

Doctors, Scholars and Liberals

120 Years on the King's School Grounds

by Rupert Denham, former King's teacher

IN 2008 King's School in Nottingham Road marked a centenary of schooling on its grounds. Three doctors' practices followed by three different schools have occupied the property's main building, which dates back to the first settlers in the area.

The 21-acre plot was originally part of a 3 066-acre grant from the government, made in 1859 to a Mr Michael Short. Known as Spring Grove Farm, the land was used for grazing cattle and passed through the hands of five other owners before being bought jointly by Edward McKenzie Greene and George Ross in 1890. Friends and business partners, Greene and Ross led similar early lives.

Born in Pietermaritzburg, as young men they both served with the Natal Carbineers during the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War, Greene being promoted to Colonel

and Ross to Major. Afterwards Ross settled down to life as a farmer in the Nottingham Road district, while Greene



*Edward Greene (second row, left) and
George Ross (second row, right) with
the Natal Carbineers*



The 18-inch ironstone walls of the main building date back over a century

enjoyed a successful career as a lawyer and politician, becoming the Natal Minister of Railways and Harbours and then treasurer for the colony. He also commanded the Carbineers during the Anglo-Boer War.

In the 1890s Ross and Greene began to subdivide their land, and in 1894 they sold the present King's

School property for £150. The deed of transfer describes it as “a certain piece of freehold land, in extent 20 acres, 0 roods and 6 perches” (roods and perches were small units of measurement). The buyer was a young doctor named James Wylie.

Wylie was born in Ireland – which was then part of Britain – in 1866, and after studying medicine moved to South Africa, where he started the first medical practice in Nottingham Road. A keen rider and captain of the village polo club, little else is known of his time in the village except that he once gave an unusual prescription: a letter relates how 80-year-old Elizabeth Ellis, an early settler in Nottingham Road in the 1850s, visited him with bronchitis. The doctor recommended a little whisky every night, but Miss Ellis refused the advice, fearing that it might be habit-forming. Wylie left Nottingham Road at the turn of the century for Howick, where he got married and continued his career as doctor to the Indian community. He died a wealthy man in 1944.

While the age of the property's main building is not known, it is likely to



The main building today houses the school offices, reception and staff room

have been constructed around the turn of the century: the rise in value of the property from £150 to £2 250 between 1894 and 1906, a 15-fold increase, suggests that a large building was added during this time. A further indication that the building dates to later than 1894 is that Spring Grove Farmhouse, a kilometre away, was built in 1899 in an identical style by Greene, with the same stone and proportions. As well as the striking similarity of the buildings, which is not shared by any others in the village, it seems unlikely that Greene would have sold a tiny part of his land to Wylie in 1894 if it already had a large farmhouse on it, only to build a similar house of his own nearby a few years later.

In 1900 the property was taken over from Wylie by Dr Robinson for use as a sanatorium. Frederick Augustine Robinson was born in 1870 in Liverpool, England, the youngest of eight sons of Reverend George Robinson. After qualifying as a doctor in England in 1892, he worked in Central Africa, Canada and lastly Zululand, where he was district surgeon. Following these travels Robinson sought a country practice for the sake of the health of his wife Lillian, who had also studied medicine, and he was appointed District Medical Officer for Nottingham Road. With Lillian's help the sanatorium built up a considerable measure of success, and during their six years in the village the couple also had two children, Gwendoline and Arthur.

The *British Medical Journal* described Robinson as hard-working and idealistic, writing that, "He cared little for money excepting as a means of helping others." It observed that Robinson would offer people a chance to work, as well as medical help: "It was laughingly



The board in the main office in memory of Dr Robinson

said of him by his own household that every tramp who came within a mile of the sanatorium always found work there, no matter how unpromising a specimen he might be. The sanatorium was freely open to all who were friendless, temporarily disabled or in any way down on their luck."

During the Anglo-Boer War, Robinson treated soldiers recovering from enteric fever, including those from Fort Nottingham. The fighting came close to the sanatorium in November 1899, when the Boer army invaded Natal and reached Mooi River. The Somerset battalion was sent to Nottingham Road by train to stop the advance, and on a misty night was marched to trenches on the hill above the grounds. With cannon fire heard in the distance, the soldiers were told to challenge anything coming from the west. A stray horse charged their line, leading to much gunfire, but the expected fight did not materialise as the Boers had already started their retreat.

In the same month of November, Edward McKenzie Greene was newly besieged at Ladysmith with the Carbineers, having left instructions with workers to build a farmhouse on his land opposite the sanatorium. However, his Italian labourers took fright at the news of the Boers' presence at Mooi

River and decided to flee, leaving the stone building unfinished and without a roof. It was completed soon afterwards, and today forms the centre of Clifton School.

Robinson died unexpectedly in 1906 at the age of thirty-six. A widely-told story is that he committed suicide having never been able to forgive himself for failing to save the life of his five-year-old daughter, Gwendoline, who died in a riding accident. However, the truth is less dramatic: the headstones of father and daughter in the graveyard of St. John's Church in Nottingham Road show that Gwendoline died a few months after her father. According to his obituary in the *British Medical Journal*, Dr Robinson died from "sudden heart failure due to his exertions as medical officer during the recent native rebellion". He had volunteered to serve with the British army during the Bambatha uprising of 1906, and had exhausted himself: "Dr Robinson's ardent, energetic spirit caused him to overtax his strength during the campaign," the article went on, and on his return to Nottingham Road in August his medical staff ordered him to bed. His condition worsened, however, and he died a few weeks later from an "over-strained heart with a valvular deficiency of an acute nature". The story of his daughter's subsequent death is true: Gwendoline's pony bolted, dragging her along with her foot caught in the stirrup.

Robinson's obituary praised him as "a shrewd observer and judge of men and their motives", stating that his death "removes from Natal one of the best types of colonist". It added that, "There are dozens of men in Natal today who could speak of the open-handed generosity and over-flowing hospitality of the man who made them free of his home

for weeks at a time." The evaluation of his estate showed that he had made little money: his only assets were the sanatorium and grounds, valued at £2 250, and he had borrowed heavily from his wife, to whom he left the property.

During his life Dr Robinson had been a keen member of the Natal Medical Corps, constantly working for its interest and efficiency. When the corps was being reformed in 1903 a motto was wanted, and Robinson offered the first part of his own: "Non nobis solum", meaning "not for ourselves alone". It was accepted, and is engraved on the badge of every member of the Natal Medical Corps today. It sums up his philosophy: that in service to others lies the real meaning of life.

After his death the sanatorium was leased by Doctor Alan Lawrence, who worked as Medical Officer for Nottingham Road for two years. Soon, sightings of Robinson's ghost began to be reported. One of the more plausible took place at the end of 1906, a month or two after his death, when the local volunteer force was called to help subdue the Zulu Rebellion and was stationed at Nottingham Road. Many of these men went to the doctor's residence to have their teeth pulled out.

One day Mrs Lawrence and Miss Chadwick, the headmistress of the Nottingham Road government school, were sitting on the verandah, sewing. A man approached and Mrs Lawrence remarked, "Here is another poor wretch with toothache, I suppose." She asked Miss Chadwick to call Dr Lawrence, motioning the man to the surgery. When Mrs Lawrence followed the man, however, there was no sign of him, even after a search of the grounds. She expressed her disappointment, saying she would have liked to have seen him

again as he was so absurdly like the photograph of the late Dr Robinson that was hanging in the drawing room. Miss Chadwick was convinced they had seen the doctor's ghost, and refused to discuss the episode again.

The Mitchell family, who have owned the property since 1939, tell stories that in earlier days horses shied when passing the school's entrance. Today the ghost of 'Dr Rob' is frequently reported by the King's children, who believe that he hanged himself and now haunts the grounds, appearing each year on the night of his death, on October 14th.

In 1908 the property was bought by a Miss Evans, who together with Miss Ward ran St Winifred's Girls' School, becoming sole principal in 1916. Life for the girls was austere but happy: Lettie Bennett remembered how letters were censored, there was no hot water, a small tuck box was allowed each term and the only entertainment was the occasional "fancy dancing and deportment lessons". Girls received lessons in shooting as well as in blouse making and needlework, while occasionally gathering apples in their pillow cases

from Mr Greene's neighbouring farm. Past pupil Mrs Bennett recalled Miss Evans as "a lady-like little person, quietly spoken and a strict disciplinarian. I do not remember her ever being unkind to any of the girls. My years there were very happy." Girls also reported that Dr Rob's ghost would appear when they were getting changed.

St Winifred's closed in 1920 and was succeeded briefly by Chippenham Boys' School under Mr and Mrs Black, who leased the property from Miss Evans. Hilda Black ran the scholastic side while her husband Bertie was the secretary and helped with the finances, as well as continuing his work as an insurance agent. However, he died suddenly in 1922 at the age of 39, and a term later his widow closed the school, being unable to make ends meet. Commenting that the couple were "hopelessly insolvent" at the time of Black's death, with debts of hundreds of pounds and no assets, the Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court wrote, "The situation of the school is excellent and it ought to be a success."



St Winifred's School, 1908–1920: the view from the Loteni Road. The principal, Miss Evans, can be seen standing on the verandah.

In late 1922 Sidney Edminson, the retired principal of Merchiston, took over the property and with 15 boys reopened it as King's, naming it after a school that he had worked at in England. Born in the UK in 1862, he taught Science at Maritzburg College before becoming headmaster of Merchiston in 1910. He left at the age of 60 to found King's, leasing the property from Miss Evans and buying it three years later.



Sidney Edminson, first headmaster of King's, 1922-1939

At King's he taught Science and Latin. Below average height, urbane and brusquely decisive in manner, he allowed only the highest standards and used the cane on lazy or uncooperative pupils. He acquired the nickname "Fundy" because he often referred to the fundamentals of a problem and the first boarders, who came from rural KwaZulu-Natal and were fluent in Zulu, referred to him as "umfundisi", meaning teacher.

Past pupil Pat McKenzie remembers Edminson as a scholarly man who spoke slowly and deliberately and used the cane less readily than other teachers, while Lal Greene recalls him as charming and affable. A pupil from the 1920s, Newman Robinson, reminiscing in the 1980s, described Edminson as "small, brown and wrinkled as a walnut" and "for many of us, our best ever teacher".

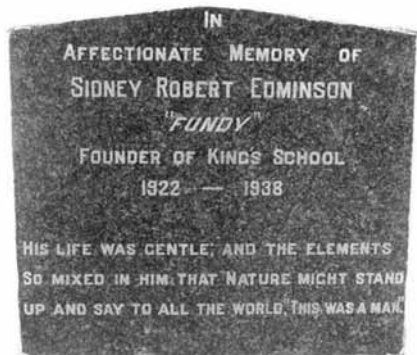
Life was tough for the children, with an open verandah serving as one dormitory, even in winter, and baths in open tubs with buckets of hot water. It was a hard physical country life for all. "The school was a spartan establishment," remembers McKenzie. "There were

only pit latrines and there were three bathrooms, two of which had no hot water. I remember shouting for water and a servant would appear with a paraffin tin of hot water on his shoulder and throw it into the bath. There was no heating in the school and we would try to catch a bit of morning sun to warm up before going into class. There was great rivalry between Clifton and King's, and the notice boards of both schools were often disfigured by eggs and

pellets from their neighbours. Political correctness prevents me from saying what we said CPS stood for."

Edminson's high standards led to a steady rise in pupil numbers from 15 to 44 when he retired in 1938 at the age of 76. His reputation as a teacher and headmaster brought many a parent to Nottingham Road to entrust their sons to him, in the belief that King's would be the best.

Edminson sold King's to John Carlyle-Mitchell and the school has been run by his family ever since. Educated



The plaque to Edminson at the school swimming pool, with a quotation from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar

at Downside in England, Mitchell was headmaster of several Rhodesian schools, including Fort Victoria. He made the journey south from Rhodesia to Nottingham Road by road with his wife and two children.

Fluent in Latin and Greek, he taught the former subject plus English. He is remembered by past pupils and grandchildren as a kind man, with a mischievous sense of



*John Carlyle-Mitchell
(Snr), headmaster from
1939 to 1955*

humour that involved practical jokes on his pupils. “He was a relaxed looking man who looked like a wise owl,” remembers pupil McKenzie. Roll call and the Lord’s Prayer were in Latin, and discipline was strict: McKenzie adds that Mitchell “... could be fierce – and a much feared cane called Aunt Jane was kept in his office. Stealing fruit from neighbours’ gardens was one of the main crimes, and meant four or six of the best.” His wife “Ma Car” played a central role in running the school, while her singing lessons consisted of patriotic British songs from the two World Wars. During Mitchell’s time as principal several new buildings were added, such as a hall and dormitories.

In 1955 he handed over to his son, also John, who ran the school for the next 35 years. Born in Pietermaritzburg, John attended the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg at the age of 16, majoring in English and Psychology. Afterwards he taught in England, before returning to South Africa to help his ageing father. When Mitchell senior retired in 1955 John took over, and with his wife Mary ran the school until 1990.

A lover of literature, he could recite poems from memory for hours and would make children learn a poem a week, so that in his words, “poetry became part of their emotional and intellectual background”. A Shakespeare play or another of the classics was produced every year, and John would begin each school day with classical music and reading. Combining warmth with

firm discipline, he had a knack with problem pupils, walking and talking with them late at night under the stars in order to understand them and to get them to understand their responsibilities to themselves and others.

The school accepted girls from 1967 when some parents arrived for the new year with their son, and also, unexpectedly, a daughter dressed in school uniform. “I didn’t know what to do,” Mitchell recalled laughing. “I phoned the matron and asked if the girl could share with her daughter.” In this way King’s became co-ed; later the school would be well known on the sports circuit for having girls in its rugby team.

Having been a conventional school under its first two headmasters, King’s now became increasingly at odds with the apartheid government. Influenced by friends such as Alan Paton and Peter Brown, who regularly attended and sometimes spoke at Speech Day, Mitchell joined the South African Liberal Party and in the 1970s decided to admit children of all races. The application to the government for permission was turned down, but Mitchell went ahead with his plans, which led to the loss of

the government subsidy. The school continued though, with the financial support of parents.

The relationship with the government led to some awkward school inspections: during one, a black pupil was quickly given a mop, and successfully pretended to be a worker. In Mitchell's words, he sought to "sweep the whole sordid business of separate education into the corner it should never have come out of. By the time I left the school, more than half the pupils were black. The transition was easy – the children lived together comfortably." As Peter Brown commented, the open admissions policy also gave parents the chance to integrate.

The school developed a reputation for being political and a safe haven for opponents of the government. Colin Gardner, a former English professor and current King's board member, recalls: "I was asked to give a speech in 1964 or 65. Those were the days when headmasters kept their heads down and didn't want to be embarrassed by anything political. When I asked John what I should speak about, he said "Whatever you like." Then he added, "For God's sake, make it political."

Makhosi Khoza, a former King's parent



*John Carlyle-Mitchell,
headmaster from 1955 to 1990*

and now a KZN provincial politician, was displaced during the political violence of the 1980s. She found a new home at King's as a teenager, and though not a pupil would stay at the school: "For me the school represented the ideal of the society we were fighting for," she said. "It gave me much of my confidence and optimism for later life. The Mitchells were our white comrades."

Day to day life was enjoyable for teachers as well as children. Anthony Durnford, now a master at Hilton College, arrived at the school after replying to an advertisement that read, "WANTED: Teacher of English who can swing a cricket bat." He remembers, "A most wonderful rapport existed and exists between staff and pupil. One had the feeling of belonging with the boys to a special place – not a school with its normal connotations." Former English teacher Nick Carter writes, "King's was defined by integrity, whether integrity



Peter Brown (centre) at Speech Day in the 1970s

were to be defended against the government, parents or against personal hardship. One drawback to teaching there was that later employment became problematical – you could never find another school like it.”

In 1980 a fire, started by an electrical fault, destroyed nearly half of the buildings – but thanks to the generous response to a fire call by local farmers and neighbouring Michaelhouse and Clifton School the old building was saved. The school remained open after a certain amount of improvisation: the children lived in army tents that winter and some slept in the headmaster’s office, the library and dining room.

“The children were very good about it,” said former matron Sally Davis. “One night the tent collapsed on them, and they didn’t complain. They said they didn’t want to trouble us because we had enough to worry about.”

In the words of “Mister John”, as Mitchell was known by all with a mixture of formality and affection, King’s

at this time was “a Spartan school, but there was a great deal of love around. And that combination of discipline and affection made the children what they grew up to be.” Friend Colin Gardner aptly described Mitchell as “A Christian gentleman – humane, serious, relaxed and open-minded. The wonderful loving and warm ethos of King’s was in many ways moulded by him and his wife Mary.”

A board of trustees was formed in 1986, including Peter Brown as Chairman and other prominent figures, in the hope that it would help to protect the school. In 1990, Mitchell handed over to his daughter Tanya – one of eight children –and stepson Anton Davis. They each possess the academic ability and flair for teaching of their predecessors, along with a leaning towards science.

Anton worked in Zambia prior to coming to King’s in the early 1960s. Later he joined the Physics Department at the University of Natal, before



“Mr John” teaching in his cottage on the school grounds in the 1980s



Former Principal Anton Davis

returning to the school in 1980. With a warm and relaxed demeanour and a talent for sport and directing drama, for 40 years Anton taught Science and Maths, coached cricket and hockey and produced the annual Shakespeare play – in addition to fixing almost anything, from lawnmowers to computers. He stepped down as joint principal in 2005 and continues to teach Science at the school.



Current Principal Tanya Carlyle-Mitchell

Tanya studied a Bachelor of Science at the University of Natal followed by a Masters in Biochemistry at the University of Stellenbosch, before coming to King's in the 1980s. Conscientious, compassionate and patient, she dedicates her life to the school, teaching a full timetable and setting an example to staff and children. As one teacher said recently, "She gives us all backbone."

Today the school remains small, with classes of a dozen contributing to a sense of being part of an extended family. King's has developed an environmental emphasis, becoming a leading South African eco-school, and has opened a successful pre-primary. While the buildings and dormitories now have the usual modern comforts, life remains simple, with a limit on luxury and materialism that echoes earlier times. The school also retains the same openness and willingness to help that for over a century has characterised the residents of its grounds.

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King's in the 80s