



Cordwalles over 100 years

This morning I am going to spend a short time talking about the beginnings of Cordwalles and share with you some interesting aspects that I have been able to glean from old documents. I have decided to concentrate on the start of the story of Cordwalles and so I will not be spending much time talking about the later YEARS and the last few headmaster's contributions to the school.

The story of the start of Cordwalles goes back to 1910. Michaelhouse had started in Pietermaritzburg in 1896 and had then moved to Balgowan in 1901. The second Rector of Michaelhouse resigned from the school in 1910 due to ill-health. Mr Tatham wrote: "By that time, Michaelhouse was in low water and there appeared to be no hope of the tide turning. Natal, with

the rest of South Africa, had experienced a very severe financial depression. People were emigrating to Australia and property was unsaleable." The number of boys at Michaelhouse decreased from 88 to below 60. A decision about the future of the school had to be taken. Bishop Baines and Fred Tatham were instrumental in deciding that the school should continue.

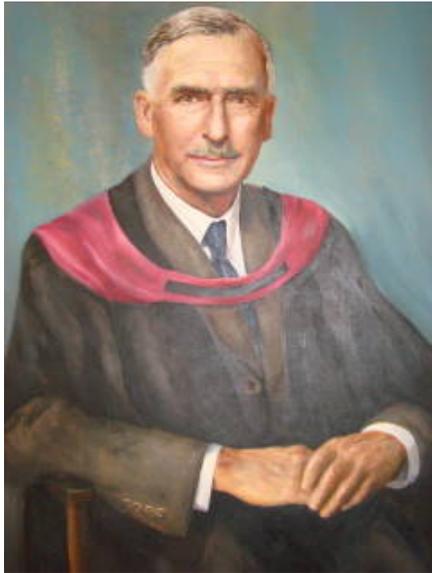
***Anthony Brown** was appointed as the new Headmaster of Michaelhouse and he was tasked with rescuing the school. It was indeed Anthony Brown's idea to build a prep school that would assure a steady supply of boys of the appropriate age to enter Michaelhouse. In 1911, Bishop Baines set up a committee to establish a prep school for Michaelhouse in Pietermaritzburg and thus began the story of our school.*

*One day, in 1911 Bishop Baines walked up Town Hill and found a house on "Blenheim" farm that he felt would be suitable for a prep school. He subsequently bought the property for £1450 and arranged for renovations and alterations to take place. Due to his very kind gesture in terms of purchasing the property, Bishop Baines was given the privilege of naming the school. He named it after the school "Cordwalles" that had educated British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, as well as his own nephew, Fanshawe Baines. Bishop Baines also insisted that the **school colours** should be brown and white as those were the house colours of his house while he was a boy at **Winchester College**.*

We are indeed very privileged and honoured to have Jonathan Carroll here today from the old Cordwalles situated in Maidenhead in the UK. This English school which is closely linked to our own Cordwalles changed its name from Cordwalles to St Piran's in 1919. Over the years we have developed our links with St Piran's and so we are thrilled that Jonathan could be here with us on this momentous occasion. We also welcome three boys from St Piran's Tom, Freddie and Callum who are here on exchange for the next two weeks. Three of our boys will be joining them in the UK in June.

*The Honourable Judge Cecil Jackson, Bishop Baines and Fred Tatham were all part of the initial committee that was involved in starting the school. Furthermore, a large sum of money (£600) to assist with the renovations and the purchase of equipment was very kindly given by Harry Butcher. Our four houses - **Baines, Butchers, Tathams and Jacksons** – are hence named after these very important people who were involved in setting up Cordwalles. The first mention of these four houses was made in the school magazine of 1927.*

As the Rector of Michaelhouse, Anthony Brown was very active in the preliminary work of setting up and purchasing equipment for the new prep school. However, his association with Cordwalles and his enormous contribution was brought to a halt when he was drafted into the army to fight in the 1st World War and he left Michaelhouse and South Africa in March 1915. Sadly, he was killed in the trenches in France in 1916. It seems unfortunate that the huge contribution made by Anthony Brown, the Rector of Michaelhouse, seems to have been overlooked in the history of the school and the naming of various houses or buildings.



***Jack Besant** was appointed to be the **first Headmaster** of Cordwalles and he arrived early in 1912 and began the school with 12 boys. Together Michaelhouse and Cordwalles have symbiotically grown and flourished with most of the Cordwalles boys in those days going on to Michaelhouse.*

By 1917, the school was going very well and a decision was made by the Board to extend the school. Once again Bishop Baines very kindly gave £500 and this went a long way in making the building possible.

*On the **14th of June 1924** the two wings that now form part of the chapel quad were built and opened. These buildings were dedicated by the bishop with the words: **"TO THE GLORY OF ALMIGHTY GOD AND FOR THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND SOUND LEARNING"***

*It was the Bishop's vision that these buildings on either side of the school would eventually form part of a large picturesque quadrangle. This forecast was happily realised some eight year later, when the **Chapel** was added in 1932. **The Christopher family** of Ladysmith donated the Chapel in memory of their son, John, a Cordwalles boy who died in 1930.*

I would now like to share with you some interesting things which I found in the documents that have been preserved from that time. In 1927 Mr Besant felt aggrieved that he had not been given a salary increase for the last 15 years and so he wrote very respectfully to the Board to request that they should review this situation. The issue had come to head when he realised that one of the teachers was earning more than he was. It should be pointed out that this was after Mr Besant had bought a piece of land for £35 and had given this as a gift to the school. What service and dedication and selfless sacrifice for the good of the school.

It was interesting to note that the health of the boys was a major item in the Headmaster's report to the Board each term as the school often had out breaks of Whooping Cough, Chicken Pox, pneumonia, scarlet Fever, mumps or measles to contend with during these times. Even malaria was a threat at times and this required the board to consider getting a full set of mosquito nets.

The Board in these days seemed to have far reaching powers! Mr Besant, in his report to the Board in 1933 indicated that one of his staff had got married and was now applying for a rise in salary or a married allowance. In the argument against giving the staff member this increase he writes "As for marriage, he undertook this responsibility on his own without reference to the Board." I would like to just let Luke Hounsom know that the Board is still waiting for his request to marry Mags and until he gets its go ahead he must not consider his marriage as binding or lawful.

I have always wondered why Cordwalles did not develop more as a day school. In the early days of the school there were a few day boys at the school and then later in Mr Parmiter's time Cordwalles became an all boarding school. This lasted right up until 1974 when day boys were once again allowed to enter the school. The answer to this question I found in Mr Besant's board report of June 1932 where he writes "I very much doubt that we shall attract many day boys of a young age as the school is too far out from town". We forget that Cordwalles at that time was perceived as being out in the country and far from the town centre.

Some other significant things which happened during Jack Besant's time as headmaster included:

- The earliest record of the fees that I could find was that in 1916 the fees were increased from £42 to £45 per annum.*
- The fields at Cordwalles were built in an odd order. The first to be built was the Oval in 1923, then Hollows in 1927 and the Rugby field in 1931.*
- During Mr Besant's time he was involved in an enormous amount of building. He not only oversaw the building of the new quad and the chapel, he also drove and led the building of the Cricket Pavilion, the Kitchen, the Gymnasium (which is where the Grade 1 classes are now), the Swimming Pool, the double story section where the Boarding House is now, the Tennis courts and a whole lot more. Most of these developments took place in the 1930's.*
- In December 1928, Mr Besant attended the conference for Heads of Church Schools in Bloemfontein. He was the only Natal school Head there. Cordwalles was a founding school of the Headmasters Conference which has ultimately become ISASA.*
- Before the Rugby Field was ready to be played on in 1931, matches were played at the Show Grounds.*
- In 1931 the Old Boys' Tie was developed.*
- In 1941 Mr Besant banned boys' comic books as it was felt that they were too sensational and many boys were reading nothing else. This decision was recorded as important news in the Natal Witness.*

Jack Besant remained at the helm of the school through many turbulent times. He was headmaster during the two World Wars and through the 1930's Depression. It was in 1947, some 35 ½ years after starting the school, that he retired having built the school up considerably and leaving it in a very healthy position with 120 boys on the roll. However, he is most notably remembered by old boys for his insistence on the boys wearing serge suits during winter and summer. White shirts with long sleeves and school ties were worn on Mondays to Saturdays. Stiff starched Eton collars were worn every night after showers and on Sundays for morning and evening Chapel Services. Straw bashers bearing the school colours of brown and white were also required. Can you imagine doing this in the burning heat of February? How incredibly lucky our boys are now.

Reading through Mr Besant's reports and the Minutes of the Board was inspirational. It was clear that Jack Besant was a man of vision and passion and he worked tirelessly to build and develop Cordwalles into a leading Prep School in South Africa. His legacy was enormous and it ensured the future success of the school.

Mr Denys Parmiter then took over and was Headmaster from 1948 to 1956. During this time additional dormitories, the Dining room and basement, three staff houses and a new house for the Headmaster were built. Mr Parmiter was praised for changing the uniform to one that was far more boy friendly and more suitable for the hot African climate.

It was in 1948 that Cordwallles had an outstanding cricket team. Three of the boys in the side went on to play for South Africa, these being Norman Crookes, Derek Varnals and Kelly Seymour.

Mr Parmiter had to retire at the end of 1956 due to ill health.



Mr Ronald Brooks took over as Headmaster in 1957 and had a distinguished 28 years as Head of the school. His forte was Latin and Greek and he produced and directed the most amazing Shakespeare plays each year. A great deal of development took place during his time in terms of building. The sick bay and sisters flat were built in the 1960's and then in the early 1970's some land called grassy hill was sold in order to build the double story classroom block on top of the west wing of the chapel quad. Furthermore, the most magnificent Besant theatre was completed in 1974.

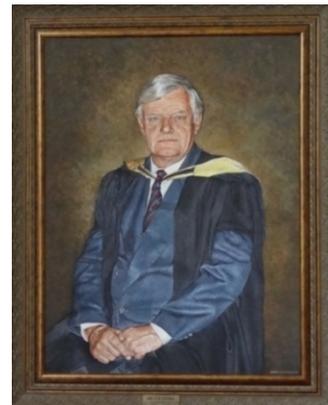
In 1985 David Bawden was appointed as headmaster and he was then followed by Tim Evans in 1996 to 2003



Ronald Brooks



David Bawden



Tim Evans

In investigating and delving into the history of Cordwallles I have become profoundly aware of the enormous contribution our Founders, and those who have gone before us, have made. These people were people of courage, people who had passion, people who showed perseverance. They were people who were willing to take risks, people of faith, people who gave generously to the school and people who were trying to be the best for the world. From these early beginnings, the school has flourished and grown. Cordwallles is very proud to be starting with 350 boys in this our Centenary year. We hope that, as the current custodians of the school, we can emulate our Founders and those who have gone before us to ensure that it grows from strength-to-strength and continues to educate and provide our leaders of the future with the foundations they need to make meaningful contributions to our society and community.

So during this Centenary year let us "Look Back with Pride and let us Look Forward with Expectancy" as we grow and develop this special school for future generations.