

The evolution of JC over the years

Jamaica College history Number 12

By Michael Burke

We have no records to tell if the first students at JC (when it was named Vestry School) were the sons of slave owners or not. But society was different. Just as now there was a need for lawyers, doctors, tailors, store owners and so on but the economy rested mainly on sugar cane. The secondary products were indigo (dyes used mainly in clothing) and lumber.

More than likely the first students would have been the children of the estate owners who had slaves. The book keeper's children might have been there also. The book keepers on the estates were usually the brown people born outside of wedlock whose fathers were slave owners and mothers were slaves. They in turn could only have native or conjugal relations with other brown persons; such was the stratification of the Jamaican society in those days.

Piped or running water could be had only in the town of Falmouth. Flush toilets were non-existent so latrines were very much in use. Luxuries such as air conditioning did not come to Jamaica until the 1930s and therefore was unknown. Electricity did not exist. The trains had not yet arrived and there was really no postal system either. These were the circumstances in which JC was born. We really have come a very long way.

When JC started the capital of Jamaica was Spanish Town. The capital was moved to Kingston in 1872. But in those days even urban areas were rural areas by [today's](#) standards. And these were the circumstances in which JC was born. There are no available records to show how many the school started with but it might have been less than 20 as with their schools. The fact that the school began in the vestry room of the old courthouse in St. Ann's Bay suggests that it could not have been many.

I doubt if the school had been initially a boarding school given the circumstances under which the school began. I suspect that the boarding facilities began when the school moved to Walton Pen (near Moneague) in St. Ann. What we do know is that the diet stipulated in Charles Drax will seem to have been followed almost to the letter in those days as found in the old Jamaica High School yearbooks.

Jamaica College History Number 13

Aspects of JC's history that are missing.

JC has a school prayer. It is anyone's guess as to who wrote it/

JC has a motto and a school crest It is anyone's guess as to who created the motto and who designed the school crest. What we do know is that the griffin is a Greek mythological animal that symbolises higher learning. It has a lion's head and eagle's wings.

There have been many discussions as to what is on the crest whether it is a dragon or a griffin since it does not look a griffin. Some of us accept that it is the lion's impression of a griffin.

Were these symbols created or were they copied from somewhere in England?

It was certainly the trend to do so. For example we read from the history of JC in the handbook of 1939 that the stained glass windows in the JC chapel are replicas of those in Canterbury cathedral.

The old beginning of term and end of term hymns were copied from colleges abroad.

The truth is that Jamaica College traditionally has been more concerned with science and mathematics than history.

JC history number 14

Traditions

Jamaica College history number 14

By Michael Burke

Some JC traditions are harmless while others should not return. Jamaica College reopened its boarding school in 2016. This time around, the boarding school culture does not impact on the rest of the school. A hundred years ago, most JC students were boarders. By the 1960s the day students outnumbered the boarders. The old boarding school was run along the lines of an English public school.

In most of JC's old boarding school history, Jamaica was a colony of Great Britain. Most of the teachers of yesteryear were Englishmen who came to Jamaica as Anglican catechisms on a three year contract.

The old boarding school was run like a para-military academy and first formers were regarded as privates and each firm above had a higher rank. Somehow in my experience these military words were not used but that was nevertheless the reality. First formers were imitated by being forced to sing, sometimes standing on a chair or desk with outstretched arms laden with books.

Beatings by bigger boys, applied on the Gluteus Maximus were done with tennis shoes or sneakers called 'boogas' and the beating, usually a punishment sometimes for very minor offenses if they were offenses at all, were called 'booga beatings'.

First formers were often sent to the canteen to buy food, many times with less money than need for the purchase of the food items. First formers were often called and forced to run gauntlets, where they ran through the middle of the dormitory while they were whacked by bigger boys who used laundry bags filled with all sorts of things to inflict blows on the first formers,

At the end of term there was the candle greasing and the ' crack toes' where lit candles would be held over the heads of first and second formers and the hot wax allowed to drop in their heads. Sticks were used to knock the smaller boys on truer ties as they slept at nights. Some survived the experience while in the case of others it affected them for life. In the dining room where boys lined up in seniority to receive their meals, many of the small boys were forced to fetch cups of water and other things for the senior boys.

The meals were as would be expected, not always appetizing. In the earlier days JC was noted for tough corneal dumplings which the boys called bullets. By the 1960s bullets had gone out of style. Saltfish fritters that stank were called Bragadap in the old days. And there were terms for many other cooked food items.

Speaking of tradition, at old boys dinners there used to be bullets (tough cornmeal dumplings) but thus went out as the dinners moved from the school to hotels.

Jamaica College history number 15

Jamaica College boys then and now

When the idea of the University College of the University of London was abolished, there was no longer the sort of subvention from the colonial government that was needed to run the institution. Jamaica College started to advertise for students whose parents could pay the required fees. Boys from the age of nine year olds were allowed into the

school. This really did not change until Michael Manley announced free education in 1973 when boys under ten year-olds were not accepted. Scholarships were granted to boys not less than eleven years old.

Before the advent of the Common-Entrance Examination, first sat in 1957 for the students to enter in January 1958 (the beginning of the academic year until 1963), there were nine government scholarships offered for the whole of Jamaica, some of whom were sent to Jamaica College. Other than that, JC students came from parents who could afford to send their children here and the school looked like what obtains at schools like Hillel Academy [today](#).

As recently as March 2018, to reenact the Drax Day was revived after some two decades. In the old days Drax Day took place in the month of July because the buildings were opened on July 9, 1885. [Today](#) the students are on holiday by that time so it no longer makes sense. Many old Boys came out to speak to the students on the [Saturday](#) that Drax Day was re-enacted.

Giving testimonies of their lives, many of whom spoke of moving literally from 'rags o riches' or at least to positions of prominence when they came from poor homes could not be heard fifty years ago at JC. In this respect things have changed in that boys from very poor homes can have the opportunity to be students at Jamaica College.