iron holiday cottages to which they withdrew from the heat of the coast, particularly in the December-January season. On the list of early tenants appear names like Binns, Churchill, Greenacre, Harwin and Beningfield. Not all the pioneer residents were migratory, however. In 1895, the Rev. Oxley-Oxland opened a school for boys which he called Delamore. As a result of this, the little settlement came officially to be known as Delamore Halt, where the train stopped on a bend in the line, several hundred metres south-west of the present Hillcrest station. The winding path along which Oxley-Oxland's pupils travelled to and from the halt is today immortalized in tarmac under the sign 'Crooked Lane'. A rough shelter at the halt caused many locals to refer to the siding not as the official 'Delamore' but by the less grandiloquent name 'The Soapbox'.²⁶

Little is known of the Rev. Oxley-Oxland's Delamore School. It does not appear to have lasted very long. Perhaps he was following the practice not uncommon among English clergymen of running a school while he had sons of his own to educate. At all events, Oxley-Oxland was not the only person to see the pedagogic possibilities of the new township. In 1903, a young widow with two sons, Sibella McMillan, opened a preparatory school for boys which she named Highbury, after a school run by her brother in England. After many initial difficulties, Highbury grew into one of Natal's leading junior schools and the only one in Hillcrest proper to survive to the present. After Sibella McMillan's retirement, the school was managed successively by her son, Elliott, and her grandson, Sholto. Sholto McMillan, who chronicled the growth of his school,²⁷ retired in 1986 and the McMillan era at Highbury ended.

In 1907 another widow with young children followed Sibella McMillan's example. She was Ellen Baker, who (when her husband died) turned her cottage, Redcliffe, into a primary school for girls.²⁸ Mrs Baker ran Redcliffe single-handed and provided basic schooling with few frills for the daughters of several residents of the district, including members of the Gillitts family and the storekeeper, Fregona, whose interests were expanding with the village. In this way, Mrs Baker was able to send her sons to Hilton College for their own education. Later, she married Thomas Robertson, secretary of the Durban Club, and moved her school to the other side of the village, just off the Inanda road. From that time, not long before the outbreak of the Great War, it seems to have been known simply as 'The Girls' School'. 'Ma Rob', as her later pupils called her, retired to live in neighbouring Gillitts and died in Pietermaritzburg in 1972 at the age of 104.

Although there was only one girls' school in the village, it would not have been possible (even had Sibella McMillan permitted such cavalier treatment) to refer to Highbury after 1910 just as 'the boys' school'. About that year, former Durban chess champion Samuel Courtenay Chard, who claimed relationship to the hero of Rorke's Drift, moved to Hill Crest and took over the premises earlier occupied by the Rev. Oxley-Oxland.²⁹ Chard had been a master at the Berea Academy of Archibald Forbes in Durban. He had later started his own Musgrave School in fashionable Musgrave Road, on the

corner of Grant's Grove. Chard called his new venture Hill Crest School, an indication that the present name of the town was being used early in this century. The establishment, which was run on traditional lines imitative of the British public school, employed several full-time teachers (including Chard's elder son) as well as a couple of part-time specialists who came in each week to conduct lessons in music, Dutch and drill. Chard's daughter, perhaps with some assistance from her mother, was responsible for the domestic arrangements of the boarding school. Chard's school appears to have enjoyed a good reputation. Certainly it drew pupils from all over the sub-continent, including Mozambique and the Belgian Congo. The school closed, however, when Chard retired in 1922, his son being unwilling to carry on the tradition.

By the 1920s Hill Crest had grown considerably. A post of the South African Constabulary had been established not far away on the Inanda road (at a farm now called *Camp Orchards*). No doubt the officers and men from the camp were made welcome at the dances and other entertainments arranged in the wood-and-iron community hall which had been erected on the site of the present library. Several older residents recall attending weddings at the hall, the old church having apparently long since disappeared. *The Waggoner's Rest*, too, had gone, but across the road a tearoom called *The Pepperpots* catered for the needs of locals and travellers alike. After some initial difficulty in choosing the appropriate side of the line, a proper railway station had been built and the introduction of a regular daily service enabled the gentlemen of Hill Crest conveniently to travel between their homes and their places of business in Durban, something which would be impossible today. Old Fregona had built a trading store opposite the railway station, thus ending the monopoly of Christian's, which had been founded in 1908 by Willie Christian's uncle as S.G. Wood's Main Road Supply Store. Across the street there was a small brick post office. Hill Crest had outgrown the holiday resort stage and become for many a place of permanent residence.

It was to this thriving village that Miss Cecil Mayhew came in 1918. Formerly the Headmistress of St Anne's at Hilton Road, ³⁰ Miss Mayhew took over the holiday home of J.J. Beningfield (who is credited locally with introducing azaleas to the district). Here she started a boarding school for girls which she called St Margaret's. It was run according to the principles of the Parents' National Education Union, a British organization which pioneered learning through activity, and employed several full-time teachers who lived in rondavels in the grounds. The girls received a broad education which emphasized European history, art and English literature. They played tennis, netball and cricket, as well as being taught to ride and shoot. Their riding instructor at one time was young Lance Baker, whose mother's original property, Redcliffe, lay next to St Margaret's. The St Margaret's girls, in their butcher-blue uniforms, soon became a familiar sight in the village. On Saturdays they went for long supervised walks over the surrounding hills, to beauty spots with names like 'Fregona's Cascades' and 'Aladdin's Cave'. On Sundays, in a crocodile, they walked to the village hall, to join local worshippers and the pupils from the other schools in religious services conducted week by week alternately by visiting Anglican or Methodist clergymen. When Miss Mayhew sold her school in 1931 to

return to England, St Margaret's enjoyed a high reputation. Her successor, however, closed the school after a couple of years (a development to which the Great Depression had doubtless contributed) and by 1934 the buildings were once more being used as a private home.

By the time St Margaret's closed, however, another school for girls had been opened. Known as The Firs,³¹ it was started in 1929 by Miss Violet Badock, formerly a teacher at Chippenham (now King's School) at Nottingham Road and later Senior Mistress under Miss Mayhew at St Margaret's. The Firs at its largest had only thirty-two pupils and at various times occupied different houses near the main road. One of them, not far from Highbury, has now been incorporated in a cluster of garden flats known as Pomona Gardens. The Firs was notable particularly for the close family atmosphere which prevailed and for the bonds which developed between Miss Badock and her pupils. Not surprisingly, perhaps, when Miss Badock retired in 1935, the school closed.

Meanwhile, the growth of the village had continued. William Gillitt, who died in 1899, had left the land on which it was built to his three younger sons and, in 1924, fearing for the security of their tenure, a small group of leaseholders had formed a company called Hill Crest Properties to buy the share of one of the brothers. After prolonged negotiation, agreement was reached on the valuation of the properties, so that those tenants who wished to could convert their leases to freehold. The conversion was achieved in 1926. In 1929 the property known as Redcliffe, once Mrs Baker's school, was taken



The village became a popular stop for motorists on the main route to the interior.

(Photograph: Author's Collection)

over by the Natal Provincial Administration and a hospital was built for the chronic sick. It would remain for some time Hill Crest's largest institution. By the 1930s the village had a service and filling station as well as an hotel started by that indefatigable pioneer, Fregona, who also ran a dairy off the Inanda Road. The Gillitt brothers, furthermore, had donated a sports and recreation ground in memory of their father. By 1944 the village, which had become a popular stop for motorists, had grown to the point where a regular Health Board was necessary to manage its future development.

By the outbreak of the Second World War, of all the schools which had opened in Hill Crest, only Highbury remained. Earlier in 1939, however, Kearsney College had moved from its original site inland of Stanger on the North Coast to its present position on top of Botha's Hill. After the war, the whole area developed rapidly. In 1952 the Natal Education Department opened the Hill Crest Primary School which (after ten years) moved to its present premises, incorporating the grounds of old St Margaret's. It was about this time that the custom developed of writing the name of the village as one word. Fifteen years later still, a high school had become necessary and it was built not far from the site of Mrs Robertson's Girls' School. The tradition started in 1895 by the Rev. Oxley-Oxland was being carried on in a way he could hardly have imagined.

Hillcrest, then, had been involved with schooling from the beginning. But only the initiated would be aware of it. Of Redcliffe and Chard's and the Girl's School there is today no trace. The houses once occupied by The Firs are still standing but the association has long been forgotten. Only Delamore Road and St Margaret's Road, in themselves unremarkable streets, carry any reminder of the schools which once bore those names. As the centenary of the founding of Hillcrest approaches, it is to be hoped that the civic authorities will give some thought to an appropriate way of marking the town's long connection with education in this province.

NOTES

- ¹ Information provided by Central Statistical Service, Durban.
- ² Details furnished by the Office of the Town Clerk, Hillcrest.
- ³ Anon., *Natal: Official Railway Guide and Handbook*, p. 45 (n.d.).
- ⁴ According to Jonathan Kaplan, Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg.
- ⁵ According to Aron Mazel, Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg.
- ⁶ Mackeurtan, G., *The Cradle Days of Natal*, p. 121 (London, 1930).
- ⁷ Gardiner, A., *Narrative of a Journey to the Zoolu Country*, p. 307 (London, 1836).
- ⁸ Lt C.J. Gibb reported to his commanding officer, on September 5, 1843: 'The road is very good, much better than any road I have seen in the (Cape) colony.'; Hattersley, A., *More Annals of Natal*, p. 117 (London, 1936).
- ⁹ Barter, C., *The dorp and the veld*, p. 19 (London, n.d.).
- ¹⁰ An account of the inn's history is to be found in: Lamplough, R., *In Search of Mr Botha*, *Natalia* No. 12, p. 27, December, 1982.
- ¹¹ Currey, R.N., *Letters of a Natal Sheriff*, p. 41 (Cape Town, 1968).
- ¹² Mason, G.H., *Life with the Zulus of Natal*, p. 101 (London, 1855).
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- ¹⁴ Gardiner, A., *op. cit.*, p. 307.
- ¹⁵ Anon., *From the Cape to Natal and back*, *Natalia* No. 5, p. 10, December, 1975.
- ¹⁶ Tainton, N.M. et al., *Common Veld and Pasture Grasses of Natal*, p. 190 (Pietermaritzburg, 1976). The subject is more fully treated in: Tainton, N.M., *The grasses and grasslands of Natal*, *Neon* 46, p. 12, December, 1984.

- ¹⁷ Mason, G.H., *op. cit.*, p. 116.
- ¹⁸ Anon., *From the Cape to Natal and back*, *Natalia* No. 5, p. 11, December, 1975.
- ¹⁹ Child, D. (ed), *Zulu War Journal of Col. Henry Harford, C.B.*, p. 9, (Pietermaritzburg, 1978).
- ²⁰ Campbell, E.D., *The Birth and Development of the Natal Railways*, p. 72 (Pietermaritzburg, 1951).
- ²¹ Many of the details of William Gillitt's life were obtained from his granddaughter, Mrs Sheila Halsted, of Emberton.
- ²² Mackeurtan, G., *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.
- ²³ The text of this letter appears in Kearsney College Local History Pamphlet No. 4, *Early Hillcrest*, p. 7 (Botha's Hill, 1984).
- ²⁴ This and other details of the early township are taken from the pioneer essay on the subject: Davis, H.E., *A Hill Crest Record*, published about 1950 but now out of print.
- ²⁵ Acutt, K.H., *R. Acutt & Sons: One Hundred Years of Service*, p. 4 (Durban, 1951).
- ²⁶ Not to be confused with 'Soapbox Siding', an early name for Escombe, where the boxes were used as steps to assist passengers boarding or alighting. See: Stayt, D., *Where on Earth?* (Durban, 1971).
- ²⁷ McMillan, J.S.D., *Highbury*, (Durban, 1978).
- ²⁸ For further details of this and other schools in the village, see: Kearsney College Local History Pamphlet No. 3, *The Forgotten Schools of Hillcrest*, (Botha's Hill, 1983). The information about Mrs Baker was provided by her son, Mr Lance Baker, of Nottingham Road. An account of Redcliffe appears also in: Lamplough, R., *Two Forgotten Schools*, *Neon* 51, p. 41, December, 1986.
- ²⁹ Much of the information about Samuel Chard was provided by his daughter, the late Mrs Gwen Gold, of Durban. An account of Chard's School appears in: Lamplough, R., *Mr Chard of Hill Crest*, *Neon* 47, p. 24, May, 1985.
- ³⁰ The Headmistress was responsible for academic matters in the school and came under the authority of the Lady Warden. For a speculative consideration of the circumstances surrounding Miss Mayhew's departure from St Anne's, see: Lamplough, R., *A Cameo*, *Neon* 44, p. 21, April 1984.
- ³¹ An account of The Firs appears in: Lamplough, R., *Two Forgotten Schools*, *Neon* 51, p. 41, December, 1986.

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